

PHIL*4230-01

SOCIAL & POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Instructor: V. Burke

Brief Course Synopsis:

Surrealism is a literary and aesthetic genre, an avant-garde cultural formation. Walter Benjamin wrote that surrealism pushes the idea of poetic life to the limit of its possibility, where the threshold between waking and sleeping is worn away. The founders of the surrealist movement were influenced by Jewish mysticism, and they also embraced Freudian theory. They announced their solidarity with the communist parties. They sought, in Benjamin's words, a kind of "profane illumination." Leaving behind theological illumination, they sought to portray objects in their material form, but as transformed within collages of remote and antithetical extremes. Images would be juxtaposed in ways in which there would be no space for coherent meaning. The surrealists wanted to harness for the revolution the powers of intoxication. Surrealist thinkers were political in that they viewed surrealism as a form for critical representation of the fragmentation and decay of bourgeois reality. Georges Bataille called surrealist style the "absence of myth," where mythology was associated with bourgeois illusion. Bourgeois reality had a dreamlike quality, and the surrealist juxtapositions of montage could disenchant it in the name of a materialist revolution—not a political revolution that would transform the state, but a political revolution in manner of thinking that would transform everyday apprehension. Surrealism sought to shatter the comfortable myths that anesthetized bourgeois reality. It is the most important political reception of Freud: the surrealists thought that through the juxtaposition of images in montage the unconscious of fragmented capitalist society would make itself manifest. Surrealism was also engaged in the overthrow of bourgeois forms of art. Theodor Adorno criticized Benjamin's political appropriation of surrealism, claiming that it itself simulated the dreamlike and mythological state of bourgeois reality that it sought to shatter, producing a dreamworld that was just as anesthetizing as the fragmented capitalist world. Through the writings of Breton, Aragon, Freud, Bataille, Benjamin, and Adorno this course in Surrealism and the Politics of the Particular will explore the political climate of late modernity in which surrealism sought to intervene. We will examine selected works of surrealist art and literature, and the surrealist method of Benjamin's Arcades Project. Central to our inquiry will be the widely held view that surrealism is an "idealist" movement that employs a dialectical method. This seminar is interdisciplinary, integrating material from the visual arts, literary theory, literature, political theory, philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Required Texts:

Andre Breton, *Mad Love*

Andre Breton, *Communicating Vessels*

Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*

Photocopy Packets: readings from Kristeva, McCumber, Ricoeur, Heidgger, Benjamin, Adorno, Freud, and Bataille

Recommended Text:

Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*

Evaluation: TBA