

*Surrealist Ghosts and Spectrality in
Surrealist Ghostliness
by Katharine Conley
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Martine Antle
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

The spectral, ghosts, and ghostliness, haunt Surrealism. Whether at the movement's center starting with *Nadja*, or at its peripheries within the communities of artists who rejuvenated the movement, or with those who continue to redefine Surrealism even today, the notion of the ghost is omnipresent in both the writing and the visual art of the avant-garde. It is one of the most important and well-known clichés of Surrealism; everyone talks about it. Moreover, the avant-garde movements, bearers of the memory of the two World Wars, are themselves movements haunted by the memory of war. Ghostliness is a polysemic and yet unifying concept capable of taking on various forms, from the haunting of history to repressed ghosts. As Conley affirms and demonstrates judiciously, "Ghostliness as a keystone idea unifies a movement with disparate artistic practices. It concentrates on the common thread the ghostly legacy of automatism weaves through the movement's thought and works: its punning texts and anamorphic images" (19).

Nonetheless, even though critics have successfully discerned the omnipresence of ghostliness before the publication of Katharine Conley's work, no study had been entirely dedicated to this subject within the framework of Surrealism. How can we explain this gap in the criticism of Surrealism, a gap that Conley's study is finally going to fill? Conley's study of ghostliness—and all its derivatives, such as "ghosts," "ghostly," "ghosting effects," etc.—fills a sizeable void in contemporary European and transatlantic studies. Some may argue that several critics have worked on the function of the ghost and on what has also been called "spectral identities" in Surrealism—for example, in *Nadja*, Aragon's *Paysan de Paris*, or de Chirico's *Hebdoméros*. Still, no one has explored this notion in depth by taking it from the center of the movement to its peripheries, thereby providing a stage not

Martine Antle: martine.antle@gmail.com

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only for the contributions of women artists, from the surrealists Claude Cahun, Lee Miller, and Dorothea Tanning, to Francesca Woodman's photographs of haunted houses in the 1970s, and Susan Hiller's work *From the Freud Museum* of 1991-1997; space is also thereby cleared for film, specifically, Man Ray's early films. Conley's thorough, detailed and systematic analysis in *Surrealist Ghostliness* is also a welcome and much needed addition to studies of modernity since it re-contextualizes vanguard movements and their aftermath. She traces ghostliness from Lewis' gothic novel *The Monk*, in its cartography, and in the Freudian unconscious or "psychic geography" from Europe to North America. Throughout the study, ghostliness becomes a vehicle to re-examine the Surrealists' attraction to objects, and it emerges as a "creative practice" (237). According to Conley it permeates and haunts the entire twentieth century.

Moreover, Conley's approach is original, unprecedented and multifaceted. Demonstrating the extent to which surrealist perception and representation of ghostliness is above all anamorphic, Conley engages the reader in a close reading of the anamorphic paradigm and its ghostly effects. She clearly identifies and problematizes the main functions and traits of surrealist ghostliness, including a detectable connection to spiritualism. The omnipresence of automatism also generates ghostly effects; its manifestations are analyzed and identified through the opposition between moments of suspension and those of flow. Finally, her analysis of the art of the senses problematizes the sensuality of the surrealist experience and the extent to which tactile art takes on the role of the double in artistic experience. Conley explains, "The surrealists were also attracted to the creation of works that depended on touch" (9). She charts ghostliness from this standpoint in European and North American film, visual art, collage, and in objects, from the 1920s to the 1990s.

Additionally, this study offers new and original readings of surrealist photography, including that of Man Ray—"the scintillating light captured by the camera" (43)—and the ghostly effects of the Rayograph in his early films, for example (Chapter 1). Brassai and Claude Cahun also engage in ghostliness and create a new artistic language: "*Human frontier* invites the viewer to see at least double: to look up, down, and behind the human head; to imagine a man and see the ghost of a woman" (66).

Miller's photographs of Egyptian lands evoke a "temporal doubleness inherent in surrealist ghostliness" (115). Tanning's creations (Chapter 5) are situated at the crossroads of the gothic and the baroque, and connect ghostliness to everyday life. With Pierre Alechinsky's palimpsests, ghostliness is born from the juxtaposition of historical references and representations of the world. As Conley argues, his work functions as ghosts of Bretonian and Desnosian automatism (Chapter 7).

Chapter 8, which treats Hiller's Freudian ghosts, offers a probing case of the legacy of Surrealism. Conley's choice of this contemporary figure as the final

artist of the study reveals a solid strategy, namely, to conclude *Surrealist Ghostliness* by bringing Surrealism's legacy into the contemporary "postmodern" age. She states, "In its persistent reflexivity, its inherent doubleness, its forceful insistence on the most fundamental human truth—that human beings are being defined by their mortality—*Surrealist Ghostliness* illuminates the ways in which Surrealist theories always embodied aspects of both modernist and postmodernist tendencies" (239).

Given the depth and the quality of its analysis as well as its expansive attention to visual art, it is unfortunate that the University of Nebraska Press could not provide larger, high-resolution color illustrations. The illustrations are adequate and the front cover is indeed beautiful, but the superb quality of this scholarly work surely merits superior illustrations.

Surrealist Ghostliness is undoubtedly one of the best studies of Surrealism written in the last decade. It is likely to foster much discussion and invite new studies of the legacy of Surrealism within contemporary art. Overall it offers new approaches to the surrealist movement and draws chief connections between the center of the movement and its peripheries. It re-situates studies of Surrealism in the U.S. and beyond in doing so. First and foremost, Conley's study is directed toward specialists in the field of Surrealism, art historians and film scholars. Yet because of its wide and far-reaching approach, it will also appeal to scholars interested in modernity, and in visual art, Cultural Studies, and Women's Studies.