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## André Breton and Vladimir Mayakovsky: Poeticizing Politics and Politicizing Poetry

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**André Breton and Vladimir  
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Hazel Donkin

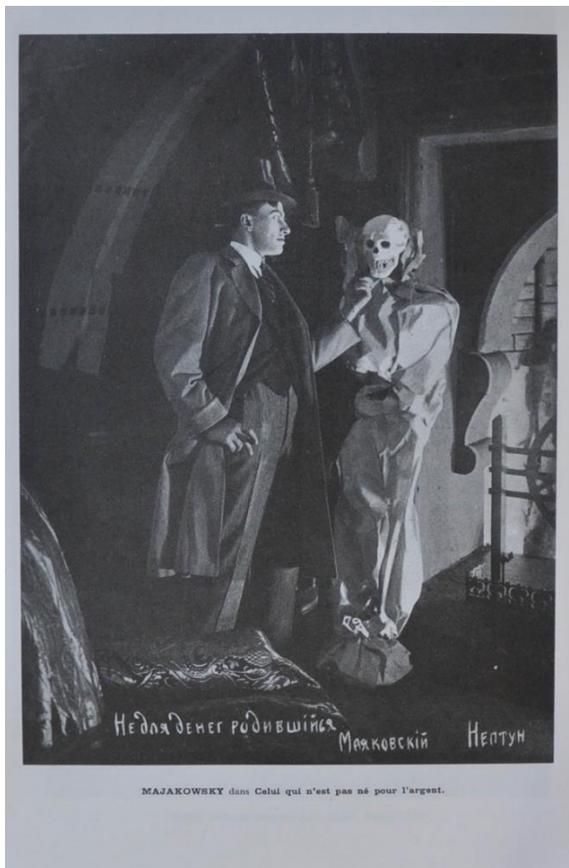


Figure 1: Film still showing Mayakovsky in *Not for Money Born*, 1918. *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* 1 (July 1930): final page.

Much has been written on the creative use of photography in French surrealist journals, and the focus has been on the publications of the inter-war period, particularly *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924-1929, 12 numbers). Georges Bataille's review *Documents* (1929-1930, 15 numbers), often defined as a surrealist journal, and *Minotaure* (1933-1939, 13 numbers), a luxurious art review under the editorial control of the surrealists, have also been closely examined.<sup>1</sup> In all of these journals texts are interspersed with illustrations and in *Minotaure* they are lavishly produced. Far less attention has been paid to the second surrealist journal, *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (1930-1933, 6 numbers) in this respect. This is understandable; the illustrations are relatively few and generally placed together at the back of the journal, separated from the text that they allude to. They are mostly photographic. For the surrealists and the commercial press alike photographs became, at this time, an indispensable tool of communication used with intention. Whereas the commercial press used photography to seduce the reader and to provide "documentary" evidence to support text, the surrealists delighted in the instability of the photographic image and how it could trigger uncontrollable associations in the mind of the viewer. The surrealists' use of photography was often elegant and incisive, providing images which offered a challenge to the viewer and were open to various interpretations. "Photographs are always photographs of something" Roland Barthes said, and the surrealists were adept at exploiting the potential of the two planes of the image that he identified as "studium" and "punctum" (25-28).<sup>2</sup> The viewer learns something from the photograph, but it also "works" on the sensibilities as they are affected by details. Although the second surrealist journal differs from the first, the relationship between text and image remains a key feature and the use of photographic illustrations is shrewd and creative, evidence of Breton's mastery of editing. The launch of the new politically charged journal was important in 1930 as it came at a crossroads for the group following the publication of the *Second Manifesto* in 1929; in retrospect, Breton considered it to be the peak of surrealism. In 1952 he stated that of all the surrealist journals, *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* was

... by far the richest, in the sense that mattered to us: the most balanced, the best put together, as well as the most fully alive (with a thrilling and dangerous life). It was in this magazine that Surrealism burned with the

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<sup>1</sup> See Ades; Ades and Baker; Bate; Walker.

<sup>2</sup> The first half of *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes is devoted to distinguishing between two planes of a photographic image. The "studium" is informative or educational; it is the manifest subject, meaning, and context of a photograph. From a photograph we can gain knowledge; Barthes uses the example of a photograph by William Klein of May Day in 1959 in Moscow and notes details of how Russians dressed, something he had not known about previously. The "punctum" is subjective, it is the aspect of a photograph (usually a detail or details) that arrests (or "pricks" as Barthes says) the viewers and works on them.

most intense flame. For a time, we all saw nothing but this flame, and were not afraid to be consumed by it. (*Conversations* 120)

The focus here is on the first issue of the journal and specifically on the way in which Breton used the death of the Russian futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in a dialogue about love, suicide, and the role of the artist in society and politics. Mayakovsky hardly needs introduction, being “one of the most theatrical, spectacular and controversial figures on the twentieth-century Soviet Russian cultural stage and definitely the most *visible* Soviet poet in the west” (Boym 123). Scholars have outlined how he was canonized by the Russian Communist Party immediately on his death and has been mythologized by a wide range of writers, including Breton (Mayakovsky, *The Bedbug* 48; Boym 119-90). His brain is preserved in the Moscow Brain Institute (Neumeyer). As editor of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, Breton demonstrates his understanding of the potential of photographic images and makes good use of them in this issue to render the surrealists’ declaration of support for Soviet Russia at the front of the journal equivocal. The complex play of text and image produces myriad associations and helps Breton to establish a distinct position for his group, politically and culturally, presenting it as rigorously intellectual, ferociously political, and culturally radical.

The recent death of Mayakovsky dominates this issue; he committed suicide in April 1930 and the journal was published in July of that year. Mayakovsky was extolled by Breton, who identified with the poet politically, as a writer, as a modern myth-maker, and personally as one who valued love highly and was tormented by it. Mayakovsky is mythologized by Breton, as Svetlana Boym says, and in the process the surrealist group

exposes their own complexities and contradictions, particularly the tensions between politics and poetics in the relationship between Surrealists and Communists. It also forces us to re-examine some vital issues of avant-garde poetics, particularly the conjunction between poetry and revolution. (Boym 158)

Boym’s detailed analysis of the flexibility of Mayakovsky as a figure is fascinating. Her analysis of Louis Aragon’s connection to him is illuminating, but she does not mention the illustration that accompanies the text in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. The following discussion is focused on the full page reproduction of a photograph of the poet in the journal which, as both homage to Mayakovsky and a synthesis of surrealist ideology is, arguably, deliberately, and magnificently poetic *and* political (fig. 1).

The turbulent relationship between the French surrealists and the Communist Party is well documented. Despite a violent hostility towards the leadership of the French Communist Party, Breton and his group were drawn to Communism because, like many, they were inspired by the Russian revolution of October 1917. The catalyst for the political radicalization of the group was the Rif rebellion in Morocco in 1925, the same year that Breton was enamored of Trotsky’s book on

Lenin (Borislavov 133). Although the production of the journal is generally understood as signifying a shift towards placing the movement at the service of the Communist Party, tension is evident at the outset and the published response to Mayakovsky's death by suicide particularly denotes discordance. From the start the Communist Party was mistrustful of the surrealists who were insistent on autonomy. In *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1925 Paul Éluard had reported an unfounded optimism among delegates at a conference organized by *Philosophies*, part of a left-wing alliance that included the surrealists and *Clarté*, concerning the extent of revolutionary change in Soviet Russia.<sup>3</sup> Éluard suggested that the nature of Russian society may have changed but that it was nevertheless characterized by "inequality, disorder and madness" (Éluard, Untitled report).<sup>4</sup> Éluard's concerns about the period of reaction in Russia following the defeats suffered by revolution on an international scale, notably in Germany, and Lenin's death in 1924 were crudely expressed but shrewd. Éluard's fundamental support for the revolution, his distance from the Party, and his naivety facilitated this insight. At this time, when the international bourgeoisie was willing the Soviet state to falter and the left was reluctant to voice concerns, the fact that the surrealists were critical of Russia was extraordinary. The surrealists maintained an affinity with the ideas and protagonists of "October" at a time when most were falling in behind the Party apparatus in Moscow and moving rapidly to the right. By 1930 the surrealists knew that they were staring into the abyss of Stalinism. The "Kharkov conference" later that year would establish a hardline Communist Party position on "proletarian literature" as the only acceptable kind and condemn Breton's position in the second surrealist manifesto (1929) in which he reiterated his belief that such a thing was not possible.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The French war in the Rif region of Morocco (Spring 1925-Spring 1926) led to a mass anti-colonial campaign led by the French Communist Party (PCF) and galvanized the left in France. *Philosophies* was the name of a journal founded in 1924 by a group of young intellectuals, including Henri Lefebvre, Georges Friedmann, Paul Nizan, Georges Politzer, Pierre Morhange, and Norbert Guterman. René Crevel as well as Philippe Soupault collaborated on issue 2 of the journal. *Clarté* was a bi-monthly review launched in 1919 by a group founded by Raymond Lefebvre, Paul Vaillant-Couturier, and Henri Barbusse as an "International of the Mind."

<sup>4</sup> Except where noted, translations from French are mine.

<sup>5</sup> The Second International Conference of Revolutionary Writers was held in Kharkov in the Ukraine in November and December of 1930. The majority of the delegates were members of the Communist Party and the surrealists were represented by Louis Aragon and Georges Sadoul. Both publicly renounced their association with the surrealists at the close of the conference. Breton railed against the Kharkov resolution and the subsequent promotion of "proletarian literature" in a lecture given under the auspices of the Association of Revolutionary Artists and Writers at the Salle de Frand-Orient, parts of which were published as "On the Proletarian Literature Contest sponsored by *L'Humanité*" in 1933

The first issue of the new surrealist journal famously opens with a reproduction of a telegram to the surrealist group from the *Bureau International de Littérature Révolutionnaire* in Moscow which demands clarification on the position that Breton would take should “imperialism declare war on the soviets” (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> The collective response (written by Breton and Aragon) states that the surrealists would follow the directives of the Third International. It then offers intellectual services as their “particular forte.”

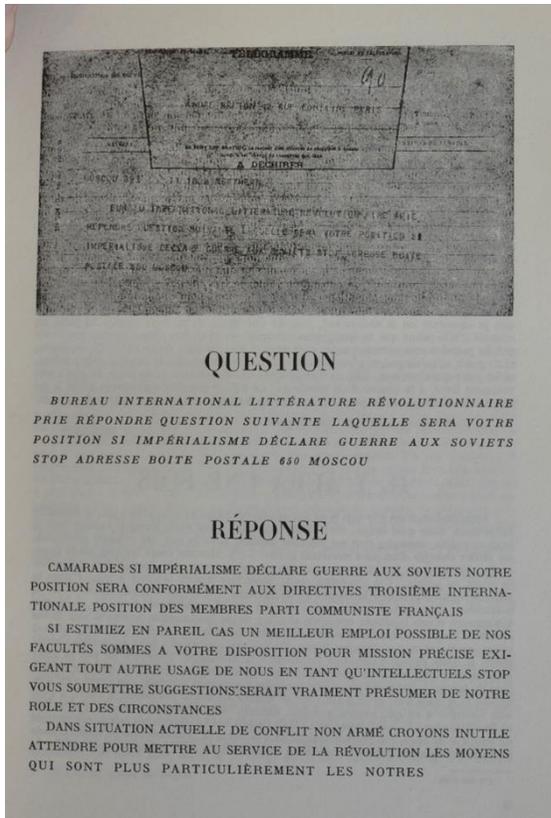


Figure 2: The telegraph from Moscow and the published response. *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* 1 (July 1930): first page.

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(translated in *Break of Day* 78-87). Breton had expressed his belief that art or literature which expressed the aspirations of the working class was not possible in “The Second Manifesto of Surrealism” (*Manifestoes of Surrealism* 154-57).

<sup>6</sup> The International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature was a group that attempted to organize “proletarian literature” on an international scale following the First Conference of Proletarian and Revolutionary Writers in Moscow in 1927.

A positive answer then, declaring loyalty to Moscow, but also candid. The friction between the “revolution” of the Communist Party and that of the surrealists is further illuminated by the reaction to Mayakovsky’s death. This first issue of the journal devoted seven pages of text (out of forty-eight pages in total) and a full page photographic illustration to the poet. The illustration appears on the last page of the journal, in direct opposition to the telegram from Russia. The text consists of a long essay by Breton entitled “Lyubovnaya lodka razbilas o byt” (Love’s boat has smashed against the daily grind), a phrase from Mayakovsky’s poem *About that (Pro eto)* (1923) which also appears in his suicide note. Breton’s text is spread across the seven pages, flanked (in the following order) by reproductions of all three parts of Mayakovsky’s suicide note<sup>7</sup>; the obituary published in *Komsomolskia* (the youth division paper of the Russian Communist Party) written by Petr Neznamov and Vasily Katanyan, Mayakovsky’s *Leif* comrades; an extract from *About that*; Mayakovsky’s poem *Notre Dame* (1925); and finally three press reports, all dated June 1930. These include an article from the French Communist Party newspaper *L’Humanité* about Aragon’s response to an abusive article about Mayakovsky by André Levinson in *Nouvelles Littéraires*. Aragon had turned up at Levinson’s house and punched him. The published response from Levinson and an article applauding Aragon’s aggression in *Canard Enchaîné* were also reprinted.

The surrealists believed themselves to be in a position to effectively contribute to a live debate on the issue of freedom in both political activism and in cultural production. Both the text and the photograph reveal the difficulties in negotiating a route between poetic freedom of thought and channeling the imagination to practical effect. Breton’s surrealist text presents a forceful argument about love, revolution, and suicide as well as lambasting the political exploitation of the poet’s death in the mainstream press in France as well as the Communist press.

On the surface Mayakovsky and Breton appear to have much in common in addition to their political perspective. They were both great editors and writers.<sup>8</sup> They both had enormous egos. As writers they were fond of self-centered lyricism.

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<sup>7</sup> On 14 April 1930 Mayakovsky shot himself through the heart. He left a letter, signed and dated two days earlier, addressed “To All of You” beginning “Blame no one for my death.” The first section directly addresses his mother, sisters, and comrades, asking for forgiveness and also Lily [Brik], asking for love. He then asks that “comrade government” grant his extended family a “bearable life” and pass his verses to the Briks. Two additional notes follow, each signed, first greeting his “comrades in RAPP” (including a message for Vladimir Ermilov specifically) and finally an instruction to use the 2000 rubles in his desk to settle his taxes. See Brown 352-54 and Jangfeldt 547-49 for full analysis of the suicide note and the circumstances surrounding it.

<sup>8</sup> Mayakovsky edited *LEF* (1923-1925) along with Osip Brik and *Novy LEF* (1927-1929) along with Sergei Tretyakov. In the inter-war period Breton edited *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924-1929) from issue 4 onwards, *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (1930-1933), and *Minotaure* (1933-1939) with Pierre Mabille.

They had immense faith in the power of love: in his work Mayakovsky often links the destiny of the world with the destiny of his love; he unites love and revolutionary politics in a fight for “the only happiness” (Shklovsky 84). Extraordinary and intense love, “mad love” as Breton calls it, was central for surrealism in the inter-war period and beyond as it was understood to express

the entire power and hope of surrealism to remake the world through the emotions and through the confidence that the relation between the exterior or natural world and the interior or human world can reveal more about both than the rational mind can possibly detect. At some moments, this relation takes on a political aura, at others, a purely personal one, and at still others, a mystical one; but the basic confidence remains identical. (Mary Ann Caws, Translator’s Introduction to Breton, *Mad Love* xiii)

Both men personally invested heavily in love and felt badly let down by it. Mayakovsky had fallen in love with Lily Brik at first sight in 1915 and a longstanding *ménage-à-trois* involving her husband Osip Brik ensued. Mayakovsky loved Lily as long as he lived and wrote countless verses for her, but he was periodically tormented by their highly charged relationship.<sup>9</sup> Mayakovsky also had several intense and difficult relationships with other women.<sup>10</sup> In 1930 Breton’s long-standing relationship with Suzanne Muzard was imploding; he met her in late 1927, they ran away to Toulon together, leaving their respective partners (she was living with the writer Emmanuel Berl), and for three years they had a passionate but torrid love affair. In 1930 Breton eventually divorced his wife Simone so that he could devote himself to Suzanne, only to find that she had married Berl. Even so their entanglement continued for over a year before finally ending in 1931. Breton was in deep emotional despair during this time and this is evident in his writing, not least in this essay. At one point Breton superimposes his affair with Muzard onto Mayakovsky’s with Tatyana Yakovleva (“Lyubovnaya lodka razbilas o byt” 58). Love is in the foreground. Breton even provides a footnote to the fragment of *About that* to inform the reader that *that* is love.<sup>11</sup> Even the great Russian revolutionary poet had nothing in his arsenal to deal with the power and danger of “woman,” he says (55). This surrealist text reveals an open wound; it is delirious, in parts a rant. However, this lack of restraint is not accidental; it facilitates and illustrates Breton’s contribution to the live debate about “individualism,” on how much of a writer’s personal life was permissible

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<sup>9</sup> For a summary of Breton’s relations with women see Polizzotti, “Phrases Knocking at the Window” 21-24. Viktor Shklovsky offers an account of Mayakovsky’s investment in love in *Mayakovsky and his Circle*.

<sup>10</sup> For details of Mayakovsky’s affairs with Tatiana Yakovleva, Veronica Polonsky (Nora) and Elly Siebert see Bengt.

<sup>11</sup> Breton’s footnote reads “*C’est a dire: De L’amour*” (18).

or valid in their work or in their realization of literary characters. For Breton of course freedom was paramount and his text emphasizes the inevitability and fruitfulness of the convergence of the personal, the political, and the poetic.

Furthermore both men understood suicide as a viable option in a world where life became unbearable: it is a regular motif in Mayakovsky's work. "There is no other way out for me," Mayakovsky had written in his suicide note. Breton had regarded suicide as a touchstone of revolt since the death of his friend Jacques Vaché in 1919.

Breton and Mayakovsky had met briefly in Paris in 1928, introduced by Lily Brik's sister Elsa Triolet, who was soon to marry Louis Aragon; however, meaningful dialogue was unlikely and the meeting went unrecorded in the Russian poet's letters home.<sup>12</sup> Mayakovsky was perceived by Breton as a free thinker, imbued with terrific revolutionary energy and wholly committed to Bolshevism, but as one who believed that in a sense, art should be free from "politics" and revolutionary in spirit. Stalin's decree in 1932 would instruct that the arts must serve and represent the state as a tool of propaganda, but the cultural debate about the role of art had raged since 1917 and Mayakovsky had increasingly come under attack. He was seen by the Communist Party as being too individualistic and too powerful because of his popularity; his plays were delayed in publication and harshly criticized and he was publicly denounced as a "bohemian."<sup>13</sup> In 1929 he was denied an exit visa (Brown 350). Mayakovsky planned and produced his self-curated solo exhibition *Twenty Years of Work* (January 1930) with little help, and although the opening night was attended by a few close friends and a large crowd of young people, none of the prominent writers or high ranking state and party officials that he had invited turned up, to his obvious dismay (Jangfeldt 490). The poet was increasingly isolated from the literary world but also from his comrades in *Lef* whom he abandoned, without consultation, in 1930 to join the semi-official group RAPP (Revolutionary Association of Proletarian Writers). According to Viktor Shklovsky, the last time he saw his friend was at the House of Writers where Mayakovsky was attending a RAPP meeting to be "re-educated" (Shklovsky 200). Towards the end, Shklovsky says, Mayakovsky "found himself in a stagnant bay" (97). Jangfeldt summarizes the contemporary responses to Mayakovsky's suicide and notes that it was

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Polizzotti documents a meeting between Breton and Mayakovsky in his preface to *Break of Day* (xii, xiv). There is no mention of a meeting with Breton in Mayakovsky's letters to Lily Brik, edited and published by Bengt Jangfeldt as *Love Is the Heart of Everything*.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of Mayakovsky's work and contemporary reception see Railing, ed., *Voices of Revolution*. For an account of Mayakovsky's revolutionary activities from 1922 until his death and documentation of the criticism he suffered see Railing, "A Revolutionary Spirit."

attributed to illness (he had suffered from influenza) and to his personal angst but also to his literary and political alienation (541-50).

Mayakovsky's second suicide note, addressed to his RAPP comrades, explains his dilemma.<sup>14</sup> The poet asks that his comrades not consider him weak but understand that he saw no alternative. He then asks them to relay a message to Vladimir Ermilov, critic, RAPP leader, and party hack: "Tell Ermilov I'm sorry I took the placard down, ought to have had our quarrel out," presumably referring to an incident that took place a month earlier. Mayakovsky's *Bathhouse* (1930), a direct assault on the cultural bureaucrats of the regime, was declared to be unacceptable by the theater censorship committee; it was subsequently edited and failed badly when staged. Criticism was harsh. Even before the premier Ermilov had suggested, in *Pravda*, that the poet was a Trotskyite. Mayakovsky had responded by adding a placard to the display of large anti-bureaucracy banners hung in the Meyerhold theatre for the premier that read

You can't immediately steam out the swarm of bureaucracy.  
There wouldn't be enough bathhouses or soap.  
Besides, the bureaucrats are aided by the pen of critics like Ermilov.

Patricia Blake recounts the story of Ermilov's protest and how the RAPP ordered that the placard be removed in her introduction to *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry* (43-44): Mayakovsky complied and understood that in 1930, with Trotsky's deportation, with the suppression of the opposition, and with the arrest of many leaders of the revolution, the struggle of ideas within the Party had been won by those who had abandoned the principles of "October."

At the end of his essay Breton berates the "riffraff," represented here by Augustin Habaru writing for *Monde* (a French international Communist review founded by Henri Barbusse) and *Le Soir*, for taking the poet's death as an opportunity to vent a deep hatred of those who, like Mayakovsky, "proclaim the absolute inanity of supposedly proletarian literature" ("Lyubovnaya lodka razbilas o byt" 62). Breton also attacks *L'Humanité*, which presented the poet as a "bourgeois individualist" who had no understanding of the working class and who had been exposed as a fraud through his resorting to suicide. There is no explicit criticism of the Russian Communist Party, but Breton's sustained focus on the question of "proletarian literature" and on Mayakovsky's characterization as an exemplary "proletarian poet" are antagonistic to say the least. Through a Central Committee decree in 1928 Stalin had made his intentions clear regarding writers' creative freedom:

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<sup>14</sup> Mayakovsky's note is translated into French in *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* as "Ne m'appellez pas lâche. C'est sérieux, il n'y a rien à faire. Salut. Dites à Ermilov que c'est dommage d'avoir abandonné le mot d'ordre, il fallait vaincre. V. M." (16).

Literary art must be developed, its social contents must be made deeper, it must be made completely understandable for the masses, its circulation enlarged etc. We must struggle for the hegemony of proletarian literature. (Garrard 29)

The obituary written by Mayakovsky's *Lef* comrades commends him as a "revolutionary poet," emphasizing his contribution to literature and to the class struggle, arguing that he was indeed a great "proletarian poet," not because he chose the proletariat as his theme, but because he shared their goal and consistently wrote "for the revolution," despite coming under attack. Breton uses the reproduction of this Russian obituary to emphasize the chasm between Mayakovsky's work and "proletarian literature," but also to sound an alarm. Breton aligned himself with Trotsky, whose dismissal of "proletarian art" in *Literature and Revolution* (1924) was widely known, as was Victor Serge's article entitled "Is a proletarian literature possible?" written in Russia in 1925 but directed at French readers, warning of the dangers of literary constriction. The surrealists were actively countering attempts, orchestrated by Barbusse and supported by the Comintern, to establish a "proletarian literature" in France. Breton's text concludes with a denial of "any possible existence to poetry or art that would adopt the extreme simplification – à la Barbusse – of ways of thinking and feeling. We are still waiting for someone to show us a "proletarian' work of art," he says (63).

Breton's skill as an editor is evident in the composition of the article and in his choice of an unusual image of the Russian poet as the illustration. We know that Breton was a scrupulous editor, that he sought illustrations for inclusion in surrealist reviews, and that he provided instructions pertaining to design and page layout.<sup>15</sup> One of Rodchenko's portraits of Mayakovsky would have been an obvious choice for the illustration if a simple homage was required. Instead, a film still was chosen from Mayakovsky's 1918 adaptation of Jack London's *Martin Eden* (1909) (fig. 1).<sup>16</sup> Breton's text is thus supplemented by an image so rich in connotation that an intention to advance the dialogue on the implications of

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<sup>15</sup> Breton's photographic collection included prints ordered from agencies and museums as well as individuals. The image of Mayakovsky was not in his collection, but he retained many of the prints that were published in surrealist journals until his death, facilitating an insight into editorial decision-making. His collection, held at his apartment at 42 rue Fontaine, was documented before the sale of contents in 2003 by L'Association l'Atelier André Breton, and is available to view at <http://www.andrebretton.fr/#>.

<sup>16</sup> Jack London's semi-autobiographical *Martin Eden* was published in 1909. It tells the story of a poor worker intellectual who falls in love with a bourgeois woman and becomes a novelist in order to "improve" himself and rise to a position where he would be a suitable husband. Despite his literary success, his project ends in alienation and Eden commits suicide. The novel deals with the difficulties faced by writers and issues of individualism versus socialism.

Mayakovsky's death in an imaginative way is clear. The relationship between the texts and the image advances Breton's argument in a way that language alone would have been unable to do. In the illustration Mayakovsky is presented playing the role of a writer contemplating death. The photograph, together with the caption which identifies Mayakovsky playing Ivan Nov, the main protagonist in his film *Not for money born* (1918), sets up a series of dichotomies; between individualism and political allegiance, love/poetry and revolution, life and death and social classes.<sup>17</sup> The reader of the journal understands that the photograph represents Mayakovsky as an artist, but intertextuality sets off associations.

A reader who was unfamiliar with the film or the novel on which it was based would find the image rich in associations, but knowledge of the narratives adds layers of meaning. The protagonists in both are, like Mayakovsky and Breton, consumed by love: in the novel Eden explains that he is powerless to resist:

Love was too fine and noble, and he was too loyal a lover for him to besmirch love with criticism. What did love have to do with Ruth's divergent views on art, right conduct, the French Revolution, or equal suffrage? They were mental processes, but love was beyond reason; it was super-rational. He could not belittle love. He worshipped it. Love lay on the mountain-tops beyond the valley-land of reason. It was a sublimated condition of existence, the topmost peak of living, and it came rarely. Thanks to the school of scientific philosophers he favored, he knew the biological significance of love; but by a refined process of the same scientific reasoning he reached the conclusion that the human organism achieved its highest purpose in love, that love must not be questioned, but must be accepted as the highest guerdon of life. (London 176)

The novel *Martin Eden* is presented by Jack London as an attack on individualism and a critique of personal ambition; the central character is a poor sailor who falls in love with Ruth Morse, a middle class girl, and sets out to educate himself and become a writer so that he can rise to a position to marry. He denounces socialism personally and in public meetings. He does find success and becomes rich, but too late, and Ruth abandons him just before this happens. He becomes disillusioned with his fame and money and commits suicide. Mayakovsky, filled with revolutionary zeal, wrote *Not for Money Born* shortly after October 1917 with David Burliuk. Mayakovsky cast himself as the male lead in the film. Indeed Mayakovsky played the principal part in all of the three films that he

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<sup>17</sup> Nikandr Turkin's *Nye dlya deneg radiivshisya* (Not for money born, 1918) was written by Vladimir Mayakovsky and David Burliuk. The cast: David Burliuk, Margerita Kibalchich, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Yanina Mirato. Cinematography by Yevgeni Slavinsky.

made in 1918.<sup>18</sup> This particular film still, which shows him dressed in a top hat and smoking a fat cigar, echoes contemporary accusations of his questionable class consciousness. However, the narrative of the film after this point develops with Nov rejecting material wealth.

Mayakovsky's protagonist, like London's, is from a poor background, and when he falls for a middle class girl he also decides to become a writer to impress her. When he becomes a famous and rich futurist poet she eventually shows an interest in him, but he suspects that she is simply after his money and cannot accept her love. He plays with a revolver, contemplating suicide (ironically given that Mayakovsky would shoot himself in the heart with the same weapon), but decides instead to fake his death by dressing a skeleton in his fine clothes and setting fire to it before walking away dressed in his old working clothes to resume his ordinary life. Bengt Jangfeldt offers a synopsis (115). Mayakovsky liked to think of himself as a young, Russian version of Jack London (Brown 118). An important link between them is that they had both become disillusioned with the organizations they had committed to; London had joined the Socialist Party of America after being inspired by *The Communist Manifesto*, but had resigned in 1916 "because of its lack of fire and fight, and its loss of emphasis on the class struggle" (Manguel 21). Mayakovsky's death was partly attributable to the fact that he was committed to a struggle for freedom that he felt had slipped away.

Mayakovsky identified with the semi-autobiographical aspect of London's novel, his intermingling of politics and life. The work of the Russian poet is characterized by a mixture of the personal, poetic, and political; even his suicide notes are a complex mesh. His first note for example includes four lines from his poem *About that*, the narrative of which involves a man who shot himself and left a note but died with "a love song on his lips." The film still used to illustrate Breton's essay raises questions about the dissolving of boundaries between life and art, between the personal and the collective at a time when both Mayakovsky's and the surrealists' tendency to do so was under attack. The surrealists highlighted Mayakovsky's diverse talent and modernity in choosing a film still and also aligned him with Luis Buñuel. The first four illustrations in the issue are from Buñuel: an unidentified photograph of a bishop fondling the breast of a young woman and three stills from *L'Age d'Or* (1930). These prominent and copious illustrations by Buñuel in the first issue of the new journal demonstrate the importance that Breton placed upon cultural as well as political radicalism. *Not for Money Born* was similar to *L'Age d'Or* in that it focused on the theme of frustrated passion and bridged poetics and politics. Indeed, Marina Burke observes that watching *Not for Money Born* "one is struck by the foreshadowing of the surrealism

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<sup>18</sup> In 1918 Mayakovsky starred in *Lady and the Hooligan* (Dir. Yeugeny Slavinsky, script Mayakovsky) and *Shackled by Film* (Dir. Turkin, script Mayakovsky) as well as *Not for Money Born*.

of the early Bunuel, an impression reinforced by the stills that show Ivan Nov talking to a skeleton, which he bought in a shop and took home" (Burke 140).

Our understanding of the intellectual content of the photographs published by the surrealists benefits from an approach that considers them not in isolation, aesthetically or as exclusive to surrealism, but in their historical specificity in relation to contemporary concerns and journalistic practices. Vincent Gille emphasized the need for political history in scholarship on surrealism and a focus on the movement as "a passionately human adventure." Svetlana Boym's contribution to an understanding of Breton's response to Mayakovsky's death is insightful; his zeal is evident and the complexities of the political background do melt into mythology. Michael Holquist refers to those who hold that "Mayakovsky's life and work are at the core of the Revolution's meaning" (127): this belief was clearly also held by Breton. Breton's mythologizing is purposeful and the relationship between this image and the text in the surrealist journal is far from simplistic. The surrealist journals often included photographic images that were simply reproduced without alteration, commandeered so to speak. Breton understood the power of the image as argument, but also subverted this by wrestling the visual from the realm of language and asserting its independent power. He was interested in new ways of seeing, thinking, and communicating through photography, and the images used are often unstable in terms of meaning, allowing the group, in this instance to shake the hand of the Russian Communist Party and stick two fingers up at it simultaneously.

Breton uses Mayakovsky's death to analyze the central friction between the surrealists and the Communist Party around the issue of the relationship between individual freedom and political allegiance. The journal opens with what appears to be an unequivocal statement of support for the Party, but this is tested in articles throughout the issue and counterpoised on the final page of the journal.<sup>19</sup> The photograph raises myriad concerns, reflects the complexity of the relationship between free thought and directed cultural production, and hails Mayakovsky as one who was able to produce work which was both poetic and political. Breton's proficiency as an editor facilitates the addressing of these issues productively using a synthesis of image and text. If we consider the illustration, its allusions, and its complex relationship to the texts, we can see that the treatment of Mayakovsky's death in the journal is simultaneously and successfully political and poetic. Breton does not just highlight Mayakovsky's revolutionary poetic mission, but arguably demonstrates it in the first issue of the aptly titled new journal.

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<sup>19</sup> For instance Dali's "L'Ane pourri" on pages 9-12 contains conflicting attitudes toward political commitment, and on pages 10 and 11 the feature "Le Sottisier surréaliste" ridicules the dissident surrealists and attacks Desnos's apparent support for social realism in his review of Eisenstein's *La Ligne Générale* published in *Documents* 4 (1930): 220, while texts such as Breton's "Il y aura une fois" on pages 2-4 and Rene Char's "Le jour et la nuit de la liberté" on page 23 attempt to marry art and politics in an innovative form.

Shklovsky said of Mayakovsky that “he surrounded his death like a disaster area with warning lights” (202); it would seem that Breton deployed these lights in his new journal.

*Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* differs from its predecessor in many ways, and in terms of the use of photography the fact that it differs in format is often noted. It has been suggested that the varied illustrations in the second journal are placed at the back as *hors-textes* for reasons of economy (Ades 252; Bate 235). The second review sold substantially fewer copies than *La Révolution surréaliste*, the group funded the journal themselves, and finance was a problem.<sup>20</sup> Both Breton and Éluard regularly sold art from their personal collections to secure publication.<sup>21</sup> J. H. Matthews however has suggested that this formal change signified an elevation in the status of photography. He has argued that it represented a transformation of the character and function of the contribution made by photographs to the surrealist publication and thus drew a line between the two journals with respect to its role. In support of this claim he notes the absence of Atget’s work and the fact that Man Ray’s photographs were generally presented as independent surrealist art works equal to the paintings, sculptures, and objects reproduced at the back of each issue, a trend which he believed was merely accelerated rather than instigated in *Minotaure* (44-45). This is not an analysis that stands up to examination.

Matthews fails to note that in fact Man Ray’s work had been presented in this way in the first journal, often accompanied by his signature. In *La Révolution surréaliste* his work was never given a full page, but other works of art were rarely presented in this way either as they too were generally integrated with text. The use of photography in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* reflected a shift in the preoccupations of the group, but continued to rely on the popular cultural form of photography to parade them. This was not simply an incidental similarity between surrealism and the mass media but rather a result of an understanding within the group of the contemporary reception of illustrated journalism as progressive and truthful, and of the potential of the photographic image to shake the reader’s consciousness.

Thirty-four of the fifty-two *hors-textes* in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* are photographic images, including nine reproductions of sculptures and objects and four Man Ray photographs. Of the remainder, nine are documentary photographs, five are film stills, five are photo-collages, two are taken from popular culture, and one is an altered photograph by Dali. Taken as a whole the

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<sup>20</sup> *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* sold 350 copies of its first two issues while *La Révolution surréaliste* had attained a circulation of over 1,000 (Ades 251).

<sup>21</sup> For example, in 1931 *Paris-Magazine* reported that Breton and Éluard held a sale of “primitive” art in July 1931 to finance the journal; in April 1933 Éluard sold some paintings to Vicomte de Noailles to fund issues 5 and 6. See *André Breton: La Beauté convulsive* 203 and 206 respectively.

photographs published in the journal, besides supporting specific texts, generally contribute to Breton's expressed wish in the second manifesto to use any means necessary to "lay waste to the ideas of family, country, religion" (*Manifestoes of Surrealism* 128). Some photographs, notably those by Man Ray, appear less didactic but are nevertheless integral contributions to the themes of the journal, providing images which are open to various interpretations, and offer a challenge to the viewer. In the new journal, the reader is led by text and image to engage with a new order of values drawn from the works of Sade, Lautréamont, Hegel, and Lenin.

For example in the second issue the first illustration is Man Ray's *Hommage à D. A. F. de Sade*. The surrealists were fascinated with Sade, Man Ray in particular. Sade had featured in the list of "honorary" surrealists in the first manifesto in 1924, the first journal had praised him, and his rehabilitation dominated issue 2 of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, which included Maurice Heine's seminal text "Actualité de Sade" (3-6) as well as René Char's "Hommage à D A F de Sade" (6). At the same time as criticizing bourgeois morality the surrealist journal attempted to establish a "surrealist morality" in opposition to it, and Sade was instrumental in this project. Interpretations of Sade differed in the group, but for Breton his violence against conformism addressed political and moral issues and the extreme sexual explicitness of the works was less important than their allegorical nature. The surrealist journal constantly attacked bourgeois morality and juxtaposed it with an alternative. The illustrations were instrumental in this and the photographs included were used with intentionality as acute as that of the commercial press.

In the second issue the group found it necessary to respond directly to a swelling patriotism. Issue 2 begins with a preface consisting of a selection of press clippings relating to the recent Atlantic crossing by the French aviators Dieudonne Costes and Maurice Bellonte and ends with an unaltered "found" photograph of the actress Marie Costes, the wife of the pilot (fig. 3). The articles reproduced in the collated display at the front of the journal focus on Mrs. Costes, who was a well-known singer and actress; a Kertész portrait of her had featured on the cover of *Vu*, the leading illustrated weekly, on 16 April 1930. The excerpts chosen by the surrealists represent the nationalist fervor in the media surrounding the successful flight wherein Costes's reputation as a fighter pilot in World War I was fully exploited. It is clear that the surrealists would have felt the need to respond to this. The "commandeered" photograph of Marie Costes published at the end of the journal is used to pull together various threads of ideas within the second issue. Marie Costes is pictured in a domestic interior surrounded by dolls and soft toys, one of which she comically scolds. We are led to believe that this is in fact the home of the Costes as a photograph of her husband occupies prime position on the wall and a framed photograph of Marie is visible on the furniture. The caption "Damned stupidity in 1930: Marie Costes inside her little home" links specifically to two texts in the issue.



Figure 3: *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution 2* (July 1930): final page.

The first is Éluard's short article attacking the special edition of *Vu* published to celebrate the centenary of the French Tricolor. That edition (no. 121, 30 June 1930) was dominated by propaganda about how much Algeria had benefitted from French colonialism in terms of education and medical provision. Photographs were used to support the claims made throughout the magazine about the supremacy of France and its produce. The article entitled "The triumph of French taste: Parisian *Couture*" contrasted French elegance to the "hideous Germans" and "monstrous Americans." In his text Éluard ridicules articles in the issue, stating that "The most seductive women in the world are French" and "The French military machines are the fastest in the world," and concludes that "Damned stupidity is French, the pox is French, pigs are French" (Critique 25). Second, the photograph of Maria Costes references the article entitled "Sur Lénine" which consists of a short text by Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, taken from her recently published memoirs. She describes how Lenin detested "bourgeois sentimentality" in the image of

man at home shown with his wife, children, photographs of the members of his family on the bureau, books, dressing gown, a little cat on the knee, his lordly place of residence where he rests from public life.

Krupskaya had been made responsible for education policies in the Soviet Union in 1917, and her inclusion in the journal lends her a gravitas in stark contrast to the absurd figure of Marie Costes in the photograph.

The photographers associated with the surrealist movement in its formative years, including Man Ray, were closely involved in the process by which the photographic image became a major means of communication. The surrealists were conscious that photography was central to the circulation of ideas and developed a radical notion of the illustration of text. Breton's statement in 1952 that *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* was "by far the richest" surrealist journal is understandable, and this is partly because of the creative and intelligent use of photography to convey the totality of the surrealist vision throughout the six issues in a way that is not evident in *Minotaure*, the luxurious art review dominated by the surrealists but without the status of a dedicated journal.

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