

The Social Legacy of the Surreal – A Study of Dalí's Paranoiac-Critical and Liberated Reality

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The recent revival of Surrealism has been noted across the collector's world, the fashion industry and even internet search histories. If we expand 'surreal' beyond the 20th century self-identified group of surrealists to include any identification of 'surreal' expression, we see its impacts on modern artists, fashion and language. The clear and growing appreciation for Surrealism encourages a reevaluation of surreal methods, impact and evolution in other industries. Many of the stylistic legacies of Surrealism have been explored in great depth. Instead, this analysis turns to the conceptual legacies of the movement and traces surreal methods and revelations through industries. The intent of this investigation is to offer an explanation as to why the movement surfaces when it does. In doing so, we see how Surrealism has engaged with progressive values and become an important part of our verbal and artistic expression of political uproar, global tragedies and pandemics.

Surrealism began as an art movement in the 1920s. Without meaning to, Sigmund Freud inspired the first-generation surrealists to believe that a fracture from reason would lead them to discover universal truths. Salvador Dalí and his colleagues launched a subsequent genre to liberate the mind. Though the group of surrealists was formally disbanded in the 1960s upon the death of its founder, André Breton, Surrealism still has a noticeable impact on many creative pursuits. Modern admirers of Surrealism turn inward to

amend reality with the unconscious, which is supposedly superior to observable reality. In this spirit, Dalí developed the paranoiac-critical method, a principled and “scientific”¹ way of observing delirium, with which he claimed control over both the conscious and unconscious. By isolating and reinterpreting his dreamscapes, Dalí’s method allowed him to generate images and make new, controversial revelations, even to his surrealist colleagues. The novelty of this method allowed Dalí to pioneer artistic advancements grounded in observable reality long after many of his colleagues had lost influence. Among these paranoiac-critical revelations, Dalí’s early breakthroughs in androgyny, though restrained by adherence to Freudian feminine expressions, wove into the discourse between Surrealism and fashion. Observing the relationship between this method and high fashion’s greater strides in androgyny offers a lens to better understand the recent reignition of Surrealism as a product of the paranoiac-critical method’s appeal to audiences after mass trauma.

Paranoiac-Critical

Dalí describes the paranoiac-critical (PC) method as “irrational knowledge” that comes from a “delirium of interpretation.”² Bringing his unconscious onto the same plane as his observed reality, Dalí could perceive multiple interpretations from the same stimulation. To distance fantasy from its private, vulnerable source, Dalí interpreted his dreams and hallucinations before using them as inspiration. In doing so, he distances these fantasies

from their private, vulnerable sources. Herein lies the source of Dalí's ability to create visual intricacies that lure viewers into bizarre distortions.

The method surpassed his colleagues' efforts to liberate their automated psychic mechanisms. Dalí's PC method responded to automatism, a popular surrealist tactic endorsed by identifying figures like André Breton. Automatism encourages the recording of a passive, hallucinatory mental state, where the result captures hidden truths and unconscious desires. Dalí criticized automatism for being detached from immediate reality and thought surreal art should speak to observable tragedies and places for action.³ Dalí's paranoia requires voluntary and active participation and substituting the imagination for the real world. Paranoia is capable of both addressing real circumstances and de-realizing them. This is the paradox of paranoid activity; it employs the observable world as a means of observing unconscious ideas, with the effect of making our unconscious world valid to others.

Dalí's demonstration of PC soon became an instrument praised by Breton, who acknowledged PC as "immediately ... capable of being applied equally to painting, poetry, the cinema, the construction of typical surrealist objects, fashion, sculpture, the history of art and even, if necessary, all manner of exogenesis."⁴ The PC method allowed early surrealists to ground themselves in social context by grafting fabricated evidence onto observable realities. While early Surrealism lost traction in the mid-20th century, PC's engagement with observed reality attracted discourse with other industries that would carry and advance PC revelations.

Liberating Gender

As Dalí developed his PC method, he began making revelations about his unconscious desire for androgyny. His discoveries are still tethered to his observance of patriarchal structures, but PC allowed him to obfuscate gender divisions. Dalí's first piece to rely entirely on the PC method, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, explores a gender paradox (fig. 1) through a double image that retells the Greek myth of Narcissus. In this oil painting, an androgynous figure staring at their reflection represents Dalí's exploration of his unconscious journeys. This representation inverts the usual tale of narcissism and madness foreshadowing sin or death, as Dalí cites salvation in their aftermath to turn a story of tragedy into one of self-exploration.



Figure 1. Salvador Dalí, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, 1937
Collection of Tate Modern, London; ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

Whereas Freudian gender discourse firmly delineated feminine and masculine expressions, Dalí shows the benefits of their coexistence. For him, Narcissus' gender fluidity is a contrived, positive development. This reading is supported by the employment of color shifts, the subversion of gaze and the ambiguity of anatomy. The composition of Dalí's *Metamorphoses of Narcissus* is divided between two representations of androgynous (unconscious) desire and observed reality. The golden tint on the left, suggestive of the masculine Apollo, changes to a silver wash on the right, evoking the feminine counterpart, Artemis.⁵ On the left, Narcissus embodies androgynous idealization. On the right, the hand and egg signify observed reality. In the background is a crowd representing a gendered reality, while on the right, an androgynous figure on a pedestal illustrates idealized unity. Another duality stands in the right half of the painting. The egg symbolizes the life instinct, while the ants on its surface forbode death. The flower sprouting from the egg represents a new life that has emerged from Narcissus' death, signifying the paradox of Freud's Eros and Thanatos (the life and death drives).

Dalí suppresses historical interpretations and gendered symbols to create a painting that celebrates the ambiguous nature of metamorphosis and the simultaneous existence of feminine and masculine expressions. His painting results from a deliberate misreading of Freud since he claims to control both the conscious and unconscious mind.⁶ His paranoid explorations distinctively allow him to incorporate contradictory visualizations into an artistic

program. This exploration of dualities, masculine and feminine or Eros and Thanatos, demonstrates his intention to transgress gender divisions in his mission towards androgyny.

Dalí's attitude towards androgyny was heavily influenced by traditional evaluations of masculinity and femininity. In particular, his representations of ambiguous gender seem to feminize men (like *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*) more than they masculinize women. While Dalí believed that men could work towards feminine attributes, he said that "women have no talent" and "talent is purely in the testicles."⁷ The reason behind this attitude might be the surrealists' adherence to Freudianism and fear that women would stop functioning as keepers of unconsciousness, a reservoir of creative energy for men.⁸ While his attribution of *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* to the PC method demonstrates the potential breakdown of gender divisions, Dalí failed to realize androgyny entirely, likely because of his Freudian views towards women as the source of creative inspiration.

Surreal Fashion

The PC dichotomies explored by Dalí and his surrealist colleagues corresponded with the medium of fashion. As the surreal fascination with disfigurement and gender developed, fashion, a predominately women-marketed art form, became a lucrative platform for the psychology-obsessed surrealists. Surrealists borrowed fashion iconography for their paintings. Dalí's collaborations with designer Elsa Schiaparelli, starting in 1935, solidified the interdisciplinary exchange between surreal painters and high fashion. Adopting their art to

runways, surrealists raised fashion beyond personal style to important documentation of culture and founded an exchange between fashion and fine art. While Surrealism as a traditional art lost traction after World War II, its legacy in the fashion industry never died down.

Just as the sewing machine makes the clothing and thus “makes the woman,” the medium lends itself easily to contradictions⁹. Fashion designers confront the most compelling friction between masculine and feminine, disfigurement and beautification, the organic and the artificial, and fantasy and reality. Since these contradictions naturally define fashion, Dalí’s use of the PC method to overlay illogicalities fits naturally into the fashion industry. Just as Dalí’s overlap of gendered dichotomies was the PC subject of his oil paintings, the gender binary is often challenged when Surrealism appears in fashion.

When Dalí brought his paranoid explorations to Schiaparelli, their discoveries



received coverage for conceptually elevating high fashion. His collaborations with Schiaparelli brought about critical pieces like the “skeleton dress” (fig. 2) and the “lobster dress” (fig. 3).

Figure 2. Collaboration between Elsa Schiaparelli & Salvador Dalí. “Skeleton Dress.”



Figure 3. Collaboration between Elsa Schiaparelli & Salvador Dalí. "Lobster Dress," 1937.
Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art

One of the greatest legacies of "Skeleton Dress" is its distortion between fabric and anatomy by using artificial material that accentuates (rather than covers) organic forms. Engaged in another dichotomy, the "lobster dress" faced controversy over placing a phallic shape on the front of an otherwise feminine dress. Surrealism found a home in fashion because it allowed designers to lure the viewer's gaze with attractive symbols before presenting something unprecedented. The conceptual challenges that PC activity opened in fashion unlocked a line of discourse between surrealists and designers.

Eventually, surreal fashion diverged conceptually from the early surrealists. While the art movement lost traction, fashion's engagement with public discourse pushed PC activity to new frontiers. Fashion's demand to engage with worldly imperatives allowed PC fashion to

break down traditional dichotomies where even Surrealists failed. Surrealists have typically held women as objects of erotic desire, following Freud's suggestion that they do not participate in the symbolic order as men do. The early generations of surrealists, including Dalí, saw women as incapable of creation outside of procreation. Thus, their depictions of androgyny are held back by their inability to see feminine identity apart from its role in the unconscious. On the other hand, the applications of PC activity in surreal fashion reclaim symbols of fetishization, break binaries and subvert gendered gazes. Jean Paul Gaultier is one of many surreal designers who works to upset sexualized expectations by implementing surreal techniques. In "Naked Dress" (fig. 4), Gaultier juxtaposes nakedness and coverage to condemn arbitrary objectification. The product is a liberating implementation of PC, masking the typical accentuations of a feminine body with a universal "nude" image and challenging how we envision feminine bodies in fashion.



Figure 4. Jean-Paul Gaultier, "Naked Dress"

When PC is used incorrectly or irresponsibly, the effect is oppressive rather than liberating. While PC androgynous revelations over time have moved away from their misogynist attachments, the fashion industry still ruminates over them. Designers have cited Surrealism as the excuse for ambiguous misogynist statements, taking the original intentions of surrealists rather than using the methods they employed. Early generation surreal works are popularly criticized for their oppressive regard for women. Thom Browne's surreal-inspired show in 2018 (fig. 5) sits unsettlingly next to early surreal works like Dalí's 1954 *Young Virgin Auto-Sodomized by the Horns of Her Own Chastity* (fig. 6).



Figure 5. Thom Browne's 2018 Surreal-inspired show, *Bind Me Up and Set Me Free*.



Figure 6. Salvador Dalí, *Young Virgin Auto-Sodomized by the Horns of Her Own Chastity*, 1954. Private Collection. ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

Browne's show instantly received negative feedback for his allusions to the confined woman. While Dalí and other surrealists professed a desire for a liberated world and used PC methods to achieve new revelations, they were still constrained by angry and misogynistic representations of sexuality. Rather than applying PC activity to spark an interesting conversation, Browne references Surrealism as the justification for his art of women dolled up, sewn up and unable to move freely down the walkway. Browne demonstrates the destructive potential of copying an art movement without responsibility to its social context.

Successful surreal fashion draws inspiration from Dalí and other surrealists for their PC methods and launches into new conversations. Irresponsible surreal style xeroxes both the aesthetic and the controversial ideologies of the original movement. While we admire

previous artists for their innovations and their non-linear journeys towards androgyny, we demand more from those of our time. It's precisely why lobsters and sexual ownership are celebrated but gags and corset bondage are repressive. Combining imagination with reality well can be liberating, but audiences should take pains not to tolerate it when it is repressive.

Pandemic Responses

Surrealism's appeal to other industries and its unique psychological offer to audiences cause the movement to not only resist but flourish during global crises. Most recently, the COVID-19 crisis sparked devastating economic setbacks in most arts sectors, including restrictions that limited gatherings, changes in consumer behavior and severe unemployment.¹⁰ Despite a natural resistance to financial crises, many art collectives, museums and artists felt the stress of these setbacks.¹¹ However, while audiences in 2020 reconsidered their prioritization of non-essential activities like art, Surrealism reignited across multiple industries.

While the world cloistered itself during the pandemic, evidence suggests a new fascination with unconscious reflection. Within the collectors' world and other areas of formal study, scholars have noted an obvious renewed appreciation for surreal artwork. According to art collectors, the development "coincides with expanding tastes for timeless artworks that reflect crucial modern milestones," a new fascination with the subconscious and a return to figuration.¹² Since fashion has become one of the most enduring successors to the original

movement, one of the most compelling arguments for Surrealism's return is dictated by the fashion industry's leaders. In 2022, Maison Schiaparelli embodies post-pandemic PC applications. Though Schiaparelli did not catch up to the late 20th-century strides of its couture competitors, the house's recent comeback is largely due to the tenure of creative director Daniel Roseberry. It's Roseberry who noticed the resurgence of Surrealism in the 2022 Spring-Summer Collection:

That churn of red-carpet appearances, award shows, even fashion presentations—something about it feels lackluster. Aren't we all exhausted by all of it? What does fashion mean, what does fashion have to say, in an era in which everything is in flux? And, with regards to this Maison, what does surrealism mean when reality itself has been redefined?¹³

While the 2020 and 2021 lines featured hope for the future, 2022 brings about a new sense of loss: a loss of reality. For Roseberry, this loss of reality has prompted him to question whether fashion matters going forward and what designers' roles should be in the post-pandemic culture. Roseberry's sentiment echoes the interwar identity loss documented by Avant-garde artists during the golden age of Surrealism. Maison Schiaparelli responds by rejecting bright colors, high volume and other haute-couture tricks often used for shock and grandeur. Instead, Roseberry turns to elemental schemes to imagine an empyreal (fig. 7). He uses the line as an opportunity to imagine a surreal and otherworldly divine.



Figure 7. Schiaparelli, *Look 9*, 2022, Haute Couture Spring-Summer 2022.

The Schiaparelli line responds to previous couture innovations pioneered by surreal designer Elsa Schiaparelli, but it also reminisces on early generation surrealists like Dalí. Look 9 features a dress with vintage jewelry pieces that serve as trompe l'oeil buttons. The matching gold clutch with decorative drawers strongly resembles Dalí's *Venus de Milo with Drawers* (fig. 8).



Figure 8. Salvador Dalí, *Venus de Milo with Drawers (and PomPoms)*, Cast 1964; Original plaster 1936. Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL. ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

Seeing that Dalí's influence is alive and well in other industries, Surrealism's revival reflects more than an appetite for early 20th-century styles, but a human need for PC activity in the face of conflict.

Surrealism's initial momentum in the language of fashion during the 1930s was a result of deep global insecurity. The impending war opened space for specific fantasies within the fashion and commercial industries. Surrealism offered a whimsical but thoughtful respite from war. PC activity filled the need for psychological evasion in the late 1930s¹⁴. In all its forms, Surrealism neither describes the terror directly nor evades cultural fears; it harnesses the issues facing audiences and softens the partitions of illusion and reality.

Surrealism brought absurd subjects to the foreground with striking detail, creating “distant realities” that activated audiences’ imaginations and challenged reason. The context of interwar loss of identity is famously what inspired the fascination with imagination and a search for truth in the subconscious. But the progress made during Dalí and his colleague’s lifetime is more than a forced response to one development. After Sandy Hook, 9/11 and other national tragedies, “surreal” skyrocketed in online searches. In 2016, a year of repeated terrorist attacks, shootings, refugee crises and unprecedented world events, Merriam-Webster defined “surreal” as the word of the year.¹⁵

André Breton wrote, “so strong is the belief in life, in what is most fragile in life—*real* life, I mean—that in the end this belief is lost.”¹⁶ The fragility of reality is at the heart of observations that we deem surreal. We become concerned that the truth no longer lies in what we can observe, and Surrealism presents a solution. Tools like the PC method help individuals come to terms with those events. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, billions of people suddenly found that the most mundane activities – family reunions, schools, doctor visits – were rife with danger. Watching vibrant cities shut down overnight felt like a bad dream. Whether we’re reacting to a world war or a global pandemic, years like 2020 feel surreal. We struggle to understand the suddenness of trauma, to face pain and not to justify it as an unconscious misperception. The surreal developments made within formal and informal artistic communities resurface whenever disaster hits and we are encouraged to

question reality. When something dramatic and unprecedented happens, Surrealism becomes a part of our grieving process.

Conclusion

To answer Roseberry's question about the purpose of Surrealism during crises, Surrealism is not a luxury. Art like Dalí's may seem frivolous or unnecessary when we fear for our physical safety and have to set resources aside. But large-scale traumatic events shake more than our sense of security; they rattle our grip on the world. Surrealism, in all its absurdity and even failures, offers us clarity when we're grappling with moments that up our understanding of life. When other Avant-garde movements offer distraction or confrontation with worldly imperatives, PC allows us to express our disgust with immediate reality. While contemporary styles can seem outmoded, fleeting, or highbrow, Surrealism has evolved and engaged with public discourse. The movement's migration into fashion has demanded new PC revelations that embolden progressive values. Surrealism is not a whimsical or extravagant rejection of reality but an accessible engagement with our nightmares. If art is a reflection of our cultural values, then Surrealism remains relevant because it reflects our refusal to see tragedy as real. Dalí's contribution to surreal methods and his cross-industry collaborations are largely to thank.

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- ¹ Stefan, "When Dalí met Freud," Education Blog, Freud Museum London, last modified February 4, 2019, <https://www.freud.org.uk/2019/02/04/when-dali-met-freud/>.
- ² Sinéad Mooney, "'Delirium of interpretation': Surrealism, *the possessions*, and Beckett's outsider artists," *Translation Studies* 12:1, (June 2019), 47-63, DOI: 10.1080/14781700.2019.1599299.
- ³ Donald A. Gordon, "Experimental Psychology and Modern Painting," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 9, no. 3 (1951): 234, <https://doi.org/10.2307/425884>.
- ⁴ Andre Breton, "What is Surrealism," (lecture, Brussels, June 1, 1934), <https://www.generation-online.org/c/fcsurrealism2.htm>.
- ⁵ Kalnická, "The Gender Metamorphosis of Narcissus. Salvador Dalí," 65.
- ⁶ Steven Zucker, "Metamorphosis of Narcissus," filmed October 2011, *Smarthistory* video, 4:08, <http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/dali-metamorphosis-of-narcissus.html>.
- ⁷ Adrian Dannatt, "Interview With Amanda Lear on Being a Celebrity and Being an Artist: 'Everything that Happened to Me Was Completely by Accident,'" *The Art Newspaper*, September 30, 2001. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2001/10/01/interview-with-amanda-lear-on-being-a-celebrity-and-being-an-artist-everything-that-happened-to-me-was-completely-by-accident> (accessed July 26, 2022).
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- ⁹ Richard Martin, *Fashion And Surrealism* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1987), 12.
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- ¹² *ibid*
- ¹³ "An Age of Discipline," Haute Couture Spring-Summer 2022, Schiaparelli, accessed July 20, 2022, <https://www.schiaparelli.com/en/haute-couture/haute-couture-spring-summer-2022/collection>
- ¹⁴ Martin, *Fashion And Surrealism*, 12.
- ¹⁵ Jess McHugh, "Why We Turn to the Word 'Surreal' Whenever Something Terrible Happens," *Times*, June 9, 2021, <https://time.com/6071418/surreal-definition-dictionary-history/>.
- ¹⁶ André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924): André Breton," in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 718.

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