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Women criminals captured by Surrealism

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1 In France in the middle of the inter-war period, two cases involving women criminals received extensive media coverage and featured in photomontages elaborated by the Surrealists. On January 22, 1923, the young militant anarchist, Germaine Berton, assassinated Marius Plateau, secretary general of the French League of Action and the Camelots du roi, extreme right-wing Royalist movements, before trying to commit suicide. She was the subject of a photomontage which appeared the following year in the first number of the review, La Révolution surréaliste. Almost ten years later, in 1933 in the town of Le Mans, Geneviève and Léonie Lancelin were violently murdered by their domestic servants, Christine and Léa Papin. A non-signed montage devoted to the Papin sisters was published in the 5th edition of the review, Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution.

2 The elaboration of these two Surrealist photomontages can be analysed through the prism of the political positioning of the group, while placing them in a context of photographic portraiture history. The aim here is to show that the photographic forms used by the Surrealists to portray these cases of women criminals serve as pivots to affirm the political radicalism of the group during periods which were crucial for the movement, but which were in fact profoundly conservative in aesthetic terms, drawing for example on relations of dominance based on class and gender.

Crime, art and politics

3 Both by their violent disruption of social order and by their literary potential, sensational criminal cases aroused the interest of the Surrealists as the movement and its members evolved, in lasting manner as from 1919. The notion of transgression which constitutes an assassination became a subject of fascination and a resource of political reflection for the Surrealists, who intensified their demands and political
posturing during the inter-war period. This long-term attraction towards crime can be explained by the way in which these cases highlighted the structures defining society: the family, class relationships, the political organisation of the country, or the unconscious forces driving individuals within this structure. Through these violent events the Surrealists also sought to question the shaping of medical or historical knowledge, or the contours of morality and the law, as underlined by Jonathan Eburne:

For the surrealists, the social phenomenon of crime offered revealing insights into the historical forces and institutions of knowledge that shaped twentieth-century life. Rather than viewing violent crime merely as source for material for artistic inspiration, the surrealists scrutinized the newspaper reports, scientific studies, and fictional accounts that both represented crime publicly and speculated about its historical consequences. This scrutiny formed the basis of the movement’s own theories of representation and historical consequence.4

The reviews published during the 1920’s by the Surrealist movement became a favoured media for the analysis of bourgeois society structure. The titles of two of the reviews, La Révolution surréaliste and Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution (The Surrealist Revolution and Surrealism at the service of the Revolution) refer directly to the radical ambitions of the group. As organs for diffusion of the movement’s ideas, they provided the settings for visual and literary experiments, for surveys of society and reactions to current events. It is essential to take their influence into account in order to understand the political positioning of the group, placing in perspective the visual forms they produced.5

Political assassination attempts and class rebellion, as forms of questioning the established order, interested the Surrealist movement, as demonstrated by the Berton and Papin cases. While the gender of the criminal is not the original motive of interest in these cases, they represent one of the reasons for the intense media coverage. According to Frédéric Chauvaud, “Women criminals appear all the more frightening because they are so few, as if their limited presence were inversely proportional to their dangerousness”.6 The media exposure of the two cases contributed to the interest of the Surrealists in these women, leading to a questioning of the focus on female crime in the eyes of the law, the media and artists. With the boom in press coverage of sensational affairs, illustrated by photography and the emergence of reviews such as the Detective (1928-1940) or Police Magazine (1930-1939), images of these criminals were widely distributed and contributed to the propagation of a stereotyped image of female deviance, to which the Surrealist productions reacted.

Surrealist photography took on many different forms: collages and montages, re-appropriations and recycling of retrieved images, manipulations in the developing room or autonomous productions such as those of Eli Lotar, Brassai or Man Ray. Contrary however to what took place in the field of painting, no surrealist theory of photography emerged. As Rosalind Krauss however has shown,7 these uses of photography constitute a real surrealist aesthetic through their capacity to subvert reality and highlight the construction of representations. Produced during a period of upsurge in the use of photomontages, coming over initially from the Dada movement, the two montages which interest us occupy a singular place in Surrealist production. Far removed from theories of automatism, they are conceived in reaction to current events and addressed to a particular community of readers. They are the result of deliberate fabrication and fall into the realm of reviews4 sold in bookshops. While photomontage was emerging as an anti-artistic practice within the Dada movement,
linked to the experience of industrial modernity and for the use of activists, the Surrealist montages which interest us are distinguished by their ambiguity. They reveal the underlying contradictions in the political positioning of the Surrealists.

Page 17, *La Révolution surréaliste* 1, 1924

An anarchist amongst the Surrealists

The montage reproducing the portrait of Germaine Berton appeared in the first number of *La Révolution surréaliste*, which came out in December 1924, not long after she had made another suicide attempt. A year earlier, at the time of her acquittal, Breton, Aragon and Morise had a bouquet of red rose and carnations delivered to her accompanied by these words: “To Germaine Berton, who did what we did not succeed in doing”. For Breton, her acquittal seemed to have lessened the radicalism of her act, but this suicide attempt revived its interest and that of the other members of the group. Thus, in the Surrealist daily journal, Aragon writes that “his mind is too preoccupied with Germaine Berton”, while in a letter to Simone Kahn (his partner at the time), Breton mentions Berton coming out of hospital and states his intention of writing to her. She aroused the admiration of the surrealists by her incessant activity amongst the anarchists, by the suicides she seemed to provoke or by the suicide attempts she resolved to carry out, and especially by her own individual rebellion. The note attached to the flowers clarified their position: the revolutionary action of the group, the subject of much discussion during the formative years of the movement, is here already siding with the symbolic dimension.
Elaborated in parallel to the drafting of the *Premier manifeste du surréalisme* by André Breton, the layout of the review *La Révolution surréaliste* was based on that of the popularising science review, *Nature*. According to Dawn Ades this choice was made by Pierre Naville, the review’s co-director, so as to “differentiate the new review from other art or literary magazines, but also to suggest an approach devoted to the “research” of facts and data which in addition aimed at destabilising scientific certitudes of the ‘reign of logic’”. The Surrealists were therefore deliberately using the codes of a scientific review to include their periodicals in a framework of proof and truth. This choice is to be emphasised since a large part of their discourse aimed at undermining scientific rationality.  

On the suggestion of André Breton and Paul Éluard, the montage is presented in full page form, reproducing a portrait of Germaine Berton, framed by twenty eight portraits of tutelary figures and close members of the group. The portraits are framed in square format, set out in a grid, each one outlined by a faint border. At the bottom, in the centre, is a phrase from *Les Paradis artificiels* by Baudelaire, chosen by Eluard: “The woman is the being who throws the greatest shadow or the greatest light in our dreams”.

The figure of Germaine Berton, placed in the middle, tilting slightly towards the top of the image, is twice as big as the other portraits. The reframed image comes from a double face legal identity photograph, frontal and profile view, taken on February 16, 1923. Only the frontal view was kept and the frame narrowed down around the face of the criminal, while the information relating to the provenance of the image was removed. The bust of Berton almost disappears into shadow. The reproduction reduces the model of the face, accentuating the shadow of the right cheekbone, the fixed gaze and the tightened lips. It produces a flattening of the image similar to the form of a press shot or a police wanted notice. The short hair, cut to ear level, is characteristic of a boy’s haircut of the period, a symbol of women’s emancipation and here of the militant lifestyle of the young anarchist.

During the media battle following her act, Germaine Berton drew support from amongst others, the anarchist journal *Le Libertaire* and its readers. During her trial the famous journalist, Séverine, was called to testify in court. In her view, Germaine Berton was just a “Charlotte Corday without the prestige”, this comparison tending to minimise the political motivation behind Berton’s act. Her Lawyer, Maître Torrès, spoke of a crime of passion and referred to famous cases of female criminals ending in acquittal.

The grid form used in the montage resembles the synoptic tables which enable “scientists to elaborate a presentation which is essential and succinct, using an organisation which the eye takes in at a single glance”. The tight re-framing of the faces along with the juxtaposition of the portraits in contact sheet form, resemble the lay-out of the “flyers” reporting sensational stories, sold door to door, like the manuals of criminology which adopted the same presentation. Plate XI of the French translation in 1887 of *L’Uomo delinquente* by Cesare Lombroso, devoted to morality crimes, uses such a grid of portraits with one face in the centre bigger than the others. This close-up presentation of faces serves two main purposes: for the police authorities it is used to determine the facial characteristics of each criminal in order to proceed with his/her future identification, and for the illustration of criminal anthropology
theories, it enables a recognition of the physical characteristics of the deviance of the person. Allan Sekula refers as follows to such uses:

It was a war of representations. The photographic document serves as an image of scientific truth, despite the demonstration of its insufficiencies by Bertillon. Photographs and technical illustrations were used not only to show the body of the representative criminal but also to show the body as a carrier and producer of its own representations, as an inferior form.

In the Surrealist montage, in contrast to features in the criminology publications of the time and in the press, the faces are neither numbered nor named. If this could be construed as a way of thwarting the process of police identification or of scientific observation, it rather supposes that the montage is designed for a readership sufficiently cultivated to recognise the persons represented, or even suggests that the montage is not so much aimed at the readers of the review but to affirm the “entre-soi” nature of the Surrealist group. In fact, despite the diversity of the photographs brought together (studio or outdoor portraits, enlargements and re-framing), and the poses (frontal, profile, three-quarters), the processing and reproduction of the printing creates a visual uniformity which relates to the forming of a community symbolically sharing the gesture and act of Germaine Berton.

This “entre-soi” of the Surrealist microcosm featured in numerous photographs of the group in the 1920’s and the beginning of the 30’s, taken at the Surrealist centre during the launching of different events or in more private contexts. The masculinity of the group is highlighted owing to the scarcity of women present, those who are being mostly the partners of members. This is patent in the collage “Loplop presents the members of the Surrealist group” by Max Ernst (1931) and in the “Surrealist chessboard” by Man Ray (1934). Three photographs of the group hard at work, accompanied by the declaration “We have to have a new declaration of human rights” also feature on the cover of the first number of La Révolution surréaliste, in which Simone Kahn holds the position of secretary of the session.

Conversely, as shown by Linda Steer, the bodies upon which the Surrealist aesthetic was founded were essentially those of women, very often naked and fragmented. The motif of the masculine artistic “entre-soi” composed around a female figure is exemplified in the last number of La Révolution surréaliste, in which the painting by Magritte, “I can’t see the woman hidden in the forest”, presents a naked woman, the Muse, painted in the middle of photographic portraits of the Surrealists who have their eyes shut. The formal similarities of this work with the photomontages under study have been pointed out by several authors. The phrase of Baudelaire, chosen by Eluard: “The woman is the being who throws the greatest shadow or the greatest light in our dreams” also defines this masculine group, the possessive adjective “our” rendering the woman as a figure of “otherness”. Positioning themselves in a space between the photograph of Germaine Berton and the phrase of Baudelaire, the Surrealists, in the form of a tribute, place themselves under the patronage of the young anarchist. By using the visual language of criminology they appropriate her revolutionary aura, while preserving at the same time the classic dichotomy of the male artist and the female muse. The agency of Germaine Berton, the subject of their interest, is neutralised by the act of montage and the activist transformed into a muse.
Almost ten years later an extremely violent double murder was committed in Le Mans. On February 2, 1933, two domestic servants, Christine and Léa Papin, killed their employer Léonie Lancelin along with her daughter Geneviève. Their bodies were lacerated by stab wounds, their skulls partially crushed and three eyes had been torn out by bare hands. The two sisters were after found asleep in their bed by the police and confessed to the crime without fuss. The motive was not elucidated during the court case, the two sisters being suspected as much of insanity as of calculated vengeance. Contrary to the case of Germaine Berton, a young activist corresponding to the image of the modern woman, the Papin sisters seemed to have emerged from the 19th century. Domestic workers since their adolescence, they came into the service of the Lancelin family in 1926, a period of crisis with the number of servants diminishing. Having two servants in the house was at the time a sign of bourgeois affluence. While they were apparently well treated by their employers, the professional standing of the Papin sisters revealed the opposition of classes existing in France during the “roaring twenties”. 

Image reproduced in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* 5, 1933

In 1925 the Surrealists had adopted the following motion:

The Revolution can only be conceived by us in its economic and social form defined as: the Revolution is the set of events determining the transition of power from the hands of the bourgeoisie to those of the proletariat and the maintaining of this power by the dictatorship of the proletariat.
In July 1930, La Révolution surréaliste was replaced by Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution. The Surrealists – who in the meantime had signed up to the French Communist Party, before drifting away – could not have failed to be sensitive to this motive of class struggle as portrayed by newspapers such as L’Humanité very shortly after the crime, even though such an explanation was rejected by the guilty parties themselves.

The montage dedicated to the Papin case, accompanied by a text from Péret and Éluard which subscribed to the hypothesis of a class-based crime, appeared on May 15, 1933, in the fifth edition of the review, while the case was being heard. It was published at the end of the review like all other full page images. It consists of two photographs of the Papin sisters, placed one above the other, the first with the caption “Before”, the other with “After”. Below this is a referral to the text of Péret and Éluard. The montage was probably made by André Breton since the two source photographs were sold in 2003 during the dispersal of his personal effects. The top photograph appeared rapidly in the press: on February 9, 1933, just one week after the event, it featured on the front page of the weekly publication, Détective, under the headline “The rabid sheep”. The two sisters, Christine on the left, Léa on the right, are framed in close up, dressed identically with the same hair style: the hair crimped and swept back, black dress and white collar, most certainly their working uniform. They are positioned facing each other, their faces almost touching, thus highlighting their resemblance. The similarity of their facial traits is reinforced by the uniform-like dress. The lower photograph, presenting the two sisters in a similar position but this time with ruffled hair and a vague far-away gaze, is a montage. The juxtaposition of the two shots, one above the other, gives the impression of an untouched picture.
Press agency Mondial Photo-Presse, « Le crime des deux bonnes du Mans : Léa Papin, 1933 »,
glass plate negatives, 13 x 18 cm

Bibliothèque nationale de France.
The original photographs were taken by reporters from the **Sarthe** local newspaper, the day after the crime, in the corridors of the Le Mans court building. The pose and the framing on the original photographic prints lead us to believe that the photographer had obtained official authorisation to take the shots: the guilty parties seem to be immobilised while waiting for the end of the court session. The incongruity of the two sisters’ clothing is accentuated by their pose and relaxed expression. In fact they are still in the nightdresses they were wearing when arrested: both also wear a flowery dressing gown, a detail relating to the circumstances in which the police discovered them, lying next to one another in the same bed. The dressing gown, like the carpet slippers Léa Papin is wearing in the photograph published by the **Détective**, point to the domestic nature of the crime and the horror of its irruption into daily life. The two portraits were taken up by the national press: on the first page of **Paris-Soir** on February 5, in **Détective** on February 9 or in **Police Magazine** on February 12.

In the montage put together by the Surrealists, the upper part of the dressing gown has been re-touched in order to highlight the closeness of the two mirror-like images, similar to the top photograph taken where they are posing in black dresses and white collars. According to Rosalind Krauss, this repetition of the image is typically Surrealist and points to the intentionally fabricated nature of the photographs:

> If we consider the varied technical options which Surrealists photography explores, from reality photos, free of manipulations, to negative print developing, solarisation, montage and rayography, we can observe a constant consideration of duplication, and we can see that this is not only thematic, but also structurally specific. Since the structure of a double image identifies a form of trade mark.
Here the duplication effect works on several levels: the accentuation of the resemblance of the two sisters through their wearing of the same clothes and the construction of a similarity of physical positions creating an impression of twins. We thus have difficulty in distinguishing Christine from Léa Papin. The duplication is also present in the rapport between the two sisters and the rapport of the two images. It is also present in the relation between the guilty parties and their victims; the idea of a mirror like projection of the relation between the Lancelin mother and daughter and between the two sisters, Christine Papin having had an overpowering influence over her younger sister, is an important element in the psychiatric interpretations which would be developed by Jacques Lacan.45

The montage of the two photographs, one above the other, associated with the terms “Before” and “After” generates a chronological effect. It invites the reader to observe the visual signs of what occurred during the interval between two representations: the crime. In the press illustrated by engravings (for example in *Le Petit Journal* or in *L’Œil de la police*), the crime is represented on the spot, but with the arrival of photography in the popular press, the attention of the reader shifts towards other aspects which can be shown; the scenes of the crime, sometimes the victims and of course the faces of the guilty parties or suspects. The Surrealist montage dedicated to Christine and Léa Papin works along these lines, annotated in the form of medical images in which the captions designate and characterise the normal or pathological state of the patient. Here they indicate there is something to see, without specifying what exactly. This “something” refers to the lapse of time which separates the taking of the shots, during which the crime took place. The reader is placed in the position of the doctor or the reader of medical texts, leading to an observation of the visual proofs of a pathology. This attention made to visible symptoms makes reference to psychiatric uses of photography.46

This adherence to the sphere of alienist photography is not just a detail. Article 64 of the Penal Code of 1810,47 still in force in 1933, allows for a declaration of penal irresponsibility of the two sisters, rendering insanity a major legal factor in the case. When the edition including the montage of the two sisters was published their psychiatric assessment had not yet been released.48 Reference to the psychiatric sphere is a recurring trait of Surrealism: Aragon, like Breton, had studied medicine and Breton read the works of Freud during the war. He had also worked as an intern with the neurologist Babinski, former director of the Charcot clinic at the Salpêtrière hospital. The Surrealists regularly published virulent criticism of mental health measures, seen as a guardian of bourgeois norms. This was the case with the first *Manifést du surréalisme* or in the article “Mental health care before surrealism”,49 published in the second edition of the review, *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*.

In this text, Breton, speaking as a doctor, vigorously questions alienist science, accusing it of being behind a form of repression similar to that of the police, and to be at the service of bourgeois justice. He denies the possibility of scientific objectivity in this field and also questions article 64 of the Penal Code. The question of mental disorder also appeared in 1928 in the 11th edition of *La Rédution surréaliste*: the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of hysteria took the form of a text celebrating hysteria as a “the most important poetic discovery of the end of the 19th century”,50 accompanied by a selection of photographs from *L’Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*. The
Surrealists were therefore at least partly familiar with medical and alienist photography.

26 As Linda Steer has shown, having recourse to such notions was deeply contradictory since it was presented as a subversion of the psychiatric institution while cultivating at the same time a fascination for women suffering from mental health problems, and followed the conventions of scientific proof through images. The montage devoted to Christine and Léa Papin, presented as a criticism of psychiatric and legal institutions, is not therefore the first to use conservative terms reproducing the dominations and norms they sought to question. While in 1933 physiognomy as the theory of the born-criminal promoted by Cesare Lombroso was considered obsolete, the Surrealists nevertheless conceived a visual rhetoric in which the reader is invited to ascertain physical signs of insanity on the faces of Christine and Léa Papin.

27 These images of women criminals created by the Surrealists reflect therefore profoundly contradictory postures. These photo-montages refer to the repeated criticisms of the judicial, medical or scientific institutions, while conserving the visual codes and devices forged by these same institutions. Far from undermining them, the Surrealist productions “objectify” the persons represented, placing the reader in a position of domination, similar to that of a criminologist or psychiatrist. In this sense the images replicate the classic categories of the active male artist, producing images of a passive female model and contributing to the stereotyped show casing of female crime. This fascination for the transgression generated by female crime and its capacity to upset the social, familial and patriarchal order, replenishes the concept of the naturalised female as being inferior and differentiated by the positivist sciences of the 19th century, whose visual language they re-employ. These photo-montages also expose the paradox of questioning bourgeois society in media form (the Surrealist reviews) destined exclusively for a privileged minority of cultivated intellectuals. These visual gestures are thus presented as demonstrations of radical political postures, while in reality they bear witness to an underlying conservatism.

NOTES
2. On this subject see the collection edited and presented by Masao Suzuki, Faits divers surréalistes, Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 2013.


10. Ibid., p. 37.


17. “La femme est l’être qui projette la plus grande ombre ou la plus grande lumière dans nos rêves.”: Ibid., p. 55: Entry of Tuesday November 11, 1924.


20. Caroline Rémy, known as Séverine (1855-1929): writer and journalist concerned by social questions and a supporter of anarchist and feminist movements.


23. The Department of Prints and Photography of the French National Library conserves under the heading PF-6, leaflets from the middle of the 19th century which used this page lay-out, particularly when presenting criminal gangs.


26. Surrealists’ work centre, also with a permanently manned office.

27. “Loplop présente les membres du groupe surréaliste”.

28. “L’Échiquier surréaliste”.

29. “Il faut aboutir à une nouvelle déclaration des droits de l’homme”.


31. “Je ne vois pas la femme cachée dans la forêt”.


33. “La femme est l’être qui projette la plus grande ombre ou la plus grande lumière dans nos rêves”.

34. An idea also developed by Michel Poivert, “‘Le phénomène de l’extase’”, art. cit., p. 4.


36. “La Révolution ne peut être conçue par nous que sous sa forme économique et sociale où elle se définit : la Révolution est l’ensemble des événements qui déterminent le passage du pouvoir des mains de la bourgeoisie à celles du prolétariat et le maintien de ce pouvoir par la dictature du prolétariat.”: Cited by Carole Reynaud Paligot, Parcours politique des surréalistes, op. cit., p. 73.

37. The contentious relations which existed between the Surrealists and the Communist party are described by Carole Reynaud Paligot in the chapter “L’enjeu littéraire au cœur du rapprochement avec le parti communiste”. Ibid., p. 67-151.


39. L’Humanité entitled its article on the Papin sisters in its edition of February 5, 1933 as: “The murderers of Le Mans are the victims of exploitation and servitude”.


41. “Les brebis enragées”.

42. Frédéric Chauvaud, L’Effroyable Crime des sœurs Papin, op. cit., p. 86.

43. Ibid., p. 86.


45. Minotaure, n° 3-4, Décembre 1933.

46. For an in-depth analysis of this notion of temporality and the observation of faces, see Jonathan Eburne, Surrealism and the art of crime, op. cit., p. 178-179.

47. “There is neither crime nor offence when the accused was in a state of insanity at the time of the act, or when he had been compelled by a force he was unable to resist”. Version in force from 23 February, 1810 to 1st March 1994: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000006490631/1994-02-28 > (consulted on July 19, 2021).
48. The experts’ report was submitted on June 1st, see Frédéric CHAUVAUD, L’Effroyable Crime des sœurs Papin, op. cit., p. 111.

49. “La médecine mentale devant le surréalisme”.

50. “la plus grande découverte poétique de la fin du XIXe siècle”.

51. Linda STEER, Appropriated photographs in French surrealist periodicals, 1924-1939, op. cit., p. 41.

52. Frédéric CHAUVAUD, L’Effroyable crime des sœurs Papin, op. cit., p. 73.

ABSTRACTS

This article analyses the composition of two surrealist photomontages dedicated to Germaine Berton and the Papin sisters. By situating them in the history of photographic portraiture and by taking into account the political positioning of the surrealist group, the text seeks to demonstrate that these montages, while furthering their political radicalism, were in fact profoundly conservative in aesthetic terms, drawing for example on relations of dominance based on class and gender.

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Keywords: Photo-montage, portrait, surrealism, crime, gender, revolution, violence

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Célia Honoré is a doctoral graduate in the History of Art at the University of Geneva. She is currently preparing a thesis on the representation of women criminals in French photography (1860-1940). Her research aims at determining the role played by photography in the diffusion of an imagery of female deviance. In broader terms it consists of studying how photography contributes to the creation and diffusion of modern gender norms.