

Högre seminarium/Docentföreläsning

onsdag 16 februari 2022

kl 15.15-17 (i Comenius, Key-huset, med även via Zoom)

Higher Seminar/Inaugural Lecture as Associate Professor

Wednesday 16 February 2022

3.15 pm - 5 pm (in Comenius, Key Building, but also via Zoom)

Surrealism and Sexuality: A Revisionist Perspective

Anna Watz (SKI, IKOS)

The feminist reframing of art and literary histories, beginning in the 1970s, resulted in fierce critique of the surrealist movement's cult of femininity. The pioneering feminist study of surrealism, Xavière Gauthier's *Surréalisme et sexualité* (1971), argued that the movement's representations of women perpetuated a phallogocentric notion of femininity as embodying otherness. Gauthier's critique was followed, in the 1980s and early 1990s, by a wave of feminist criticism dismissing surrealism as a misogynistic boys' club. This was largely the critical context through which I encountered surrealism, as a doctoral student in the early 2000s. In this lecture, I reflect on the trajectory of my own view and understanding of surrealism's relationship to questions of gender and sexuality since the completion of my PhD thesis in 2012.

Focusing particularly on Breton's experimental novel *Arcane 17* (1945) – hailed by some surrealist scholars as a feminist text while attacked by, for example, Simone de Beauvoir and Xavière Gauthier for its mythologising and othering tendencies – I aim to show the tensions inherent in the surrealist celebration of femininity. Thus, I demonstrate the text's problematic rehearsal of patriarchal myths of femininity, while also framing it in relation to surrealism's pervasive critique of masculinity; these contradictory impulses present in the text simultaneously re-inscribe and unsettle gendered stereotypes. I subsequently juxtapose Breton's traditional understanding of femininity with the work of Claude Cahun – in particular her collection of short stories, *Héroïnes* (1925) – which displays a distinctly demythologising attitude towards traditional categories of gender and sexuality. This juxtaposition serves to demonstrate that the movement's early engagement with questions of gender and sexuality was both multi-layered and ambivalent – while surrealist gender politics certainly had problematic aspects, they were not as clear-cut as some critical narratives have proclaimed.