Film was seen by the surrealists as the ideal medium for the expression and exploration of surrealist concerns. The only truly modern art form, it was unhampered by tradition; its immediacy and emotive power offered fertile ground for the surrealist metaphor; its condemnation by the establishment as immoral and corrupting clearly enhanced its potential for social revolt and the expression of sexual fantasy; its perceived similarities to the state of dreaming seemed ready-made for the surrealists’ own exploration of dreams and subconscious desires. Such ideas underpin surrealistic theory and practice with regard to film. They are also, perhaps, at the basis of the conviction that the cinema itself is inherently surrealistic.

The central importance of this notion should be recognized, since it cuts across much of the confusion surrounding the nature of surrealist film, particularly the tendency to confuse ‘surrealist’ with what is merely fantastic or bizarre. To some extent this elastic use of the term ‘surrealist’ results from the disconcerting disparity between the group’s unreserved enthusiasm for cinema as the ideal vehicle for surrealism, and the small number of films which they actually produced. This is often cited as proof of the failure of cinema, or surrealism, or both, to fulfil their initial promise. However, the close association between cinema and surrealism remains fundamental, and there are, for example, very few European directors who have not at some point acknowledged their personal debt to the movement. Moreover, it is clear that the surrealists’ remarkably perceptive and
sophisticated understanding of the nature of film anticipates many of this century's most significant critical theories.

If, for example, it is the surrealists' energetic enthusiasm for the cinema which surfaces so repeatedly in their poems, novels, paintings and scenarios, a more considered response is to be found in their critical articles where they explore ways in which the realistic images of film can be simultaneously strengthened and subverted through editing to create the multi-layered realities of surrealism. Often these critical articles take the form of parallel readings of individual films, clearly reflecting the surrealists' belief in the essentially creative role of the spectator in negotiating the film's meanings.

It is this astoundingly far-sighted awareness of the medium rather than the so-called dearth of surrealist films which interests me; and it is not my intention to provide either a list of films which merit the surrealist classification, or the definitions which might be used to establish such a list. Nor am I concerned to impose on surrealist films a single theoretical viewpoint. Any one of these activities implies a stasis which has a limited significance within the essential mobility of the surrealist process. Instead, I propose a journey through the disorientating topographies of surrealist film; a journey whose constant movement and shifting focus and viewpoint will reflect those of the films in question and indeed of surrealism itself. Of course, the brevity of the trip inevitably means that many of the most important landmarks and most haunting corners of the surreal film landscape will remain unvisited. But my purpose is to consider film's unique position as both ideal vehicle or means of transporting us into the passionate adventure that is surrealism and, at the same time, privileged creator of the very landscapes we discover on that journey: cinema as movement and locus within the process of surrealism.

Since cinema, like surrealism itself, is a predominantly visual medium, it is natural for the journey to begin with the eye or, more precisely, with the two eyes of the spectator: an eye (the organ of sight) and an I (personal identity; the seer). Both eye and I may be closed or opened, dreaming or awake, looking out or looking in, but on this journey they must look afresh, must see in a new way, and this, precisely, with the two eyes of the spectator: an eye (the organ of sight) and an I (personal identity; the seer). Both eye and I may be closed or opened, dreaming or awake, looking out or looking in, but on this journey they must look afresh, must see in a new way, and this, clearly, is one of the messages of the opening sequence of Un Chien andalou (Luis Buñuel, 1929), whose image of a slashed eye, now widely recognized as one of the icons of surrealism, provides our point of departure.

The sequence begins, in true narrative style, with the intertitle: 'Il était une fois . . .' ('Once upon a time . . .'), and we settle down for the story. We see, in closeup, a man sharpening a razor, and as he steps out onto the balcony the film alternates third-person shots of him, looking upwards, with shots which appear to show his point-of-view of the dark sky where a narrow wisp of cloud is moving

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1 Examples include poems and scenarios by Louis Aragon, Antonin Artaud, André Breton, Robert Desnos, Benjamin Péret and Philippe Soupault, and these were a frequent feature of reviews in publications such as Nord-Sud, Le Film et Littérature. Some idea of the range and number of such publications can be found in Ado Kyrou, Le Surrealisme au cinéma (Paris: Le Terrain vague, 1936), pp. 53–9; M. Sanouillet, Dada à Paris (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1985), pp. 85–95; and in collections of texts such as Alain and Odette Virmieux, Les Surréalisistes et le cinéma (Paris: Seghers, 1976). Poems and novels alike attempt to recreate the special effects of film, or make direct reference to films and film stars. One of the most striking examples of cinematic influence on writing is a novel which can be seen as nothing less than a collage of film: Louis Aragon's Anicet (Paris: Gallimard, 1921). For a study of this aspect of the book, see Wendy Everett, 'Anicet and the "bolte de prestidigitation"', Quiénadero, New Studies in Modern Literature, no. 1 (1977).

2 The surrealists were amongst the first people to take cinema seriously, and this is shown by the number and range of their articles of film criticism, a genre they might almost be said to have invented. Dealing with the latest releases, and studying a wide range of critical themes, such articles appeared regularly from 1919 onwards. Desnos, for example, published some forty-five film articles between 1923 and 1930, in popular publications such as Paris Journal, Journal Littéraire et Le Soir. The idea of criticism as parallel reading, the surrealists' unique synthétique, is illustrated in articles such as Philippe Soupault's 'Chariot Voyage (The Immigrant, 1919)', where the description of the events experienced by Chaplin on his voyage to America uses the first person plural nous pronoun, thus including both critic and readers within the filmic diegesis.

The eye in the cinema is the perfect eye, the steady and ubiquitous control of the screen passed from director to spectator by virtue of the cinematic apparatus. See Stephen Heath, Questions of Cinema (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 32.

A comparison may be made with the appearing and disappearing bandage on the woman's finger in the mirror sequence in L'Age d'or, to which I refer later. It is also important to relate this subverting of temporal structure to that which, through non-sequential, even contradictory use of intertitles, subverts the entire narrative structure of Un Chien andalou.

The complexity of issues of metaphor, figure and metonymy are fundamental to any consideration of the language of film, and accordingly have received considerable theoretical attention. See, for example, Christian Metz, 'Metaphor and metonymy: a disymmetrical symmetry', in Psychoanalysis and Cinema: the Imaginary Signifier, trans Celia Britton, Anwyll Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzi (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 197-206.

The sequence is extremely brief and, expressed in words, appears fairly benign. However, on the screen its impact is unbearable, unforgettable. Outward and inward vision violently collide in this intensely horrifying image of the destruction of sight, and of cinema's own 'perfect eye'. And so it seems that the journey of eye into, or through, the screen must culminate in absolute destruction. However, this sequence cannot constitute an ending; no stasis, no conclusion is possible, because the narrative does not accord the eye any status. It has no identity, no raison d'être; it is simply there, and the 'story' quickly moves on.

Nevertheless, the eye demands our complicity, and we try to understand. Are we dealing here with filmic realism? Perhaps this is a form of prologue somewhat akin to the scorpion sequence that opens L'Age d'or (Luis Buñuel, 1930)? Is this a form of cine reportage, possibly the recording of an 'everyday' operation (the type of video footage which appears to be so popular in Britain today)? The sequence is brutal enough, and the information conveyed to us as the eye is slit is detailed and factually correct; thus would an eye appear if sliced by a sharp razor. But if it is 'real', what then is its diegetic function? That the eye is part of a narrative has been clearly signalled by the film's fairy-tale start: 'Once upon a time...'. Yet the woman whose eye has been mutilated reappears onscreen seconds later. She has not been blinded; indeed, both her eyes are open and undamaged. So where then are we to situate this sequence?

Indeed, how far can we describe this image as real? The 'woman's' eye is of course not actually the woman's eye. It is only through editing, the temporal and spatial positioning of this particular image in relation to others, that we accept the eye as hers. But careful attention to this apparently realistic and coherent sequence will, in any case, undermine any narrative realism; for just as the film's narrative will ultimately fail to contain it (the woman appears later with her eyes intact, the man who slices her eye in the prologue – Buñuel himself – does not seem to play any further role in the diegesis), so too the temporal structure which is created by editing is simultaneously subverted by that editing. The man holding the razor loses his watch and somehow acquires a striped tie, for example, during the course of what we are otherwise inclined to read as a continuous sequence. And so the real of the story is simultaneously the not-real of the story.

Are we perhaps dealing with filmic metaphor or metonymy? It is tempting to explore this notion briefly. We might read the sequence as 'the razor slices the eye as the cloud slices the moon' (or vice
It is interesting to compare this presentation of the real world in terms of the two-dimensional fictional space of film in conjunction, for example, with a scene in *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984), when one of the characters gazes along a deserted railway track whose lines, appearing to meet at a point through the screen, may be read as a trope for the illusory nature of filmic depth, and insists that there is nothing there, that the illusion is indeed illusion. See S. Jones, *Wenders’ Paris, Texas and the American way of seeing*, in Wendy Everett (ed.), *European Identity in Cinema* (Oxford: Intellect, 1996), p. 48.


Ibid., p. 24.


versa). Clearly, this reading is doomed: the cloud does not slice through the moon, but only seems to do so; in fact it passes harmlessly in front of it, and by a comfortable margin. The depth and vast distances of our cosmology are distorted, flattened by the two-dimensional space of the screen. The cloud slicing the moon, we must recognize as an illusion; whilst it may look as though it does, we know this is not possible (it would in any case evaporate, cease to exist). Are we then being made to see that if the cloud appears to slice the moon (but does not) similarly the knife appears to slice the eye (but does not)? Is this sequence a disquisition on the very nature of film language? The trouble is that the razor does slice through the eye: we watch as the eye bursts open under its blade; we see the vitreous humour spilling out.

Might this therefore be a surrealist metaphor of the exploding variety, the bringing together of distant realities: Lautréamont’s umbrella and sewing machine? The clash of opposites, of conflicting worlds; Reverdy’s ‘rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées’? Is the physical *choc* it produces in the spectator the prerequisite of surrealism’s *merveilleux*? Or might the sequence present an alternative version of Breton’s inspirational ‘Il y a un homme coupé en deux par la fenêtre’ (‘There is a man cut in half by the window’)? Razor as window or threshold, cutting across an image of sight, slicing through the inner/outer dichotomy, preparing us for the film as exploration of the semiotics of dream?

This last idea suggests various Freudian readings, based on the film’s repeated devices of condensation and displacement, its portrayal of latent desire. In such terms, we might consider this sequence as symbol of intercourse, rape or castration. While such an approach appears to be justified by, for example, Buñuel’s comment that the only possible explanation of *Un Chien andalou* would be a psychological one, it is important to bear in mind Breton’s repeated warnings about single and exclusive interpretations which inevitably limit the generation of meanings essential to the surrealist process: surrealist art is movement not stasis, hence the unease created by Raymond Durgnat’s pronouncement that razor blade and eye are clear symbols of ‘the male and female organ’, for instance. And, in any case, such a reading merely returns us to our original questions: ‘whose eye?’ and ‘what is the relationship of this sequence to the film’s story?’ becomes ‘whose rape?’ and ‘what is its relationship to the story?’

The seen eye is experienced as the viewer’s eye, so are we ourselves being raped? Visually assaulted by Buñuel (for, remember, he is responsible for the cutting in all senses)? Forced, as it were, to open our eyes by closing them, to escape our natural passivity. The slashed eye then becomes a self-conscious, self-generating trope for the whole film, which perfectly fulfils Antonin Artaud’s desire for ‘a film with purely visual sensations, the dramatic
force of which springs from a shock on the eyes, drawn, one might say, from the very substance of the eye . . .'.

And all the time, behind it all, lurks our uncomfortable awareness that what we are seeing does not in any case exist: images on the screen are mere traces of traces; illusions of a world whose spatial and temporal dimensions exist only as marks on a narrow strip of celluloid, which itself can be contained in a flat tin – nothing. So the sequence perhaps reminds us that film must alter our personal definitions of reality by forcing us to accept as real what we are simultaneously forced to see as unreal, and vice versa. Carrying us, in other words, to the very heart of Breton’s definitions of surrealism, and returning us to the surrealists’ fascinating conviction that film itself is inherently surreal.

And even as we wrestle mentally with the proliferating ambiguities of the sequence, we are physically assaulted by its immediacy and its violence. The screen towards which we have voyeuristically turned our eyes in the expectation of pleasure, titillation or escape has turned its gaze back on us. As eye recognizes eye, the barrier between self and other, between internal and external viewpoints, and inner and outer realities is destroyed, and with it all our certainties. Like a surrealist poem, film itself is flux or movement, and any exploration of it must therefore remain entirely open-ended. Once started there can be no stopping for definition or certainty; all possibilities coexist simultaneously and the surreal landscape will remain uncharted.

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The meeting point between vision and enunciation, between spectator’s gaze and film’s gaze, is the screen which, within the oniric darkness of the cinema (what Robert Desnos describes as ‘La nuit parfaite du cinéma . . .’), ceases to be perceived as a flat white surface on which images are projected, and becomes instead an opening or threshold through which both eye and I must journey in their quest for surrealism’s aventure absolue. Hence, no doubt, Breton’s fascination with a single phrase in Nosferatu (F.W. Murnau, 1922): ‘Passé le pont les fantômes vinrent à sa rencontre’ (‘On the other side of the bridge, the ghosts came to meet him’); film as bridge connecting our reality with that of the film. Alain Robbe-Grillet echoes this idea in his claim that the subject of his film, La Belle captive (1983), is to ‘go through’. For him the moment of connection between the diverse realities is visualized as a lock in a canal, ‘When you open the locks, a sudden flow invades completely by the simple fact that an object from another world has entered into this world’, and he links this directly with surrealism, as the point where insoluble contradictions cease to be contradictory. The idea of text (whether poem, painting or film) as threshold or passageway is central to surrealism, emerging, for example in the covered passages of Paris along which Aragon wanders in Le Paysan de Paris, in search of the unexpected and the marvellous; in Reverdy's
fil conducteur along which distant realities meet and the surrealist spark is released; in Breton’s discovery of ‘un tissu capillaire assurant l’échange constant ... entre le monde extérieur et le monde intérieur ...’ (‘a capillary tissue providing a constant exchange ... between external and internal worlds’) explored in Les Vases communicants; even in their games where L’un dans l’autre provides perhaps the most striking example of the fusion of different objects and images, but even Le Cadavre exquis gives an instance of their meeting and metamorphosis in a process whose progression from segment to segment must inevitably recall that of film.

In all such examples we are struck by the coincidence of process and form; for surrealism is inevitably self-aware. Surrealist paintings frequently figure their role as threshold as their own subject matter: as window or door for example, as passage way between internal and external realities. As we saw with Buñuel’s eye, this movement between gazes, via the threshold, is constant, and must be constantly maintained in both directions. There can be no mere passengers on the surrealist journey; the spectator’s role is as creative as that of the author. If Aragon includes a reproduction of Matisse’s La Porte-fenêtre (1914) in his autobiographical Je n’ai jamais appris à écrire ou les incipit, it is because for him it is ‘le plus mystérieux des tableaux jamais peints’ (‘the most mysterious of all paintings’), an opening into another world which, in its refusal to depict anything, functions as an opening into his own imagination. Buñuel shows a similar understanding of film when he claims that ‘it would suffice for the white pupil of the cinema screen to reflect the light which is proper to it, to blow up the universe’, and it is interesting to consider the little box which the oriental client brings with him to the brothel in Belle de Jour (1967) in the light of this comment. Although the man shows the prostitutes what is in the box (something which seems to horrify all of them except Sévrine) we, the spectators, are not allowed to see. According to Buñuel, he was constantly being asked what the box contained, to which he would reply: ‘Whatever you want to be there’. But of course, the need for creative reading is not always understood, and it is perhaps salutary to contrast Aragon’s response to Matisse’s painting with that of the authors of Post-Impressionism: the Rise of Modern Art who, reproducing the painting with its English title Open Window at Collioure, comment that whereas Matisse often painted the view from his window, ‘Here, however, the view has been painted over in black and is lost to us’. Magritte surely makes it impossible for any glance to remain passively on the surface of the canvas, by plunging the eye into a world in which no distinctions can be established between objectivity and subjectivity, outward and inner viewpoints, reality and illusion. In On the Threshold of Liberty (1929), solid walls are replaced by walls which are simultaneously inside and outside, painting and view.

19 Robbe-Grillet too talks of the ‘passages’ to be found in Magritte’s paintings, in Fragola and Roch, The Erotic Dream Machine, p. 106.
23 So many of Magritte’s paintings deal with reality as blending of internal and external vision that I cannot do justice to them here. But I should like to refer to a few in particular: La Clef des champs (1933), with its clear reference to Breton, L’Appel des citees (1942), and La Condision humaine (1933 and 1935) all present pictures within a picture, in which different levels of reality overlap; Le Mois des vendanges (1959) where our outward view through an open window is obscured by a group of bowler-hatted men standing in through the window at us; and various versions of L’Empire des lumieres (1954) where the ‘oppositess’ of day and night, light and dark, coexist disturbingly.


25 It is interesting to compare this with Robbe-Grillet’s ludic treatment of continuity in Trans-Europ-Express (1966), in a scene where the director, scriptwriter and producer struggle to decide whether or not Elias, the main character, is still carrying a parcel containing his possessions. He, of course, refuses to obey their instructions, and as they decide he is still carrying it, throws the parcel into the sea. Again and again and again.

26 This merging of reality and imagination is a fundamental characteristic of personal memory, and as such may be seen as one of the defining characteristics of autobiographical film. One example occurs in Terence Davies’s The Long Day Closes (1983), in a scene which shows the boy, Bud, sitting in his classroom, dreaming of a galleon. As the light fades out the rest of the class see the scene that he is imagining: a fully-rigged ship tosses about on a stormy sea. As the camera cuts back to the child, still seated at his desk, we see that he is soaked with spray. Just like Buñuel.

We might compare the failure of the walls to play their expected role in defining the spatial construction or status of the room, with the failure of the narrative to contain the spatial and temporal construction of Un Chien andalou. In both, the lack of closure makes it impossible to define what is real and what not, and necessitates an essentially mobile and creative response. And of course, like Buñuel’s razor, Magritte’s cannon threatens to destroy what we are looking at and with, particularly since it is aimed at clouds which, for him too, are frequently depicted in relation to eyes (for example, Le Faux miroir, 1929).

As in painting, eye, gaze, window and mirror figure repeatedly in the self-referential images of surrealist film, but film is able to go a stage further in exploring the nature of threshold since it adds movement, or at least the illusion of movement, to its depiction. This is beautifully illustrated in the bedroom scene in L’Age d’or, in which the shifting perspectives of inner and outer vision both meet in, and give rise to, the threshold image of the mirror, recalling Gratton’s notion of surrealist image as ‘a sentient lens, an aperture which sees, both a window on and a vision of surreality – une fenêtre qui fait naître’. In this scene, the woman sits at her mirror, buffing her nails and dreaming of her lover; thus shots of her are interposed with shots of him, implying a readable narrative sequence. But, just as in Un Chien andalou we are faced with loose ends, incidents that do not fit and thus subvert the narrative construction. One of these is the bandege on her finger: now we see it, now we don’t. Our confusion is further increased by the fact that just before this scene, in response to her mother’s concern at the sight of the bandege, the woman claims that she has had it for the last eight days; a comment we have seen to be untrue. Furthermore, the soundtrack (that much heralded means of enhancing film’s realism) here serves to confuse narrative levels still further: throughout the scene we hear a cowbell, which can be accounted for since we have seen it hanging from the neck of the cow which, just a few minutes earlier, the woman nonchalantly chased from her bed, and which we may therefore assume to have remained just outside the bedroom door. However, we also hear the insistent barking of the dog which exists at a different place, time and narrative level altogether, and the noise of the wind which disconcertingly issues forth from the mirror, in what we might assume to be the woman’s imagination were it not for the fact that we can actually see it blowing the flowers and ruffling her hair. As different realities merge, and space and time are deconstructed, the mirror too refuses to function as mirror, as a flat surface which reflects our gaze. Like the screen, it has become a threshold which, as in Derrida’s concept of brisure, is both entrance and exit, place of exchange and movement. Thus a closeup of the mirror reveals not the woman’s reflection, but moving clouds (although it simultaneously continues to perform as mirror by
Davies refuses to distinguish between different realities; he uses the natural ambiguity of film to create the fundamental reality of the imagination.


reflecting the line of glass bottles on the dressing table). As we cut to a view from directly behind the woman, we see the back of her head but not the reflection of her face (in an image which has many links with Magritte’s La Reproduction interdite, 1937), her hair is still being ruffled by the wind blowing from the mirror which, for its part, still reflects clouds and sky. As the scene ends, the two contradictory realities of the mirror meet: the woman rests her head against its hard surface, but even as she does so, the wind continues to blow her hair, thus denying the very existence of that surface.

The mirror, that objet filmique privilégié is, of course, a privileged place for self-regard and, as Lacan demonstrates, it plays an active role both within the individual’s quest for subjective identity and — through its reflection of individual as Other — in the construction of that identity. Buñuel’s mirror does not reflect the woman’s appearance, but her interior being; it moves us and her into the subconscious level, the locus of surrealism:

l’idée du surréalisme tend simplement à la récupération de notre force psychique par un moyen qui n’est autre que la descente vertigineuse en nous, l’illumination systématique des lieux cachés et l’obscurcissement progressif des autres lieux, la promenade perpétuelle en pleine zone interdite . . .

(surrealism aims quite simply to restore our psychic power through the vertiginous descent into our inner being, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of other places, the perpetual exploration of forbidden territory . . .)

Thus the unreflecting mirror reflects the unreflectable: the process of desire.

Buñuel’s mirror thus recalls Matisse’s Porte-fenêtre where, by denying the viewer access to a meaning, through its refusal to provide a mimetic image, the painting transfers its locus to the viewer’s imagination: creator and creation are thereby unified through the infinite recess and regress of the look. But, as we have seen, Buñuel can introduce further layerings into his work through the use of sound and, essentially, movement. Film is able not only to designate its own function as a self-reflecting, self-generating work, but also, through its movement, to depict the very process of the descent into the hidden places of the unconscious. It is with this awareness that we can begin to understand the surrealists’ conviction that film was inherently surrealist, that it was able to create quite spontaneously the confusion of opposites and the coexistence of contradictory states which they so constantly sought: ‘Je crois à la résolution future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de surréalité, si l’on peut ainsi dire’ (‘I believe in the future resolution of these two apparently contradictory states of dream and reality . . .')

Thus the unreflecting mirror reflects the unreflectable: the process of desire.
A great deal of misunderstanding concerning the nature of surrealist film has arisen from a failure to recognize this central feature: its naturalness. Surrealist films do not attempt to portray a fantastic world, but a real one in which the fantastic, the merveilleux, is an integral part of the reality. They do not need complex special effects to create their disorientating topographies, since these are the outcome of the nature of filmic discourse: images which are simultaneously real and not real; constant flux or movement which denies these images any stability or certainty and constantly threatens their diegetic status; the juxtaposition of distant realities which is the natural dialectic of montage, but which can disrupt the spatial and temporal continuity of the narrative as easily as it creates it. ‘Or, le cinéma est, par nature, l’instrument privilegié de déréalisation du monde. Ses ressources techniques ... alliées à la photogénie, offrent les moyens alchimiques d’une transmutation du réel’ (‘Now, the cinema is, quite naturally, the privileged instrument for de-realizing the world. Its technical resources ... allied with its photo-magic, provide the alchemical tools for transforming reality’), comments René Gardies, in an article entitled ‘Le cinéma est-il surrealiste?’.

Bergman reveals a similar understanding of the power of film when he claims that ‘No form of art goes beyond ordinary consciousness as film does’.

Much of the power of Buñuel’s directing results, as we have seen, from his ability to transform reality even as he creates it. The apparently straightforward realism of his films hides a disturbingly solid and subversive unreality: the merveilleux which results from the collision of inner and outer vision, the unexpected eruption of the subconscious into the rational world. Surrealists exploit the unreal/reality of film to create a world characterized by uncertainty in which the spectator feels increasingly disorientated.

In a dream sequence in Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie (1972), Buñuel mercilessly confuses the spectator by refusing to use any of the classical codes which indicate a switch from one level of reality (the General’s invitation) to the next (Sénéchal’s dream). The unwary spectator is thus confronted with a series of impossible events to which he or she is obliged to accord an equivalent degree of reality. The sequence (which follows on from an entirely traditional narration and representation of the young soldier’s dream), begins with a straight cut which transports us from Sénéchal’s house to that of the General, as we hear the latter issuing his invitation to dinner, and announcing his address, 17 rue du Parc. The switch of place is signalled by a closeup of the name of the street, just before the camera pans down to show the guests arriving. Nothing therefore prepares us for the increasing strangeness of the scene which unfolds: the bourgeois dinner party is gradually revealed to be taking place on the stage of a packed theatre. One by one the guests shuffle into a sort of absolute reality, of surreality, if I may put it that way’.


31 Gardies, Europe, p. 152.

from the stage in embarrassment, to the sound of loud catcalls from the audience. Not until we hear a telephone ringing, and see Sénéchal wake up, can we identify what we have been watching as his dream, and thus recover our sense of control. But, of course, in Buñuel’s work nothing is as simple as it at first seems: in fact the telephone which appears to move us back to waking reality is a trompe l’œil (or trompe l’oreille) since it ultimately transpires that this dream and the following sequence, which we have labelled as reality but which rapidly becomes as astonishing as the previous one, are, in fact, both elements of a dream being had by a different character altogether (Thévenot). His confusion echoes our own: ‘Je rêvais que . . . non, je rêvais que Sénéchal rêvait que . . . ’ (‘I was dreaming that . . . no, I was dreaming that Sénéchal was dreaming that . . .’) he stutters. Our reading of each sequence and, particularly, of objects common to both (for example, Napoleon’s hat which features prominently in both sequences), must constantly be questioned and revised. Moreover, the playful editing discontinuities we noticed in Un Chien andalou and L’Age d’or happen here as well. How, for example, does Thévenot happen in his dream to hear intimate snatches of conversation between his wife and the Ambassador with whom (unbeknownst to him) she is having an affair? We are faced with countless similar loose ends which cannot be fitted into a single narrative reading. By ignoring classical editing codes and continuity, and by constantly subverting the narrative sequence he is creating, Buñuel exploits to the full the natural ambiguity of film, its ability to depict all events as equally real. In so doing, of course, he also foregrounds and explores the surrealist belief in the reality of dream and imagination.
This brings us directly to the dream/film analogy, which emerged clearly right from the earliest surrealist writings for or about cinema, and which remains fundamental to surrealist film: ‘nous considérons alors le film comme un merveilleux mode d’expression du rêve’ (‘at that time we considered film to be a marvellous way of expressing dreams’). The parallels between film and dream are too numerous to be explored in detail here, and are in any case widely recognized: both normally occur in the darkness; both create alternative universes which absorb and enthrall; both proceed via moving images which are simultaneously real and unreal, illogical and disturbing; both express the hidden realms of desire and the subconscious, and so on. However, what really interested the surrealists was not a facile imitation of dream content, nor yet the attempt to make films that pretend to be dreams (indeed Artaud claimed that Dulac had entirely ruined his scenario for *La Coquille et le clergyman* by describing it in her film as a dream), but the exploration, through film, of the mechanics of dream; of the very processes by which dream creates its meanings. Perhaps the surrealists’ most important contribution to film theory is their attempt to understand ways in which dream and film function as systems of communication which differ significantly from verbal language.

If, as we have suggested, cinema’s true place is within the look itself, then film and dream meet within that look which must therefore be simultaneously directed inwards and outwards. For in both, the hauntingly real unreality of the landscapes we explore, with their insecure surface structures and unstable and transient landmarks, are simultaneously external and internal, their contours are shaped by our own subconscious desires. We are both looker and looked-at, explorer and explored. And if the screen is a mirror to our look, it is one which can only reflect the unreflectable, for it is mirror turned threshold, and it is through this threshold that inner and outer realities collide, and contradiction is destroyed. This explains why the surrealist moment of revelation, *le merveilleux*, may occur at any time, and in any film (Man Ray, for instance, claims that in even the worst films there will be ‘ten or fifteen marvellous minutes’), and why such moments will be different for different spectators.

Earlier I referred to the influence the surrealists had on contemporary European directors, but of course the impact of the movement is by no means limited to this side of the Atlantic. David Lynch is an example of a director who freely acknowledges his debt to surrealism, and the opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* (1986) provides a striking example. In this sequence, Lynch shows us what seems to be an innocent and benign image of small-town America: bright flowers against a picket fence; a man contentedly watering his garden; healthy, happy children crossing a litter-free road. And yet, by depicting this world as just a little too bright, too nicely normal, too pure, Lynch stirs in the spectator an uncomfortable and
disturbing awareness of the suppressed desires and violence lurking below its squeaky clean surface. As outer and inner realities meet, the camera focuses in terrifying closeup on the ground, now become insecure, unstable; a delicate shell through which the hidden reality of the subconscious may, at any moment, erupt. The screen thus becomes the opening into our own subconscious desires and fears; the despcte vertigineuse it imposes becomes our own.

Watching a surrealist film cannot be a passive experience because to watch is to create our own parallel films, and as we slip through the screen into the reality of the film, so too its images slip into us. Eye into eye, dream into dream. And if the surrealists, while still in their teens, were captivated by the magic realism of Louis Feuillade's Fantômas (1913–14) or Les Vampires (1915–16), it is to no small extent because as they stepped out of the cinema into the cold evening light they found that reality itself had changed, had become insecure; that within its apparent realism anything might happen – for such is the revolutionary potential of film. Which brings us back to the eye and the razor; the slicing of our outward gaze through the surreal landscape of our inner vision.