THE CHosen LAND OF BLack HUMOR:
André Breton’S Construction of MExico

La tierra elegida del humor negro. La construcción de México de André Breton

A terra escolhida do humor negro: A construção do México por André Breton

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ABSTRACT:
This essay discusses the construction of Mexico in the writings of André Breton as “the surrealist place par excellence.” I focus on Breton’s claim that Mexico is “the chosen land of black humor” through an analysis of his literary sources and his engagement with the printmaker José Guadalupe Posada. I then address Breton’s presentation of Mexico in France through the 1939 exhibition Mexique, which was Frida Kahlo’s Parisian debut, and the article “Souvenir du Mexique,” published in the surrealist journal Minotaure.

KEYWORDS:
Surrealism, black humor, Mexican art, André Breton, Frida Kahlo, José Guadalupe Posada, surrealist exhibitions.

Cómo citar:
Resumen:
Este ensayo analiza la construcción de México como “el lugar surrealista por excelencia” en los escritos de André Breton. Me centro en la afirmación de Breton de que México es “la tierra elegida del humor negro” a través de un análisis de sus fuentes literarias y de su interés por los grabados de José Guadalupe Posada. A continuación, abordo la presentación que Breton hace de México en Francia a través de la exposición Mexique, de 1939, que supuso el debut parisino de Frida Kahlo, y del artículo “Souvenir du Mexique”, publicado en la revista surrealista Minotaure.

Palabras clave:
Surrealismo, humor negro, arte mexicano, André Breton, Frida Kahlo, José Guadalupe Posada, exposiciones surrealistas.

Resumo:
Este ensaio analisa a construção do México nos escritos de André Breton como “o lugar surrealista por excelência”. Concentro-me na afirmação de Breton de que o México é “a terra escolhida do humor negro” por meio de uma análise de suas fontes literárias e de seu fascínio pelo gravador José Guadalupe Posada. Em seguida, paso à apresentação que Breton fez do México na França por meio da exposição Mexique de 1939, que marcou a estreia de Frida Kahlo em Paris, e do artigo “Souvenir du Mexique”, publicado na revista surrealista Minotaure.

Palavras-chave:
André Breton claimed Mexico for surrealism even before his first visit to the country in 1938. As a locus of the marvelous—a concept “that superseded automatism as the basic principle of Bretonian surrealism”—where the fantastic was reality itself, Breton’s Mexico was governed by instinct and irrationality.¹ His texts constructed Mexico as the land that proved the natural triumph of surrealism.² Breton’s visit only served to confirm these views and to reward him an even greater license in expressing them. His idea of Mexico—as manifested especially in the 1939 exhibition Mexique, a compilation of selected artworks and objects, and the article “Souvenir du Mexique,” published as a special supplement in Minotaure that same year—became one of his most enduring legacies. It is too easy, however, to dismiss his as an outsider perspective that thoughtlessly enacted stereotypes—Elza Adamowicz refers to it as “blindness,” stating that “Breton viewed Mexico in 1938 in essentially primitivist terms, a country where men lived in harmony with nature, free of capitalist influence, a position contradicted by Mexico’s real postcolonial and capitalist situation.”³ What I argue in this essay is that he began constructing his discourse about the country carefully and deliberately since before considering the possibility of traveling there, which suggests that he had something at stake in his need to argue for Mexico’s intrinsic surrealism. Before his journey, and later in writings produced after his return, Breton shaped his philosophy of surrealism to include Mexico as its natural site.

The trip was a major event for surrealism and made a lasting impact on the movement. While there, Breton met with Leon Trotsky, with whom he drafted the “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art,” a treatise co-signed by Diego Rivera that condemned fascism and Stalinism and advocated for aesthetic autonomy as a necessary vehicle for social revolution.⁴ In fact, the collaboration has been the subject of most analyses devoted to that visit.⁵ Breton’s account of Mexico as a surrealist place and the promise of artistic freedom espoused in the manifesto may have encouraged an influx of European surrealists fleeing persecution from fascist Spain, Vichy France, or the unfolding horrors of World War II, including Wolfgang Paalen, Benjamin Péret, Luis Buñuel, Leonora Carrington, and Remedios Varo, in the period immediately following his trip.⁶ Besides New York, Mexico City became the largest center of surrealist adherents during World War II and hosted the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1940.

As noted by Melanie Nicholson, Breton and surrealism “experienced a chilly reception in Mexico.”⁷ On the one hand, his lectures were poorly promoted and even canceled without his knowledge; on the other, “Breton’s alliance with Trotsky made him the natural enemy of the Communist Party in Mexico at a moment when many Mexicans still sided with Stalin.”⁸ The slight was such that Rivera was driven to pen an article in protest, accusing the Universidad de México—Breton’s host institution—of capitulating to Stalin and the clergy.⁹ In

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1. Hal Foster, Compulsive Beauty (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 19. See also Breton’s first surrealist manifesto (1924), where, after describing the literary marvelous through the novel The Monk, by Mathew Gregory Lewis, he writes in a footnote: “What is admirable about the fantastic is that there is no longer anything fantastic: there is only the real.” André Breton, Manifestes of Surrealism, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 15.
2. The term “surrealism” in this essay is used to refer to Breton’s brand thereof.
4. Although co-authored with Trotsky, the manifesto was not signed by him. See André Breton, “For an Independent Revolutionary Art,” in Free Rein, translated by Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d’Ambroise (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 29-34.
6. Several monographs have been devoted to each of these figures. For a recent article on this later period, see Karla Segura Pantoja, “Le Surréalisme déplacé. Inventaire, établissement et étude des oeuvres des surréalistes exilés au Mexique,” Hommes et migrations 1329 (2020): 39-47.
defense of Breton, Rivera wrote the following: “lover of Mexico, understanding as no other artist could our country’s content of beauty, of pain, of oppressed force, of black humor, he came to offer us the best of himself: the light of his intelligence as a writer and man of science, modest to the point of hiding his knowledge, and to offer us the splendor of his POETIC GENIUS.” Rivera and Frida Kahlo were Breton’s primary hosts in Mexico during his four-month stay and traveled around the country with him, his wife Jacqueline Lamba, and their daughter Aube.

The legacy of Breton’s trip eventually had a far greater impact than the actual presence of the pope of surrealism on Mexican soil. His characterization of Kahlo as an innate surrealist and the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1940 had long-lasting effects on the perception of Mexican art and culture. The trip and exhibition are often mentioned as significant and related events, in both general and specialized texts. Given Breton’s efforts to internationalize the movement by staging exhibitions in Tenerife and London in 1935-36, it is easy to assume that he was also aiming to recruit artists and intellectuals in Mexico. In the catalog to the 1940 exhibition in Mexico City he is listed as one of the three curators (along with Wolfgang Paalen and César Moro); there is little evidence, however, that he was deeply involved in its planning. In 1939, when it was coming together, World War II would have slowed down communication between surrealists in France and Mexico City, although Breton does appear to have lent some paintings. His texts related to Mexico reveal that he was not driven by a desire for widespread cultural exchange. Since Mexico was innately surrealist, it did not need him. In other words: Breton’s goal was not to bring surrealism to Mexico but rather to claim Mexico for surrealism.

**Surrealist Mexico**

By 1935, the surrealist movement was at a crossroads. Many of the original members had left the group, for political or philosophical reasons. According to his biographer, at this point in his life Breton was in a “desperate financial situation” which led him to become involved in a variety of activities. In 1935 he approached Editions du Sagittaire for a “project that could be completed with a minimum of time and effort and that would warrant a substantial advance,” and it was suggested that Breton edit an anthology of black humor, which would be published in 1940 as Anthologie de l’humour noir. The following year, presumably in an effort to relieve his financial plight, he applied for a visiting professorship abroad. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs considered sending him to Prague or Mexico but eventually rejected the idea because Breton lacked a university degree. The publication of L’Amour fou in 1937 did not do much to quell his
monetary needs, as the book sold very few copies. That same year he took on the job of managing the Gradiva gallery to support his family, but this also proved financially insufficient. Breton’s outlook brightened when the Ministry reconsidered its original decision and offered to send him on a three-month long visit to Mexico for a series of lectures on French literature and art.

What did Breton know of Mexico at this point? In his 1952 interviews with André Parinaud, he speaks of being fascinated with Mexico since childhood. Certainly, the French invasion of Mexico (1861-67), orchestrated by Napoleon III and memorialized in Édouard Manet’s series of paintings *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (1867-69), would have been common knowledge. Closer to the time of his departure, his curiosity must also have been piqued upon hearing about the experiences of Antonin Artaud, who had gone there in 1936 and famously claimed to have participated in a peyote ritual with Indigenous peoples of the Sierra Tarahumara. Furthermore, given Breton’s passion for collecting ethnographic objects, he would have been familiar with Pre-Columbian artifacts and Mexican crafts circulating in Paris. How much Breton would have known of modern Mexican art is unclear beyond the artists who were living or exhibiting in Paris and the sporadic article in a French journal. He was, however, well acquainted with notable Latin American artists and intellectuals including César Moro, Roberto Matta, and Alejo Carpentier, among others. In 1937, he published in *Minotaure* a set of engravings by the Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada along with a brief text written by him. A significant source of information about the country came from his correspondence with a Guatemalan poet residing in Mexico City, Luis Cardoza y Aragón, whom Breton had met in Paris. Apparently, when Breton learned of the possibility of visiting Mexico in 1936, he wrote to him requesting information. Cardoza’s response, which he also published in the local press, is a poetic evocation of Mexico through a surrealist lens:

The marvelous is woven with the same substance as the days, the seconds, and the centuries in Mexico [...]. We are in the land of convulsive beauty, in the country of edible deliriums [...]. The supremacy of our nature, of our time, of our indigenous reality is so overwhelming and proudly ruthless that it even offers us a new death, different from other deaths. Mexico has its death as it has its life, different from other lives. If in other regions art emerges from fear of death or as a natural rhythm of life, like our breath or our pulse, in Mexico the supremacy of the medium engenders [art]. For this reason, until now, it has lacked another language that is not that of its own death, of its slow unending agony, of its new, unbearable, and sweet death that is given to it by Mexico’s uneven death.
Such an account could only appeal to Breton, and it is purposely conceived to entice him to visit. Given that Breton would later compose a similar image of Mexico, Cardoza’s letter is a significant model. Notably, Cardoza’s emphasis on death and its manifestation in Mexican art is a concept that Breton vigorously embraced in his writings.

The notion of a surrealist country depicted in this letter must have been compelling. Breton consequently took on the mission of proving Mexico’s surrealism, not only to himself (indeed, his writings reveal that he accepted this assumption before embarking on his trip) but, more importantly, to the Parisian public for the purpose of defending and affirming surrealism as still relevant and viable in its aesthetics and political engagement. He adopted the role of ethnographer, bearing witness to a foreign culture that he would represent to French audiences through the processes of documentation, his supplement in *Minotaure*, and his activities as a collector. As James Clifford relates, in 1930s Paris “ethnography was a process of collection […]. The ethnographic object […] was understood to be a peculiarly reliable ‘witness’ to the truth of an alien society.”26 There are many precedents, both in surrealism and in the wider cultural context, for Breton’s ethnographic attitude.27 The appeal of the primitive and the exotic is at the crux of surrealism and is especially relevant to Breton in his passion for collecting. *Minotaure* had dedicated an issue to the Mission Dakar-Djibouti of 1932, further allying ethnography and surrealism.28 Plans to create the Musée de l’Homme were unveiled at the International Exhibition of 1937, revealing the growing importance of cultural anthropology in Parisian intellectual life. While by 1938 ethnography was becoming more sophisticated and scientific,29 Breton’s own version corresponds to Clifford’s characterization: to collect observations and objects that bore witness to Mexico’s surrealism.30

Besides showing Mexico to be inherently surrealistic, the movement’s alliance with Trotskyism is another way in which Breton attempted to strengthen and affirm his philosophy; this came about, however, as a result of his voyage and could not be said to have motivated it. When the trip became a possibility for Breton, Trotsky had not yet settled in Mexico (he would move there in 1937). What is evident in the texts produced after Breton learned of the prospective journey is that he deliberately proceeded to construct a surrealist ideology around the idea of Mexico’s innate surrealism. He treated Mexico as a text that he loosely interpreted to suit his needs, just as he drew on the theories of three important precursors (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Vaché) to craft his understanding of black humor. Breton’s adaptations of texts by these predecessors reveal poetic license as a common strategy in his conceptualization of surrealism. He shaped the image of Mexico in a similar manner.

28. See *Minotaure* 2 (1934).
The first engagement with Mexico in Breton’s writings took place in 1937 when he published a short article on the printmaker José Guadalupe Posada in *Minotaure* along with several of his prints (imgs. 1 and 2). Titled “Bois de Posada” (Woodcuts by Posada), the brief essay sets the tone for his future texts involving Mexico. Here, I quote it in its entirety:

The triumph of humor in its pure state and manifested in the plastic arts seems as though it should be located very close to us and recognized by its first artisan, the Mexican artist Posada, who in his admirable popular engravings makes us aware of all the currents of the Revolution of 1910 (if we examine the shadows of Villa and Fierro alongside these compositions, we may
become aware of humor’s passage from speculation to action—Mexico, with its splendid funeral toys, affirms itself as the chosen land of black humor.\textsuperscript{31}

Posada (1852-1913) was a printmaker from Aguascalientes who published biting and humorous cartoons in the popular press. He is best known for satirical penny broadsheets, especially those featuring \textit{calaveras}, or skeletons, engaged in all manner of activity, as stand-ins for social types. Breton mistakenly claims that the Posada prints he reproduces are woodcuts, when they were actually engraved onto metal plates. He references the Mexican Revolution (1910-20) by naming two rebel generals, Francisco “Pancho” Villa and Rodolfo Fierro. In Mexico, Posada was rediscovered in the 1920s by artists promoting printmaking. A monograph published in Mexico City in 1930, which reproduced 406 engravings, is likely to have been Breton’s source.\textsuperscript{32}

The claim that Mexico is the chosen land of “black humor” is intriguing. Breton does not specifically define this term but rather illustrates it with pictures involving death. There are four illustrations of current events and two fantastical scenes. Those based on real occurrences include \textit{Maria Luisa, The Suicide}, a print of a woman plummeting from the heights of the Mexico City cathedral; \textit{The End of the World}, a scene of communal terror in the face of the infamous Acambay earthquake that hit Central Mexico in 1912; \textit{Collision Between a Streetcar and a Hearse}, which depicts a shattered open coffin on the train tracks to the surprise of onlookers; and \textit{Man Hanged on Calle de las Rejas de Balvanera, Horrible Suicide, Monday, January 8, 1892}, a scene of a woman reaching over to a man hanging from the side of a building, possibly to hoist his body (this last image was misidentified as \textit{Crime of an Adulteress} in the 1930 monograph, and the same title is cited by Breton). Not all the scenes are humorous. The earthquake image depicts a terrifying moment of near-total destruction of a town during a seismic event that killed up to 140 people and left many injured. The hanging man composition is stark and haunting. In \textit{Maria Luisa} and \textit{Collision} dead and dying bodies are treated with irreverence. In \textit{The End of the World}, Posada inserts a humorous note: a man flying through the air, his limp body resembling a rag doll. In its day, though, the earthquake was nothing to laugh about. The other two scenes depict \textit{The Temptations of St. Anthony}, with the hermit surrounded by demons and allegorical figures of the cardinal sins while sitting before a recently fired cannon, and a \textit{calavera showing} a spider with the face of Victoriano Huerta, a short-lived president who usurped power from Francisco Madero during the Mexican Revolution. The latter is no longer attributed to Posada, as it is now known to have been made after his death. In the context of these images, Breton’s allusion to Mexico’s “funeral toys” (\textit{jouets funèbres}) as revealing the country’s black humor supports the visual connection

\textsuperscript{31} André Breton, “Bois de Posada,” \textit{Minotaure} 10 (1937):18-19 (my translation).

\textsuperscript{32} Monografía: \textit{las obras de José Guadalupe Posada, grabador mexicano}, edited by Frances Toor, Paul O’Higgins, and Blas Vanegas Arroyo, with an introduction by Diego Rivera (Mexico City: Mexican Folkways, 1930).
between humor and death. The idea of “humor’s passage from speculation to action” posits humor as the impetus for revolution. The relation of that claim to the images themselves, though, is tenuous.

**Foundations of Black Humor**

Like many of the catchphrases of surrealism (e.g. “convulsive beauty,” “fixed explosive”), “black humor” is a term invented by Breton to codify the movement. Following its development allows us to assess how it came to be positioned as inherently surrealist and as a key notion for a surrealist account of Mexico. What Breton intended by black humor cannot be understood without examining his engagement with Hegel, Freud, and Vaché, the three writers from whom he derived his own philosophy of humor. The close readings that follow reveal how Breton constructs and adjusts concepts to suit the evolving needs of surrealism, as he will later do with Mexico. His relation to his precursors is complex and shifting, but it is only by appreciating the degree to which he not only employs but also manipulates these sources that his efforts to draw Mexico into his philosophy of surrealism may be understood.

In the 1930s Breton became increasingly preoccupied with Hegelian aesthetics and began to write about Hegel’s dialectic construction of history in positive terms, after having denounced the Hegelian system as a “colossal abortion” in the second surrealist manifesto. Rather than asserting a model of rupture for his movement—a common trope in the rhetoric of the avant-garde—Breton now stressed continuity, accepting Hegel’s characterization of the development of art as a progression that culminates in romanticism, the most significant artistic tendency of his own time. Taking up where Hegel left off, Breton asserted that the next major movements to follow romanticism were surrealism and its precursors, thereby locating his movement as the heir to the Hegelian tradition. As is well known, Hegel attributed a spiritual purpose to art:

> [I]n this its freedom alone is fine art truly art, and it only fulfills its supreme task when it has placed itself in the same sphere as religion and philosophy, and when it is simply one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the Divine, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit.

The emphasis on freedom is reminiscent of Breton’s desire for surrealism to emancipate itself from rational consciousness. In fact, Hegel’s “Divine” could be substituted with “unconscious,” and the passage would align quite closely to Breton’s own philosophy.

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33. Polizzotti relates that in 1937 Breton introduced the concept of “black humor” in a lecture at the International Exhibition. It seems to be the first public mention of the term preceding the Posada article. A pamphlet entitled “De l’humour noir” appears in a photograph in Minotaur in 1937-1938, as does an advertisement for this text.


35. Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, 140.

In the *Aesthetics*, Breton’s main source, Hegel’s discussion of humor arises in his analysis of romanticism. For him, romantic art oscillates between two tendencies, the objective and the subjective: “On the one side [...] there stands the real world in, from the point of view of the ideal, its prosaic objectivity. [...] On the other side, it is the subjectivity of the artist which, with its feeling and insight, with the right and power of its wit, can rise to the mastery of the whole of reality.”\(^{37}\) Romantic art exists in the tension between these poles. Its most characteristic quality, however, is towards the subjective, or inner expression of the artist. Notably, Hegel foregrounds wit and attributes to it the potential to master the real, thereby endowing it with a central role in the late romantic aesthetic. Earlier he had commented that “the end of romantic art is the inner dissolution of the artistic material itself which falls asunder into its elements; its parts become free.”\(^{38}\) In describing the art of his time, he notes the tendency toward inwardness, individualism, and the increasing abstraction of form.

Hegel approaches humor through the same dialectic of subjective and objective. “Subjective humor” is a fundamental characteristic of modern art, whose purpose is “destroying and dissolving everything that proposes to make itself objective and win a firm shape for itself in reality, or that seems to have such a shape already in the external world.”\(^{39}\) The idea of dissolution is key, for what modern art achieves through its preoccupation with subjectivity is to upend “our usual way of looking at things” to the degree that “everything drawn into this sphere proves to be inherently dissoluble owing to the shape and standing given to it by its subjective opinion, mood, and originality; and for contemplation and feeling it is dissolved.”\(^{40}\) Hegel’s analysis of subjective humor aligns with the pictorial strategies of Posada’s prints as interpreted by Breton: “Therefore, every independence of an objective content along with the inherently fixed connection of the form (given as that is by the subject matter) is annihilated in itself.”\(^{41}\) In other words, though Posada depicts real-word events, his rejection of an objective mode of representation by depicting the bodies of victims in a cartoonish, irreverent, and ultimately comical formal language, leads to the destruction of the original subject. In Hegel’s words, “the presentation is only a sporting with the topics, a derangement and perversion of the material.”\(^{42}\) In the move from the representation of “common reality” to “contingent individuality,” art “turns vice versa into a mode of conception and portrayal completely contingent on the artist, i.e. into humor as the perversion and derangement of everything objective and real by means of wit and the play of a subjective outlook, and it ends with the artist’s personal productive mastery over every content and form.”\(^{43}\) In *Collision of a Train and a Hearse*, the shocking incident of a transit crash involving new urban forms of transportation becomes an opportunity for jest. As pictured by Posada, no one is hurt, and both the train and hearse are unscathed. The only

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\(^{38}\) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 575.

\(^{39}\) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 600.

\(^{40}\) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 595.

\(^{41}\) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 595 (emphasis added).

\(^{42}\) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 595.

casualty was already dead. The elegant corpse in a tailcoat maintains a haughty
demeanor in a shattered coffin on the tracks while onlookers aboard the vehicles,
representing a range of social classes, stand agape.

Hegel's characterization of subjective humor as dissolution, perversion,
or derangement suggests an underlying ambivalence. The eventual union or
dialectical resolution of the subjective and the objective would mark the end of
romantic art:

Now romantic art was from the beginning the deeper disunion of the inward-
ness which was finding its satisfaction in itself and which, since objectivity
does not completely correspond to the spirit's inward being, remained broken
or indifferent to the objective world. In the course of romantic art this oppo-
sition developed up to the point at which we had to arrive at an exclusive sub-
jectivity. But if this satisfaction in externality or in the subjective portrayal is
intensified, according to the principle of romantic art, into the heart's deeper
immersion in the object, and if, on the other hand, what matters to humor is
the object and its configuration within its subjective reflex, then we acquire
thereby a growing intimacy with the object, a sort of objective humor.44

In this passage, the only definition that Hegel gives of "objective humor,"
he postulates an intimate relation between art and its object of representation.
The phrase "the heart's deeper immersion in the object" implies a profound
investment in external reality on the part of the artist, despite the tendency to
make jest.

What Hegel envisioned as an example of objective humor is not fully
clear, despite his attempt to describe it in the following few sentences:

Yet such an intimacy can only be partial and can perhaps best be expressed
only within the compass of a song or only as part of a greater whole. For if it
were extended and carried through within objectivity, it would necessarily
become action and event and an objective presentation of these. But what we
may regard as necessary here is rather a sensitive abandonment of the heart in
the object, which is indeed unfolded but remains a subjective spirited move-
ment of imagination and the heart—a fugitive notion, but one which is not
purely accidental and capricious but an inner movement of the spirit devoted
entirely to its object and retaining it as its content and interest.45

Here, we recognize retroactive echoes of Breton's characterization of
black humor as the passage “from speculation to action” in the Posada text. It
would seem from his tentative characterization that Hegel himself could not

44. Hegel, Aesthetics, 609.
45. Hegel, Aesthetics, 609.
fully picture this art form, which had not yet come into being. The examples he gives in the pages that follow all harken back to the art of the past, such as Persian or Islamic (“Arab”) visual forms, which approach “its objects entirely contemplatively;” the poetry of Petrarch, and a poem by Goethe titled “Widerfinden” (Meeting Again). According to Hegel, Goethe’s poem exhibits “a pure delight in the topics, an inexhaustible self-yielding of imagination, a harmless play, a freedom in toying alike with rhyme and ingenious metres” which ultimately “lift the soul high above all painful entanglement in the restrictions of the real world.”

In this example we see that, for Hegel, “play,” “freedom,” and “toying” represent the poem’s humorous elements, which work together to overcome adverse conditions of reality. This is his most concrete example of objective humor, and it is offered as the next-to-last paragraph of the Aesthetics. The dialectical method necessitated an end to romantic art, and Hegel’s brief remarks on objective humor appear to be what he could foresee in the abstract.

Philosophy scholar Martin Donougho notes that, for as much commentary as Hegel’s work has engendered, there has been relatively little analysis of the role of comedy and humor in his thought. On the one hand, Hegel’s own remarks on the topic were sparse. On the other, given that the Aesthetics was a compilation of university lectures, Donougho contends that the “Hegelian voice is muffled.” Through his analysis of Hegel and comedy, he draws a similar conclusion as I do around the insufficiently defined concept of objective humor: “in every way, comedy marks the ‘end’ of art, though it is not clear just what follows.”

Bringing in other texts by the philosopher, Donougho’s discussion fills in many gaps and provides the basis for a more in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of humor in Hegel. For him, comedy “both depict[s] and enabl[es] the victory of individual over fixed essence (which includes classical “individuality”). Comedy is the emergent truth of tragedy—indeed, of art generally […]. [C]omedy both takes and dissolves its distance from life. The dual movement is what makes us laugh.” The notion that laughter exists in the movement towards and away from life sheds light on Posada’s humor. Most significantly, Donougho remarks that the most extreme form of distance from life is death. Furthermore, Breton’s comments about a passage from speculation to action are contextualized by one of Donougho’s closing comments: “comedy is forever caught in the act of leaving the realm of art altogether, to become theory or social fact.” Given the importance of humor in Hegel’s system, the end of romanticism may well have signaled the end of art itself.

A close reading of Hegel makes clear that humor is contingent on the real and troubles the aesthetic. Sigmund Freud’s examination of the mechanisms of the comical foregrounds lived experience. His two key texts on humor are the book Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious (1905) and the essay “Humor”

46. Hegel, Aesthetics, 610.
47. Hegel, Aesthetics, 611.
Breton’s references to Freud indicate a closer engagement with the latter. In this text, Freud analyzed the characteristics of humor, arguing that the humorous effect arises partly out of an encounter with the unexpected. He also emphasized the role of the individual, offering the following example:

a person [is] in a situation which leads the listener to expect that the other will produce the signs of an affect—that he will get angry, complain, express pain, be frightened or horrified or perhaps even in despair [...]. But this emotional expectancy is disappointed; the other person expresses no affect, but makes a jest.

The shock produced by the humorous was something that would immediately resonate with surrealism. As noted by Hal Foster, in psychoanalytic discourse “shock is an alternate route to the unconscious, the discovery of which is so often traced first to hysteria, then to dreams.” Furthermore, for Breton, the context of its production became a point of emphasis in his understanding of humor as a surrealist strategy.

Freud’s humor was all about refusing to be brought down by misfortunes and overcoming adverse conditions through jest. As he wrote,

[H]umor has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation [...]. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. This last feature is a quite essential element of humor [...]. Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances.

The battle between external circumstances and the self is one of the prerequisites of humor in Freud’s account. For the humorous effect to take place, the subject should be able to take pleasure in adverse conditions and achieve a moment of triumph over them. In Freudian terminology, the activation of humor entails the pleasure principle prevailing over the reality principle. The pleasure principle encompasses the sexual instincts and is responsible for the avoidance of pain and the obtainment of pleasure, while being kept in check by the reality principle or the instinct for self-preservation. In the following passage, Freud clarifies the roles of the two principles and the interaction between them:

55. Foster, Compulsive Beauty, 49.
The [reality] principle does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure. The pleasure principle long persists, however, as the method of working employed by the sexual instincts, which are so hard to “educate,” and, starting from those instincts, or in the ego itself, it often succeeds in overcoming the reality principle, to the detriment of the organism as a whole.\textsuperscript{58}

As the definition shows, the triumph of the pleasure principle over reality usually works to the “detriment of the organism.” Nonetheless, Freud viewed humor as one of the positive manifestations of the pleasure principle’s capacity to prevail over the reality principle, as it created a liberating and elevating effect at a time when the subject most needed it.

A third term, the death instinct, jumbled up the clear-cut distinction between the two forces that dominate the ego as presented in Freud’s “Humour.”\textsuperscript{59} Although the death instinct did not feature in Freud’s definition of humor, it lurked in the background of Breton’s black humor, particularly in the connection between the Posada prints and death. Since Freud’s own discussion of the death instinct is schematic, I will summarize it in the broadest of terms. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud introduced the phenomenon of “repetition compulsion,” or the compulsion to unconsciously repeat unpleasant or traumatic events. He found this compulsion to be contrary to instincts of self-preservation, and attempted to relate it to the pleasure principle, although at first sight they might seem incompatible.\textsuperscript{60} Repetition compulsion causes the subject to relive painful events, while the pleasure principle works to avoid discomfort. Nonetheless, Freud insisted that there was no direct contradiction; rather, he stipulated that there could be other instincts at work which would override the pleasure principle, as in the following passage: “Enough is left unexplained to justify the hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat—something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides.”\textsuperscript{61}

The “primitive” instinct introduced in this passage is what Freud later theorized to be the death instinct. It is primitive because, rather than progressing towards a more civilized state, it aims towards involution in order to return to an originary, inorganic state. Freud admitted that, of any of the instincts that he had observed and theorized, the death instinct was the hardest to prove. His analysis of it remained tentative to the last, but he ended with an intriguing conjecture: “the pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts.”\textsuperscript{62} While this

\textsuperscript{58} Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 7.
\textsuperscript{59} In actuality, the distinctions between the different instincts are much more complicated than Freud makes them out to be in this essay.
\textsuperscript{60} Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 21-25.
\textsuperscript{61} Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 25.
\textsuperscript{62} Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 77.
view of the relation between the death instinct and the pleasure principle was not explicitly intended to be read in conjunction with Freud's ideas on humor as the triumph of the pleasure principle, it remains relevant to Breton's macabre view of black humor.

Freud's notion of overcoming adverse conditions through jest must have been especially resonant for Breton in relation to Jacques Vaché, whose concept of “umour” was perhaps the most direct precursor to black humor. Vaché was a young soldier in service whom Breton met in 1916. They maintained a close friendship, predominantly through correspondence, until Vaché’s suicide in 1919. His letters to Breton, often involving intellectual discussions on literature and art, are also poignant documents of life on the front, relating Vaché’s loneliness, boredom, and frustration. They were treasured by Breton throughout his life.63 In his letters, Vaché frequently used the term “umour” almost at random, as in “The British army is without umour” or “I am reading St. Augustine [...] and trying to find in him something other than a monk who knows nothing about umour.”64 Apparently, what he meant by this word was not clear even to Breton, who explicitly asked him to define the term. Vaché’s response reads as follows:

And then you ask me for a definition of “umour”—just like that!—
IT IS IN THE ESSENCE OF SYMBOLS TO BE SYMBOLIC
has long seemed too me worthy of being deemed such in that it is liable to contain a host of living things: EXAMPLE: you know the horrible life of the alarm clock—it is a monster that has always appalled me because of the number of things its eyes project, and the way that good fellow stares at me when I enter a room—why, then, does it have so much “umour,” why then? But there you have it: it is so and not otherwise [...] I believe that it is a sensation—I almost said a SENSE—that too—of the theatrical (and joyless) pointlessness of everything.65

Vaché’s definition pointed to a cynical and absurd world view with nothing funny about it.66 In this context, his reference to St. Augustine was even more irreligious, implying that the non-existence of God was the reason for Augustine’s ignorance.

Vaché’s other correspondence with Breton was also marked by this irreverent attitude, with frequent references to “umour.” In a later letter Vaché even invented an adjective form, “umore” (pronounced umoure).67 Significantly, Breton’s humour noir follows Vaché’s spelling rather than the alternative, “humeur.”68 Although Vaché’s “umour” predates Freud’s essay on humor, Breton must have taken notice of their convergences. Vaché developed this concept in the harsh circumstances of World War I. His suicide in 1919 indicated a triumph
of the death instinct. Vaché’s “umour” referred to the worthlessness of life, and death is even inscribed into the very term “umour.”

**Breton and Humor**

One of Breton’s early references to humor (“objective humor,” in this case) occurs in “The Poverty of Poetry,” a lecture that comments on Louis Aragon’s defection from the surrealist movement and addresses the topic of the artist and political engagement. Breton’s allusion to Hegel’s dialectical system of the arts comes as a minor point here, but it is significant in that it signals an embrace of Hegel. In this early excerpt, Breton stresses the two spheres delimiting romanticism: the objective, which he defines as “the servile imitation of nature in its accidental forms,” and the subjective, or “the personality’s need to achieve its highest degree of independence,” and maintains that they find their resolution in “objective humor.” Breton thus wholeheartedly accepts the Hegelian framework and inserts surrealism within it:

> [T]he various artistic movements which have followed each other since Hegel’s death (naturalism, impressionism, symbolism, cubism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism) contest the tremendous prophetic value of his assertion. The truth is that romantic art in its broadest sense is far from having reached the end of its days and that [...] we are probably, in art, whether we choose to be or not, in the phase of objective humor.

Although this quotation clearly shows to what extent Breton sought to approximate Hegel, two footnotes reveal their divergences. In one, Breton replaces Hegel’s divine ideal with “the material, transposed and translated in the minds of men,” adding however that Hegel’s “error” does not “contradict the dialectical movement assigned to art.” If we consider how comfortably he replaced the divine with the material, with no regard for the impact of this substitution on Hegel’s original argument, we may argue that Breton quoted the *Aesthetics* in the service of his own thesis. In the second footnote, Breton characterizes Hegel’s humor as “particularly striking in disturbed periods and testifying in the artist to the imperious need to dominate the accidental when the latter tends to prevail objectively.”

Although he does not acknowledge it, this definition owes more to Freud than to Hegel. The thrust of the argument is distinctly Freudian: humor arises as a reaction against adverse conditions and entails an assertion of the ego over reality. Breton thus applied Freud’s definition of humor to Hegel’s objective humor: the terms “disturbed periods” and “accidental” harken back to Freud’s contextualization of humor, while the phrase “prevailing objectively” refers to

In the same footnote, Breton states that symbolism corresponds to the Franco-Prussian War and dadaism to World War I. By creating these historical parallels, he managed to connect Freud's context-based theory of the production of humor to Hegel's dialectical system of historical progression.

Another text in which Breton links Hegel and Freud to the subject of humor is the 1935 lecture “Surrealist Situation of the Object,” which he first delivered in Prague. In this text, Breton sets out to define surrealism—and the surrealist object in particular—using the dialectical method. The essay is constructed around oppositions and syntheses. It begins with a discussion of the forces that brought about surrealist poetry—the struggle between the subjective and the objective, which, of course, culminated in “objective humor.” In the following passage, Breton illustrates how the resolution was achieved:

[In Jarry] the struggle between the two forces which by turn tended to dominate art in the romantic era was fought and suddenly became crucial: the force that made the accidents of the outer world a matter of interest on the one hand, and on the other hand the force that made the caprices of personality a matter of interest. The intimate interpenetration of these two tendencies, which more or less alternate in Lautréamont, in Jarry’s case ends in the triumph of objective humor, which is their dialectical resolution. Willy-nilly, all poetry after him had to pass through this new category, which in its turn will fuse with another so as to be able to be surmounted [...]. I was saying that objective humor today still has almost all its value as a means of communication, and, in fact, there is not a single outstanding work in these last few years that does not turn out to more or less bear its imprint. I will here propose the names of Marcel Duchamp and Raymond Roussel, and after them those of Jacques Vaché and Jacques Rigaud, who went so far as to try to codify this sort of humor. The whole futurist movement, the whole dada movement can claim it as their essential characteristic.

In referring to the “triumph of objective humor,” Breton implied that romantic art had reached its end. The claim that Vaché sought to codify objective humor is misleading, given that it was Breton who prompted him to define “umour,” which otherwise appears at random in his writings. Vaché’s definition of “umour” as “the sense of the theatrical pointlessness of everything” is hard to reconcile with Hegel’s “objective humor” as “a sense of a growing intimacy with the object” or “an inner movement of the spirit devoted entirely to its object and retaining it as its content and interest.” Where Vaché suggested distance and detachment, Hegel recommended intimacy. Where Vaché saw pointlessness, Hegel witnessed the divine.

73. The idea of the “accidental prevailing objectively” also recalls “objective chance.”
74. André Breton, “Surrealist Situation of the Object,” in Manifestoes of Surrealism, 255-278. From the beginning, Breton explicitly acknowledges his debt to Hegel in this essay.
In “Nonnational Boundaries of Surrealism,” a lecture delivered in 1937 in London following the International Surrealist Exhibition, Breton referred again to objective humor, this time relating it to Freud and objective chance. The lecture marks one of Breton’s attempts to internationalize the movement. It begins by historicizing surrealism and then relates it to English trends in literature, particularly the gothic novel. The relevant passage on humor appears after a discussion of the precursors of surrealism:

To these various influences that combine in shaping surrealism, we must not forget to add two distinct modes of awareness that go back, without a doubt, much further and have numerous antecedents. One of these modes expresses itself in objective humor, in the Hegelian sense of a synthesis of the imitation of nature in its accidental forms on the one hand and of humor on the other. Humor, as a paradoxical triumph of the pleasure principle over real conditions at the moment when they are considered the most unfavorable, is naturally bound to take on a defensive character during the period so fraught with menace in which we live. From Swift to Lewis Carroll, the English reader is in a better position than anyone to appreciate the resources of that humor that in France is represented by Alfred Jarry and that hovers over the origins of surrealism (the influences of Jacques Vaché and Marcel Duchamp). The second mode of awareness in question [...] is objective chance, defined by Engels as the “form of manifestation of necessity.” [...] Objective humor and objective chance are, strictly speaking, the two poles between which surrealism is confident it will produce its longest lasting sparks.

Even though this passage did not explicitly say so, by now it was becoming obvious that “that humor” is black humor. Breton’s black humor was then a synthesis of objective humor and Freud’s humor, which Breton clearly attempts to align in this passage, however strained and inchoate the comparison may seem. He further emphasizes humor’s defensive character, finally offering a characterization that resonates with Freud’s definition. The five names that he mentions as representing this kind of humor: Jonathan Swift, Lewis Carroll, Alfred Jarry, Jacques Vaché, and Marcel Duchamp were all figures that Breton included in the Anthologie de l’humour noir. The passage constituted Breton’s most explicit attempt to write black humor into surrealism while holding fast to the Hegelian terminology. Although he refrains from acknowledging that Hegel’s objective humor is in fact his own, black humor, Breton attempted to maintain as close a connection as possible to the German philosopher, continuing where he left off.

Black humor thus came to be understood as inherently surrealist. Breton arrived at its theorization through his efforts to reconcile Freud and Hegel. While

76. André Breton, Anthologie de l’humour noir (Paris: Gallimard, 1940).
Breton acknowledged Freudian psychoanalysis to be one of the most profound influences on the development of surrealism from the beginning, the Hegelian system was a retroactive attempt to inscribe surrealism into the history of art and literature. Hegel became tremendously relevant when Breton sought to historicize the movement and affirm its validity and place in European culture. Read in the context of Breton’s other writings on humor, his short article on Posada both sheds further light on what he understood by black humor and reiterates his previous definitions. His attempt to establish a connection between humor and social action resonates with both Hegel and Freud, while Posada’s irreverent treatment of death recalls Vaché’s derision of the sacred and Freud’s characterization of humor as rebellious.

Breton relied on Hegelian thought to accredit surrealism, and he used Mexico for a similar purpose. The views expressed in the Posada article set the tone for his later observations about the country. In an interview given before traveling, but after learning of the impending trip, Breton revealed other preconceptions that signaled his incipient efforts to construct Mexico as innately surrealist. Following Cardoza y Aragón, Breton referred to it as the land of “convulsive beauty” and even broached the topic of black humor. Upon being asked why he considered Mexico to be its country of choice, Breton gave the following puzzling reply:

Freud has stated that “black humor” not only has a liberating quality, but also something sublime. The teachers of “black humor”: Swift, Quincey, Grabbe, Baudelaire, Kafka, among others, have left for humanity works that are called on to carry on their dazzling task; their “latent content” is exceptionally rich. Some of these artists, like Roussel and Lautréamont, have been the most magnetic of modern times. Hegel’s “objective humor,” which he presents as the end of romantic art, is not “black humor,” of which I regard Mexico as an opulent source.

The comment denying the connection between Hegel’s objective humor and black humor appears odd after tracing Breton’s repeated efforts to establish a direct link between the two in his previously discussed texts. What underlies this shift is Breton’s need to view Mexico as primitive and Other. In rejecting a Hegelian teleology, Breton now indicated that Mexico had not experienced the same historical progression that led to surrealism in Europe. Timeless Mexico, free from historical bondage, was thus a place where surrealism arose naturally. Breton’s insistence on exoticizing the country in the same interview supports this claim. When asked what he thought of Spanish-American painting, he answered that Europe had a great interest for Pre-Columbian art. It is
obvious from comments such as these that Breton sought to deny the European aspect of modern Mexican culture and instead treated it as a place untouched by the outside world. Indeed, he would later characterize Mexican art in those same terms, writing that “since the beginning of the nineteenth century [it] has remained largely free from foreign influences and profoundly attached to its own resources.”

Reading these interviews in conjunction with Breton’s contemporary theorizing of surrealism, his essentializing view of Mexico shines through. In “Surrealist Situation of the Object,” Breton states that the aim of surrealism is to “liberate instinctive impulses, to break down the barrier that civilized man faces, a barrier that primitive people and children do not experience.” Since Mexico lacked the traditional boundaries imposed by civilization, it fell outside a Hegelian teleological framework and was, therefore, not subject to dialectical oppositions. Instead, Mexico was the place where the conscious and the unconscious became one. Another interview underscored the Freudian connection. In it, Breton gave a brief description of the aim of surrealism: “to put a stop to the bitter and paralyzing effect caused by the immemorial opposition of dreams to reality.” Mexico was surrealist because it broke down these barriers, and Breton’s own experience proved it: “I dreamed of Mexico and then I was in Mexico: the move from this first state to the second happened in these conditions without the slightest shock [...]. In effect, for me reality has never so splendidly fulfilled the promises of dreams.” Dream and reality were not the only oppositions which Breton claimed to find dissolved in Mexico. There was also a continuity between past and present, which Breton referred to as “its still active mythic past,” and between life and death, as evinced by the so-called funeral toys. But as Breton noted, it is important to remember that “this Mexico is not a myth. It is a Mexico that vibrates with reality.” Mexico’s reality was surreality, as Breton went to great lengths to prove: it was the “surrealist place par excellence.”

BACK IN PARIS

Just as Breton relied on Hegel to historically accredit surrealism, he needed Mexico to prove its natural triumph. He returned to Paris an authority, ready to disseminate his views. His first effort to do so was through the exhibition Mexique, which he framed as a survey of Mexican art. A letter dated August 22, 1938, from the French dealer and collector of African, Pre-Columbian, and Oceanic art Charles Ratton to Michel Petitjean, his gallery associate, sheds light on Breton’s arrival and plans for showcasing Mexico in Paris. According to Ratton, the Bretons

84. Rafael Heliodoro Valle, “Diálogo con André Breton,” Universidad 29 (1938); reprinted in Bradu, André Breton en México, 124-132.
85. Bradu, André Breton en México, 126 (my translation).
86. Bradu, André Breton en México, 127 (my translation).
87. Bradu, André Breton en México, 127 (my translation).
88. Bradu, André Breton en México, 127 (my translation).
89. Petitjean would go on to have an affair with Frida Kahlo, who gifted him the painting Memory, The Heart (1937).
brought back many cases full of everyday works of art, and we watched them unpack. André is planning to have an exhibition with them. I don’t really share his admiration for them and if he asks me to have the exhibition in rue de Marignan I’m not sure what I’ll say. Some more or less primitive-style nineteenth-century paintings. Not very many archaeological pieces, and all of them of very average quality.  

Eventually Breton did request to hold the exhibition with Ratton, who declined but offered to lend “a few good pieces from his collection to ‘raise the standard.’”

Breton showcased the collection as well as other works on loan at the Galerie Renou et Colle for two weeks in March 1939. According to his pref- 

90. Quoted in Petitjean, The Heart, 36.
91. Petitjean, The Heart, 36.
92. André Breton, “Preface,” Mexique (Paris: Renou Colle Gallery, 1939), 1. All translations from this text are my own.
95. By that point she had opted, on the advice of her New York gallerist, Julien Levy, to use only Frida Kahlo, but Breton had titled his essay on her, written for her 1938 exhibition there, “Frida Kahlo de Rivera.” The Rivera name would have been recognizable in the Parisian art world.
96. Breton, Mexique, 1.
betrayed his ethnographic attitude. He emphatically asserted, however, that their aesthetic qualities justified their inclusion:

> These objects, whose capricious grouping constitutes the great attraction of Mexican markets, deserve to be considered in their own right, that is to say independently of the boring pedagogical point of view which attaches itself to folklore. They respond to the need to hold fast to the individual artistic accent found in the most insignificant ordinary objects, to mark in the product of work the caress of the hand of man.\(^{97}\)

Placing craft on a par with high art was a well-worn strategy in post-revolutionary Mexican aesthetics and exhibition practice. During the 1920s, the photographs of Edward Weston had elevated Mexican *artesanía* and popular paintings to the status of modernism, isolating each object through compositions emphasizing tonal contrasts and clean forms. Although Breton claimed to be motivated by an aesthetic intent, we have seen that Ratton, a specialist, was not impressed with the quality of the pieces he brought back with him from Mexico. Moreover, their arrangement in the gallery was crowded and haphazard. He chose deliberately quirky objects, some of whose craftsmanship was not particularly skilled or refined (unlike those photographed by Weston).

The breaking down of high-and-low categorization was both an ethnographic and a surrealist attitude, as pointed out by James Clifford, who remarks that “[c]hronography [...] shares with surrealism an abandonment of the distinction between high and low culture.”\(^{98}\) Clifford cites the journal *Documents* as a prime example of the tendency to juxtapose the two: “*Documents* itself is a kind of ethnographic display of images, texts, objects, labels, a playful museum that simultaneously collects and reclassifies its specimens.”\(^{99}\) While Breton had parted ways with Georges Bataille, the editor of *Documents*, Clifford’s description of the journal brings to mind the Paris exhibition.\(^{100}\) *Mexique* contained objects in multiple media spanning pre-contact cultures to the present, from a Tarascan anthropomorphic vessel to nineteenth-century portraits rendered in precious detail and rough-hewn ceramic miniatures.\(^{101}\) For anyone familiar with the exquisite quality of Mexican textiles, metalwork, carving, and pottery, or the astounding craftsmanship and ingenuity of Pre-Columbian sculpture, it is easy to see why Ratton was unimpressed with many of the items that Breton had brought back. In a letter to Nickolas Murray, a photographer with whom Kahlo had a prolonged, intermittent affair, she offers a vivid description of the objects that shared the stage with her work: “Now, Breton wants to exhibit together with my paintings, 14 portraits of the XIX century (Mexicans), about 32 photographs

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98. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 130
100. Breton would have emphatically denied any such connection, and his insistence in aestheticizing these objects is, in fact, directly opposed to Bataille’s rejection of the beautiful. For more on the subject of Bataille, *Documents*, and ethnography, see Denis Hollier, “The Use-Value of the Impossible,” *October* 60 (1992): 3-24.
101. Color photographs of certain objects from the exhibition may be viewed on a website dedicated to the collection of André Breton. See: “1939, Mexique, Galerie Renou et Collé,” André Breton, https://www.andrebreton.fr/en/event/302935#.
of Álvarez Bravo, and lots of popular objects which he bought on the markets of Mexico—all this junk, can you beat that?”

Another point of convergence with *Documents* is worth noting: the emphasis on the documentary. In the section on popular objects, Breton described how these formed part of the Mexican landscape and recounted anecdotes about finding them, making the ethnographic search as important as the works themselves. In a similar vein, he referred to the Pre-Columbian artifacts as witnesses to Mexico’s past. As mentioned, the sole text in the catalog in which Breton unveiled his equation between Mexico and surrealism was the essay on Kahlo. There, he acknowledged his preconceptions about the country: “I had long been impatient to go there, to put to the test the idea I had formulated of the kind of art which our own era demanded, an art that would deliberately sacrifice the external model to the internal model, that would resolutely give perception precedence over representation.” Breton’s intuition could not have been more correct, for he found in Kahlo an innate surrealist. He famously claimed that her work was “conceived without any prior knowledge whatsoever of the ideas motivating the activities of [his] friends and [him]self,” a debatable point given the global reach of information in the early twentieth century. At the time, Kahlo wrote to her friends Ella and Bertram Wolfe, “I never knew I was a surrealist until André Breton came to Mexico and told me I was one.” Years later, she uttered the well-known quip, “They thought I was a surrealist, but I wasn’t. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality.” Unwittingly, though, she was giving credence to Breton’s claim that in Mexico dreams and reality were one. Kahlo was for him living proof of his theory that surrealism could arise naturally given the correct environment. He considered her painting *What the Water Gave Me* to be a weirdly prophetic illustration of a phrase uttered by his protagonist Nadja: “I am the thought of bathing in the mirrorless room.” Not only did Breton find in Kahlo this example of objective chance, he also located black humor in her paintings: “This art even contains that drop of cruelty and humor uniquely capable of blending the rare affective powers that compound together to form the filter which is Mexico’s secret.” Kahlo is a product of her surrealist environment. According to Breton, “no art [is] more perfectly situated in time and space than hers.” A surrealist country produced a surrealist artist.

Just as he went to great lengths to prove Kahlo’s surrealism, Breton took pains to deny any aesthetic intention on the part of the other living artist featured in *Mexique*, Manuel Álvarez Bravo. In fact, to Breton, Álvarez Bravo was less an artist than a documentary photographer. If his pictures looked surrealist, it was because they were iconic representations of a surrealist country: “Photography is in general happy to reveal to us Mexico under the easy angle of surprise, such as could be experienced by the foreign eye at each turn of the road.”


103. Breton, “Frida Kahlo de Rivera,” 141-144.

104. Breton, “Frida Kahlo de Rivera,” 144. Although it may be true that Kahlo had no formal knowledge of surrealism prior to Breton’s arrival in Mexico, she was acquainted with the work of De Chirico and may have had some exposure to Freudian theories and psychoanalysis. See Teresa del Conde, “Frenesímo, surrealismo, metafísica: su absorción en México,” *Modernity and modernización en el arte mexicano, 1920-1960* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1991), 109-19.


107. Breton, “Frida Kahlo de Rivera,” 144.

108. Breton, “Frida Kahlo de Rivera,” 144.

disregards the fact that Álvarez Bravo deliberately sought out scenes with uncanny elements, in the manner of Eugène Atget, in such works as *Mannequins Laughing* (1930) or *Optical Parable* (1931). Instead, he highlights the unique and “admirable synthetic realism” of his compositions. The photo historian Ian Walker, in an article on the photographer and surrealism, warns that “the term ‘documentary’ can be problematic in discussing Álvarez Bravo’s work.” He then adds:

There are examples within his oeuvre where the image has been overtly constructed and the concept of documentary seems far away, yet there are many other pictures (perhaps the majority) that feel like moments caught from the flow of reality, recorded rather than obviously constructed. However, even then, the image has been created—framed, focused, and frozen—by technology and the intentions of the photographer, operating within the larger formations of national and cultural histories.

Like Kahlo, Álvarez Bravo eschewed the surrealist label.

*Mexique* was on view for two weeks, and only one of Kahlo’s paintings sold, out of the seventeen that were featured. The gallery was small, and the exhibition appears to have been targeted to a niche crowd. As described by Petitjean,

The Renou et Colle gallery was an intimate space with four small rooms. Private viewings were held between six in the afternoon and nine or ten at night […]. It was not prestigious. It wasn’t a place where people drank, it wasn’t a society event. The aim wasn’t to have three hundred people, but thirty good people. And that they did.

Although the many works included competed for attention, Breton did manage to underscore the theme of death through the Posada broadsheet, other calavera images, Álvarez Bravo’s photographs, a nineteenth-century painting of monsters devouring women, and a metal relief of Veronica’s veil, with the bloodied face of Christ wearing the crown of thorns. Kahlo exhibited *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), a painting that depicted her stillbirth during a sojourn in Detroit and featured her lying on a hospital bed over a pool of blood, the disproportionately large fetus stoically looking on. She also showcased *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (1939), picturing the self-inflicted death of a New York socialite in shocking detail, from the body in free-fall to the bloodied corpse on the ground to the appearance of blood spatters on the lower part of the frame. Frida had also planned to show *A Few Small Nips*, a painting of a man who has brutally murdered his wife by stabbing, but it was vetoed by Pierre Colle, one of the owners of the gallery. This last painting most clearly evoked black humor: it depicted
a banner painted, held aloft by a dove and a blackbird, that read: “UNOS CUANTOS PIQUETITITOS!”, the title in Spanish. The scene is said to have been inspired by an actual event, where a husband “excused himself by explaining, ‘But I only gave her a few small nips.’”117 Despite the omission of this painting from the selection, the black humor did not go unnoticed, although critics were not exactly amused. An anonymous reviewer for Beaux-arts noted: “I feel there is no point in insisting the exhibition is of any interest. It gives off a whiff of death and demonic life. This latent satanism appears everywhere [...] Frida Kahlo de Rivera is a necromancer.”118 Breton is likely to have read this as high praise.

Breton’s surrealist and ethnographic intentions come together in “Souvenir du Mexique,” his most complex text involving Mexico.119 The article is divided into five portions: an overall view of Mexico, which constructs it as a sensory, timeless world; an account of Breton’s surrealist experience at the “palace of fate;” an homage to Diego Rivera; a general description of Breton’s dream of Mexico and how it coincided with the Mexican landscape, together with a recollection of his Mexican friends and his trip to Monterrey; and an anecdote about his departure from Veracruz. Conceived as a special supplement to Minotaure, the text is separated from the rest of the journal by a distinct cover designed by Rivera (Img. 4). The image depicts a minotaur trapped in a


119. I will be citing from two translations of “Souvenir du Mexique,” one by Geoffrey MacAdam in Review: Latin American Literature and Arts 51 (1995): 9-16; and the other in Breton, Free Rein, 23-28. Specific references will be noted.
labyrinth, surrounded by skulls, and two human figures rendered in a Mayan style. The text is accompanied by a variety of photographs by Álvarez Bravo and Fritz Bach, paintings by Rivera, as well as paintings and objects included in the *Mexique* exhibition.

“Souvenir du Mexique” is a complex text, which merits more thorough analysis. I bring it up only to discuss two interrelated aspects by way of conclusion: the coming together of Breton’s ideas in this final construction of Mexico as a surrealist place and its deliberate misrepresentation of Mexican art. As with *Mexique*, Breton’s use of Mexico in this text to advance his personal views and fulfill his own felt need to find a surrealist country results in a misreading of many facets of Mexican culture.

From the start of the essay Breton molds the image of Mexico as a place that breaks traditional boundaries. The frontispiece is a full-page photograph by Álvarez Bravo of an intersecting plant and cross on a grave—marking a union between life and death (Img. 5). The essay then immediately takes up the reference to death, its first lines reading: “Red, virgin land impregnated with the

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120. In-depth analyses of “Souvenir de Mexique” may be found in Walker, “Manuel Álvarez Bravo,” 4-13; and Robin Adèle Greeley, “For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky, and Cárdenas’ Mexico,” in *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, edited by Raymond Spiteri and Donald Lacoss (London: Routledge, 2003), 214-17.

most generous blood, a land where man’s life has no price.” As if to prove that life really is worthless, the passage is illustrated by another Álvarez Bravo photograph of a dead man covered with blood (Img. 6), *Striking Worker Murdered* (1934). This image precedes the text, thus making the impact of death even more immediate. As in “Bois de Posada,” Breton associates death with Mexico’s history of revolutions and bloodshed. He goes on to establish the cyclical aspect of Mexico’s time. The implication is that life and death are insignificant because they are continuous, as life is always followed by rebirth: “that is their nature, repeated ly to come back to life and blossom on the ruins of this very civilization.” Mexico’s pyramids, with their many layers, also attest to cyclical time. Just as life merges with death, nature merges with culture in the hills that are formed out


of ancient ruins. These analogies are to be found everywhere in “Souvenir du Mexique.” Breton claims to be objective and illustrates his text in order to prove the truth behind his words. His use of photography, therefore, is on the most part iconic: a literal depiction of the text, witness to Breton’s remarks. At times, the text describes the photographs, but overall, they serve a documentary purpose. As in the exhibition, the implication is that Álvarez Bravo and Bach simply capture what they see. Although he praises the photographs’ beauty and Álvarez Bravo’s technical skill, he voids the artist of a profound artistic vision and also fails to acknowledge the political subtext of his images.

Although he dedicates a whole section of “Souvenir du Mexique” to Rivera, his treatment of the Mexican master’s art is equally reductive. In the text, Breton renders homage to his host by praising him more than anyone. Including Rivera in this presentation of Mexico puts Breton in the interesting quandary of having to account for a social realist artist in surrealist Mexico. He solves the problem by depicting Rivera as a surrealist. Anyone familiar with Rivera’s art could not help but be shocked, but Breton foresees this objection and immediately dismisses the importance of Rivera’s murals, saying that the Mexican artist deserted “fresco for easel painting” several years prior, realizing that “[m]ural painting can only be the art of a specific moment.” In Breton’s view, Rivera has now rediscovered Mexico’s secret of timelessness, and his landscapes are his true masterpieces (Img. 7):

Rivera’s landscapes show what new flights he was capable of when he decided to escape such torment [of mural painting]. These flights allowed him to position himself at that critical point which stands between things, where point of view is practically identical with vision, where no gap separates the imaginary from the real. Not so long ago, the Impressionists sought a “motif,” but today, Rivera has decided that he needs to respond to other requirements, that he must satisfy both the physical and the mental eye at the same time.

Considering that when Breton visited Mexico, Rivera dedicated much of his time to taking him to see his murals, it is unlikely that he would share Breton’s opinions on how misguided his art was before he “discovered” surrealism within himself. While it is true that Rivera began to paint landscapes with surrealist overtones, this was a short-lived result of Breton’s visit. The two landscape paintings reproduced by Breton in “Souvenir du Mexique” date from 1938.

As evinced most emphatically in “Souvenir du Mexique,” Breton refused to compromise his vision of a surrealist Mexico for anything, even if it meant deliberately misrepresenting Mexican art and offending his hosts in the process. Breton needed Mexico, and to some extent Mexico needed him. After all, he

123. See also: Adamowicz, “Surrealism’s Cartographies,” 83.
introduced Kahlo to the gallerist Julien Levy in New York and showcased her work in Paris, and then supported an influx of surrealists who changed the face of Mexican art and enriched its culture in the process. While he had specific motives for constructing Mexico in the manner that he did, many people, even Mexicans, continue to take his stereotypes at face value. Instead, it bears remembering that Breton’s view of Mexico always remained a fabrication. His was a dreamt-up Mexico all along.

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