

Dreaming along Yasser's Footpath...

Preliminary note :

The following text is a comment on Yasser Abdelkawy's introduction text published in The Room, the Egyptian surrealists magazine issue #1. Some comments by Stuart Inman have also been added as footnotes. The idea is to re-connect current surrealism to so-called "post surrealist" art and political movements of the second half of the 20th century which are actually a legitimate part of today's surrealism heritage, and to explore possible paths for today's surrealism in a close future.

A copy of Yasser Abdelkawy's original text is provided [here](#).

It is surprising as well as wonderful that Yasser discovered all by himself, in very different circumstances, what the Situationist International (S.I.) once stated around the 1970's in the following concise form: "Le Pouvoir ne crée pas, il récupère" (Roughly "The Power does not create, it recovers"). And frankly, I prefer Yasser's formulation, as being much more open than that of the SI, of which I find that it too much tends to enclose the understanding within the concepts developed by the S.I. itself – I mean the now well known "Détournement"- "Récupération" couple -- the general validity, or rather *scope*, of which, I am not at all so sure ...

"Détournement" ¹(Diversion) corresponds to the use, by revolutionaries, of what is there, as a "ready-made", floating within the society². In the Situationist theory, "détournement" has a meaning that is nicely tainted of misuse. And as every object in the capitalist society is so to say tuned to the objectives and needs of capitalism, any revolutionary use has to be a misuse.

"Récupération" (Recover) corresponds to the use, by the Power, of the results of the proletarians' (creative) imagination - artists included of course. In French the word "récupération" has a meaning close to picking up things out of the trash.

This Détournement-Récupération couple, as attractive as it may look at first, seems to me to elude somewhat too quickly a very small question : *Work*.

And it is true that the practice of the S.I. was not really renowned for ardor at work (I mean *communist work* here).

The Feast... The always started again Feast... That's great. The S.I. actually had picked up their ideas about the Feast from an analysis of the Paris Commune, considered as a revolutionary Feast, that had been initially proposed a little bit earlier by [Henri Lefebvre](#).

But the question still arises of *who* shall produce the elements (materials among others) necessary for the Feast. And in the situationist theory, one can clearly see that it is not supposed to be the S.I. itself. While the slogan "Do not ever work !" essentially targeted wage work, it also had the effect to suggest that the more general concept of human work did not need to be addressed.

The fundamental question, once innocently raised by Kropotkin in "The Conquest of Bread", namely, "What shall we eat?", is hence not really solved in the S.I. theory. In terms of theory and theorists it is important to note that Kropotkin, compared to most other theorists, had the intelligence to note that Paris Commune mainly died of starvation and to draw some conclusions of it.

1 "Les deux lois fondamentales du détournement sont la perte d'importance, allant jusqu'à la déperdition de son sens premier, de chaque élément détourné ; et en même temps l'organisation d'un autre ensemble signifiant qui confère à chaque élément sa nouvelle portée" - Raoul Vaneigem, ***Histoire désinvolte du Surréalisme*** (Paul Vermont publisher 1997- P120)

2 Détournement is actually a surrealist invention as Raoul Vaneigem notes in his book ***Histoire désinvolte du Surréalisme*** (Paul Vermont publisher 1997 - P119) while quoting Breton sentence in *Le Pont du Jour* : "Toutes choses sont appelées à d'autres utilités que celles qu'on leur attribue généralement". But as everyone knows the surrealist Marcel Duchamp was the actual inventor of "Détournement".

From there, a vague suspicion that a revolutionary organization of the type of the SI may be in an excellent position to exploit somewhat (although, in full brotherhood) the workers required to produce the elements necessary for the Feast.

This is, for instance and among others, the criticism addressed to the SI by the surrealist [Louis Janover](#) in "Surréalisme et situationnistes. Au rendez-vous des avant-gardes", (Ed. Sens & Tonka, 2013).

What is clear, is that any organization which does not incorporate within itself the production of the whole of life, will have no choice but to reproduce the exploitation system since it shall have to address elsewhere (outside of itself) for this little detail, once highlighted by Kropotine, namely "What do we eat?".

We can say things in another, perhaps deeper, way : "Anything that preserves within itself the separation between production and consumption shall end up causing an intermediate class -- may it be merchant, bureaucratic, "revolutionary" class or whatever – to emerge between them and shall hence rebuild – per construction – the exploitation system, since such an organisation derives its very existence from the separation between production and consumption".

This is also the conclusion to which Vincent Bounoure and Vratislav Effenberger arrived³ – but based on ethnological observations -- in 1975 when they consider *any human activity as essentially a form of human expression*, regardless of whether it is otherwise considered as production or consumption.

It should be noted here that the separation between production and consumption is -- at least partly – abolished within the Free Software Movement, which constitutes the largest (and real!) communist movement of recent decades⁴.

The beauty of Yasser's text is that we immediately understand that, *what is exploited in wage labor, is human imagination itself and as such*.

This idea certainly had been developed simultaneously by the S.I. and by the "[Socialisme ou Barbarie](#)" group in the 1960s and 1970s, but perhaps not as deeply, and moreover not as clearly as Yasser does in his text. Above all, the vision provided by Yasser is directly drawn from purely surrealist premises, *without any reference to lines of thought external to surrealism*.

As a direct and logical consequence of Yasser's text, it becomes obvious that *the struggle of surrealism and that of what has been called "the workers' emancipation movement" are one and the same thing*.

The Situationist International happened to be the historical manifestation of this situation in the 1970s, in the sense that it abolished the separation between Art and Politics. A separation that – probably by timidity, or rather weakness – surrealism had maintained, by delegating the management of the "political" aspects of the surrealist project to marxist organizations or later to "Anarchism". In other words, in one case as in the other, outside of the surrealist field of activity.

Entrusting "politics" to specialists, "professional revolutionaries" and other "experts" was probably not a bright idea.

3 In the collective book "*La Civilisation Surréaliste*" (Payot 1976)

4 Note by **Stuart Inman** : "A partial, but obviously incomplete thought around production/consumption in my essay, link below. Obviously my own use of the terms refers primarily to them in capitalist use. If I produce cabbages to consume that can break with capitalist forms of production and consumption, and even be too much fun to be work! But I think one must still preserve 'useless time' as the essence of free time." <http://stuartinman.blogspot.com/2019/08/surrealist-time-part-2.html>

Agreed Stuart, "one must still preserve 'useless time' as the essence of free time". And this is a possible drawback of societies where production and consumption are integrated and hardly discernable. This is just as true of Fourier's harmonic social models. - **Pierre Petiot**

The hesitations and the lack of clarity of Breton himself on this point, and in spite of the certainly much more advanced, sharper and richer vision of [Benjamin Péret](#) , show that there existed, within surrealism, the vague and confused feeling of something like an error was being made. The relative but yet notable success of the S.I. in 1968 -- in the sense that the ideas of the S.I. very largely irrigated the ideas of the 1968 movement -- showed that it was indeed an error. The late, but respectful and friendly relations ⁵ between [Guy Debord](#) and [Annie Le Brun](#) demonstrated that Debord had finally admitted the legitimacy of his surrealist ancestry.

However, while I am speaking above of an "error", this is somewhat a little too quickly said⁶ ... Because in a certain way, "[L'Ode à Charles Fourier](#)" shows that Breton already had -- although confusedly -- understood that, delegating the political and social organisation questions outside of surrealism was not satisfying. By this reference to [Charles Fourier](#) , Breton understands and pin points - at least at a poetical level - that the communist organization must incorporate the production of the entire human life, as the social schemes proposed by Fourier, as static as they may be, state it strongly enough.

Yes. Production of human life, *in all its aspects*, and this in an integrated way, without any separation between production and consumption. And this becomes even more obvious when reading Fourier's book "[Le Nouveau Monde Amoureux](#) " (yet unpublished while Breton was still alive and still not available in English), a book in which, to say the least, Fourier anticipates Freud and goes much further.⁷

From there follows that, in the time when "L'Ode à Charles Fourier" was written, it was already intuitively clear to Breton that the communist (= surrealist) social organization has to abolish the separation between production and consumption.

The closest point of view to these ideas that I have found in the recent thought, is the idea of "*Cooperatives of Knowledge*", as developed by [Bernard Stiegler](#) ⁸ a couple of years ago, and which Stiegler of course derived from the practices of the [Free Software Movement](#). Anyone with some understanding of Marx 's thought will certainly identify the project of humanity consciously building its own history. Just as anyone with some understanding of Alchemy will sense the presence of the old underground alchemical topic of the transformation of the alchemist himself by the effect of his own patient work -- and *not necessarily a conscious work* -- when refining and transforming chemical bodies in his crucible and furnace.

5 And Debord speaking of Breton's 'grandeur'... -- **Stuart Inman**. See for instance <http://www.notbored.org/debord-9October1992.html>

True. Debord was quite fond of "grandeur", reusing for instance Shakespeare's words : "Gentlemen, if we live, it should at least be to walk on the heads of kings" -- **Pierre Petiot**.

6 I'm not sure that Breton was confused on the point, but his explication is certainly very incomplete, and possibly at a time when something more was needed from him. I think to some extent it goes back to the point about over or under determination of an idea, it would have been helpful to have a clearer analysis from Breton, but it was also important to leave it in the hands of other surrealists.. - **Stuart Inman**.

7 While homosexuality is at best tolerated in contemporary societies, Fourier considers homosexuals as *useful* and *necessary* -- that is, *required* -- for the completeness, balance and stability of his "passionate series". In other terms to the completeness of human social happiness.

8 It however seems to me that, by an effect of the human passion that Fourier named "La Papillonne" (= the passion of permanently browsing from one place to another), Bernard Stiegler may somewhat have forgotten this idea in recent years, but I may be wrong there. - **Pierre Petiot**

But the simple expression "Cooperatives of Knowledge", once dropped in a surrealist playground, raises the question of the role of consciousness in the surrealist project. Is it a matter of accepting what seems to be the position of the three major thinkers of the unconscious that Marx, Freud and, in part, Nietzsche were, as summed up by Freud's sentence "**Wo Es war, soll Ich werden**" ? Or is the surrealist position different? Perhaps it is wise, from a surrealist point of view, to decide to leave this question open, but at least it should be raised, because in terms of "knowledge", we obviously have to take into account the unconscious work and *the unconscious knowledge that underlie each one of our thoughts, but also each one of our gestures*⁹.

For a long moment, I have been dreaming that nowadays surrealist groups could be or become Cooperatives of Knowledge, but I ended up observing that perhaps one should not confuse hopes or even revolutionary necessities and the current state of things and realities.

Why are the surrealist groups not acting as Cooperatives of Knowledge as one would feel and sense they should do ?

The first reason is that they do not set themselves this goal. Or more exactly, they do, but they restrict the scope of the knowledge that they accept to take into account, *to surrealist affairs only*, as if – if one could possibly say so -- surrealism was some kind of specialty or expertise. Hence, the problem with surrealists as regards Cooperatives of Knowledge, first more or less lies in the restrictions that surrealists impose on themselves and their activities.

One probably remembers that Breton insisted on surrealist meetings to be held in cafés, it was of course not due to the scarcity of available meeting rooms in Paris, but rather connected with the idea that surrealist meetings remain permanently open to the hazards of the world, open to new encounters, open to "objective chance". It was a precaution intended to prevent surrealism from closing in on itself. The idea of a surrealist meeting in Breton's mind, was probably not necessarily restricted to that of a meeting where surrealists would be discussing their own business, but also open to circumstances where surrealist meetings could or should be situations where *the meeting itself would be surrealist*, and not only the expected attendees.

A second reason which constrains the activity of surrealist groups and prevents them from becoming Cooperatives of Knowledge lies in the platonicist structure which constitutes the foundations of culture in general. Plato himself is obviously not the only one responsible for that, since we find the same structure in all class societies, on all continents, and intellectual elites are always more or less linked with the ruling classes.

Since Antiquity, studies have been divided into "[Liberal Arts](#)" – noble arts, where you do not get your hands dirty -- and "[Mechanical Arts](#)" -- arts that are not noble at all, and where you get your hands dirty.

This division hardly seems to only have been somewhat shaken on two occasions: on the one hand, in the early 17th century when [modern science](#) was created together with its instruments (astronomical telescope, microscope, etc.), and on the other hand -- and to a much larger extent -- in the 18th century,

9 I am speaking of the *procedural unconscious* here... We once learned how to walk, talk, swim, ride a bicycle, and although we are doing these actions consciously, the details of these actions that cost us so much effort during the learning process, became unconscious and now are hidden to us.

when Diderot's and D'Alembert's [Encyclopédie](#)¹⁰ was initiated, in which knowledge relating to what was formerly called the Mechanical Arts is finally recorded in a similar way and with the same care and accuracy as the one used for the Liberal Arts.

The division between the mechanical and the liberal arts, which originated in the slave societies of Antiquity, ultimately brilliantly resisted the disappearance of slavery, and for the most part, it is still there.

The bourgeoisie, which, in the 18th century, had managed to seduce nobility by publishing some of its manufacturing "secrets" in the *Encyclopédie* – fascinating even up to the king of France [who did not hesitate to become a locksmith in his spare time](#) – quickly abandoned this great educational impetus after the French revolution, by restricting the teaching of the mechanical arts to the dedicated populations : the engineers responsible for organizing production on the one hand and the workers paid for producing on the other hand.

We now know that – except of course during their periods of paid work and strictly to the extent required – consumers do not have to put their fingers and much less their brains into technical questions. Even when they see their world collapsing around them, even when they fall ill or die because of them.

The ecological problems, although resulting from a certain short sighted understanding - or even frank ignorance - as to the consequences of production processes in the highly distant and foreign space-time domain that extends just beyond the cash drawers, will inevitably be resolved as soon as the consumers take the habit of sorting their waste in order to "save the planet". In short, the customer is king, but what was once good enough to convince the King of France of the wonders of industry before 1789, can in no way any longer be part of the average culture of the 21st century citizens.

[Hardly any philosophers](#) were to be found in the second half of the 20th century to suggest the extension of the common public culture to the mechanical arts - in other words to technology.

In their daring, these philosophers suggested that public ignorance of technology matters – firmly maintained by public authorities – could be the source of a particular form of alienation, of a rather painful type of both consciousness and unconsciousness, in the general population as well as among intellectuals. They even went so far as to suggest that it be remedied by modifying the content of public education programs as well as the content delivered by the mass media.

But these were excessive and particularly irresponsible proposals from an economic point of view. What would happen, indeed, if consumers started to repair their machines themselves – such as their cars for example. Would they not end up demanding that repairable machines be built? Wouldn't they suddenly come to realize the existence of certain forms of planned obsolescence? Could it not happen that the public would come to discover more clever technical solutions than those implemented in the industry? Who knows, even, whether they would not demand a complete reorganization of production processes. Obviously anyone who is a little aware of economic constraints will agree on the complete absurdity of such requirements. That is why such demands will never be met.

This is why surrealism – like the rest of society – inherited from this "natural" division between intellectual things (roughly the "liberal arts") and non-intellectual things (roughly "mechanical arts"), without questioning in the least the origin of this division, once rooted in slavery systems. In the case of surrealism, this platonicist tradition was additionally historically transmitted through the somewhat exacerbated type of elitism which had sometimes been one of the characteristics of [Symbolism](#) .

10 “Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts”

Symbolists had many excuses in that. They had to [place their intellectual demands very high](#) , in order [to openly oppose the stupidity of the bourgeois culture](#) that [Alfred Jarry](#) ridiculed and immortalized in the puppet theatre character of [Ubu](#). Surrealism, breaking with Dada, could hardly avoid doing the same, especially Breton, who remained, more than others, fairly faithful (and fortunately !) to certain aspects of Symbolism. This was certainly not for nothing in the impatience that Breton manifested with regard to workers' meetings of the Communist Party. Other surrealists got used to it, but himself could not ever.

However, surrealism has at least managed to blast the boundaries between the various disciplines of Fine Arts. It will never happen to any surrealist to reduce Ernst, Matta, Bellmer or even Dali to the status of painter. Even less, of course, Duchamp. All surrealists have always used the various classical artistic and literary means - just like many other resources which were certainly nothing classic - according to the needs required for their mental experiments.

But, when considered seriously, are the technical skills required in the arts or literature so different from those used in any trade or craft? And when we turn the question around, and consider it from the angle of [Art Brut](#), do the technical skills used in Art Brut artworks do the least harm to the quality, depth, or even to the purity of the kind of surrealism that they reveal ?

There would actually be no fundamental problem with a form of surrealism extended to plumbing, carpentry, heavy truck driving or [agriculture](#), and indeed to a generalized form of misuse applied to any professional domain, or to any scientific, artistic or technical discipline, as [Marcel Duchamp](#) taught us. In fact, as everyone can see, the People spontaneously become surrealist – at least partly – within each potentially revolutionary period, riot , or demonstration.

There is no difficulty either with a surrealism implemented in the culinary field - and it is so true, that cooking recipes are not difficult to find in the surrealist literature. How can we speak of a surrealist daily life if our surrealist activity does not encompass and include all activities that produce our daily life ?

The word “knowledge” in the expression “Cooperatives of Knowledge ” designates the various types of knowledge in use -- and in permanent development -- in all human activities. It does not matter whether they are classified in categories such as production, consumption, sleep, gardening, eroticism, poetry, beekeeping or arts whether fine or not.

I remember that someone once mentioned to me the existence in Australia of a small newspaper entitled:” *The Surrealist worker* ”.

Why would we fear to encompass the entire field of the Encyclopedie and much more ? I raise this question quite hypocritically, because I know the answer very well.

The answer lies in what Vincent Bounoure in "La Civilisation Surréaliste" called "our internal enemy", that is to say Art. And of course, just as well, Literature.

Most surrealists continue to place some hopes in Art. It is certainly quite unreasonable to do it under the surrealist banner, as surrealist art is out of fashion and it is best to leave the glorious label alone.

What can be expected from an exhibition – even in Paris – nowadays? Some rather good things indeed, but certainly not money or notoriety. You may gain some sincere admirers -- although penniless -- and make some really good friends – although not very rich either. You may also gain the recognition of your peers for your work, and that is precious, real and fundamental – provided they venture to visit your exhibition.

Some surrealists, even more unreasonable ones, still hope to make a living from their art ... In the vast majority of cases, they will get – and by far – much more money from their unemployment benefits than from the sales of their works. It would probably be quicker and more efficient to start by paying first more personally, and to sleep with the right wealthy one or the editor of the right newspaper -- provided however you came across someone who is reasonably honest and a little grateful, and not on the usual pure cynic.

And besides, what could seriously anyone hope for from the current art market given what it really is , what it really shows ?

The situation is obviously the same as regards poetry ... There are hundreds and hundreds of poetry publishers – in France, for instance. The majority of them are as almost as wealthy as you are -- or most often rather less – and rely upon their savings and their sleep time to publish you.

So, why not just build on what is good, and even great, in the traditional system? In other words, the opening and closing of exhibitions and the public reading and signing of poetry books. Alcohol and good food with friends and friends of friends -- and a little bit more if we please each other.

Do we need the art market or the publishing industry for that? No, what is needed is only a real surrealist audience, in other words surrealist friends and friends of these friends.

In fact, we are in the same situation as the people of Free Software Movement, that is, both producers and consumers of our own works, working essentially, or even totally free of charge, as well as occasional fundraisers. We are just not aware of it.

But this, is it not the beginning of communism? No leaders, no parties -- not even anarchism to tell the truth. There are no big changes required in our behaviors – at first at least. *The only change required is just the vision we have of it.*

I am not asking for an occultation of surrealism. As almost everything in this world is already occulted by the mass media, that would be like to break already open doors. We just have to let it be as it is.

I am just suggesting that we first focus on ourselves, on our needs, on our pleasures, on our common surrealist world. I am just suggesting that we are not so poor in fact. That we have means, starting with ourselves, but not only. Our means also include what we own as a collective, as well as what we may borrow, share and lend, rent and steal¹¹. We just have to organize ourselves and set up it all in a surrealist way -- that is, *collectively*.

We don't have to worry too much about the so-called “real world” around us. We do not have to care so much about whether it likes or does not like us, or whether there is some glory to get out of it. *This “real world” is falling apart anyway.* Let's be wiser, build our own world and save ourselves by our own means.

However, that requires us to definitely abandon the platonicist world where we were born. This requires that we abolish this slavery-originated difference between the liberal arts and the mechanical arts. This requires us to learn, practice and surrealize the mechanical arts as well. This requires that we collectively cultivate our overall autonomy -- food included, where and when possible. This requires us to identify, connect and collaborate with our allies.

Because faced with the coming disasters, only strong enough collectives shall get through the World Wide Wreck.

End 2019

11 I mean what we privately own, but that we can share or rather put in common - concretely - without even changing the ownership of it. Focus on the [Use Value](#) and forget about the [Exchange Value](#) . *Exchange Value has no meaning where there are no owners.*