

Surrealism Beyond Reality and Perception

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Abstract

Surrealism has often been interpreted through the lens of psychoanalysis, particularly as a visual expression of the unconscious mind. However, limiting Surrealism to the representation of hidden desires and dream imagery reduces its deeper philosophical and experiential significance. This research paper proposes a shift in understanding Surrealism not merely as a depiction of the unconscious, but as an active process that transforms perception, disrupts reality, and redefines human experience. Moving beyond the traditional influence of Sigmund Freud, this study explores Surrealism through phenomenological and philosophical frameworks. It examines how Surrealist art does not simply reveal hidden meanings, but creates altered states of perception that challenge the boundaries between reality and imagination. The unconscious, in this context, is not treated as a fixed structure filled with symbols, but as a dynamic and continuous process embedded in human experience. The paper also establishes a dialogue between Surrealism and philosophical traditions, particularly the ideas of perception and reality explored by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, alongside parallels in Indian thought, including the concept of Maya and the fluid nature of consciousness as discussed in the teachings of Gautama Buddha. These perspectives allow for a deeper understanding of Surrealism as not only an artistic movement but also a philosophical inquiry into the nature of existence. Rather than focusing solely on symbolic interpretation, this research emphasizes the viewer's experience how Surrealist artworks create disorientation, ambiguity, and emotional tension. Through this lens, Surrealism becomes a transformative space where perception is destabilized, and reality is reimagined. The study ultimately argues that Surrealism should be understood as an experiential and philosophical practice that extends beyond psychoanalysis into broader questions of consciousness, perception, and being.

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Introduction

The history of art is often understood as a progression of styles, techniques, and visual languages. However, certain movements go beyond formal innovation and challenge the very foundations of how reality is perceived. Surrealism is one such movement that does not merely represent the world but actively questions the nature of reality itself. Emerging in the early twentieth century, Surrealism developed in a time of intellectual crisis, where traditional structures of logic, reason, and order were being questioned. While it is commonly associated with psychoanalysis, particularly the theories of Sigmund Freud, this association has often limited the understanding of Surrealism to a narrow framework of dream symbolism and unconscious desire. In many academic interpretations, Surrealism is treated as a method of decoding hidden meanings where each image is seen as a symbol representing something repressed or unconscious. However, such an approach reduces the complexity of the movement. Surrealist artworks often resist fixed interpretation. They do not always communicate clear meanings but instead create experiences that are confusing, unsettling, and open-ended.

This raises an important question:

Is Surrealism about revealing meaning, or is it about transforming perception? To answer this, it is necessary to move beyond psychoanalytic interpretation and consider philosophical approaches to perception and experience. The work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty becomes particularly relevant in this context. His philosophy suggests that perception is not a passive act of observing reality but an active, embodied experience shaped by the interaction between the body and the world. From this perspective, Surrealism can be understood as an artistic practice that disrupts ordinary perception. It does not simply depict strange or dream-like images; it alters the way reality is experienced. Objects lose their stability, space becomes ambiguous, and the familiar turns unfamiliar. This transformation is not just visual but psychological and sensory. Furthermore, when examined through the lens of Indian philosophy, Surrealism reveals deeper parallels. In the teachings of Gautama Buddha, reality is understood as impermanent and constantly changing. The concept of Maya in Indian thought suggests that what we perceive as reality is not absolute but constructed and illusory. These ideas resonate strongly with Surrealist practices, where the boundary between reality and illusion collapses.

Beyond Freud: The Unconscious as Experience and Process

1. Limitation of Psychoanalytic Interpretation

The traditional understanding of Surrealism is deeply rooted in psychoanalysis, particularly the Theories of Sigmund Freud. According to this approach, Surrealist images are seen as symbolic representations of unconscious desires, fears, and repressed memories. While this interpretation played a significant role in the early development of Surrealism, it also imposes certain limitations. Freud's model treats the unconscious as a hidden layer of the mind a kind of storage space where suppressed thoughts reside. In this framework, the role of art becomes similar to that of psychoanalysis: to reveal and interpret these hidden contents. Every image is assumed to carry a meaning that can be decoded. However, this method of interpretation reduces Surrealism to a system of symbols. It assumes that: Images have fixed meanings, the unconscious can be fully explained, Art functions as a representation rather than an experience. In practice, many Surrealist artworks resist such interpretations. They do not offer clear meanings or stable symbols. Instead, they create ambiguity, tension, and confusion. The viewer is often left without a definite answer. This suggests that Surrealism is not simply about expressing the unconscious as content. Rather, it engages the viewer in a process where meaning is unstable and constantly shifting.

2. The Unconscious as Lived Experience

A more advanced understanding of the unconscious can be developed through phenomenology, particularly the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He argued that perception is not a passive reception of information but an active engagement with the world. According to this view: We do not simply "see" objects; we experience them through our body, memory, and context. This means that the unconscious is not hidden deep inside the mind. It is present in the way we perceive and interact with the world. In Surrealist art, this becomes evident through: Distorted forms, Unstable spaces, and unexpected juxtapositions. These elements do not just symbolize something they alter perception itself. The viewer is forced to experience reality differently, often in a way that feels unfamiliar or unsettling. Thus, the unconscious becomes an experience, not just a hidden meaning.

3. The Body as a Site of the Unconscious

Moving beyond the mind-centered approach of psychoanalysis, the body emerges as an important site of unconscious activity. Artistic creation is not purely intellectual; it involves gestures, movements, and physical interaction with materials. In many creative processes: The hand moves before conscious thought, the artist responds intuitively rather than logically, which suggests that the unconscious is

present in the act of creation itself. It is not something that is later interpreted but something that actively shapes the artwork as it is being made. This idea transforms the understanding of art: From representation to embodiment, from meaning to process, The artwork becomes a trace of unconscious action rather than a coded message.

4. Indian Philosophical Parallels: Illusion and Impermanence

A deeper understanding of Surrealism can be achieved by connecting it with Indian philosophical traditions. In Buddhism, as taught by Gautama Buddha, reality is seen as impermanent and constantly changing. The concept of self is also fluid, rather than fixed. Similarly, in Advaita Vedanta, the idea of Maya suggests that the world we perceive is not the ultimate reality but an illusion shaped by perception.

These ideas resonate strongly with Surrealism: Reality is unstable, Identity is fluid, Perception is unreliable. Surrealist artworks often create environments where: Objects defy physical laws, Space becomes ambiguous, Time appears distorted. Rather than representing dreams, these works reflect a deeper philosophical insight—that reality itself may not be as stable as it appears.

5. From Interpretation to Experience

The most significant shift in this research is moving from interpretation to experience. Traditional analysis asks: What does this image mean?

This research asks: What does this image do to the viewer?

Surrealist art: Disorients perception, creates emotional tension, breaks logical expectations. These effects are not secondary they are central to the work. The unconscious, therefore, is not just something hidden within the artwork. It emerges in the interaction between the artwork and the viewer. It is felt as confusion, curiosity, discomfort, or fascination.

3. Reinterpreting Surrealist Techniques: From Method to Perception

1. Rethinking Technique in Surrealism

In traditional art history, Surrealist techniques are often described in a fixed way—automatism, juxtaposition, dream imagery, and irrational composition. These are usually explained as methods to access the unconscious mind, largely influenced by Sigmund Freud. However, such explanations reduce technique to a tool for expression. In this research, Surrealist techniques are reinterpreted not just as methods of creating images, but as strategies that transform perception itself. This shift is important: Technique is not just how art is made, It is how reality is disrupted and re-experienced, Thus, Surrealist techniques function less as representation and more as intervention into perception.

2. Automatism Reconsidered: Beyond Spontaneity

Automatism is one of the most well-known Surrealist techniques, originally promoted by André Breton as a way to bypass rational control and allow the unconscious to express itself freely. Traditionally, automatism is understood as: Drawing or writing without conscious thought, allowing randomness to guide creation, but this definition is incomplete. A deeper interpretation suggests that automatism is not simply about spontaneity it is about breaking the illusion of control. When an artist practices automatism: The boundary between intention and accident becomes blurred, the artist is no longer fully “in control” of the artwork, and creation becomes a dialogue between conscious and unconscious processes. This aligns with the philosophical idea that human perception and action are never fully rational or controlled. The unconscious is not something separate it is already active within every gesture. Thus, automatism reveals: Creativity is not purely intentional, It is a process of emergence.

3. Juxtaposition and the Collapse of Logic

Another important Surrealist technique is juxtaposition placing unrelated or contradictory elements together. In basic interpretation, juxtaposition is seen as symbolic: A strange combination represents hidden meaning, However, in this research, juxtaposition is understood differently: It disrupts the structure of logical perception, when two incompatible elements are placed together: The mind tries to make sense of them, but fails to find a stable meaning, this creates a gap in understanding, where logic breaks down. This gap is important because: It forces the viewer out of habitual thinking, it reveals how much perception depends on expectation, Thus, juxtaposition is not just symbolic—it is experiential. It creates a moment where reality itself feels unstable.

4. Materiality and Texture as Unconscious Expression

Surrealism is often discussed in terms of imagery, but less attention is given to material and texture. Artists like Max Ernst experimented with techniques such as: Frottage (rubbing textures), Grattage (scraping paint). These methods introduce: Chance, Physical interaction, and unexpected forms. From a deeper perspective, these techniques show that: The unconscious is not only in images, it is also in material processes. The surface of the artwork becomes active: Textures suggest forms without clearly defining them, the viewer perceives patterns that are not fully controlled, this creates a state where: The image is neither fully intentional nor completely accidental, thus, materiality itself becomes a site of unconscious emergence.

3.5 Distortion of Space and Time

One of the most powerful aspects of Surrealism is its ability to distort space and time. Traditional art follows: Linear perspective, Logical spatial relationships, Surrealism disrupts this by: Flattening space, creating impossible environments, and Altering scale and proportion. From a phenomenological perspective (as discussed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty), space is not just physical it is experienced through perception. When Surrealist artists distort space: They are not just creating fantasy, they are revealing that space itself is unstable in perception, Similarly, time in Surrealism: Feels suspended, Repetitive, and non-linear. This reflects a deeper insight:

Human experience of time is psychological, not fixed. Thus, Surrealism exposes the subjective nature of reality.

6. Viewer as Participant: Psychological Engagement

A major shift in this research is understanding that Surrealist techniques do not end in the artwork, but continue in the viewer's mind. Traditional art: The viewer observes, Surrealist art, The viewer participates, through: Confusion, Curiosity, Emotional tension, The viewer is forced to: Question what they see Engage with their own perception, this interaction creates a psychological process where: Meaning is not given, It is constructed by the viewer, Thus, the unconscious is not only in the artist or the artwork, It emerges in the interaction between viewer and image.

Case Studies Reimagined: Surrealism as Experience, Not Representation

1. Rethinking the Analysis of Artworks

In conventional art analysis, artworks are interpreted through symbols, meanings, and historical context. Viewers are often guided to "decode" the image, as if it contains a hidden message waiting to be revealed. However, this method becomes limiting when applied to Surrealism. Surrealist artworks often resist clear interpretation. They do not behave like puzzles with fixed answers. Instead, they create states of uncertainty, tension, and psychological engagement. In this section, the focus shifts from: What the artwork means to what the artwork does to perception The following case studies explore how Surrealist works transform the viewer's experience of reality, space, and self.

2. Yves Tanguy: The Experience of Infinite Space

The paintings of Yves Tanguy present vast, empty landscapes filled with abstract, undefined forms. At first glance, these works appear calm and silent. However, upon deeper engagement, they create a sense of unease. There is: No clear foreground or background, No recognizable objects, No stable point of

reference. This absence produces a unique psychological effect: The viewer feels lost within the image, unlike traditional landscapes that guide the eye, Tanguy's compositions remove orientation. The viewer cannot fully understand where they are or what they are seeing. This creates: A sense of infinity, A feeling of isolation, A quiet but persistent tension, The unconscious here is not expressed through symbols, but through spatial disorientation. The painting becomes an environment where perception itself begins to dissolve.

3. Giorgio de Chirico: The Uncanny Familiar

Although not strictly a Surrealist, Giorgio de Chirico's work deeply influenced the movement. His paintings depict empty city squares, classical architecture, and long shadows. At first, everything appears logical and realistic. However: The spaces are strangely empty, Shadows are exaggerated, Time feels frozen, this creates what is often called the uncanny a feeling where something is both familiar and unsettling at the same time. The viewer experiences, Recognition followed by discomfort, Clarity followed by confusion. This psychological shift is important: The artwork destabilizes normal perception without distorting reality completely, instead of showing something impossible, de Chirico shows something almost possible, which makes it more disturbing. The unconscious here emerges as a feeling, not a symbol: A sense that something is "not right", A tension between reality and illusion

4. Remedios Varo: Inner Worlds and Transformation

The works of Remedios Varo present highly detailed, dream-like environments filled with figures engaged in mysterious activities. Unlike earlier Surrealists, her work is less chaotic and more structured. However, the psychological experience remains complex. Her paintings often depict: Transformation of bodies, Fusion of human and environment, Enclosed, intimate spaces, The viewer does not feel lost, as in Tanguy's work, but rather: Drawn into a closed, internal world This creates: A sense of introspection, A feeling of quiet mystery, An emotional, almost meditative engagement. Instead of shock or confusion, Varo's work produces slow psychological immersion. Here, the unconscious is experienced as: A process of inner transformation, A movement between identity and environment.

5. Leonora Carrington: Identity and Fluid Reality

Leonora Carrington's works introduce themes of identity, mythology, and transformation, often through ambiguous figures and hybrid forms. Her paintings challenge: Fixed identity, Stable form, Clear boundaries between human and non-human, The viewer encounters: Figures that are neither fully human nor fully animal, Spaces that feel both real and imagined, This creates a unique experience: Identity

becomes fluid and unstable, Unlike traditional portraiture, where identity is fixed and recognizable, Carrington's work suggests that: The self is constantly changing, Identity is not a stable structure, The unconscious here appears as: Transformation, Multiplicity, Continuous becoming.

6. Conclusion of Case Studies

These case studies demonstrate that Surrealism cannot be fully understood through symbolic interpretation alone. The unconscious is not simply represented it is activated through experience. Surrealist artworks: Disrupt spatial understanding, Challenge identity, create emotional and psychological responses, The viewer becomes an active participant in this process, completing the artwork through perception. Thus, Surrealism moves beyond representation and becomes an experiential field, where reality, identity, and perception are constantly shifting.

Surrealism as a Bridge: Psychology, Philosophy, and Contemporary Relevance

1. Moving Beyond a Single Framework

Surrealism has often been confined within a single interpretative framework—most commonly psychoanalysis. While the influence of Sigmund Freud played an important historical role, this research has demonstrated that Surrealism cannot be fully understood through psychology alone.

Instead, Surrealism operates at the intersection of multiple domains: Psychology, Philosophy, Perception, and Artistic practice. This intersection transforms Surrealism into a bridge, rather than a fixed movement. It connects: Inner experience with external reality, Thought with perception, Conscious awareness with lived experience. Thus, Surrealism is not limited to revealing the unconscious It actively reconfigures how reality is understood.

2. Surrealism and Phenomenology: Reconstructing Reality

The philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides a powerful framework to understand this transformation. According to his ideas: Reality is not objective and fixed; it is constructed through perception, The body plays a central role in experiencing the world, Surrealism reflects these ideas by: Distorting space and form, breaking visual continuity, challenging logical relationships, these disruptions do not destroy reality; rather, they reveal its instability. Surrealist art shows that: What we consider "real" is already shaped by perception, by destabilizing perception, Surrealism allows us to experience reality as something fluid, incomplete, and constantly changing.

3. Dialogue with Indian Philosophy

A significant contribution of this research is establishing a dialogue between Surrealism and Indian philosophical traditions. In the teachings of Gautama Buddha:

Reality is impermanent (anicca), The self is not fixed (anatta), Experience is a continuous flow, Similarly, the concept of Maya in Indian thought suggests that: The world as we perceive it is not ultimate reality, it is shaped by illusion and perception, Surrealism resonates deeply with these ideas: It questions stable reality, It dissolves fixed identity, It reveals the constructed nature of perception. This connection expands Surrealism beyond its Western origins and places it within a global philosophical context. Thus, Surrealism can be understood as: Not just an art movement but a universal inquiry into the nature of existence

4. Contemporary Relevance: Surrealism in the Modern World

Surrealism continues to remain relevant in contemporary art and culture, but its role has evolved. Today, artists are less concerned with illustrating the unconscious as hidden content. Instead, they focus on: Fragmented identity, Digital realities, Psychological and emotional states, In the age of technology: Reality itself has become unstable, Virtual and physical worlds overlap, Identity is no longer fixed, Surrealist strategies such as distortion, fragmentation, and ambiguity are now used to explore: Social disconnection, Inner anxiety, Existential uncertainty. Modern visual culture, including digital art, cinema, and photography, frequently uses surreal elements to represent the complexity of contemporary life. In this sense: Surrealism has moved from a historical movement. To an ongoing method of understanding reality

5. Surrealism as Experience Rather Than Interpretation

One of the key arguments of this research is that Surrealism should not be reduced to interpretation alone. Traditional analysis focuses on: Decoding symbols, explaining meaning, However, Surrealism operates differently: It creates experiences, It disrupts perception, it engages the viewer emotionally and psychologically, The unconscious, therefore, is not something hidden inside the artwork. It emerges through: The act of creation, The structure of the image, The viewer's engagement. This shifts the role of art: From representation to transformation, Surrealism does not tell us what to think. It changes how we perceive.

6. Final Conclusion

Surrealism, when understood beyond its traditional psychoanalytic framework, reveals itself as a complex and dynamic field that bridges psychology, philosophy, and artistic practice. This research has shown that: The unconscious is not merely a hidden structure but an active process, Surrealist techniques function as disruptions of perception, Artworks create experiences rather than fixed meanings, The viewer plays an essential role in completing the artwork. By connecting Surrealism with phenomenology and Indian philosophy, the study expands its scope beyond Western modernism and situates it within a broader inquiry into reality and

consciousness. Ultimately, Surrealism is not just about dreams or irrational imagery. It is about the instability of reality, the fluidity of identity, and the transformative power of perception. It invites us to question: What is real?, What is perceived? And where does the boundary truly lie?

Conclusion

In the end, Surrealism cannot be fully understood if we keep looking at it only as a way to decode hidden meanings or unconscious symbols. That approach feels too limited for something that is actually much more alive and dynamic. What this study has tried to show is that Surrealism is not just about what an artwork represents, but about what it makes us experience. When we engage with Surrealist art, something shifts inside us. Our sense of reality becomes unstable, familiar things begin to feel strange, and we are pushed out of our usual way of seeing. This moment of disturbance is not a flaw it is the essence of Surrealism. It opens a space where perception is no longer fixed, and where reality can be questioned rather than accepted. By moving beyond Freud and bringing in phenomenology and Indian philosophy, Surrealism starts to feel less like a historical movement and more like an ongoing way of understanding existence. The idea that reality is fluid, that identity is not stable, and that perception itself shapes the world these are not just philosophical ideas, but experiences that Surrealist art allows us to feel directly. What becomes clear is that the unconscious is not something hidden deep inside the mind, waiting to be interpreted. It is already present in how we see, feel, and respond to the world. Surrealism simply makes us aware of it. So instead of asking “What does this artwork mean?”, maybe the more honest question is: “What is happening to me as I look at it?” That shift in questioning changes everything. Surrealism stops being something we analyze from a distance and becomes something we go through something that challenges us, confuses us, and sometimes even transforms the way we understand reality itself.

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