

Fantastic art, Barr, surrealism

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Introduction

Surrealism was not entirely unknown to American audiences before 1936,¹ but that year it was introduced once and for all to a great many people. Curator and director Alfred Barr, jr. (1902-1981) staged the grand show *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. The exhibition ran from December 1936 into early 1937 before packing up to travel to six other major museum locations in the US, and in 1938, in adapted form and under the title *Fantastic Art, Past and Present*, to a further five smaller locations. The exhibition must have been hard to miss; over 50,000 visitors graced it at the MoMA alone, the print press had a field day—or several of them, with Salvador Dalí also having arrived on the scene—and Universal and Paramount Pictures incorporated reports about it into their newsreels.²

Although eventually the show's impact would prove far-reaching, at the time the reception was rather lukewarm. Visitors and critics struggled to get the point of it. Barr hardly made it easy, including not only over 700 objects in his show but those also a rather heterogeneous bunch: dada and surrealist works of art, works by other modernists including such diverse artists as George Grosz and Wassily Kandinsky, as well as old masters from the fifteenth century through to Symbolism. The show further incorporated children's drawings, cartoons by Walt Disney, a machine-design by Rube Goldberg, 'folk' art or naïve art, and art by mental patients or asylum art.³ 'Drawings by Lunatic Asylum Inmates as Good as

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¹ New York: Valentine Gallery exhibited Miró in 1928, Gallery Julien Levy a selection of surrealists in 1932, Dalí in 1933 and 1935, Dalí and Giacometti in 1934, and Dalí, Tanguy, Magritte and Ernst in 1936. Pierre Matisse Gallery showed Miró in 1932, Miró and Masson in 1933 and 1935, and Miró and de Chirico in 1936. Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford Connecticut, showed *Newer Super-Realism* in 1931. Also worth mention are the American modernist little magazines based in Europe, such as *The Little Review*, *Broom*, and *transition*, which published French surrealist material. Anne Reynes-Delobel and Céline Mansanti, 'Americanizing Surrealism: Cultural Challenges in the Magnetic Fields', *Miranda* 14, 2017, 1-12, 2.

² Sandra Zalman, *Consuming Surrealism in American Culture: Dissident Modernism*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, 11, 17.

³ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ed., *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936. This edition does not include important essays on surrealism and dada by Georges Hugnet, published in *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 4: 2-3, November-December

Most of the 700 Items in Museum's 'Fantastic Exhibit' was the subtitle of one review in the press.⁴ The exhibition was quite a *succès scandale*; critics and intelligentsia loved to hate on it as much as on surrealism in general.

For all that the show did have some failings, Barr succeeded rather well in putting surrealism on the map of American, and also international, audiences, and his vision of surrealism would reverberate internationally for decades to come. Two concepts in particular Barr proposed through the show would prove immensely successful, indicated by how quickly they came to be part of the general discourse around and about surrealism. The first is the historicity of surrealism. The second is its 'fantasticity', as it were, or intimate association with the fantastic. Before turning to the latter, first a few words on the former, the view that surrealism comes from a long tradition and has a deep history or might even be a modern iteration of an older phenomenon. This historicity of surrealism is built upon the idea of surrealist predecessors or proto-surrealists, many of them fifteenth and sixteenth-century European masters, linearly related to the twentieth-century group. Barr made this proposed relation visually very explicit by opening *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* with old masters.⁵ The catalogue followed this categorisation and emphasis on historical linearity.⁶ In his introduction, Barr distinguished between 'Fantastic art of the past', which begins with Hieronymus Bosch 'working at the end of the Gothic period, [who] transformed *traditional fantasy* into a personal and original vision *which links his art with that of the modern Surrealists*';⁷ and 'Fantastic and anti-rational art of the present', which begins with Dada.⁸ The constant referral to old masters and their art in reviews of *Fantastic Art* illustrates that the idea of late-medieval proto-surrealism was widely received in the press; the review 'Surrealism from 1450

1936. Later editions of the catalogue (most importantly the third, 1946) include both Hugnet's essays and an introduction by Barr originally published in 1937 as 'A Brief Guide to the Exhibition of Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism'. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ed., *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, 3rd edition, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946. References here are to this 3rd edition, unless indicated otherwise.

⁴ Emily Genauer, 'Real Value of Dada and Surrealist Show Rests on Few Good Pictures: Drawings by Lunatic Asylum Inmates as Good as Most of the 700 Items in Museum's Fantastic Exhibit', *New York World Telegram*, 12 December 1936.

⁵ Barr, *Fantastic*, 67-92, 93-112. Barr had taken the notion of predecessors from surrealism itself; already in their dada-days the (proto-)surrealist group around Breton had shown a tendency to co-opt or otherwise claim certain illustrious figures from the past as predecessors or otherwise surrealist relations. Yet it was Barr who placed artists such as Bosch and Brueghel in such a prominent relation to surrealism, as I have also explored in Tessel M. Bauduin, 'Bosch als "surrealist": 1924-1936', *Ex Tempore* 35: 2, 2017, 84-98. See also Kirsten Strom, *Making history: Surrealism and the invention of a political culture*, Lanham: University Press of America, 2002.

⁶ The plate sections are 'Fantastic art: 15th century to the French Revolution' and 'Fantastic art: the French Revolution to the Great War of 1914-18', although apparently originally planned as 'Fantastic Art of the Past: 15th and 16th centuries' and '17th and 18th centuries'. The Museum of Modern Art, press release 113036-38 concerning *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, 3 pages, undated (but before 5 December, 1936), www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2823 (accessed 27 March 2017).

⁷ Barr, *Fantastic*, 9 (my emphasis).

⁸ Barr, *Fantastic*, 10.

to Dada & Dali', for instance, was illustrated by a cinquecento painting captioned 'Surrealism in fifteenth century Siena'.⁹

The second — related — concept to make a successful leap from Barr's construction (in text and exhibition) to the audience's perception of the movement and to a wider discourse about surrealism, is the understanding that the label 'fantastic' can logically, perhaps even naturally, be applied to surrealist art. In 1936 'fantastic art' and 'surrealism' were still parataxically arranged, together with dada: *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*. Yet by 1938 the show's title had changed to *Fantastic Art, Past and Present*: all things surrealist and dada had been subsumed by the fantastic. 'Fantastic(al) art' was apparently a meta-category extending over time from "the past" to today. Critics took the occasion to use the term and underlying concept: 'Fantastic Art has always existed, always will as long as men have illogical minds and unruly imaginations. The Museum's walls historically carried fantastic art from the horror pictures of medieval ... Bosch and ... Brueghel, through ... to the comic cartoons of Rube Goldberg...'.¹⁰ 'Fantastic art' became something of a genre of its own, almost overnight. As well, 'fantastic art' quickly came to operate as an equivalent for 'surrealist art'. While my focus here lies upon the 'fantastic' and its provenance, the relevance of the constructed deep history of surrealism is obvious; the invented super-genre 'fantastic art' would prove an excellent tool to bridge the considerable divides that separate fifteenth-century 'proto-surrealists' from their modern counterparts.

Barr's choice for the particular label 'fantastic' to frame dada and surrealism is not as obvious as it may appear. It was, for instance, infrequently used in surrealist discourse of the time. More central to surrealist concerns was the concept of the *marvellous*. In fact, Barr had considered *Art of the Marvellous and Anti-Rational*, and *Painters of the Marvellous* and *Painters of the Irrational* as alternative titles for the show;¹¹ options that show that Barr had engaged surrealist theoretical material. As well, both 'marvellous' and 'irrational' appear more in line with surrealist concerns of the 1920s and 1930s. Yet, Barr opted for 'fantastic'. The consequences of this move were far-reaching, for surrealism but also for art history. Up to then, the 'fantastic' had primarily been a literary genre. Barr did not invent it as a new visual arts genre, but his show certainly contributed to wider acceptance of that genre, particularly in Anglophone contexts. The genre of the 'fantastic' would eventually flourish in the 1950s and 1960s, up to and including being the theme of the 1954 Venice Biennale, where it served as convenient category to pay historical surrealism its due.¹² The

⁹ Martha Davidson, 'Surrealism from 1450 to Dada & Dali at the Museum of Modern Art', *Art News* 35, 1936, 9-22.

¹⁰ Anon., 'Marvelous and Fantastic', *Time* 24, 14 December 1936, 60-62, 60.

¹¹ Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvellous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and Surrealist Exhibition Installation*, Cambridge [etc.]: MIT Press, 2001, 14. Camelia Darie, 'Victor Brauner and the Surrealist Claim on the *Fantastique Noir* Imagery', in Laura Cleaver and Ayla Lepine, eds, *Gothic Legacies: Four Centuries of tradition and Innovation in Art and Architecture*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, 135-157, 140. André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, Marguerite Bonnet, Philippe Bernier, Étienne-Alain Hubert and José Pierre, eds, Paris: Gallimard, 1992, vol. II, xlix.

¹² Gavin Parkinson, *Futures of Surrealism. Myth, Science Fiction and Fantastic Art in France, 1936-1969*, New Haven [etc.]: Yale University Press, 2015, 113-4, where also several

question is, then, why Barr went with ‘fantastic’? Here I will explore several possible sources for his concept of the fantastic, as well as possible reasons why he may have found it an appropriate, even necessary designation. First I will delve into the surrealist connection. Barr had been reading surrealist sources in preparation. The political subtext of lectures by one of surrealism’s main theoreticians, André Breton (1896-1966), that discuss the fantastic, will be reviewed. As will be shown, historical events and figures, and the spectre of history as such, played an important part in the political framing of the ‘fantastic’ by Breton. I will further tease out a Belgian connection: in art historical and critical discourses in Belgium the genre of the *fantastique* in art had already been introduced and connected to surrealism. Here, as will be demonstrated, the *fantastique* carried political-ideological overtones, being related to the concept of the “north”, even a particular “genius” or *esprit* of the North, which was further identified with the Germanic and with expressionism. These strands come together in Barr’s *Fantastic Art*, which was at least partly motivated by ideas about the *esprit* of certain artists and the distinction between form and content related to it, to discussions of a cultural division of ‘North’ vs. ‘South’ or Gothic vs classical, and to the political subtext of a ‘fantastic’ in a time when the (European) political reality and an increasing stronghold on art by totalitarian regimes and ideologies resulted in “fantasy” and “fantastic” no longer being neutral, innocuous categories.

Finally, it should be noted that the *fantastique* is a long-standing category of French literature, with a history that is not identical to that of the ‘fantastic’. Darie has noted the possibility that Barr was familiar with the *fantastique* and nineteenth-century French literary debates about it.¹³ Because of my exploration of Francophone sources, as well as Barr’s partial rootedness in Belgian and French

European exhibitions on ‘fantastic art’ from the early 1950s are mentioned. A major one was *Bosch, Goya et le fantastique*, catalogue edited by G. Martin-Méry, Bordeaux: Musée des Beaux-Arts 1957. Several (popular-audience) publications were also dedicated to this ‘genre’ at that time; Marcel Brion, *L’Art fantastique*, Paris: Michel, 1961, translated in several languages (see further Parkinson *Futures*, 114-5); the same with Aline Jacquot, *Quatre siècles de surréalisme* [!]: *l’art fantastique dans la gravure*, Paris: Belfond/ Club Français du Livre, 1973, translated as *The waking dream: fantasy and the surreal in graphic art 1400-1900*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1975; William Gaunt, *Painters of Fantasy*, London: Phaidon Press, 1974, translated in several languages. The category still persists today: Werner Hofmann, *Phantasiestücke: Über das Phantastische in der Kunst*, Munich: Hirmer, 2010. Although the specifics vary, a core-group of ‘fantastic’ artists can be found in all these publications, including German masters such as Altdorfer, Baldung, Grünewald and sometimes Dürer, Netherlandish masters Bosch and Breughel, Arcimboldo, Piranesi, Blake, Goya, Böcklin, Moreau, Ensor, Ropps, de Chirico, and a slew of surrealists, including at least Ernst, Dalí and Magritte. General characteristics of this “genre” are: a) strong representation of northern fifteenth and sixteenth-century masters, a smattering of Italians and Baroque painters, strong representation of romantics and symbolists, besides obviously some surrealists; b) artists are male, white, usually European and well-known; c) all art is western, more or less belonging to the canon; d) primarily paintings and drawings/etches; e) iconographical concentration around scenes of hell, torment and nightmares, the Temptation of saint Anthony, witches, hybrid or monstrous beings, uncanny erotica, fantasy architecture and perspectival jokes; f) the ‘fantastical’ is always posited as having existed for a long time/being a traditional genre.

¹³ Darie, ‘Victor Brauner’, 140.

sources, the fantastic should here primarily be understood as an analogue of the *fantastique* and not fantasy.¹⁴ That is not say that ‘fantastic’ as derived from fantasy as such played no part; on the contrary, I think that an additional reason why Barr may have opted for the term is because of the interpretation and function of “fantastic” in American discourses.¹⁵ However, because of considerations of space that will not be further explored in this article, which is focussed primarily upon European sources.

Limits not borders: the fantastic and the politic

Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism was the closing event in what had been a busy year for both surrealism and Barr. In the early 1930s Barr had travelled extensively through Europe, and he did so again in the months before *Fantastic Art* opened at the MoMA, visiting both the *Surrealist Exhibition of the Object* at the Galerie Charles Ratton in Paris (May 1936), and, in June, the *International Surrealist Exhibition* in London at the New Burlington Galleries.¹⁶ Among the many artists and thinkers he contacted during this time, he also met and started a correspondence with Breton and another leading surrealist thinker, Paul Éluard (1895-1952).¹⁷ Incidentally, as they couldn’t agree on how the show should be organised and presented, by high summer Breton and Éluard withdrew their collaboration, to Barr’s disappointment—a considerable break with precedent, as all surrealist shows up to this point had been organised or at least co-organised by the surrealist themselves.¹⁸ Still, Barr read surrealist tracts and materials, and prepared a bibliography of dada and surrealist sources for the *Fantastic Art* catalogue.¹⁹ One may think, therefore,

¹⁴ Risking a further statement of the obvious, fantastic art is not the same as fantasy art, a twentieth-century visual genre related to fantasy literature and comics.

¹⁵ For one, there may have been the practical reason of coming up with a catchy title to draw in audiences, for which ‘fantastic’ was deemed more suitable, possibly carrying exciting overtones of pop culture sensationalism. My thanks to Abigail Susik for pointing this out. As well, in American cultural milieus at the time ‘fantastic’ was linked with concerns about (American) popular art, neo-romanticism and forms of neorealism such as magic realism. We find expression of this in the special issue of surrealism-related American periodical *View*, on ‘America Fantastica’ (*View* 2: 4, 1943). Barr’s further three shows in the five-fold series that started with *Cubism* (1935) and *Fantastic Art* (1936) were *Masters of Popular Painting* (1938), *American Realists and Magic-Realists* (1943) and *Romantic Painting in America* (1943), indicating his interest for home-grown popular art, neo-romanticism and forms of realism.

¹⁶ Apart from his notebooks and letters chronicling his travels through Europe in the 1930s, the MoMA Archives also contain Barr’s copy of the catalogue of the London *International Surrealist Exhibition*, complete with his notes; The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records, Alfred H. Barr Papers, Subseries C: Addendum 1936, #6.C.1, and Exhibition Files #55.1-9, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

¹⁷ Zalman, *Consuming*, 13-4.

¹⁸ The break between Breton-Éluard and Barr occurred in early August, Zalman, *Consuming*, 13-4; Kachur, *Displaying*, 13-17.

¹⁹ Barr, *Fantastic*, 263-7. Included is Breton’s *Qu’est-ce que le surréalisme?* (1934), its English translation of 1936, the catalogue of the *International Surrealist Exhibition*, and *Surrealism* edited by Read (1936); all marked as being part of the MoMA Library. In fact Barr acquired

that he had based his choice for 'fantastic' upon surrealist sources. If he did not attend Breton's lecture at the opening of the London show, entitled 'Limites non-frontières du surréalisme', Barr still picked up the anthology that came out only a bit later: *Surrealism*, edited by yet another renowned art critic who would play an important part in the reception and canonisation of surrealism, Herbert Read (1893-1968). A slightly adapted and translated version of 'Limites non-frontières' was included in this anthology, as well as a lengthy introduction by Read and other essays.²⁰

In 'Limits not Frontiers' Breton addressed several topics, but the key point is the role of surrealism in effecting social change in difficult political circumstances and a call to fraternity among surrealists from all nations.²¹ History, and the relevance of history and particular historical episodes for surrealism, is a recurrent theme. Very sensitive to the problematic political situation of the day and rising tension between Germany and France, Breton peppered his lecture with references to the Franco-Prussian War, the French Revolution, and the 'Great War' of 1914-18, as much as to contemporary developments such as the Spanish Civil War and the French workers' strikes that were occurring at that moment. This brings us to Breton's use of the term 'the fantastic', which he employed in a discussion permeated by questions of history and revolutions.

The relevance of history in the present with regards to art, Breton enunciates, is as follows: 'In the light of the greatest examples of the past we deny that the art of a period can consist of an imitation ... of its external trappings.'²² The greatest art is not of its time, but supersedes it. '[W]e expressly oppose the view that it is possible to create a work of art ... by expressing only the *manifest content* of an age.' That is therefore not what surrealism is about; '[o]n the contrary, Surrealism proposes to express its *latent content*.'²³ This will, one assumes, allow surrealism to arrive at full

for the MoMA two excellent collections of surrealist publications, one formerly belonging to Éluard; www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2009/modernlibrary/ (accessed 3 May 2017). The material arrived just around the opening of *Fantastic Art* and it is not taken into consideration here.

²⁰ Herbert Read, ed., *Surrealism*, London: Faber and Faber, 1936; which includes André Breton, 'Limits not Frontiers of Surrealism', 95-116. I will refer to this translation, but another version is 'Nonnational Boundaries of Surrealism', in *Free Rein*, Michel Partmentier and Jacqueline d'Amboise, trans., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995 [1953], 7-18, which is not quite identical; originally published as 'Limites non frontières du surréalisme', *Nouvelle revue française* 48: 281, 1 February 1937, 200-215.

²¹ Breton, 'Limits', 99.

²² Breton, 'Limits', 105.

²³ Breton, 'Limits', 106 (emphasis original). Hegel's philosophy was influential for Breton, something he also avows in 'Limits'. Relevant here are Hegel's concept of historical progress and, moreover, his understanding of the work of art as an expression of its time. Material expression and spiritual content are related. A concept such as *Kunstwollen* that one can derive from Hegel's thought was obviously contrary to the surrealist view of the world and of history. I would suggest, however, that Breton's referral here to the *latent* content of an age is his solution to remaining true to Hegel's dialectical materialism while allowing him not only to cut art loose from time and history but also to reinterpret it to fit the surrealist agenda. More on Hegel and surrealism in David Cunningham, 'The Futures of Surrealism: Hegelianism, Romanticism, and the Avant-Garde', *SubStance* 34: 2/107, 2005, 47-65.

integration of all perceptions of reality—the ultimate goal of surrealism—by resolving ‘the contradictions of being awake and sleeping (of reality and dream), of reason and madness, of objectivity and subjectivity, of perception and representation, of past and future, ...’.²⁴ It will also allow surrealism to play a highly urgent social and political role. How to effect this? That which constitutes ‘the supreme key to this latent content’, is the ‘fantastic’.²⁵ ‘[T]he most profound emotion of the individual ... [has] the fullest opportunity to express itself’ only ‘at the approach of the fantastic, at a point where human reason loses its control’.²⁶ The fantastic is not investigated further, for all that it is positioned as a supreme key and something ‘to which Surrealism never ceases to appeal’. The term is used only twice in the entire lecture (both given here), and Breton subsequently turns to a discussion of the gothic novel.

A couple of years earlier, during another public lecture, now in Brussels and entitled ‘Qu’est-ce que le surréalisme’ (*What is surrealism*, 1934; also in Barr’s library), Breton had said:

Let us speak plainly: The marvellous is always beautiful, anything marvellous is beautiful; indeed, nothing but the marvellous is beautiful. What is admirable about the fantastic is that there is no longer a fantastic; there is only the real.²⁷

Here he was in fact citing himself, that is, his first *Manifesto*. The passage it derives from discusses the gothic novel *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis (1796)—to which he returned in ‘Limits’—as proof of the literary possibilities of the marvellous.²⁸ The gothic novel or *roman noir* appears to play a central role and is generally linked to the marvellous. Breton seems to have preferred ‘marvellous’ over ‘fantastic’—and, as Camelia Darie has shown, it was indeed often a case of one against the other, at least in France. There was in fact a heated debate concerning these genres in literature, which was not resolved by the time of surrealism.²⁹ Breton’s phrasing—

²⁴ Breton, ‘Limits’, 105.

²⁵ Breton, ‘Limits’, 106.

²⁶ Breton, ‘Limits’, 106. Cf. Breton, ‘Nonnational’, 13.

²⁷ André Breton, ‘What is Surrealism’, in *What is Surrealism: Selected writings*, Franklin Rosemont, ed., London: Pluto Press, 1978, 112-141.

²⁸ ‘In the realm of literature, only the marvellous is capable of fecundating works which belong to an inferior category such as the novel, and generally speaking, anything that involves storytelling. Lewis’ *The Monk* is admirable proof of this. It is infused throughout with the presence of the marvellous.’ André Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’, in idem, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, eds, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972 [1924], 1-47, 14-5.

²⁹ Very briefly, the main thing distinguishing the *merveilleux* from the *fantastique* is that in the first case, the inevitable intrusion of the supernatural is not met by fear, anxiety, horror or similar reactions of rejection, but rather unquestionably accepted. This is however a stopgap-definition only and does no right by the complexities of the literary genre and genre theory, nor by the deep complexities of the discourse in nineteenth-century France. Find an overview of that debate in Camelia Darie, *Victor Brauner and the Surrealist Interest in the Occult*, University of Manchester: PhD Dissertation, 2012, 38-46. See Parkinson, *Futures*, for

only the marvellous is beautiful, and there is no longer a fantastic, there is only the real—is strongly indicative of him taking a stand in the debate on the merits of the fantastic versus the marvellous. This may go some way towards explaining why the fantastic, although used in surrealist discourse, appears generally to give sway to *le merveillieux*.³⁰ The fantastic occurs primarily as a subcategory. In ‘What is surrealism’ Breton also cited his fellow surrealist of the first hour, Louis Aragon (1897-1982):

Aragon expressed himself in very much the same way in *Une Vague de rêves* (1924):

It should be understood that the real is a relation like any other; the essence of things is by no means linked to their reality, there are other relations besides reality, which the mind is capable of grasping and which also are primary, like chance, illusion, the fantastic, the dream. These various groups are united and brought into harmony in one single order, surreality...³¹

These and several other citations of earlier surrealist sources are all concerned one way or another with the nature of the real. By rehashing them in 1934 Breton emphatically underlined the continuity of surrealist thought over time and the centrality of the real (and relations to the real) in it, in the process likening the fantastic to dream and illusion.

The difference between the marvellous and the fantastic is slight.³² Unexpected narrative temporal and spatial dislocations as eruptions of other layers

the development of the genre of the ‘fantastic’ (with regards to literature and art) in France from the early 1940s to 1969.

³⁰ An in-depth discussion of *le merveilleux* and its various functions in (French) surrealism can be found in Nathalie Limat-Letellier, ed., *Mélusine 20: Merveilleux et surréalisme*, Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 2000, in particular Henri Béhar, ‘Le merveilleux dans le discours surréaliste, essai de terminologie’, 15-29, 16, 29.

³¹ Breton, ‘What is Surrealism’, 126. Louis Aragon, ‘A Wave of Dreams’, Susan De Muth, trans., *Papers of Surrealism* 1, 2010, np, <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal1/> (accessed 27 March 2017). Aragon, *Une Vague de rêves*, Paris: Commerce 1 & 2/ Seghers, 1924.

³² A translated section of Pierre Mabillet’s book *Miroir du merveilleux* (1940) was published in the *London Bulletin*: “‘Monk’ Lewis in ‘Le miroir du merveilleux’”, which I will cite here as an example of the definitions of the marvellous in the Parisian, Bretonian, group. ‘For me, as for the realists of the Middle Ages, there exists no fundamental difference between the elements of thought and the phenomena of the world, between the visible and the comprehensible, the perceptible and the imaginable. Consequently, *the marvellous is everywhere*. Comprehended in things, it appears as soon as one manages to penetrate any object.’ The article opens with a citation from Lewis’s *Monk*, which therefore emerges as the quintessential marvellous novel. Note also the reference to the medieval. The marvellous can indeed be traced back to medieval thought, but more important here is Mabillet’s meaning of pre-Enlightenment medieval times in which the super-real (marvellous beings, strange occurrences) would unhesitatingly be accepted as real. Pierre Mabillet, “‘Monk’ Lewis in ‘Le miroir du merveilleux’”, Geoffrey Barratt and Robert Melville, trans., *London Bulletin* 18-20, 1940, 48-50. Published in English in 1940, it might be possible that this too was intended as a discursive intervention to combat the success of Barr’s ‘fantastic’, but that remains

of reality, for instance, pertain to both the marvellous and the fantastic. Some semantic drift also manifests in surrealist thought.³³ Additionally, we should note that subtext in the Bretonian discussions of the fantastic relate it more to the visual, and the marvellous to language.³⁴ Indeed, the act or activity of marvelling, underlying the noun marvellous, which furthermore always takes place within the real (not in fantasy), was always an important factor in surrealist preference for and theory about *le merveilleux*. This would further explain Breton's preference for the marvellous—he was after all first and foremost a writer—but also goes some way towards explaining Barr's favouring of 'fantastic' for a visual arts show that would also highlight fantasy.

'The Museum's Fantastic show': Correspondence

The question remains why Breton suddenly introduced the 'fantastic' in his high-profile and political lecture in London. In fact, rather than looking for the source of Barr's fantastic in surrealism, one may well look for the source of Breton's fantastic in Barr. Parkinson suggests that Breton introduced the 'fantastic' into his lecture in direct response to Barr's foregrounding of it in *Fantastic Art*. While that show would open in December 1936, it was already in preparation during the summer of that year—and Barr corresponded with Breton and Éluard, as well as with other surrealists who would have kept the two informed. Parkinson writes, 'Breton's text ['Limites non frontières'] may be read as an intervention attempting control of [surrealism's] reception and defining descriptors';³⁵ an assessment I fully agree with.

The time frame between Barr's arrival in Europe in May and Breton's lecture on 16 June is rather tight, but it remains probable that Breton had already heard that Barr planned to introduce fantastic art in one way or another in his exhibition—an exhibition, furthermore, that neither Breton nor other surrealists were eventually

speculative for now (although in *Miroir Mabilite* distinguishes it emphatically from the *fantastique* and other such categories; Mabilite, *Le Miroir du merveilleux*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1962 [1940], 21.) In Bretonian surrealism the gothic novel is understood as subversive and revolutionary, a specific view not widely shared today. Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall, 'Gothic Criticism', in David Punter, ed., *A New Companion to the Gothic*, Hoboken: Blackwell, 2012, 267-287, 270-1, 274, 276.

³³ Béhar, 'Le merveilleux', 29. In Aragon's writing from the 1920s/early 1930s the 'fantastic' was framed slightly differently (and more positively) than in Breton; Parkinson, *Futures*, 6. This article is concerned with a (heavily condensed) surrealist discourse on the fantastic and marvellous; definitions of these two in literary studies are often slightly different. Classic studies are T. Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1970, J. Bellemin-Noël, 'Notes sur le fantastique', *Littérature* 8, 1972, 3-23, and R. Jackson, *Fantasy. The literature of subversion*, London: Routledge, 1988, although all three have come in for considerable critique.

³⁴ Reynes-Delobel and Mansanti, 'Americanizing', 11 note 2.

³⁵ Parkinson, *Futures*, 7. Hubert has posited it, more generally, as a response (by Breton) to 'la critique artistique, notamment anglo-saxonne, [which] est tentée de confondre le surréalisme dans une inspiration fantastique traversant les siècles et à l'impliquer dans une généalogie quelque peu étouffante.' André Breton, *Ceuvres complètes*, Marguerite Bonnet, Étienne-Alain Hubert et al., eds, Paris: Gallimard 1999, vol. III, 1339.

directly involved in but with which Barr went ahead anyway, on his own. During that summer of 1936, Barr used various titles for the prospective show in his letters to collectors and artists, sometimes but certainly not always including mention of the fantastic. Indeed, he seems to occasionally have tailored the name and subject of the show to his addressee; when addressing potential lenders of old masters, for instance, he would downplay or leave out the avant-gardist element. In his correspondence concerning the lending of a drawing then ascribed to Bosch from the Louvre, he wrote of the 'exhibition of fantastic art' (6 August, 1936) and 'an exhibition of Fantastic art of the past and present' (11 September, 1936).³⁶ This informal title, 'Fantastic art of the past and present', recurs in many letters from late August through September and may for a time have been seriously considered as official designation—as indeed it became with the travelling show in 1937.³⁷ In a letter to Duchamp Barr had written of 'the exhibition of fantastic and anti-rational art' that it 'is planned to bring together works of art of a marvellous or fantastic or anti-rational character both of the present and of the past.'³⁸ In July, Barr had called it 'the Museum's Fantastic show'.³⁹ Yet he wrote to German dada artist John Heartfield, also in July: 'Our Museum is to hold an exhibition (retrospective) of Dada and Surrealist art.'⁴⁰ To Belgian surrealist and art dealer E.L.T. Mesens, around the same time: 'Notre idée est d'organiser pour l'Amerique une exposition du Dada et du Surréalisme qui inclura beaucoup d'œuvres importantes.'⁴¹ No mention of the fantastic here, either. Even earlier, in May, it was 'an exhibition of Surrealism and its Ancestors'.⁴² Incidentally, already in March Barr had inquired about the *International Surrealist Exhibition* in London and whether that could travel to the MoMA in November. It couldn't. As Lewis Kachur has observed, *Fantastic Art*, 'now regarded as a seminal event', may in fact have been 'the consequence of another plan falling through.'⁴³

Somewhere in the early summer, therefore, and perhaps partly to set his own stamp on this surrealism show just as much as to appease conservative lenders of art who might be less enthusiastic about contemporary radical movements such as dada and surrealism, Barr settled definitely on 'fantastic'. By August 27, 1936, Barr writes about 'an exhibition of Fantastic Art'.⁴⁴ By November the title was internally set at 'Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism', although in some of the

³⁶ Letter from Barr to Eustache de Lorey, August 6 1936; letter from Barr to Henri Verne, September 11 1936, both MoMA Exhs., #55.5, MoMA Archives, NY.

³⁷ Letter from Barr to Leo van Puyvelde, August 26 1936: 'an exhibition of Fantastic Art of the past and present', MoMA Exhs., #55.8, MoMA Archives, NY. Barr to Georges Braque, September 1 1936: 'an exhibition of Fantastic Art of the past and present', MoMA Exhs., #55.4, MoMA Archives, NY.

³⁸ Barr to Duchamp, 7 August 1936, MoMA Exhs., #55.4, MoMA Archives, NY.

³⁹ Barr to Henry Clifford, 27 July 1936, MoMA Exhs., #55.2, MoMA Archives, NY.

⁴⁰ Barr to John Heartfield, 10 July 1936, MoMA Exhs., #55.9, MoMA Archives, NY.

⁴¹ Barr to E.L.T. Mesens, 14 July 1936, MoMA Exhs., #55.4, MoMA Archives, NY.

⁴² Barr to Katherine Dreier, 11 May 1936, MoMA Exhs., #55.2, MoMA Archives, NY.

⁴³ Kachur, *Displaying*, 13.

⁴⁴ Copy of Barr to Henry Moore, 27 August 1936, MoMA Exhs., #55.2, MoMA Archives, NY.

correspondence it was called ‘the Fantastic-Surrealist show’,⁴⁵ or ‘the exhibition of Fantastic and Surrealist art’.⁴⁶

I think it very probable that Barr decided on his own to go with the label ‘fantastic’, for reasons that stood apart from surrealism itself. Some have already been mentioned, some of those will be explored below, but let me note two more facts here: firstly, it was not something only conceived in 1936. Barr, who had first expressed his admiration for surrealism in 1930,⁴⁷ observed in a catalogue note from 1931 that Paul Klee’s most important works are ‘those which anticipate by many years the ideas of the contemporary Parisian surrealists. Like them he is concerned primarily with an invented world full of incredible paradox or of *spontaneous fantasy*.’⁴⁸ And in 1934 he noted that ‘Super-realism’ [surrealism] ‘asserted the value of the astonishing, the fantastic, the mysterious, the uncanny, the paradoxical, the incredible – whatever is above (super) reality.’⁴⁹ In other words, Barr had already for some years associated surrealism with *fantasy*; and not, therefore, with reality, which is how the surrealists understood surrealism. This underlines that *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* represents Barr’s understanding of surrealism, which in several instances and not least the preference for fantastic over marvellous differs markedly from that of Breton and his circle.

Secondly, in May 1935 a high profile article of art critic E.M. Benson was published in *The American Magazine of Art*. Third part of a series exploring ‘Forms of Art’, it was subtitled: ‘Phases of Fantasy’.⁵⁰ *American Magazine* was published by the influential American Federation of Arts and the MoMA library had a subscription; there’s a considerable chance Barr would have seen it. Already in the introductory part I, Benson had spoken of ‘artists separated by hundreds of years in time and thousands of miles’ who ‘produced works of striking ... similarity’, just after he had rhetorically asked why people who appreciated ‘Gothic gargoyles and choir stall carving, ... [and] the paintings of Grünewald, Bosch, Bruegel, ... flinch[ed] before... Ensor, Nolde, Grosz, Dali?’⁵¹ The suggestion of a meta-tradition of art is thus already present here. Discussing “primitive” art in part I—including the surrealists⁵²—and naturalism in part II, in part III Benson turns to a ‘fantasy’ that is very clearly an analogue of the *fantastique*. Schöngauer, Bosch, Bruegel, Goya, Blake, Redon, Ensor, Grosz, even Kandinsky are assigned to this category, as are several surrealists because among ‘the contemporary fantasts’, ‘all those bearing the

⁴⁵ Barr to Henry Rossiter, 18 November 1936, MoMA Exhs., #55.2, MoMA Archives, NY.

⁴⁶ Barr to George Edgell, 28 October 1936, MoMA Exhs., #55.2, MoMA Archives, NY.

⁴⁷ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ‘Foreword’, in idem, *Painting in Paris from American Collections*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1930; cited in Susan Noyes Platt, ‘Modernism, formalism, and politics: the ‘Cubism and abstract art’ exhibition of 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art’, *The Art Journal* 47: 4, 1988, 284-295, 288.

⁴⁸ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *German Painting and Sculpture*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1931, 27 (my emphasis).

⁴⁹ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *A Brief Survey of Modern Painting*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1934, 17.

⁵⁰ E.M. Benson, ‘Forms of Art III: “Phases of Fantasy”’, *The American Magazine of Art* 28: 5, May 1935, 290-299.

⁵¹ E.M. Benson, ‘Forms of Art: I’, *The American Magazine of Art* 28: 2, February 1935, 70-77, 72.

⁵² Benson, ‘Forms: I’, 73.

Surrealist trade-mark' should be included.⁵³ Benson mentions one source: *Le genre satirique dans la peinture flamande* (1903, 1907) by Belgian art historian Louis Maeterlinck, and from his emphasis upon demonology and the prime importance of Bruegel, it is clear that he read Maeterlinck closely—as that is the main point of Maeterlinck, who associates *fantastique* with images of demons and finds Bruegel the most well-versed in such 'fantastic' imagery.⁵⁴ I'll return to this publication below. Barr, who already associated surrealism with fantasy, may well have found inspiration or even confirmation in Benson's article, including the core group of artists of the "fantastic tradition" that we find reiterated again and again. Benson's article also assured that culturally literate (American) audiences would recognise 'fantasy' as phase or trend in modern art.

Opposites attract: rational, fantastical; form, content; German, French

More than just familiarity with surrealist thinking and concerns, Barr's alternative titles for the show, which besides *Painters of the Marvellous* and *Painters of the Irrational* also include 'Post War Romanticism',⁵⁵ indicate that there was a particular point Barr wanted to make.

Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism followed immediately in the footsteps of Barr's landmark show *Cubism and Abstract Art* at the MoMa in 1935.⁵⁶ This had been a show in which form dominated, in particular analytical and rational form. Barr's overarching plan was to educate American audiences about modern and contemporary art. After the rational formalist tone of *Cubism*, he set out with *Fantastic Art* to present the opposite art current, a direct reaction against it: 'diametrically opposed in both spirit and esthetic [sic] principles'.⁵⁷ In one of the many letters he wrote during the summer Barr noted:

As you doubtless know, the Museum last year put on an exhibition of cubism and abstract art, which was intended to show the development of the impulse toward pure design. Next fall we shall do an exhibition illustrating the opposite tendency – the interest in fantastic subject. ~~matter and anti-formal technique; I mean by this technique which is concerned primarily with spontaneity rather than with calculated form.~~ [sic].⁵⁸

Fantastic Art may be said to have functioned as a double antithesis to *Cubism*. It included (mainly) figurative art, where the first had been (mainly) abstract; in other

⁵³ Benson, 'Forms: III', 297 and passim.

⁵⁴ Louis Maeterlinck, *Le genre satirique dans la peinture flamande*, Brussels: G. van Oest, 2nd expanded edition, 1907 [1903].

⁵⁵ In a 1934 note looking forward to coming exhibitions, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., 'Summer Show', *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, 1: 2, October 1933, 1-2+4, 4.

⁵⁶ Platt, 'Modernism'.

⁵⁷ Barr, *Fantastic*, 9-13, 9.

⁵⁸ Barr to Russell Allen, 8 August 1936, MoMA Exhs., #55.2, MoMA Archives, NY, emphasis mine, strikethroughs original. There are a few more marks which I have not copied here for readability.

words, it formed a formal pendant. It was, in addition, an intellectual pendant: 'fantastical' and intuitive, 'concerned with spontaneity', sensuous, childish and humorous, where *Cubism* had been rational, analytical, concerned with 'calculated form' and very serious.⁵⁹ In the introduction to the catalogue, Barr notes that an explanation for the art exhibited in *Fantastic Art* 'may be sought in the deep-seated and persistent interest which human beings have in the fantastic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the marvellous, the enigmatic, and the dreamlike.'⁶⁰ He further opposes subject matter (or content) to form and to 'external reality', with 'fantastic' (or 'fantastical') associated with the former — and so, by implication, with some sort of inner reality.⁶¹

Looking back in 1954, Barr detailed this relation as follows:

The intense interests in the esthetic values of form and design which so stimulated the synthesists... the fauves, ...the cubists, ... the futurists, ... and the various abstractionists, ... cumulatively produced after World War I several kinds and degrees of reaction: neo-classicism, ... romantic or objective realism [*Neue Sachlichkeit*], ... or art with deliberate social or political content... But possibly the most important and surely the most original reaction against formal values was the fantastic and anti-rational art of the Dadaists ... and the surrealists ... They were anticipated to some extent by late medieval masters such as Bosch, and by Goya and Blake, Ensor and Redon,⁶²

Neoclassicism, objective realism, and the art of dada and surrealism are positioned as reactions against formal values. This reaction is built upon 'deliberate social or political content', which formalist art apparently lacks, as well as the 'fantastic' and anti-rationality. While the reactionary quality implies that these movements are recent and post-cubism, Barr dispels this notion by highlighting a continuity with earlier art.

The dichotomy between form and content had been present in Barr's thinking and had manifested in some of the MoMA exhibitions already before *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art*. Indeed, it had been given explicit form in a clear distinction Barr drew between French and German art.⁶³ In 1931 the MoMA hosted a show on contemporary 'German Painting and Sculpture', and in his introduction to the catalogue Barr — in a move that he would repeat later, and with

⁵⁹ Barr had unequivocally excluded both realist form and historical, social and political context and content from *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Platt, 'Modernism', 284, 289, *passim*.

⁶⁰ Barr, *Fantastic*, 9.

⁶¹ Barr, *Fantastic*, 9: 'These qualities [the fantastic, the irrational, etc.] ... have been less frequent in painting, which in the past was largely concerned with reproducing external reality, with decoration, and, as in some of the more advanced movements of recent years, with the composition of colour and line into formal design.' Also, 'Fantastic subject matter has been found in European art of all periods'.

⁶² Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Masters of Modern Art*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1954, 128.

⁶³ Gregor Langfeld, 'How the Museum of Modern Art in New York canonised German Expressionism', *Journal of Art Historiography* 11, 2014: 1-13, 4, arthistoriography.wordpress.com/11-dec14/.

which we are well familiar now – made a point of establishing the forefathers of German expressionism: Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein and Matthias Grünewald.⁶⁴ History is therefore linear and the fifteenth and sixteenth-century German masters can be considered the direct ancestors, certainly in spirit, of the twentieth-century German expressionists and the artists of Die Brücke, Der Blaue Reiter, and Neue Sachlichkeit. Barr also pointed out that German artists ‘frequently confuse [i.e., not separate] life and art’; in other words, it is less about ‘form and style’, and more about ‘feeling, ... emotional values and ... moral, religious, social and philosophical considerations.’⁶⁵ He qualifies the German artists as ‘romantic’.⁶⁶

Having established that much of German art ‘is very different from ... French ... art’, Barr notes in his discussion of expressionism that one of its sources is the art of the foreign painters van Gogh and Munch, ‘[n]either of them... Latin’.⁶⁷ As Gregor Langfeld has convincingly shown, MoMA exhibitions in 1929 and 1930 had already established the link German-Northern and French-Latin.⁶⁸ Although phrased differently on different occasions, all in all “northernness” seemed to come down to, or perhaps spring from, a timeless Germanic character of intense spiritual fervour and direct and spontaneous expression.⁶⁹ Form relates to the French school, and content, in particular emotion and introspection, relates to northern, Germanic art and artists.⁷⁰ Things therefore boil down to formalism, but validated differently than Clement Greenberg would do only a few years later. For all that *Cubism and Abstract Art*’s monumental status in modern art history, helped along not least by its well-known linearly organised style chart, has defined Barr’s heritage to such an extent that he has been placed firmly in the camp of formalism, there is every indication that Barr validated the opposing trend as well.⁷¹ Two fields of associations appear opposed to one another, with reason, ratio, rationality, analytical thought, form and design, and emphasis on formal development on one side, and irrational or anti-rational faculties such as fantasy, dream, the marvellous, emotion, spirit, spiritual fervour, and subject and content on the other. To the one group is further added an association with France, formal invention, and (it is implied) indifference to socio-political issues, to the other associations with the north, northernness, the German/Germanic, expressionism, and concern with socio-political developments as much as with inner states. Whereas Greenberg strongly favoured formalism and abhorred content (let alone politics), in art, Barr showed interest in both. Indeed, the mere act of immediately following up the rational *Cubism and Abstract Art* with the irrational *Fantastic Art* underlines his commitment to bringing both approaches to American audiences’ awareness.

Barr hardly invented the form vs. content, formalism vs. expressionism, French/Latin vs. German-debate, which is much older and was consolidated in art

⁶⁴ Barr, *German*, 7; also 22.

⁶⁵ Barr, *German*, 7.

⁶⁶ Barr, *German*, 7.

⁶⁷ Barr, *German*, 7; 9.

⁶⁸ Langfeld, ‘How the Museum’, 4.

⁶⁹ Langfeld, ‘How the Museum’, 5.

⁷⁰ Barr, *German*, e.g. 26, 9, 21, 32.

⁷¹ As I hope to show here, but see also Platt, ‘Modernism’, *passim*.

historical debates in the nineteenth century,. Quite interesting is the positioning of surrealism in it on the side of spontaneity, romanticism and expression. For this we can find precedent in the Belgian art discourse of that time.

Belgian art criticism

In Belgium 'fantastic art' in fact already existed. It had been introduced as a subsidiary category of *satirical art*, albeit in reference to (late-)medieval art, early in the twentieth century. Typical are the studies of Belgian and specifically Flemish art by Louis Maeterlinck (1846-1926) whose *Le genre satirique dans la peinture flamande* was referred to explicitly by Benson, as discussed above. Maeterlinck's following publication, *Le genre satirique, fantastique et licencieux dans la sculpture Flamande et Wallone*, the second volume of which focuses on *Les miséricordes de stalles, art et folklore*, is implicitly present in Benson's article.⁷² 'Flemish' art is positioned as the opposite of French (read: academic and elite) art, and is 'democratic' and 'of the people', the fantastic is their prerogative.⁷³ Additionally, since 1928 'fantastic' had been used to describe surrealist art, in a particular Belgian art milieu that equated it to expressionist art, a connection we also find in Barr's thinking. A further link is provided in the rather loose use of the term 'romantics' to, apparently, encompass expressionists as much as surrealists, something that can be found with Barr as well as British art critic Read, as will be shown.

The Brussels art scene, and more specifically, the art discourse about 'modern' (then contemporary) art, was for a large part defined by the *Sélection-*

⁷² For one, note Benson's references to choir stall carving, i.e. Benson, 'Forms: I', 72. Louis Maeterlinck, *Le genre satirique, fantastique et licencieux dans la sculpture Flamande et Wallone: Les miséricordes de stalles, art et folklore*, Paris: Libraire Jean Schemit, 1910; Maeterlinck, *Le genre... peinture*. What falls outside of the scope of this article is that this art historical category of the 'satirical' continues, or largely incorporates, the earlier grotesque and *drôlerie*, even as it further develops in close proximity to the (Bakhtinian) *carnavalesque*. In a way one can even consider the *fantastique* as a continued and slightly reinvented grotesque. The later development whereby the category of the 'surrealistic' comes to include various art works from the fifteenth to early twentieth century, in fact subsumes the grotesque; by way of the *fantastique* and its long pedigree as argued here but also by unmediated overlap with the grotesque, in particular the ornamental grotesque.

⁷³ The *fantastique* arrives in the tenth chapter of *Le genre satirique*. Maeterlinck first uses *fantastique* adjectively but later posits it as a genre, dating it to the later Middle Ages. The genre encompasses subjects such as hell, dreams, sorcerers and witches, all scenes with devils, and the temptation of saint Anthony. Maeterlinck discusses Schöngauer, Bosch and especially Bruegel, but continues the line of artists whose work includes the *fantastique* via David Teniers up to Ensor (204ff.). Note that by 1910 the 'fantastic' had been sufficiently established that Maeterlinck upgraded it to the title of his second book. Prominent Belgian art historian Paul Fierens took a similar approach: Fierens, *Le fantastique dans l'art flamand*, Brussels: Éd. du Cercle d'art, 1947 ; idem, *Le fantastique dans l'Art Flamand au XVIe siècle*, Antwerp: Académie des Beaux-Arts, 1962. Within art history of the time, Francophone specifically, the connection between the (historical) gothic and fantastic remained a prominent theme, e.g. Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Le Moyen Âge fantastique: antiquités et exotismes dans l'art gothique*, Paris: A. Colin, 1955, where it is the exotic in particular that is associated with the *fantastique*.

group, which subsequently became the *Variétés*-group. *Sélection* was a gallery, rather short-lived, and also the title of a longer lived periodical. Editors were the art critics André de Ridder (1888-1961) and Paul-Gustave van Hecke (1887-1967). The latter also dealt in art and owned the gallery *Sélection* and subsequent galleries. Van Hecke can be considered the main driving force behind the avant-gardist periodical *Variétés*, which is known in surrealism studies primarily for its 1929 special issue on surrealism. Yet that was but one of the topics covered; *Variétés* blended contemporary visual arts such as Flemish expressionism and *Brusselois* surrealism, non-European art then referred to as *art nègre*, couture, jazz, and related aspects of modern and trendy culture. With regards to the arts, the mainstay of *Variétés* was Flemish expressionism, which van Hecke also sold and had promoted through *Sélection* and other publications. With the arrival of René Magritte on the scene and the development of a surrealist aesthetic in Brussels in the late 1920s, van Hecke had added surrealist work to his gallery and the topics of *Variétés*.

It is clear that for van Hecke, at least, Flemish expressionism and (Belgian) surrealism were akin. He qualified the painting he and others discussed in *Variétés* initially as expressionist, and also as “romantic”.⁷⁴ Notably, in 1928 he changed the label to ‘fantastic art’. In an essay discussing this change of tack, van Hecke writes:

Therefore, the vision or presentment of the fantastic of our time which expresses itself in the art of painters such as Ensor, Henri Rousseau, Chirico, Max Ernst, Picasso, Frits van den Berghe, René Magritte, Hans Arp, Paul Klee, Picabia, Marc Chagall, Campendonk, George Grosz and Joan Miro, who are pictorially so dissimilar, contains and reveals the existence of a new mysticism. The disparate techniques that they employ serve, with each of them, as the most perfect conductors of invention, thought or emotion.⁷⁵

Listing this rather diverse group of artists allows van Hecke to make the point that it is about content (invention, thought, emotion), not style. The *fantastique* therefore does not constitute a style or movement but an expression.⁷⁶ In this art of today, continues van Hecke, ‘manifest the expression’ of an inner existence that is ‘fed by the disturbing and fantastical mysticism of which our life consists’.⁷⁷ The artists’ “inner being” was their mainstay. Rather than responding to or taking up rational formalism, the ‘fantastic’ artist was propelled by a new mysticism. Thus the

⁷⁴ An Paenhuysen, *De Nieuwe Wereld. De wonderjaren van de Belgische avant-garde (1918-1939)*, Antwerpen: Meilenhoff Manteau, 2010, 236.

⁷⁵ P.-G. van Hecke, ‘La peinture fantastique’, *Variétés* 1: 7, November 1928, 343-346, 346 (my translation). ‘Dès lors, la vision ou le pressentiment du fantastique de notre temps qui s’exprime dans l’œuvre de ces peintres, si dissemblablement picturaux, tels Ensor, Henri Rousseau, ... [etc.] et Joan Miro, renferme et révèle l’existence d’un mysticisme nouveau. Les techniques disparates dont ils procèdent sont, chez chacun d’eux, étroitement en fonction de parfaites puissances conductrices de l’invention, de la pensée ou de l’émotion.’

⁷⁶ Cf. Paenhuysen, *De Nieuwe*, 236.

⁷⁷ Van Hecke, ‘La peinture’, 344 (my translation). ‘Le phénomène plastique [d’aujourd’hui] ... se manifeste par l’expression, sans recherches ni efforts techniques apparents et pourtant enrichis de découvertes, trouvailles et audaces, d’une existence intérieure, nourrie de cette mystique troublante et fantastique dont se compose notre vie.’

fantastique was here too construed as the (positive) antitype of reason and logic, albeit with a mystical bent.

It further relates to an important issue of geography, and even ethnicity. Formalism and rationality was, as discussed, associated with the south, with the classic or Latin spirit; spontaneous creative expression and a mystical imagination, in contrast, fuelled the Northern, Germanic *esprit*. A 'confusing and fantastical mysticism' formed the basis of the imagination of northern artists, specifically the 'génie du Nord'.⁷⁸ In fact *Le génie du Nord* (1925), a book that explored the particular qualities of the "northern genius" —who was Flemish, incidentally— was written by André de Ridder, and may be considered a condensation of ideas he shared with van Hecke, and which also circulated more widely in circles where expressionism was appreciated, including among Flemish expressionists themselves.⁷⁹ As Paenhuysen notes, '[t]he "Genius of the North" was expressive, young, spontaneous, instinctive, fantastic, almost barbarian, and spiritual and therefore capable of the creation of a new, modern art instead of French art which was exhausted by fossilized traditions and formal experiments.'⁸⁰ Thus, in contrast to the southern, Latin and classic, associated with formalism and the intellectual faculty of reason, the northern came to be associated with imagination, sentiment, and feeling, and finally, perhaps as the ultimate antitype of cold, rational thought, with fantasy and the fantastic. Obviously such ideas partly come to fruition in Barr's *Fantastic Art*.

The Germanic was furthermore associated with gothic art. This early twentieth-century discussion is grounded in nineteenth-century debates concerning North vs. South, Germanic vs. Latin, and Ossian vs. Homer, shaped in (and by) Romanticism, and rooted in turn in the eighteenth century. Debates on these dichotomies played out particularly in the discourses of philology, literature and art.⁸¹ Initially, the dichotomy was conceived as German(ic)/Italian, barbaric/Latin, gothic/classical. The connection of gothic art and style to the Germanic peoples goes back to Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* of 1550, where he described German gothic architecture as barbarous and rude.⁸² In nineteenth-century connoisseurship and early art history the inevitability of the Italian renaissance and its art as *the* standard against which all other art was measured (and failed) prompted further explorations of the north vs. south-trope and led in particular to a reframing of the northern in (more) positive terms, in which 'barbaric' and 'rude' came to be seen as expressive and authentic. As well, the 'gothic' became ahistorical, and interpreted as an

⁷⁸ Paenhuysen, *De Nieuwe*, 236-7.

⁷⁹ André de Ridder, *Le génie du Nord*, Antwerp: Sélection, 1925. Paenhuysen, *De Nieuwe*, 236.

⁸⁰ An Paenhuysen, 'Surrealism in the Provinces. Flemish and Walloon identity in the Interwar Period', *Image & Narrative* 13, 2005, <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/surrealism/paenhuysen.htm>, np.

⁸¹ Joep Leerssen, 'Gods, Heroes, and Mythologists: Romantic Scholars and the Pagan Roots of Europe's Nations', *History of Humanities* 1: 1, Spring 2016, 71-100.

⁸² Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, J.C. Bondanella and P. Bondanella, eds & trans, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 117, see also xiii. The topos of barbarity in combination with intense spiritual favour even goes back to Tacitus, who had portrayed the 'Teutonic' people as rude but pious; Christopher S. Wood, *Forgery Replica Fiction. Temporalities of German Renaissance Art*, Chicago [etc.]: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 69.

essential, intrinsic quality, a gothic “spirit” (*esprit, Geist*)⁸³—think for instance of the gothic novel, but also of the art historical school exemplified by Wilhelm Worringer, which influenced expressionism.⁸⁴

By the beginning of the twentieth century, though, the contemporary standard against which everything was measured was no longer Italian but French art. The influential formal innovations had been happening in France: realism, impressionism, post-impressionism, cubism. At the same time, art markets were still dominated by the conservative taste for neo-classical, academic art—which was also, predominantly, French. Hence, while the north/south-opposition remained, the geographical location of the latter shifted towards France. Such is the debate as we find it in *Brusselois* art circles in the late 1920s and turn of the 1930s, although here with the Flemish as northern. Such too does it crystallise in Barr’s thought, where the opposition arises between French formal innovation and German expressionism. Barr was not in direct contact with van Hecke and his circles, but—apart from the fact that these ideas were circulating widely in western art historical and art critical circles from the later nineteenth century onwards—they moved in similar and overlapping circles. Barr was in contact with Belgian art collectors, dealers and artists such as Mesens, and museum directors such as Pierre Janlet, collector and director of the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. They corresponded about a lecture Janlet would give in the US. In October 1936 Barr suggested Janlet should speak on ‘Fantastic art’: ‘in which you might discuss the tradition of Fantastic art in Belgium from the time of Bosch and Bruegel and Huys down through Teniers and the Baroque ornamentists [sic] ... down to Wiertz, Ensor to Magritte’⁸⁵—a list almost identical to what Maeterlinck discussed. With other words, Barr was to some extent familiar with the Belgian art historical construction of a tradition of fantastic art and very probably with Maeterlinck’s studies specifically, as with the construction of Bosch and Breugel as “fathers” of such a tradition; even as he was too with prevailing thinking about the surrealist-fantastic in van Hecke’s circles and possibly with issues of *Sélection* and *Variétés*.⁸⁶

Further, Barr knew and read Herbert Read. Read wrote extensively on surrealism in the 1930s, and knew several surrealists, including Mesens, who, in turn, knew the *Brusselois* surrealists such as Magritte quite well, in addition to van Hecke and his group. The circle is therefore closed via Read.

⁸³ Merel van Tilburg, ‘Spasmodic lines and dead form: Gothic angst in abstract art’, in idem and Justine Moeckli, *Le retour des ténèbres: L’imaginaire gothique depuis Frankenstein*, Genève: Musée Rath, 2016, 72-93, 73-4, 80.

⁸⁴ Magdalena Bushart, *Die Geist der Gotik und die expressionistische Kunst: Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttheorie 1911-1925*, Munich: Schreiber, 1990. Ethnicity/race plays a particular (and unsettling) part in Worringer’s *Formprobleme der Gotik*, see Ann Stieglitz, ‘The Reproduction of Agony: Toward a Reception-History of Grünewald’s Isenheim Altar after the First World War’, *Oxford Art Journal*, 12, 2 (1989), 87-103, 87-9.

⁸⁵ Barr to Pierre Janlet, 13 October 1936, MoMA Exhs., #55.4, MoMA Archives, NY.

⁸⁶ All issues of *Variétés* are in the MoMA Library.

'Political tyranny' vs. the 'romantic principle'

Herbert Read understood surrealism as a form or part of romanticism, which he opposed to 'classicism', a reiteration of the old debate.⁸⁷ Read politicizes this opposition, and in particular 'classicism', considerably:

Classicism, let it be stated without further preface, represents for us now, and has always represented, the forces of oppression. Classicism is the intellectual counterpart of political tyranny. It was so in the ancient world and in the medieval empires it was renewed to express the dictatorships of the Renaissance and has ever since been the official creed of capitalism. Wherever the blood of martyrs stains the ground, there you will find a doric column or perhaps a statue of Minerva.⁸⁸

Read continues,

[T]he universal truths of classicism may be merely the temporal prejudices of an epoch, the universal truths of romanticism are coeval with the evolving consciousness of mankind.

It is in this sense, then, that *Surrealism is a reaffirmation of the romantic principle*....⁸⁹

Read therefore positioned surrealism within an ideological debate. His distinction between the abstract and formalist, on one side, and the 'romantic', as he calls it, on the other, can also be found with van Hecke.⁹⁰ Once more this too resonates strongly with Barr's thinking. In 1933 he qualified, under the heading 'The Romantic Reaction', 'Superrealism [as] the most conspicuous movement which has involved the recent liking for romantic or mysterious subject matter'.⁹¹

One may wonder about surrealism, which was of course originally a *French* movement, just as linked to Paris as cubism was. This need not necessarily have posed a problem, though. Just in 1928 Wilhelm Uhde (1874-1947) had published

⁸⁷ Read, 'Introduction', 21, 22.

⁸⁸ Read, 'Introduction', 23.

⁸⁹ Read, 'Introduction', 27-8 (emphasis mine). Surrealism was by no-means an anti-classicism movement. It wasn't a style, either; it was a lifestyle or a worldview, a politics of culture—or the surrealism as originally propagated by the Parisian surrealists, that is. Both Read and Barr could be said to have "misunderstood" surrealism, but even so their interpretation of it is not only interesting, and even valid, it severely impacted the eventual global discourse about surrealism and is therefore highly relevant.

⁹⁰ E.g. Van Hecke, 'La peinture', 345.

⁹¹ Barr, 'Summer Show', 2, 4. For the sake of clarity I am highlighting the opposition formalism and rationalism vs. the expressionist-romantic-fantastic, but that is not to say that this (northern) "fantastic" should be thought of as one homogenous category. One relevant distinction can be made between a 'fantastic' that relates to content and subject matter, as can be seen in Barr, and one that is framed more in terms of the relationship between image and psychic process and relates to an emotive effect. Interesting in this regard is Gerald Eager, 'The Fantastic in Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 30: 2, 1971, 151-157.

Picasso et la tradition française that had positioned Picasso as tormented, romantic, and *Germanic*—due to the artist’s Spanish, particularly Basque, background. This “northernness” of Basque or Spanish heritage is in turn part of a discourse that positioned the Gauls, and the Celts generally, as Gothic peoples or partaking of the Germanic (i.e., non-classic because non-Roman) esprit.⁹² Being from Mediterranean Europe therefore would not necessarily mean that one were “Southern”. Uhde’s view was shared more widely. Allow me a brief loop to surrealism here; Breton, who came from Brittany, felt a strong affinity to the Celts and may too have associated them with Germanic, Northern, and/or barbarian virtues and values—or at least, with another heritage than the Latin-classical.

This raises the issue of politics—of major concern in 1936. In his 1936 lecture Breton qualified the ‘fantastic’ as something that ‘socialist realism excludes in the most radical manner’ (and ‘to which Surrealism [therefore] never ceases to appeal’).⁹³ I would argue that Breton is referring here to National Socialist and Stalinist interventions in art, both in outlawing certain forms as “degenerate” and in the promotion of (figurative) socialist realist styles of painting and sculpture glorifying the state and the (patriarchal) family. ‘Fantastic’ is therefore here too placed in a politicised opposition. If this was the case for Breton, why then not also for Barr? Although the well-known exhibition of *Entartete Kunst* in Munich dates to 1937, the notion that certain forms of art were degenerate had been part of National Socialist governmental policies since the establishment of the *Reichskulturkammer* in 1933.⁹⁴ Not only abstract art was consigned to the category of degenerate art, figurative art too, especially fauvism, expressionism and New Objectivity. And these specifically were the German art currents Barr celebrated in his MoMA exhibitions. Barr travelled in Germany throughout the 1930s, lived in Stuttgart for year (1932-3) and was well aware of, and worried by, developments there; worry that, as Platt has clearly shown, pervaded his thinking on art and exhibition making already from the summer of 1933 onwards.⁹⁵ Eventually, Barr would speak out forcefully in public about the art policy of National Socialism in 1939, as detailed by Langfeld.⁹⁶ Although *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* is not about German expressionist art, I argue that it should still also be seen in light of the rise of fascism in Europe. For one, dada and surrealist art was being declared degenerate. Secondly, the ‘fantastic’ and ‘antirational’ art of dada and surrealism was clearly situated by Barr within the same paradigm as (German) expressionism, and the

⁹² Wilhelm Uhde, *Picasso et la tradition française. Notes sur la peinture actuelle*, Paris: Éditions des quatre-chemins, 1928, passim but for instance 30-1, 52-3, 86. Uhde is problematic for several reasons, not least his hallowing of a white, Germanic race. He was also a pioneering art dealer and influential art critic whose ideas resonated, were even aligned, with many others of his time. One finds a direct reverberation of Uhde in an essay on Picasso by Read, as argued by Andrew Causey, ‘Herbert Read and Contemporary Art’, in David Goodway, ed., *Herbert Read Reassessed*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998, 123-144, 125.

⁹³ Breton, ‘Limits’, 106.

⁹⁴ Stephanie Barron, ‘Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany’, in idem, ed., *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991, 9-23, 9-10.

⁹⁵ Platt, ‘Modernism’, 288-9, 290-1.

⁹⁶ Langfeld, ‘How the Museum’, 7-11; Platt, ‘Modernism’, 290.

opposition of unbridled fantasy, irrationality, folk culture and the art of children and the insane to National Socialist ideology of reason and (racial) purity is obvious. Thirdly, although it is frequently overlooked because Barr doesn't write explicitly about politics in the catalogue, his show was politically framed. Periodical divisions are made with regards to the French Revolution and the war of 1914-18.⁹⁷ The catalogue's chronology of dada and surrealism makes mention of the Russian revolutions and 'the War' and its aftereffects in reference to several years.⁹⁸ Without a doubt a chronology of surrealism, let alone dada, would be sorely lacking if it didn't include some mention of war. Still, Barr's successive inclusion of 'civil war in Germany' may point toward a deeper concern with (and understanding of) developments in Germany and their effect upon art and culture. In comparison to the linear chart for *Cubism and Abstract Art*—which covers the years 1890-1935 without any mention of politics or war—the chronology for dada-surrealism is teeming with politics. Drawing up this chronology in 1936 after just having been in Germany—and having noted his concern with developments there in letters—I cannot but think that, at least on some level, he must have also been making a political statement with his choice for the forms and kinds of art that he included in *Fantastic Art*, as much as with the label 'fantastic' in itself. From the political subversion ascribed to the marvellous and fantastic in Bretonian surrealism, to Maeterlinck's association of 'le genre fantastique' with democracy and expressions of an underclass,⁹⁹ to van Hecke's notion of creative freedom and spontaneous expression as part of a *fantastique*, to Read's identification of classicism with political tyranny and hence by implication romanticism with democratic freedom, all of these ascribed a certain political opposition to the romantic-fantastic which surely resonated with Barr. It should be noted that uncomfortable statements about race and a (superior) Germanic *esprit* permeated art discourses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, certainly in the sources I've described here that hallow the Germanic 'génie du nord' over southern formalism. Obviously too a large part of the superiority discourse of National Socialism turned around a very similar perceived pre-eminence of the Germanic people. Yet there was little room for a fantastic in fascism, even as it was given a podium by others.

In conclusion

Not the creator of the genre of the 'fantastic' in the visual arts, Alfred Barr still consolidated it to a considerable degree, not least by introducing it so prominently to Anglophone and specifically American audiences. The construction of the 'fantastic' as a supergenre extending backwards in time to a particular group of fifteenth and sixteenth-century old masters was also not by his hand. But again, Barr consolidated the tradition and popularised it visually in the organisation of his exhibition and catalogue. I have traced the 'fantastic' through Francophone and

⁹⁷ Barr, *Fantastic*, 67-92; 93-112.

⁹⁸ Barr, *Fantastic*, 54-8.

⁹⁹ Maeterlinck, *Le genre... sculpture*, e.g. 3: 'L'art flamand, qui fut toujours démocratique et populaire, a trouvé dans le genre satirique ou grotesque son expression plus intime et la plus puissante...'

Belgian sources from the early twentieth century, and the discourse makes its way to Barr through those sources, as well as through Read and such American publications as Benson's 'Phases of Fantasy'.

It has become clear that a large role was played by a trend towards dichotomous construction of opposites: form vs. content, classic vs. romantic, reason vs. irrational qualities; these being further framed by (ideological, political, and cultural) conceptions of south vs. north, Latin vs. Germanic, French academicism vs. German (or Flemish) expressionism. Such oppositional fields and related associations that could be found in art historical and critical discussion of the day and earlier came through very strongly in Barr, who explicitly positioned *Fantastic Art* as antithesis to *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Across the board, surrealism was identified with the category of the irrational, the romantic, the imagination, as well as with socio-political content. Barr summarised this trend under 'fantastic art' and enshrined it as *Fantastic Art*. The 'fantastic' also became politicised (if it wasn't already), not least by Breton in his 1936 lecture 'Limites non frontières', but the tendency to relate the 'fantastic' to free expression, democratic values and subversion of power was already present in Belgian art historical and critical writing. Barr too made a political choice, albeit somewhat implicit, with 'fantastic'.

Finally, the 'fantastic' became closely intertwined with the public perception of surrealism. It gained little prominence within surrealism, but it gained quite a foothold and was often used by critics, reviewers, and eventually popularising art historians in relation to or even as synonym of surrealism, certainly from the 1950s onwards when the 'fantastic' became quite modish.¹⁰⁰ By 1962 the use of 'the fantastic' had gotten so out of hand that Breton saw the need to put it in its place ('inconsequential fiction') once and for all:

The marvellous, nothing defines this better than setting it in opposition to "the fantastic," which, unfortunately, our contemporaries tend more and more use as its replacement.

The problem is that the fantastic nearly always falls under the order of inconsequential fiction, while the marvellous illuminates the furthest extreme of vital movement and engages the entire emotional realm.¹⁰¹

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¹⁰⁰ As excellently analysed by Parkinson in *Futures*, see for instance 113-123 but *passim*.

¹⁰¹ André Breton, 'Foreword: Drawbridges' [1962], in Pierre Mabile, *Mirror of the Marvellous*, Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1998, vii-xv.

(with Henrik Johnsson, 2018). Articles on various subjects related to surrealism and early twentieth century art criticism and curatorial practices are forthcoming in, among others, *Primitive Renaissances* (Ashgate 2017) and *The Encyclopaedia of Surrealism* (Bloomsbury 2018). For more information, a teaching portfolio, and a selection of publications and presentations, see:

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