

# Illuminating Reality From Within

Saturday 11 May 2019, by [LÖWY Michael](#), [Red Wedge](#) (Date first published: 22 August 2018).

**The term “critical irrationalism,” though present and well-known in the spheres of literary and arts scholarship, is unfamiliar to most. But then, so is living in the world of 2018. It is also alienating and in constant violent flux. Which means perhaps there is something for this critical irrationalism to teach us...**

Michael Löwy has written about critical irrationalism – along with realism, Surrealism, Situationism, Romanticism and a great many other aesthetic approaches. He is the author of many books on a wide array of topics written from a Marxist perspective, from liberation theology to uneven and combined development, from Che Guevara to Walter Benjamin and Franz Kafka.

For Löwy, as for *Red Wedge*, the process of changing and understanding the world always runs next to our ability to imagine and re-imagine it. We asked him to share with us some of his thoughts on how art helps us in striking this balance.

**Red Wedge:** Let’s start with the basics... Can you tell us about your experience becoming a socialist, and how this was intertwined with your aesthetic interests? Do you recall any formative moments?

**Michael Löwy:** I was born in Brazil and became a socialist at age 17, around 1955. I fell in love with a woman, and it was for life: Rosa Luxemburg! I joined a small (very small!) revolutionary band – followers of Rosa Luxemburg – and that was the beginning of my socialist commitment. More or less at the same time I became very much interested in Surrealism. I read a lot about it, and in 1958, while visiting Paris, I had the chance to meet the Surrealist poet Benjamin Péret. The first article I published, in 1959 in a small literary journal, was about the FIARI, the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art, founded by André Breton and Leon Trotsky in 1938. So art and politics, Surrealism and Marxism, were very much associated in my “formative years,” and still are today.

**Red Wedge:** To continue with “political” questions, what prospects do you see for a renewed international Left? In the last few years we have seen new, but decidedly uneven articulations of the “parliamentary road to socialism”. On one hand, there is the tragic capitulation of Syriza, yet we also have seen the growth in popularity of figures like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. Meanwhile, inter-imperial conflict and betrayed revolution litter the landscape in the global south. What is your assessment, then, of the present conjuncture, and what kind of role can the left – in particular leftist cultural producers – play?

**Löwy:** Your question is a bit too large! I think we see, on a global scale, a powerful right-wing, nationalist, racist and religious fundamentalist offensive. There are, however, signs – you mentioned some – that socialist ideas are becoming popular among the youth. In the US, the UK, but, I think, also Latin America. I believe that the radical left can only become a significant force by participating in the social movements that challenge the established order: indigenous, peasant, workers, feminist, ecological, anti-racist, and other movements.

Culture is a key aspect of this struggle. To paraphrase Lenin, *without revolutionary culture there can be no revolutionary movement*. Fortunately, there are many artists, writers, filmmakers, and other cultural activists that are deeply committed to emancipatory movements. Just to give a recent example: Raoul Peck's two recent pictures, the documentary on James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro* and the fiction on *The Young Karl Marx*.

**Red Wedge:** In your essay, "A Moonlight Enchanted Night," you note the long tradition of "critical realism" in Marxist cultural thought – but note its potential exclusivity and rigidity (famously shown in the Brecht-Lukacs debates). Could you elaborate a bit on how this notion of critical realism can so easily fall into that kind of narrowness – then and now?

**Löwy:** Critical realism can be of extraordinary value. One cannot deny that Marx learned a lot from the novels of Honoré de Balzac and Charles Dickens. The mistake is to transform this into an exclusive cannon, in a very narrow and dogmatic way.

Let me take the case of Lukacs, certainly one of the most brilliant Marxist literary critics and historians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of his least satisfactory works is *Die gegenwartsbedeutung des kritischen Realismus* (1957) – *The present meaning of critical realism*, also published with the title *Wider den missverstandenen Realismus* (1958), or *Against the misunderstanding of realism*. One of the main chapters of the book is called "Thomas Mann or Franz Kafka." The choice between them is presented as one between "an artistically interesting decadence" (Kafka) or a "critical realism true as life" (Mann).

The correct choice is supposed to be made easier by "the beginning of the collapse of the Cold War and the perspective of a peaceful coexistence of the nations," which permits to overcome "the permanent fear, the fatalistic terror." Lukacs builds an artificial dilemma, mixing Soviet foreign policy – "peaceful co-existence" – the dogmatic pseudo-Marxist concept of "decadence," and an extremely narrow view of critical realism, which excludes "pessimistic" authors lacking "the belief in the progress of humanity."

Less than ten years later, Lukacs was forced to revise his judgement on the Prague writer. What motivated this change of heart? There is a curious history, told by the Hungarian philosopher himself to his disciples. After the suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956, he was imprisoned by the Soviet authorities in a Rumanian fortress. While waiting to be judged, he had no idea of the accusations weighing on him. One day, during this long and disquieting expectancy, on the occasion of a walk in the prison's courtyard, György Lukacs turned to his wife and shared with her the following confidence: "*Kafka war doch ein Realist*," or "after all, Kafka was a realist..."

Was Kafka a realist or not? I would argue that Franz Kafka's novels and tales defy such classifications; they establish themselves in a no-mans land, a border territory between reality and *irreality*. Kafka's writings do not follow the classical realistic cannon because of their disquieting oneiric atmosphere. The author seems to erase – silently, discretely, unnoticed – all distinction between dream and reality. His visionary power flows precisely from this subjective approach which, without being either "realist" nor "anti-realist," illuminates social reality from within.

**Red Wedge:** You propose, in that same essay, and as an alternative, a method of critical irrationalism. Could you sketch some of the main elements of critical irrationalism?

**Löwy:** This term obviously does not exist in any dictionary nor in any established literary terminology, but I would argue that it is helpful in describing a vast area of the literary landscape which has been neglected, despised, or ignored by (most of) the partisans of critical realist aesthetics. Of course, there is an element of provocation and irony in manufacturing this expression,

but I think it has a deeper meaning.

Of course, not all irrealist literature or art is critical. Fairy tales, for instance, can be quite conformist in their ethical and social values. Critical irrealism can be said of œuvres that do not follow the rules of *accurate representation of life as it really is*, but nevertheless are critical of social reality. Their critical viewpoint is often related to the dream of another world, an imaginary, idealized, or terrifying one, opposed to the gray, prosaic, disenchanted reality of modern (capitalist) society.

Even when it takes the superficial form of a flight from reality, critical irrealism can contain a powerful implicit negative charge challenging the philistine bourgeois order. The word *critique* should not be understood as a rational argument, a systematic opposition or an explicit discourse. More often, in irrealist art, it takes the form of protest, outrage, disgust, anxiety, angst – the feeling so thoroughly dismissed by Lukacs. Sometimes the critique is only present in an indirect way, through the idealized images of a different, non-existing reality.

**Red Wedge:** In another one of your works – *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, written with Robert Sayre – you mount a defense of romanticism and the romantic impulse as a legitimate one in the face of the degradations of modern life. It would appear that capital has a tendency to recreate the conditions that give rise to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics in the first place: the creation and destruction of the intelligentsia as well as various centers of “semi-autonomous” cultural production and social interaction (including working-class spaces). How do you see this in relationship to oppositional critical irrealism? How do you explain the tendency for certain Marxists to see the romantic as inherently reactionary or alien to Marxism?

**Löwy:** Most – or at least a very substantial part – of irrealist critical art belongs to Romanticism and its later manifestations, such as Symbolism or Surrealism. For us (Sayre and myself) Romanticism is not a literary school of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, but a *world-view*, present in modern culture since Jean-Jacques Rousseau until today. Its central component is a cultural protest against capitalist civilization, in the name of past, pre-capitalist values. Marx explained in a passage of the *Grundrisse* that life had greater plenitude in pre-capitalist times, but it is absurd to dream of returning to the past, as the Romantics advocate. However, bourgeois society has only emptiness to propose, and therefore the Romantic critique will exist, with some legitimacy, as long as capitalism exists.

This comment by Marx includes *almost* everything which has to be said about Romanticism. Except that there is one form of the Romantic culture that does not advocate the return to the past, but a *detour* by the past, towards an emancipated future. This we call revolutionary Romanticism, which begins with Rousseau, followed by Blake, Shelley, William Morris and many others.

Many Marxists, including György Lukacs, perceive only the regressive, conservative, reactionary forms of Romanticism, such as Novalis’ dream of restoring Medieval Christianity. Both forms are present in the history of the Romantic movements, but it is a serious mistake to ignore the revolutionary component, of which Surrealism is a striking example.

**Red Wedge:** You’ve written a good deal on Surrealism, rescuing it, in some ways from the distortions placed on it by figures like Sartre as well as the political decontextualizing that the art academy, at least in the United States, projects on it. In your book *Morning Star*, you write that “Surrealism is not, has never been, and never will be a literary or artistic school but is a movement of the human spirit in revolt and an entirely subversive attempt to reestablish the ‘enchanted’ dimensions at the core of human existence – poetry, passion, mad love, imagination, magic, myth, the marvelous, dreams, revolt, utopian ideals – which have been eradicated by this civilization and

its values. In other words, Surrealism is a protest against narrow minded rationality."

What do you think such a movement has to offer a critical or radical imagination in the age of late neoliberalism, where there is on one hand an entrenched hyper-rationality but also a very phantasmagorical, neo-Victorian mindset promoted?

**Löwy:** In one of their first documents, "Revolution First and Always" (1925), the founders of Surrealism proclaim:

*Everywhere that Western civilization rules, all human connection has ceased, with the exception of anything motivated by economic interest, "payment in cold, hard cash." For more than a century, human dignity has been reduced to the level of an exchange-value.*

Is this assessment not relevant today, in the neo-liberal nightmare in which we live? This is of course a typical romantic anti-capitalist statement, referring to a past when human connection and dignity still existed. But for the Surrealists, a social revolution is the only way to get rid of the capitalist civilization. This is why they stubbornly tried to connect to revolutionary movements, first Communist, then Trotskyist, as well as Anarchist, and, always, anti-colonialist.

Capitalist phantasmagories are expressions of commodity fetishism. They are nothing new, only intensified to an unprecedented degree. Walter Benjamin, an admirer of Surrealism, discusses this extensively in his *Parisian Passages*. Of course, capitalist civilization can use and manipulate various forms of irrationalism, such as racism, fanatical nationalism, religious fundamentalism, etc. as long as they are compatible with profit accumulation. Donald Trump is a perfect example of this.

**Red Wedge:** We have covered a lot of different modes of "ur-realism" here. Realism, irrationalism, Surrealism. Where is the convergence or overlap between the three? Is such an overlap to be found in the lived experience of working and oppressed people or must it be forged through the activity of artists, revolutionaries and radicals?

**Löwy:** I don't think we have to foster a convergence or overlap between them. Realism, irrationalism and Surrealism (these two partially overlap) are different ways to relate to the world. There exist great Realist works of art, or of literature, that powerfully contribute to the de-legitimation of the established order of things, and therefore are part of the subversive culture without which no subversive moment can rise. Have we not all read Jack London's *Iron Heel*, and did we not feel inspired by it to fight capitalist infamy?

Now, Surrealism and Situationism (which was a dissident branch of Surrealism) played a very significant role in inspiring young people to rebel in May 1968. Some of the slogans in the walls - such as "Let us put imagination in power" - were directly related to these two movements. And André Breton's conferences on Surrealism and Freedom in Haïti, in January 1946, were the spark that ignited the popular insurrection which brought down a dictatorship in the island.

**Red Wedge:** What current radical artists, writers, musicians, poets, cultural workers whose work exemplifies critical irrationalism? Or, if not exemplify, are there any who come close? And what can other cultural workers or artists engaged in the transformation of society learn from them?

**Löwy:** There are many Surrealist artists around the world which belong to critical irrationalism, and try to engage in social transformation. Several of them recently sent some of their works to an International Art Festival organized in Chiapas by the Zapatista Liberation Army (EZLN). The Chicago Surrealist group had strong links with the Industrial Workers of the World and Surrealist

writer Franklin Rosemont wrote a beautiful biography of Joe Hill.

I consider the movie *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) as an interesting example of critical irrationalism, by creating an imaginary (“non-realist”) world where a nature-friendly species wages a liberation war against a murderous, technocratic, capitalist-colonial expedition.

I don’t know if something can be learned from such experiences. Each artist or cultural worker committed to social emancipation has to find their own way to produce radical, critical, subversive and/or utopian culture. Without forgetting the principles laid down by André Breton and Leon Trotsky when they met in Mexico in 1938 and founded the FIARI: authentic art has a revolutionary vocation, but should never submit to any state control or party discipline.

Michael Löwy is a Marxist scholar, author, and activist. His works include *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx* (Brill), *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (Duke University Press), and *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’* (Verso).

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**P.S.**

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