

**Gallatin School  
New York University**

**Writing Seminar II:  
*The Surreal Thing*  
K10.0675**

Spring 2009  
Monday, Wednesday 2:00-3:15  
715 Broadway, Room 601

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## **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 first essay (3-5 pages) will be a *close reading* of a text. 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 argument about 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 *concept-based* essay (3-5 pages) involves two elements: a theoretical model or concept and an object which 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 three of the 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.

## 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.

### **Required Texts**

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

Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*

André Breton, *Mad Love*

Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*

John Ashbery, *The Tennis Court Oath*

### **Trips**

We will be going on at least two, probably three field trips. One will be to Bobst Library, where a librarian will take us through the library's various resources. We will 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 which regularly screens classic and contemporary avant-garde films.

### **Syllabus**

#### **I. *The Surrealist Revolution***

#### **Week 1**

Wed, Jan 21

- Introduction
- In-class reading: Frank O'Hara, "A Step Away From Them" (1956), "Personal Poem" (1959) (from *Lunch Poems*, 1964), from "Personism: A Manifesto" (1959)
- In-class writing: noticing
- Discussion: what is the "personal"?

#### **Week 2**

Mon, Jan 26; Wed, Jan 28

- Reading: André Breton, "The Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924); Maurice Blanchot, "Reflections on Surrealism (1945); Peter Bürger, from *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974)
- In-class writing: defining surrealism
- Discussion: close reading

#### **Week 3**

Mon, Feb 2; Wed, Feb 4

- Reading: André Breton, Diego Rivera, and Leon Trotsky, “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art” (1938); Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia (1929)”; Rosalind Krauss, “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism” (1981)
- Discussion: the idea of revolution, the politics of resistance

#### Week 4

Mon, Feb 9; Wed, Feb 11

- Reading: Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939); Léopold Sédar Senghor, “Speech and Image: An African Tradition of the Surreal” (1965)
- Discussion: ambivalence (close reading)
- **Draft of close reading due**

#### Week 5

Mon, Feb 16 (**no class**); Wed, Feb 18

- Workshop

### II. *Lost Objects, Found Texts*

#### Week 6

Mon, Feb 23; Wed, Feb 25

- Reading: Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919); “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad’” (1925); Mary Ann Caws, “Outlook and Inscap in Dada and Surrealism” (1981); Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter” (1844)
- In-class writing: presenting a concept; applying a concept
- Discussion: the detective figure
- **Close reading due**

#### Week 7

Sun, Mar 1

- **Film:** Jean Cocteau, *The Testament of Orpheus* (1959), Anthology Film Archives (2<sup>nd</sup> Ave and 2<sup>nd</sup> St), 7:30 pm

Mon, Mar 2; Wed, Feb 4

- Reading: André Breton, *Mad Love* (1937); Maurice Nadeau, from *The History of Surrealism* (1944); Rosalind Krauss, “No More Play” (1984)
- Discussion: self and other
- **Draft of concept-based essay due**

### III. *The Dream and Its Double*

**Week 8**

Mon, Mar 9; Wed, Mar 11

- Reading: Sigmund Freud, from *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900)
- In-class writing: dream-text
- Discussion: analysis of dream-text (condensation and displacement)
- Workshop

**Week 9**

Mon, Mar 16; Wed, Mar 18 (**Spring Break**)

**Week 10**

Mon, Mar 23; Wed, Mar 25

- Reading: Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (1936); Tyrus Miller, from *Late Modernism* (1999)
- Discussion: surface and depth
- **Concept-based essay due**

**IV. Street (Still) Life****Week 11**

Mon, Mar 30; Wed, Apr 1

- Reading: Karl Marx, from *Capital* ["Commodity Fetishism"] (1867); Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1935) and selections from *The Arcades Project*; Siegfried Kracauer, "Farewell to the Linden Arcade" (1930)
- Discussion: possible research projects

**Week 12**

Mon, Apr 6; Wed, Apr 8

- Reading: Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant* (1926); Mary Ann Caws, "For a Cinema of the Central Eye" (1978)
- Discussion: types of sources
- **Trip: Bobst Library**
- **Site-specific essay due**

**Week 13**

Mon, Apr 13; Wed, Apr 15

- Reading: *Paris Peasant*; Charles Baudelaire, "A Philosophy of Toys" (1853); Walter Benjamin, "Allegory and Trauerspiel" (from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*) (1928); Fredric Jameson, from *Marxism and Form* (1971)

- **Group presentations of secondary sources and central questions; annotated bibliographies**

#### **Week 14**

Mon, Apr 20; Wed, Apr 22

- Reading: John Ashbery, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), “The Heritage of Dada and Surrealism” (1968), “Joseph Cornell” (1967).
- **Group presentations; annotated bibliographies**

#### **Week 15**

Mon, Apr 27; Wed, Apr 29

- Discussion: dealing with precursors, academic and poetic
- **Draft of research essay due**
- Workshop

#### **Week 16**

Mon, May 4

- In-class reading: Frank O’Hara, “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul” (1959) (from *Lunch Poems*, 1964)
- Conclusion