

Artyfacts episode 6

Hello and welcome to the 6th episode of Artyfacts where we will be pondering the question

What is Surrealism?

To begin your journey into trying to comprehend surrealism, I want you to think about the past week of your life. Think about all the little things that have happened and the big moments that stood out amongst the rest, slowly weave together that imagery into a tapestry that slowly distorts itself as more and more memories coming flooding in trying to take control of the already full caverns you created. Squishing and pushing each visual trying to gain dominance over the other. Now imagine that this tapestry was slowly ripped apart thread by thread and then sown back together, what once held a small glimpse of continuity and memories is now a scene of missed matched imagery with nothing in-common other than you being the relative factor. No one other than you will truly understand complex network of symbolism sure they can guess and try and understand the meaning but ultimately its true potential as a painting will be lost as time slowly moves on and memories just as dreams fade losing all definition overshadowed by day to day life. Thank you for going on this small journey with me and now to transition to our next topic of discussion

The surrealism manifesto written by andre breton

As this is a fairly large piece of written media, I shall only be reading select quotes of which I believe to hold significance in providing us with some clear answers.

I will provide a link in the description so you can read the entire manifesto at your leisure.

http://www.exquisitecorpse.com/assets/manifesto_of_surrealism.pdf

So strong is the belief in life, in what is most fragile in life – real life, I mean – that in the end this belief is lost.

This is the first sentence in the surrealist manifesto and I believe it to hold two potential meanings partly due to the way the sentence is structured. The first meaning is that during towards the ends of one life the Idea of one's own mortality becomes more apparent. The other potential meaning is that a person's concept of reality can be shattered if only for a second with the use of illusion or thoughts of the impossible.

Man, that inveterate dreamer, daily more discontent with his destiny, has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use,...If he still retains a certain lucidity, all he can do is turn back toward his childhood.....There, the absence of any known restrictions allows him the perspective of several lives lived at once

In essence this states the monotony, boredom and harsh realities of life can lead one to day dream, much like when we were children giving ourselves a Personas of superhero's, doctors, astronauts the sky was the limit due to our innocence and lack of understanding of reality or our indifference towards it.

Threat is piled upon threat, one yields, abandons a portion of the terrain to be conquered....This is because he henceforth belongs body and soul to an imperative practical necessity which demands his constant attention.

So In order to become an adult we must become aware to the constraints of reality and the responsibilities we must uphold not only to ourselves but to our fellow man. In the forms of our laws, regulations and taxes.

In his mind's eye, events real or imagined will be seen only as they relate to a welter of similar events, events in which he has not participated, abortive events....On no account will he view them as his salvation.

Every man, woman and child have had dreams of grandeur, dreams that seem more and more Irrational when a person compares themselves to other far more talented and with so much time left in their lives. As one grows older they see the possibility's that once seemed to solid slowly become transparent and fade away to nothing.

**Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality...Among all the many misfortunes to which we are heir, it is only fair to admit that we are allowed the greatest degree of freedom of thought....It is up to us not to misuse it. To reduce the imagination to a state of slavery
Imagination alone offers me some intimation of what can be,.....to allow me to devote myself to it without fear of making a mistake (as though it were possible to make a bigger mistake).**

Any person can come up with illusions of grandeur, but it takes someone incredibly brave or stupid to act upon them. Life isn't forgiving and putting oneself out there more often than not will end in a broken heart with his shards of effort littered across the ground.

Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy.....For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud.....human explorer will be able to carry his investigation much further, authorized as he will henceforth be not to confine himself solely to the most summary realities.

Much of what we consider myths and legends have been disproven or explained away by science leaving little mysticism in the world. But for those of you who don't know who Sigmund Freud literally wrote the book on dream interpretation. As such the realm of dreams were new and exciting lands to be discovered and concurred by the artists of our society.

Freud very rightly brought his critical faculties to bear upon the dream.... (since, at least from man's birth until his death, thought offers no solution of continuity, the sum of the moments of the dream, from the point of view of time, and taking into consideration only the time of pure dreaming, that is the dreams of sleep, is not inferior to the sum of the moments of reality, or, to be more precisely limiting, the moments of waking)

Dreams are the workings of the subconscious mind as such it is relevant to one's reality, yet holding knowledge bearing on reality or being constrained by it allowing for another worldly experience which is parallel to our own. Which is equally significant to the waking world for the individual who is living said dual life.

1) Within the limits where they operate (or are thought to operate) dreams give every evidence of being continuous and show signs of organization....By the same token, at any given moment we have only a distinct notion of realities, the coordination of which is a question of will.*For the most part I retain only what I can glean from its most superficial layers.....I would like to sleep, in order to surrender myself to the dreamers, the way I surrender myself to those who read me with eyes wide open; in order to stop imposing, in this realm, the conscious rhythm of my thought.

For most dreams have no true beginning, middle or end as such we can only draw upon our past experiences and can we truly compare the two realities without being biased. Such a bias is applied to an interpreter of said dreams or surrealist works for they have not lived the life of the dreamer.

Can't the dream also be used in solving the fundamental questions of life?...Is the dream any less restrictive or punitive than the rest?

Both in a psychological and philosophical sense our dreams could potentially hold many of answers for one's own problems in the real world. Such as a dream were your being chased by something. Indicates that your avoiding an issue that is currently present in your life

The image is a pure creation of the mind....It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.....The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be

Dreams are not comprised of a single memories or experience but multiple memories woven into a tapestry, as such we cannot compare one dream to another as every dream is its own individual experience. However the more we come to understand our own dreams the better we may be able to define the significance of each individual symbolic object or action presented to us in said dream.

Poetically speaking, what strikes you about them above all is their extreme degree of immediate absurdity, the quality of this absurdity, upon closer scrutiny, being to give way to everything admissible, everything legitimate in the world: the disclosure of a certain number of properties and of facts no less objective, in the final analysis, than the others.

Somehow no matter how realistic a dream maybe, once one becomes lucid and start to break free from the puppeteering grasp of the subconscious mind; it becomes all too apparent to the waking mind that you are in a dream. At which point you will either become the ruler of said reality or you will be kicked out from it not being able to except the surreal experience.

What follows are two definitions of Surrealism seen within the manifesto, I will leave these open to inspiration as they can be perceived as the true meaning of Surrealism

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express -- verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner -- the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

ENCYCLOPEDIA. Philosophy. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.

In the final analysis, it's not such a bad thing for these images to upset the mind, for to upset the mind is to put it in the wrong. The sentences I quote make ample provision for this. But the mind which relishes them draws therefrom the conviction that it is on the right track; on its own, the mind is incapable of finding itself guilty of cavil; it has nothing to fear, since, moreover, it attempts to embrace everything.

Much of our dreams are forms of simulations preparing us for potential events and outcomes of daily life, more over they test us slowly exposing us to things our waking mind can't grasp or handle such as traumatic experiences, our fears, anxieties, unresolved feelings and even suppressed memories. All are forced into the open in our dreams when the mind wonders through once locked doors.

I do not believe in the establishment of a conventional Surrealist pattern any time in the near future.

Due to the way in which human consciousness functions, no two people are alike, each one filled with different ambitions, memories and emotions. Are dreams are shaped by these factors as such they are as equality individual and diverse as the people they belong to. However some symbolism and events within dreams will share a likeness to one another even across multiple dreams by different people, this is due to the fact that we all share this reality of which we live in.

Surrealism, such as I conceive of it, asserts our complete nonconformism clearly enough so that there can be no question of translating it, at the trial of the real world, as evidence for the defense.

Due to the way in which dreams and the human mind functions, no true correct answer in the terms of analysis of ones dreams will be fully correct; much like looking at a painting everyone that gazes upon it will display a range of different emotions and gain individual answers that pertain to their own experiences and over all knowledge of life but only within their terms.

Now that we have hopefully come to some understanding of what surrealism is in the sense of meaning, let's try and comprehend what it is in terms of visuals. For this I will be looking at some surrealistic media from each medium that I can think of at this moment in time, however I will be limiting it to one artist per medium to help move things along.

Photography

Jerry Uelsman is a photographer and a master of the technique of photo montage, in which he is able to mix, rework and combine alternate reality as he sees fit. The result is often imagery that has an angelic feel as well as a surrealist quality to them. One of the most impactful widely used recurring forms of symbolism to be prevalent in his work is that of the humble cloud. Why is this? It is due to a clouds fluid and flexible nature that lends itself to the surrealistic theme. Alfred Stieglitz a very infamous photographer also had an interest in clouds in his series known as Equivalents and a small quote by him states as such:

“My cloud photographs are equivalents of my most profound life experiences, my basic philosophy of life. All art is an equivalent of the artist's most profound life experiences.” – Alfred Stieglitz

Something else quite apparent symbolism in his work are rowing boats, which often depict a need to escape or get away, sometimes they give off the idea of intensive effort or hard work needed to complete a task at hand. Finally some very common imagery to see within surrealism, firstly being disobeyed eyes which have a different meaning depending on the focus of the piece, but generally connote a need to seek out a new vision on one's own reality. Secondly imagery pertaining to birds, which again depending on how they are represented usually come down to two meanings one a feeling of freedom and spiritual liberation the other emotionally or trapped and condemned. Thirdly are perfect geometric shapes which distort the reality around them, perfect objects hold a surrealist quality due to them being fundamentally impossible because of the laws of reality that hold us at bay.

Painting

A large amount of the attributes and symbolism I previously talked about in the work of Uelsman also appear in the work of Rene Magrett, so will be skipping over them in order to give you some new information. Magrett held a large interest in the human form more over the distortion of the human form. Men were often depicted as being fully clothed with their faces mostly always obscured either by facing way from the viewer, cover over by an apple or missing from the painting entirely, partly in an effort to preserve anonymity; the apple in all of his paintings works as a mechanism to challenge the views referential expectations of reality. When one dreams of apples they are presented with their desires of perfection and success within their own life. However by obscuring the face of his alternate persona's with an apple, Magrett is suggesting a disconnect from life and himself, this is the perfect man he wishes to be. More where men are depicted there is always the symbolism of the bowler hats, hats depending on the state they are in within ones dreams shows that one is either trying to hide their true nature or exhibit a new side to themselves. For Magrett it was about showing a constant relation to concepts and objects.

This much can be seen in his painting *La Trahison des images*, which states This is not a pipe but a picture of a pipe, this is one of his larger conventions within his surrealist works which is reality within other reality's. Much like a dictionary one finds a word only to find a reference to another word, we are led on new and ever expanding paths of questioning, this is the nature of Magretts dreams endless questions with no desirable answers.

As for the female form, woman are always depicted as naked with parts often detached or warped, this is a respiration of Magretts sexual desires, these female figures are also regularly depicted like statues made out of marble or

porcelain. This is a respiration of admiration of the female figure, literally putting them up on a pedestal so he could admire their beauty, but still a clear display of lust and a need for ownership. We can also see this lust in the use of fire within ones dreams can show a few different emotions, but since their seen is always connected to an object more so a musical instrument in a few works. This symbolises sexual impulse more over the need to mastering playing the instrument which symbolism's a woman's torso or chest.

Theater

Now here is an example of Surrealist Theater read by Gordon

Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights

The piece opens with Faustus (his precise name shifts and alters throughout the piece) looking out from the doorway to his study, which streams with intense white light from beyond, when Mephisto appears:

Faustus growls out.—The devil what the devil what do I care if the devil is there.

Mephisto says. But Doctor Faustus dear yes, I am here.

Doctor Faustus. What do I care there is no here nor there? What am I. I am Doctor Faustus who knows everything can do everything and you say it was through you but not at all, if I had not been in a hurry and if I had taken my time I would have known how to make white electric light and day-light and night light and what did I do I saw you miserable devil I saw you and I was deceived and I believed miserable devil I thought I needed you, and I thought I was tempted by the devil and I know no temptation is tempting unless the devil tells you so. And you wanted my soul what the hell did you want my soul for, how do you know I have a soul, who says so nobody says so but you the devil and everybody knows the devil is all lies, so how do you know how do I know that I have a soul to sell how do you know Mr. Devil oh Mr. Devil how can you tell you cannot tell anything and I who know everything I keep on having so much light that light is not bright and what after all is the use of light, you can see just as well without it, you can go around just as well without it you can get up and go to bed just as well without it, and I wanted to make it and the devil take it yes you devil you do not even want it and I sold my soul to make it. I have made it but have I a soul to pay for it.

Mephisto coming nearer and trying to pat his arm.

Yes, dear Doctor Faustus yes of course you have a soul of course you have, do not believe them when they say the devil lies, you know the devil never lies, he deceives oh yes he deceives but that is not lying no dear please dear Doctor Faustus do not say the devil lies."

Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights (act one, scene one)

Movie

So now let's talk about surrealism in film, specify the dream sequence from the movie *Spellbound*. As not to spoil any of the movie which was directed by Alfred Hitchcock with the sequence being designed by Salvador Dali. I'm going to play this scene without sound but provide my thoughts on the imagery shown and a link will be available in the description if you wish to watch it in your own time.

As the dream sequence opens we see an array of eyes, which soon turn out to be curtains with eyes painted on them located within a gambling house with no walls. This information is already very telling, J.B.'s subconscious is telling

him that that all eyes of the accusatory are upon him with no means of an escape and every action has consequences.

A man walks around with a large pair of scissors cutting all the drapes in half, this is symbolism for once covered information slowly being unveiled. A woman walks onto the set with hardly anything on and starts kissing everyone, this is an embodiment of his sexual and romantic desires. The scene then cuts to a gambling game where J.B. is playing with a bearded man, the bearded man claims to win the game but his cards are blank. The proprietor of the establish who has no face tell the bearded man he believes him to be cheating. This scene is a reference to J.B.'s case of amnesia and the growing suspicion the others have of him, as well as the blank face representing anonymity of his true self.

The scene then transitions to a man with a bird walking off a roof, this is the subconscious showing one's own feeling of being overwhelmed as if they are falling without control; this is combined with the visual of roots on the chimney which indicate solid ground. The face in the background of the scene restates the idea that J.B.'s feels as if he is being watched or tested. The chimney itself comes into relation of one venting this has the connotation of sexual frustrations.

The proprietor stands on the roof holding a misshaped, a regular wheel would have converted a sense of easy as if everything is fine, but as it is irregular it show a feeling of being put down a hazards or bumpy path, this is also shown though the action of dropping said wheel. Finally J.B. is chased down a hill by a winged creature, being chased in a dream usually is ones subconscious telling them that they are avoiding a subject or trying to escape a situation. The winged beast is the threat looming over him and the hill is the obstacle or situation that stands in his way.

Music

Now we shall play for you an example of Surrealist Music
Bohuslav Martinů Puppets (Book I) performed by Hayk Melikyan
You can find a link to the original video in the description
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31tWb5qxlfI&t=166s>

Animation

Paprika (2006)

Ok I have been wanting to talk about animation in relation to surrealism as I believe it to be one of the best methods of conveying surrealism though the use of imagery. As dreams seems to always move forward and flow in the same manner as a movie, but live action creations can't truly capture the wonderment of the unreal at least without true passion, skill and a large budget. However animation can do this and more for a much lower cost, at least when said animation is only a few minutes long. But the feature length anime known as Paprika dose all of this and more.

As not to spoil anything I shall only be talking about one particular scene form the movie, however I would highly recommend giving the full movie a watch.

The scene starts off with our main character Detective Toshimi holding an old fashioned camera and spotting the perpetrator of a crime in the background of one of his dreams, this is symbolic of him being a witness important events and the old camera represents his past. He then begins to chase after his perpetrator this connotes both his working life and his drive to succeed. We then hear a gunshot and spot a falling body frozen in time; this is the crime we talked about. However being frozen in time shows this to be a scene of great significance in the detective's life and tied to horrific emotions and then we pan to the criminal escaping through an exit, indicating that the detective failed at something during his past. The detective runs after him before the world starts to warp and the rug is literally pulled out from under him and he falls into the despair over his failure and overwhelming anxiety.

In reaction to all of these mediums would like to talk about surrealism as a genre, as of now the two genres I most associate with surrealism are horror and comedy; mainly because of the way in which surrealism fundamentally operates in relation to the human mind. The moment prompts the unexpected with will always have one of two natural reactions from the onlookers one of abject horror and terror and the other being nervous laughs of the absurd and illogical.

Horror

Wild Strawberries (1957)

Comedy

Lastly for comedy I want to talk about the work of Monty Python, in particular the Find The Fish scene from Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*. The scene starts with a presenter asking if you can find the fish, the fish being a metaphor for the meaning of life. We then cut to a man with elongated and twisted arms asking where the fish has gone, his long and misshapen arms are a symbol of him trying to reach for fish which is both out of reach or in an unattainable place. We then quickly pan to a man dressed oddly, this is a representation of one wanting to be their true self to find their meaning in life. This man also has a lobster claw for a hand, this is suggestive of the pain in his life due to his hidden side which he can only show in his dreams. He is also wearing taps and a plug around his sexual areas which depicts deep sorrow over his sexuality or lust. Lastly a butler in an elephant costume walks towards the screen carrying an array of alcoholic beverages, this is a very literal meaning of the elephant in the room an important subject that no one wants to talk about. It being a butler is a respiration of the film maker spoon feeding the audience said answers as being waited on by a servant and the alcohol shows humanity's need to drown our sorrows.

There is far more to pick apart from this scene however to do so we would need to look in relation to the rest of the movie and we simply don't have time for that. But I would recommend watching Monty Python's *Flying Circus* if you

enjoy British surreal humor, I'm currently on season 3 and working my way through it rather fast.

In conclusion surrealism is what you make of it, everyone will have a different interpretation due to the nature of the mind, comprised of individual experiences, emotions and drives. Moreover the meaning in one's own dreams and the symbolism behind it may be lost on those viewing said piece, if not the dreamer themselves. So what can we really say about surrealism other than it is the art of the impossible, a state of two reality's clashing via the creative endeavor of the artists who pursue to escape the laws that bind us to this realm; filled with disenchantment of the mundane society, perhaps they wish to pass us the rope that leads out of the dwelling in which we have furnished with creature comforts.