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.

Writing

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

(1) The exhibit-based essay (3-5 pages) will be a close reading of a surrealist text, verbal or visual. A text does not have to be linguistic — it can be any medium, or in several at once. The only requirement is that it be dense and organized enough to merit sustained attention and reward extended analysis. Close reading derives
the meaning of a text through minute attention to particulars, cropping out small areas of a text in order to examine them in detail and then attempting to explain their relation to the whole from which they’ve been taken. This explanation of the relation of part to whole will often involve an argument about the interaction between meaning and structure, between what a text is saying and how it’s saying it. Close reading will be a skill I’ll 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 object 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.

(3) The site-specific essay (3-5 pages) is your chance to take the methods of surrealism where they belong – to the streets. Taking our authors’ ambivalent wanderings between public and private spaces for your models, you will explore urban reality in the expectation of an objective encounter with a subjectively meaningful site – some unforeseen intersection between a specific time and a specific place. Your essay should both find a way of clearly describing this encounter and explaining its significance in precise, analytic terms.

(4) The research essay (8-10 pages) will make use of all the approaches from the first three essays: close reading, application of concepts, description and analysis. 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 the earlier critics. You will form small groups based on common research interests and together compile an annotated bibliography of scholarly sources, which you will then present to the class, along with a list of questions which frame the scholarship on your topic.

You will be writing drafts for all four 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:

(1) 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 two or three 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 be asking you to write in them during class.

(2) Reading Responses: Each of you will need to write a total of six reading responses (about 2 pages each): three original ones and three secondary responses to the responses of your classmates. All this responding will take place online, on our Blackboard site. On Discussion Board, I will create “Forums” for each of our readings, and you will post your original responses as “Threads” and your secondary responses as “Replies” to the threads of your classmates. Like the journals, these will not be officially graded, but I will be keeping track of their quality and consistency. Since these, too, are meant to facilitate our conversations and to provide you with material for your essays, it’s very important that you spread them out evenly over the semester and not leave them for the last few weeks of class. Try, also, to do them in plenty of time before each class so that you have time to process the reading and formulate your thoughts. Part of your reading assignment for each class will be to read the responses posted for that day, so please post them as early as possible to give all of us time to read them before we meet. These are meant to be provisional writing, rather than polished and unassailable arguments. They are the place to try out ideas, ask questions, venture arguments — to be tentative, confused, ambivalent.

Readings

Our texts will range in genre, discipline, and length: poetry and prose fiction, philosophy and psychology, literary and art criticism — and several hybrid texts that cross all these divides. Some address — even announce — surrealism explicitly, while others form crucial parts of the background of ideas out of which surrealism 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, authors, or texts 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: 15%
Method-based essay: 20%
Site-specific essay: 20%
Research essay: 25%
Group presentation/annotated bibliography: 5%
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’ve gotten the notes, I would 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.

A Note on Plagiarism

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 all our books at the NYU Bookstore. There will be links to all additional materials on our Blackboard site.


Trips
We will be going on at least one, possibly two or three field trips. One will be to Bobst Library, where a librarian will take us through the library’s various resources. We may also go to MoMA (the Museum of Modern Art), where you will have a chance to see firsthand a lot of the twentieth-century art relevant to our topic. We will also try to see a film at Anthology Film Archives, the cinema-museum that regularly screens classic and contemporary avant-garde films.

Syllabus

I. Exhibits: The Surrealist Revolution

Week 1

Mon, Jan 23
- Introduction
- In-class writing: noticing
- Discussion: “close reading”

Wed, Jan 25
- Reading: Paul Eluard, from Capital of Pain (1926); Anna Balakian, “The Surrealist Image” (from Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute, third edition, 1986)
- Optional readings: André Breton, “The Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924); Maurice Blanchot, “Reflections on Surrealism” (1945)
- Discussion: reading a poem: the surrealist image

Week 2

Mon, Jan 30; Wed, Feb 1
- Group work/discussion: the translated image: presentations of poems and paintings

Week 3

Mon, Feb 6; Wed, Feb 8
- Films: Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel, Le Chien Andalou (1928); Maya Deren, Meshes of the Afternoon (1942)
- In-class writing: noticing
- Discussion: *reading a film*: shots and sequences
- **Draft of exhibit-based essay due (Wed)**

**Week 4**

Mon, Feb 13; Wed, Feb 15
- Slide show: Joseph Cornell, selected works
- Writing exercise/group work: *reading an object*: Cornell boxes
- Workshop

II. **Methods:**

*Lost Objects, Found Texts*

**Week 5**

Mon, Feb 20 (**no class**); Wed, Feb 22
- Reading: Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919)
- Writing exercise/discussion:
  - Presenting a theory
  - Applying a theory: analyzing an uncanny instance (show & tell)
- **Exhibit-based essay due (Wed)**

**Week 6**

Mon, Feb 27; Wed, Feb 29
- Reading: Karl Marx, from *Capital* [“Commodity Fetishism”] (1867); André Breton, Diego Rivera, and Leon Trotsky, “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art” (1938)
- Optional reading: Fredric Jameson, from *Marxism and Form* (1971)
- Writing exercise/discussion:
  - Presenting a theory: what is a commodity?
  - Applying a theory: reading a commodity (show & tell)

**Week 7**

Mon, Mar 5; Wed, Mar 7
- Reading: G. K. Chesterton, “The Blue Cross” (1910)
- Discussion: *reading a space*: the detective figure
- Workshop
- **Draft of method-based essay due (Wed)**
Week 8

Mon, Mar 12; Wed, Mar 14: **Spring Break**

**III. Sites/Sights:**

*The Image and Its Double*

Week 9

Mon, Mar 19; Wed, Mar 21
- Reading: André Breton, *Mad Love* (1937)
- Writing exercise/discussion: *reading a photograph*
- **Method-based essay due (Wed)**

Week 10

Mon, Mar 26; Wed, Mar 28
- Discussion: identity and self-image
- Writing exercise: types of sources: critical arguments
- **Draft of site-specific essay due (Wed)**

**IV. Site-Seeing:**

*The Inside on/of the Outside (The Arcade)*

Week 11

Mon, Apr 2; Wed, Apr 4
- Reading: Siegfried Kracauer, “Farewell to the Linden Arcade” (1930); Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia (1929)
- Discussion: the outmoded
- Writing exercise: research topics and questions
- Workshop

Week 12

Mon, Apr 9; Wed, Apr 11
- Discussion: research topics and questions
- **Trip: Bobst Library** (tentative date)
- **Site-specific essay due (Wed)**
Week 13

Mon, Apr 16; Wed, Apr 18
- Group presentations of exhibits, arguments (secondary sources), and central questions

Week 14

Mon, Apr 23; Wed, Apr 25
- Group presentations; annotated bibliographies due (on Blackboard)

Week 15

Mon, Apr 30; Wed, May 2
- Reading: Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant* (“The Passage de l’Opéra”) (1926)
- Optional reading: Mary Ann Caws, “For a Cinema of the Central Eye” (1978)
- Draft of research essay due (Mon)
- Workshop

Week 16

Mon, May 7
- Reading: Hal Foster, “Beyond the Surrealism Principle” (1993)
- In-class reading: Frank O’Hara, “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul” (1959) (from *Lunch Poems*, 1964)
- Conclusion: surrealism today?

Wed, May 9
- Research essay due (hard copy in my mailbox or, if impossible, by email as a Word document)