

Manuel Álvarez Bravo
Surrealism and Documentary Photography

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When André Breton went to Mexico in 1938, he saw the photographs of Manuel Álvarez Bravo, took a set of them back with him to France and the following year published and exhibited them as part of his espousal of Mexico as “the surrealist place par excellence.”¹ That is the first reason why the work of Álvarez Bravo cannot be overlooked in the broader context of Surrealism. This circumstance, often cited, has rarely been explored in any depth and part of the aim of the essay that follows is to undertake that exploration.

But there is for me a more specific interest in looking closely at Álvarez Bravo’s images within a surrealist context. I have by now spent over two decades exploring the relationship between Surrealism and documentary photography and, in various books and essays, I have studied this in Paris, England, Prague and even in Arizona.² Looking at the work of Manuel Álvarez Bravo enables us to come at this subject from another angle. Partly, this is because of the particular cultural context in which he worked and because he was in fact wary of the connection with Surrealism. And it is partly because the term “documentary” can itself be problematic in discussing Álvarez Bravo’s work. 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.

The complex intermeshing of objective and subjective, exterior and interior, is now recognized as a major aspect of any developed form of documentary photography. In addition, a surrealist documentary foregrounds the unexpected and uncanny, destabilizing what might have seemed stable and exploiting the way that desire (the photographer’s and indeed the viewer’s) can discover correspondences in the environment pictured and beyond. All this we find in the photography of Manuel

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Álvarez Bravo.

Yet, relevant as I believe Álvarez Bravo's work is to such discussions and much as I admire it, I have until now held back from saying very much about it. Because I have never been to Mexico,³ and every commentator, both in Mexico and outside, sees Álvarez Bravo as a quintessentially Mexican artist. As Leonard Folgarait has put it, "we seem not to be able to truly look at his images without all this celebratory weight taking our attention elsewhere first, to the trap of 'the greatest Mexican photographer.'"⁴ My attitude began to change, however, when I heard a paper by a colleague in Britain, Elza Adamowicz, which addressed the Surrealist fascination with Mexico. She began by distinguishing between an actual Mexico, visited and indeed lived in by several Surrealists, and a Mexico she described as "a fantasized space," a Mexico imagined by Surrealism: "I would like to argue that 'Mexico' (in quotation marks!) was a discursive fabrication, forged by the ideological, political, and aesthetic context of the period, a map – or more precisely a mapping process – with constantly shifting parameters."⁵

In an aside, she noted: "The concept of a discursive 'Mexico' is based on the work of Mieke Bal, who distinguishes the artist Rembrandt from the fabrication 'Rembrandt' forged by the contemporary art-historical and art-critical texts on the artist."⁶ Thinking about this, I realized that if I could not speak about the work of Manuel Álvarez Bravo as it might be spoken about by a Mexican writer, I could perhaps say something about the work of "Manuel Álvarez Bravo" as it could be viewed from 5000 miles away on the other side of the Atlantic. Specifically, I want to focus on the encounters between Álvarez Bravo and two French Surrealists during the 1930s, and build from that an analysis of how we might relate Álvarez Bravo's work first to Surrealism and then to surrealist documentary. But, I must emphasize, what I do not want to do is to claim Álvarez Bravo's work *for* Surrealism.

These two encounters were with Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1934 and André Breton in 1938. However, I want to discuss them in reverse chronological order, since it was the way Álvarez Bravo's work was picked up by Breton and placed within a surrealist context that has framed the relationship of his work to Surrealism. It may then seem surprising to move on to talk about Cartier-Bresson as a Surrealist, since he did not formally identify himself as such. But Cartier-Bresson in the early 1930s forged a very distinctive form of surrealist documentary, influenced profoundly by his experience in surrealist circles in Paris at the start of the decade and his immersion in the ideas circulating there.⁷ Compared with Breton's later relationship with Álvarez Bravo, Cartier-Bresson's was very different. The two younger men were both already accomplished photographers whose early work had earned some level of public recognition; they could therefore exchange ideas in a much more equal and intimate way than would have been possible for either with Breton. But both Cartier-Bresson and Breton were outsiders, and, as European visitors, their understanding of Mexico would necessarily have been different from that of Álvarez Bravo the insider.

André Breton arrived in Mexico in April 1938, stayed for four months

and, when he returned to Paris, wrote effusively about his experience in the essay “Souvenir de Mexique,” published in the last issue of *Minotaure* (May 1939) and richly illustrated with photographs by Álvarez Bravo.⁸ Breton’s relationship with Mexico (and Latin America more generally) has been very controversial and was indeed complex. It has been criticised with some ferocity, one particularly extreme example being that of Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser from 1989:

Latin America has been repeatedly discovered and rediscovered, interpreted, classified and expropriated by others. Within the history of art the prime example is André Breton, who staked a claim to the discovery of Latin America as the Surrealist Continent, and proceeded to classify Latin American artists such as Kahlo, Matta, Gironella and the photographer Nacho López, as “natural” surrealists, innocent and unselfconscious. When, however, Matta laid claim to conscious, independent thought, Breton expelled him from the movement. When in 1983 Grenada was plunged into chaos by the assassination of Maurice Bishop, the United States took the opportunity to invade and take the island over. They are very different events but, ultimately, they are rooted in the same set of values and assumptions.⁹

This is, to be frank, rather shocking. It is first and rather fatally incorrect in its facts. Matta was not expelled from the surrealist movement by Breton personally but by the decision of the larger group in 1948, and it was because he had an affair with the wife of Arshile Gorky, who subsequently committed suicide.¹⁰ One might question why this personal tragedy was at odds with Matta’s adherence to Surrealism, but nevertheless this is a very different reason for his expulsion than Baddeley and Fraser’s explanation that he was an uppity colonial who didn’t know his place.

But more importantly, the equation drawn here between André Breton’s enthusiastic celebration of Mexico and Ronald Reagan’s invasion of a small, defenseless country is bizarre. Breton’s attitude to Mexico was in fact rather similar to (if more focused and intense than) his feelings for Prague, which he had visited three years earlier. In both places, he discovered deep levels of magic and poetry embedded within the country’s history and culture in ways that he obviously found profoundly liberating compared to the domination of rationality within French culture.¹¹ But no one responds to his tribute to Prague as “the magical capital of old Europe” in the way that they do to his praise of Mexico, and the reason surely lies in the larger context. Czechoslovakia had not been a colony as had Mexico. Breton’s attitude to Mexico may have been romantic, over-assertive, somewhat insensitive to the tensions within the country and to his own role as an outsider. But he was not Cortés or indeed Reagan.

Some facts might be helpful. Breton’s trip to Mexico was partly for immediate financial reasons, though there’s no doubt he had a long-standing

fascination with the country: “I dreamed about Mexico and now I am in Mexico,” he told Rafael Helidoro Valle of the University of Mexico in an interview he gave during his visit.¹² Though formally invited by the French Embassy, Breton and his wife Jacqueline were unexpectedly met at the dockside by Diego Rivera, who offered to act as organizer for the Bretons’ trip. They stayed with Rivera and his wife Frida Kahlo, whose paintings Breton also came to admire. Breton did fulfill a few formal engagements, including a lecture on “L’art et le surréalisme” and an introduction to a screening of *Un chien andalou*, but then, his official role was terminated after a campaign by the Stalinist-dominated League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (LEAR).¹³ Otherwise, much of the Bretons’ time was spent exploring the countryside (Breton took his camera with him and made snapshots that only emphasize the distance between such touristic “souvenirs” and the images of Álvarez Bravo).¹⁴ And Rivera provided the introduction to Leon Trotsky, one of the few figures that Breton truly idolized. Though the conversations between Breton and Trotsky were sometimes fraught, they did result in the important “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art.”¹⁵

Manuel Álvarez Bravo was also present to document the meeting of Breton, Trotsky and Rivera.¹⁶ According to Álvarez Bravo, he had met Breton at Rivera’s house and, presumably at Rivera’s instigation, had shown him his photos. When Breton returned to France in August, he took with him a selection of Álvarez Bravo’s prints, either bought or more likely a gift from the photographer. (When Breton’s collection was auctioned in 2003, the sale included seventeen prints by Álvarez Bravo.¹⁷) Several of these were included in the exhibition *Mexique* that Breton organised in March 1939 and ten images were used as the main illustrations for “Souvenir de Mexique,” published two months later.¹⁸

Breton’s most famous statement about the relationship between Mexico and Surrealism was made during the already cited interview with Rafael Helidoro Valle: “Mexico tends to be the surrealist place par excellence. I find surrealist Mexico in its topography, its flora, in the dynamism arising from its racial mixture, and in its highest aspirations.”¹⁹ This frequently quoted comment has, for better or worse, come to stand for Breton’s position. Yet his position was in fact much more complex, as we can see if we look at the essay he wrote when he returned to Paris. “Souvenir de Mexique” is a retrospective piece, weaving experience and memory together. It is important to emphasize that it is also a very personal response, as Breton’s use of the term “souvenir” indicates.

There is insufficient space here to fully analyze the text, but we might note the major elements to which Breton responds. The opening sentence of the essay conjures up the landscape, the “red, virgin land” of Mexico. But this is a landscape with a violent history — it is “impregnated with the most generous blood,” a reference that both goes back to the Aztecs and their human sacrifices and up to the recent past of the Mexican revolution, still reverberating in the 1930s.



Fig. 1. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Obrero en huelga, asesinado* (Striking Worker, Assassinated), 1934, photograph © Colette Urbajtel/Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo S.C.

Landscape and history are linked inextricably together, as figured in the image of “a giant candelabra cactus, from behind which a gun-bearing man with fiery eyes suddenly appears”. This extravagant, indeed melodramatic figure seems almost to have stepped out of the popular prints of J. G. Posada and indeed the final page of “Souvenir de Mexique,” after Breton’s text, is given over to a reproduction of Posada’s portrait of Zapata: gun-wielding and fiery eyed.²⁰ Breton admits that his is a “romantic vision” of Mexico, but, he insists, it cannot be dismissed.

At the head of his article in *Minotaure*, Breton placed a photograph by Manuel Álvarez Bravo depicting a young man lying dead on the ground, his arm flung out and his face running with blood (Fig. 1). Breton titled it *Après l’émeute* (*Tehuantepec*). “L’émeute” is an ambiguous word that might be translated as “riot” or “uprising” with differing connotations. In the catalogue for the exhibition *Mexique*, Breton used a different title: *Ouvrier tué dans une bagarre*: “Worker killed in a riot (or brawl).” Later, Álvarez Bravo, whose other titles were often notably oblique and metaphorical, gave this picture the stark title *Obrero en huelga, asesinado*: “Striking worker, assassinated.” His use of the term “assassinated” rather than simply “killed” gives the picture an added political resonance.²¹

The fact that Breton also gives the name of the place—Tehuantepec—where Álvarez Bravo made the picture suggests he had received the story of how the picture was taken directly from the photographer. Álvarez Bravo was in the town

shooting a film, when he heard what he thought was fireworks coming from the train station. When he got there, he found it was in fact a strike by workers from a local sugar-mill. One of them had been killed and was lying in the street. Having only two frames left in his camera, Álvarez Bravo spontaneously crouched down low to make this image. Then he had to get out quickly as the situation became threatening.

Breton made no explicit reference to this photograph in “Souvenir de Mexique” (though, as we will see, he praised it highly elsewhere), but of course, it does connect very powerfully with the landscape of violence already mentioned. We imagine the ground on which the man lies as the “terre rouge,” dusty and baked by the sun, into which flows the deeper red of his blood. It is as if it were a human sacrifice connecting to the ancient rituals of the Aztecs while being resolutely of its time, the result of political struggle.

Such direct images of violence were rare in *Minotaure*, and the autopsy photographs mentioned towards the end of this essay are unusual.²² This type of picture had been more common and challenging in George Bataille’s journal *Documents* (1929-30), but *Minotaure* was both more broadly artistic and aimed at a more socially privileged audience. Some readings of *Striking worker, assassinated* have emphasized its factuality—its status as a “document”—and its confrontational quality. The Irish novelist John Banville, for example, called the picture “a bare and shocking piece of documentation which might have been presented among the evidence in a murder trial.”²³ Breton may have attacked Bataille for his “anti-dialectical materialism,”²⁴ but Surrealism had often exploited the factuality of violence as a way to open up the audience’s response. Like the opening seconds of *Un chien andalou*, there was undoubtedly an element of shock intended by Breton in the placement of this photograph at the very start of “Souvenir de Mexique”; it makes us wonder just what sort of “souvenir” this will be.

That factuality and shock value are also part of what would have given the photograph its political power and we can easily imagine its reproduction in a Marxist journal to demonstrate the brutality of the authorities. Indeed, in 1936, *Striking worker, assassinated* had been included in a photomontage on the cover of the third issue of *Frente a Frente*, the magazine produced by LEAR (the same organization that two years later would oppose Breton’s presence in Mexico). As used in *Minotaure*, the photograph loses that role of an immediate call to action, but André Breton would have argued that does not mean its political efficacy was negated. His visit to Mexico and meeting with Trotsky had reignited his passionate belief in the irreducible intersection of the poetic and the political. As the “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art” declared, “the artist cannot serve the struggle for emancipation unless he has internalized its social and individual content, unless he feels its meaning and its drama in his very nerves and unless he freely seeks to give his inner world an artistic incarnation.”²⁵ Breton found in Mexico itself “the one country in the world where the wind of liberation has not abated” and Álvarez Bravo’s photograph, we

may surmise, represented that feeling on several different, inseparable levels.

Another important aspect of the picture is pictorial and there is, I think, a revealing parallel to be drawn here with another depiction of a dead body made by a photographer with surrealist affiliations: the 1945 photograph by Lee Miller of the young daughter of a German burgomaster who had committed suicide.²⁶ Miller depicted her in close up with her head thrown back across the arm of the couch where she had died. As with Álvarez Bravo's image of the murdered worker, the photographer had got down close and on a level with the dead person. This gives the figures a monumentality, a sense of dignity, but also a peculiar intensity, as if the subjects were somehow still alive, as if they were levitating, floating up. Of course, we might read this effect differently in the two images, given that one of the bodies is that of a heroic martyr and the other a fascist sympathizer; Miller's picture may thus be read ironically where Álvarez Bravo's is more tragic. But, still, what the pictures share is a powerful conjunction of horrifying reality and a transcendent surreality. These are bodies done to death in appalling circumstances, yet their images are disturbing and memorable in ways that the mere statement of fact cannot account for.

There is an extraordinary beauty in this—a beauty all the more striking because it should not really be there. Although Breton did not mention Bravo's picture in "Souvenir de Mexique," he had written about it two months earlier in the short catalogue text for the exhibition he had organised at the Galerie Renou et Colle of work from Mexico; this included paintings by Frida Kahlo and examples of folk art as well as photographs by Álvarez Bravo.²⁷ In this text, Breton singled out *Ouvrier tué dans une bagarre* and said that here Álvarez Bravo had achieved what Baudelaire had called "eternal style."²⁸ This is high praise indeed, albeit rather vague; one way to read it would be as an evocation of the photograph as a Baudelarian compression of the contemporary moment and a deeper, more mythic presence. It's evident that Breton considered the image to have transcended the circumstances of its immediate making in ways that connect with Surrealism, but which, as we will see when we return to the *Mexique* essay, he did not think of simply as "surrealist."

Further into the text of "Souvenir de Mexique", Breton's focus shifts. After his initial panegyric to the country as a whole, he moves in to look closely at Álvarez Bravo's photographs with an intense scrutiny that is worth examining in some detail. He begins this section by stating, "The ability to reconcile life and death is doubtlessly the principal lure of Mexico. In this regard, it offers an inexhaustible range of sensations, from the mildest to the most insidious. There is nothing like Manuel Álvarez Bravo's photographs to reveal to us its extreme poles." So Breton immediately sets up a duality between life and death, which he says is fundamental to both Mexican culture and to Álvarez Bravo's photographs. In this, he is echoing what Mexican writers and artists have said, not least Álvarez Bravo himself.²⁹ (This duality is also echoed in the layout of the photographs, where the image of the murdered

worker is bracketed by two more ambiguous photographs by Álvarez Bravo. On the page opposite, fronting Breton's essay, is a large vertical image of a grave on which a plant is luxuriously growing. Then, if one turns the page, the posture of the corpse is echoed in another image of a young man lying horizontally, but this time asleep and dreaming rather than dead.)

Breton reproduces ten photographs by Álvarez Bravo with "Souvenir de Mexique," scattered through the text together with other photographs, two paintings by Rivera and a number of folk objects.³⁰ Of these ten Álvarez Bravo photos, only four were given titles, all differing from titles later used by the photographer. After his initial general praise for Álvarez Bravo, Breton goes on to refer specifically to six individual photographs. Five of these are among the ten reproduced, but they are placed through the essay in a different order to that in which Breton refers to them and there is no cross-referencing; any reader would therefore be forced to move slowly back and forth between text and images. Moreover, and somewhat oddly, one photograph that Breton discusses (that of a mummified figure) is not reproduced at all, so that the reader must call upon either memory or imagination.

Breton begins with the 1931 image that Álvarez Bravo had titled *Ladder of ladders* (Breton does not give it a title): "That workshop where they make caskets for children (the infant mortality rate in Mexico is 75%); the relationship between light and shadow, between the stacks of boxes by the ladder and the one by the gate, and the poetically dazzling image created by placing the phonograph horn inside the lower coffin are exceptionally evocative of the emotional atmosphere in which the whole country is steeped" (Fig. 2). Breton starts here on a notably unromantic note, quoting the statistics of infant mortality, and ends with the "poetically dazzling image" of the horn rising out of a coffin, like one of those flowers growing on a grave. Quite able to bring together, as in the picture itself, apparent contradictions of sociology and poetry, Breton sees a number of relationships — between light and shadow, the stack of boxes and the one on its own, the coffin and the phonograph horn — that amplify and echo the duality between life and death with which he began.

Next, Breton turns to the picture he does not reproduce, titled *Posthumous Portrait* by Álvarez Bravo. This depicts an ancient mummified figure photographed in darkness with, as Breton notices, just the teeth and a fingernail catching the light (Fig. 3): "That composition made up of a head and one hand, both mummified; the way the hand is placed and the endless spark produced by the proximity of the teeth and the nail describe a suspended, buzzing world, torn between conflicting poles of attraction."³¹ In this metaphor of the spark passing between teeth and nail, we come close to a Barthesian "punctum," the arresting detail around which the rest of the picture circulates. Breton's subsequent evocation of "a buzzing, suspended world" seems curious, but perhaps points indirectly to that same intersection of life and death to which he had already referred; it is hard not to read an uncanny animation



Fig. 2. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Escala de escalas* (Ladder of ladders), 1931, photograph © Colette Urbajtel/Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo S.C.



Fig. 3. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Retrato póstumo* (Posthumous Portrait), 1930s, photograph © Colette Urbajtel/Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo S.C.

into this stillness, to imagine that the closed eyes are actually gazing out at us, that the hand (which may or may not belong the same body as the head) is supporting the chin in a gesture of tenderness.

Breton continues this theme of life and death coexisting with the next photograph, one that echoes the very first image: “That corner of an Indian cemetery where daisies, sprung up from the gravel-covered soil, maintain mysterious relations with hoops of bleached feathers.” Then he takes up again the role of the human figure. “Finally”, he writes, “if a girl or a woman appears in the picture, a dramatic element is introduced under the blazing sun by the white hat tilted back, wide enough to block the porthole of darkness, by the chipped surface of the wall, by the sense of time standing still one gets from seeing the effortless, ever so graceful tiptoeing” (Fig. 4). What is remarkable here is Breton’s close attention to detail — the effect of light, pattern, texture, gesture, all coming together to produce both drama and stasis, “time standing still.” Then a further dualism is introduced in a brief description of another picture: “Or yet that element appears when a black veil



Fig. 4. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *La hija de los danzantes* (Daughter of the Dancers), 1933-34, photograph © Colette Urbajtel/Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo S.C.



Fig. 5. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *El eclipse* (The Eclipse), 1933, photograph © Colette Urbajtel/Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo S.C.



Fig. 6. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *La trilla* (The Threshing), ca.1935, photograph © Colette Urbajtel/Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo S.C.

is suddenly lifted and stands out sharply against a glacier of wash drying in the sun” (Fig. 5).

In both these last two pictures, the central woman looks away, is observed by the camera while observing something else, caught in a gesture of grace, a gesture that seems to have a meaning that remains beyond us. This element of unknowability is a feature of Álvarez Bravo’s work to which we will return, but it’s useful here to think of the role that titling plays in this. The first picture of the young girl apparently looking into a dark opening in the wall, Breton titles *Le puits*—“the well.” This immediately gives the girl’s activity a meaning, but one might wonder where Breton got the title from, since it is quite different from Álvarez Bravo’s own title: *Daughter of the Dancers*. The other photograph of a woman standing behind some washing and holding a black veil up across her eyes was left untitled by Breton, and thus utterly mysterious. Álvarez Bravo though titled it *The Eclipse*, which, like *Daughter of the Dancers*, points us towards a meaning yet without fully explicating the woman’s gesture (and thus removing the mystery). In both cases, there were apparently explanatory circumstances beyond the picture’s frame, which, though obliquely alluded to by the title, are excluded from the final photograph.³² The woman in *The Eclipse* was apparently using the veil to watch an actual eclipse, but, not knowing that, we are likely to read the title as a suggestive metaphor.

Breton is coming to the conclusion of his evocation of Álvarez Bravo’s images: “Chance seems to have been completely excluded from such an art – the black horse against the black house (Fig. 6)—for the greater benefit of that sense of fate, pierced by divinatory glimpses, that has inspired the greatest works of all time and that is today in the custody of Mexico.” It does seem strange that Breton should claim that chance is excluded from these pictures—it is of course chance that brings the black horse and the black house together and chance that gives the images their life.³³ Yet he seems rather to be claiming a deeper meaning beyond the merely coincidental, a meaning we glimpse through these pictures. Here he calls it fate; it might also be that “objective chance” of which Surrealism speaks elsewhere and to which we will return when looking at the work of Cartier-Bresson, for whom it was a central concept.

This is an extraordinarily intense and close reading. One can imagine Breton in his study, laying out the prints he has brought back from Mexico on his desk and poring over them. I can recall nowhere else that he looks at individual photographs with such sustained scrutiny, and I can think of no other photographer he discusses with the same level of respect—as essentially an artist in their own medium. Reading carefully, we can also see that Breton shows an awareness of how Álvarez Bravo’s photographs (like most photographs, in fact) work in a space between finding and creating, observing and constructing. With *Ladder of ladders*, it is intriguing that Breton indicates that the power of the image is “created by placing the phonograph horn inside the lower coffin.” What he leaves open is the question of who has done

the placing—the coffin maker or the photographer? (And even if it were the former, the latter would need to see it and think it worth recording.)

As we have seen, Breton also eulogized Álvarez Bravo's work in the short text that he wrote for the *Mexique* catalogue. It was there that he linked the assassinated worker with Baudelaire's "eternal style," but I also want to point to what comes before that allusion. Photography, writes Breton, "has in general been content to show us Mexico through the easy angle of surprise"; he is doubtless thinking of the acres of touristic and ethnographic images produced. But he goes on to say, "It is essential to have participated in Mexican life from early childhood and to have continued to question it passionately in order to be able to read it in its entirety. This is what Manuel Álvarez Bravo has succeeded in doing with his compositions of an admirable synthetic realism, of which I know no equivalent. All the pathos of Mexico is placed within our reach, where Álvarez Bravo stopped, where he took the time to capture a ray of light, a sign, a silence, there the heart of Mexico beats."³⁴

The sense of stillness, of a caught moment, in Álvarez Bravo's work is exquisitely captured here—"a ray of light, a sign, a silence"—and it is interesting to see Breton finding the essence of Mexico in such quiet details, very different from the grand rhetorical gestures of the muralists. This has a lot to do with the small-scale nature of photographs, intimate objects requiring close viewing and contemplative attention. It is also significant that Breton doesn't claim these images as surrealist. That tantalizing phrase "synthetic realism" ("réalisme synthétique") suggests something rather different, if connected, related perhaps to that amalgam of finding and making to which I have already pointed. We might speculate that Breton is here adapting the concept of the Hegelian dialectic wherein a thesis is countered by an antithesis and the two fused to create a synthesis. It is a concept of central importance to Surrealism; here, it may conjure the way that, in a photograph, object might meet object, gesture meet gesture, gesture meet object, to create a spectrum of implied meanings. Moreover, "synthetic realism" was surely intended to suggest not only an aesthetic process, but also a cultural one. For Breton clearly states that these images come out of Álvarez Bravo's deeply internalized understanding of his own culture, a response which runs counter to simplistic claims that Breton's celebration of Mexico is crudely colonialist.

Two years later, in 1940, Álvarez Bravo's work was once more sited in a surrealist context, when he was invited to provide the cover image for the catalogue of the "International Exhibition of Surrealism" held in Mexico City. Álvarez Bravo himself told the story of receiving a phone call one day from someone speaking for André Breton, asking him to make the image. Working "very rapidly, obeying a sense of surrealist automatism," with a nude model, a roll of bandages and some cacti, he produced the photograph *Good Reputation Sleeping*.³⁵ For many commentators, this has been the key image that links Álvarez Bravo's work to Surrealism; he himself would indeed claim that, due to the circumstances of its making, it was the only

image of his that could be justifiably be called “surrealist.” But in comparison with the images selected by Breton for *Minotaure*, it seems to me mannered and too consciously worked up. In an interview of 1984, Álvarez Bravo suggested that where *Striking Worker, Assassinated* represented “unmediated reality,” *Good Reputation Sleeping* represented a “reality invented by the artist.” He added, “These are two complementary aspects of an individual’s perception of reality.”³⁶ But the best of his photographs—some of which were in Breton’s selection—represented a subtle interweaving of the found and the constructed, containing both in the same image.

Good Reputation Sleeping gets more interesting when one sees the version that Álvarez Bravo proposed for the catalogue—the image repeated three times, one piled up on another.³⁷ The result is like a living (and fabricated) reworking of the stacked coffins in *Ladder of ladders*. But, as is well known, the proposal was rejected, not by Breton but by the catalogue’s printers, who were worried about the depiction of pubic hair. Another photograph by Álvarez Bravo took its place: *About winter*, a study of a stained glass window leaning against a vine-covered wall. It was a safer photograph perhaps but still involved a subtle play on levels of reality (somewhat reminiscent of the images that Clarence John Laughlin would soon be making in New Orleans). This image was also repeated and flipped left to right on the front and back of the catalogue cover.³⁸ Such doubling and reversal in Álvarez Bravo’s work is one more way in which his pictures remain unsettled and unsettling; we can never be quite sure where we are in the constant intermeshing of the found and the constructed. And, on a larger front and more tentatively, we might also think of this doubling as a metaphor for the apparently antagonistic concepts of Mexico as “the surrealist place par excellence” and Surrealism as a foreign and rather awkward import.³⁹

Frida Kahlo traveled to Paris in 1939 for the *Mexique* exhibition and, in a letter to a friend, famously remarked: “I never knew I was a Surrealist until André Breton came to Mexico and told me I was.”⁴⁰ Like Kahlo, Álvarez Bravo was initially attracted by the wider audience that Surrealism could afford him, but, in his own much quieter and apparently more modest way, he also ultimately resisted the absorption of his work into Surrealism. This comes out most clearly in interviews and statements from late in life; in 1978, Álvarez Bravo remarked: “Many times my work, taken as a whole, has been related to Surrealism. I believe that this is an equivocation. I believe that when a person is attentive to reality he finds all that is fantastic. People don’t realize the fantasy that life itself contains. There was a French writer, Renan, who said that here on earth are symbol and mystery. He lived before Surrealism as a school existed; he was speaking of symbol and mystery in daily life. When people look for it, they find a contact with that enormous surprise: reality.”⁴¹

It is worth pausing at this point to consider the larger context of this statement within Latin American culture, for Álvarez Bravo was not alone in refusing a connection with Surrealism. Reading his comments, one might well be reminded

of the prologue that the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier wrote for his novel *The Kingdom of this World*, published in 1949 and often seen as the first Latin American expression of the concept of “magic realism.”⁴² Carpentier had been in Paris around 1930 and had himself experienced a fraught relationship with André Breton.⁴³ In his 1949 prologue, Carpentier dismissed Surrealism as a set of “conjuring tricks” and revealed instead in the “marvelous reality” (“lo real maravilloso”) he had recently experienced in the Caribbean: “What many forget ... is that the marvelous becomes unequivocally marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality, a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed or singularly favorable illumination of the previously unremarked riches of reality, an amplification of the measures and categories of reality, perceived with peculiar intensity due to an exaltation of the spirit which raises it to a kind of ‘limit state.’”⁴⁴

It is somewhat surprising, reading that, to see Carpentier re-using a term — “the marvelous” — that Surrealism had made its own in order to define a sharpened and transformative “alteration of reality” as opposed to the softer, more diffuse sensations of “the mysterious.”⁴⁵ Moreover, Carpentier’s use of “lo real” is also not very far away from a central surrealist idea. As Dawn Ades, discussing the role of Surrealism in Latin America, wrote: “Reality was always an essential term in the surrealist equation, and it was never Surrealism’s intention to seal off the imagination from that reality, desire from action, the unconscious from the conscious, the marvelous from the everyday world, dream from waking.”⁴⁶ Perhaps, then, we might speculate that Carpentier, like many other artists attracted by Surrealism yet resistant to being taken over by it, somewhat willfully misrepresents its fundamental thesis in order to stress his distance from it. But this claim to ownership of their particular ideas and practices had a special importance for the artists of post-colonial Latin America, where an insistence on difference was deemed necessary in order to avoid the risk of co-option and cultural re-colonization.

This interweaving of the fantastic and the real is often seen as something privileged in Latin American culture. “What is the history of America,” asked Carpentier at the end of his prologue, “if not a chronicle of the marvelous in the real?”⁴⁷ If Carpentier here points to a deep historical continuity, then Gabriel García Márquez, the best known “magic realist” novelist of a succeeding generation, claimed this “marvelous reality” was something woven into the texture of day to day existence. The rationalism of Europeans “prevents them from seeing that reality isn’t limited to the price of tomatoes and eggs,” whereas “(e)veryday life in Latin America proves that reality is full of the most extraordinary things.”⁴⁸ However, the younger novelist Isabel Allende took a broader and more generous view: “I think you find magical realism everywhere ... in the West you would also find it if you looked further back towards the Gothic, the folklores, the sagas.”⁴⁹ André Breton (and Surrealism more broadly) was not only concerned to find the marvelous in other cultures, but also to rediscover those older traditions in European culture; when he

called Prague the “magical capital of old Europe,” that is what he was evoking.⁵⁰ For Breton, perhaps there was no fundamental difference between the “marvelous” as it revealed itself in central Europe and in Mexico; from a Mexican perspective, though, it looked rather different.

There was one major figure in Mexican literature and culture who did identify with Surrealism, although this was later after the Second World War. At the time of Breton’s visit to Mexico in 1938, Octavio Paz had apparently been deeply suspicious of his rapport with Trotsky, but after Paz moved to Paris in 1945 to work as a diplomat, he and Breton established a close and mutual friendship. After Breton’s death in 1966, Paz commented: “I often write as though I were engaging in a silent dialogue with Breton; countering him, replying to him, coinciding with him, diverging from him, writing a homage to him—all this together.”⁵¹ While earlier, in 1956, Paz had pointed to the significance of Surrealism beyond literature: “Surrealism is not a poetry but a poetics and even more, and more decisively, a world vision.”⁵²

At the same time, Paz reflected deeply on *mexicanidad*: Mexicanness. While in Paris, he published *The Labyrinth of Solitude*,⁵³ one of the key studies of Mexican culture that, although controversial, has also been much cited in Anglo-American studies of Álvarez Bravo’s work.⁵⁴ In Paz’s poem “The Broken Waterjar,” of 1955, these dual elements of Surrealism and Mexicanness come together to hypnotic effect:

We must sleep with open eyes, we must dream with our hands ...
we must break down the walls between man and man, reunite what has been
sundered,
life and death are not opposite worlds, we are one stem with twin flowers,
we must find the lost word, dream inwardly and also outwardly...⁵⁵

This can read in one sense as an evocation and affirmation of Breton’s insistence that dream and reality are “communicating vessels” that need to be brought together into a larger Surreality.⁵⁶ For other readers, it has struck a particularly Mexican note; Carlos Fuentes called the poem “the final, most lucid expression of Mexican tragedy: the country that dreams itself in the light, and lives itself in the dust and the thorns.”⁵⁷ It is also obviously relevant to Álvarez Bravo’s images and, inevitably, Paz wrote about his work as well. Indeed, the two men were close enough to collaborate in 1982 on the publication *Instante y revelación*, which juxtaposed Álvarez Bravo’s photographs and Paz’s poems.⁵⁸

The convergences and disjunctions sketched out in the last few paragraphs suggest just how ambivalent and contentious was the relationship between Surrealism and Mexico (and Latin America more generally).⁵⁹ As much might also be said about Álvarez Bravo’s personal relation to Surrealism. His refusal to be

categorized as a “surrealist” photographer had parallels with the similar refusal of Parisian photographers like Brassai and Kertész to be thus categorized, but it is additionally complicated by his own position in Mexico.⁶⁰ It is also difficult to place Álvarez Bravo’s work in relation to surrealist photography—or indeed to the international avant-garde more broadly—because we cannot be quite sure of what he saw when. Certainly, while many of his influences were indigenous, others came from a range of external sources. He knew Edward Weston and Tina Modotti in the late twenties, he worked with Eisenstein when he came to Mexico in 1930 and met Paul Strand when he was there in 1933. We also know that he saw the work of Eugène Atget at an early point – ordering a copy of the 1930 monograph, published in New York as well as Paris and Leipzig⁶¹—and was sufficiently affected by it to later write an appreciation (in 1939, the year after his meeting with Breton).⁶² And of course he shared this admiration for Atget’s work with some of the Surrealists.⁶³

But did Álvarez Bravo also see the work of those Parisian photographers who had been influenced by Atget—Lotar, Boiffard, Brassai and Kertész—and whose work appeared in the early thirties in journals such as *Variétés*, *Documents*, *Bifur* and a little later *Minotaure*? We don’t know, though Álvarez Bravo did later comment in one interview, “I knew about it [Surrealism] through some French magazines and I might have produced some work under its influence.”⁶⁴ His statement is sufficiently vague (perhaps deliberately?) as to be rather frustrating. Equally, there are uncertainties if one tries to read the internal evidence of the pictures. There are images made by Álvarez Bravo in the early thirties that could find a place in any of those surrealist journals: pictures such as *The Laughing Mannequins* (1930), *She of the Fine Arts* (1933) or *Fire Workers* (1935). But there are also pictures like *La Tolteca* (the image which, in 1931, won him a prize from the cement factory of that name) that point to a quite different sensibility, allied more to the formal and abstracted photography being made in Germany, Russia or indeed the U.S.A. at the time.

There is though one encounter with a surrealist sensibility that we can be sure of. Henri Cartier-Bresson came to Mexico early in 1934 as a member of an anthropological expedition (another member was Alejo Carpentier) and, when the money ran out, stayed on. He and Álvarez Bravo became friends and there is a well-known image of them posing together in a parodically solemn manner against the gaudy backdrop of a commercial photographer’s studio (Fig. 7). Cartier-Bresson also accompanied Álvarez Bravo on his film-making visit to Tehuantepec. In March 1935, the two photographers exhibited together in the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City.

On April 1, Cartier-Bresson left for New York, where he reconnected with a friend from Paris, Julien Levy. Levy had already shown Cartier-Bresson’s work in 1933 at the gallery he ran in New York. Now another exhibition was mounted with surprising swiftness: “Documentary and Anti-Graphic Photographs by Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans and Álvarez Bravo,” opening on April 23.⁶⁵ This is an



Fig. 7. Nacho Aguirre, *Manuel Álvarez Bravo and Henri Cartier-Bresson*, 1935, photograph © Colette Urbajtel/Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo S.C.

intriguing conjunction—and characterization—of three of the major photographers of the period and it is frustrating that little is known of what they each exhibited. And of course, in this context, it is particularly intriguing that these three artists with a “borderline relationship” to Surrealism should have come together to show with a

galerist with a similar relationship to the movement, fostered in Paris and developed in New York⁶⁶; the following year, Levy would publish his own book on Surrealism.⁶⁷

In those two exhibitions in 1935, Cartier-Bresson would have shown not only new pictures made in Mexico, but also prints that he had brought with him from Paris. In the previous four years, traveling across Europe, he had put together a small but intense body of work using the new 35mm Leica camera to capture the fugitive, the ephemeral and the coincidence of human actions and their environments. In this, he had been explicitly influenced by Surrealism, embracing the fundamental concept of “objective chance,” that Breton in *L'Amour fou* would describe as “implying between events imagined and real a consistent parallelism.”⁶⁸ Cartier-Bresson would later say that Surrealism “taught me to allow the camera lens to rummage in the debris of the unconscious and of chance.”⁶⁹ There can be little doubt that, during the period in 1934-5 when Cartier-Bresson and Álvarez Bravo were close, they would have discussed such ideas. As part of that dialogue, Cartier-Bresson would have had ample opportunity to tell Álvarez Bravo about Surrealism, so that, when the latter met Breton three years later, he would already have been well-informed.⁷⁰

Cartier-Bresson would wax lyrical about his time in Mexico, saying of the country, “It is not a curiosity to be visited but a life to be lived.”⁷¹ Álvarez Bravo later remarked that, though he and Cartier-Bresson never photographed together, they did work in the same environments and we can see in their work an interest in similar subjects: the in-between states of sleeping figures, for example.⁷² But in one major respect, the two men were working from entirely different positions. Álvarez Bravo was an insider, photographing his own culture, while Cartier-Bresson was an outsider. This has been a fundamental distinction within photographic criticism of the past few decades and, in 1994, Abigail Solomon-Godeau described the relationship between the two positions, emphasizing what is often taken to be the moral superiority of the one over the other: “The insider position—in this particular context, the ‘good’ position—is thus understood to imply a position of engagement, participation and privileged knowledge, whereas the second, the outsider’s position, is taken to produce an alienated and voyeuristic relationship that heightens the distance between subject and object.”⁷³

As we have seen, André Breton more than sixty years earlier had clearly stated the advantage that Álvarez Bravo had in photographing his own culture: “It is essential to have participated in Mexican life from early childhood and to have continued to question it passionately in order to be able to read it in its entirety.” But, in this instance, the relationship between Álvarez Bravo as “insider” and Cartier-Bresson as “outsider” is more complex and ambiguous, with both photographers working on similar themes. One of these shared preoccupations is with screening and concealment, and, through that, with the relationship between what one might see in a photograph and what one can know, or not know, about what is being photographed. (This tension between seeing and knowing has also been a



Fig. 8. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Trampa puesta* (Set Trap), 1934, photograph © Colette Urbajtel/Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo S.C.

preoccupation of more recent photographers and it is a quality that makes these early thirties photographs by Álvarez Bravo and Cartier-Bresson still seem fresh and challenging.)

In an image by Álvarez Bravo from 1934, a man and a woman are sheltering under a striped blanket stretched across a tree, while in front of them is fruit scattered across a layer of newspaper (Fig. 8). The picture has had two titles. Álvarez Bravo would later give it the rather poetic, unspecific title *Set Trap*, encouraging us to ask who is trapped: the people in the picture, the passers-by or indeed us as viewers? But its earlier title was more direct: *The Ones who went to La Villa*. This was a church that housed a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe. The photograph was taken outside the church and there's an image of the Virgin on the newspaper. The figures under a blanket are probably peasant farmers come in from the country to scrape a living. The picture's title refers to a local saying: *If you go to La Villa, you will lose your chair*, which may be taken ironically to refer to their situation.

All those factual elements in the picture I found out in my reading about it; it is information that I as an outsider can only have second hand.⁷⁴ Yet it is quite possible to love this picture without knowing all that: to love the mystery of the shrouded faces, the dappled light across the fruit, the layering of surfaces back into the picture. Indeed, to love the fact that one does not understand it. And that is also often the strength of Cartier-Bresson's early pictures, including many of those he

took in Mexico. He also photographed people shrouded, turned away or glimpsed through screens, and his subject might be said to be this very impossibility of understanding that renders everyday situations strange and disturbing. Moreover, Cartier-Bresson refuses the sort of evocative titling exploited by Álvarez Bravo, his pictures being factually captioned *Mexico, 1934*.⁷⁵

In one of his most uncanny images, perhaps also taken in a market, a wrap of shrouded cloth is posed beneath a hanging suit jacket, but it is so enveloping that in fact we don't even know if there is indeed a human being beneath the cloth.⁷⁶ And the permanence of the photographic moment does not allow us to resolve that mystery, but rather aggravates it. The photographed scene is viewed at one moment in time, from only one point of view and context is removed through framing; by these familiar means in conjunction with the particular subject matter pictured, photographs such as this point to a world where there are things that resist closure of meaning and rationalist narrative.

The recurring motifs of figures veiled, shrouded in cloth or shadow, sleeping or gazing out of frame all suggest something present but unavailable. Through these motifs, both Cartier-Bresson and Álvarez Bravo repeatedly engage the paradox of using visual means to suggest the limits of immediate vision in order to provoke a reflective, imaginative response. Their photographs activate the medium's capacity not simply to preserve the perception of a fleeting moment, but transform it into a permanent irritant, with the potential to disturb complacent thinking.

In the post-war years, Cartier-Bresson would become a leading figure within international photojournalism and his work undoubtedly lost the uneasy edge it had in the early 1930s. Later, in the late 1970s, he would re-emphasize his connection with Surrealism and his work of the thirties would be re-evaluated in light of shifts within contemporary documentary photography.⁷⁷ The position of Manuel Álvarez Bravo remained more constant, responding to what was useful in Surrealism and remaining within his own space. His pictures were never as unnervingly rough-edged as Cartier-Bresson's had been in the thirties and the elegant compositions and epigrammatic titling of his work gave it a unique status as the value of "poetic photography" rose. The connection with Surrealism may have been beneficial in boosting the visibility and reputation of Álvarez Bravo's work, but we must nevertheless emphasize that it is reductive to call that work "surrealist." Yet to place that work in relation to Surrealism—next to the words of Breton or the photos of Cartier-Bresson—helps to illuminate some of the most intriguing aspects of Manuel Álvarez Bravo's work, as well as casting light on that relationship with which we began, between Surrealism and documentary.

To end, I want to jump forward again, this time seventy years, right up to the recent past and to one other siting of Álvarez Bravo's work. In the winter of 2009-10, the exhibition *La Subversion des Images* was mounted by the Centre Pompidou in Paris. This was perhaps the largest showing yet of surrealist photography, with

over 400 images and other artifacts on display, and it was accompanied by a weighty catalogue.⁷⁸ I caught up with the show when it travelled to the Fotomuseum in Winterthur, Switzerland, in the spring of 2010, and was immediately struck by its provocative juxtapositions, one of which involved two of the photographs by Manuel Álvarez Bravo that I have discussed here.

One wall in the exhibition was given over to images of dead animal parts, with some of the famous photographs made by Eli Lotar in the Paris abattoir flanked by less well known pictures by Wols (a lamb's head) and Cartier-Bresson (curled-up intestines). Then, immediately adjacent on the wall to the right, was an arrangement of photographs of dead *human* bodies. Here, Álvarez Bravo's two pictures of the murdered worker and the ancient mummy were juxtaposed with a spread from *Minotaure* featuring autopsy photographs including one of Jack the Ripper's victims.⁷⁹ It was a juxtaposition that took the breath away. In one sense, it was of course outrageous, making rather lurid connections between images made in different contexts and for altogether different purposes. But in another sense, it was a layout that was very much in the spirit of how photographs were often treated in surrealist publications, creating new meanings and connections with no respect for original context or authorial intention.

And it is a provocative but appropriate point to end this paper, for the relationship between Manuel Álvarez Bravo and Surrealism remains uncertain, undecided and open to continuing interpretation. Like many other photographers, he negotiated a space close to Surrealism, where he could engage without being absorbed into it — an energizing and productive space to work in. And across this space, there still flickers a tension, an “endless spark” not unlike the one that André Breton once detected between the teeth and the fingernail of that mummified corpse.



1 Rafael Helidoro Valle, “Diálogo con André Breton,” *Universidad*, 5:29 (June 1938), reprinted in *México en el Surrealismo: Los Visitantes Fugaces* (Mexico City: Artes de México, 2003), 61; translated as “Conversation with André Breton,” 80. For a fuller quotation, see below, note 19.

2 The references here are to three books: *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris* (Manchester University Press, 2002); *So Exotic, So Homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and Documentary Photography* (Manchester University Press, 2007); *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia: On The Needles of Days*, co-authored with Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (Farnham and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2013). Also the essay “As If One's Eyelids Had Been Cut Away: Frederick Sommer's *Arizona Landscapes*,” *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, 2:2 (Winter 2009).

3 The closest I have been was when I delivered an earlier version of this paper at the conference

Surrealism and the Americas, Rice University, Houston, Texas, November 2010.

4 Leonard Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico Photographed: The work of Horne, Casasola, Modotti, and Álvarez Bravo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 153.

5 “The Surrealists in Mexico: Shortcircuits of Desire,” delivered at the conference *Surrealism Laid Bare 5: Living in Surrealism*, at West Dean, Sussex, 2007. My thanks to Elza Adamowicz for forwarding a copy of the paper to me. An earlier version of the paper was published as “Off the map. Surrealism’s uncharted territories,” in Elza Adamowicz, ed., *Surrealism: Crossings/Frontiers* (Oxford/Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 197-216.

6 This is a reference to Mieke Bal’s book *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge University Press, 1991). As it happens, I was at the same time reading *Figuring Jasper Johns* by Fred Orton (London: Reaktion, 1994), in which Orton also makes a distinction between Jasper Johns and “Jasper Johns” (14-15). The first, he says, “is the name of the agent who ... made the objects I look at, see and seek to understand. He is ... the real person who is known to no one but himself, and not even to him. ‘Jasper Johns’ on the other hand, is a representation I have made from the resources available in our culture ... and who, I am well aware, is but one moment in the pattern of possibilities.” And he adds: “Because he is unknowable, I saw no reason to go out of my way to make the acquaintance of Jasper Johns ... This puts a distance between this book and those books devoted to the study of ‘Jasper Johns.’ Most of them — all of them — try to conflate the distinction between Jasper Johns and ‘Jasper Johns.’” In contrast, says Orton, he wanted to hang on to that distinction.

7 For a discussion of Cartier-Bresson’s relationship with Surrealism, see Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, 168-87.

8 André Breton, “Souvenir de Mexique,” *Minotaure*, 12-13 (May 1939), 29-52. The essay was reprinted in a shortened version and without illustrations in André Breton, *La Clé des champs* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1953), 34-41, translated as “Memory of Mexico” in *Free Rein* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 23-8.

9 Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser, *Drawing the Line: Art and Identity in Contemporary Latin America* (London: Verso, 1989), 4-5.

10 See the account in Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (London: Bloomsbury; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 556-7.

11 See Philippe Bernier, “Le Voyage à Prague” in Agnès Angliviel de la Beaumelle, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine and Claude Schweisguth, *André Breton: la beauté convulsive* (Paris: Musée nationale d’art moderne, 1991), 223-7. Breton’s reference to Prague as “the magical capital of old Europe” is from a lecture he delivered in Prague on March 29, 1935, later published as “Situation surréaliste de l’objet” in *Position politique du surréalisme* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1935), 122 (translated in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1969), 255).

12 Valle, “Diálogo con André Breton,” 61 (translation: 80).

13 The Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios had been set up in 1933 by a group of artists supporting the Mexican revolution; at that stage, these included both Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, who would later find themselves on opposite sides with regard to Trotsky’s presence in Mexico.

14 Breton’s snapshots from Mexico were published in de la Beaumelle et al, *André Breton: la beauté convulsive*, 238-9.

15 Though co-written by Trotsky and Breton, the manifesto was signed by Breton and Rivera. It was published in Breton, *La Clé des champs*, translated in *Free Rein*, 29-34. The same volume also contains Breton’s “Visit with Leon Trotsky,” 35-47, the text of a talk delivered in Paris on 11 November 1938. For a detailed analysis of the convergence of Breton and Trotsky as well as the differences between them, see Robin Adèle Greenley, “For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky and Cárdenas’s Mexico” in Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss, eds., *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*

(Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 204-25.

16 However, Álvarez Bravo's photos of the meeting were not used by Breton at the time; the picture of the three men reproduced in *Minotaure* (48) was by another photographer, Fritz Bach, and Breton had a number of Bach's photographs of the encounter in his collection.

17 See the auction catalogue *André Breton 42 rue Fontaine: Photographies* (Paris: Calmels Cohen, 2003). For reproductions of twelve of these photographs by Álvarez Bravo, see de la Beaumelle et al, *André Breton: la beauté convulsive*, 322-7.

18 *Mexique* was on show at the Galerie Renou et Colle, Paris, 10-15 March 1939.

19 Valle, "Diálogo con André Breton," 61 (translation: 80). The conversation would have been in French but only survives in this Spanish translation.

20 Breton, "Souvenir de Mexique," 52. This much reproduced image by Posada had itself been based on a 1911 photograph of Zapata by Hugo Brehme and would in turn be the basis for a 1930-1 fresco painting by Diego Rivera; see Adrian Lock, *Mexico: A Revolution in Art 1910-1940* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2013), 35-7.

21 Stressing the importance of titles for Álvarez Bravo, Olivier Debrouse has commented on *Striking Worker, Assassinated*: "The comma, in this case, is indispensable. Given that the *striking worker* and *assassinated* are not written contiguously, the comma marks a break in action, in time." See Olivier Debrouse, *Mexican Suite: A History of Photography in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 227.

22 These illustrate the essay by Maurice Heine, "Regards sur l'enfer anthropoclassique," *Minotaure*, 8 (1936), 41-5. This takes the form of a conversation between, among others, the Marquis de Sade and Jack the Ripper, who shows the photographs of his victims to de Sade.

23 John Banville, "A Magician in Light" in Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Photopoetry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 9.

24 This phrase is used by Breton in his "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" (1930); see Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 183.

25 Breton, *Free Rein*, 33.

26 I first discussed this comparison in a paper on "Lee Miller and Surrealism" at the symposium *The Quintessential Lee Miller*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2007, mounted to coincide with a major exhibition of Miller's work. (For a reproduction of Miller's picture plus her own commentary on the picture, see the exhibition catalogue: Mark Haworth-Booth, *The Art of Lee Miller* (London: V & A, 2007), 194-5.)

27 *Mexique*, exh. cat. (Paris: La Galerie Renou et Colle, 1939). The catalogue text is reprinted in André Breton, *Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. II*, Marguerite Bonnet, ed. (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1992), 1232-7, with notes on 1813-5. (Some of the Álvarez Bravo pictures in the exhibition were the same as those in *Minotaure*, but there were others, one of which, *Girl looking at birds*, was featured on the catalogue cover. It is one of those images where he used the title to add a significant dimension to our reading of the picture.)

28 In Breton, *Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. II*, 1815, n.2, the Baudelaire reference is given as coming from his text *Fusées*: "La note éternelle, le style eternal et cosmopolite. Chateaubriand, Alph. Rabbe, Edgar Poe" (Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. I* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975), 661).

29 See, for example, this statement from Álvarez Bravo: "What in fact there is in Mexico is an ancient awareness of the duality of life and death, death being the end result of life, and that it is impossible to treat these two terms separately. This concept of duality we Mexicans receive as children, when, in November, we are taken to the fair and buy toys of death and skulls of sugar, which we eat. Eating is an activity which sustains life, and this life is sustained by a skull" ("Bravo Bravo!," interview with Manuel Álvarez Bravo by Tom Picton and Marcos Valdivia, *Camerawork*, 3 (July 1976), 3).

30 These must be among the objects collected by Breton, since they are credited as being photographed by Raoul Ubac, presumably in Paris. Elsewhere, in the same issue of *Minotaure* (61),

another photograph by Álvarez Bravo was reproduced to head the article “Ruines: ruine des ruines” by Benjamin Péret. Álvarez Bravo and Péret would later work together in Mexico, for example on a book of photographs of the Aztec sculptures in the National Museum, for which Péret provided the introduction.

31 The print of this picture owned by Breton was rather different from those reproduced elsewhere (including that illustrating this essay); see the reproduction in *André Breton 42 rue Fontaine: Photographies*, lot 5418. It is much darker and indistinct as well as being tightly cropped in on face and hand, eliminating the legs to either side of the face (see also note 79). This focus might help to account for Breton’s concentration on the teeth and fingernail, which do indeed stand out from the general darkness. This may also have made the image difficult to reproduce and account for why Breton omitted it from the illustrations in *Minotaure*.

32 Amanda Hopkinson outlines these circumstances in Hopkinson, *Manuel Álvarez Bravo* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 44 and 46. The *Daughter of the Dancers* was taken at a “shabby popular theatre” where the dancers were performing, while *The Eclipse* was photographed on Álvarez Bravo’s own rooftop and the woman was his first wife, Lola, using the veil to screen her eyes from the sun during the eclipse.

33 Breton again leaves the picture untitled, whereas Álvarez Bravo’s title *The Threshing* draws our attention to the activity going on in the picture.

34 Breton, *Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. II*, 1237.

35 Untitled text by Álvarez Bravo in Jain Kelly, ed., *Nude: Theory* (New York: Lustrum Press, 1979), 8. This is perhaps his most detailed account of the impulses behind *Good Reputation Sleeping*.

36 Angel Cosmos, “Conversación con Manuel Álvarez Bravo”, *FotoZoom* (Mexico City), 9:108 (September 1984), 51, translated in Susan Kismaric, *Manuel Álvarez Bravo* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 37.

37 Álvarez Bravo’s dummy for this layout is now in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; it is reproduced in *In Focus: Manuel Álvarez Bravo* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001), 58.

38 *Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo*, curated by André Breton, Wolfgang Paalen and Cesar Moro, exh. cat. (Mexico City: Galeria de Arte Mexicano, 1940). The catalogue lists four photographs by Álvarez Bravo.

39 A full account of Álvarez Bravo’s engagement with Surrealism in Mexico would also need to take account of his images published in *Dyn*, edited by Wolfgang Paalen between 1942 and 1944; see Donna Conwell, “The Photographic Aesthetic of *Dyn*” in Annette Leddy and Donna Conwell, eds., *Farewell to Surrealism: The Dyn circle in Mexico* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute / London: Tate, 2012), 35-62.

40 Letter to Ella and Bertram Wolfe, 17 March 1939, quoted by Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 230.

41 Kelly, ed., *Nude: Theory*, 9-12.

42 Alejo Carpentier, *El Reino de Este Mundo* (Mexico City: E.D.I.A.P.S.A, 1949), translated by Harriet de Onís as *The Kingdom of this World* (London: André Deutsch, 1990).

43 See Stephen Henighan, “The Pope’s Errant Son: Breton and Alejo Carpentier” in Ramona Fotiade, ed., *André Breton: The Power of Language* (Exeter: Elm Bank, 2000), 139-48.

44 Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World*, “Prologue,” translated by Heather Martin, 10.

45 Breton deployed this distinction in the title of his essay on nineteenth century French poetry: “Le merveilleux contre le mystère,” *Minotaure*, 9 (1936), 25-31.

46 Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 215.

47 Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World*, xv.

48 Gabriel García Márquez and Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, *The Fragrance of Guava* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 35.

49 Quoted by Elgy Gillespie, “Magical Realism comes to Marin County,” *The Independent on Sunday* (3

February 1991), 30.

50 In 1967, Alejo Carpentier published the original, extended text of the essay from which he had extracted his 1949 “Prologue.” There his argument for the specifically American qualities of “lo real maravilloso” were prefaced by sections detailing his own fascinated but ultimately dislocated visits to China, Russia and, most interesting for this text, Prague. It is translated in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds., *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 75-88.

51 Octavio Paz, *Alternating Current* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), quoted by Jason Wilson, *Octavio Paz* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 86.

52 From Octavio Paz, *El arco y la lira* (Mexico: F.C.E., 1956), translated in Jason Wilson, *Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 6. Wilson’s book contains an extended analysis of the relationship of Paz to Surrealism.

53 Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Mexico City: Cuadernos Americanos, 1950), translated as *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1961).

54 See, for example, Gerry Badger, “The Labyrinth of Solitude: the Art of Manuel Álvarez Bravo,” in Peter Turner and Gerry Badger, *Photo-Texts* (London: Travelling Light, 1988), 89-95.

55 Octavio Paz, *Early Poems 1935-1955* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 143 (dual language edition, “El cántaro roto” translated as “The broken waterjar” by Lysander Kemp).

56 Breton had been due to take this as a subject of one of his lectures in Mexico in 1938, but when it was cancelled, Diego Rivera made a (rather alarming) print to stand in for it; see “Communicating vessels (Vasos comunicantes)” in Dawn Ades and Alison McClean, *Revolution on Paper: Mexican Prints 1910-1960* (London: British Museum, 2010), 6 and 76.

57 Letter from Carlos Fuentes quoted by Muriel Rukeyser in the “Foreword” to Paz, *Early Poems 1935-1955*, np.

58 Octavio Paz and Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Instante y revelación* (Mexico City: Fondo Nacional para Actividades Sociales, 1982).

59 There has recently been a larger re-evaluation of the relationship between Surrealism and Latin America; see Dawn Ades, Rita Eder and Graciela Speranza, eds., *Surrealism In Latin America: Vivismo Muerto* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute / London: Tate, 2012) as well as the essays in the special issue on Surrealism and post-colonial Latin America, *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, 3:1-2 (2009).

60 For comments by Brassai and Kertész, see Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, 152-3.

61 The mail order for the book, dating from 1931, is now in the Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S. C., Mexico City; cited by Laura González Flores, “Manuel Álvarez Bravo: Syllables of Light” in *Manuel Álvarez Bravo* (Paris: Jeu de Paume / Madrid: Fundación Mapfre, 2012), 24, n. 41.

62 Manuel Álvarez Bravo, “Adget [sic]. Documentos para artistas,” *Artes Plásticas*, Mexico City, 3 (Autumn, 1939).

63 See Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, 88-113.

64 Interview with Manuel Álvarez Bravo in Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper, *Dialogue with Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 230-1.

65 This exhibition was reconstructed in a show at the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paris, 2004; see the accompanying book *Documentary and Anti-Graphic Photographs* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2004). “Anti-graphic” was a term that Levy had coined to contrast Cartier-Bresson’s work with the fine-print formalism then dominant in American avant-garde photography and exemplified in the work of “the three great S’s—Stieglitz, Strand, Sheeler.” For a larger discussion of Levy’s gallery, see Katherine Ware and Peter Barberie, *Dreaming in Black and White: Photography at the Julien Levy Gallery* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2006).

66 The phrase “borderline relationship” is coined by Roberto Tejado in the course of a longer examination of the Levy show in his essay “Equivocal Documents” in *Manuel Álvarez Bravo* (Paris /

Madrid, 2012), 48.

67 Julien Levy, *Surrealism* (New York: Black Swan Press, 1936; republished in facsimile, New York: Arno/Worldwide, 1968).

68 André Breton, *Mad Love* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1987), 39.

69 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *André Breton: Roi soleil* (Paris: Fata morgana, 1995), unpaginated.

70 A letter in the archive of the Cartier-Bresson Foundation suggests that Cartier-Bresson asked Breton to write a text for the catalogue of the 1935 exhibition in Mexico City (see Clément Chéroux, *Henri Cartier-Bresson* (Paris; Centre Pompidou, 2013), 36). There is however no further evidence that the text was written or sent, but this does suggest the possibility that Breton would have known of Álvarez Bravo three years before his own voyage to Mexico.

71 Letter from Cartier-Bresson, February 25 1935, quoted in Agnès Sire, “Le voyage Mexicain ou la quête de la maturité” in *Henri Cartier-Bresson / Paul Strand, 1932-1934* (Paris: Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, 2012), 17; translated in Lock, *Mexico: A Revolution in Art 1910-1940*, 134.

72 Interview with Susan Kismaric, March 15 1996, cited in Kismaric, *Manuel Álvarez Bravo*, 31.

73 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Inside/Out,” in *Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 49.

74 This account is particularly indebted to the conversation recorded under the title “Optical Parables” in *In Focus: Manuel Álvarez Bravo*, 110. The photograph is also reproduced in Breton, “Souvenir de Mexique,” 45, where it is titled “La Villa de Guadalupe (La Villita).”

75 This convention of titling by place and date was adopted by Cartier-Bresson in his post-war books and exhibitions, and subsequently became commonplace within documentary photography. Unfortunately, though, there is no evidence whether he was already using it for his exhibitions in Mexico City and New York in 1935.

76 For reproductions of this photograph, see Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: the Early Work* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1987), 139, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Mexican Notebooks* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 26. The latter volume juxtaposes the images made by Cartier-Bresson in 1934-5 with those made on his return to the country in 1964. The differences between the two sets of photographs are often striking.

77 See Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, 168-9.

78 Quentin Bajac, Clément Chéroux, Guillaume Le Gall, Phillippe-Alain Michaud and Michel Poivert, *La Subversion des images: Surréalisme, Photographie, Film* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009).

79 The exhibition display is reflected in the layout of the photographs in the catalogue: *La Subversion des images*, 262-269. The print of “Posthumous Portrait” (borrowed from the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and reproduced on page 269) is similar to the one owned by André Breton, referred to in note 31.