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Experimental Film

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Film as an Independent Art Form through Surrealism and Dadaism

From the early days of the cinema, film theorists struggled to find film's place amongst the arts. There are those who saw film as merely a representation of already existing arts, namely the theater and painting. This led to many experimental and avant-garde filmmakers to experiment with their films to try and create a unique art form. Two movements that sprung from this was the Surrealism and Dadaism films. Dadaist and Surrealist film makers used abstract forms, natural objects in unnatural ways, and lack of narrative to create their films into a unique art form.

One of the people coined with starting the surrealist film movement was André Breton. Along with his friend Jacques Vaché, Breton would go to various cinemas around Nantes, France and walk into shows with no prior knowledge as to what was showing and commonly in the middle of the film. Breton and Vaché would enter in the middle of the film, stay for a short while and then leave whenever they felt like it. They would repeat this process several times over. "The method (Breton) and Vaché followed is one that can turn any succession of films into surrealist material – regardless of what the filmmakers had in mind" (Matthews, 121). This practice by Breton showed his want for a type of cinema that stepped away from every day reality; thus surrealism film was born.

Attending the cinema for Breton was not about seeing a story projected onto a screen. The narrative of the film was not important.

“Here is the essence of the surrealist’s interest in the cinema, an inevitable consequence of his desire to transcend everyday reality and his willingness to avail himself of any means which seems to offer the opportunity to do so”
(Matthews, 121)

Surrealists also used the new medium of film to “provide a ‘revolutionary’ language which would overcome both the static nature of painting and the shortcomings of spoken or written language (Fotiade, 11). Some of the major Surrealist and Dadaist filmmakers were Germaine Dulac, Man Ray, Luis Buñuel, and Hans Richter. By examining films from these filmmakers, one can see the techniques used to establish film as a unique and independent art medium.

Hans Richter was an extremely influential German artist and filmmaker. He spent his time not only making films, but studying film and writing about his observations. In his essay *The Film as an Original Art Form*, he stated that “problems in modern art lead directly into the film” (Richter, 19). Through his films, he attempted to avoid these problems and establish film as a true art form. One of his most influential films was *Rhythmus 21* (1921). Toshio Matsumoto and Michael Raine described Richter’s film as a film “that excluded all literary or explanatory elements and reduced the abstract movements of interiority to purely visual movements” (150). There is no plot. There are no figurative representations of any normal objects, no people, no landscapes. It “plays with optical effects of simple shapes: circles, squares, rectangles, lines” (Stein). The film

was one of the first abstract films. Richter attempted to make a film that was independent of other art forms by using abstract shapes and offering no plot.

Another Hans Richter film attempted to become a unique art form in a very different way. *Ghost Before Breakfast* (1928) is a very different film from *Rhythmus 21*. *Ghosts* includes human actors. There are discernable items in the six minute film. Such as a bow tie, a clock, and a gun. But many of these objects, including the humans in the film, are shown in unreal ways. The film is considered one of the first surrealism films. It shows every day common objects in ways that have not been seen by the viewer before. From hats flying around to bow ties untying themselves to guns moving by themselves. The film is an excellent example of early surrealism and the attempt to make film as a art form that could not be duplicated by any other form.

A film that came out around the same time as Hans Richter's *Ghosts before Breakfast* was *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (1928) by French filmmaker Germaine Dulac. Dulac made many impressionist films, but *La Coquille et le Clergyman* was her attempt at a surrealist film. This film has some similarities to Hans Richter's *Ghosts before Breakfast* but also differs in some important ways. Of the three films talked about so far, it is the first one that kind of has a plot. It is still not very noticeable, but it is more present than either of Richter's films. The film is about a priest who is having erotic hallucinations about a general's wife. The film doesn't rely as much on objects and abstract shapes as Richter's films did. Dulac's film uses the way it films it's characters and the unnatural movements and actions of the characters to give it a surreal feel. The film blurs the line between the real and the hallucinations. Matsumoto said of Dulac's

film it “pushed close to the world of the human conscious, aiming for the absolute liberation of the imagination” (15). There is no discernable difference between the real and unreal in the film. *La Coquille et le Clergyman* is an excellent example of a surrealist film that helped establish film as a unique art form.

A couple of years before Dulac made her surrealist film, American filmmaker Man Ray made his surrealist master piece in *Emak Bakia* (1926). Of his own film, Man Ray said “‘There was no scenario, all would be improvised’... He intended the film to be viewed as a series of ‘dream-like sequences without apparent logic, and complete disregard for conventional story-telling’” (Aiken, 240). Ray’s own description is the perfect way to describe the film. There is no plot. There is no noticeable relation between shots. This is not to say that there is no meaning to any of it though. “Man Ray saw his film as a cogent and ordered word of art. For him, the film contained ideas – ideas that were closely related” (Aiken, 240). He uses many different techniques to give the film a surreal feel. He uses the technique of throwing objects directly on the film strip and exposing it, using mostly nails and tacks. He uses superimposing and out of focus shots. There are long takes of objects that are shot in a way that they cannot be easily distinguished, such as really close up, or at unusual angles. All of these are ways to show everyday objects in completely unnatural ways.

The last film we will look at comes from one of the most influential surrealist filmmakers, Luis Buñuel. His film *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) is considered a quintessential surrealist film. Allen Thiher described surrealism practice as “a ludic activity, a form of play, that attempts systematically to subvert the rules of the game, whether it be in the

realm of syntax, narration, or iconic representation (Thiher, 39). Buñuel's film very much so attempts to not only disobey the rules, but to also change them. This is done largely through iconic representation. The film, which Buñuel made with Salvador Dalí, presents many shocking images to the watcher. Within the first couple of minutes of the film, an eye ball is shown casually being cut open by a razor. This is an iconic image in the film, and one that sets the tone. Another iconic image is of ants crawling out of the hole in a man's hand. There can be little meaning to be found in the image of the ants, but what Buñuel is creating is what Thiher refers to as a "surrealist figure" (Thiher, 43). There are many more images and scenes in the short film that could be considered surrealist figures, in that it is hopeless to try to find some bigger meaning in them. There is the scene of the crowd of people standing around a severed hand while a man pokes it with a stick and another scene where a woman is seen standing in the street nonchalantly as cars drive by quickly around her and eventually she is run over by a car. These two images along with many others in the film show people in a totally unnatural way. *Un Chien Andalou* is an extremely important surrealist film even to this day. It took film a long way in terms of giving it respect as an independent art form.

From the very first film created, it was apparent that film was going to become a powerful medium and art form. It's rise to a powerhouse entertainment industry in the 1920s raised question if it was a true art form. As academics and intellectuals struggled with this question, many filmmakers decided to bend away from the path of mainstream narrative film, and show that film could stand alone as it's own art form. These Surrealist and Dadaist filmmakers may not have made films that were as

commercially successful as others during the same time period, but these films mentioned above and others left a strong lasting impact on film.

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