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# Surrealist Hybrids – Contemporary Hybrids Árpád Mezei and the Late Surrealist Theories of Hybridity

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**Abstract.** Árpád Mezei (1902–1998) was a Hungarian art theoretician and psychologist. In the 1940s he was co-founder of the Európai Iskola (European School), the most important assembly of progressive Hungarian artists and art theoreticians of the period. His readings in art theory and his friendship with the Surrealist painter and writer Marcel Jean (who lived in Budapest in the period between 1938 and 1945) had a strong impact on his intellectual profile: he co-authored with Marcel Jean three volumes that became important for the understanding of the international Surrealist movement. The paper analyses Mezei's concepts and tries to reconstruct his interpretative framework where several aspects of culture including mythology, history, literature, art and history of architecture communicate with each other, and hybridity is one of the key concepts. Being used to describe contemporary shifts in culture and identity by authors like Peter Burke, hybridity is of great interest to contemporary culture. The paper points out possible links between late Surrealist theories of hybridity and contemporary culture.

**Keywords:** hybridity, Lautréamont, Minotaur, organic, Surrealism.

## The Material Dimensions of the Sign

> Just like coins, words also have two faces: they are simultaneously signs and what they signify. [...] A word is [according to Plato and Leibniz] constructed from particular functions that provide it with a structure that is analogous to the structure of the object it expresses. […] Surrealism was born out of the discovery that reality is constructed in its entirety on the principle of equivalence. The term 'Surrealism' expresses precisely this double nature of reality. Dadaism, the current that preceded Surrealism, corresponded

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> quite simply to the uncertainty principle, opposing the principle of identity: Dadaists used the two facets of words indistinctly. Surrealism starts from the distinct realities of the conscious and the unconscious and goes towards the synthesis of these components.[1] (Mezei 1947, 59–61)

These words exploring the possible connections between sounds and signification, material aspects and meanings, can be found in the catalogue of an important Surrealist exhibition, *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, and were written by Hungarian art theoretician Árpád Mezei, co-author with Surrealist painter Marcel Jean of several volumes on Surrealism and its contexts: *Maldoror* (Paris, 1947), *Genèse de la pensée moderne* (Paris, 1950), *Histoire de la peinture surréaliste* (Paris, 1959). In my paper I will argue that a re-reading of Surrealist texts and images could be inspired by one of Mezei's key concepts: hybridity. It is important to identify the historical role of such conceptualizations within Surrealism itself (that is, the role of hybrids in postwar Surrealist art), but this concept may also help to individualize Surrealism among other currents of avant-garde or modernism. With the increasing interest of scholars in the theories of hybridity within the context of globalization and multiple identities, the theories rooted in Surrealism may add another dimension to the issue. Transferring Surrealism from its interwar period to the postwar context was a difficult task in itself, many artists considering at that time and also in later interpretations that Surrealism had lost its relevance in postwar society. Therefore we have to speak here about a sort of double transfer if we want to explore the subject.

The starting point for Mezei in his essay is psychoanalysis, but if we consider his interpretative framework, we can notice that within it several aspects of culture including mythology, history, literature, art and architecture communicate with each other, and the concept of hybridity stresses on the *organic* side of the types of multitude that the author is considering. As he states elsewhere: "Surrealism conceives of man as being in the process of eternal change – he is therefore essentially a hybrid being" (Mezei 1983, 14). One of the most important goals of Surrealists was the attempt to wipe out all kinds of dualisms in culture – therefore we can see in the conceptualization of the "hybrid" a central element of their views. The "hybrid" beings of ancient mythologies are revived in Surrealist journals like the well-known *Minotaure*, and incorporate an inner alien, giving a material dimension to it.

1 Translations from French and Hungarian are my own throughout the article except where explicitly specified.

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## The Contexts of the 1947 International Surrealist Exhibition

Mezei entered the international scene of art criticism in 1947, publishing two texts in the catalogue of the Surrealist exhibition – one of them was the above cited *Liberté du langage*, the other an essay about the sixth canto of *Maldoror* by Lautréamont, this latter text being written in cooperation with Marcel Jean. This was to become a chapter of a whole book on *Maldoror*, published in the same year in Paris, in a collection directed by Maurice Nadeau (Jean–Mezei 1947). His works were well received within Surrealist circles – decades later, Sarane Alexandrian mentioned him in one of his reference books on Surrealism noting his perseverence: "In Hungary, the psychologist Arpad Mezei was an assiduous correspondent of the Parisian group, in whose work he participated" (1974, 236).

In the context of the 1947 exhibition the question of the "liberty of language" as formulated by Mezei seemed for André Breton, who conceived the structure of the catalogue, a statement supporting his own vision of postwar Surrealism. One of Mezei's most important arguments in his text, correctly pointed out by Alyce Mahon in a recent reading, is that words as signs are often rooted in ancient referents and therefore are loaded with special powers and potentialities (2005, 138). Surrealism grew more and more interested during these years in mythology and magical rituals. André Breton's reaction to the war was an urge to reshape human mentality, hoping for a renewal, trying to mark this shift also at a ritual level, in his theoretical texts but also by organizing the 1947 exhibition. His attempts to deal with the "latent content" of an age besides dealing with its "manifest content" – a remark formulated initially before the war, in 1938 (Breton 1967, 26–27) – showed an interesting convergence with Mezei's analysis of the nature of language. The international surrealist exhibition marked Breton's return to the French art scene, and a reformulation of Surrealist goals, the current being challenged at that time more and more strongly by communists and by existentialists in France. As Mahon points out in her book about late Surrealist theories and practices:

> They responded to the horrors of the war by bringing together an international field of artists, the art of the insane and non-western art, to insist upon the need for creative rebirth. Through display and installation, a thematic focus on myth and magic, and lengthy essays in the accompanying catalogue, the exhibition reflected Breton's determination, explained in 1941, to turn to Eros as a means of 're-establishing that equilibrium' broken by the war. The 1947 exhibition marked surrealism's re-entry to French culture and its belief that art and the exhibition should act as a forum within which the spectator could be initiated into a new world vision. (2005, 109)

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Mezei's texts that appeared in the catalogue supported Breton's ideas and objectives in an indirect way: his text about the "liberty of language" insisted on the "multidimensional" character of words, where the materiality of the utterance is in a way the meaning itself – this is where he sees a decisive analogy between the surrealist and the magical approach to language (Mezei 1947, 61). Terms like "dialectical logic" or "synthesis" (of the realities rooted in the conscious and the unconscious) also show that Mezei was aware of the links of his approach to previous stages of Surrealism.

The joint interpretation of the Sixth Canto of *Maldoror* also aimed to highlight the possibility of a synthetic approach – this time between the "scientific" and "irrational" elements, compared here to the dual characteristic of light. Indeed, the text of the Sixth Canto itself announces a new level of consciousness and of "materiality:"

> Would you then assert that because I have insulted man, the Creator, and myself in my explicable hyperboles, and with such whimsicality, that my mission is accomplished? No; the most important part of my work is nonetheless before me, a task remaining to be done. Henceforward the strings of the novel will move the three characters mentioned above; they will thus be endowed with a less abstract power. Vitality will surge into the stream of their circulatory system and you will see how startled you will be when you encounter, where at first you had only expected to see entities belonging to the realm of pure speculation, on the one hand the corporeal organism with its ramifications of nerves and mucous membranes and, on the other, the spiritual principle which governs the physiological functions of the flesh. It is beings powerfully endowed with life who, their arms folded and holding their breath, will stand prosaically (but I am sure the effect will be very poetic) before your eyes, only a few paces away from you, so that the sun's rays, falling first upon the tiles of the roofs and the lids of the chimneys, will then come and visibly shine on their earthly and material hair. […] You will touch with your own hands the ascending branches of the aorta and the adrenal capsules; and then the feelings! (Lautréamont 1978, 91)

For Mezei and for Marcel Jean, these lines mean that Lautréamont passes in this Sixth Canto from the method of perception to the method of coordination, assuming a new role, that of the creator (Jean–Mezei 1947, 117). For this creator the material element is crucial as far as the outcome of creation is concerned (it is some sort of "proof," dedicated to empirical minds), although, as Mezei and Jean point out, the superiority of the spiritual principle is not denied by Lautréamont (1947, 115). Meanwhile, the authors assume that the Sixth Canto proves in a

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psychological approach that Lautréamont is able to exit his personal labyrinth represented in the first five cantos, accessing a higher level of consciousness.

## Psychoanalysis and the Organic

The metaphors used by psychoanalysis in describing man rely very much on an ontogenetical logic. In one of his papers Mezei states, commenting on Freud's views: "the personality develops ontogenetically: innate properties are modified by experiences incurred in the course of a life cycle. […] The consecutive phases through which the personality with its threefold structure evolves mark the stages in a gradual process during which the psyche permeates particular body parts and their functions" (1983, 11–12). The process is described through the oral, anal, oedipal, narcissistic and motor stage – with the stress on different parts and functions of the body. In fact, Mezei and Jean present Lautréamont's text as a sort of self-accomplishing work, the different cantos representing different stages of prenatal life, of infantile life and of genital life, with the sixth canto that leaves this pattern and becomes a reflexion upon creation itself.

Of course, the authors do not claim the structure of *Maldoror* to be just as simple as that – instead of linearity they associate it rather to a spiral movement presented at the beginning of the Fifth Canto by Lautréamont himself: the movement of the flocks of birds.

> Flocks of starlings have a way of flying which is peculiar to them, and seem to move according to a regular and uniform plan such as that of a well-drilled company of soldiers punctiliously obeying the orders of their one and only leader. The starling obey the voice of instinct, and their instinct tells them to keep on approaching the centre of the main body, whereas the rapidity of their flight takes them incessantly beyond it; so that this multitude of birds, thus joined in their common movement towards the same magnetic point, incessantly coming and going, circling and criss-crossing in all directions, forms a kind of highly turbulent eddy, the entire mass of which, though not moving in any definable direction, seems to have a general tendency to turn in upon itself, this tendency resulting from the individual circling movements of each one of its parts, in which the centre, endlessly tending to expand but continually pressed down and repulsed by the opposing force of the surrounding lines which weigh down on it, is constantly tighter, more compact, than any one of these lines which themselves become more and more so, the nearer they come to the centre. (1978, 75)

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In their interpretation of the Fifth Canto, Mezei and Jean consider this movement to be a basic characteristic and a recurring motif of the whole work and they try to identify the centre of this movement (which symbolizes, among other things, the complexity of the self) as the present moment (1947, 132). This means that, according to their views, human nature is essentially a dynamic one, undergoing constant transformations. This representation coincides, of course, with the Surrealists' representations of the human personality, and partly also explains their fascination with Lautréamont's works.

As they put it: *Maldoror* has a labyrinthic structure, and in the centre of labyrinths there awaits a hybrid being, half-animal and half-man, the Minotaur. The encounter of Theseus with the Minotaur is, as many interpretations argue, an encounter with oneself (Jean–Mezei 1947, 88–90). But the hybrid identity, as the myth itself suggests, is not a static one – the labyrinthic movement is essential to it: Theseus has to perform a specific, spiral movement before meeting the other side of himself. Although Theseus kills the bull-headed beast, his victory does not mean that the ideal, static type of man has overcome the other model based on discontinuity. Theseus himself is the one to lose Ariadne after his victory, and indirectly to kill his own father. It seems as if, in the long run, the Minotaur had only lost a battle. Therefore, as Mezei and Jean suggest, a sort of synthetic process is needed to survive the storyline provided by the myth, where the Minotaur (representing a variant of the unconscious side) and Theseus (representing the conscious side) would cooperate. Mezei's statement is finally that the Surrealists viewed the Theseus-model of the "pure man" as a fiction, and they considered instead a model where the Minotaur is himself part of human nature and has to be dealt with (Jean 1959, 231; Mezei 1993, 72–73). That is what they found in the text of *Maldoror*, where such a world vision incorporating hybrids and shapeshifters prevails. And this also explains why one of the most important journals of Surrealists was entitled *Minotaure*. As the author of *Surréalisme et mythologie moderne* has formulated recently, "the Minotaur became the emblem of surrealism, its most reliable ally in its fights against the excesses of rationalism. […] *Minotaure* marks the entry of surrealism into its 'mythological age'" (Ottinger 2002, 47–49).

What I find essential in the metaphor of the *hybrid*, used by Mezei and Jean, is that it is based on an organic structure: if we compare it to other models like that of the *collage* (often used by other avant-garde movements, including Surrealism itself) or, from a later time, that of *bricolage*, we can see that this model maintains the belief that the hybrid organism is *alive* besides being *functional* – it is not an artificial product. A Surrealist collage (like the ones made by Max Ernst) is very likely to hide the fact that it is made from fragments – it simulates and creates the impression of a totality. As Pál Deréky points out, Surrealism maintains the principle of montage of earlier avant-garde currents, but transfers, at least partly,

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its structuring laws to the realm of the unconscious or of the dream. A Surrealist poem acts *as if* the elements of a metaphor or of a montage would come from the unconscious, and the effect on the reader is that his attention is not drawn upon the fragmentary nature of the work (Deréky 1992, 165).

If we return to a contextualization of such Surrealist techniques and approaches within the postwar historical situation, we may note that it can be viewed as a signal of hope: the renewal of human mentality and the re-establishment of the equilibrium in the world was approached and expressed by the postwar Surrealists at another level than French communists or existentialists did it.

## Conclusion: Surrealist vs. Contemporary Hybrids

The contemporary world is often described as an age of cultural encounters, and of economic and cultural globalization which is strongly connected to a process of hybridization (Burke 2009, 2). As Peter Burke points out, there is a terminological debate concerning the accurate description of this process, with dominant metaphors coming from the fields of economics, zoology/biology, metallurgy, food and linguistics. These are: borrowing, hybridity, the melting pot, the stew and translation/creolization (Burke 2009, 34). As we can see, all of these are connected to human actions, but only one of them is an organic metaphor: hybridity. It is important to see, of course, what are the objectives that we want to reach through the use of such concepts and what is the standpoint that we take by making a choice between these metaphors and these fields.

I would argue that an organic metaphor, like the one coming from the field of zoology/biology can be suitable when addressing problems at an individual level, either anthropologically or psychologically. While organic essentializations should be avoided, the concept of man as a hybrid opens up some possibilities as compared to those postulating identities directly or through metaphors as static and unchangeable.

The Surrealist experiments with the hybrids do not hide the conflicting aspects: the famous Surrealist games of the "cadavre exquis" or the lines in *Maldoror* beginning with "*beau comme*" are good examples of violent and disruptive differences incorporated into one single entity. However, the organic metaphor suggests something very important: that the multitude is not to be avoided and is not something that can be "fixed" like in the case of a machine or of a mechanical object. One should consider the reactions of a living organism when dealing with it.

Authors like Mezei trace back the question of hybridity to mythological times and stories (mainly of Greek and Egyptian mythology), offering to their readers an insight that reaches beyond short-term comparisons. Their activity proves that Surrealism maintained its basic positions concerning the importance of dealing

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with the conscious and the unconscious levels of the human psyche also in the postwar period, experimenting with new conceptualizations and with new methods where objects, bodies and performed rituals gained a greater significance than before.

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