**Surrealism in Film**

**INTRODUCTION**

Speaking of an authentic Surrealist cinema is a difficult task since, outside of the first two films by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, *Un Chien Andalou* (An Andalusian Dog, 1928) and *L’Age d’Or* (The Golden Age, 1930), there are no other films that undisputedly belong to what could be strictly called an official Surrealist film canon. There is also the obverse problem where the term ‘surreal’ has entered common parlance as a synonym for the bizarre, strange, or phantasmagoric, with the label ‘Surrealist’ being applied as an adjective to any film with a lurid visual style despite lacking any aesthetic or political properties that would qualify the film as a proper Surrealist film. Filmmakers like, for example, Federico Fellini, Peter Greenaway, Terry Gilliam, David Lynch and Guy Maddin, have all been labeled as being ‘Surrealist’ when they should be seen as being inspired by Surrealism rather than being Surrealist proper. Since the radical artistic and political practices of the original Surrealist movement defy any reduction to a formulaic genre or visual style, it is more productive to discuss Surrealism *and* cinema or the influence of Surrealism *in* film rather than a distinct Surrealist style, genre or cinema.

**MAIN ENTRY**

The Surrealists were fascinated with the potential of cinema not only as a ‘screen’ on to which both desire and the imagination could be projected, but for its ability to reveal those elusive moments of what the Surrealists called the ‘marvelous’, or those extraordinary and wondrous contradictions that unexpectedly erupt out of everyday life. To this end, the group celebrated what Surrealist film critic Ado Kyrou called the ‘involuntary surrealism’ of B-movies and the detritus of popular culture: the stage magician fantasies of Georges Méliès, the anarchic slapstick of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, the restless pulp imagination of Louis Feuillade’s serials. Beyond this appreciation of popular culture and cinema, the Surrealist group were also interested in exploring the potential of cinema through sketches for film scenarios, film criticism or film appreciation, and the production of unfilmable screenplays that gave the imagination free reign. Among these efforts, however, the original Surrealist group only produced two completed films that could be considered intentional examples of Surrealism in film: *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) and *L’Age d’Or* (1930).

The opening scene of *Un Chien Andalou*, the first film by director Luis Buñuel and screenwriter Salvador Dalí, begins with a close-up of a man slashing open a woman’s eyeball with a straight razor. It is one of the most famous in cinema history and it perfectly exemplifies the Surrealist aspiration to have the viewer see the world with a new savage eye unconditioned by a society that represses individual desire and imagination. For the Surrealists, this type of oneiric-ocular intervention in cinema was best achieved by creating shocking images or depicting uncanny and absurd situations that would work on the viewer’s unconscious desires and obsessions. For this reason, Buñuel raged against those viewers and critics who treated *Un Chien Andalou* as a mere aesthetic experience and not as the “desperate, passionate call to murder” (Buñuel 1929: 34) that he intended for his film.

The Surrealist group intentionally cultivated scandal, and the hostile reception and subsequent banning of Buñuel and Dalí’s second film *L’Age d’Or* (*The Golden Age*, 1930) was more in keeping with the Surrealist goals for cinema. With its scenes of a woman fellating the toes of the statue or the final scene of human scalps affixed to the top of a crucifix, the film was undoubtedly created to offend the values system of both the Catholic Church and bourgeois society. Looking back on his first two films, Buñuel claimed that “the real purpose of Surrealism was not to create a new literary, artistic or even philosophical movement, but to explode the social order, to transform life itself” (Buñuel 1985: 107). For this reason, any discussion of the Surrealist movement’s must take into account the politics of Surrealism, its emphasis on desire and the imagination, and the purposes to which shock or the uncanny is mobilized.

Outside of *Un Chien Andalou* and *L’Age d’Or*, there are no other films that unquestionably belong to the so-called Surrealist film canon. Even films made by artists connected to the original Surrealist group were often disqualified by the group for not being properly aligned with Surrealism’s artistic or political practices. Pre-dating *Un Chien Andalou* by one year, Germaine Dulac and Antonin Artaud’s collaboration on the film *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (*The Seashell and the Clergyman*, 1928) is one such film with obvious Surrealist connections but was quickly disqualified as not being an official Surrealist text. Scenario writer Artaud would distance himself from Dulac’s film and would arrive at the film’s premiere with Andre Breton, Robert Desnos and Georges Sadoul to heckle the film for choosing to film as the *representation* of a dream, of someone else’s desire, rather than a film that attempts to use cinema to *induce* a dream-like state in its viewers. Subsequent critics like Linda Williams (1981) and Michael Richardson (2006) would also question the validity of including *The Seashell and the Clergyman* as part of any so-called Surrealist film canon.

Due to a loss of patronage, sectarian fracturing of the movement, and a changing and hostile political climate in Europe, the activity of the Surrealist group in Paris dramatically decreased before any other films were completed. Although he would continue to make challenging films influenced by his involvement with Surrealism, Luis Buñuel, for example, left the official movement in 1932 seeing it as incompatible with his Communist politics. While Surrealist painting and poetry was widely practiced outside of Europe in the thirties, it would not be until well after World War Two that Surrealist practices would find their way into cinemas over the world.

Perhaps owing to a Surrealist group active in Prague since the thirties, Czechoslovakian cinema around the thawing of Prague Spring produced some of the most interesting films incorporating Surrealist influences. Věra Chytilová's anarchic feminist comedy *Sedmikrásky* (*Daisies*, 1966), and the Jaromil Jireš’ *Valerie a týden divů* (*Valerie and Her Week of Wonders*, 1970) are two strong examples from Czech cinema. One of the best known Czech filmmakers, the animator Jan Švankmajer, is explicit about his commitment to the ideals of Czech Surrealism. Uninterested in the mere aesthetic appropriation of Surrealism, Švankmajer’s project for film is fully aligned with the Surrealist ambition of reconciling the viewer’s repressed unconscious and their reality. Švankmajer uncanny animated films are preoccupied with the inner life and malevolent ontology of everyday objects, and he is best known for his ‘realized dream’ anti-fairy tale adaptation of Lewis Carroll, *Něco z Alenky* (*Alice*, 1988) and his films *Lekce Faust* (*Faust*, 1994), *Spiklenci slasti* (*Conspirators of Pleasure*, 1996) and *Otesánek* (*Little Otik*, 2000). American animators, the Brothers Quay, were heavily influenced by Švankmajer and the early animated films of Polish Surrealists Walerian Borowczyk and Jan Lenica. Their animated adaptation of a Bruno Schulz short story, *Street of Crocodiles* (1986), was cited by Terry Gilliam as one of the greatest animated films of all time.

**Further Reading**:

Buñuel, L. (1929) “Un Chien Andalou.” *La Révolution Surréaliste* (12): 34-37.

(full French language version available):

http://melusine.univ-paris3.fr/Revolution\_surrealiste/Revol\_surr\_12.htm

Buñuel, L. (1983) *My Last Sigh: The Autobiography of Luis Buñuel*. New York: Knopf.

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*Cinema*. San Francisco, City Lights Books.

Kuenzli, R. (1996) *Dada and Surrealist Film*. Cambridge, MIT Press.

Ray, M. (1963) *Self Portrait*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Richardson, M. (2006) *Surrealism and Cinema*. Oxford, Berg.

Short, R. (2003) *The Age of Gold: Surrealist Cinema*. London: Creation.

Williams, L. (1981) *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film*.

Urbana, University of Illinois Press.

**Paratextual Material.**

Attached:

1. An image from Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929)

2. An image from Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s *L’Age d’Or* (1930)

3. An image from Jan Švankmajer’s *Faust* (1994)

4. An image from The Brothers Quay’s *Street of Crocodiles* (1986)

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