

## Some notes on Surrealism

'Surrealism at all times emphasis's *image* rather than *word*, feeling rather than thought, instinct and desire rather than reasonable commonplace'. Matthews.

### Background

European artistic/cultural movement originating in the 1920's. Surrealists were prominent in the areas of painting, literature and the cinema.

### Dada

Surrealism evolved out of Dada, an artistic/intellectual movement dating from around 1916 to about 1922.

**Dada was a protest against everything**, a nonsensical, absurd world represented by the slaughter and stupidity of the 1st world war (the term Dada was a nonsensical word).

Dada was **nihilistic** and **anti rational**. Leading exponents made nonsensical speeches, poets constructed poems at random (cutting up words from newspaper articles and picking them out of a sack) and artists such as Duchamp exhibited 'found objects' out of context e.g. Urinals.

Dada was humorous, deliberately shocking and anti art.

*The aeroplane weaves telegraph wires  
and the fountain sings the same song  
At the rendez-vous of the coachmen the aperitif is orange  
but the locomotive mechanics have blue eyes  
The lady has lost her smile in the woods.*

A **Dadaist random poem**. Charm without meaning.

### The origins of Surrealism

Founded as a movement by Andre Breton in 1924. Was more organised and revolutionary than Dada. Issued manifestos and declared themselves enemies of Bourgeois society. Many were Marxist's who wanted to transform society and held a romantic faith in the power of art. Breton talked of 'Pure Psychic Automatism' and of his belief in the 'Omnipotence of Dreams in the undirected play of thought'.(ref. to Freud). Many were influenced by the 'untutored' art of children, madness and so called 'primitive art forms'.

**Surrealists wanted to create something more real than reality itself.**

### Surrealism and the Cinema

Surrealist cinema developed in the period 1924-30 and was more radical in aims and content than Impressionist film. Surrealist filmmakers were forced to work outside the commercial film industry and to rely on private patronage.

#### **The attraction of Cinema**

*"To begin with, entering the dark auditorium was like closing your eyes. Your isolation from the crowd, your body submitting to a feeling of depersonalisation; the droning music obdurate the sense of hearing; the stiffness of the neck necessary for the gaze's orientation; all of this was like going to sleep" Brunius.*

Surrealists were naturally attracted to the cinema i.e. cinema's attempt to re-present the world in a darkened room, the individual experience (dreamlike participation), the manipulation of time and space, editing etc. they were influenced by films that presented **untamed desire**, the **fantastic** and the **marvellous** (see slapstick comedies, Nosferatu, King Kong).

Painters such as **Salvador Dali** and **Man Ray** and writers such as Antonin Artaud dabbled in film as did its most famous filmmaker, Spaniard **Luis Bunuel**. Bunuel referred to the cinema as *'the best instrument to express the world of dreams, of emotions, of instinct.'*

Refer to **Man Ray's** *Emak Bakia* (1927) and *L'Etoile de Mer* (The Starfish) Artaud, *The Seagull and the Clergyman* (1928) and the 2 major films of surrealist cinema, **Un Chien Andalou** (An Andalusian dog) 1928 and **L'Age D'or** (The Age of Gold) 1930 both collaborations between Bunuel and Dali.

**Un Chien Andalou** - themes of sexual desire and violence, ecstasy, blasphemy and bizarre humour.

**L'Age D'or** - full scale attack on bourgeois culture, themes of Sex, Religion and Violence. The film caused riots when it was first screened and was banned until 1970's.

### **End of the Unified movement**

European Surrealism as a unified movement began to break up around 1930. Dali continued with painting, Man Ray with photography while Bunuel moved to Spain via Hollywood.

**Bunuel** continued the surrealist tradition in film and became one of the great directors of his times continuing to make his own brand of surrealist films until his death in 1983. This tradition is evident in his later films such as Belle Du Jour (1967), The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (1972), The Phantom of Liberty (1974) and That Obscure Object of Desire (1977).

The Surrealist legacy continues and has influenced many key filmmakers including, more recently David Lynch, Ken Russell and Terry Gilliam. Surrealism has also been influential in 'avant garde' film and in the fields of comedy and advertising.

### **FREEDOM & RATIONALITY**

Central to an understanding of surrealism is their notion of freedom. Surrealists felt let down and restricted by the rational, **bourgeois society** to whom many belonged. They wanted freedom from the constraints, conventions and restrictions of bourgeois life and saw art as a means to achieve this.

### **Revolutionary**

Many Surrealists held more complex/revolutionary views. They wanted to change society and peoples perception of the world. Surrealism challenged **reason and 'modernity'** and **favoured the magical and the mystical, the instinctive, the chance encounter, automatic writing etc.**

### **Reaction against Realism**

Surrealists attacked rationality itself, reacted against accepted realist forms and sought to promote their own notions of reality often in the public arena. Surrealist activities were not confined to the arts, they attempted to undermine and change public perceptions of reality through manifestos, demo's, scandals, outrages and association with the communist party.

They aimed to derange meaning, to upset, disorientate and shock.

Surrealists wanted to liberate western culture from what they saw as the tyranny and repression of reason and to reveal the true nature of reality.

Referring to the work of Freud, they believed that only when the mind was in its semi-conscious or dream states could liberation be achieved.

### **THE INFLUENCE OF FREUD**

Surrealism was heavily influenced by Freudian ideas of the unconscious and particularly the notion of **dreams** as states uncontrolled by reason. A truly liberated state of being. They sort to render the often incoherent world of dreams directly in words or images without the interference of conscious thought processes.

Surrealists were interested in the **Id**, the primitive, uncivilised area of the mind where repressed sexuality and other desires resided. For many, like Freud the sexual drive (**libido**) was thought to be the strongest human impulse and the key to life.

Repressed sexuality and desire are key themes of classic surrealist film.

**ANTI NARRATIVE**

Surrealist filmmakers rejected conventional narrative forms and sought to liberate the film and the spectator from narrative itself. Such films serve to focus attention upon narrative itself and upon filmic processes of constructing meaning and upon the relationship between the film and its audience.

Narrative and continuity expectations are denied **and an absence of narrative logic** defies us to impose any meaning on events.

Causal connections among events are dissolved while character psychology is virtually non-existent. e.g. unnamed characters in *Un chien Andalou*, the use of ambiguous title cards in the same film '*once upon a time*', '*eight years later*'.

Surrealists attempted to disrupt narrative conventions of time and space, of plot, character and causality. To disorientate to spectator and render to unconscious, irrational world of dreams. Often through a series of powerful, seemingly unconnected images.

Refer to *Un Chien Andalou*, and *L'age D'or* in the first instance

**FILM FORM AND STYLE**

Use of a variety of conventional devices and techniques without wanting to be tied down to any predictable form. Dissolves, superimposition's + some traditional editing conventions. Point of view shots, a mixture of discontinuity and continuity editing and the unexpected juxtaposition of images were often used to shock and disorientate the spectator.

**Mise - en - Scene** was often influenced by surrealist paintings, e.g. the ants in '*Un Chien*' from Dali's paintings, the pillars and city squares in '*The seashell and the Clergyman*' from De Chirico's paintings. Objects/things often positioned out of context - free to live a life of their own and be shown in a new light.

Breton referred to beauty '**as the unexpected meeting, on a dissection table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella**'.

**MAIN THEMES**

Sexuality and sexual desire (mainly male), love, violence, religion, the fantastic, terror, Black humour, Bourgeois institutions and values.

**READING**

Many books on the subject are hard to get hold of are some are rather heavy going. However refer to the following list.

L Bunuel - *My Last Breath* (1978).

M Gould - *Surrealism and the Cinema* (1976).

P Hammond ed.- *The Shadow and its Shadow*, Surrealist writings on cinema.

Kuenzli (1987) - *Dada and Surrealist film*

JH Matthews - *Surrealism and film* (1971)

JH Matthews - *Surrealism and the American feature film* (1979)

L Williams - *Figures of Desire*, A theory and analysis of Surrealist film (1981)

**ARTICLE**

P Drummond 'Textual Space in *Un Chien Andalou*' *Screen* 18 Autumn 1977 (55)