

BOOK REVIEW:

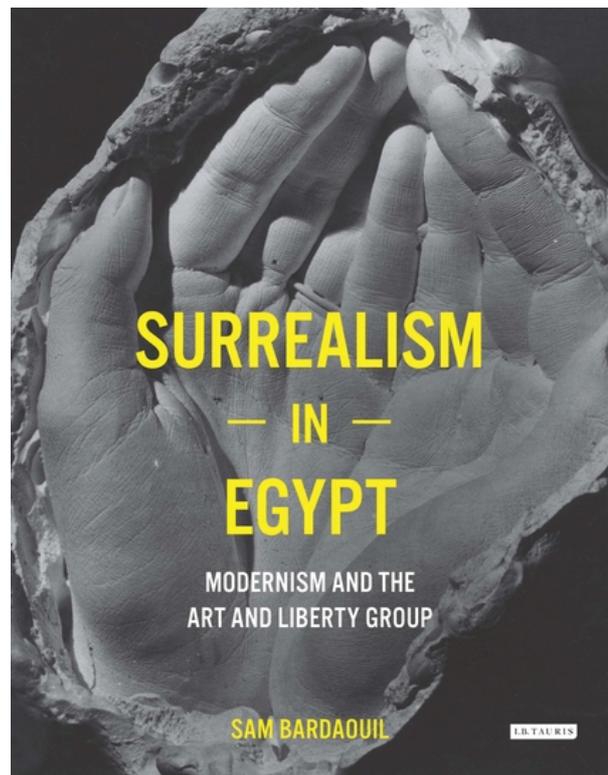
Sam Bardaouil, *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group*

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Sam Bardaouil's *Surrealism in Egypt* shares an intimate historiography of an artistic movement in Egypt as championed by an avant-garde group named 'Art et liberté' that was active in Egypt from about 1938 to 1952.

In eight chapters, plus an exceptionally rich appendix that reproduces artworks by members of the group, Bardaouil traces the group's driving passions and their meticulous efforts to stir the stale waters of thinking as humanity was descending into the nightmares of World War II. The group sought to bring forth the revolutionary ardour that hopefully would instigate an egalitarian world order, not just for Egypt but for the world at large. As Bardaouil illustratively shows, borrowing from mainly French sources and British models did not inhibit the surrealists of Egypt from being inventive and attentive to local specificities. Unlike the proponents of the postcolonial discourses so prevalent in the last few decades, the local for the 'Art and Liberty' group was but one instantiation of the universal, but unless the universal subject is vigorously empowered, the local will stay incarcerated in the swamps of its tradition, resulting in a concentration camp, both literal and symbolic.¹ Such was the group's philosophy, which the book seeks to carefully delineate. Given the group's both local and international contentions, Bardaouil's readers will gather that unlike contemporary sensibilities, so often sprinkled with liberal tastes wherein art appears as exclusively a bourgeois undertaking, the group in question approached art with the same vigour that it did to, say, religion, sex or politics. Via poetry, sculpture, painting or photography, these angry young men were incendiary.

Historiographical works, as Bardaouil shows, are rarely innocent and have over the years succeeded in mostly disfiguring the group's legacy. The question that persists is: does *Surrealism in Egypt* succeed in doing otherwise – that is, in transmitting the justice it thinks Art and Liberty deserves? Leaving the laudatory statements aside, the author sells the group members as



¹ In the Group's manifesto, 'Vive L'art dégénéré', Hénein writes 'we refuse to see in these regressive myths anything but real concentration camps of thoughts', quoted in Sam Bardouil, *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group*, 2017, p 245

reformists (and in several places, see pp 4, 23, 44, 97 and 123). Yet, on other occasions (pp 12, 28, 50), he shyly alludes that they were at the receiving end of the reformist spectrum. It does not take much to notice that Georges Hénein, the group's founding father, lived and practised an incendiary life. This is evident in the manner in which he carefully kept his clarity of vision in respect to both the Fascists and what Bardaouil calls the Democracies (the Allies during World War II). Bardaouil tells us that Hénein, within two days of the obliteration of Hiroshima and one day before the bombing of Nagasaki, condemns these actions, casting them as yet another variation of Fascism.² The critical insight wherein the American role is seen as one of impairing all possible pockets of resistance against a taste for barbarism (predominant in the post-1945 world order) hardly connects with any reformist agendas. Likewise, Ida Kar, a photo artist and a member of Hénein's close circle, in a piece titled *Still Life, Egypt*, which 'offensively' illustrates the bourgeois elites' masturbations over an Egyptian mummy, in a desperate gesture to sell nationalism to the reified multitudes and thus decimate the internationalism of the struggle, cannot be deemed reformist. These are just two examples that Bardaouil makes reference to that undersell an unparalleled intensity in resisting a multifaceted tyranny.

Considering some examples that Bardaouil does not refer to, however, proves how the group acted outside reformist frameworks. In *The Prestige of Terror* by Hénein, one finds 'less of a thesis and more of a manifesto',³ tinged with a tone of finality and urgency that unless the leviathan of profit is addressed, humanity will be on the road to its antithesis. Kamel el-Telmisany, a painter-turned-filmmaker, was another illustrious figure in the Art and Liberty group. His 1945 film *Al-Souq Al-Sawda'* (The Black Market) is a reminder that bourgeois morality can only be anti-human. Long before Hollywood clinched its enslaving thrall over audiences worldwide, el-Telmissany discerned that, more than nuclear bombs, the US was going to usher in a neo-feudal age via the most far reaching of the arts: cinema. Likewise, in refusing to title his paintings, and because of his works' subversive value, Ramsès Younane compares to the radical French *sans-culotterie* of whom Gracchus Babeuf is the iconic representative. As Younane puts it: 'the crisis of the bourgeois is not consumerism as such but that lack of carnal desire for poetry, pleasure and ecstasy. It is a crisis in movement, growth and openness. In short, a crisis of life.'⁴ Younane's dissidence against what he assesses as the stale academic hegemony and artistic practices is not unsubstantiated. Readers may want to contextualise the group's call for degenerate art and its manifesto, '*vive l'art dégénéré*', during exceptional phases when similar men of letters opted for peace and even 'repentance' at the expense of freedom and intellectual

² 'We are currently witnessing a penetration of Hitlerian political behavior into the ranks of democracy' (*OEuvres* 481), quoted in Michael Richardson, 'The Foolishness of Living: Georges Henein Between Worlds', *Dada/Surrealism* 19, 2013: n. pag. 5 Web. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0084-9537.1270>

³ See Broomberg & Chanarin's website: www.broombergchanarin.com/prestige-of-terror

⁴ In *Evolution* (the Group's magazine), No 5, May 1940, quoted in Sobhi Al-Sharouni, *Al-Muthāḳaf al-Mutāmārid: Ramsès Younane* (The Rebellious Intellectual: Ramsès Younane), Al-Heiāa Al-Masria Al-āmma Lilkitāb, 1992, p 68, translation by the author

integrity. Indeed, even the now celebrated writer Taha Hussein had to contradict his own findings on pre-Islamic poetry (1925) as a consequence of pressure from Al-Azhar, the all-powerful and intransigent religious institution in Cairo (comparable to the papacy during medieval Europe) and threats of legal proceedings.

Several other sources for the group's prolific output could easily fill the pages of the study. Bardaouil keeps the discussions of these revolutionaries' repertoire to a minimum; instead, in several instances, readers are flooded with chit-chat about who dined with whom and what was on the menu (p 74). A beginning art historian's cursory search will find a radical perspective, one that sets the group and their *oeuvres* apart from most movements, and even today inspires a dis-alienation from the dictates of the market economy. Indeed, contemporary historiography, loaded with nationalist polemics (but those subscribing to liberalism, too), not only has not set Art and Liberty's legacy right, but on the contrary has worked to actively silence their revolutionary and radical flame.

Likewise, and in referencing the theoretical substratum upon which the group sits, readers cannot be sure whether the glitches or the imagined preference of Hegel over Marx are a misreading by the author or the group's own stance. As evidenced from their writings and drawings, Hénein and his fellow members could not regurgitate the findings of the two theorists and worship them as timeless pronouncements valid for eternity. Like any truly perceptive readers, the members of Art and Liberty read Marx and Hegel less to celebrate them and more to bypass them. Instead of zooming in on the primacy of matter over ideas, or the reverse, the group discerns their own dialectical method whereby knowledge of the absolute emerges. It is true that not all members were crystal clear that emergence is neither a generation nor a construction. Indeed, the author overlooks the group's united stance vis-à-vis universality in their overall theoretical arsenal, both in form and content, a position that won them not a small number of enemies. Apart from, or before highlighting the fact of 'winning' them accusations of insensitivity to local exigencies, universalism, for the group, underlies the inseparable essence of material reality from the abstract realm of ideas and thinking. This is evidenced in how the group contended the fallacy of certain intellectuals' championing of Egyptian art, modernity or thinking. Instead, they maintained a steadfast perseverance to engage only in art, modernity or thinking in Egypt. Before nationalism took full swing in the Middle East and North Africa, the group's members synthesised identitarian thinking as a substitute for the class struggle, a regression into 'an imagined past', hence their larger assessment of Fascism explaining why the powers-that-be in Egypt (both the monarchy and later the Free Officers from 1952 onward) perceived them as an existential threat.

This is where Bardaouil's account of the group's debacle and its eventual disbanding is imprecise. Hénein's frustration with the younger generation's lack of sensitivity, or their uncritical subscription to ideologies such as nationalism, is only the tip of the iceberg. The iceberg itself has to do with the repercussions from democracy's triumph over the then immediate and most obvious of evils, Fascism. It matters little whether Hénein or members of

Art and Liberty realised what victory in World War II translated into or not. In the interest of fairness, they did – for the American order meant the complete vassalage of genuine alternatives to the market economy. ‘Complete’ here means specifically the cultural erosion of any pre-capitalistic cavities in terms of sensibilities and unconscious predispositions of taste, of that passion for the beautiful. With the American ascendancy, cultural war is deemed far more reaching and cost-effective than the military one. The group specifically regrets the erosion of sense-certainty in the sensible; the one that emits the certitude of dignity in that sensible which does not necessarily connect with the allures of the shop window. Nevertheless, art in the post-1945 world has been enlisted to accommodate and enforce that American victory, the sense-certainty in the packaged sensible. Those whose agenda is the foundation of an egalitarian world order have been squeezed to the limit and are literally left with no place under the sun. Little wonder, then, that for Art and Liberty it was André Breton in France who sought to turn surrealism into a personal cult, gratifying egos and nurturing narcissisms.

If indeed the group engages in some theoretical glitches, it is in the merging of Freud with both Marx and Hegel, not the confusing of the latter two. To retain anything of relevance from these two results in the certainty that the personal cannot be a barometer of the collective. Differently put, personal experiences or difficulties are historical injunctions, but in themselves they cannot gauge or map the collective’s determination towards freedom. When considered critically, the Freudian model has been the precursor of almost all sorts of enclosures, spelling regressions that Art and Liberty specifically underlined – such as, for example, nationalism, side by side with future metastasising such as Islamism.

Similarly, the presumption of the centrality of the artist as *l’éveilleur des consciences* for the masses, without whom ‘the herds’ just miss their path, remains undoubtedly an issue. Differently put, the group could not envisage that the *avant-garde* as a social category is more of a narcissist construction that presupposes the primacy of cogitation, with cogitation being that activity of the mind that the masses are deemed incapable of affording. Such a Leninist and, more importantly, narcissist construction annuls the auto-movement of history whereby the proletariat ceases the opportunity whenever that opportunity is ready. By ‘ready’ one means that which Hegel finds ‘necessary’.⁵ The group’s alternative definition of ‘knowledge of the absolute’ contradicts the auto-movement of human reality. In order to justify the artist’s *raison d’être*, they resorted to the necessity of the *avant-garde* in the life of the populace. For never in the history of mankind did the ‘uneducated masses’ have to wait for the enlightened intellectuals or the avant-gardes to carry out what they felt they have to carry out. There exists an immanence to revolutionary outbursts that makes a given revolution inevitable, with or without avant-gardes. All artists can do is precipitate the new dawn of history, never instigate it. Such ambiguity vis-à-vis the Hegelian formulation of the auto-movement, whereby a given

⁵ Hegel, in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, finds that ‘Necessity has been defined, and rightly so, as the union of possibility and actuality’, see www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/sl/slactual.htm#SL143n_1

phenomenon (revolution included) evolves from being to essence to concept clouds certain members of Art and Liberty from realising that even art has to cease existing once the *Guttungwesen* (the non-alienated and non-alienating individuals) become a reality. Readiness to see even art as superfluous once it has fulfilled its role seems lacking in their nevertheless very rich *oeuvres*.

While the group's celebration of degenerative art is indeed seditious, their intended audiences – that is, other members of the elites – cannot take them seriously except as expressing dissidence characteristic of, and sometimes expected from, similar young men in their age and class. The shock value in the painting and poetry, stemming from Hénein and his circle's capitalisation on dreams and the subconscious, seem too abstract for ordinary people to even consider, let alone afford indulging in. For the Egyptian *fellahin* or the urban poor, living in the black misery of the pre-1952 situation, were in no position to be receptive to the group's conversations. Therefore, in targeting the few educated, that is, their social equals, Art and Liberty signed its own death certificate.

Surrealism in Egypt challenges the core thesis of the now classic and celebrated 1982 study by Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939*. Bardaouil's readers discover that there existed far-more thrilling and radical intellectuals in the members of Art and Liberty, who were diametrically opposed to those Hourani presents as progressives and revolutionaries such as Taha Hussein or Mohamed Abduh. The works of these two, often celebrated scholars pale in comparison with the actual works of Art and Liberty. Their legacies, nevertheless, were different from their achievements in consequence of a questionable historiography. Bardaouil's liberal stances may have hindered his perspective, overlooking that fiery zeal behind the surrealist group he studies. Nevertheless, the reading materials in the appendix (36 pages of them), where rare literature and biographic details of the group members are collected, compensate for the oversight. *Surrealism in Egypt* remains an excellent introduction for contemporary readers, and for those who are not necessarily art historians, to discover that public taste in the Arab world was not always as low or lethargic as it has become. *Daesh* (ISIS) and other life-denying movements are regressive tendencies, which have historically prevailed over others, over those that called for and used to enjoy life and savour its erotically fuelled poetics.

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