
H-France Review Vol. 9 (August 2009), No. 100

Haim Finkelstein, *The Screen in Surrealist Art and Thought*. Aldershot and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2007. xi + 328 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (hb); £60.00 UK (hb). ISBN: 978-0-7546-6116-0.

Review by Raymond Spiteri, Victoria University at Wellington.

The topic of the screen in surrealist art and thought may, at first sight, seem esoteric, but its implications are not limited to the field of surrealist studies. It could be considered an exploration of the limits of modernity, particularly the stresses placed on the process of representation when addressing experiences that are, in one way or another, extraordinary, yet still grounded in the quotidian. One of Haim Finkelstein's achievements in this book is to articulate the link between surrealist experiences and everyday experience. The book does a particularly fine job of examining how the former are located on the threshold of the latter; it shows, indeed, that what separates *surrealism* from conventional understandings of *realism* may be little more than a permeable screen.

Finkelstein has produced a rich and fascinating reading of the surrealist movement during the 1920s. He is able to trace the emergence of what he calls the "screen paradigm" from the early 1920s to its eclipse in the early 1930s through compelling readings of writings by Robert Desnos, André Breton, and Louis Aragon, and artworks by Max Ernst, René Magritte, Joan Miró and André Masson. One of the benefits of Finkelstein's discussion is that he is able to avoid the popular misapprehension of surrealism as a horde of dreamers floating along in an inebriate state by offering a concrete articulation of the experience of the surreal. He successfully demonstrates how surrealist experience was grounded in the everyday as a profound exploration of the texture of the real.

The screen fulfils a regulatory function in Finkelstein's argument, acting like a hinge between the real and the surreal. It becomes a threshold that regulates the transformation of conventional, physical reality into the imaginatively embellished understanding of experience at the heart of the surrealist enterprise--what Breton would call the marvellous or convulsive beauty. At the core of Finkelstein's argument is "the notion of the 'screen' as a spatial paradigm with far-reaching conceptual ramifications" that "subsumes a chain of representations, beginning with the actual cinema screen, and continuing with the screen as a surface that constitutes a plane of projection, reflection, and seeing-through" (p. 4). Thus Finkelstein moves from an analysis of the surrealists' response to cinema to the conceptual coordinates that underpinned their understanding of experience.

The book is broadly divided into two parts: the first part (chapters one to three) develops the screen paradigm through a close reading of texts by Desnos, Aragon and Breton to bring out a constellation of concerns that shape the screen paradigm. Although Finkelstein does consider the example of cinema, it functions more as an instance of the surrealists' fascination with the notion of the screen; in this way he is able to bring out the way that the screen paradigm structures key motifs in surrealist thought. The second part (chapters four to seven) develops the way the screen paradigm can be used to understand the reception of painting in surrealism, looking closely at practice of four artists closely associated with the surrealist movement during the 1920s: Max Ernst, René Magritte, Joan Miró, and André Masson. The final chapter, which doubles as a conclusion, discusses the eclipse of the screen paradigm in the

1930s. I will focus my discussion in this review on the first part, since I think it offer the most suggestive reading for a non-specialist audience; this is not to diminish the chapters on specific artists, only to acknowledge that, by necessity, the discussion of painting is of more limited interest.

Finkelstein's argument is carefully developed through the analysis of specific texts so that his thesis emerges from the material in question, rather than being imposed externally. There is elasticity to the argument, so that if at points it defies credulity—as is often the case with surrealism—a subsequent example may regain the reader's confidence.[1] Finkelstein opens his account with a discussion of the role of the cinema in surrealist thought during the 1920s. This decade was the apogee of the silent cinema and the introduction of sound at its end coincided with the decline of cinema as a surrealist experience. Finkelstein begins with a passage from the end of Desnos's "Pénalités de l'enfer ou Nouvelles Hébrides," which describes the narrator's fascination with a blank, luminous screen in an empty cinema, a fascination that draws the narrator towards the screen so that he is able to peer through two small holes and see the bodies of two friends impaled on church spires. Finkelstein uses this passage to tease out the motif of the screen as a permeable surface that separates two realms. Desnos's text also intertwines dream and imagined narratives and, as such, introduces the proximity of cinematic and dream experience, a proximity underlined by a 1925 article by Jean Goudal. If Desnos's text represents a surrealism given over to imaginative reverie, then Finkelstein is able to ground his argument in a more lucid example of surrealism by turning to Aragon's *Paysan de Paris*, which is based in part on a detailed description (albeit imaginatively embellished) of a dilapidated shopping arcade—the *Passage de l'Opéra*.

Finkelstein then discusses the films of Louis Feuillade—*Fantômas* and *Les Vampires* were celebrated by the surrealists—looking particularly at the way Feuillade constructs space in his films as a series of layers parallel to the screen.[2] This constitutes a spatial relation that Finkelstein terms "layered depth" and it plays a central role in his later discussion of surrealist painting. Significantly, the screen for Feuillade is not simply a transparent window or proscenium arch, but a self-reflexive surface that draws attention to its own status as a type of artifice, what Finkelstein terms a "self-aware screen."

The second chapter develops this reading of the screen paradigm "in its metaphorical role as the threshold embedded in the surfaces of the real" (p. 62). This chapter focuses on the character of Aragon's descriptions in *Le Paysan de Paris* as cinematic collage that "perceived reality as a façade with apertures... opening onto interior space" (p. 66). This theme is continued in the discussion of Breton's *Nadja*, which Breton famously described as a book left-ajar, "*battant comme une porte*." Here Finkelstein addresses the spaces evoked by Breton behind the surface of the real—surfaces that suggest the mystery implicit in the façade of the modern city. Also playing a part here are *Nadja's* photographic illustrations, which frequently include doorways and windows, suggesting mystery on the threshold of the real.

Perhaps one of the more surprising aspects of the book is the discussion of automatic writing, a concern that would initially seem distant from the screen or the cinematic. However, Finkelstein develops a convincing argument by pursuing the implications of the metaphors and images used to describe the process of automatic writing. Finkelstein turns to the inaugural work of surrealism, *Les Champs magnétiques*, one of the earliest examples of automatic writing, collaboratively written by Breton and Philippe Soupault in 1919. Central here is the title given to the first section of *Les Champs magnétiques*, "*La glace sans tain*" (an unsilvered glass or two-way mirror), which "sums up the basic dialectic involved in the process of automatic writing": "The two-way mirror is the site of an admixture of the imaginary—a corollary of memory and desire—and the real; it reflects or mirrors the reality of the writer as well as what the writer projects on it; at the same time, it allows a partial view of the depths of the mind, albeit one dependent on the distorting quality of the mind's interior mirror" (pp. 106-07).

In the second part of the book (chapters four to seven), Finkelstein employs his earlier discussion of the screen paradigm to consider the work of four artists closely associated with surrealism during the

1920s: Ernst, Magritte, Miró and Masson. His strategy here is to illustrate how the screen paradigm can be used to illuminate the work of these artists, demonstrating how the notion of the screen can supplement current scholarship on the artists. The problematical notion of “flatness” or “surface” has long played a central role in discussions of modernist painting, so the notion of a screen is already implicit in discussions of modern painting.[3] The value of Finkelstein’s contribution is that, in relation to the overly reductive notion of flatness, the screen is a far more dynamic concept that suggests how the two-dimensional surface of a painting can be used to stage spatial and psychological depth.

The chapter on Ernst explores the role of the screen as an articulation of layered depth that draws on the imagery of mental processes found in the writings of Sigmund Freud and F.W.H. Myers. This strategy is particularly successful since, instead of simply interpreting iconography in theoretical terms, it suggests a link between the pictorial devices deployed by Ernst and psychological and psychoanalytical theory. This chapter is followed by a short chapter on Magritte, which draws on the earlier discussion of mystery in Feuillade’s cinematic space. The chapters on Miró and Masson explore how the notion of the screen can supplement recent scholarship on these artists.

Finkelstein advances a convincing argument for the emergence of screen paradigm during the 1920s. Less clear are the reasons for the dissolution of this paradigm in the 1930s. The problem is one of causality. During the 1920s, the screen paradigm subsumes a series of oppositions that structure surrealist thought, but in the 1930s these oppositions no longer are felt compelling. Why is this so? The introduction of sound in the late 1920s appears to coincide with the eclipse of the screen paradigm, but I think it is misleading to conclude that this was the cause of this transformation. Although the greater verisimilitude of sound cinema—or rather its codification of verisimilitude—reduced the potential for revelatory experiences that had made silent cinema so attractive to the surrealists, this does not appear to be a sufficient cause for the eclipse of the screen paradigm.

I would suggest that the reason for the decline of the screen paradigm in the 1930s results from the repeated attempts to compensate for the political impasse of surrealism: the surrealists’ attempts to engage in some kind of revolutionary political activity—from joining the PCF to the rapprochement with Trotsky in the late 1930s—necessitated a thickening of the vocabulary used to describe the experience of surrealism, one in which the oppositions that initially underwrote the screen paradigm were placed under increasing stress. Allied to this is a shift in the status of surrealism as an avant-garde movement. As surrealism became more fully assimilated as an established cultural movement, its initially oppositional stance, with its underlying binary logic, was qualified by its location within an ever-more complex system of coordinates in the social space.[4] There is also the changing status of the political in the 1930s. With the increasing polarization of politics between fascism and Stalinism, the very politics of emancipation that initially attracted the surrealists to the French Communist Party—embodied in the idea of the 1917 Russian Revolution—became ever more remote. This unresolved tension between culture and politics increasingly became inflected on an aesthetic level. Breton’s *L’Amour fou* (1937) is crucial here. Are not the qualities that Finkelstein considers exemplary of the eclipse of the screen paradigm also the qualities of the aesthetic embellishment of the text at this particular instance?

The emergence of the surrealist object and its theorization during the 1930s would seem a natural complement to Finkelstein’s account of the screen paradigm. Here Finkelstein’s account could be read in conjunction with his own earlier analysis of the surrealist object as well as in relation to Steven Harris’s recent study of 1930s surrealist art and thought.[5] Indeed, Finkelstein’s consideration of the screen paradigm and its dissolution could be developed further in terms of a broad-ranging study of the fate of the ‘image’ during the interwar years, a study that would situate surrealism and other manifestations of the cultural avant-garde in the context of the contemporary writings of Aby Warburg, Martin Heidegger, and Walter Benjamin.[6]

All in all, *The Screen in Surrealist Art and Thought* makes a valuable contribution to the study of surrealism and its place in twentieth-century culture. It can be read with profit by not only art, literary and cultural historians, but by anyone concerned with the effects of technological and cultural modernity on the human imagination.

NOTES

[1] Any close reading of surrealist texts involves a degree of projection on the part of the reader, with the attendant risk of an overly subjective interpretation.

[2] On the surrealists' interest in the films of Louis Feuillade, see Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[3] Flatness is often associated with the influence of the art criticism of Clement Greenberg, although its genealogy can be traced back to comments by Maurice Denis.

[4] On the historical dynamic of the avant-garde, see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

[5] Haim Finkelstein, *Surrealism and the Crisis of the Object* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1979); Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[6] Elements of such a project are already evident in the writings of Georges Didi-Huberman. See, in particular, *Devant le temps: Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images* (Paris: Minuit, 2000) and *L'Image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Minuit, 2002)

Raymond Spiteri
Victoria University at Wellington
Raymond.Spiteri@vuw.ac.nz

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172