Surrealism and the Political. The Case of *Nadja*

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It is, as it were, from the fortuitous juxtaposition of the two terms that a particular light has sprung, *the light of the image*, to which we are infinitely sensitive. The value of the image depends upon the beauty of the spark obtained; it is, consequently, a function of the difference of potential between the two conductors. (André Breton 1924a: 37)

This essay discusses the implications of the convergence of Surrealism and communism on a reading of André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928). It locates the book in the context of Surrealism’s political position to explore how the construction of *Nadja* manifests Surrealism’s ongoing engagement with what Claude Lefort has called “the political”. In this context *Nadja* is not simply an account of Breton’s encounter with a young woman on the streets of Paris – although this is the principal thread of the narrative – but also an attempt to work through the political impasse that confronted Breton in the course of 1927.

Breton met Nadja in October 1926 and began to write his account of their relationship in August 1927 (Bonnet 1988: 1502-04). These dates bracket a series of meetings of the Surrealists that eventually led to Breton joining the Parti communiste français (PCF) in January 1927. According to Breton’s *Second manifeste du Surréalisme* (1929: 142-43) and *Entretiens* (1952: 127), the party hierarchy subjected his revolutionary credentials to close examination. As a result of this incommmodious welcome and continuing suspicion from his fellow comrades, Breton’s tenure as a militant was short-lived, and he soon withdrew from active participation in the PCF.
As is well known, the Surrealists had been moving closer to the PCF since May 1925, when their opposition to French military intervention in Morocco led them to collaborate with intellectuals allied to *Clarté*. Relations between the Surrealists and the editors of *Clarté* had reached an impasse in March 1926 after the PCF vetoed the merger of *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Clarté* to form *La Guerre civile* (Lewis 1988: 51-52). Although individual Surrealists continued to contribute to the new series of *Clarté*, collectively they felt frustrated that the PCF viewed their efforts to establish common ground between Surrealism and communism with scepticism, merely offering to let them contribute to the literary column of *l’Humanité*. Events came to a head in June when Pierre Naville – a former Surrealist who had not participated in the movement since mid-1925 and was now one of the editors of *Clarté* – published *La Révolution et les intellectuels: Que peuvent faire les surréalistes?* (1926), a pamphlet discussing the Surrealists’ position vis-à-vis the PCF. Breton (1926) responded in September with his own pamphlet, *Légitime défense*, where he defended Surrealism against Naville’s charges, and criticized shortcomings in the editorial policy of *l’Humanité*. In particular, he rejected the stark opposition Naville posed between the “world of facts” and “inner reality of the mind”, arguing that Surrealism overcame this opposition through the “appeal to the marvellous” (Breton 1926: 34). However, *Légitime défense* did not settle the issue: after a series of meetings held in November and December 1926, Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Péret and Pierre Unik finally joined the PCF in January 1927. Despite their best intention, the Surrealists discovered that the PCF only accepted them with profound reservations, leading to the publication of *Au Grand jour* in May 1927, a series of open letters signed by the Surrealists who joined the PCF. As *Au Grand jour* reads, the PCF maintained “a serious confusion towards Surrealism,” regarding it as either “a political tendency” or “a ‘brand’ in the hands of some dexterous publicity agents”, and thus incompatible with communism (1927: 75).

At this point it is worth considering the Surrealists’ own perception of their position in the social space.¹ Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the relation between the field of artistic production, the field of class relations, and the field of power is useful here (1993: 29-73). The Surrealists, as members of an emergent avant-garde