

The beginning of the surrealism movement in 1920s

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“ Surrealism is destructive, but it destroys only what it considers to be shackles limiting our vision.” According to Salvador Dali, a Spanish surrealist artist, this quote was the essence of surrealism. The term “ surrealism” was first coined by a man named Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917 with the French word Surréalisme; however, the poet André Breton took the term and transformed it into a movement. The movement actually began in the 1920’s and ended in the 1960’s. It first originated in France but can be seen throughout the entire world. While it was predominantly men who provided surrealist creations, female surrealists experimented and created as well. Many artists were swept into the movement because of political uneasiness and global war. Artists felt the human civilization was at crisis for total collapse. With the upheaval of “ normal” lives, many began to search for ways to break boundaries and create new normal. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, surrealism is defined as “ a movement in art and literature seeking to express the subconscious mind by a number of different techniques, including the irrational juxtaposition of realistic images, the creation of mysterious symbols, and automatism.” This was the desire of the movement’s great artists’, to bring the subconscious mind to light and create something original. They gave the world something new to look at, even if it was unsettling and completely unorthodox.

There is a common goal among surrealists. Surrealism is meant to break boundaries, go places art has never gone before and to allow life to be meaningless amongst the chaos and unpredictability of life. It is the everyday life that appeals to surrealists. Specifically, “ it was surrealism’s goal to show that the unconscious was a valuable dimension of waking life”

(Frank, 17). The idea of the ungoverned unconscious and the intrigue of the dream world are inspiration for surrealist creations. The irrational and unorthodox processing of the unconscious human mind creates a sort of masterpiece that other artistic movements lacked. It is both intriguing and terrifying that the unconscious mind is somehow bound to the waking mind. Human beings cannot be without the two. This idea is what artists were determined to show the world.

The use of surrealist art in the early 1920's largely used ideas of the time to redefine art. Of course, as expected, the movement was rejected in the beginning. The ideas and styles of surrealism were too different from what people were used to. Change only brought uneasiness, especially when the change came in the form of disturbing art. Surrealist art followed the Dada movement which was also widely used in the early 1900's. The Dada's avant-garde or nonconformist ideals stemmed perfectly towards the beginning of the surrealist movement. It launched the beginning of artists trying to completely break all boundaries of "normal." The transition between Dada to Surrealism is often pinpointed in 1922 when French artist Francis Picabia declared Dada to be dead. He believed that the movement had become too organized, which directly juxtaposed all the ideals of the movement. The fading away of the Dada movement gave space for new philosophies to fill. It didn't take long for André Breton to finish and publish his work. Consequently, Breton defined surrealism as the "fusion of elements of fantasy with elements of the modern world to form a kind of superior reality." This fusion of differing realities opened a whole new pallet for artistry. The superior reality would lead artists to ground breaking

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creations. Fantasy and the unconscious could suddenly overlap with the “real” world. Breton’s work permitted a new definition for art and the surrealism movement was created.

The surrealist movement began as a literary movement; however, it was not officially consecrated as a movement until 1924 with the release of the Manifesto of Surrealism. André Breton, as mentioned earlier, took this publication and created the movement. From then on, writers, psychologists, politician, and other forms of artists took surrealist ideologies and ran. Many artists used eroticism, juxtaposition and atypical imagination as the main drive for creation. Names like Antonin Artaud, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Rene Magritte, and Yves Tanguy are some of the highly influential people of the Surrealist movement. Each person added significant style, ideology and artistry to the movement itself. Some of the most recognized surrealist works are *The Interpretation of Dreams* (written by Sigmund Freud), *The Persistence of Memory* (painted by Salvador Dali), *The Son of Man* (painted by Rene Magritte), *This Is Not a Pipe* (painted by Rene Magritte), *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (directed by Germaine Dulac), *Un Chien Andalou* (directed by Luis Buñuel) and *L’Age d’Or* (directed by Luis Buñuel). All of these artists and works set the foundation for surrealism. Surrealist paintings forced viewers to question. Questioning the idea of normal gave way to possibly accepting what maybe wasn’t “normal.” Surrealist literature produced the same questions. Authors begged readers to forego conscious thought and embrace the absurdities within the imagined realms of the mind.

The surrealism movement for film specifically meant showing the audience something they had never seen before. It was meant to leave the audience in a sort of awe and confusion while simultaneously leaving them thinking. The power that film had over other mediums of art was its authenticity. Seeing something atrocious or different in front of your eyes creates a completely different outcome than a painting would. While Breton was one of the first to publish writing on surrealism, Ado Kyrrou wrote specifically about cinema. In his publication, *Le Surréalisme au cinema* Kyrrou explains his belief that cinema is the essence of surrealism. The job of a surrealist artist, specifically within film, is to find how “ different realms of existence” (Richardson 3) can meet in conjunction. Although not written until 1953, his book gave great explanations for the power behind surrealist film from past and current cinema. He believed that film fit perfectly for surrealism because of the similarity between observing a film and being in the dream state. They were almost one in the same, although considered two different “ realms.” When cinematographers utilized the camera to create an authentic dream state for an audience to watch, surrealism was coming alive. It was real, it was not only a movement. According to Michael Richardson, author of *Surrealism and Cinema*, “ the conjunction of ‘ surrealism and cinema’ is a seductive one. It evokes an undefined relation, a meeting point between the opposites of light and dark, presence and absence, actuality and imagination” (Richardson 1). This, simply put, is the essence of surrealism within the world of cinema. Many directors and cinematographers understood this idea. The presence and absence of an object or a person caused confusion and paralleled the thoughts a brain may have while asleep

and awake. Imagination was so perfectly created on film. It became tangible when it was seen with the human eye, it was no longer imagined within the brain.

Luis Buñuel is one the most influential director's in surrealist cinema. With a total of about twenty-three movies, Buñuel's artistry was distinct, yet irrational. He once stated, " Don't ask my opinions about art, because I don't have any" (1). To say that Buñuel was unorthodox in his creativity would be an understatement. However, that is what he was all about. Both his personal life and his films exhibit evidence of " criminality." According to Carolyn Dean, in *The Self and Its Pleasures*, the term " criminal" has " conventionally been used as evidence of deviance and pathological behavior in order to define and to punish forbidden acts" (Stone 1). Buñuel used this idea of criminality to create a metaphor for the things that are impossible to symbolize. And his metaphor is present in his work. It is extremely difficult to find rational symbols and ideas in his films. Each shot portrays abstract images that simply do not lead to any " deeper meaning." His and Dalí's film *Un Chien Andalou* has left audiences utterly perplexed for decades. Although many do try, symbolism within this film is close to nonexistent. Buñuel's ability to create challenging, disturbing, and odd cinema is exactly what makes his name so important.

Salvador Dali is another influential surrealist artist of the 20th century. Although his main work consisted of painting, his and Buñuel's work on *Un Chien Andalou* does not fall short of genius. He had an artistic gift for all that he did. Much of Dalí's work attempted to attack on " social, sexual, and

cultural mores" (Shanes 10) within his society. His finest works were surrealist at the core. He explored universal states of mind. Some of his most remembered paintings are *The Great Masturbator*, *The Persistence of Time* and *The Burning Giraffe*. His incredible talent and mind allowed him to create outside of his typical medium in art. It is often thought that his paintings played a significant role in his writing of *Un Chien Andalou*.

Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* is a film that encompasses all that surrealism is meant to be in a short twenty-one minutes. It was filmed in 1929 and was considered "a desperate, passionate call to murder" by Buñuel (Elza 1). It was the film's quick-changing, unrelated dream images - a woman's eye slit by a razor, ants emerging from a man's palm, moths on the wall, dead animal carcasses sprawled atop two pianos - that shocked audiences when it was first released. In an interview, Buñuel was asked how the film was created. He replied:

When I arrived to spend a few days at Dali's house in Figuera, I told him about a dream I'd had in which a long, tapering cloud sliced the moon in half like a razor blade slicing through an eye. Dalí immediately told me that he had seen a hand crawling with ants in a dream he'd had the previous night. 'And what if we started right there and made a film?' he wondered aloud. Despite my hesitation, we soon found ourselves hard at work, and in less than a week we had a script.

The film opens on man sharpening a razor blade while intense (but not necessarily negative) music juxtaposes the scene in the background. Within seconds, the infamous scene of a woman getting her eye sliced open is

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shown. The rest of the film follows this trend where seemingly normal situations quickly become daunting. Ominous excerpts are laced throughout almost every scene. A man riding his bike, falls and hits his head. A woman surrounded by frantic people pokes a detached human hand with a cane. A man stares at his hand while ants crawl from the center of his palm. Similar to a dream, there is virtually no plot throughout the film. Varying shots appear while adding little to no meaning to the story.

The cinematography techniques themselves were as “surrealist” as the film. Cinematographers Albert Duverger and Jimmy Berliet both broke the boundaries of acceptable techniques. With the direction of Buñuel, they created the unconscious mind through the lens of a camera. The film uses precise lighting that creates noticeable shadows and silhouettes throughout each shot. These shadows add depth and value to the seemingly plotless film. In addition to this, the dream-like state and ominous mood remains intact via the shadows’ presence. Other cinematography techniques used – fast editing, incongruous juxtapositions, disjunctive narrative — are often used in modern video clips and advertising. Duverger and Berliet’s use of these techniques in *Un Chien Andalou* created the dream-like feeling of the film. The appearance and disappearance of different characters and objects broke down the reality of the story. One second the camera is shooting a woman on the street, the next second a woman in a room is shown behind the camera. Towards the beginning of the film a man rides his bicycle on a neighborhood road; However, the next shot of this man riding his bike is shown from behind in surrounding darkness. The inability to correctly explain how and why different events happen is a shared problem between both the

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film and a dreaming state. Duverger and Berliet impressively construct a world within a world.

The soundtrack used adds even more to the confusion of the *Un Chien Andalou* world. Used completely throughout the film, the diegetic sounds from Wagner's *Liebestod* and *Tristan und Isolde* "alternately accompany and contradict the action" (Elza 36). The sounds of *Liebestod* accompany scenes of love, death and death of love. The *Tristan und Isolde*, however, accompanies the more gruesome scenes like the eye-slitting scene and the intense seduction scene. The soundtrack provides contradicting feelings to the confusing plot line. The soundtrack is perfectly placed and "matched" with the film. It only disorients the audience more hear music that in no way provides understanding to the action within a scene.

Unlike many films, *Un Chien Andalou* manages give very little "deeper meaning." Buñuel and Dalí both said many times that there simply was no rationalization behind the film. It was simply a film meant to fulfill surrealist criteria. Buñuel explained one example of their working methods as:

We chose only those images that surprised us, and that we both accepted without discussion. For example, the woman grabs a tennis racket to defend herself against the man who wants to attack her. He looks around for something and (now I am talking to Dalí): 'What does he see?' - 'A flying toad.' - 'Bad!' - 'A bottle of brandy.' - 'Bad!' - 'OK, I see two ropes.' - 'Good, but what is there behind these ropes?' - 'The chap pulls them and falls because he is pulling two large dried marrows.' - 'What else?' - 'Two Marist brothers.' - 'And then?' - 'A cannon.' - 'Bad!' - 'A luxurious

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armchair. No, a grand piano.’ - ‘ That’s great, and on top of the piano, a donkey... no, two rotting donkeys.’ - ‘ Fantastic!’ In other words, we conjured up irrational images, without any explanation.

Because of this, attempting to find meaning can be a wasteful task.

Although, Buñuel and Dalí placed many motifs throughout the film. Even without astonishing symbolism, these motifs provide substance to the film.

The repeated close up shot of a single hand is shown, but with varying twists. There is the infamous shot of the bugs crawling out of the man’s, a disembodied hand on a street, and the woman putting the fingers of a man’s hand inside her mouth. This motif creates one of the only “ connections” between the jumbled plot structure.

Un Chien Andalou fits the criteria of the surrealism movement perfectly.

Seeing as it is often considered one the most famous surrealist films, it contributed greatly towards creating the “ criteria” of surrealist cinema. It encompasses themes of confusion, varying realms and unorthodox shots.

Buñuel manages to break through set barriers within the film world and genuinely shock his audiences. Surprisingly, the grimmer shots throughout the film are not the only surrealist aspects. The main woman throughout the film often displays herself very sexually. Surrealism has a definite relationship with eroticism. This is shown in multiple scenes of the film. The concept of hands throughout the film and the woman’s nude body portray strong themes of sexual desire. During the time of this film’s release, nudity and sexuality typically remained less prevalent. Buñuel, however, managed to break through many different boundaries in his twenty-one-minute film,

eroticism being one of them. The audience is unable to read into the film, which adds to the continual shock and horror. *Un Chien Andalou* is essentially untouchable in the analysis sense, which may be the spirit of surrealism.

Un Chien Andalou continues to inspire cinema of today. The film is often seen today as the “ canon for surrealist cinema, the model for American independent film, the first instance of gore cinema” (Elza 2). For many, the film completely changed the way people see and think about cinema. Countless films over the last seventy years have alluded to *Un Chien Andalou*. Famous horror films of the twenty-first century such as *Inferno* (1980), *The Terminator* (1984), *The Silence of the Lamb* (1991), *The Ring* (2002), and *The Possession* (2012). In addition to this, singer David Bowie showed this film at concerts throughout 1976. This film is influential in more ways than one. Many of the infamous scenes, especially the splitting of the eye, are alluded through many different works of art.

Un Chien Andalou continues to shock audiences of the present day. Considered a classic, *Un Chien Andalou* is revolutionary for countless films in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Buñuel and Dalí make audiences disturbed, confused and interested with technologies from almost one hundred years ago. The effect this traumatic film has had on audiences over the last seventy years is one that directors of today continually try to create, in one way or another. A masterpiece was created and viewers are left wanting so much more, simply because *Un Chien Andalou* gives nothing to grab onto. The film leaves no space for interpretation or symbolism. All

that it does is create a sense of awe and intrigue, but nothing deeper.

Interestingly, with the continual production of horror films and the threshold of violence and terror rising, *Un Chien Andalou* continues to shock audiences of the twenty-first century. “ *Un Chien Andalou* continues to resist totalizing readings and to exert a fascination which no critical discourse can fully contain” (Elza 95). This is why audiences continue to watch the film. It is a surrealist masterpiece.