

Panel 26

Ekphrasis, Narrative Experiments and New Ways of Seeing

‘I Refuse to Go into His Room’: Toward a Surrealist Poetics of Description

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Description has long served as the principal locus for exploring literary visuality, from classical rhetoric to recent intermediality studies. Yet André Breton, surrealism’s foremost theoretician, famously repudiates novelistic descriptions as the very emblem of positivism and bourgeois banality. Quoting Dostoevsky’s description of an ordinary room, he declares, ‘He is wasting his time, for I refuse to go into his room’.

This paper argues that, despite surrealism’s broad polemic against mimesis, a distinctive visuality resurfaces in both explicit and implicit modes. First, Breton’s deployment of photography in narratives seeks to elide verbal description, exposing both the promise and limits of writing with actual images. Second, surrealist writings foreground the phenomenology of encounter with objects. Here, surrealist objects possess an evocative power beyond mere surface data; through objective chance, their material conditions fuse with subjectivity. Such encounters are not static observations but kinetic practices of attention, prompting readers to forge new ways of perception. Drawing on Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Reverdy, this image-based poetics transcends medium and genre, insisting on the real presence and ‘alchemy of the word’ as a catalyst for revelation.

Reframing description through this surrealist lens yields two key advantages. It shifts criticism from Greenbergian formalism—grounded in optical purity—to the realm of symptom, where singular events, psychic ruptures, and affective energies drive aesthetic meanings. Moreover, it opens the novel to a philosophy of language that links the function of signs to the lived world, inviting readers through a portal toward layered realities.

Biography

Yunqian Yang is pursuing a PhD at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He earned an MA in English at University College London. His research focuses on the interdisciplinary exchange between literary and visual studies, specifically exploring image and visuality as critical categories in modernist and contemporary works.