

A letter and reply on Art and Freedom: André Breton and problems of twentieth-century culture

5 August 1998

Dear friends,

I found the article by Frank Brenner and David Walsh on Andre Breton and the problems of 20th century art to be one of the most interesting to appear in the left press ever. For years surrealism and its relation to Marxism has been slighted at best and at its worst completely falsified by art critics and other intellectual capitalists. However, to compare the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* to 'Third period Stalinism' really is too much! Andre Breton was never guilty in executing any of his comrades. I find this comment particularly offensive given the fact Andre Breton went on record as one of the first to speak out on the notorious Moscow Trials. Considering that Mark Pollizotti's biography of Breton is hopelessly flawed and filled with outright lies and can only be categorized as a defamation such a book is hardly worth citing.

Unfortunately, much of Breton's translations into English are either unreadable or filled with the puffed up pride of its translators to be of any real value in the understanding of this great poet's effervescence of thought. We live in a time, as the poet Philip Lamantia once said, when it is a scandal to have principles. If Breton is guilty of anything it is of having such principles. At the end of the century it is safe to say surrealism has been at the forefront in the struggle for the first principles of freedom, liberty and love. In this era of bankrupt ideologies and totalitarian mind control it is refreshing to see the man discussed on your website.

RB

Frank Brenner replies:

Dear RB,

Thanks for your letter about our article on André

Breton. We certainly agree with you that Breton has been a neglected figure for a very long time, and that this neglect has been due to his dedication to revolutionary principles in both art and life. As for the point about the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, I think you've misread what we've written. All that we were pointing out was the *vituperative tone* of the manifesto, especially its harsh and personalized attacks on former collaborators. There was never any suggestion that Breton was guilty of participating in Stalinist crimes; on the contrary, Breton's opposition to Stalinism and his adherence to the revolutionary Marxist standpoint represented by Trotskyism was one of our central themes. Actually, we were no more critical of Breton in this regard than he had been of himself: at the end of the 1946 preface to the *Second Manifesto*, he admits that 'the violence of expression in these pamphlets sometimes seems out of all proportion to the deviation, the error, or the 'sin' they are claiming to castigate.'

As you say, not only has Breton suffered from neglect, but in particular his relationship to Marxism has been slighted and ignored. For us, one of the most inspiring things about Breton was that he worked for the unity, all too rare in this century, of the artistic and political vanguards. I'd be interested to hear more of your thoughts on this matter. Do you see the revival of an effort to work for such a unity as being essential to carrying forward Breton's legacy today?

Frank Brenner

See:

André Breton and problems of 20th century culture



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