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## **Dreams and thresholds: The violence of doors that never close in Magritte, Kafka and Buñuel**

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In this chapter, I examine representations of the threshold in René Magritte's series of door paintings (1933–62), Franz Kafka's parable 'Before the Law' (1905) and Luis Buñuel's film *The Exterminating Angel* (1962). With reference to the Surrealist approach to the dream as a means of subverting 'normality', I explore the allegorical engagement of these figures with the notion of the threshold, which signals the violence of normative power in contemporary society. Both Magritte and Kafka's doors are open, free to pass, yet strangely encapsulate a sense of inaccessibility, which is more blatantly expressed in Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* – a story about people trapped in an unlocked house. I will discuss whether these nightmarish representations of open yet inaccessible doors can be understood as a criticism of normative violence, as articulated in Giorgio Agamben's (1999) and Jacques Derrida's (1992) interpretations of Kafka's 'Before the Law'. Both Agamben and Derrida argue that the law fundamentally belongs to the literary space of narration, revolving around ambiguous relations between reality and story, anomy and nomos. At the origin of the law, for them, is the fictionality that makes possible the normalisation of life by narrating the universal out of the singular. Surrealist quests for the dream implicate this literary space in which the 'natural' sense of reality is generated by ideologically manipulated standards of normality. In their quests, the dream appears as a liminal space where the conscious and the unconscious, fact and fiction, the personal and the social, collide, exposing the insidious hold of various clichés, canons and norms on our imaginaries. I demonstrate how the conceptualisation of the threshold by Magritte, Kafka and Buñuel illuminates the literary space of the law/norm that is fictitious yet actual in legitimising reality, challenging the normalised perception of reality through a subversive use of the dream and dreamlike imagery.

### **Surrealism, violence and dreams**

a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, of sabotage according to rule ...

[Surrealism] still expects nothing save from violence. The simplest Surrealist act

consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level.

(Breton, 1969: 125)

This disarray, this panic that Surrealism wanted to foster so that everything would be called into question, some stupid Nazis achieved it much better than we did and denying it was not an option ... Against prevailing pessimism, I propose a search for joy and pleasure.

(Magritte, 2001: 200)<sup>1</sup>

At the origin of Surrealist quests for dreamlike aesthetics lies violence. In the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), the founder of the movement, André Breton, describes ‘the simplest Surrealist act’ as a random firing of a pistol into a crowd (1969: 125). Behind this pistol is the figure of Jacques Vaché, an eccentric poet and one of Breton’s creative ‘muses’ (now acknowledged as one of the chief inspirations behind the development of Surrealism) who in 1917 threatened a crowd with a pistol in a theatre in Paris, where Guillaume Apollinaire’s play *The Breasts of Tiresias* was shown. Witnessing this incident, Breton became fascinated by Vaché’s antisocial behaviour, which left an indelible trace on his pursuit of Surrealism. Both Breton and Vaché were darkly illuminated by the violent horizon newly opened up by their experiences of the front in the First World War, which devastated human bodies and minds on an unprecedented scale through the use of new military technologies. Working as a psychiatric aide in military hospitals caring for wounded soldiers, including shell-shocked victims, Breton became fascinated by psychiatric diseases and the use of neuropsychiatry for treating these patients (Haan, Koehler and Bogousslavsky, 2012). Vaché’s eccentric, destructive character, and his unhindered passion for art and poetry, accelerated Breton’s creative investigation into the darker corners of the human psyche. At the heart of Surrealism lurks Vaché’s pistol, which triggers subversive actions, and challenges existing conventions and norms.

In ancient Greece, the dream had served as a foresight or another sense, open to the world of divinity or the future; only recently has the dream come to be considered as a

private and incommunicable phenomenon. Modernity dismissed the dream as an irrational form of the human psyche and excluded it from rational discourses. As a result, 'the dream became withdrawn from life, closed in on itself, and hermetically inaccessible', until Freud opened up the realm of the dream once again and brought it back to the surface of waking life with his publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Ferguson, 1996: 159).

Surrealism's ambition essentially concurs with Freud's project of bringing the dream back to the subject of life.

In his Surrealist work, Breton pursued the *point suprême* (sublime point), where two states, dreams and reality, 'life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions' and resolve 'into a kind of absolute reality' (1969: 123; 14). In order to achieve this 'absolute reality', Breton applied Freud's theory of the dream and the unconscious to creative processes. He and his fellow Surrealists conducted various experiments that implemented methods of automatism (methods with which to reach the unconscious without conscious self-censorship), such as automatic writing and drawing, hypnotic slumber and urban drifting.<sup>2</sup> Yet their artistic and poetic exploration strayed from Freud's original theory of interpretation, intended for the psychoanalytic investigation of repression surfacing via the unconscious within the dream. By contrast, Breton's intention was to celebrate and amplify the irrational and the unconscious as a creative frontier, defending 'the right of poets to utilise the new technique, implicitly challenging the professional jurisdiction of medical psychiatrists over the mind's domain' (Lomas, 2000: 2). Dreams constitute a passage to this frontier, brimming with deviant, sometimes violent images and thoughts, detached from our rationally constrained way of living. As opposed to Freud, who was concerned with implementing the 'objective' meanings of dreams to arrive at, or prove, a particular diagnosis, it is imperative for Surrealists to let the irrational and the abnormal surface in the dream without 'curing' it – that which was intended to liberate the individual mind, and hence society. For this revolutionary goal, Breton gives credibility to dreaming as equal to waking life, as both are equally structured by the irrational and the absurd. Neither pathological nor divine, dreams are an inextricable part of the very lives we live. Thus, while appreciating dreams *as* reality, Breton persistently refuses to acknowledge the subservient relationship of dreams *to* reality as explored by Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>3</sup>

## The critique of the violence of everyday life

In 1946, Magritte launched a new Surrealist movement, *Surrealism in Full Sunlight*, with his fellow Belgian Surrealists Marcel Mariën, Paul Nougé and others. In conceiving the manifestoes, Magritte saw, in the advent of Nazism, what appeared to be a violent outcome of the Surrealist doctrine of *point suprême*, in which the world can be contested via the dissolution of the boundaries between the conscious and the unconscious, the individual psyche and the collective mind. Perhaps he realised that the Surrealists' dream of aesthetic and social revolution from a logic of repression and desire, in a moment of panic and horror, would be soon replaced by the violence inherent to the postmodern consumption of images and simulacra to come. The Surrealist strategy of 'convulsive beauty', which evokes shock and awe to deconstruct our perception of reality, was to become normalised as a consumable object. In his implicit juxtaposition of Surrealism and Nazism in the conception of revolutionary power, Magritte saw the potential continuation between the totalitarian regime and neoliberal late capitalist society. Now, our everyday life is saturated with 'surreal' imagery, from commercial advertisements to fine art, in which people's unwritten desires and unconscious narratives are amplified through the aesthetics of the irrational and the dreamlike. The Surrealist ambition thus turned out to be the horror of mass culture, in which life, art and politics coincide in the exercise of normative power that governs contemporary society.

What Breton's Surrealism persistently ignored is that the unconscious and the dream are not free from power relations: the unconscious faculty of dreaming can be oriented, disciplined, organised and controlled in its very origin, as precisely demonstrated by Emily-Rose Baker's chapter (Chapter 5) (and authors in Part II) that discusses the dream as a sphere of both political domination *and* resistance in its imaginative quality, referring to how the Nazi regime effectively employed irrational aesthetics in devising propaganda and mass communications in order to colonise the conscious and unconscious lives of citizens. The strategy of controlling the bodies, thoughts and behaviours of the subject is the arcanum of the contemporary exercise of power, which reaches all levels of the human psyche, perception and bodily constitution. Surrealist imagination seems increasingly doomed by the disciplinary and biopolitical power of the modern state that generates a 'normalising society' as defined by Michel Foucault, the aim of which is to

create manageable, productive subjects and to fashion them as objects of use (Foucault, 2004: 249–50). It is not surprising that Freud’s psychoanalysis went hand-in-hand with the capitalist and ideological manipulation of mass psychology as exemplified by the psychoanalyst’s nephew Edward Bernays, who effectively employed his uncle’s theory to pioneer the field of public relations and propaganda in twentieth-century USA.<sup>4</sup>

For Breton and his contemporary Surrealists, the dream was radical enough to challenge the constructed consciousness of bourgeois everyday life. Today, Magrittian imagery is everywhere in advertising and publicity (Roque, 1983), embodying the turning of Surrealism into a contemporary aesthetic of capitalist consumption inscribed by dreamlike imagery. The artistic strategies of Surrealism – namely, the defamiliarising of objects and spaces through the distortion of scale and perception – have come to pervade our reality to such an extent that we do not necessarily recognise these motifs as particularly ‘surreal’. However, referring to J. G. Ballard’s remark that ‘The pervasiveness of Surrealism is proof enough of its success’, Hal Foster challenges the myth of ‘the limit’ of Surrealism in the contemporary context of late capitalist society (1993: 211). As Foster detected a few decades ago, it seems that ‘the old opposition of surrealism and fascism has in part returned’ in the form of the battle against the normalisation of cultural, intellectual and artistic productions (1993: 212).

*Surrealism in Full Sunlight*, the Belgium Surrealists’ new direction after the war, was Magritte’s last engagement with a collective movement, which marks the shift of his artistic concern from the ideal of social revolution to an immanent critique of the violence of everyday life.<sup>5</sup> We are still beholden to his efforts to reconsider revolution in response to the increasingly dispersed power structures within neoliberal capitalist societies, where the ordinary and the normal become the places of the highly political. In this context, the dream can be revitalised as a strategy to make visible the invisible nature of normative power permeating ordinary life, in which Magritte saw a new mode of violence. Magritte, Kafka and Buñuel were deeply inspired by the dreamlike form of their Surrealist creations, motivated to illuminate the uncanniness of ‘reality’. Via an analysis of their Surrealist approaches to the dream, in what follows I discuss how Magritte, Kafka and Bruñel’s representations of the threshold problematise the invisible violence that permeates contemporary life.

## Magritte's disappearing doors

One of the main features of Magritte's works is the breaking down of boundaries between words, objects, images, spaces and nonhuman creatures, through which the Surrealist allows for the unmapping of the psyche. Magritte's concern with thresholds is prevalent within paintings that depict doors with gaping holes through the middle, such as *The Unexpected Answer* (1933), *The Amorous Perspective* (1935) and *The Early Morning* (1942), or half-opened doors detached from any architectural structure, such as *The Good Adventure* (1938–39), *The Victory* (1939) and *The Improvement* (1962). Magritte particularly elaborates on the idea of the threshold in the latter three paintings, in which doors begin to blur the boundary between interior and exterior, assimilating themselves into their surroundings.<sup>6</sup> *The Victory* depicts a half-opened door to a seaside landscape from which a cloud sneaks through, the lower part of the door blending with the sandy earth, while the upper part takes on the blue of the sea and sky. Here, the door is situated completely outside, standing alone on a cliff. The door represented in *The Improvement* is also isolated, standing by the sea. In the former image, the cloud sneaking through the door in *The Victory* merges with the background of the clouded sky, and a bell-like spherical object – one of Magritte's recurrent motifs – appears on the sand next to the door. Here the door is completely open to the view of the clouded sky, which is painted brightly in contrast with the shaded doorframe. This shading creates a pictorial illusion of the division between inside and outside, the contrast of the sky producing an uncanny sense of domesticity, as though the blue sky in the shade were the wallpaper of a nursery. Paradoxically, while these works illustrate the illusory function of the door as a device for rendering a spatial or conceptual partition, they create a sense of inaccessibility, rather than a liberatory opening. The more Magritte's doors are integrated with their surroundings, the less accessible they appear; open but closed, inviting but rejecting. Where does this sense of inaccessibility come from as the door abandons its function of enclosure?

The recurrent presence of the seaside in these door paintings exemplifies the boundary between the inhabitable land and the unfamiliar realm of the sea. It is tempting to interpret the motif of the sea as a metaphor for the boundary where conscious reality meets dream space. Magritte never gave credit to the dream, the unconscious, or the entire field of psychoanalysis for his Surrealist aesthetic, renouncing 'the seriousness of specialists in

the unconscious' as something 'comic' (2016: 173). On the contrary, he insisted that 'dreams [were] a disease of thought' that are 'easy to forget', and that neither dreams nor the unconscious were his source of inspiration (2016: 231). According to the artist himself, Magritte needs 'perfect presence of mind' to be able to 'see a picture', calling his creative process an 'investigation' (2016: 202) – 'an attempt to solve a problem with three "givens": the object, the thing tied to it in the shadow of [his] consciousness and the light into which this thing had to emerge' (2016: 65). Magritte's apparent disinterest in the dream and the unconscious, which estranged him from the Paris Surrealist group, reflects a defensive posture aimed at dispelling simplistic interpretations of his image-making. In fact, Magritte often refers to visions arising from a semiconscious state or an instant of waking. Nevertheless, it is clear that his work was inspired by hypnagogic imagery and lucid dreams which, he claims, have nothing to do with 'family romance' and pathological investigation, making a mockery of Freudian psychoanalysis.

For Magritte, the dream is thought in itself in its morphological potentiality that generates the resistant force against the dominating/oppressive power exercised over the waking life, which is meticulously investigated in Baker's chapter. The lucid quality of the dream state Magritte cherished granted him insight into what he called 'the mystery of the world' that makes it appear as such – the sum of various myths, discourses, fictions and narratives built around the pursuit of the origin and truth of reality. In his visual 'investigation', the waking, real world ('a very unpleasant world because of its routine ugliness') that opposes the 'fantastic' has to come into play (2016: 108). His painting is 'a battle, or rather a counter-offensive' against the violent exercise of power in the form of various clichés, canons and norms (2016: 108). What comes out of Magritte's 'investigation' is the veil of 'a *natural* image', an ideologically manipulated standard of normality (Allmer, 2009: 102). It seems that the more translucent Magritte's doors become, the more exposed the fabricated sense of *naturalness* and 'its routine ugliness' are.

### **Kafka's open door of the law**

Magritte's translucent doors remind us of another contemporary mystery: Kafka's parable 'Before the Law', included in his novel *The Trial*. The story tells of a countryman who is

refused entry through the gate of the law and takes his place next to the gate, hoping that the doorkeeper will let him in some day. The gate is perpetually open but the doorkeeper who stands at the entrance tells the man that even if he were to pass through this gate, he will encounter more gates guarded by even more powerful gatekeepers. The man tries to negotiate with the doorkeeper but perpetually fails and ends up dying on the spot after many years of waiting. At the end, the countryman, who has become almost blind and 'does not know whether the world is really darker or whether his eyes are only deceiving him', captures 'a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the gateway of the Law' (Kafka, 2005: 4). At the moment of his death, he asks the doorkeeper why nobody else has asked to enter the gate, to which the doorkeeper replies: 'No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it' (2005: 4).

Kafka's open door can be read as an allegory of a legal state founded on an invisible mode of sovereign control that does not seem to prohibit anything. It seems that no explicit power is exercised here, the door always being open, as if there were no door in the first place to prohibit visitors from entering. However, what actually regulates the countryman is not the existence of the door or the guard, but the very discourse surrounding this open door: there will be more doors, he is assured, guarded by even more powerful gatekeepers. In reality, the guard does not prohibit the countryman from passing through the gate; he only warns him of the potential impossibility of going further.

This parable has provided rich material for thinkers to theorise the nature of the law and its complex relation with violence and power in the modern state, which depends on a system of inclusion by way of exclusion.<sup>7</sup> The focal point of their discussions is most eloquently articulated by Agamben (1999) and Derrida (1992). According to their interpretations, this parable illuminates the paradoxical condition of the law, mapping out how a legal system encompasses living beings wholly within itself by referring to its own limits in the invention of norms. When the door is perpetually open and nothing prevents one from entering, the act of entering loses its significance, since it is ontologically impossible to enter a door that is already open. Likewise, the law functions by generating the already open door; by the invention of norms and the suspension of their application.<sup>8</sup> The law is founded on an anomic zone which functions to encompass realities within the juridical order without dealing with the specific. 'Before the Law' is about 'the abstract universality and thus openness of the law', in which the country man is excluded precisely



because the law includes him in its potentiality, in its mere means (Frey, 2011: 377). Agamben's and Derrida's interpretations articulate the politics of the threshold, which is founded on the invention/narration of life that should be primarily excluded for the sake of including life wholly into the legislative order. What is at stake is the violence of law that originates in a fictitious space that is to be kept in order to make the law possible. The countryman embodies life lived through the violence of fiction in which the myth of impossibility is put into practice.

Nonetheless, both Agamben and Derrida see a subversive element in Kafka's parable that makes the invisible power of the law's force visible. Agamben proposes that the countryman's waiting can be interpreted as his tactic to go beyond the myth of impossibility, transforming his inoperativeness into a passive yet resistant action. If the source of violence is coming from the door that never closes, then an effective way to counter it is to let the door close. By reintroducing the possibility of opening by way of closing, the countryman's action breaks down what narrates the impossibility of entering. Derrida pays more attention to what the gatekeeper told the countryman at the very end – this door is only for you – which reverses the narrative of the universal and the particular, challenging what appears to be a norm. At the origin of law lies the literary space of narration which does not require an actual event (or a reality), thus resembling a fiction, a myth, or a fable. Likewise, for Kafka, the law, '– being (viz. Derrida) neither a natural thing nor an institution – is "literature" in its active unfolding' (Corngold, 2016: 22). Kafka's door is precisely concerned with the force of fictionality that appears as a matter of literature, or a manifestation of belief as an immersion in a certain narrative.

Magritte's series of open doors analogously demonstrate this uncanny nature of a power exercised in pure eventuality, of the norm that originates in fictionality. In *The Improvement*, the pure eventuality of the door, of accessibility, is exposed and nullified by the fact that the door is standing open in an open space in which there is nothing to obstruct one's path. It succeeds in narrating a total nullification of accessibility, without leaving any possibility of entering. It closes without closing, depriving accessibility without shutting down. The bell-like object sitting back in the shade appears as life in a perpetual state of exception, representing both the doorkeeper and the countryman. The colour differentiation in the sky cast by the doorframe renders the power of fiction that transforms reality without changing anything, by merely putting the spell of discourse on it. Magritte intensifies the

illusionary function of the door in the ambivalent representation of the sky which partially appears as if a layer of a wallpaper printed in *trompe l'oeil* style. While the function of the door as a spatial partition is nullified by the fact that it stands on its own detached from any architectural structure, the sunny sky painted inside the doorframe, in contrast to the shadowed area, still creates a strong sense of spatial division. Playing with the contradictory and treacherous nature of a system of representation, Magritte appeals to our optical and psychological drive to perpetually look for a division to come. The radiance through the door, which is also described in 'Before the Law', which appears divine to the blind eyes of the countryman, can be interpreted as the moment of realisation of the source of belief. It reveals what has thus far constituted the apparent naturalness of the life one lives (that is, a system of representation), resulting from an exposure to the fissure between reality and fiction.

The paradoxical illustrations of the open door by Magritte and Kafka capture the transcendental nature of the norm/the law that, while it pretends to narrate reality, does not in fact coincide with it, that goes beyond the realm of an individual agency. This transcendent space that permeates reality is 'the mystery of the world' that Magritte aimed to reach through lucid dreaming, and perhaps, akin to what Diane Otosaka discusses in her chapter (Chapter 8) analysing Jean-Claude Grumberg's play *Rêver peut-être*: the spectral truth of humanity's potential for inhumanity that formulates itself in dreams and emerges to reveal another layer of reality, shaped by the violence of the law and the concentrationary presence.

### **Between life and parable, reality and dreams**

Kafka's 'Before the Law' illuminates the nature of the law as fiction in its capacity to discipline our lives via the invention of norms. Kafka explicitly addresses this issue in his parable 'On Parables' (1931), a dialogue between two men and narrated by a third one. The narrator is concerned with the incommensurable discrepancy between 'the words of the wise' which are 'merely parables' and 'the care we have to struggle with every day' (Kafka, 2005: 457). Parables that call for 'fabulous yonder, something unknown to us' are 'of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have' (2005: 457). Then, two men

converse with him about this matter:

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid yourself of all your daily cares. Another said: I bet that is also a parable. The first said: You have won. The second said: But unfortunately only in parable. The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.

(Kafka, 2005: 457)

Here, Kafka plays with the threshold between the inside and outside of a literary space, where fiction intrudes into readers' reality. This parable challenges the nature of narration, questioning where life and story overlap, where 'the only life' that we have and something more than 'the only life' blur into each other. It is about transcendence, a movement around two incommensurable states either in an allegorical, theological, philosophical or juridical sense, between reality and parable, the secular and the divine, the universal and the singular, life and law. As Judith Butler (2011) discusses, Kafka's parable challenges the conventional idea of transcendence. It deflects a transcendent expectation for a single point, or 'truth', to come at which we expect to make sense, to anticipate a doubtless comfort, by circulating a referential movement between life and life beyond. The parable bears a sign of reality, or truth, outside of its own storytelling, going beyond fiction and crossing into life. When we see the final line in 'On Parables', we are relieved to think that something about reality is finally said, but soon we will realise that this is still another voice of parable.

This issue of transcendence concerns the dream, too: the dream is constantly in tension between reality and fiction, making us ponder whether it is related to our 'daily concerns' from which we are supposed to 'learn' and expect 'truth', or if it is something beyond, irrelevant to our daily cares. 'On Parables' illuminates what is articulated in 'Before the Law': the law shares its very nature with literature in the fissure between the universal and the singular, and so do parables and the dream. For Kafka, the dream is literature in a similar way that the law is. It is known that Kafka suffered from insomnia, which he obsessively recorded in his diaries with meticulous descriptions of accompanying

draining feelings as well as his dreams and hypnagogic imagery (1964). Lack of sleep brought Kafka to a dreamlike state while being awake, and like Magritte, he was deeply inspired by this state. He writes: 'Again it was the power of my dreams, shining forth into wakefulness even before I fall asleep ... I feel shaken to the core of my being and can get out of myself whatever I desire' (1964: 62). In this altered state, a dream manifests with 'many ramifications, full of a thousand connexions that became clear in a flash', sometimes illuminating 'the perpetually shifting frontier that lies between ordinary life and the terror that would seem to be more real' (1964: 392; 417). Kafka uses his sleepless state to lure what is lurking behind ordinary life, trying to attain the coincidence between fictional stories and the actual life he lives, in a moment of terror oozing out of reality. Here, coming back to the *point suprême*, Kafka appears as a precursor of Surrealist explorations of the dream as a way to reveal a fictional layer of reality. For him, the dream is not an object of interpretation, but the very literary object that makes visible the frontier between ordinary life and the terror of what generates a sense of reality – the norm. This frontier is perhaps what Vaché's pistol targets, 'the absolute reality' that Breton sees as able to subvert 'the petty system of debasement and cretinization' (the corruption and hypocrisy of the bourgeois values of the normal, everyday life in early twentieth-century Europe), and what Magritte sees uncannily in the rise of Nazism.

### **Unspelling the impossible: Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel***

Another master of surreal nightmare, Luis Buñuel also expresses a sense of paralysis and impossibility like that emanating from Magritte's and Kafka's eerily open doors. Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) tells of a group of bourgeois guests entrapped in an unlocked mansion. After enjoying a night party, some attempt to leave the room, only to find themselves unable to step over its threshold for no apparent reason. Although nothing stops them from walking through the door, nobody does so. Somehow, they do not or cannot get out/in. Slowly, people are falling into a panic, suffocating from this nightmare, heading for madness and anarchy. Their sophisticated, civilised postures are stripped off, and they give themselves away, exposing their violent, savage behaviours. Eventually, the guests decide to re-enact the first night's events. At the end of this performance, a woman desperately exclaims lines that were not articulated during the night of the party: 'We are

all tired. It's very late, and we must be going'. At this moment, everyone explodes in exultation as if being disenchanted, rushing to the threshold of the room, finally stepping over it, and getting out of the mansion.

Buñuel is known for his Surrealist film *An Andalusian Dog* (1929), created together with Salvador Dalí, and which consists of a series of unrelated scenes based on their dreams. As Buñuel wrote in his biography, his love of dreams was 'the single most important thing' that he shared with the Surrealists, and he directly brought into his films his dreams as well as delirious imagery and fantasies, 'trying as hard as [he] could to avoid any analysis' (1985: 93; 96). Surrealists appreciated the affinity between inconsistent sequences of dreams and the film as a temporal medium which allows cutting up, mixing, blurring and overlaying different scenes and images (Hammond, 1978). Surrealist films such as Germaine Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928) as well as Buñuel and Dalí's *An Andalusian Dog* and *The Golden Age* (1930) employ these dreamlike techniques to disrupt the rules of the classical narrative, opening up a space where the division between film, waking life and dream breaks down. For this purpose, their films are constructed strictly in a 'realistic style in commonplace settings' as opposed to 'frameworks by special effects and/or fantasy settings' developed by Hollywood-style popular films (Sharot, 2015: 84). While 'Hollywood adopted Freud's writings on dreams to overcome neurosis and to return "maladjusted" protagonists to normality and appropriate gender roles' (2015: 84), Surrealists insisted that the dream is not a subordinate spectacle or fantasy to supplement or cure problematic thoughts strayed from awake life but an essential part of it. Buñuel appreciated the dream as a place where deviant and violent imagination surfaces in the form of absurdity and comedy, interrupting coherent narratives and harmonious symbolism. As seen in the iconic opening of *An Andalusian Dog* – a razor slitting the eyeball of a woman – his use of dreamlike images seeks to shock and challenge the comfort of the bourgeoisie as a ruling class which embodies established institutions and values (Hammond, 1978: 69).

*The Exterminating Angel* shows Buñuel's mastery of Surrealist dreamlike techniques with great subtlety. As Marsha Kinder (2009) states, this film 'creates a tension between sensory perceptions and narrative coherence – a dialectic Buñuel had learned from Freud's dreamwork theory, where the narrative drive is distrusted as a form of censorship (or secondary revision) and the underlying images valued as a source of discovery and

subversion'. There are numerous 'continuity errors' in the form of repetitions, inconsistencies and contradictions, which are so subtle that viewers would overlook them in order to make sense of a story line and assure a narrative consistency. For instance, every time someone opens the walk-in closet in the living room, which use is implied as a toilet, what is stored inside is different. Something is slightly wrong elsewhere, which constantly overrides our desire to make sense. Everything else but the subtle errors is set in a realistic style except the most peculiar moment of the film, when the tension among the guests reaches its climax: a feverish woman, suddenly set alone in the darkened room, sees a female hand approaching her from a closet. She grabs a figurine to squish it in fear, then a male hand emerges to choke her. The moment she flings it off and stabs it with a knife, the scene returns to the bright room with the guests where another woman is screaming at the knife that nearly stabbed her hand. The delirious woman practices a kabbalah-style witchcraft with chicken feet hidden in her pouch which, she claims, symbolises the keys to unlock the unknown. This hand and the chicken feet are the only explicitly odd elements of the film, ludicrous yet horrific, crystallising a sense of hostility and fear prevailing among the guests in desperation.

As usual with his mockery of religion, Buñuel shows how the ultimate state of mind brings out a superstitious belief or a myth is brought out particularly when the violence lurking underneath normality is unleashed. As Laura M. Martins states, Buñuel 'makes visible the celebration of "normality" as a permanent mask of oppression' (2004: 190). The invisible yet oppressive force of normality is intensely revealed by the fact that no visible, physical obstacle is set in the scene that barriers the threshold. In a sense, an impasse enacted solely by the deviant behaviours of the guests is Buñuel's most ingenious Surrealist technique that succeeds in pointing towards a fictional space that equally structures dreams and reality, representing what remains otherwise invisible. The absurd yet dominant absence of physical partition corresponds to the open yet inaccessible doors in Magritte and Kafka. Like the paralysed countryman, nothing stops the guests from leaving the room. Here, there is not even a guard telling them that they cannot get out. Perhaps the guests were enjoying the party so much that they procrastinated, calling it a night, as one of them murmured: 'We were all under the spell of the music, the friendly conversation, the good cheers'. Yet, at some point, a charm of lingering farewell turned into a self-induced nightmare of impasse, an unwritten norm that is impossible to break. The doors of Magritte

and Kafka are open not for accepting passengers but for rejecting them, and Buñuel's story precisely represents this paradoxical nature: this paradox becomes possible only through an active participation of people's psyche in believing in the impossible access to the other side of the door. It seems that the countryman at the gate and the guests enclosed in the room blindly bind themselves with the fictitious voice of 'no'. The inexplicable appearance of the invisible threshold that oppresses the guest in *The Exterminating Angel* is an ultimate expression of what Magritte and Kafka's open doors represents: the horrendous violence of a fiction that evolves into a norm, groundless yet fatal enough to manipulate people's psyches into fear and incapacity and restrict their behaviours.

### Conclusion

By discussing the representation of the threshold by Magritte, Kafka and Buñuel in reference to their Surrealist approach to the dream, I aimed to articulate the capacity of the dream that makes visible the invisible violence of the norm as a system founded on the drawing up of fictional boundaries. The sense of inaccessibility emanating from their depictions of the threshold disturbingly resonates with the ubiquity of the violence that dominates all aspects of contemporary life, increasingly undetectable within the dispersed power structures of neoliberal capitalist society. Their open doors expose us to a fictional layer of waking reality that is structured irrationally and absurdly in the same way that the law, norms, parables and the dream are, problematising the violence at the perpetually shifting threshold between 'the only life' and life beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> Ce désarroi, cette panique que le surréalisme voulait susciter pour que tout soit remis en question, des crétiens nazis les ont obtenus beaucoup mieux que nous et il n'était pas question de s'y dérober [...] Contre le pessimisme général, j'oppose la recherche de la joie, du plaisir' (Magritte, 2001: 200). My translation.

<sup>2</sup> Urban drifting is a purposeless wandering whose aim is to detach oneself from the constructed consciousness of everyday life and reach the unconscious and desire

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intertwined with urban landscapes. Surrealists conceived it as a creative (and anarchist) method to challenge the social/political hierarchy.

<sup>3</sup> Freud himself could not tolerate Surrealists' use of his theory for the sake of poetry and art and their aim to subvert all social values instead of striving for a revision of the social order (Kaplan, 1989: 321–2).

<sup>4</sup> By taking Freud's notion that irrational forces drive human behaviour, Edward Bernays applied the idea of 'engineering consent' to pioneer a form of branding in a contemporary sense and develop techniques to manipulate people to desire something that they do not need. By turning citizens into consumers, he played a large part in the rise of Western consumer culture, working for numerous corporations as well as governmental projects (Justman, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Magritte joined the Belgian Communist Party in 1945, which was followed by his initiation of *Surrealism in Full Sunlight*. Throughout the 1940s, Magritte was most keenly engaged in developing the Belgian Surrealist movement into one with a more explicit social/political concern, in contrast to Breton's Surrealism.

<sup>6</sup> Between *The Victory* (1939) and *The Improvement* (1962) lies Magritte's brief involvement in *Surrealism in Full Sunlight*. The difference between them informs his post-war direction as to an increasing sense of the door's assimilation into their surroundings depicting the ubiquity of the normative power exercised in everyday life.

<sup>7</sup> Kafka's 'Before the Law' has been discussed in reference to Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* (1921) by major contemporary thinkers such as Judith Butler as well as Agamben and Derrida. Agamben and Butler in particular have looked to elaborate Benjamin's peculiar idea of 'divine violence' in relation to his idea of the messianic in the Jewish context, which is further connected to a philosophical discussion on the perception of time and the notion of coming or arriving (Agamben, 2003; 2005; Butler, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Concerning the violence of the law, Agamben later developed the theory of the state of exception (2003), discussing it as the original legal structure through which the biopolitical paradigm encompasses living beings within administrative control. He elucidates that it is the very structural foundation that enables the biopolitic to transform the democratic revolutionary tradition into the absolutism of the totalitarian regime as exemplified by Nazism.