

# Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis by Natalya Lusty

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I am interested in the process by which certain avant-garde texts refuse, then and now, to be so easily accommodated within the normalizing narratives that inevitably come to inform a movement's place in history.  
- Natalya Lusty (p.3)

Arming itself from the outset with Lee Miller's loaded piece of photographic journalism, *Revenge on Culture* (1940), this book, *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, promises to put into play an intriguing trio of discourses. As a lecturer at the University of Sydney, this study mirrors the Australian scholar Natalya Lusty's current area of teaching and expertise in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, building on her previous article and book chapter publications, and as a revision of her doctoral thesis. Like much of the work in this interdisciplinary field it will appeal to scholars of a variety of persuasions and to a range of research interests.

Thankfully Lusty takes a revisionist's approach, allowing her to critically reassess certain assumed historical facts and outmoded positions from a distinctly twenty-first century's feminist point of view. For instance, Whitney Chadwick's foundational study *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (1985) is acknowledged as key in helping promote study of the less well known aspects of the movement in the mid 1980s, but Lusty picks up on Chadwick's oversights, particularly her inability to read certain female contributions as politically motivated. Lusty refers to a photographic

portrait by Lee Miller, depicting a miniature Dorothea Tanning next to a gigantic Max Ernst in the Arizona desert, indeed one example which would appear to make “a very explicit statement of the gender politics of the movement” (p.11). Lusty also rightly complains of the “often reductive materialist/ idealist binary”, which has been ascribed to the Bataillean versus Bretonian philosophies of Surrealism in discourse of the past twenty years (p.2), and thus commences on what makes for a more accurate understanding of their positions.

The seven chapters read as individual essays. The first two consider the literary works of the English artist and writer Leonora Carrington, no doubt inspired by the insightful work of cultural historian Marina Warner (1989). In ‘Masking the Crime of Femininity’, Lusty employs the psychoanalytic work of Joan Riviere, a peer of Sigmund Freud and Ernst Jones, as a valuable “frame” with which to read Carrington’s short story of the late 1930s ‘The Debutante’ (p.23). Lusty then goes on to effectively link Carrington with Lewis Carroll, highly apt due to their mutual concern with the *femme-enfant* (or ‘child-woman’) as protagonist as well as their shared subversion of bourgeois English manners. In ‘Surrealist Transgression and Feminist Subversion’ Lusty re-reads Carrington’s late Surrealist novel *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974) next to Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* (1928). Both enable her to engage in a critique of Surrealism’s feminine ideals, most readily apparent in André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928). However, Lusty is also aware that Bataille’s perverted nymphomaniac, Simone, stands in stark contrast to Carrington’s deaf crone Marian Leatherby, and suggests that Carrington’s use of de-eroticization is perhaps as subversive, if not more so.

The following two chapters, ‘Disturbing the Photographic Subject’ and ‘Fashioning the Lesbian Subject of Surrealism’, focus on the work of the photographer and writer Claude Cahun. Here Lusty

asserts that the lesbian subject is primary and shows how Cahun distanced herself from the violent strategies of many male Surrealists. However, thematic and aesthetic connections with the uncanny nature of Hans Bellmer's *Poupée* (1934–35) are easily drawn and inevitably lead to a discussion of Sigmund Freud's famous essay and Jacques Offenbach's homage to ETA Hoffman's *The Sandman* (1816). However, Lusty manages to maintain her originality in this argument by referring to a less well-known *Self-portrait* (1932) in which Cahun has photographed herself as a doll-like figure in a chest of drawers. This unusual image is included amongst the eight high quality reproductions.

The penultimate and concluding chapters bridge into the postmodern, putting the work of Cindy Sherman into dialogue with the Surrealist works of Bellmer once again. As with Cahun, Bellmer may at first appear to be an obvious comparison with Sherman but Lusty's treatment reinvigorates this link. Here she contributes to the mounting feminist scholarship on Sherman, perhaps the most articulate being that of the theorist Laura Mulvey (1991), which Lusty references and absorbs. Again less well-known aspects of Sherman's oeuvre have been chosen to reproduce, here two of the more abject tableaux, this time in full lurid colour. Lusty also considers Sherman's problematic celebratory status alongside Madonna whom she was photographed beside for *Rolling Stone* magazine as promotion for her 1997 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art.

Throughout, Lusty's study encompasses effective identification of critical junctures and paradigmatic overlay. For instance, the political climate of the notorious Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937 finds its echo in the late 1980s Mapplethorpe/Serrano controversy in terms of censorship. She also notably makes

apparent how “[i]n striking ways the works of Carrington, Cahun and Riviere preempt many of the critical concerns in contemporary feminist theory”(p.5).

What is especially interesting overall is Lusty’s ability to put into play different practices which radically disrupt the political and cultural conventions of their historical moments. Thus, histories overlap and unconventional narratives are inserted which collectively reinvigorate the study of avant-garde. The more erotic, violent and perverse aspects of the Surrealist movement are laid bare. Though based in Australia, Lusty’s concerns both chime with the current Surrealist research in the United Kingdom into non-normative sexualities, and extend the international scope upon which the Surrealist movement was initially founded. Why this book is not yet more widely discussed and available in this country is a serious omission. Natalya Lusty offers us an important re-reading of Surrealism and its aftermath which should not be overlooked.

### **References:**

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