**Surrealism and Dance**

The Surrealists set out to destabilize the Western European paradigm that ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ are sight-based and rational and to challenge artistic conventions that they saw as in keeping with that line of thought. As an embodied art form, dance enabled the Surrealists to work outside these visual arts conventions to produce dynamic and multi-sensory experiences. Dance, then, played an integral role in the Surrealist quest to recover truths suppressed by the development of modern Western culture over the past five-hundred years; art based on linear perspective was one of the Surrealists’ most worthy opponents.

Photographer Man Ray’s short experimental film *le* *Retour à la raison* (1923) is an early example of Surrealist interest in dance. With the interjection of the word ‘Dancer’ among a montage of rayographs, still photographs, manipulated stills, and film clips that include the twisting torso of Kiki of Montparnasse, Man Ray equated the moving properties of film with dance. As a moving montage, the film simultaneously challenges the ‘truth value’ of the photographic medium that is yoked to the static image of Western perspective.

The intersection between film and dance also offered the Surrealists an alternative route into knowledge operating outside the Western visual arts canon. As an embodied art form, dance is also connected to the Surrealist idea of ‘automatism’ or involuntary actions operating beyond the realm of conscious control such as a heartbeat or behaviours produced by intoxicants or mental illness. Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dali’s silent film, *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) was originally set to the beat of tango music, in an exploration of the erotic as bodily experience that cannot be entirely controlled. Likewise, Hélène Vanel’s gyrating dance-piece *l’Acte* *manqué* (1938) staged a poignant critique of the customs and constraints of polite bourgeois behaviour by tapping into theories of hysteria as another manifestation of automatism.

The Surrealist engagement with embodiment extended to collaborations with important ballet companies and choreographers. For example, in 1926 Joan Miró and Max Ernst were responsible for the costumes and sets for *Romeo and Juliet* for Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. In 1945, the American-born surrealist Dorothea Tanning created the set and costume designs for George Balanchine’s *The Night Shadow*.

Surrealist artist Salvador Dalí worked frequently with choreographers. He was commissioned to design the sets and costumes for Leonide Massine’s *Bacchanale* (1939) for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo – a production in which the breast of a huge swan was used as an entrance by the dancers. In *Labyrinth* (1941), another choreographic work Dalí designed for Massine, the torso of a gigantic bust of a man served as way for the dancers to enter the stage. Dalí created designs for a production of *Romeo and Juliet* (1943), which the choreographer, Antony Tudor, declined to use. Despite this rejection, the Surrealist artist continued to receive dance commissions. In 1944, for instance, he worked on *Sentimental Colloquy* and *Café de Chinitas* and *Mad Tristan*. In this last piece, three horses’ heads loomed over the performers. Dalí also created the sets and costumes for Ana Maria’s production of *Three Cornered Hat*, which Ballet Espanõl premiered at the Ziegfeld Theater in New York in 1949. Dalí was involved in dance as late as 1961, when he worked on Maurice Béjart’s *Gala*.

Some of the Surrealists were interested in dance beyond Western theatrical expressions. While exiled in the United States during the Second World War, Max Ernst and André Breton designed their travel itineraries through the western states with the goal of seeing Hopi and Zuni dances. Each amassed extensive collections of indigenous regalia, especially masks.

The influence of Surrealism on dance also extended to Canada when, Françoise Sullivan and Jeanne Renaud, two members of the Automatists – a multi-disciplinary group of artists in Montreal initially influenced by the French Surrealists – adapted the Surrealist ideal of using spontaneity to access the subconscious to their early choreography. Sullivan wrote about the importance of spontaneity and the subconscious for choreographic experimentation in her essay ‘L’danse et l’espoir’ (‘Dance and Hope’) that was published in the Automatists’ 1948 manifesto, *Refus global*.

The Surrealists’ embodied practices of automatism also inspired the Action Paintings of American abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, who blurred the boundaries between painting and dancing as documented by Hans Nemuth’s film of Pollock at work on a glass canvas.

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**Moving Image Material**

Man Ray’s *le* *Retour à la raison* (1923) is available for viewing at:

http://www.ubu.com/film/ray.html

Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dali’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) is available for viewing at:

<http://archive.org/details/UnChienAndalou_313>

**Still Image Material**

Sketches of Joan Miro’s costume designs for *Romeo and Juliet* are available at:

<http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/houghton/exhibits/diaghilev/iconic_designs/49_2.cfm>

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