

4. The Surrealist “Pêle-Mêle”: Picturing Literary History

Famous for their desire to change the world and the moral order of their time, the surrealists, since their first manifesto, established their own literary history, filled with ancestors and influences. This literary history often took the form of an anthology, because anthologies provided the surrealists with a way to select, collect and make concrete objects and excerpts accessible. Given that the bulk of their anthologies were to be seen rather than read, the *pêle-mêle* constituted an important analogous, visual application of this historiographic technique. A *pêle-mêle* is a frame with cut-outs for photographs. This craft of collecting and presenting several “random” pictures together, focusing on people and portraits, had been widely used for more than a century. This popular way of representing families, with an amalgamation of various pictures, differed from the group portrait, the photo album, the scrapbook and keepsakes, because it did not include captions and most of the time was on public display in the living room. A *pêle-mêle* is also more specific than a photomontage or collage, because it is a frame made for a well-defined, practical purpose (Fig. 1).¹

Together with many other amateur collage practices, the surrealists integrated this scrapbooking technique: they revisited the family *pêle-mêle* in a literary way, presenting portraits of writers and artists they considered to be family. Two important surrealist trends merged in



Fig. 1 – Example of frame with cut-outs: contemporary “pêle-mêle romantique” by Denise Crolle-Terzaghi. Photographed by Jean-Luc Syren. Reproduced with their kind authorization.

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the practice of the pêle-mêle: the use of popular photography such as photo booth pictures, postcards or newspaper pictures, and their inclination toward anthologizing. Unlike the two famous photomontages published in the first and last issues of *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924 and 1929) that showed a portrait of a group in the present, the surrealist pêle-mêle incorporated writers, philosophers, artists and other people from the past. This indicates that, initially, the pêle-mêle was less a testimony of a collective identity than a visual form of genealogy.² A mother can mix pictures of her children at the age of 2, 8 and 15; the author of the surrealist pêle-mêle took things one step further and mixed portraits of figures from Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the present day, and so on. He created a diachronic, imaginary and a yearned-for family portrait that represented the genealogy of a group. The surrealist pêle-mêle, then, initially was the photographic equivalent of the famous genealogy Breton proposed in the 1924 manifesto with his “(x) is surrealist in (y)” series.

Thus, genealogy and anthology from the start were intertwined? Today, they raise similar issues in critical reading: What choices were made, and for what reason? What does the composition reveal? The photographic genealogy was also an anthology of important figures, such as the famous *Anthologie de l'humour noir*.³ Like an anthology of texts, an anthology of portraits was an image of the past in the present and thus a document of a distinctly *visual* literary history made by and for the writer and not only for the reader. As such, it is a useful object for literary historians. This especially holds true when the pêle-mêle was circulated in the public domain, which was the case of the “Pêle-Mêle” presented by Belgian

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surrealist Scutenaire in *Intervention surréaliste* (special issue *Documents* 34) along with a text of his hand about the very idea of the pêle-mêle. In this chapter we first look closely at this piece, and then turn to two other examples which were also published: Breton's collage "H.N." in *De l'humour noir* (1937) and Man Ray's photo-montage "L'Echiquier surréaliste" in *Petite Anthologie poétique du surréalisme* (1934). The process of self-exposure through the portraits of some writers leads us to consider, in conclusion, the idea of collective exhibition.

Louis Scutenaire can be considered a real specialist of the pêle-mêle, both in theory and in practice. Scutenaire's "Pêle-Mêle" was published in the magazine *Intervention surréaliste*, in July 1934, with a brief, complementary text or commentary alongside of it: "La justice immanente" (Fig. 2).⁴ The frame consists of 33 portraits of writers, thinkers and activists Scutenaire admired (Fig. 3).⁵ Most of the pictures were taken from newspapers and magazines. In addition to original drawings (Lewis Carroll, Jarry and Djerzinski), Scutenaire used original photographs of the Brussels surrealist group, which he put in the middle of the pêle-mêle: René Magritte, André Souris (a studio portrait), and Paul Nougé (on baryta paper). The portrait of E.L.T. Mesens was roughly cut from a group portrait published in *Variétés* in 1930. The French surrealist group is represented by five portraits obviously taken from one and the same series: on the same thick paper with margins, their excessive posing gives them the appearance of movie stars. They are in the upper middle, and the direction of their gazes creates a kind of frame, while Lenin stands between Breton and Aragon. The seven portraits of "The Bonnot Gang," the French criminal anarchist group of the 1910s,

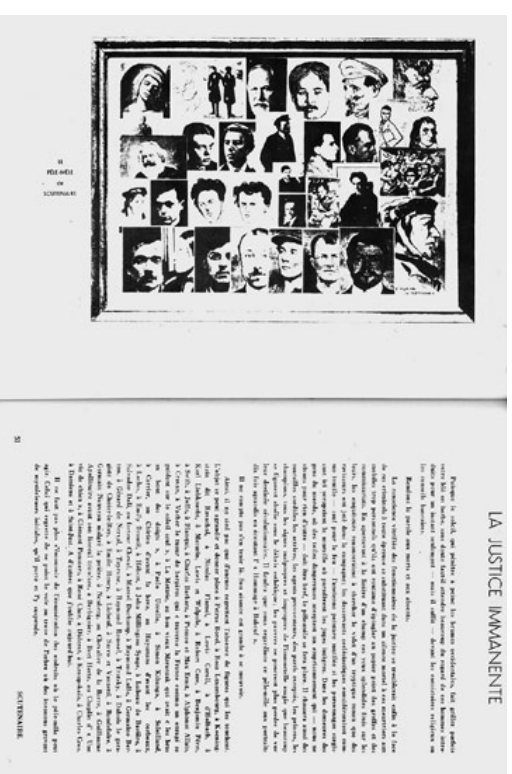


Fig. 2 – Louis Scutenaire, "La justice immanente," in *Intervention surréaliste* (special issue "Documents 34"), July 1934, 50-51.



Fig. 3 – Louis Scutenaire, “Pêle-mêle” [Le Panthéon surréaliste]. Collage: 37 x 50 cm with frame. Photographed by Alice Piemme. With the kind authorization of the *Archives et Musée de la Littérature* of Brussels.

at the bottom of the frame, are all depicted in the same way. Rimbaud and Lautréamont, the mythic pair in the genealogy of surrealism, appear as brothers designed by the same artist (initials “F.V.”). Furthermore, it is remarkable that some portraits – Hegel, Heraclitus and Freud – were cut out carelessly.

At first glance, we could think that these portraits are arranged in a disorderly way, but the number of tutelary figures, the selection itself, and the choice of the reproductions and the lay-out, are not mere coincidence. The pêle-mêle seems to map surrealism at a given time. The group of Brussels is clearly brought together, closer to the anarchists than the French group, which is not far from Freud and Marx. We cannot say that Scutenaire wanted to depict the (at times intense) rivalries and differences between the French and Belgian surrealist groups (because the issue of *Intervention surréaliste* was a rare attempt at a joint publication), but Scutenaire put the emphasis upon the anarchist and revolutionary figures more than Breton would have done. However, they both shared a taste for occultist characters such as Cornelius Agrippa and unconventional literary figures such as Lassailly and Forneret, romantic writers who dealt with madness, Achim von Arnim, a German Romanticist, and, of course, Lewis Carroll for his dream world and playful work.

Scutenaire himself does not appear in his own pêle-mêle. Yet this piece could easily be considered a self-portrait. We can imagine that he is the 34th character (to reach the number 34, corresponding to the year 1934) and the 5th member of the Belgian group. It can also be stated that the whole pêle-mêle depicts him as a surrealist characterized by a focus on both imaginary worlds and

political action. But the portrait is more personal: deeply anarchist, Scutenaire was also fascinated by criminals, offenders, lunatics and other marginalized people whom he met when he was working for the court. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the short text or comment facing the *pêlè-mêle* is, somewhat enigmatically, entitled "La justice immanente." In this poetic text, Scutenaire drew a comparison between the portraits of criminals in police stations and the *pêlè-mêle* he wished to spread all over society, so that, "poor people will not be able to lose sight of their revolutionary destiny anymore."⁶ Like a religious icon, the *pêlè-mêle* was supposed to depict exemplary figures, but in this case, the moral values were inverted. In his text, Scutenaire further insisted on the variability of the *pêlè-mêle*, which he deemed progressive:⁷ "The object is expandable."⁸ He gave a list of people who are not in the picture but could have been, such as Petrus Borel, Swift, Picasso, Blanqui, Max Ernst, Cravan and others. A *pêlè-mêle* is indeed never set: the existence of a second one with Mallarmé and Edgar Poe⁹ is further evidence of this. Like canons in literary history, the *pêlè-mêle* is subject to change, and, moreover, it is the present itself that is multiple in the dynamics of literary history. Since it makes selections and classifications, the *pêlè-mêle* functions as a sort of "discourse" on literature.

"Neither should we be moved by the list of places where the *pêlè-mêle* can act. Whoever feels sorry not to see the trunk of the tree where unknown people carve mysterious initials has to leave and hang it there."¹⁰ In the last paragraph, Scutenaire turned a traditional object into a revolutionary weapon, bringing back to the streets what initially was a creation of the police and the

family, two institutions the surrealists tried to change if not destroy. His idea was that if the *pêlè-mêle* would manifest itself in posters that were hung everywhere, it would have ended up belonging to everyone. Just as the discreet initials on a tree are the sole remnants of a love affair, the *pêlè-mêle* itself would become a revolutionary declaration of poetic and political love. As such, "La justice immanente" claimed the revolutionary power of visual objects. It developed a theory for the object. Scutenaire recreated a family by cannibalizing family practices, turning them into public and political ones. Like many other creative uses of pictures in surrealism, the *pêlè-mêle* is a good illustration of what Paul Nougé calls the "subversion of images."¹¹

The *pêlè-mêle* by Scutenaire differs from the genre's potential anthropological function if we consider it a self-portrait. But a *pêlè-mêle* made up of writers' portraits can also be used to illustrate literary anthologies, thus becoming a visual anthology in and of itself. Such is the case in the next two examples we turn to: a collage by Breton, which was oriented towards the past (it was a genealogy), and one by Man Ray that focused on the present (it functioned as a contemporary snapshot of the surrealist group).

Breton had been fond of collage ever since the early 1920s.¹² Unlike lots of images he created for use in the private sphere, the "extraordinary photomontage" entitled "H.N." was intended for publication in *De l'humour noir* (1937, see Fig. 4).¹³ This collage functions as a *pêlè-mêle* even though it has no cut-outs: writers of all times and countries were put together in the same frame as a family. The great ancestors of French poetry, Baudelaire, Apollinaire, Rimbaud and Charles Cros are mixed with



Fig. 4 – André Breton, “H.N.”, in *De l’humour noir* (Paris: GLM, 1937). With the kind authorization of Aube Breton.

the present representatives of surrealism in literature and painting – but painters are listed here for their writing. 45 of those artists represented in the later anthology of black humor in its definitive edition (1966) are already depicted or otherwise evoked in this early collage made for the small brochure published after a famous lecture of Breton in 1937. More precisely, we can identify 49 people, 32 writers’ portraits and 15 symbols such as a painted billy goat, a drawn lizard and horses, a knife, a photograph of the shadow of a swan, a louse or a comb. This *pêle-mêle* is part of the anthologizing desire typical of the anthology itself, a serious project which Breton handled with great care.¹⁴

Some of the images can be identified because they were common portraits circulating in the press, such as the photograph of Apollinaire in a hospital bed with his bandage (1916), published in *L’Esprit nouveau* (October 1924). We can easily identify Baudelaire photographed by Nadar, Rimbaud by Carjat or Huysmans painted by Jean-Louis Forain. Breton further re-used some of the photo booth pictures published in *La Révolution surréaliste*. This *pêle-mêle* includes classical portraits such as the ones of Charles Fourier, Swift, Petrus Borel or even Jarry, but some of them are strangely cut. This reframing was not so much due to a lack of space. It is a way to focus on the very faces (Huysmans in the top left-hand corner, Rigaut, on the right side of Freud), and especially on the eyes: Poe is framed around his eyes, only the eyes of Rimbaud appear, and two single eyes (Gide and Picabia) fill blank spaces. However, people are not only represented by their face: Sade is present with his signature, Arthur Cravan by a full-length portrait on a boxing ring. Others are symbolized by animals (Goya by

a goat, Villiers de l'Isle Adam by a swan) or objects.¹⁵ As such, this pêle-mêle plays with the representative concept of the writer, using a visual metonymy that enables intimacy: to understand the sign, to recognize the writers, we have to know them already.¹⁶

Contrary to Scutenaire, whose creation he surely must have seen, Breton did not stop at the mere depiction of faces. A specialist of collages and scrapbooking, he indeed mixed techniques. The result is that his pêle-mêle appears intentionally far more aestheticized. It is also closer to a symbolic way of considering the individual. This pêle-mêle even has an alchemical dimension in the inscription of the letters "H" and "N" within the collage and in the way Breton uses highly symbolic elements such as a burst goatskin¹⁷ (for Raymond Roussel), insects and a group of toads (for Brisset). There is a further mystic-geographical dimension in the picture of rocks at the seaside (representing Tristan Corbière) and a small piece cut from a map of the Irish Aran Islands (for Synge). From this alchemical perspective, much welcomed by Breton, this pêle-mêle shows itself as a crucible that merges the portraits and ingredients of political and literary history to become an embodiment of surrealism.

Man Ray's 1934 "L'Echiquier surréaliste" consists of 20 neatly arranged portraits, with alternating black and white backgrounds. It was published a month before Scutenaire's pêle-mêle, in June 1934, as an illustration in a poetry anthology. Because it presents a clearly organized grid, Man Ray's "L'Echiquier surréaliste" contrasts with the disordering principle of the pêle-mêle. Unlike Scutenaire's pêle-mêle and Breton's collage, Man Ray's photomontage shows only contemporary writers and artists. It is not a genealogy but a representation of the

surrealist group at a particular moment in history. Yet, although the past is not included, time is still an issue in this picture. A first version of this "chessboard," made in 1930, was shown during the screening of *L'Âge d'or* and was destroyed by the angry audience, whereas the second one, which Man Ray made in 1934, emphasizes the people floating in and out of the French surrealist group in the 1930s. "L'Echiquier surréaliste" is a portrait of the surrealist group, but one that is volatile and subject to change.

If we assert that Scutenaire's and Breton's collages are anthologies in and of themselves, it is interesting that the poetry anthology was illustrated by an orderly collage like Man Ray's. As a matter of fact, if we look at both Scutenaire's and Breton's creations in relation to Man Ray's, the freedom of the pêle-mêle form becomes more obvious. Man Ray mostly played with the title of his work, and organized the portraits along their background. At first, it is difficult to find a real order, but, of course, in the upper left corner is Breton, and in the lower right one is Man Ray himself – so nothing is truly random. Moreover, apart from the faces, we see only two things: in the first square, the hand of Breton, as a possible symbol of writing, and in the last square, the camera of Man Ray, representing the image. The portraits can be linked to one another only because there is a game and because they represent the game itself. But it is not possible to play with them: if we were to put two faces next to each other, no "image" would emerge. On the contrary, the pêle-mêle relies heavily on the surrealist concept of the Reverdian-like image: distant realities are put together, produce a spark, and a surrealist image is created.

The three variants of the pêle-mêle discussed so far

foreground the personal outlook the French surrealists had on literary history. A large part of the surrealist identity consisted of the choices they made between books. In a sense, the only real surrealist work of art would have been a selection of books (a private or public library) or texts (an anthology). Hence, it is no coincidence that the first trace of what we call this anthologizing ambition can already be found in the famous letter Aragon and Breton wrote to Jacques Doucet in 1922 about the constitution of the perfect library.¹⁸ Like a surrealist pêle-mêle, this letter is a piece of literary history not only because Aragon and Breton both became famous, but also because they produced part of a discourse on literature and its influence on the present. This tendency was reinforced in the 1924 manifesto, which included a list of ancestors but also a mini-anthology of short surrealist texts. Other collective practices as well dealt with this question of selection from the literary flow. We need but recall the selection of writers published in *Littérature*.¹⁹ As to the surrealists' private outlook on literary history, it is worth mentioning that many surrealist games took the anthology as a point of departure. Apart from revealing a literary strategy (choosing the past we want means defining our own present), this practice was something André Breton was also personally preoccupied with. For example, he used portraits in the collages he made for himself in the 1920s,²⁰ collected writers' portraits and even drew a number of portraits of Baudelaire and Fourier around 1960.²¹

The practice of the pêle-mêle is thus one of many ways in which the surrealists expressed their choices and preferences in literature so as to turn literary history into a (personal as well as collective) mythology. Among

them, the pêle-mêle was a highly creative one. The very clearly organized lists produced to create the surrealists' roots or ancestors are not as random as the pêle-mêle. Only the pêle-mêle managed to articulate poetry, disorder, genealogy and substance simultaneously. Finally, the different kinds of pêle-mêle and the various anthologizing practices were not only a testimony, a document of a certain take on literary history. They were also an attempt to change it: our choices change over time, but we can also decide to make different choices. And when it is time to act, the image is always a powerful ally. In this process of taking on the world of literature, writers' portraits in particular are crucial because they allow large-scale transmission and efficient recognition.

Exposing literary history through writers' portraits also means exhibiting oneself. Like the traditional group portrait, such as the famous ones by Henri Fantin-Latour,²² the pêle-mêle has a performative function in that it contributes to the formation of a collective identity. It can be used as an identifying mark for a group. When the pictured writers are dead, it revives them, inserting them into a new group. The pêle-mêle also has the function of an altar, a place for devotion, upon which a collective identity can be based. Like a picture of a rock band printed on a T-shirt or a poster of a famous actor pinned on the wall of a teenager's bedroom, the pêle-mêle is a private object which is nonetheless exposed to everyone's gaze. This emphasizes the importance of trivial pictures: the more the images are common and even familiar, the stronger the identification process in a social group.

Such desecration thus also creates new myths. In surrealism, writers' portraits seem re-sanctified on the altar

of Art. The pêle-mêle is like a hall of fame, a "pantheon" (etymologically: "every god"). The famous international surrealist exhibition of 1947 implemented this new form of canonization. With this event, Breton wanted to create a "mythe nouveau," as he wrote in the letter about the organization of the exhibition which was partially republished in the catalogue itself.²³ Breton was clearly trying to ritualize surrealism, even if, due to the 1947 exhibition heavy reliance upon window-cases, it has often been argued that surrealism here was turned into a series of commodities. It is worth paying attention to this 1947 exhibition in that it displayed some of the pictures already used in the collage "H.N.": the full-length portrait of Raymond Roussel,²⁴ the profile portrait of Duchamp, a picture of Charles Cros with his curly black hair and a bow tie, and another one of Gisèle Prassinos, as we can see on a photograph taken by Denise Bellon (Fig. 5).

On the ground floor, "Les surréalistes malgré eux" presented both artists regarded as the ancestors of surrealism and artists who had, at some point, been considered surrealists (such as Bosch, Arcimboldo, Rousseau, Blake, Magritte, Chirico, Picasso, Masson, and Dalí). Here, Breton's letter to the participants stressed the importance of display windows. Ideally, Breton would have wanted each author, thinker and painter to have one dedicated area, but in the end, paintings, photographs and traces of writers were all exhibited together, more like in a "diorama" than in a pêle-mêle.²⁵ On the second floor, there was a labyrinth of three rooms, as well as twelve altars. Devoted to the twelve signs of the zodiac, and presenting offerings and a mixed setting of paintings, objects and sometimes pictures integrated as "collages," the animist and voodoo altars were at the very



center of Breton's project to establish a new surrealist myth.²⁶ Some of the altars were also celebrating authors present on the first floor: Roussel had his altar, and so did Lautréamont/Ducasse's "chevelure de Falmer." The pagan ritual of the altars was accessible only after having wandered into a labyrinthine setting and having followed Duchamp's thread into what was described by Breton and Kiesler as a hall of superstitions, then as a room of multi-colored curtains evoking rain, and finally as a kind of billiard room. The setting aimed at reproducing the different stages of an initiation, and the exhibit was designed to unsettle, confuse and astonish the visitors.

Interestingly, the 1947 surrealist exhibition played extensively with order and disorder. The window displays, as a principle of exhibition, objectified the concept of *pêlè-mêle*.²⁷ This reification was largely due to the simple fact that some collections of pictures were displayed behind glass. To a certain extent, it was also a metaphorical reinterpretation: since paintings, photographs, books and objects were presented together, the whole structure of the exhibit can be considered a *pêlè-mêle*. Also, if we simply focus on the symbolism of the items collected and shown, past and present were exhibited with the purpose of summarizing and representing surrealism – just like a *pêlè-mêle* was a way to display one's chosen identity. In the Galerie Maeght, the display of the ancestors of surrealism on the first floor went along with a possible constant re-enacting of surrealism, thanks to the altars on the second floor.

However, the stairs giving access to the second floor were made out of books, as if tangible literary objects mattered more than the images of the writers, as if con-

crete collections of books were more likely to give access to the new post-war surrealism than the images of writers that could be found in some of the first floor display windows. Here, the tension between order and disorder was replaced by a tension between the known and the unknown, magical mystery and historiography. These stairs, which led to a floor devoted to mythology, were indeed themselves quite esoteric since they were organized on tarot arcane; but at the same time, the books and their authors were clearly chosen by Breton for grounding surrealism genealogically.²⁸ In other words, the stairs were physically as well as symbolically at the intersection between the two floors. And instead of photography and images, an objectified literature of "book objects" had been chosen to establish the new surrealist myth. This signals that new modes of representation besides the *pêlè-mêle* were also being tested.²⁹

Yet, if we assume that the 1947 exhibition played with the concept of the *pêlè-mêle*, it is worth stressing that here, too, what was initially an intimate and familiar bourgeois display was turned into a more abstract principle of scenography in surrealism – one that made visible the tension between order and disorder. The creation of a new surrealist myth asked for a historiography, and the *pêlè-mêle* represented the best way to turn a readable anthology into something visual. The *pêlè-mêle*, then, is a literary object with a significant impact on the history of literature. It shows literature's dynamic process of becoming in clear terms and it does so by means of non-textual materials which allow a synthetic way of seeing and an appropriation of dispersed iconography.

The *pêlè-mêle* also reminds us that the present perfect was at the core of surrealism: the past was recon-

sidered through its impact on the present. We face the same kind of paradox in the very idea of an anthology, which documents literary history while also stating what it should have been. The 1947 exhibit further created the paradoxical idea of presenting a "new surrealist myth," for how can a myth ever be brand new? The inclination toward anthologizing appears to have been teleological, then: the idea that everything led to surrealism is one more variant of the many other "modernist myths" identified by Rosalind Krauss.³⁰ As a patchwork synthesis of heterogeneous elements, the pêle-mêle can be described as a completion point, albeit temporary, of a selective history. This history is embodied by faces that are supposed to evoke what they represent. If they do not need a text to be efficient, they at least represent the books in the minds of the pêle-mêle's authors.