Surrealism and Anti-colonialism

Jacques Leenhardt

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1288>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.1288

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2011

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Jacques Leenhardt, "Surrealism and Anti-colonialism", *Critique d'art* [Online], 37 | Printemps 2011, Online since 14 February 2012, connection on 08 August 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1288> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.1288>

This text was automatically generated on 8 August 2021.

EN

Surrealism and Anti-colonialism

Jacques Leenhardt

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Leclercq, Sophie. *La Raçon du colonialisme : les surréalistes face aux mythes de la France coloniale (1919-1962)*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2010, (Œuvres en sociétés)

- 1 This book, which is the product of a thesis on Cultural History, has opted for the relationship to colonialism to broach the development of the Surrealist group from the First World War to the end of the French colonial era. The period does not include the still open debates about the status of “France overseas”. Sophie Leclercq makes an immediate distinction between *colonization*, the historical phenomenon that dates back to the dawn of the modern period and which, for France, gathered speed in the 19th century with the conquest of Algeria and the Third Republic’s imperialist saga, and *colonialism* and *anti-colonialism*. These latter made their appearance in 1895 and issue from the apologetic and critical discourse, with this latter spreading all the wider because the colonial fact henceforth gave rise to the beginnings of protest. Among the different persons and groups involved with *anti-colonialism*, the Surrealists would play a quintessential part in the immediate postwar years, in the wake of Dada.
- 2 Two factors are analyzed: the Marxist legacy of *anti-colonialism*, which the Surrealists would take on board, but do little with—it would remain a prisoner of the ambivalence of their relations with the Communist party—, and a certain mythical dimension of Africa and so-called “primitive” peoples in general. In the 1920s, the Africa of the *bal nègre* or “black dance” was very much in vogue, as were the masks referred to and interpreted by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani and Fernand Léger in their works. That summons to a superlatively depicted Africa in Raymond Roussel’s *Impressions d’Afrique* (1910) represented a lever for countering the philosophy of official France. Drawing on both political and cultural opposition, then, and hatred of the “western civilization” which had led to the butchery of 1914-18, that revolt still did

not culminate in a real knowledge and recognition of colonized peoples. It was not until after the Second World War that that epidermic, not to say exotic climate would be replaced by an analysis of the effects of colonization on populations subjected thereto (Aimé Césaire, Pierre Mabille, Franz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Memmi).

- 3 S. Leclercq devotes the second part of her book to Surrealists' curiosity about the sidelines of culture, black African fetishes and "primitive" creations, along with works by children and "mad" people. Step by step, she follows the Surrealists' relations with the commercial art world and with collectors of masks. She demonstrates the ambivalence of their relations with the ethnology of the day, developing in the lee of the colonial fact, as illustrated by Michel Leiris, who played an active role therein, while at the same time explaining his reservations. She sheds light on their fascination with the Orient, which was palpable among members of the group (Crevel, Ribemont-Dessaignes). The book is a sound summary of knowledge in this domain, which is then followed by an analysis of the political ideas of *anti-colonialism*, from the Rif War (1925) to opposition to the Colonial Exhibition in Paris (1931). The conclusion of this part clearly outlines the boundaries of the anti-colonialism of the Surrealists in question.
- 4 The final chapter of this part deals more specifically with black America, including Brazil with Perret, and Martinique around Césaire and the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (with a preface by Breton and illustrated by Wifredo Lam in its Spanish version), a political project undertaken by the magazines *Légitime défense* (1932) and then *Tropiques*. Césaire would later explain the degree to which Surrealism, membership to which he never dreamt of claiming, had helped him to free up his poetic language and become aware of the importance of that liberating process in and through language.
- 5 Haiti merits special attention, as does Pierre Mabille's role in the recognition of voodoo cultures. As the first colonial possession to win its freedom through arms from Napoleonic France, Haiti had to be the paradigmatic figure of *anti-colonialism*. Breton, who gave a still famous lecture there during the war, emphasized the value of the African heritage, which applied not only to Haiti and the Caribbean, but to the whole of the rest of the world, too.
- 6 This part of the book winds up with a lengthy historical analysis of the Surrealists' involvement against the war and for the de-colonization of Algeria, along with their support of the FLN fighters. S. Leclercq soundly analyzes the tensions that came to the fore in the anti-colonialist camp (Breton, Schuster, Legrand) and the political alignment with the FLN. This was the period when, after 1956, intellectuals were split over the issue of the Communist party's role and the conditions of engagement. The right to insubordination would be re-asserted by the *Manifesto of the 121*.
- 7 The book offers a clear view of the way in which the challenges and stakes of the anti-colonialist struggle of the day were intellectually organized. The author sets forth its complexity in a well-balanced and critical manner. Certain sources are sadly missing: not a word about Alain Jouffroy (*La Génération surréaliste*) or Pierre Naville, oddly absent from the analyses of the political debate in the 1920s and 1930s. He does earn a mention among the "non-Surrealist authors", which is paradoxical for the man who was the first editor of the magazine *Le Surréalisme et la révolution*! This does not mar the serious nature of the endeavour, but it is a pity, on the other hand, that this study remains closely bound up with the history of writings and ideas, and does not broach the contribution of visual artists to the anti-colonialist struggle. Roberto Matta and Wifredo Lam (mistakenly given an 'l') are invariably quoted in a purely anecdotal way,

which is regrettable. It is true that these artists, whom Breton admired and commented upon from 1940 on, did not regard anti-colonialism from a strictly “French” angle, which they were obviously quite right to do!