Introduction

The Surrealist movement sought to transform the self and the world, each one by way of the other. The world was to be remodeled in the image of the liberated psyche, alienation and repression overcome by a passionate exchange between the self and its environment. Inside and outside would continually change places as the psyche discovered its own desires written in the cipher of material things and assimilated these fragments of reality into its language of dreams. Inanimate objects would come to life, speaking the language of the self, while the self would take its place among them as a fellow thing of the world. This class will explore Surrealism as a method of perceiving the material world and a model for living in it. We will, therefore, not limit ourselves to texts officially included in the Surrealist canon or to the historical period usually assigned to the movement. Taking our cue from the Surrealists’ own interest in precursors and followers, we will attempt to derive from their texts – and from those of their most influential theorists — an approach to words and things that can be found elsewhere and that has remained available to the present day. And just as the Surrealists traversed the modern city, building passages between and among its living things, we will set at least one of our essays in contemporary urban space, exploring the meanings of a chance encounter with an everyday object.

Course Objectives

- To examine the Surrealist movement as both a theory of culture and an artistic practice, tracking its manifestations across mediums and examining its philosophical context and influences, particularly the ideas of Marx and Freud

- To closely read and make connections between texts in critical and psychoanalytic theory and use them as methods for interpreting works of visual and verbal art

- To formulate aesthetic and political questions about Surrealist works and thought and to respond to them with arguments that draw on a variety of both primary and secondary sources, discovered through individual and group research
Writing

Over the course of the semester, you will write three essays.

(1) The exhibit-based essay (3-5 pages) will be a comparative close reading of a short Surrealist text with a Surrealist image. I will ask you to choose your text and image from those we will discuss in the first few classes and on which you will be presenting in small groups. (You will not be limited to the ones your group presents.) Close reading derives the meaning of an exhibit (verbal or visual) through minute attention to particulars, cropping out (by describing or quoting) small areas of the exhibit in order to examine them in detail and then explaining their relation to the whole from which they were taken. To interpret the exhibit as whole is to make an argument about the relation between its meaning and its structure, between what the exhibit is showing or saying and how it’s showing or saying it. Close reading will be a skill (an art, really) I will expect you to demonstrate for the rest of the semester, and which all of the other essays will require.

(2) The method-based essay (3-5 pages) involves two elements: a theoretical model or concept and an exhibit that the model could help to explain. You will need to present an idea from one of our theoretical texts and apply it to either a text or an image, whether from the syllabus or of your own choosing. An applied concept is a method.

(3) The research essay (8-10 pages) will make use of all the techniques from the first two essays: close reading, presentation and application of concepts (method use), and interpretation. It will add one more: engagement with prior scholarship on your topic (known as secondary sources). While you work on this essay, we will be spending several classes on the objectives and methods of academic research: finding scholarly writing on your topic, locating the central questions underlying various arguments, and formulating your own argument in relation to — as different from while not necessarily opposed to — those of earlier critics. You will form small groups based on common research interests and together compile (and post online) an annotated bibliography of scholarly sources on a particular topic. Your group will then present your topic to the class by closely reading relevant exhibits, explaining illuminating concepts, and raising controversial questions discussed in the scholarship on your topic.

You will be writing drafts for all three essays — at least one for each. I will read and comment on the drafts, and we will workshop them in class, either as a whole class or in small groups. These workshops will be a key part of the course, so please plan on having drafts done on time and ready to be workshopped. Please, also, be ready to share your work on other occasions as well; throughout the semester, I will be asking you to read your writing aloud in class or circulate it in small, informal groups.

In addition to the essays, I will also ask you to do two other types of writing, which will provide starting points for our class discussions and group work and generate ideas for your essays:
The Journal of Questions: Over the course of the semester, you will be keeping a journal of the questions that arise from your reading and our class discussions. For each of our texts, after you have read it and before we have discussed it, formulate three questions and, for each question, take some notes on what you would need to answer it — which passages of the text you would consider more closely, what background information you would need, which ideas or concepts you would need to research. I will collect your journals a few times during the semester (I won’t grade them, but will simply check that you are keeping them up). Please bring your journals with you to every class — you will be using your questions during group work and discussion, and I will occasionally ask you to write in them during class.

Reading Responses: I will be periodically assigning you writing exercises, to be done at home, in preparation for class discussions, essay drafting, and workshops. I may not always collect them, but you will often be sharing them in class and sometimes posting them to NYU Classes. Your work on these exercises will figure into your participation grade. Like the journals, these will not be officially graded, but I will be keeping track of their quality and consistency. They, too, are meant to facilitate our conversations and to provide you with material for your essays. Treat them as provisional writing, rather than polished and unassailable arguments, as a place to try out ideas, ask questions, venture arguments — to be tentative, confused, ambivalent.

Readings

Our texts will range in genre, discipline, and length: lyric poetry and narrative prose, philosophy and psychology, literary and art criticism — and several hybrid texts that cross all of these divides. Some address — even announce — Surrealism explicitly, while others form crucial parts of the background of ideas out of which the movement emerged. Still others will be retrospective, “secondary” reflections on Surrealism as both a moment that has passed and a possibility that can be reclaimed, however ambivalently. Some reclaim it by assimilating its strategies and presuppositions without ever speaking the word. In addition to the required readings, I encourage you to follow up whatever topics, texts, or authors particularly interest you. You could do this by looking up background information, searching for criticism, or getting further reading recommendations from me or your classmates. You will, in fact, need to do all of this for your research essay.

Grading

I will base your grades on the quality of your essays, your group research presentation, and your class participation. Participation includes the timely completion of your journal questions, responses, and essay drafts as well as, of course, your vocal participation in discussions and group work. It also includes responding (both orally and in writing) to the work of others during workshops. Each draft of your essay matters (though it will not get a separate grade). Presentation (i.e. grammar, proof-reading, MLA format) as well as style and substance counts.

Anticipated breakdown of final grade:

Exhibit-based essay: 20%
Method-based essay: 25%
Research essay: 25%
Group presentation/annotated bibliography: 15%
Participation (including completion of journal and responses): 15%

Attendance

If, due to illness, emergency, or religious holiday, you cannot attend class, please be in touch with me directly as soon as possible so that you can be prepared for the next class. You will also need to get the notes for the day you missed from one of your classmates; once you have gotten the notes, I will be happy to meet with you and go over what you missed. Please be aware that more than two unexcused absences will jeopardize your course grade.

Academic Integrity

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

Required Texts

You can buy our books at the NYU Bookstore. All other texts will be on our NYU Classes site, under “Resources,” in either of two folders: “Required Readings” or “Optional Readings.”


Syllabus

I. Exhibits: The Surrealist Revolution

Week 1

Mon, Jan 25; Wed, Jan 27
- Introduction
- In-class writing: noticing
- Discussion: “close reading”; walking in the city
Week 2

Mon, Feb 1; Wed, Feb 3
- Optional readings: André Breton, “The Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924); Maurice Blanchot, “Reflections on Surrealism” (1945)
- Writing exercise: types of surrealist image, with examples from Eluard’s poetry
- Discussion: reading a lyric poem: the surrealist image

Week 3

Mon, Feb 8; Wed, Feb 10
- Reading: Capital of Pain; Anna Balakian, “The Surrealist Object” (from Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute, third edition [1986], pp. 170-209)
- Discussion: the dehumanized image; the paranoid image
- Group work/discussion: the trans-medium image: presentations of poems and paintings

Week 4

Mon, Feb 15 (no class); Wed, Feb 17
- Group work/discussion: the trans-medium image: presentations of poems and paintings (continued)

Week 5

Mon, Feb 22; Wed, Feb 24
- Films: Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, Le Chien Andalou (1928); Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, Meshes of the Afternoon (1942)
- In-class writing: noticing
- Discussion: reading a film: shots and sequences
- Draft of exhibit-based essay due (Wed)

II. Methods: Lost Objects, Found Texts

Week 6

Mon, Feb 29; Wed, Mar 2
- Reading: Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919)
- Writing exercise/discussion: presenting a theory: varieties of the uncanny

**Week 7**

Mon, Mar 7; Wed, Mar 9
- Reading: G. K. Chesterton, “The Blue Cross” (1910)
- Discussion: the detective’s method
- Writing exercise/discussion: applying a theory: the uncanny in “The Blue Cross”
- Workshop

**Week 8**

Mon, Mar 14; Wed, Mar 16: **Spring Break**

**Week 9**

Mon, Mar 21; Wed, Mar 23
- Reading: Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900; revised and updated through 1930, 8th ed.): chapter II (pp. 128-154); from chapter VI (“The Work of Condensation”) (pp. 311-319)
- Film: *Spellbound*, dir. Alfred Hitchcock (1945) (screening TBD)
- Writing exercise: the role of psychoanalysis in *Spellbound*; the relation between psychoanalysis and gender
- Discussion: the psychoanalyst’s method; the detective as psychoanalyst
- Exhibit-based essay due (Wed)

**III. Sites/Sights:**

*The Image and Its Double*

**Week 10**

Mon, Mar 28; Wed, Mar 30
- Reading: André Breton, *Mad Love* (1937), pp. 5-67
- Group work/discussion: reading a photograph: what is “convulsive beauty”? what is “the found object”?
- Draft of method-based essay due (Wed)

**Week 11**

Mon, Apr 4; Wed, Apr 6
- Simone de Beauvoir, “Breton or Poetry” (from *The Second Sex* [1949], pp. 231-237)
- Discussion: found objects, gendered subjects
- Workshop
Week 12

Mon, Apr 11; Wed, Apr 13
- Reading: Claude Cahun, *Disavowals* (1930), pp. 1-34
- Optional reading: Mary Ann Caws, “Doubling: Claude Cahun’s Split Self” (from *The Surrealist Look* [1997], pp. 95-119); Rosalind Krauss, “Claude Cahun and Dora Maar: By Way of Introduction” (from *Bachelors* [1999], pp. 1-50)
- Group work/discussion: identity and self-image
- **Method-based essay due (Wed)**

IV. **Arcades:**

*The Inside of the Outside*

Week 13

Mon, Apr 18; Wed, Apr 20
- Reading: Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” (from *Capital* [1867]); Siegfried Kracauer, “Farewell to the Linden Arcade” (1930)
- Writing exercise/discussion: presenting a theory: what is a commodity?
- Discussion: applying a theory: outmoded commodities in the Linden Arcade

Week 14

Mon, Apr 25; Wed, Apr 27
- Writing exercise/discussion: research questions and topics
- **Trip to Bobst Library** (tentative)

Week 15

Mon, May 2; Wed, May 4
- **Group presentations**
- Annotated bibliographies due (Wed; on NYU Classes)

Week 16

Mon, May 9
- Optional reading: Hal Foster, “Beyond the Surrealism Principle” (from *Compulsive Beauty* [1993], pp. 209-213)
- Discussion: Surrealism today?
- Draft of research essay due

Wed, May 18: Research essay due (by email as a Word document or pdf)