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SURREALIST TENDENCIES IN UKRAINIAN INTERWAR LITERATURE

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This article examines the presence and specific character of surrealist aesthetics in Ukrainian literature of the 1920s–30s. The study addresses the problem of how surrealist features can be identified in a cultural context where no formally organized surrealist movement emerged and where writers did not explicitly associate themselves with surrealism. The aim of the article is to demonstrate that surrealist aesthetics in Ukrainian interwar literature functioned not as a coherent movement, but as a set of partially realized aesthetic strategies shaped by specific cultural and historical conditions.

The research combines comparative literary analysis with elements of stylistic and semantic examination, focusing on mechanisms of image construction such as semantic dissonance, category violation, and synesthetic associations. The analysis is based on selected works of Ukrainian authors, particularly Bohdan-Ihor Antonych and Yurii Yanovsky.

The results show that Ukrainian interwar literature exhibits a consistent, though non-dominant, convergence with surrealist poetics at the level of technique. At the same time, these features remain embedded in other artistic frameworks and are often motivated by psychological, cultural, or narrative factors. The absence of an institutionalized surrealist movement is explained by a combination of internal factors, including the orientation toward national identity and artistic individualism, and external factors, such as political repression, the destruction of the cultural elite, and the imposition of socialist realism.

The novelty of the study lies in the reinterpretation of Ukrainian surrealist phenomena as structurally grounded but historically constrained forms of aesthetic expression, which contribute to a more differentiated understanding of European modernism.

Key words: *surrealism, surrealist image, Ukrainian avant-garde, Yu. Yanovsky, B.-I. Antonych.*

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СЮРРЕАЛІСТИЧНІ ТЕНДЕНЦІЇ В УКРАЇНСЬКІЙ МІЖВОЄННІЙ ЛІТЕРАТУРІ

У статті досліджується своєрідність і специфіка проявів сюрреалістичної естетики в українській літературі 1920–30-х років. Порушується проблема ідентифікації сюрреалістичних рис у культурному контексті, де не сформувався організований сюрреалістичний рух і де письменники не позиціонували себе як сюрреалісти. Метою статті є довести, що сюрреалістична естетика в українській міжвоєнній літературі функціонувала не як цілісна художня система, а як сукупність частково реалізованих естетичних стратегій, зумовлених конкретними культурними та історичними умовами.

Методологія дослідження поєднує компаративний літературознавчий аналіз зі стилістичним і семантичним підходами, зосередженими на механізмах творення образу, зокрема семантичній дисонансності, порушенні категоріальних зв'язків та синестезійних асоціаціях. Матеріалом аналізу слугують твори українських авторів міжвоєнного періоду, передусім Богдана-Ігоря Антонича та Юрія Яновського.

У результаті встановлено, що українська література цього періоду демонструє стійку, хоча й не домінуючу, конвергенцію із сюрреалістичною поетикою на рівні художніх прийомів. Водночас ці риси залишаються інтегрованими в інші естетичні системи та часто зумовлені психологічними, культурними або нарративними чинниками. Відсутність організованого сюрреалістичного руху пояснюється як внутрішніми факторами, зокрема орієнтацією на національну ідентичність та індивідуалізмом митців, так і зовнішніми – політичними репресіями, знищенням інтелігенції та утвердженням соціалістичного реалізму.

Наукова новизна полягає в переосмисленні українських проявів сюрреалізму як структурно зумовлених, але історично обмежених форм художнього мислення, що уточнює уявлення про європейський модернізм.

Ключові слова: сюрреалізм, український авангард, сюрреалістичний образ, Ю. Яновський, Б.-І. Антонич.

Introduction. Surrealism, an avant-garde movement in literature and art that marked its centenary in 2024, has demonstrated a notable capacity for transformation across cultural and historical contexts. What began as a poetic experiment in France in the 1920s, quickly extended into visual art, cinema, photography, and other forms, spreading across the globe and adapting to various national traditions.

Today, surrealism is increasingly recognized not only as an artistic movement, but also as “a kind of natural stage in the evolution of human consciousness, inherent in many nations, including the Ukrainian one” [14, с. 130].

Ukrainian literature of the 1920s–30s shows a parallel aesthetic response to a shared crisis of rationalism and demonstrates an orientation toward new aesthetic strategies. But like many aspects of Ukrainian culture, manifestations of surrealist ideas remain insufficiently examined or are often misrepresented outside Ukraine. As noted in connection with the first major UK exhibition of Ukrainian modernism in 2024, “for decades, the modernist art production of Ukraine has been viewed through the imperialist lens of the so-called ‘Russian avant-garde’” [18].

Aims of the Study. This article seeks to contribute to the ongoing reassessment of Ukrainian cultural heritage and argues that surrealist tendencies in Ukrainian literature should be understood not as derivative or incidental, but as a structurally grounded and culturally mediated mode of expression. We investigate the parallels with French surrealist aesthetics and explore the capacity of Ukrainian literature for surrealist expression. **The tasks of the research** include: to outline the key features of French surrealism; to examine how they were adapted beyond France, with particular attention to ethnographic and cultural traditions in early 20th-century Ukraine; to analyze selected works of Ukrainian authors of the interwar period and identify specific mechanisms of surrealist image construction; to define the reasons for the absence of organized surrealist groups in Ukraine.

Research Methods. The research methodology employed in this study includes descriptive, synthetic, and analytical approaches to primary sources. A comparative analysis is used to identify parallels between French surrealist practices and those of selected Ukrainian writers. The interdisciplinary framework combines insights from art history, literary theory, and ethnography, allowing for a holistic examination of surrealist tendencies across cultural boundaries.

Key Aesthetic ideas of French Surrealism. French Surrealism emerged as an avant-garde movement deeply influenced by Sigmund Freud's theories of the unconscious. In the *First Manifesto* (1924), Andre Breton defined surrealism as "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought" [17, c. 26]. At the heart of surrealism is a quest for a world aligned with the deep structures of the human psyche accessed through dreams or automatic writing – "a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties" [17, c. 23]. By thus liberating the unconscious, surrealists sought to challenge the limitations of the rational mind, shaped and constrained by social norms and conventional language.

This brought forward a range of redefined aesthetic concepts: *surreality*, *convulsive beauty*, *the marvelous*, *chance* and *spontaneity*. Surrealist image was born from random encounters of semantically distant realities, similar to Lautreamont's famous metaphor of "the fortuitous meeting of a sewing-machine and an umbrella on an operating table" [17, c. 275]. Surrealist texts are built on autonomous dream logic which denies reality. They are filled with arbitrary associations; the imagery is disconnected from the narration, never motivated by the context – it is illogical, bizarre and impossible to explain.

Surrealist ideas quickly spread worldwide and gave rise to hybrid forms which absorbed diverse cultural and artistic characteristics of other nations. As Anna Bila observes, "the international expansion of the movement led to a natural dispersion of stylistic features" [2, c. 53], thus making it more difficult to identify the movement in the countries, where there were no groups that actually called themselves surrealist.

Ukrainian avant-garde of the 1920-30s was rich, varied and marked by highly artistic achievements in literature and visual arts. Represented by groups and individuals who rejected obsolete artistic forms and ideas, the avant-garde radically transformed poetics in terms of genre, style, themes and problems.

Surrealist ideas were well-received in Ukraine. Already in the 1920s, journals in Lviv (then part of Poland) published translations of G. Apollinaire and other poets, alongside the first attempts at surrealist expression by the Ukrainian avant-gardists – V. Havryliuk, Z. Berezhan, V. Khmeluk, and B.-I. Antonych. Kharkiv-based journals *Nova Generatsiia* and *Chervonyi Shliach*, focused on different avant-garde movements in Europe, surrealism among them. In issue No 9/1929, Sergiy Romov published a critical review of the evolution of French literature from dadaism to surrealism, predicting surrealism's "indisputable" impact on future culture. In Romov's opinion, surrealism's influence would be seen "not as much in what it will create, but in what it will reject" [13, c. 45].

Ukrainian authors' interest in surrealism was further intensified by a 1930's visit of Louis Aragon to Ukraine, where he participated in an international conference of revolutionary writers in Kharkiv. Later, émigré poets and writers continued to publish, analyze, translate and experiment with the surrealist aesthetic ideas and new forms.

The potential for surrealist development within Ukrainian culture was substantial. Scholars trace surrealist elements back to the **baroque** imagery of the 17th – early 18th centuries, a period during the Cossack Hetmanate when this style flourished in the Ukrainian art and literature. As Marynkevitch notes, "In the dreamlike plots of their works, phantasmagoric images functioned, incompatible in their essence with the sphere of everyday consciousness. Their vision of ordinary spatial-temporal relations, manifested in forms of delirium, oblivion, sleep, and revelation, was bizarre and illogical" [7, c. 10].

The revival of the interest in ancient mythologies and baroque phantasmagoric style in the early 20-century Ukraine, in Makarov's opinion, resulted in conscious merging of realistic

poetry and dreams, in a vast visual-figurative memory that most willingly revealed its riches during sleep [6].

At that period, certain parallels with surrealism can be identified in works of such authors as young Pavlo Tychyna, Bohdan-Ihor Antonych, Vasyl Barka, Teodosii Osmachka, Mykola Khvylovy, Mykola Kulish, and others, who explored themes of dreams and unconscious impulses, often creating poetry abundant in spontaneous, dreamlike imagery and what Breton would call “convulsive beauty”.

Thus, Bohdan-Ihor Antonych, a Ukrainian poet born in a Lemko village (then part of Austria-Hungary), is particularly noted for what Pavlychko calls a “dream soul” [8, c. 33] and an extraordinary sensitivity to irrational manifestations of the world. Scholars highlight Antonych’s experimental poetics, which resonates with surrealist aesthetics. As Tkachuk observes, Antonych “constructs his artistic world on oppositions and dialectic interrelations between phenomena and processes, time and space, the eternal and the fleeting, the conscious and the unconscious, the material and the spiritual – these oppositions define the core parameters of his work” [15, c. 62].

Scholars explain Antonych’s surrealist visions by his love of painting [8, c. 36] and deep interest in mythology, which is “inherited at the level of the subconscious, preserved in the memory of previous generations” [10, c. 23]. A. Billa called Antonych “a completely organic component of the surrealist discourse, the implementation of one of the numerous intellectual and aesthetic vectors of this European movement” [3, c. 337].

Among the most ‘surrealist’ of the poet’s works is a collection of urbanistic poems entitled *Rotations*, which demonstrates the proximity of B.-I. Antonych’s ideas to surrealist principles and reveals his interest in new poetic techniques. Surrealist aesthetics is most vividly verbalized through the theme of dreams:

Як віко скриню, ніч прикрила муравлисько міста,
в долинах забуття ростуть гіркі мигдалі сну.
На голови міщан злітають зорі, наче листя,
у скорчах болю і багатства людський вир заснув [1, с. 172]

(“Like a lid on a chest, the night has covered the anthill of the city, / in the valleys of oblivion the bitter almonds of sleep grow. / The stars fly over the heads of the townspeople like leaves, / in the convulsions of pain and wealth the human whirlpool has fallen asleep”).

The “intentional violation of poetic norms – broken musicality, absence of rhyme and meter, and deliberate neglect of punctuation” demonstrate Antonych’s “desire to strip poetry of its pleasing musicality – pleasant to the ear, yet lulling to the mind” [4, c. 14]. Instead, readers encounter new rhythms and are challenged to vigilantly search for shades of meaning in a poetic flow that initially seems strange or absurd, thus getting involved in the surrealist quest for the unconventional.

The plasticity, illogicality, and a certain degree of absurdity in such imagery are reminiscent of Salvador Dalí’s paintings.

Вростем у землю, наче сосни <...>
Наллється в наші жили млосний
рослинний сік — зелена кров.
корінням вгрузнуть ноги в глину,
долоні листям обростуть.
А бджоли до очей прилинуть
і мед, мов з квітів, питимуть. [1, с. 88].

(“We will grow into the ground like pine trees <...> / In our veins will flow a sickly plant sap – green blood. / The roots of our feet will sink into the clay, / our palms will grow with leaves. / And bees will flock to our eyes / and drink honey, as if from flowers”).

We have previously analyzed the language of the surrealist images in selected poetic works of B.-I. Antonych [11] and examined the mechanisms of image creation. Those include “word combinations in inappropriate, metaphorical, unexpected contexts, where they lose their direct meaning and acquire new shades; combinations with lexemes belonging to diverse semantic groups; combinations of several metaphors; synesthetic analogies” [11, c. 22].

Semantically, this poetry abounds in arbitrary juxtapositions of words with seemingly incompatible meanings. It creates rich and complex imagery built on the principle of combining oppositions, semantic dissonance, striking synesthetic associations:

*І темне місячне ядро з твердої шкаралуці
вилускують долоні тиші, що усе загорнуть...* [1, c. 171]

(“*And the dark lunar core of hard shell / is peeled off by the palms of silence, which will wrap everything...*”).

Oneiric imagery in Antonych’s work align with psychoanalytic concepts and the poetics of surrealism, yet lack destructive intentions or aggressive content. This absence of violence became one of the defining features of Ukrainian modernism. Similar processes can be observed in Ukrainian prose, which also exhibited a tendency toward surrealism.

Among the earliest examples of surrealist narrations in the Ukrainian language the scholars name Yuri Yanovsky’s short story “*The Turn*” (1927). It depicts a soldier returning to his native village after World War I, only to find it lying in chaotic ruins.

An ordinary Ukrainian peasant-soldier is exhausted and devastated, and vivid war memories naturally mingle with the visions of his home, his wife, his land, leaving him completely disoriented and unsure of his surroundings. Fighting the fatigue, he goes into the field, only to see that it is “full of human arms stretching toward him”. And he must cut them off and pull aside the corpses lying on the surface. Every swing of his scythe sounds like a gunshot, and he feels that “something higher than reason, more powerful than consciousness is guiding him”.

Overcome by inhuman despair and loneliness, he tries to commit suicide and ... wakes up. He is still at war and his return home was merely a dream. He feels relief to get back to reality – only to be immediately struck by a bullet: “It seemed to be screwing into his brain for many years, and eventually he stopped recording everything – both dreams and life, slowly falling, like a crumpled bag of earth, into the liquid swamp of the trench” [16].

In spite of oneiric imagery, surrealism in this story is not dominant but, similar to Antonych’s poetry, rather emergent at the level of technique: a range of image-construction strategies that partially converge with surrealist poetics. For example, the vision of a field with human arms can be regarded as a form of surrealist perceptual distortion in which bodily fragments are reconstructed into a striking visual image. However, this transformation is contextually motivated as the soldier is going on through traumatic experience of the war. Dream logic here does not replace reality but rather distorts it under extreme psychological pressure.

Yanovsky’s story shows the use of mechanisms similar to surrealism rather than adherence to surrealist aesthetic system. Semantic displacement, bodily fragmentation, and perceptual instability are the elements close to surrealism and they give Yanovsky’s work a special coloring, a unique tone. He experiments with form and evokes subtle emotions that invite the reader to reflect on the unconscious motivations behind his characters’ actions. The elements of surrealism are noticeable in Yanovsky’s stories, and yet, it never became a dominant trend in his work.

Despite numerous examples of surrealist tendencies in Ukrainian interwar literature, no formally organized surrealist groups ever emerged and no authors called themselves *surrealists*. This absence can be attributed to many factors, both internal and external.

In the 1920s–30s, Ukrainian culture was open to the reception of artistic movements and tendencies of the Western world [Маринкевич, с. 13]. Innovative ideas were coming through a big group of Ukrainian intelligentsia (O. Archypenko, M. Boichuk, S. Delone, S. Levytska, O. Hryshchenko, V. Khmeliuk and many others) who emigrated to Paris immediately after the revolution of 1917 and continued to share progressive insights with their countrymen by organizing exhibitions and publishing articles. However, in Pakhareno's opinion, new ideas came to Ukraine with a delay of a decade. While West European cultures developed different avant-garde schools more or less sequentially, in Ukraine all these movements often coexisted both in time and within the works of individual authors. Ukrainian poets and artists frequently experimented with multiple styles and mastered various Western artistic trends simultaneously [9, с. 214]. Many of them employed surrealist techniques as an element of their creative repertoire but rejected the label of *surrealist*.

Thus, surrealist artistic and stylistic trends can be seen in works of early 20th-century Ukrainian poets usually associated with other avant-garde schools. Danylo Rega argues that, "it was Futurism in Ukraine that became the first to engage with surrealist ideas from Europe" [12, с. 213] and identifies parallels between the poetic techniques of Guillaume Apollinaire and Mykhailo Semenko: calligrammes, "openness of structure, absence of punctuation, which, in turn, allows one to arbitrarily play with meanings" [12, с. 215].

Another noteworthy example – a famous Ukrainian poet, Todos Osmachka, who, though typically regarded as a symbolist, expressionist and neoromantic, employed formal surrealist techniques to create unique and often phantasmagorical imagery. Features such as dream motifs and hallucinatory states manifest the liberation of the author's fantasy, the search for "an aesthetic ideal beyond reality" [7, с. 20], which aligns the poet with surrealism and with Ukrainian baroque tradition.

The individualism of Ukrainian artists also played a crucial role. Ukrainian culture was deeply rooted in national specificity and Ukrainian mentality. Not yet under the pressure of censorship and Soviet control, Ukrainian authors of the 1920s attempted to revive national traditions and absorb Western innovations. Ukrainian avant-garde focused on "the local and national elements that were often rooted in the ancient past" [19, с. 22] and was "interested in personal moments of illumination and in breakthroughs to new ways of seeing and feeling" [19, с. 20] – the ideas which are very different from the collective nature of French surrealism.

More significant, however, were the external factors. In the early 1930s, the aesthetic achievements of the Ukrainian avant-garde were suppressed under Stalinist repression and the imposition of socialist realism as the sole 'correct' creative method. This resulted in devastating consequences – massive extermination of the Ukrainian intelligentsia: writers and artists executed or sent to labor camps by the Moscow regime during the 1920s–30s, which came to be known as the *Executed Renaissance*. This repression significantly weakened the development of Ukrainian cultural production and destroyed national art that had only begun to flourish after the revolution. The pre-war intellectual and artistic landscape of Ukraine was further destroyed by World War II.

Return of the Ukrainian culture to surrealism after the war was largely ensured by the poets and artists of the Ukrainian diaspora, such as Vira Vovk, Emma Andijewska, Oleh Zuevsky, Bohdan Boychuk, Bohdan Rubchak, Yuriy Tarnavsky and others. Still interested in the workings of the unconscious, intuition, irrational states, they created art which shows definite convergence with surrealist ideas. By the 1960s, surrealism would become one of the factors of disintegration of socialist realism [5]. The turn to "infernal, otherworldly, oneiric images, illusions, dreams, techniques of automatic writing, designed to go beyond the limits of controlled syntax

and phraseology” [5, c. 158] marked a “rift” in the Soviet epoch [5, c. 160]. Critics typically associate this period with such poets as Ihor Kalynets, Pavlo Movchan, Vasyl Holoborodko, Mykola Vorobyov, Vasyl Ruban, Hryhorij Kyrychenko, Viktor Kordun and others.

Surrealism in Ukraine continued to develop along two different trajectories: *Éluard-type-surrealism* and what Anna Bila terms *folk surrealism* with spontaneous, unexpected associations subordinated to folk symbols or closely tied to oral tradition [2, c. 55]. The scholar claims that both paradigms remain productive even in contemporary Ukrainian poetry.

Conclusion. Changing overtime, and being significantly transformed under the influence of global events and many national cultures that absorbed it, surrealism remains one of the leading poetic and artistic achievements of the 20th century, traces of which can be observed in many cultures of the world.

The absence of a formally organized surrealist movement in Ukraine during the interwar period does not indicate a lack of interest in surrealism. On the contrary, Ukrainian literature of the 1920s–30s demonstrated rich, though often implicit, engagements with surrealist forms and ideas. These expressions were shaped by the artists’ individualism, their deep orientation toward national identity, and the traumatic socio-political context of the time. The repression of the Ukrainian intelligentsia and the dominance of socialist realism interrupted the development of these tendencies and obscured their recognition in international art history. Nonetheless, a closer examination of these fragmented yet powerful traces of surrealism in Ukraine reveals a unique dialogue between avant-garde aesthetics and national consciousness, which deserves further scholarly attention and cultural reappraisal.

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