Anna Watz, *Angela Carter and Surrealism: 'A Feminist Libertarian Aesthetic'*
(London: Routledge, 2017)

Angela Carter's critical reputation, always strong since her early death in 1992, has received several recent boosts, with Edmund Gordon's 2016 biography arriving soon after Rosemary Hill's *Unicorn: The Poetry of Angela Carter* and Christopher Frayling's contextualising analysis of some of her gothic short fiction, *Inside the Bloody Chamber* (both from 2015). Anna Watz's *Angela Carter and Surrealism: 'A Feminist Libertarian Aesthetic'*, a careful study of Carter's complex relations to surrealist writing, politics, and thought, is a welcome addition to this burgeoning critical tradition. Watz's contribution provides important insights into some of the European cultural and intellectual influences on this most gothic of modern English writers.

The influence of surrealist writing and art on Carter's work is, of course, well known (Penelope Rosemont's 1998 anthology *Surrealist Women* mentions Carter as a writer who 'made no secret of' her closeness to the surrealist movement).[1] Watz's analysis grounds this relationship (in high gothic style, one might note) in reassessing a manuscript in the Angela Carter Papers Collection held by the British Library – Carter's unpublished early-1970s translation of Xavière Gauthier's provocative 1971 feminist analysis of the movement, *Surréalisme et sexualité*. Carter's encounter with Gauthier, Watz argues, 'had a major impact on Carter's reevaluation of surrealism' and 'shaped the development of her entire feminist project' (p. 4). The encounter furthermore 'prompted Carter to embark on a more sustained interrogation of the work of the Marquis de Sade', an interrogation culminating in *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, Carter's controversial 1979 polemic (its American subtitle, *The Ideology of Pornography*, indicates more clearly Carter's critical-political approach).

Watz deploys the key concept of 'The Surreal Uncanny' in a series of close analyses of key works, highlighting their central surreal thematics in order more broadly to delineate Carter's 'feminist libertarian aesthetic' and introduce into the discussion of surrealist influences an account of Carter's combinatory aesthetics. This both foregrounds and throws into historical relief her particular brand of post-war English gothic. Watz reads the 'surreal uncanny' as a product of intersecting currents of European thought, Anglo-American debates about pornography, and the elaboration of Carter's own English gothic avant-garde. Thus,

[1] *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, ed. by Penelope Rosemont (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p. xxxviii.

'the uncanny in surrealism' (p. 36) is analysed via Sigmund Freud, Hal Foster, and Julia Kristeva (but not, oddly, Hélène Cixous) as a form of revolt, a 'blurring of the real and the imaginary', in novels like *Shadow Dance* (1966), but also in relation to powerful gothic images like the 'freshly severed hand, all bloody at the roots' that the heroine Melanie apparently finds in a drawer in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967). This image, Watz suggests, 'invokes the many amputated hands in surrealist art and literature, perhaps the most iconic of which is the severed hand in Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien andalou*' (p. 46). Carter's writing is thus seen here as momentarily grounded in a clearly discernible surrealist tradition of recurrent motifs, and Watz's broad argument, developing through the book and particularly in chapters on *The Sadeian Woman* and (in conclusion) on 'Feminist-Surrealist *Bricolage* and Performativity', expounds the political and theoretical significance of that tradition.

The central thread of Watz's book identifies Carter's demythologising strategies, in particular as products of her engagement with Gauthier's highly critical and politicised arguments about surrealism. Carter's abiding interest in 'the sadistic themes of much surrealist art' (p. 39) is, Watz suggests, a direct product of her engagement with Gauthier, and her overall relation to surrealism emerges as both ambiguous and highly productive. Watz asserts that, '[f]ar from rejecting surrealism as a whole, Carter is engaged in an ambivalent dialogue with male surrealist discourse and iconography' (p. 42) contributing to 'a feminist extension of the movement itself' (p. 43). This argument is traced through enlightening and perceptive discussions of *Shadow Dance*, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffmann* (1972), and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), and a concluding examination of Carter's anthologies of short stories (*Wayward Girls and Wicked Women* in 1986) and of fairy tales (from 1990 and 1992).

Together, these works illustrate Carter's extensive and often ambivalent contribution to the key intersection with which Watz is concerned – that between 'the utopian element of surrealism and the central goal of 1970s avant-garde feminism' (p. 136). The significance of the gothic elements underpinning Carter's intense scrutiny of this intersection – her concern with masquerade and fakeness, her analyses of gender and other identities, her exposure of the power structures that define modern human sexual relations, her accounts of the material force of fantasy and its cultural effects – remains implicit throughout Watz's discussion. In exploring these themes, the book makes useful comparisons between Carter and Roland Barthes (both visited Japan at roughly the same time, Barthes producing *Empire of Signs* in 1970, Carter some of the short stories of 1974's *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces*; both were

consummate and highly influential critical demythologisers). Carter's strategies for the analysis of myth (which she conceived of as 'a vast repository of outmoded lies') suggest, Watz argues, 'a very Barthesian approach', mobilising works that eventually constitute 'an ethnographic surrealist collage' (p. 108).

Angela Carter and Surrealism offers a clear, well-written, critically insightful discussion of how Carter's idiosyncratic aesthetic is haunted by surrealist influences. It opens up suggestive spaces for further critical engagements. It would be interesting, for example, to complement Watz's reading by locating Carter's output and influence in relation to a particular strain of post-war English-language, surrealist-influenced, and multi-disciplinary gothic. Such a tradition might be rooted in film (Hammer horror, and the recent critical interest in English folk-horror cinema of the 1960s and 70s) and literature (J. G. Ballard's 'inner space' science fiction, with its debts to Paul Delvaux and the Belgian surrealists, but also, perhaps, the strange, trauma-haunted short stories and blitz reportage of William Sansom). Such connections would help locate Carter's work in relation to other manifestations of the specifically English post-war assimilation of European avant-garde experimentalism. Watz's book skilfully maps the cultural and intellectual territory for possible future engagements with Carter's challenging oeuvre, and provides a much-needed scholarly account of the debts that her gothic writings owe to the surrealist tradition.

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