Phantom Africa: Photography between Surrealism and Ethnography
Monsieur Ian Walker

Citer ce document / Cite this document:

Document généré le 02/06/2016
Résumé

L’Afrique fantôme. La photographie entre surréalisme et ethnographie. — L’étude de J. Clifford de 1981, « On Ethnographie Surrealism », qui établissait un lien étroit entre le surréalisme et l’ethnographie parisiens du début de années 1930, a donné lieu à de nombreuses discussions. Cet article envisage le rôle de la photographie dans ces débats de deux façons. En premier lieu, l’article examine la localisation des photos de masques dogons prises par Marcel Griaule au cours de la Mission Dakar-Djibouti (1931-33) dans certains sites: le Musée de l’Homme, le livre de Griaule, Masques dogons (1938), la revue d’inspiration surréaliste, Minotaure (1933) et enfin L’Afrique fantôme (1934) de Michel Leiris. Dans chaque site, le sens des images se modifie, en particulier dans le livre de Leiris où elles sont investies d’une subjectivité exacerbée. Dans la seconde partie de l’article, cette « ethnographie surréaliste » est mise en rapport avec l’« imagerie surréaliste » de la même période, telle qu’elle est représentée par Nadja (1928) d’André Breton ainsi que par les photographies et les films de Brassai, Eli Lotar, Jean Painlevé et Luis Buñuel. Enfin, on s’interroge sur la signification que peuvent revêtir ces pratiques pour une ethnographie ou un usage de l’image post-modernes.

Abstract

James Clifford's 1981 essay 'On Ethnographic Surrealism', which proposed an intimate connection between surrealism and ethnography in Paris in the early thirties, has resulted in much debate. The present text considers the place of photography in that debate in two ways. Firstly, the essay traces the placement of photographs of Dogon masks (taken by Marcel Griaule on the Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1931-33) in a number of sites—on display in the Musee de l’Homme, in Griaule's book Masques dogons (1938), in the Surrealist-oriented magazine Minotaure (1933), and finally in Michel Leiris's L’Afrique fantome (1934). In each site, the meaning of the image shifts, with Leiris in particular investing it with elements of extreme subjectivity. In the second part of the essay, this 'surrealist ethnography' is related to the 'surrealist documentary' of the same period, as exemplified by Andre Breton's Nadja (1928) and the photographs and films of Brassai, Eli Lotar, Jean Painlevé and Luis Buñuel. Finally, one might ask, what do these practices hold for a more contemporary 'post-modern' ethnographic or documentary practice?
Ian Walker

Phantom Africa
Photography between Surrealism and Ethnography

In Paris, in the Musée de l’Homme, in the gallery devoted to artifacts from tropical Africa, in a rather dusty glass case, is a small photograph. It depicts a native of the Dogon tribe wearing an extraordinary mask, the face and false breasts of which are decorated with rows of white shells. According to the label, this is a ‘Masque “jeune fille”’, and the image is displayed next to an actual mask of the same type. In this context, then, the photograph has a seemingly simple documentary rôle: to show how the museumized, decontextualized mask hanging next to it might have originally been worn in a Dogon ceremony.

But just as there has been in the last decade an intense questioning of the supposed scientific objectivity of anthropology, so a parallel acknowledgement of the inevitable presence of our own cultural and subjective impulses in the making and reading of photographs has filtered into documentary theory and practice. Photographs as documents are, we now realize, far from simple objects. The photograph of the ‘Masque “jeune fille”’ has travelled a long way to this site in the museum (not only in space but also now in time) and it has passed through a great many culturally mediated screens on the way.

We may think of our sensitivity to these issues as comparatively recent—post-colonialist, post-modernist. But when one looks back to the point in time—Paris in the early thirties—when this image first came to Europe, it is perhaps already possible to discern an anticipation of these repositionings in the complex and ambiguous relationship between Surrealism and ethnography. In the wake of James Clifford’s essay, ‘On Ethnographic Surrealism’, the debate about this relationship has comprised a crucial aspect of both the re-thinking of the relevance of Surrealism and the development of a more critically self-reflexive ethnographic practice.

1. For a discussion of the use of photography within anthropology, see Edwards 1992. In two recent essays, I have discussed aspects of contemporary documentary photography in parallel terms, see Walker 1995a, 1995b.

2. Originally published in 1981, it was reprinted in a revised form in Clifford 1988: 117-151.

Clifford's argument that in the thirties Surrealism and ethnography were closely bound together has been both very influential and much criticized and I do not have the space here to fully rehearse those arguments. Rather I want to extend a consideration of this relationship in two directions. First, I will take as examples two particular photographs of Dogon masks made at that point in time and examine their placement in a number of different contexts (of which the Museum is the first). Through this process, I hope to demonstrate how their apparently obvious directness can also be revealed as complex and ambiguous. Secondly, I will sketch in the context of a ‘documentary surrealism’ which was developing contemporaneously with this ‘ethnographic surrealism’ and to which it can be related. This will illuminate from another direction the status of such images as ‘documents’ and suggest that there are still useful lessons to be learnt from Surrealism for anyone who wishes to use photography as a tool for recording and for understanding.

The photograph of the ‘Masque ‘jeune fille’ is but one image brought back from what was perhaps the most extraordinary of French ethnographic expeditions: the Mission Dakar-Djibouti which traversed central Africa between 1931 and 1933. The Mission was, of course, primarily a scientific expedition, gathering material and data for the new Musée de l’ethnographie in Paris (the institution that was to become the Musée de l’Homme). It collected a great deal, including 3,500 objects, 200 sound recordings and several zoological specimens. And 6,000 photographs, of which this was one. These were primarily taken by the leader of the expedition, Marcel Griaule, an avowed believer in the use of photography to provide a context for the artifacts collected by the Mission. Griaule’s understanding of the cultural implications of his ethnographic practice was in many ways highly sophisticated, and in a text such as ‘Un coup de fusil’, he had written about it with a good deal of scepticism. Nevertheless, he did believe that the primary role

3. A summary of this debate and references to further discussion around it can be found in Richardson 1993. I want to thank Michael Richardson for reading an earlier version of this essay and making several valuable comments on it.

4. The acquisition of the actual mask that is next to the photograph in the Musée de l’Homme is credited to the Mission Labouret with the accession number: 30.31.22. However, many of the other objects in these glass cases are either from the Mission Dakar-Djibouti or from Marcel Griaule’s later expeditions, and Griaule’s photographs are used in several parts of the display.


6. See the quotation from Griaule (1930) towards the end of this text. Griaule was to spend the rest of his life studying Dogon culture, and his enterprise was to develop enormously in complexity from these early stages. For a sympathetic account of his work, see Calame Griaule & Griaule (1987), while a more critical view is that in Clifford (1988: 55-91), ‘Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule’s Initiation’.
of the ethnographer was documentation and interpretation came later. When the findings of the mission were placed on display in the Musée in 1933, a special issue of the new magazine *Minotaure* was produced. In his ‘Introduction méthodologique’, Griaule listed the many forms that ethnographic investigation could take, but ended by saying: ‘L’observation directe des faits [...] semble être le procédé le plus sûr, le plus naturel, le plus simple qui soit’ (Griaule 1933: 10). For Griaule, photography appears to have been a part of that process of ‘simple’, ‘natural’, ‘direct’ observation.

Certainly, this is the rôle such photographic images play in Griaule’s own massively detailed study *Masques dogons*, first published in 1938. The same photograph of the ‘Masque “jeune fille”’ appears (p. 539, fig. 139) as one aspect of the recording of the mask and its function. These documentations include Griaule’s description of the mask, a transcription of the chants that accompany the ceremony in which it was featured (both in Dogon and translated into French) and drawings of variations on the mask type (Griaule, 1938: 536-541). There is no sense that we are witnessing here different representational systems each coded to signal the authenticity and neutrality of this ethnographic observation. Griaule’s dry precise description is notably lacking in evaluative adjectives, the drawings have a naive crudity, the photograph is undemonstrative and frontal. None of these images or texts is intended to have any visual or literary value itself. They are ‘records’ and together they elaborate and reinforce an overall sense of documentation.

The siting of this photograph in the museum and the siting of it in Griaule’s book are of course different in several respects, each context offering what it offers best (given that we ourselves cannot travel to West Africa)—an apparently direct confrontation with the object on the one hand and an elaboration of its cultural placement on the other. But they are parallel in that they each use the photograph as unproblematic primary material, first hand evidence. And beyond them lies a third, less accessible siting which subtly underlines this status. For the original glass plates and a set of first generation prints from the Dakar-Djibouti expedition are carefully filed in the archives of the Musée de l’Homme, and it is partly their very inaccessibility which lends them that aura of the primary which the archival so often effects. When a picture such as the ‘Masque “jeune fille”’ emerges into the light of the public gallery or the book, it brings with it something of this aura, precisely because the image carries no artistic overtones. It appears to be, and we are asked to take it as, the purest, simplest form of evidence, document, fact.

However, the Dakar-Djibouti expedition was a far more complex and multiple phenomenon in the Paris of the early thirties than this suggests. Certainly it was a serious scientific expedition. But, as Jean Jamin (1987) has described, the Mission also became enmeshed with the contemporary
'Masque "jeune fille"' as reproduced in Griaule (1938: 539) and in Leiris (1933: 51)
fashion for all things ‘Negro’. The same time, it intersected crucially with the artistic avant-garde. The Mission’s departure was signalled in George Bataille’s magazine *Documents* with an essay by Michel Leiris (1930), and, as already mentioned, its findings were displayed in 1933 in a special number of the new magazine *Minotaure* (issue no 2). The materials collected by the Mission had been put on display in the Trocadéro, and this publication acted both as publicity and as catalogue.

Scanning this issue of *Minotaure* today, its version of the Mission Dakar-Djibouti remains a sober and detailed account of the expedition’s findings. Yet in the context of the early thirties, the account of the expedition—and the photographs that represented it—must have had additional dimensions, both social and artistic. Although *Minotaure* was independently produced by Albert Skira, its tone was heavily influenced by Surrealism. But it was also a most luxurious production, with large format pages, an elegant layout and lavish use of colour reproduction, very different from the asceticism of *La Révolution surréaliste*. It signalled in other words the shift of Surrealism from ‘the street to the salon’ which Susan Rubin Suleiman (1991) has described. However, these two aspects of the presentation of both the Mission and of *Minotaure*—the fashionable and the avant-garde—cannot quite be collapsed together and still need, for the moment, to be considered separately.

On a second level, then, beyond the specifically ethnographic, the materials presented in *Minotaure* must have acquired a ‘Surrealist’ meaning, within the context of an advanced taste which could admire them both for their aesthetic frisson and for the anti-colonial stance their presence represented. It’s true, though, that one would probably not be able to grasp such a meaning from viewing this issue of *Minotaure* alone. But it must certainly come into play when one views issue no 2 next to issue no 1, published in fact on the same date: 1st June 1933. There one would have found Picasso’s series of drawings ‘Une Anatomie’, Dalí’s ‘paranoiac-critical’ interpretation of Millet’s *Angélus*, Maurice Heine on Sade, Éluard on Baudelaire, Masson’s drawings of ‘Massacres’, Dr Lacan’s study of paranoia.

Seen in that context, the ethnographic materials presented in issue no 2 of *Minotaure* become entangled in a web of meanings which fascinated the Surrealists—the desire to espouse the ‘primitive’ in opposition to ‘high’ or ‘fine’ art, the desire to emphasise the unconscious, disquieting urges which erupt from behind the façade of bourgeois rectitude. Although its luxuriousness meant that its audience had in part to be members of the bourgeois, *Minotaure* was nevertheless a prime site for such a continuing Surrealist quest, and however distinctive the Dakar-Djibouti issue was, its

---

7. I’d like to also acknowledge here the help of M. Jamin in discussing these issues with me in Paris in 1993. On the fashionable ‘Negrophilia’ of the period, see also CLIFFORD 1989.
reception must at the same time have been inevitably affected by that context.

James Clifford largely centred his 1981 essay on the role of Georges Bataille and Documents in bringing together ethnography and (dissident) Surrealism. His text was thus part of a more general theoretical shift, for the seventies and eighties saw an extraordinary burgeoning of interest in Bataille’s work more generally. Certainly it is in Bataille’s denigration of the values of modern Western culture in favour of the base and the primal where one finds the most extreme espousal of the ‘Primitive’. But this desire to embrace the Otherness of other cultures ran through all of Surrealism. In 1926, La Révolution surréaliste had placed a photograph of a ‘Scène Rituelle: Nouvelle-Bretagne’ in the middle of a poem by Philippe Soupault. As Dawn Ades (1985: 63) comments: ‘It is there, not to illustrate a text, but as a “text” in its own right [. . .]. Nor is there any attempt to mediate the strangeness of the ritual scene’.

There would have been no mistaking the challenge posed by the image of the ritual dropped into La Révolution surréaliste or by the uncomfortable juxtapositions of tribal and modern in Documents and that other fascinating site of Surrealist magazine montage, Variétés. But the Surrealist dimension of the Dakar-Djibouti pictures in Minotaure is far less evident, only perceptible if one is aware of the broader context in which they were placed. That status remains ambiguous. It can be read as evidence of a new respect for the self-sufficient scientific nature of the Mission, indeed as an example of the fascination that such rigour held for Surrealism. Or it can be seen as a symptom of the taming of Surrealism by the luxuriousness of Minotaure. Or simply as a sign of Skira’s insistence on the pluralism of his new magazine.

8. For a brief account of this process, see Suleiman 1990: 72-85. For a development of his initial essay in these terms, see Clifford 1990.

9. La Révolution surréaliste, no 7. 15 Juin 1926, p. 16. It is worth noting that the taste of André Breton and the ‘official’ Surrealist group was for tribal art other than African—in particular Oceanic and American Indian sculpture—perhaps because the African connection had already been so well-worked by the Cubists. Thus, the concern in Documents for African culture was not only an extension of the popular and ethnographic interest of the time, but may also have been a position taken up contra Breton.

10. Variétés was published in Brussels and edited by the Belgian Surrealist, E.L.T. Mesens, who, albeit in a less provocative context, worked even more consistently than did Bataille with the creation of meaning through the juxtaposition of photographs. For examples involving ethnographic materials, see the pages reproduced in Foster 1993: 138-139.

11. See, for example, the formal, restrained layout of La Révolution surréaliste, based upon that of the scientific magazine La Nature. In the words of the magazine’s first co-editor, Pierre Naville (1977: 104), this was intended to provide ‘la garantie que notre entreprise ne tournerait pas trop vite à l’étalage de productions esthétiques . . .’.

12. Skira initially wanted to bring Breton and Bataille together in Minotaure and one can perhaps see a deliberate balance between the first issue, which is
Jean Jamin (1987: 86) has commented that "the Dakar-Djibouti Mission was principally interested in the spectacular dimension (let us say) of African societies" (though, he adds, it did not ignore "what animated those spectacles"). The term "spectacular" might also be used to describe the presentation of Minotaure. And it might also be used negatively to describe at least the visual aspect of Minotaure's version of the Mission—a collection of images that are rich and tantalizing but which intrigue without fundamentally challenging, a (re)presentation running dangerously close to the touristic.

But perhaps there was more to Minotaure's version just as there was to the Mission itself. In the magazine, the photographs were generally attributed to the "Mission Dakar-Djibouti" and the magazine's preface made a point of this anonymous collectivity. Jamin notes however that the issue was organized and co-ordinated by Michel Leiris, who refused Skira's offer of an editorial credit out of loyalty to that collective spirit. The main essay by Leiris himself was on "Masques dogons" (Leiris 1933), and above the title was a photograph of several dancers wearing masks—an image which has more recently been included as an example of collage in an exhibition of Surrealist art (Robertson 1986: 111). Which indeed it can be made to represent, but in the original context, there was not a whiff of 'Surrealism' nor indeed 'collage' to either the presentation or Leiris's text. His approach seems to have been as resolutely detached and descriptive as was the rest of this issue of the magazine. The photographs that accompanied his text amplified but did not clash with it.

Only now and then, by reading between the lines with a degree of hindsight that derives from what one knows Leiris will later make of the images, can one presume to look beyond the straightforward use of the photographs as documentation. One of the most striking images that illustrated Leiris's article was the "Masque "jeune fille"" photograph. This was placed next to a text which described the taboos surrounding the use of such a mask (for example if women came into contact with it, they would become obsessed). Then below the image of the "jeune fille" was placed another photograph of a pile of "Masques usés, abandonnés sous une roche". (The captions are, of course, important here in focusing our reading of the images; would we otherwise know that those masks have been "abandoned"? As, in a different way, the very title "Masque "jeune fille"" gives us the frame in which we now must see that object.)

dominated by Breton with his long essay on Picasso, and the second issue, devoted to the ethnographic concerns that had been established in Documents.

13. This collective credit continued to be used through the various editions of Leiris's L'Afrique fantôme (see below) and in the Musée de l'Homme itself.

14. JAMIN (1987: 87, fn 9) indicates that this information came directly from Leiris himself.
In this layout then, the Dogon mask is shown above as spectacle and below as debris, while the text speaks of it as ritual and belief. Caught thus between varied meanings, one begins to realize the limitations of demanding any single fixed meaning for these objects—either for us as European viewers, or perhaps for the Dogon themselves. It may be that one only reads so much into this juxtaposition of images and text because such intertextual meanings are common within the Surrealist magazines of the period. But one can also start to see these juxtapositions as creating meanings which might operate around this apparently objective documentation. However, even if that is so, it is a minimal gesture—perhaps all that Leiris could manage in this context controlled by the demands of both the Mission and Minotaure.

But some of those suppressed meanings had been gathering over the previous two years within Leiris’s private expedition diary and were to pour out in public in the book that he made from that journal: L’Afrique fantôme, published the following year. That first edition of L’Afrique fantôme (1934) carried the dedication ‘À mon ami Marcel Griaule’. This is missing from later editions and Leiris referred to the publication of his book as ‘le premier coup’ to their friendship. Evidently, Leiris’s project was very different from what Griaule thought of as ‘documentation’.

Michel Leiris, former Surrealist turned dissident now trained as an ethnographer but continuing to practice as a ‘littérature’, stood in a unique position astride the differing sites of scientific fieldwork and avant-garde reflexivity. It was not necessarily a very comfortable position, but it was this complexity that made L’Afrique fantôme such an extraordinary and perhaps unique document. By its very nature, it defies definition, but at one point in his essay ‘On Ethnographic Surrealism’, Clifford (1988: 142-143) briefly reverses his terms and seeks examples of a ‘surrealist ethnography’. One is L’Afrique fantôme. The other he cites—in a footnote—is Mass Observation, the project formed in Britain in the late thirties: it is a parallel which suggests intriguing possibilities that cannot be explored here.

15. There have been two subsequent editions, 1951 and 1981, both with updated ‘Préambules’ added by Leiris (on the various versions of L’Afrique fantôme, see Jamin 1982). Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent page references here are to the 1981 edition (Leiris 1981). It is a great omission that L’Afrique fantôme has not been translated into English. For translations of some extracts, see the special issue of Sulfur dedicated to Leiris, no 15 (1986), pp. 30-34 and 42-45, introduced by another essay by Clifford (1986).


17. Mass Observation was formed in 1937 by Tom Harrisson, an anthropologist recently returned from Borneo, Charles Madge, a journalist and poet, and Humphrey Jennings, film maker, photographer, painter, poet and member of the English Surrealist group. Their proposition was to make an ethnographic study.
Afrique fantôme is the final siting of the Dakar-Djibouti photographs that I want to discuss, containing as it does a small selection of the images. In the first instance, Leiris had a very direct relationship with the photographs, for one of his jobs as ‘secrétaire-archiviste’ of the Mission was to record in a ‘carnet photographique’ the details of each image as Griaule took it (Leiris 1981: 67). In this context, the factual descriptiveness of the photograph on the one hand and the text on the other would operate in mutual confirmation, and this seems initially to be the way that the photographs in Afrique fantôme relate to the text. But the more subjective elements in Leiris’s text break down this naturalizing convention and reveal the photographs themselves as potentially disruptive and disturbing. To the extent that, in his ‘Préambule’ to the 1981 edition of the book, Leiris could describe the ‘clichés Mission Dakar-Djibouti’ as being used ‘pour imager au gré presque de ma fantaisie’ l’édition originale et ladite réédition (ibid.: 8). Not, it should be noted, in accordance with the ‘factual’ account he made at the time, nor even with his memory of those events, but rather with his fantasy.

On the cover of the first edition was reproduced a photograph of a very similar mask to the Masque jeune fille. It was presumably considered provocative, exotic—indeed ‘spectacular’—enough to act as advertisement. But in the book itself, the image played a far more problematic rôle. It was now captioned ‘Le Masque “femme du cordonnier” avec ses seins en fruits de baobab (Sangra, 1er novembre)’. Moving to that date in the text, one reads: ‘La femme du cordonnier a de merveilleux seins pointus et dressés, en demi-fruits de baobab, beaucoup plus excitants que des vrais. La cagoule de fibre entièrement couverte de cauris, surmontée d’une coiffure en crête à trois pointes, fait au danseur un visage lunaire extraordinairement séduisant’ (ibid.: 148).

Whatever the complex impulses that lay behind Leiris’s reaction here, it is hard not to situate them now in terms of fetishism, indeed to read them as a fusing together of the anthropological sense of that term with the psychoanalytic. For, as Ades (1995: 68) points out more generally: ‘Surrealism was constituted in an awareness of what Foucault later called the “confrontation, in a fundamental correlation” of ethnography and psy-

19. Opposite p. 80 in the 1934 edition; plate 6 (between pp. 234-235) in the 1981 edition. The reproduction in each case is slightly different, with the 1934 version showing more of the head-dress and more of the background, including part of a drum on the left. (There is incidently no indication why the mask is called the “Masque “femme du cordonnier””, but again the name affects the image’s effect in small but significant ways.)
Masque “femme du cordonnier” as reproduced in Leiris (1981: ph. 6)
(Ph. M. Griaule, coll. Musée de l’Homme)
Evidently, one part of Leiris’s excitement did lie in the unknowability of the mask, a crucial example of this ‘surrealist ethnography’ which did not seek to explicate but rather to celebrate otherness. But the more overtly sexual aspect of his pleasure, with its emphasis on the ‘seins pointus et dressés’, is a classically Freudian example of fetishism, seeking signs of the missing phallus elsewhere on the female body. Though that is complicated by the unacknowledged irony that this ‘phallic female’, behind—below—her disguise, actually does possess a penis.

However one wishes to analyze the implications of Leiris’s description, one can certainly see how he suffused his text with personal and emotive elements in a manner that must have earned the disapproval of Griaule. Leiris was unafraid, indeed unashamed, of merging his observations and his fantasies—to the point of being unnervingly frank in the inclusivity of his remarks. The next entry—November 2—began with a note about a ‘pollution nocturne, après rêve à peine érotique’. He didn’t say whether this ‘wet dream’ was related to the ‘extraordinarily seductive’ face he’d seen the day before, but the proximity of these two entries does demonstrate the extent to which he was interested not only in documenting Dogon culture, but also in documenting himself.

This is an admittedly extreme example, but it nevertheless represents something of Leiris’s tactics with L’Afrique fantôme. The tone of his text was coolly descriptive, yet all the time, he showed himself to be highly sceptical of any pretence of a scientific neutrality, removed from its object of study. He deliberately wove into his factual narrative another account—that of his own implication. Sometimes, this implication was personal (as here); at other points, it involved his own strong sense of colonial guilt, when, for example, he found himself in the uncomfortable position of ‘honorary’ colonial administrator.21

Looking back in 1981, Leiris described L’Afrique fantôme as ‘ce journal à double entrée, essentiellement succession de flashes relatifs à des faits subjectifs aussi bien qu’à des choses extérieures (vécues, vues ou apprises) et qui, regardé sous un angle mi-documentaire, mi-poétique, me semble [...] valoir d’être proposé à l’appréciation...’ (Leiris 1981: 9). This last comment sounds a striking anticipation of Kathleen Raine’s (1975: 81) equally hybrid description of Mass Observation as ‘half-poetic, half-sociological’, for what the two projects shared was an understanding,

---

20. The quotation is from FOUCAULT (1970: 379) and continues: ‘Since Totem and Taboo, the establishment of a common field for these two, the possibility of a discourse that could move from one to the other without discontinuity, the double articulation of the history of individuals upon the unconscious of culture, and of the historicity of those cultures upon the consciousness of individuals, has opened up, without doubt, the most general problems with regard to man.’ For another examination of the Surrealist interest in the fetish which links it with the prevailing ‘Negrophilia’, see GOLAN 1994.

unusual for their time, that the collection of evidence can never stand alone, can never attain a self-sufficient scientific ‘objectivity’. It must inevitably be intermeshed with the subjectivity—indeed, the desires of the person collecting the evidence. More than he or she might know, and in ways often not acknowledged, the ‘participant-observer’ must participate, if not in the observed event itself, then certainly in the construction of its meaning. There is no observation that is free of interpretation.

James Clifford has written of Leiris’s presentation of his unadorned notes in L’Afrique fantôme as ‘stubbornly naive, holding off acceptable forms of narrative’, exploiting ‘the merely chronological collection of citations and snapshots’ (Clifford 1988: 172). The photographic term ‘snapshot’ is particularly appropriate, with its dual connotations of spontaneous directness and personal witness. Such a combination of effects has often been exploited in ethnography (and documentary photography) to lend authenticity and, through that, authority to the observer’s records and comments. What is particular about Leiris’s use of these tactics is that they rather serve to undermine any such idea of authority. He cannot help but be simultaneously implicated in what he is observing and distanced from it.

Towards a Surrealist Documentary

The experience of L’Afrique fantôme was unique and unrepeatable. Lei- ris’s later writings split between his professional work as an anthropologist based at the Musée de l’Homme and a sequence of autobiographical volumes, the first of which was L’Âge d’homme, first published in 1939. In his introduction ‘De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie’, Leiris himself invoked photographic metaphor for his procedure in this book, describing it as ‘une sorte de collage surréaliste ou plutôt de photomontage puisqu’aucun élément n’y est utilisé qui ne soit d’une véracité rigoureuse ou n’ait valeur de document’ (Leiris 1973: 16). And a little later, he amplified his metaphor: ‘Envisageant mon entreprise à la manière d’un photo-montage et choisissant pour m’exprimer un ton aussi objectif que possible, tentant de ramasser ma vie en un seul bloc solide (objet que je pourrais toucher comme m’assurer contre la mort, alors même que, paradoxalement, je prétendais tout risquer), si j’ouvrerais bien ma porte aux rêves (élément psychologiquement justifié mais coloré de romantisme…), je m’imposais, en somme, une règle aussi sévère que si j’avais voulu faire une œuvre classique’ (ibid.: 20).

Again, what is most important to note here is the deliberate conjunction of the objective, the cool and ‘classical’ with the subjective and ‘roman-

---

tic'. It is a common dialectic within Surrealism, and in his introduction to *L'Âge d'homme*, Leiris is explicit about the continuing influence of Surrealist method on his autobiographical enterprise: ‘Réceptivité à l’égard de ce qui apparaît comme nous étant donné sans que nous l’ayons cherché (sur le mode de la dictée intérieure ou de la rencontre de hasard) [. . .]. répugnance à l’égard de tout ce qui est transposition ou arrangement, c’est-à-dire compromis fallacieux entre les faits réels et les produits purs de l’imagination’ (ibid.: 16).

Within the same passage, Leiris cited André Breton’s 1928 book *Nadja* as a primary example of these fundamental Surrealist attitudes and tactics, and indeed there were several parallels with his own project. Though *Nadja* has often been classified as a novel, Breton insisted on the truthfulness of his account and deliberately used the present tense form of a diary, with a tone which gave the extraordinary events of the book an air of removed factuality; he himself later said that ‘le ton adopté pour le récit se calque sur celui de l’observation médicale’ (Breton 1963: 6). The disorientating *amour fou* between Nadja and Breton is set very precisely, in a contemporary Paris, and Michel Beaujour (1967: 797), making an early comparison between *Nadja* and *L’Afrique fantôme*, commented that ‘*Nadja* est le récit d’une expédition ethnologique vers l’intérieur d’une ville . . .’.

And of course, there was in both books the use of photographs to add to the effect of veracity. Throughout *Nadja*, Breton scattered images of the Parisian streets and squares where he and Nadja had walked, the deliberate plainness and anonymity of the photographs rendering them all the more susceptible to a suffusion of subjective meaning. As Walter Benjamin (1979: 231) wrote: ‘In such passages in Breton, photography intervenes in a strange way. It [. . .] draws off the banal obviousness of this ancient architecture to inject it with the most pristine intensity towards the events described’. In the first edition of *Nadja* in 1928, the photographs were unattributed—as were Griaule’s in *L’Afrique fantôme*—which increased their status as direct, almost unmediated, records. (In the second edition of 1963, however, the photographer was cited as Jacques-André Boiffard, and with the recent recognition of the extraordinary quality of Boiffard’s later photographs in *Documents*, his pictures for *Nadja* are now highly authored images, which have been published and exhibited under Boiffard’s name.)

Following *Nadja*, one can find in the early thirties many examples of a ‘Surrealist documentary’, where a tension is set up between a highly emotive subject matter and a restrained, even laconic form of representation. (Sometimes, this tension is between the subject matter and how it is portrayed. In other cases, as with *Nadja* and *L’Afrique fantôme*, it

---

23. In 1963, a new French edition ‘entirely revised by the author’ was published and this is the version now available in French (Breton 1963).
is between two different forms of representation—usually of course between image and text.) This approach achieves what Lydia Davis (1992: 3) has claimed for Leiris’s autobiographical books: ‘Taking himself as subject, with a sort of ethnographic objectivity, [...] he examines what is familiar, to him and often to us, so closely and from such an odd angle that in the end it becomes strange, an exotic close to home’. It is a tactic to be found in Surrealist writings (besides Nadja, there is Louis Aragon’s Le Paysan de Paris), even in Surrealist painting (Magritte’s work of the period shares these qualities), but above all, and most obviously, it is to be seen in the way that the Surrealists approached documentary photography and film-making during this period.

In the last decade, Surrealist photography has been almost entirely considered within the terms laid out by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston in their exhibition and book L’Amour Fou (1985): largely manipulated or staged images, focused above all on the (usually female) body. But the study of this other strand of Surrealist photography—a ‘Surrealist documentary’—and an examination of how it intersects with a ‘Surrealist ethnography’ offers another—an alternative or parallel—route into the subject.24

Here, one can only briefly describe a few disparate examples of this work. One would be Brassai’s photographs of Parisian graffiti, first published in Minotaure six months after the Dakar-Djibouti issue with the provocative title ‘Du mur des cavernes au mur d’usine’ (Brassai 1933). Though his subject—the revelation of a primal unconscious at the heart of the cultured city—was highly emotive, Brassai’s actual images were recordative and neutral, with the violently gouged and often macabre graffiti precisely framed in the centre of each image. In his text, he drew an explicit parallel with the objectifying stance of the ethnographer, an idea he took further a quarter of a century later when the graffiti photographs were finally published in book form: ‘Attracted as we are by the strangeness of primitive customs, we know more about the habits of the pygmy or African bushman than we do about a Parisian from the rue des Solitaires’.25 His own work, he claimed, was ethnography brought home, what Marc Augé (1995: 7) has recently called ‘an anthropology of the near’. Brassai, however, like the Surrealists themselves, was not interested in the mainstream of culture, but rather in the hidden, marginal and unacknowledged elements which undermined the structures of that culture. Such a positioning can be found elsewhere in this ‘Surrealist documentary’. The photographs made by Eli Lotar of the Parisian abattoir:

24. In my unpublished thesis (Walker 1995c), I discuss this subject at length, with chapters on Nadja and La Révolution surréaliste, on the work of individual photographers such as Atget, Brassai, Kertész and Cartier-Bresson, and on urban sites such as the abattoir and the flea-market. The present essay has been adapted from the conclusion of this thesis.

first published with a short text by Bataille in *Documents* (1929), also dealt with a troubling and ‘convulsive’ subject in a precise and restrained way. Lotar had previously worked with Germaine Krull, the leading Parisian exponent of the formalizing ‘New Objectivity’ photography and he had adapted that approach to his own ends. So, while Bataille indulged himself in an evocation of orgies and slaughter, Lotar quietly kept his distance, casting an unflinching gaze at the primitive scenes that were to be found on the margins of the urban metropolis, scenes of transformation that were both hidden and essential to the existence of that metropolis.26

During this period, Lotar worked as cameraman for the natural history filmmaker Jean Painlevé, who was also close to the Surrealist group without being a member. Painlevé was best known for a series of short films about underwater creatures (most famously *L’Hippocampe*, 1934), which reveal a natural world that is so ‘other’ that it comes to seem unnatural. Painlevé’s films are imbued with an absolute scientific rigour, and filled with coolly delivered factual information. But they are also startling in the use of an almost deliberately excessive anthropomorphic and cultural referencing, which provides an ironic commentary on how we react to these alien creatures. Once again, observation and interpretation cannot be disentangled. Thus, Painlevé’s films might be taken to represent a ‘Surrealist natural history’ to be placed alongside a ‘Surrealist documentary’ and a ‘Surrealist ethnography’.27

Painlevé apparently greatly admired the opening of Luis Buñuel’s and Salvador Dalí’s 1928 film *Un chien andalou*, where the slicing of the eye is indeed observed with the sort of clinical precision which Painlevé brought to his own films. In turn, Buñuel’s next film *L’Âge d’or* (1930) starts with a sequence of two scorpions fighting shot in the style of Painlevé. In his autobiography *My Last Breath*, Buñuel (1985: 138) claimed that after that, he himself was asked to go on the Mission Dakar-Djibouti, but refused and gave his place to Leiris. Instead he went to one of the poorest areas of Spain and (with Lotar as his cameraman) shot his caustic documentary film *Las Hurdes* (*Terre sans pain*, 1932): ‘I made *Las Hurdes* because I had a Surrealist vision and because I was interested in the problem of man. I saw reality in a different manner from the way I’d seen it before Surrealism’.28

26 There is no room here to extend this discussion of the imagery of the abattoir, but the influence of Lotar’s pictures can surely be found in Georges Franju’s similarly clinical film *Le sang des bêtes* (1949), with its commentary written by Jean Painlevé.

27 Recently, Painlevé’s work has become more available. In France, most of his films have been released on video (a set are held in the Bibliothèque publique d’information at the Centre Pompidou), with an accompanying publication (BERG 1991). In Britain, a compilation tape, *Surrealism and Science: The Weird World of Jean Painlevé*, was released by Academy Video, 1995.

28 ARANDA 1975: 90-91. On *Las Hurdes*, see also CONLEY (1987) and THOMAS (1994). Thomas’s highly critical view of the film as colonialist is reductive and...
As much might have been said by Leiris or Breton, by Lotar, Painlevé or Brassai, by any of the Surrealist or Surrealist-influenced writers, artists, photographers and film-makers of the period. For Surrealism—contrary to how it has often been characterized—was never only about the development of individual subjectivity; it always emphasized the necessity to seek out a heightened interaction between that subjectivity and the reality around it. The usual opposition between the inner and the outer, the individual and the world, the subjective and the objective should thus become meaningless as these elements are merged together in a heightened state of existence—surreality. Just as the facts that Griaule discovered about the Dogon masks should not be separated from the emotions that the objects aroused in Leiris. Both aspects are and must be part of its possible meaning.

The moment of ‘Surrealist ethnography’ was brief and quickly passed. *L’Afrique fantôme* and Mass Observation were two different products of a particular moment in time and a particular confluence of effects. Yet they do in some ways seem to prefigure later developments. When Fred Inglis (1990: 82) recently defined ethnography as ‘A highly specific narrative about the form of life in front of us, but a narrative always suspicious of its own common sense’, it was a very contemporary definition, which at the same time sounded an echo of Marcel Griaule’s (1930: 46) comment: ‘[L’ethnographie] se méfie d’elle-même—car elle est science blanche, c’est-à-dire entachée de préjugés’. What Leiris did, however, in *L’Afrique fantôme* was to double up on that suspiciousness, to apply it not only to his cultural positioning but also to his own subjectivity. Thus he deliberately questioned the objectifying distance that Griaule sought to maintain; at one point, in *L’Afrique fantôme*, Leiris (1981: 433) expressed his ‘ressentiment contre l’ethnographie, qui fait prendre cette position si inhumaine d’observateur, dans des circonstances où il faudrait s’abandonner’.

But, as with Breton’s use of photography in *Nadja*, one might here ask to what extent Leiris was also suspicious of the documentary veracity of the photographs he used. Did both he and Breton take that veracity for granted, a solid—indeed stolid—*donnée* against which to throw the uncertainties of their texts? Or did they recognize that the juxtaposition of images and text cast a shadow of doubt not only across their written accounts, but also across the photographs they used? In 1981, Leiris was aware that the photographs in *L’Afrique fantôme* were chosen ‘au gré presque de ma fantaisie’, but had he been aware of it in 1934? To what extent can more contemporary understandings (both Leiris’s and ours) of the complexity of representation be retrospectively applied? Can one extrapolate back to the thirties and find there an understanding of these issues?

misses its profoundly dark and anti-humanist irony, but he does site the film in relation to the ‘Surrealist ethnography’ of the early thirties.
It has been a central tenet of some recent theory that ‘reading’ (and indeed ‘re-reading’) is more important than the original act of ‘writing’. In such an argument, perhaps, it doesn’t matter that we don’t know if what Nadja and L’Afrique fantôme now seem to mean is what they meant to Breton, Leiris and their contemporary audience. But this stance is surely only one element in how we should approach these texts. The place of intentionality and historical positioning must necessarily be reconsidered within this different context, and we must attempt an ‘archaeology’ of this recent past that now seems so far away, even if in the process we run the danger of over-estimating the radical intentions behind these images and texts. For in the end, we cannot know how much of what has been proposed here was intended, or indeed how much of it was noticed, since such issues were not at the time discussed let alone theorized.

Nevertheless, and with all that in mind, it is possible to trace in the ‘Surrealist ethnography’ of L’Afrique fantôme a significant problematization, however untheorized, of its own production, a complex celebration of otherness that at the same time suggests its own self-critique. In his response to the ‘Masque “femme du cordonnier”’, Leiris throws into question the status of any neutral relationship one might have with that object. His immediate reaction, in the heart of Africa, was in the context of a direct confrontation with the mask itself. But in L’Afrique fantôme, the mask was now only to be seen through the photograph, seen as part of the phantomatic structure that Leiris constructed from his African experience. In the process, the apparent straightforwardness of the photograph itself was also implicitly thrown into question, and one can surely already see there an intuitive apprehension that no document is ever just a document. Or rather that what we call a document can be—indeed must be—threaded through with enculturation, with subjectivity, with desire: ‘au gré presque de [la] fantaisie’.

University of Wales College, Newport.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ADES, D.


ARAGON, L.

ARANDA, F.

AUGE, M.

BATAILLE, G.

BATAILLE, G. et al.

BEAUFOUR, M.

BENJAMIN, W.

BERG, B., ed.

BRASSAI

BRETON, A.

BUÑUEL, L.

CALAME-GRIEAULE, G. & GUIARD, J.

CALDER, A. & SHERIDAN, D., eds

CLIFFORD, J.


CONLEY, T.


DAVIS, L.


EDWARDS, E., ed.


Foster, H.


FOUCAULT, M.


GOLAN, R.


GRIJALLE, M.

1930 'Un coup de fusil', *Documents* II (1): 46.


INGLIS, F.


JAMIN, J.


1987 'De l'humaine condition de Minotaure', in *Regards sur Minotaure, la revue à tête de bête* (Genève: Musée d'art et d'histoire): 79-87.

KRAUSS, R. & LIVINGSTON, J.

Leiris, M.
1933 'Masques dogon', Minotaure I (2): 45-51.

Neville, P.

Price, S. & Jamin, J.

Raine, K.

Richardson, M.

Robertson, A., ed.
1986 Surrealism in Britain in the Thirties (Leeds: City Art Galleries).

Suleiman, S. R.

Thomas, N.

Walker, I.

Warehime, M.
ABSTRACT

James Clifford’s 1981 essay ‘On Ethnographic Surrealism’, which proposed an intimate connection between surrealism and ethnography in Paris in the early thirties, has resulted in much debate. The present text considers the place of photography in that debate in two ways. Firstly, the essay traces the placement of photographs of Dogon masks (taken by Marcel Griaule on the Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1931-33) in a number of sites—on display in the Musée de l’Homme, in Griaule’s book Masques dogons (1938), in the Surrealist-oriented magazine Minotaure (1933), and finally in Michel Leiris’s L’Afrique fantôme (1934). In each site, the meaning of the image shifts, with Leiris in particular investing it with elements of extreme subjectivity. In the second part of the essay, this ‘surrealist ethnography’ is related to the ‘surrealist documentary’ of the same period, as exemplified by André Breton’s Nadja (1928) and the photographs and films of Brassai, Eli Lotar, Jean Painlevé and Luis Buñuel. Finally, one might ask, what do these practices hold for more contemporary ‘post-modern’ ethnographic or documentary practice?

RESUMÉ

L’Afrique fantôme. La photographie entre surréalisme et ethnographie. — L’étude de J. Clifford de 1981, ‘On Ethnographic Surrealism’, qui établissait un lien étroit entre le surréalisme et l’ethnographie parisiens du début de années 1930, a donné lieu à de nombreuses discussions. Cet article envisage le rôle de la photographie dans ces débats de deux façons. En premier lieu, l’article examine la localisation des photos de masques dogons prises par Marcel Griaule au cours de la Mission Dakar-Djibouti (1931-33) dans certains sites: le Musée de l’Homme, le livre de Griaule, Masques dogons (1938), la revue d’inspiration surréaliste, Minotaure (1933) et enfin L’Afrique fantôme (1934) de Michel Leiris. Dans chaque site, le sens des images se modifie, en particulier dans le livre de Leiris où elles sont investies d’une subjectivité exacerbée. Dans la seconde partie de l’article, cette « photographie surréaliste » est mise en rapport avec l’« imagerie surréaliste » de la même période, telle qu’elle est représentée par Nadja (1928) d’André Breton ainsi que par les photographies et les films de Brassai, Eli Lotar, Jean Painlevé et Luis Buñuel. Enfin, on s’interroge sur la signification que peuvent revêtir ces pratiques pour une ethnographie ou un usage de l’image post-modernes.

Keywords/Mots-clés: mask/masque, photography/photographie, surrealism/surréalisme, mission Dakar-Djibouti/mission Dakar-Djibouti.