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PARANOIA-CRITICISM AS A SURREALIST VARIANT OF ARTISTIC THINKING

Abstract: While in the 1920s surrealism was dominated by the notion of mental automatism and hysteria, in the 1930s surrealist experimentation was mainly concentrated on the notion of paranoia. Introduced by Salvador Dalí in his *L'Âne pourri* ("Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution", 1930 No. 1), it was intended to expose normative understanding of perception inadequate to experience. The primary tool used by Dalí was an optically ambiguous image which could be interpreted in different ways. André Breton wrote about critical paranoia in *L'Amour fou* (1937), referring to Freud's text on Leonardo da Vinci. In *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, he defined it as "the *détournement* of the logical function in its usual modes of operation". The notion of paranoiacriticism helps to accentuate a crucial role of such perceptual states and concepts describing cognition as inconclusiveness and polysemy. To a large extent, they mark the boundaries between linguistic and visual articulation. Paranoia seems to be a concept very far from the twentieth-century model of scientific thinking, but if we refer to Wittgenstein's *Logical-Philosophical Treatise*, we can see that his concept of aspectperception is not far from a surrealist definition of paranoiacriticism.

Keywords: Surrealism, Paranoia-Criticism, *Simulacrum*, Aspect Perception, Dalí, Breton, Lacan, Wittgenstein

Since its very beginning, surrealism was interested in madness, problems with defining mental health and normality of mental functioning.¹ The problems were not new and there had been artists who considered them before, yet

¹ Cf. A. H. Esman, *Psychoanalysis and Surrealism. André Breton and Sigmund Freud*, „Journal of the American Psychoanalysis Association”, 2011, no. 59, pp. 173-181.

the amount of available scientific and clinical data had changed fundamentally since similar issues had been discussed, for example, by the Romantics. Scientific developments suggested that madness could be directly related to the degree of repression of the unconscious part of the psyche, and unconscious elements could influence the creative process.

Some artists, such as André Breton or Louis Aragon, completed part of medical studies, or an internship in a psychiatric hospital during the war, others were traumatized by the warfare period.² They read expert medical literature on the subject and showed interest in connections between creativity and mental health problems. This is one of the central themes of surrealism present in virtually all studies and in relation to all artists associated with the movement. In her monograph on Salvador Dalí, Dawn Ades writes, for example: "Aspects of imaginative and intuitive mental activity are open to the mentally disturbed but closed to the sane – a subject explored by Breton in *Nadja*, the book 'you love so much' – Buñuel remarked to Dalí."³ Their interests were practical. Experiments conducted by surrealists on themselves were used to search for new artistic methods, to explore and expand creative possibilities. On the other hand, since surrealism from its origins revolted against an illorganized world and sought to revolutionize social life, this context was also used to view role of the unconscious and the art that influences it. As a result, the very notion of "thinking" in surrealism had wider boundaries than in other movements.

While in the 1920s surrealism was dominated by the concepts of mental automatism and hysteria, in the 1930s surrealist experimentation was mainly driven by the paranoiacritical method.

Paranoia is a term known already in ancient Greece, where it denoted a kind of delusion. It was recalled in the 19th century. In 1909, Paul Sérieux and Joseph Capgras wrote about paranoia as 'delirious interpretation', emphasizing that it consists of false reasoning that had a real sensation or event as a point of departure.⁴ They introduced an important change, asserting that the problem is not about sensory hallucinations. The mechanism of paranoia starts from real sensory cues, and only their interpretation is made in a socially unacceptable, idiosyncratic way. Sigmund Freud wrote about paranoia in a similar way, pointing out the ways in which the unconscious regulated the interpretation of the

² J. Bogousslavsky, J. Haan, P. J. Koehler, *Un passant chez Babinski: André Breton en chemin vers le surréalisme*, „Histoireslittéraires” Dossier André Breton, 2013, vol. 19, no. 53, pp. 91-104.

³ D. Ades, *Salvador Dalí*, Thames & Hudson, London 2022, p. 174.

⁴ P. Sérieux, J. Capgras, *Les folies raisonnantes: Le délire d'interprétation*, Félix Alcan, Paris 1909. Cf. Constantinidou Despina-Alexandra, *When Lacan Met Dalí: Lacan's 'Paranoid' Reading of Saussure's Theory of the Sign*, „Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism” 2012, vol. 20, p. 242.

perceived reality and then appropriated one's unconscious wishful phantasies into the world.⁵

Paranoia-criticism as a creative method inspired by the recognized mechanism of mental illness was proposed to surrealists by Salvador Dalí. In 1930, in the first issue of the magazine *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, he published the text *L'Âne pourri* [Rotten Donkey],⁶ in which he pointed out possibilities that could result from a new thought process "of an active, paranoid character" if it was adopted alongside mental automatism and other passive methods already used by surrealism. The article was part of the book *La Femme visible* [The Visible Woman],⁷ published in the same year, to which André Breton and Paul Éluard wrote an enthusiastic introduction. The paranoid-critical method was described by them as a means of exposing the hypocrisy of the so-called 'reality': "The miserable mental expedient that hides behind the word "reality" is today the object of a systematic denunciation whose revolutionary consequences are indisputable. The aim is to demonstrate - and surrealism has no other intention - that reasons for social self-preservation, founded on individual cowardice, are at the root of the highly questionable phenomenon of voluntary amnesia, on which man relies to try and deceive others and himself about the true nature of his desires."⁸

In 1933, Dalí published yet another important text on the paranoid-critical method, *Intérpretation Paranodaque-critique de l'Image obsédante 'L'Angelus' de Millet. Nouvelles considerations generals sur le mécanisme du phenomène paranodaque du point de vue surréaliste*, [Paranoiac-critical Interpretation of the Obsessive Image of Millet's Angelus. New General Considerations on the Mechanism of the Paranoiac Phenomenon from the Surrealist Point of View] in the magazine "Minotaure" (alongside Jacques Lacan's article *Le Problème du style et la conception psychiatrique des formes paranoïques de*

⁵ S. Freud, *Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)*, [in:] idem, *Case Histories II: „Rat Man”, Schreber, „Wolf Man”, Female Homosexuality*, J. Strachey, A. Richardson eds., transl. J. Strachey, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin 1981, p. 209.

⁶ S. Dalí, *L'Âne pourri*, "Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution" 1930, no. 1.

⁷ A. Breton, P. Éluard, *Introduction*, [in:] S. Dalí, *La Femme visible*, Éditions Surréalistes, Paris 1930.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3. „Le misérable expédient mental qui se cache sous ces mots: „la réalité” fait de nos jours l'objet d'une dénonciation systématique dont les conséquences révolutionnaires sont indiscutables. Il s'agit en effet de démontrer, et le surréalisme n'a pas d'autre prétention, que des raisons de conservation sociale, fondées sur la lâcheté individuelle, sont à l'origine du très attaquant phénomène d'amnésie volontaire sur lequel les hommes appuient pour, aux autres comme à lui-même, tenter de donner le change sur le caractère véritable de ses désirs.” Translated with <https://www.deepl.com/en/translator> [accessed: 01.10.2023].

l'expérience).⁹ In it, he emphasized the "antagonism between passive states (sleep, mental automatism) and systematized active states",¹⁰ and drew people's attention to the potential behind paintings created by the paranoiac critical method through the unconscious content they revealed. "I challenge materialists to examine the kind of mental crisis that such an image may provoke (...)." ¹¹ The painter wanted paranoiac criticism to expose normative understanding of perception inadequate towards experience, to reveal the role of the unconscious mediating between perception and representation. Working with images and at the same time consciously trying to recognize how the mechanisms of creation work, Dalí noted that unconscious content comes to the fore when the visible shape is still unrecognized, not conceptually determined, and it is this unconscious content that plays a fundamental role in determining the meaning, the conceptualization of the perceived form. A separate and interesting perspective is Jacques Lacan's use of this discovery.¹² Dalí as an artist and Lacan as a scientist used different methods to investigate how the unconscious works. Traces of their interwar interaction survived in Lacan's engagement with structural linguistics. In terms of Lacan's later theory, what Dalí revealed and illustrated within the visual field can be described as an explanation of why form has paramount importance to representation.¹³ Millet's *Angelus* became one of the most important motifs in Dalí's paintings around 1932-1934. As he wrote, he did not aim to interpret Millet's work, but to discover the content that his own unconscious reveals under the influence of that painting.

Although Dalí did not reject mental automatism, he very clearly contrasted the passivity of automatism with the active character of the new creative method. His concept refers to experiments of Breton and Éluard, who attempted to create short texts by simulating various kinds of mental problems,¹⁴ but at the same time differs fundamentally from them. It is rather closer to Freud and his *Case Histories*.¹⁵

⁹ S. Dalí, *Interprétation Paranoïaque-critique de l'Imageobsédante <<L'Angelus>> de Millet. Nouvelles considerations generals sur le mécanisme du phénomènaparanoïaque du point de vuesur-réaliste*, „Minotaure” 1933, no. 1, pp. 65-67.

¹⁰ The first problem Dalí enumerates in the summary preceding the text is *Antagonisme entre les étatspassifs (rêve, autmatismepsychique) et des étatsactifssystematisés*. Ibid., p. 65.

¹¹ S. Dalí, *Oui: The Paranoid-Critical Revolution Writings, 1927-1933*, Robert Descharnes ed., transl. Y. Shafir, Exact Change, Boston 1998, p. 116.

¹² D.-A. Constantinidou, *When Lacan ...*, passim.

¹³ Ibid, p. 253.

¹⁴ A. Breton, P. Éluard, *Immaculée Conception*, Éditions Surréalistes, Paris 1930.

¹⁵ S. Freud, *Case Histories...* Cf. Dawn Ades, *Salvador Dalí* [in:] *The International Encyclopedia of Surrealism*, M. Richardson, D. Ades, K. Fijalkowski, S. Harris, G. Sebbag eds., vol. 2, Bloomsbury, London, New York, Oxford 2019, pp. 197-200.

The very use of the term 'paranoia' in the field of surrealism is much broader than in the field of psychiatry. Dalí referred to it as 'reasoning madness' or 'delirium of interpretation'. The paranoiacritical practice was to attempt "the critical and systematic objectification of delirious associations and interpretations".¹⁶ Paranoiac states require "the particular perspicacity of attention" and logical organisation of imaginative construction. "The paranoiac who believes himself to be poisoned discovers in everything that surrounds him, right up to the most imperceptible and subtle details, preparations for his own death",¹⁷ Dalí writes and immediately adds: "Recently, through a decidedly paranoiac process, I obtained an image of a woman whose position, shadow and morphology, without altering or deforming anything of her real appearance, are also, at the same time, those of a horse."¹⁸ This is the first example in which Dalí describes the application of the paranoiac mechanism in creation of visual works. After further transformations, the double image where the horse can be at the same time recognized as a naked woman turns into a triple image. In the painting *Invisible Sleeping Woman, Lion, Horse* (1930), the same configuration may be read as a female nude, a lion, and a horse. This is still not a very skillfully produced example of a multiple image. The artist gradually refined his technique in such a way that a viewer, when looking at his paintings, did not have the problem with switching from one interpretation to another, as in the 'duck-rabbit' psychological test. In the 1930s, Dalí repeatedly experimented with double images - applications of the paranoiac-critical method. A paranoid interprets the world and its phenomena through one dominant idea: their obsession. Translating this phenomenon into visibility, Dalí composed painting configurations which could be read in several, or at least two different ways. Another early painting using such 'double interpretations' was *The Invisible Man* (1929-1932), in which a composition of architectural fragments can be read at the same time as the figure of a seated man.

Another example of the use of the paranoiac critical method is the painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1936-1937). The painting was accompanied by a poem. It was "the first poem and the first painting obtained entirely through the integral application of the paranoiac-critical method".¹⁹ What draws our attention is the fact that two centrally placed shapes are formally similar. The left side of the painting is occupied by a young man leaning over his reflection in the water. On the right there is a mirroring form resembling a large hand

¹⁶ D. Ades, *Salvador Dalí*, Thames & Hudson, London 2022, p. 179.

¹⁷ S. Dalí, *Oui...*, p. 112.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ S. Dalí, *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, ed. and trans. H. Finkelstein, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 324.

holding an oval shape, from which a narcissus flower sprouts. Both forms are painted in such a way that, while being similar, the meaning of both can be identified without doubt.

For Dalí, the paranoiacritical method becomes a permanent method of creative work. Even in the 1930s, he still used it to create a series of paintings on Wilhelm Tell and Millet's *Angelus*. The most successful one in terms of freedom of switching between interpretations is *Slave Market with the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire* (1940).

Through this method, Dalí was not only able to create new *simulacra/signs*, but also attribute meaning to seemingly unrelated objects based on formal analogy.

In December 1931, in the magazine *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, Dalí published a visual example of how paranoiac criticism works. It consisted of illustrations and an explanatory text, *Communication: Paranoiac Face*.²⁰ Dalí described how the painting was created – he recalled that, while contemplating faces painted by Picasso in the 'black [African] period', he was simultaneously sifting through a stack of papers. At one point, he found a piece of paper which he thought to be a photograph of a hitherto unknown head painted by Picasso. After a moment, he realized it was an illusion – he was looking at a 90-degree inverted postcard depicting an African village.

The same painting was interpreted by Breton as the head of the Marquis de Sade. In the white clouds he saw the Marquis' wig, while Dalí interpreted the same fragment as an unpainted part of the canvas. This is an example of a 'paranoiac' interpretation, made even more interesting by the fact that different people read the same configuration of shapes in different ways.

Hints of this way of artistic thinking can be seen in Dalí's memories of the shapes of rocks visible above the water. "Indeed, if there is anything to which one must compare these rocks, from the point of view of form, it is clouds, a mass of catastrophic petrified cumuli in ruins. All the images capable of being suggested by the complexity of their innumerable irregularities appear successively and by turn as you change your position. This was so objectifiable that the fishermen of the region had since time immemorial baptized each of these imposing conglomerations – the camel, the eagle, the anvil, the monk, the dead woman, the lion's head. But as we moved forward with the characteristic slowness of a rowboat (...) all these images became transfigured (...) What had been the camel's head now formed the comb (of a rooster) (...)." ²¹

²⁰ S. Dalí, *Communication: Visage Paranoiac*, „Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution” 1931, p. 85.

²¹ D. Ades, *Salvador Dalí ...*, p. 171.

Paranoiac criticism seen from this perspective is defined as "artist's ability to experience different images within one configuration".²² Such a change of emphasis turns Dalí's method simply into another variant of psychic automatism, and the active character of the technique emphasized by him as opposing to the former passive techniques of surrealism loses its meaning. Instead, it clearly starts to show affinity for the frottage technique invented by Max Ernst, which involved making designs that mirrored surfaces of interesting texture, which were then interpreted by the artist.

Ernst referred to Leonardo da Vinci's practice of gazing at stains on old walls, clouds, ash or stream waters, in which one could see the outlines of landscapes or fantastic battle scenes.²³

Breton also refers to Leonardo in *Mad Love [L'Amour fou]* (1937),²⁴ a book that is a kind of a hymn to love as the most perfect surreal experience that combines the real and the imaginary, poetry and life. In it, Breton shows how emotions can shape perception. The starting point is, literally, a journey through clouds that took place during Breton and his second wife's stay in the Canary Islands, on Tenerife, during a hike towards the Teide volcano. "We have just been swallowed by a cloud,"²⁵ he writes, and at the same time reflects on clouds "appearing like suspension points between the earth and the sky". He perceives looking at the clouds from the ground as the best way to examine his own desires. In his opinion, we misread the famous scene from *Hamlet*, smiling indulgently when Polonius eagerly agrees with Hamlet saying that the cloud he sees takes the shape of a camel, a weasel, and a whale. Breton suggests looking at this scene from a completely different point of view and interpreting it as an explanation of deep psychological motives for Hamlet's behaviour throughout the play. In such an interpretation, the forms of the three consecutive animals seen in the cloud by Hamlet become as rich in content as the vulture discovered by Oskar Pfister in Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting *Saint Anne* of the Louvre, which Freud wrote about in his work *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*.²⁶ Breton recalls Leonardo's treatise in which he encouraged students to model sights they would see when looking at dilapidated walls. As he puts it: "the whole problem of the passage from subjectivity to objectivity is implicitly resolved there, and the implication of this resolution are fuller of human interest than those of a simple technique, even if the technique were

²² Ibid., p. 169.

²³ M. Ernst, *Beyond Painting [Au-delà de la peinture]*, [in:] Patrick Waldberg, *Surrealism*, Thames & Hudson, London 1968, p. 96. (96-100).

²⁴ A. Breton, *Mad Love*, transl. M. A. Caws, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London 1987 [1937], p. 85.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

that of inspiration itself." According to Breton, this is precisely the reason for surrealist interest in this technique. Surrealism did not begin with it, but found it on its way and utilized it for transcending painting, for going "beyond painting", Breton writes. "The novel associations of images that the poet, the artist, the scholar bring forth are comparable in that they take some grid of a particular texture, whether this texture be concretely that of a decrepit wall, of a cloud, or of anything else: some prolonged and vague sound carries this melody that we needed to hear, excluding any other."²⁷ Breton writes about the paranoiac critical method referring to Max Ernst, although he does not mention his name. Nor does he mention Dalí, as their paths diverged at that time.

The Anthology of Black Humour (1940),²⁸ a book with texts selected by Breton, features both the paranoiac critical method and its creator, Salvador Dalí. Describing surrealist black humour, Michael Richardson notes that it tends to evoke feelings of discomfort, although at the same time it causes laughter. "It arises from a determination not to take the world seriously and to treat our own position within it not as absurd but as strange and alien: it reminds us that we know nothing of why we are here or what purpose we are really supposed to serve."²⁹ Another fundamental fact is that "humour in surrealism is always founded in a refusal of given conditions and as a revolt against whatever is imposed upon us."³⁰

In his introduction to the anthology, Breton describes black humour as "a deviation [*un détournement*] of the logical function from its usual paths".³¹ Paranoiac criticism fits perfectly into this definition. Breton's anthology contains a text by Dalí, *The New Colours of Spectral Sex Appeal*, from his book *The Conquest of the Irrational*, in which the author considers reasons for the recent cases of obesity noted among ghosts. "The reasons for the alarming increase in weight, the compact heaviness, the realistic and extra-soft sagging of today's ghosts derive only from the primary and original notion of the materialization of the idea of ghosts, which as we shall quickly see resides in the feeling of 'virtual volume'." A ghost materializes through "simulacrum of volume", Dalí writes. "The simulacrum of volume is the envelope. The envelope hides, protects, transfigures, incites, tempts, gives a misleading notion of volume. [...] The envelope dematerializes the content, the volume; weakens the objectivity of volume; makes the virtual volume distressing. [...] we know that human

²⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

²⁸ *Anthology of Black Humour*, A. Breton ed., transl. M. Polizzotti, Telegram, London 2009.

²⁹ M. Richardson, *Black Humour*, in: *Surrealism. Key Concepts*, M Richardson, K. Fijalkowski eds, (2009), p. 207.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *Anthology ...*, p. 314. „un détournement de la fonction logique de ses voies ordinaires”.

libido makes distress anthropomorphic, that it personifies the distressing volume, that it transforms the distressing volume into concrete flesh, that it transforms metaphysical distress into concrete fat. For what is the terrifying fat of the flesh?"³²

What Dalí certainly finds interesting is ambiguity, impossibility to separate language play from the area controlled by sight. Can ambiguity inherent in visuality be transferred into the area of language? In the painting *Apparition of Face and Fruit-dish on a Beach*, above his signature, Dalí added a popular example of a double image used by psychologists and philosophers – the duck-rabbit. The drawing can be interpreted as a duck's head or a rabbit's head, but never simultaneously.³³ Contrary to appearances, the problems of the paranoid critical method, which, through Dalí's very public persona, seem to remain at the antipodes of scientific thinking, are not far from the most relevant philosophical considerations regarding boundaries between image and word, or those between percept and concept. Paranoid delirium/discourse is open to interpretation. In other words, it cannot be "reduced to mere logical language."³⁴ The image that cannot be validly interpreted evokes the problems that troubled Wittgenstein. The same image of the duck-rabbit was found in *Philosophical Investigations*.³⁵ What Wittgenstein referred to as aspect perception complicated the understanding of language play and the relations between thinking and language.

"Someone who puts the <<organization>> of a visual impression on a level with colours and shapes would be taking it for granted that the visual impression is an inner object. Of course, this makes this object chimerical, a strangely vacillating entity. For the similarity to a picture is now impaired. (...) But with a changing aspect, the case is altered. What before perhaps seemed, or even was, a useless specification once there was a copy, now becomes the only possible expression of the experience."³⁶

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³² S. Dalí, *The New Colours of Spectral Sex Appeal* [in:] *Black Humour...*

³³ D. Ades, *Salvador Dalí ...*, p. 205.

³⁴ D.-A. Constantinidou, *When Lacan ...*, p. 250.

³⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, John Wiley Blackwell, Chichester 2010, p. 207 .

³⁶ *Ibid.*

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PARANOJA KRYTYCZNA JAKO SURREALISTYCZNY WARIANT MYŚLENIA ARTYSTYCZNEGO (streszczenie)

O ile w latach 20. surrealizm zdominowany był przez pojęcie automatyzmu psychicznego i hysterii, o tyle w latach 30. najważniejszym impulsem dla eksperymentów surrealistycznych było pojęcie paranoi krytycznej. Wprowadzone przez Salvadora Dalí w tekście *L'Âne pourri* („Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution”, 1930 nr 1) miało demaskować normatywne rozumienie percepcji nieadekwatne wobec doświadczenia. Podstawowym narzędziem użytym przez Dalego był wieloznaczny optycznie obraz poddający się różnym odczytaniom. André Breton pisał o paranoi krytycznej w *L'Amour fou* (1937) odwołując się do tekstu Freuda na temat Leonarda da Vinci. W *Anthologie de l'humour noir* definiował ją jako „*détournement* funkcji logicznej w jej zwykłych sposobach działania”. Pojęcie paranoi krytycznej pozwala zaakcentować kluczową rolę takich stanów percepcji i pojęć opisujących poznanie jak nierozstrzygalność i polisemia. W znacznym stopniu wyznaczają one granice między tym, co jest artykulacją językową i wizualną. Paranoja wydaje się pojęciem bardzo dalekim od dwudziestowiecznego modelu myślenia naukowego, ale wystarczy odwołać się do *Traktatu logiczno-filozoficznego* Wittgensteina, by zauważyć, że proponowane przez niego „rozbłyśnięcie aspektu” nie jest dalekie od surrealistycznego ujęcia paranoi.

Słowa kluczowe: surrealizm, paranoja krytyczna, *simulacrum*, aspekt, Dalí, Breton, Lacan, Wittgenstein

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