

Robert J. Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art*, Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1995, 273 pp., 42 black-and-white illus., \$29.95 (paper)

Steven Harris

Volume 21, numéro 1-2, 1994

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072670ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072670ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Harris, S. (1994). Compte rendu de [Robert J. Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art*, Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1995, 273 pp., 42 black-and-white illus., \$29.95 (paper)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 21(1-2), 119–123.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1072670ar>

Book Reviews

Comptes-rendus de livres

ROBERT J. BELTON, *The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art*, Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1995, 273 pp., 42 black-and-white illus., \$29.95 (paper).

CRUEL INVENTION

Although revisionist studies of surrealism have been under way for nearly twenty years, it was the appearance in 1985 of two very different books, Whitney Chadwick's *Women and the Surrealist Movement* and the Corcoran Gallery catalogue *L'Amour fou: Photography and surrealism*, with its extraordinary essays by Rosalind Krauss, that brought this tendency to widespread attention. The last ten years have seen a proliferation of further such studies, by Krauss herself (*The Optical Unconscious*, 1993), Susan Suleiman (*Subversive Intent*, 1990), Hal Foster (*Compulsive Beauty*, 1993) and Margaret Cohen (*Profane Illumination*, 1993), in addition to the collection *Surrealism and Women* (1990) and numerous articles.

All of these revisions have been opposed to the largely positivist and uncritical celebration (and domestication) of surrealism which prevailed in surrealist studies from their inception in the 1940s to the 1970s; it is the terms of this critique which have varied widely. For Chadwick, Susan Gubar or many of the contributors to *Surrealism and Women* (who include Robert Belton), there were two principal issues at stake: the objectification of women in surrealist representations, and/or the relative exclusion of women from the surrealist group. (That there is no simple opposition between the different revisionist perspectives is indicated by the fact that the most interesting study of these issues to date is Susan Suleiman's *Subversive Intent*.) For their part, Krauss and Foster have been very much concerned to read surrealism outside its own intentions, and have subjected some of its central premises (including automatism and its aspiration to synthesize conscious and unconscious thought) to sustained criticism, through the use of psychoanalytic and Bataillean perspectives. The purposes of such studies are thus varied and open to debate: to correct what has been perceived as an overemphasis on André Breton's centrality to surrealism, at the expense of other participants in the group; to critique surrealism's unconscious sexism or its conscious misogyny; to prove impossible surrealism's own claims to a revolutionary aesthetic and political position.

Robert Belton's new book is intended to be an intervention into these debates from a consciously feminist perspective which pretends neither to objectivity nor neutrality in its analysis. It even hopes to discover a new method in the course of its examination, in keeping with a "new mas-

culinity" in sympathy with feminism. The book is thus intended to have a political effect; what this might be will be raised later in the review.

If Belton clearly sides with the feminist critics of objectification in his analysis, he brings in a quite astonishing array of sources and methods to supplement their approach, including (to name only some of the better-known figures he refers to) Clifford Geertz, Louis Althusser, Noam Chomsky, Hans Robert Jauss, Jacques Lacan, Susanne Kappeler, Alice Jardine, A.J. Greimas, Roland Barthes, Andrea Dworkin, Susan Brownmiller, Paul Ricoeur, Griselda Pollock, Erich Fromm, Luce Irigaray, Harold Bloom and Cleanth Brooks. In order to establish a critical distance from the surrealists' own investment in psychoanalysis, Belton rejects psychoanalysis as a useful analytic approach (premised upon a critique of the outdated anthropological claims made in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*), preferring instead a kind of ideology critique loosely based upon Althusser, and supplemented by semiotic, feminist and sexological studies.

Following Griselda Pollock, Belton is not content to simply examine "images of women," as for instance Susan Gubar or Mary Ann Caws could be said to have done in some of their analyses¹ – and which Pollock criticizes as a naïve approach which assumes that there can be good and bad images of women – but focuses rather on the construction of "Woman" in ideology. Critical of the post-structuralist notion of an infinitely expandable set of meanings inherent in any discourse, Belton sees instead the apparent variety of surrealist imagery as resting on a limited number of assumptions; using Chomsky's term of a "deep structure" of language to describe the ideological limitations of the surrealists' conception of "Woman," Belton writes:

It is only the surface structure of the male vision of the Surrealist Woman that is apparently infinite. The deep structure is composed of a surprisingly limited set of propositions, most of which are descendents of cultural – that is, unnatural, learned or socially encoded – misapprehensions about what Woman is and wants. All of these are complicated networks of allusions and connotations which can be understood as a horizon of expectations determined by identifiable historical and cultural conditions (xiv).

His task is to discern and reveal this ideology, through a discussion of what he terms three interrelated tropes or repeating figures of autoeroticism, perversion and novelty, all of which are based on the premise of "masturbatory fantasy as a figure for Surrealist intervention in the world" (xvii).

In Belton's model, adolescent masturbation is a perversion engendering a need for novelty in imagery, in order to ensure the repeatability of the event. He is not claiming that the surrealists privileged autoeroticism over other forms of sexuality, but rather that their attitude was fundamentally onanistic, leading to the production of images of women which were pure fantasy. Worse, in viewing women as mere tools in a drive to self-satisfaction, they were fundamentally misogynistic in character. The surrealists, he claims, were both participants in and subject to ideology; in reproducing prevalent constructions of Woman rather than challenging them, the surrealists constructed "a seductive lie about Woman" (xxxii).

Despite his hostility to psychoanalysis, as a misapprehension of phenomena which surrealism uncritically accepted (as "cultural fashion," in Belton's terms), the author employs Jacques Lacan's tripartite division of the psyche into Imaginary, Symbolic and Real in a metaphorical sense; to the extent that surrealism rejected integration into the social system, it remained within the Imaginary, having refused to enter the Symbolic order. This for Belton is either to remain within a narcissistic state of adolescence, which would be a case of arrested development, or it is a regression to an earlier stage. In any case it is a refusal of moral responsibility that would include, on the part of a mature individual, a recognition of the integrity of women as opposed to their manipulation, or the recombination of their bodily parts in images exclusively oriented to the self-satisfaction of men.

Curiously, it is the most politically conservative French psychoanalyst, Edouard Pichon (who is identified by Belton as a linguist, posing Pichon *against* psychoanalysis at this point in his argument), whom Belton uses to undercut the notion of the free play of signifiers, seeing anagrammatic play as "less an heroic linguistic innovation than a symptom of solipsism" (127), a judgment which, in fact, condemns all forms of wordplay and, indeed, experimental activity of any sort as a refusal of communication, "a real refusal to accord others recognition in speech."² There would appear to be a naturalist aesthetic underlying statements of this sort, though in keeping with his primary objective of critique, Belton does not elaborate an alternative aesthetic.

Throughout *The Beribboned Bomb*, Belton poses the projection of fantastic images of women against the struggle of French feminists for universal suffrage in the same historical period. Although Belton does not really indicate what a true representation of women would be, in constantly referring back to the suffrage movement it would seem to be this kind of conscious self-representation, women's self-definition in their struggle for political rights, that he op-

poses to imaginary representation, eliding the two meanings of the term in an opposition which privileges the real over the imaginary in every case.

To this end, Belton constructs a genealogy for surrealism that includes as its leading figures Sade, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Weininger and Lautréamont, whose works are discussed in varying detail in order to elicit their covert or overt misogyny, a counter-tradition posed against the cultural canon whose attitudes towards women, however, were no different than that of the patriarchal society it appeared to oppose.

One problem with the genealogy, as Belton constructs it, is that two of the characters who figure most centrally in his argument, Nietzsche and Weininger, were peripheral at best to surrealism. Belton's case for Nietzsche's influence is made on the basis that he was important to André Masson, and on one or two remarks by Ernst; for Weininger, on the fact that Ernst may have read him as a young man. On these slender threads, Belton assimilates the terms "surrealist" and "Übermensch" (playing, no doubt, on the association of the prefix "super" in each case once made by Georges Bataille³), and sees a "will to power" as animating the surrealist production of images – and even automatism, which is usually understood to be a passive activity:

Will, now understood as the transgression of constraints by an appeal to presumed instincts, is not that far from automatism, which proceeds towards the same destination on a slightly different but parallel route (92).

Belton constructs through Nietzsche a relation between will and desire in which desire comes to equal power, which is soon assimilated to pornography. The way in which this relation is achieved is indicated during a discussion of Max Ernst's *Garden-Airplane-Trap* series, in which Belton writes:

This is uncomfortably close to the condition of pornography as a system of power relations, rather than of sexual relations. In fact, some describe both pornography and art in terms of such projections as functions of an inability to distinguish brain-generated signs from external ones. This *is* Surrealism, conceived as an ideological Imaginary (90).

That is, surrealism *is* pornography, using the analyses of pornography and, indeed, of sexual assault by Andrea Dworkin and Susan Brownmiller to close the circle of his analysis, in which surrealist representations of women, which were initially means to autoerotic ends, have become vehicles for surrealist self-definition over their dismembered bodies. To this end, Belton is constantly eliding the difference between images of women and the "real" victims who

lie behind such representations, as if they were not paintings or drawings; for instance: "In neither case does the appropriating artist try to understand the original significance of his model" (143); "Once again, a woman was denied as a locus of human experience" (152); "in order for the male to enter into the guise of the female, he must first empty her of her original and unique substance" (154).

This argument leads to a critique of all surrealist methods as forms of male violence practised against women, who in the images Belton analyzes are all either assimilated to men as essentially phallic entities, in an autoerotic point of view unable to recognize the other, or are punished for their absolute otherness, as in a discussion of Masson's *Earth* (1939). Collage, assemblage, the production of images, condensation and displacement, poetic thought, even desire are seen as solipsistic, self-absorbed activities that refuse to recognize the other, and which thus inevitably oppress women. During a discussion of alchemy, for instance, the transformational properties of which were attractive to Breton, Belton writes:

The art of assemblage is a precise analogue of alchemy, and the arrangement of bric-à-brac can be construed as agricultural transplantation [this in relation to a discussion of the earth-goddess motif]. After all, the flea market was a source of base materials/seedlings which could be isolated from their impure contexts/unfertilized soil and given new meanings through conjunction or juxtaposition/grafting. To achieve the metaphorical sexual union of things – a stunning revenge – the artist violently stripped them of their usual functions. Since the articles in the flea market were most often mass-produced, this procedure entailed divesting them of their public significance. It was thus not only "the approval of the public" that was "to be avoided like the plague," but also public meaning (213).⁴

Collage is characterized more than once as this kind of male violence, visited here on innocent objects, to which the only apparent response is the self-organization of women, and a political engagement premised on "the abstract, disinterested vehicle of reason," which, citing Erich Fromm, Belton opposes to the "the capacity to use thinking [or its surrogates, like collage, automatism, the object] for manipulating the world outside for man's purposes" (273).⁵

It is because of the logic of the opposition Belton constructs that he can only oppose an active, engaged woman who is outside surrealism to the female victim who is its product (Unica Zürn is his example of a real woman victimized in that construction, that anagrammatical play with the body⁶). Therefore, women who did belong to the surrealist movement were either dupes, replicating the mascu-

line tropes of perversion and novelty, or they were really "post-Surrealists" with little or nothing to do with surrealist ideology:

Those women who heroically rose above Surrealism – the post-Surrealists – are gradually being more profitably examined in contexts which correctly downplay or elide the Surrealist connections or, better yet, redefine the task of constructing the ideology (268).

That is, women are only allowed agency insofar as they are distanced from surrealism, which by definition victimizes them.

Despite his faith in a disinterested reason which would serve as a vehicle of redress, as opposed to the surrealist critique of rationality, Belton is the author of some surprisingly delirious readings, of which I can only give one example here:

Susan Rubin Suleiman has reproduced a photograph of Surrealists gathered in the *centrale* with a headless female dummy suspended from the ceiling above. She asks if the dummy was the inspiration for the *femme 100 têtes*. This is certainly likely, but I find it insufficient and will add to it in a moment. What concerns me here is that the dummy hangs at the top of the scene in much the same way as the nude figure hangs at the top of "Rome" [a plate in Ernst's *La Femme 100 têtes* that was the object of an earlier discussion]. *If this is a legitimate correspondence* [my emphasis], then the papal procession parallels the Surrealists gathered around Breton, whose reputation as Pope has already been noted. The Dionysian celebrant's pose, itself operating within the tropological field of autoeroticism, thus suggests that Bretonian orthodoxy is accompanied by (and perhaps is only authenticated by) autoeroticism (174).

There are any number of examples of this kind of associational reading scattered through Belton's text. The one here is based upon his association of a documentary photograph taken in 1924 and a collage made in 1929, which is not only anachronistic but projective, since in the photograph the surrealists are hardly "gathered around" Breton, who has no more a place of prominence than has anyone else in the room.⁷ And although the headless figure in the photograph is positioned well above those present there, it is assimilated to a female figure in Ernst's collage who *is* a phallic projection from the Pope, which Belton humourlessly reads as yet another trope of autoeroticism. There is a formal relation between the two figures, which Ernst may well have chosen to exploit, but to read the relation *backwards* in order to establish his point is an odd in-

terpretive strategy, to say the least.

Somewhat surprisingly, Belton justifies such associational readings – despite his emphasis on a countervailing reason opposed to surrealist irrationality, and his critique of the surrealists' appropriation of hysteria – in terms of an “art hysteria” which, “while allowing intensively subjective revisions, recognizes that meaning is in the use, and that all subsequent interpretations have their own sets of cultural determinants, which must each be understood as a function of its own historicity” (258). That is, his book is a subjective intervention into the reception of surrealism which, in being feminist (or “new masculinist”), *ought* to turn away from the apparent objectivity of traditional approaches to interpretation, and repeat the poetic method he critiques in surrealism as solipsistic and oppressive. This is perhaps the major contradiction of Belton's text, one he seems unaware of, since in radically dissociating feminist strategies from surrealism, he appears not to see their interrelation on the level of method. And this is perhaps not so surprising, since in focusing largely on thematic readings of his material, he ignores the formal aspects of surrealist imagery, let alone the intertextual relations he cannot admit it shares with, for example, *écriture féminine*.

There is another significant problem here. Belton occasionally appears to ratify an absolute separation of the sexes based upon not only a *recognition* of sexual difference, but on an ontological difference, as for example in the following comment: “some current linguistic research suggests that women's use of verbal language constitutes a separate discourse in spite of the same vocabulary” (258). That is, even if some women *appear* to share surrealist tenets with their male colleagues, the work is different enough by reason of their gender to “correctly downplay or elide the Surrealist connections.”

Belton describes a process through which the male surrealist uses phallicized figures of women to prop up his self-conception, which is predicated upon his refusal to recognize sexual difference. I'd like to suggest another way of coming at the problem, which while acknowledging the blurring of boundaries consequent upon a refusal of social integration, would also take account of the undermining of those boundaries as an important part of the surrealist project, as opposed to the securing of self-identity. It can be approached through Christine Buci-Glucksmann's *Baroque Reason*, which describes the same counter-tradition that Belton uses to establish a genealogy of surrealism (Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Weininger), in order to formulate the notion of a “baroque reason” which developed in opposition to bourgeois society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

In the labour of writing, the metaphor of the feminine then rises up as an element in the break with a certain discredited rationality based upon the idea of a historical and symbolic continuum. It does this by designating a new heterogeneity, a new otherness.⁸

This process, which is an experimental one, also arouses fear, anxiety and a defensive misogyny on the part of its practitioners, the effects of which are found in the writings of Baudelaire, Nietzsche and Weininger, and of course in surrealist art and texts, as well. Other critics, such as Susan Suleiman and Andreas Huyssen, have also noted the tendency for oppositional cultural figures to assume a position of femininity in their antagonistic relation to the dominant culture.⁹

Belton, no doubt, would see this as deeply problematic, since it is a move which doesn't take account of women as subjects, but rather usurps – at the same time as it constructs – a position from which actual women were all too often excluded. The approach itself, however, does attempt to understand the gender issues at stake in a more complex manner than Belton is willing to do, without eliding the question of misogyny. It helps to explain, for instance, why “Woman” was taken as a figure for automatism – as more than simply a vehicle for the will to power that Belton makes her out to be – and it calls into question the assumption that gender divisions are reinforced in surrealism – paradoxically through the denial of sexual difference – rather than blurred.

This, however, would be to admit that surrealism and its antecedents might be more than ideology, a prospect that Belton quite clearly refuses. To accept that anxiety, for example, might play a role in representations of women would be to redeem these images, for the psychoanalysis that speaks of this anxiety was, in Belton's account, merely assimilated by surrealism as cultural fashion. It is his inability or refusal to provide an alternative theory of the psyche, of desire or, indeed, of representation that is the most problematic and most telling feature of Belton's analysis. He is not necessarily responsible for providing these in a book which in the first place is oriented as critique. But it returns us to the major aporia in the early feminist critiques of pornography: the lack of a theory of desire and of an understanding of representation. The aporia was self-sustaining: since desire always involved the taking of an object of desire, there could never be a desire that did not involve objectification to some degree. For an analysis premised on the critique of objectification, desire therefore became impossible to speak of, especially within a conceptual framework that emphasized closeness and intersubjective communication.

This also leads to a proscription on representation of any kind, and it is in fact the position to which Belton is led: the repudiation of any kind of imagery whatsoever, whether in poetry or in art, as inherently alienating and objectifying. He proposes instead, after Alice Jardine, that “we enter together an era of post-representation” (257), Jardine’s utopian vision of direct communication – one that is not all that different from the utopia envisioned by Tristan Tzara in his 1935 book *Grains et Issues* – which Belton wants to accomplish in the now, and to which surrealism furnishes the negative example. Representation must become political and conscious; it must step outside the realm of the image, which is equated with the Imaginary, with its constructions of Woman that are entirely ideological in character. At the same time, so many of the author’s other views – a normative sexuality which is highly distrustful of perversion, masturbation and non-genital sex; a faith in abstract reason; a belief in the necessity of social integration – are frighteningly conservative.

There is no question that the surrealists were frequently sexist and even misogynist, in an all-too-frequent replication of the pervasive sexism of their society; this needs to be subject to the kind of sustained scrutiny that Belton undertakes here. Xavière Gauthier’s lively and often brilliant polemic *Surréalisme et sexualité*, published in 1971, is still worth reading in this regard, and Susan Suleiman’s *Subversive Intent* remains, in my opinion, the best introduction to date to what such a critique would look like, one which attends to form and intertextuality in its dissatisfaction with the kind of thematic reading for the plot engaged in by Andrea Dworkin, for example, in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. It is perhaps the integral nature of Belton’s critique of representation (its rejection, even), that leads him to his own thematic reading, a forgetting of the specificity and complexity of imagery that makes his reading of surrealism both monolithic and disputable.

STEVEN HARRIS
University of British Columbia

EUNICE LIPTON, *Alias Olympia: A Woman’s Search for Manet’s Model and Her Own Desire*. New York, Meridian, 1994 (first published London, Thames and Hudson, 1993), 181 pp., no illus.

Admittedly I began reading *Alias Olympia* with fanciful preconceptions about feminist identifications and desires, intimated I thought by the words “woman’s search” and “desire” in the book’s subtitle. A few hours later, I concluded somewhat dejectedly that it was necessary to highlight the

- 1 Susan Gubar, “Representing Pornography: Feminism, Criticism, and Depictions of Female Violation,” *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (Summer 1987), 712-41; Mary Ann Caws, “Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art,” in Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 262-87.
- 2 Belton is quoting Carolyn Dean here, from her discussion of Pichon in *The Self and Its Pleasures* (Ithaca, NY, 1992).
- 3 See “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealist*,” trans. Donald M. Leslie, Jr., in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis, 1985), 32-44.
- 4 Belton is citing a passage here from the *Second Manifesto*, which he had discussed earlier. Can we see the hostility to any kind of modernist art practice here?
- 5 The brackets interpolate Belton’s own words into a quotation from Erich Fromm’s *Greatness and Limitation of Freud’s Thought*, in which Fromm is characterizing narcissism.
- 6 Belton associates a series of photographs of Zürn in bondage, taken by her partner Hans Bellmer in 1958, with her suicide twelve years later, though wisely he does not posit any *direct* connection between the two events.
- 7 A closer look at the photograph in question suggests that Chirico’s *Dream of Tobias*, positioned directly behind Breton’s head, could function as a papal tiara, if one were inclined that way. Breton was first referred to as the “pope” of surrealism in October 1924, in an article by Maurice Martin du Gard in the *Nouvelles littéraires*.
- 8 Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, trans. Patrick Camiller (1984; London, 1994), 49-50.
- 9 Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 16; Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, 1986), 45.

words “her own” from the subtitle and the word “Alias” from the title: Lipton adopts the alias “Olympia” for her own searches, frustrations, anxieties and sexuality, while the elusive Victorine Meurent merely haunts the shadows of a book written a scant ninety-five years after her death.

Such a book is difficult to review and impossible to approach except from a personal position. At the very least, Lipton confronts the reader with the self and insists upon conflation, a kind of collapsing of boundaries between the position of art historian (intellect) and person (feeling). The