

## BOOKS

# Surrealism: is it now or has it ever been revolutionary?

## WHAT IS SURREALISM? Selected Writings

By Andre Breton, edited and introduced by Franklin Rosemont  
Monad Books (Pathfinder Press), \$8.95, paperback

"Contrary to prevalent misdefinitions, surrealism is not an aesthetic doctrine, not a philosophical system, nor a mere literary or artistic school... It aims to free the imagination from the mechanisms of psychic and social repression, so that the inspiration and exaltation heretofore regarded as the exclusive domain of poets and artists will be acknowledged as the common property of all."

A bold beginning for a very bold book. Andre Breton, who in 1924 penned the First Surrealist Manifesto and remained at the leadership of the extraordinary cultural-political movement that followed, has scarcely been known in this country outside French departments and Art History classes. Now, at last, we can hear Breton on a staggering range of subjects, sounding the call for humankind to listen to its dreams and pay closer heed to its imagination as part of the revolutionary question.

Franklin Rosemont adds a meticulously researched, book-length introduction, itself a manifesto on the continuity of the movement into the present.

Readers who seek an explanation of their own cultural revolutions during the 1960s and after will find no ready-made answers here. The acid-droppings, weird rock, Aquarian expectations and bitter disillusionments seem galaxies away from the single-mindedly visionary and sometimes abstract surrealist gaze.

The mind-bending art on many recent LP covers seems to indicate that the original surrealist thrust has been superceded and devaluated. And certainly the political implications of surrealism as liberation are uncertain in a world where multitudinous classes and nationalities, women

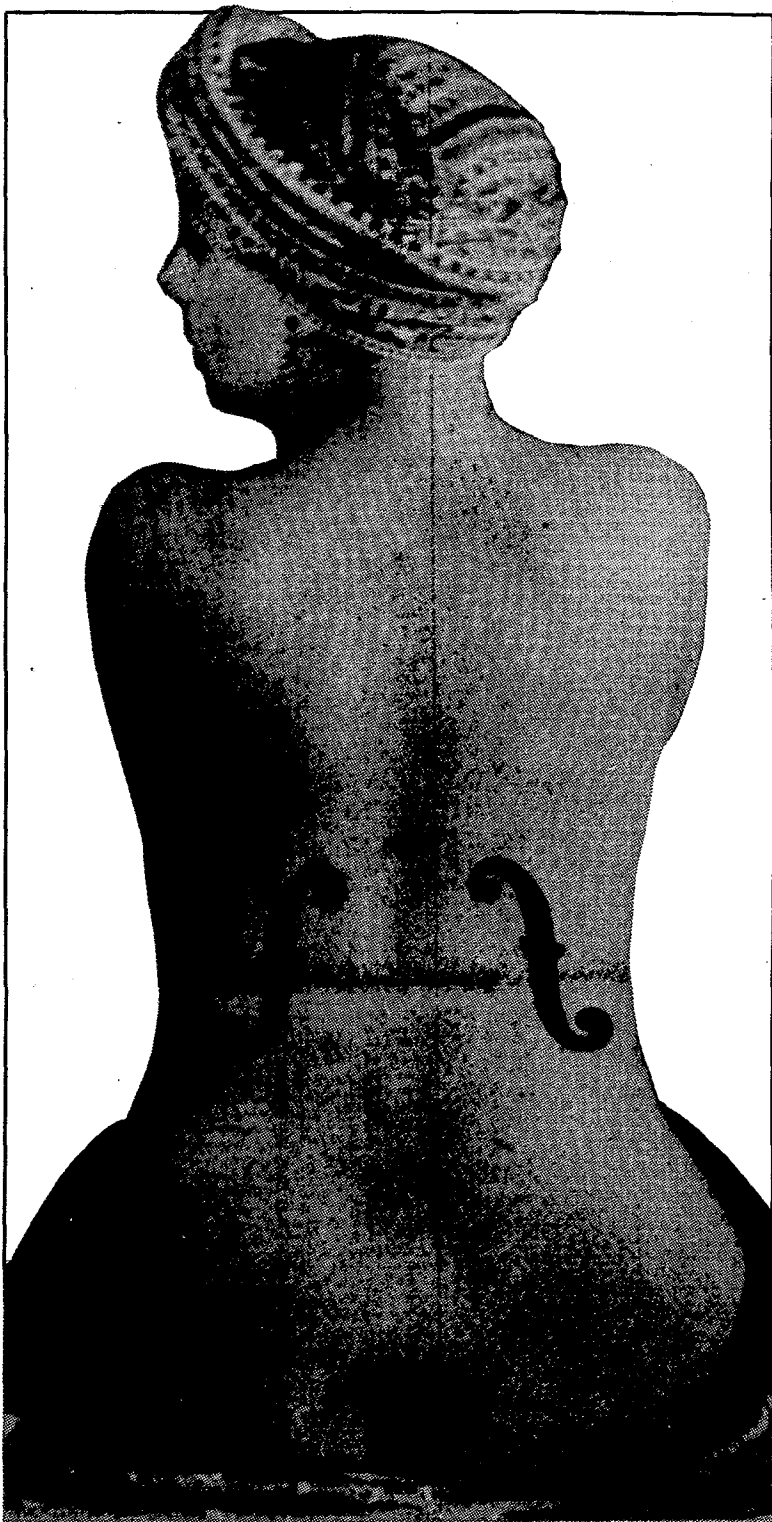
and gays have explicated their own astonishingly diverse paths.

But even so, and even despite the strident tone of text and introduction to this book, Breton remains a sentinel in the search for human creativity and dignity.

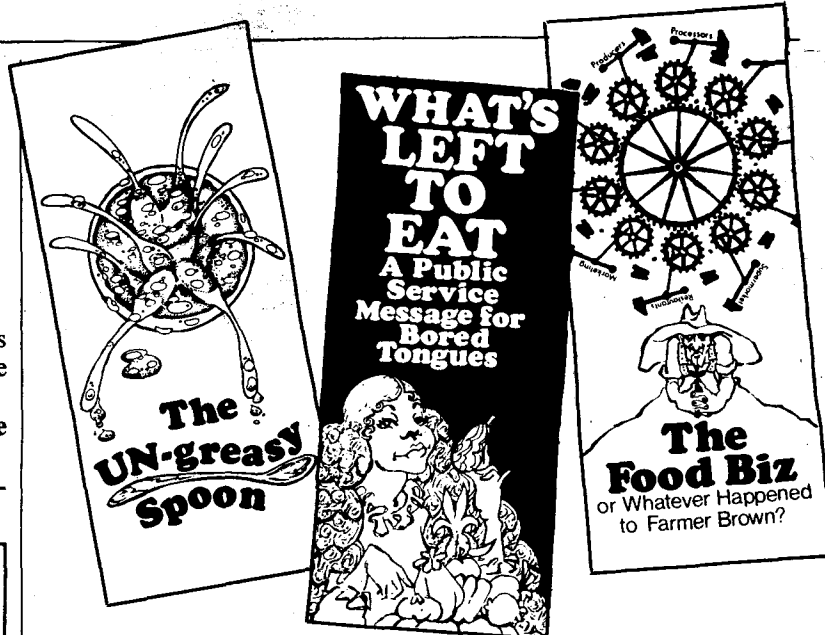
*What Is Surrealism?* takes its place alongside the classics on the revolutionary bookshelf.

—Paul Buhle

Paul Buhle is the editor of *Cultural Correspondence*.



Man Ray's *VIOLIN D'INGRES*, a 1924 in-joke.



Three of the *Midget Encyclopedia* brochures.

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All the information  
works below as well  
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—J.S.

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## FILM

# Madame Rosa, perfect vehicle for a great French actress

## MADAME ROSA

Written and directed by Moshe Mizrahi  
Starring Simone Signoret  
An Atlantic Films release.

Kids 'n' dogs 'n' goodhearted whores could be the ingredients for a very sticky confection—but not in *Madame Rosa*.

Simone Signoret has been given a perfect vehicle and steers it flawlessly between sentimentality and cynicism. Her Rosa is not another romanticized prostitute, but an unadorned human being with neither glaring faults nor gleaming virtues, who requires neither glorification or pity. She's a woman of strength who has chosen her own course in life, and until retirement at age 50 ("for aesthetic reasons"), "found it as good as any other."

As the film opens, Rosa is supporting herself by providing room and board for the little mistakes of other streetwalkers. At first the kids are packed into her sixth floor walk-up, three to a bed. But as her health declines, so does the number of her charges until she is left with only Momo, a 14-year-old Arab boy who has been badgering her for information about his absentee parents, leading the younger children to minor rebellions and getting into trouble on the street. He also possesses a moody, brooding nature that has Madame dragging him to the doctor for advice and tranquilizers (advice for him; tranquilizers for her).

But as Rosa's life becomes more tenuous and Momo's outlook more bleak, they discover in each other the only genuine emotional bond either has experienced. It eventually proves to be even stronger than ties of blood. Their roles are reversed. Momo is compelled to take care of Rosa who, after giving him affection and ideals, must leave him to face the uncertain prospect of a life without love. "Is it possible to live such a life?" Momo muses. "We shall see..."

On the surface *Madame Rosa* is about the relationship of two people, but it is also about the relationship between money and love.

For a prostitute, the connection is obvious, but it manifests itself with more ambiguity in every other aspect of Rosa's life. She loves the kids she cares for, pesters their parents to keep up with their money orders, and continues to keep the troublesome Momo although his support payments are years in arrears. She is outraged when Momo sells his beloved pet terrier and then stuffs the 500 francs down a sewer. Ostensibly her concern is for the waste of money, but it is really more for the show of cold-bloodedness on the boy's part. Although she talks with a sliver of pride about the loyal clientele of her heyday, she extracts a promise from Momo never to "peddle his ass," and in a fit of rage tears up a hundred-franc note pressed on him by a helpful whore—carefully enough to be able to piece it back together if necessary.

When Madame falls ill, the cash flows freely from the pocketbooks of her practical-minded neighbors, who also make the mistake

## They discover in each other a bond stronger than ties of blood.

of equating love with money. In the end, however, it is not the idea of life without money, but life without love that is terrifying to face.

Samy Ben-Youb as Momo lends a considerable amount of talent, as well as his melancholy

good looks. Writer/director Mizrahi has preserved a delicate quality of the story (based on a novel by Emile Ajar) by making the film a series of vignettes rather than a solid narrative. His direction and screenplay are both intelligent and subdued, the perfect touch needed for this type of subject. That touch and Signoret's superb performance make *Madame Rosa* a film worth seeing.

—P. Hertel  
*P. Hertel is a free-lance writer in Chicago who reviews regularly for IN THESE TIMES.*

Right: Simone Signoret as Madame Rosa.  
Below: Samy Ben-Youb as Momo.



# Still waiting for the victory of the people

## A COMMON MAN'S COURAGE

A TV documentary by John de Graaf and Jim Mulligan

Like the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the farmer-worker protests of the Great Depression saw millions of formerly invisible, voiceless Americans rise suddenly into history-making roles. The collective dramas of both periods were often most vividly reflected in the stories of individual men and women who acquired stunning courage, strength and vision as they became leaders of their people.

John de Graaf and Jim Mulligan have helped recover the history of one such leader from the 1930s, John Toussaint Bernard, labor organizer and one-term congressman from the Mesabi iron range. In their fine new TV documentary, *A Common Man's Courage*, they also give us a glimpse of the underlying movement that produced and sustained the man and his political expression: the Farmer-Labor party in Minnesota.

De Graaf, who conceived the

idea while writing about Bernard for a newspaper in Duluth, sought the help of Jim Mulligan, production director for University Community Video (Minneapolis) where *Union Maids'* video work was done. This documentary is the result of their collaboration.

They have spliced newspaper clippings and still shots into a splendid script, which lets Bernard tell his own story in a deep, accented, passionate voice.

If there is a weakness, it is the failure to include more background about the movements in which he was involved—shots of workers' meetings, cartoons, songs—the treatment that made *Union Maids* so effective. But *A Common Man's Courage* succeeds by conveying Bernard's life with integrity and care, giving attention to the political questions that were the heart of his concern, revealing his connection to the people that was his sustaining inspiration.

Bernard immigrated with his family from Corsica to the Mesabi in 1907 at the age of 14 and soon thereafter went to work in the mines. Remembering unions

in France, he asked how come there were none in Minnesota. For answer, the miners formed a union and elected him president. The steel trust promptly fired him.

After a stint with the army in WWI and a brief career as a fireman, he played a role in the rapidly growing Farmer-Labor party. The most momentous act of his career came on his first day as a Farmer-Labor congressman, when he had to vote on President Roosevelt's request for an embargo on supplies for both sides in the Spanish Civil War.

The new Spanish Republic was under attack by Franco, backed by Hitler and Mussolini, and for the American Left its defense had become the dividing line between the forces of progress and democracy on one side and the legions of tyranny on the other. Bernard met with a group of progressive congressmen on the day before the vote was to be taken and expected the others to join him in opposing the embargo.

When the vote came, the opposition of the others had melted in the face of the authority of

the political establishment. Bernard had to shout his objection five times before the Speaker recognized him, but he persisted and registered his opposition—the only nay vote there was.

Bernard lost his seat in 1938 as the result of a massive right-wing attack, but he continued to organize, working for years on the staff of the United Electrical Workers union. Like many others, he suffered McCarthyite repression, but maintained his resolve, optimism and commitment. *A Common Man's Courage* closes with a tribute to him, held at an iron range camp in 1977, 40 years after his vote against the embargo.

"I'm pushing 85 and I'm getting a little impatient," Bernard tells the assembled audience. "I'm still waiting for the ultimate victory of we, the people."

—Harry C. Boyte  
*Harry C. Boyte's book on citizen organizing, Sweet Land of Liberty, will appear in the fall.*

*A Common Man's Courage can be ordered, in cassette or video tape, from University Community Video, 560 Rarig Center, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis*