

Film 240
Prof. Dudley Andrew

Ignoring the Call to Murder:
The Evolution of Surrealist French Cinema

by Christopher Adler

“Un chien andalou would not exist, if surrealism did not exist. A successful film, that is what the majority of the people who have seen it think. But what can I do against the devotees of all forms of novelty, even if the novelty outrages their deepest convictions, against a press that has been bribed or is insincere, against the imbecile crowd that found beautiful or poetic something which was, basically, but a desperate, passionate call to murder?”

Luis Buñuel, *La Révolution surréaliste*
December 1929

The beginning of film history is the beginning of French film. Although the kinetoscope and kinetograph were invented in America under the auspices of Thomas Edison at his Black Maria studio just as early as – or even before – the first French films were being produced, France quickly came to dominate cinematic production and distribution in the prewar years. In 1895 the aptly named Lumière Brothers presided over the making of the first French films, a series of documentary-realist shorts, such as *Le Répas de Bébé*, ‘moving pictures’ in the most rudimentary sense. Just seven years later, a new – and very different – type of film emerged in the work of George Méliès, whose *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) expanded cinema’s storytelling capacity to the realm of science fiction and fantasy. In 1908 France sold twice as many films in the United States as American film companies did; by the outbreak of World War I her grip over the

international film market was approaching a monopoly.¹ That quasi-monopoly collapsed as soon as France became a battleground, and the United States, led by Fox, Loew's [MGM], Warner Brothers, and Paramount, filled the hole that the dramatic decrease in French film production had created. It was no coincidence that immediately following the war, the French responded with an entirely new mode of art and filmmaking – surrealism. If Georges Méliès' films stretched the limits of film technology and special effects, thereby broadening the narrative potential of the cinema, surrealism – perhaps mirroring the postwar breakdown of long-accepted principles of world order and rationalism set down by Descartes, Kant, Newton, et al. – ripped any semblance of conventional narrative construction apart. Following closely on the heels of German Expressionism and Russian-Soviet Futurism, French surrealism was arguably the last experimental film movement until the fifties and sixties.² Unlike Expressionism and Futurism, however, surrealism continued over the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries as a major film movement, even philosophy. In those years, Surrealism nevertheless has had to adapt from a revolutionary art movement into a much less radicalized and thereby subservient organizing cinematic principle, an evolution readily evident in three films spread across the history of film, Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1929) & *Belle de Jour* (1967), and François Ozon's *Swimming Pool* (2003).

It was no mere coincidence that surrealist and Dadaist art appeared when it did, just after the Great War in 1919. The rationalism and order of nineteenth-century state-making and diplomacy and twentieth-century warfare had brought the world to its knees.

¹ Twomey, John E. "Some Considerations on the Rise of the Art-Film Theater." *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, Vol. 10, No. 3. (Spring, 1956): 242.

² *Un Chien Andalou*. Dir. Luis Buñuel. Writ. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali. "Interview with Stephen Barber." DVD. Transflux Films, 2004.

Contrary to the centuries-old beliefs posited in the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, chiefly, that the universe was understandable and thus controllable, surrealism marked a retreat from the total faith in the boundless productive capacity of the scientific *mind* into the deeply personal, oneiric and subconscious demons ironically abounding within it. The Hegelian dialectic between the forces of the rational and the irrational – the traditional and the radical, the conscious and the subconscious, etc. – was the surrealist’s path to truth.³ Outside of this strictly reactionary context, however, surrealism is difficult to define. In *Qu’est-ce que Le Surréalisme?*, chairman and CEO of the movement M. André Breton defined it in this way:

SURREALISME, n. m. Automatismes psychiques pur par lequel on se propose d’exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée. Dictée de la pensée, en l’absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale.⁴

If surrealism is therefore characterized mainly by its avoidance of conscious intention, what Breton calls “psychic automatism,” it is little wonder that the movement branched out into as many variegated art forms as it did. Even by the mid-1920s, however, surrealism, despite its inherently unrestrictive guiding principles, had become an identifiable international art movement, with René Magritte, Salvador Dali, Man Ray, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, Hannah Höch, Joan Miró, Georges Bataille, and Marcel

³ See Breton, André. *Qu’est-ce que le Surréalisme?* Bruxelles, Belgique: René Henrquez, 1934: 21; Rosemont, Franklin. *André Breton and the First Principles of Surrealism*. London, UK: Pluto Press Limited, 1978: 2.

⁴ Breton, 15. “Pure psychic automatism through which it is intended to express, whether verbally, or in writing, or by another manner, the real operation of thought. Thought’s dictation, in absence of all control exerted by reason, outside of every aesthetic or moral preoccupation” (my translation).

Duchamp, *inter alia*, as its first leading lights. A characteristically witty December 1929 headline in *La Révolution surréaliste* read, “MILLÉNAIRE DU SURRÉALISME”.⁵

Surrealism did not find the limits of its expression in academia, painting and photography, however. Already in 1924 René Clair had gained notoriety with his film *Entr'acte*, and directors Germaine Dulac, Man Ray, and Jean Cocteau were not far behind him. Certainly the most celebrated of early surrealist films, however, was Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1929). As Breton himself stated,

Rien ne peut passer pour plus cohérent, pour plus systématique ni pour mieux payé de réalisations que cette dernière phase de l'activité surréaliste, qui a vu encore se produire les deux films de Luis Buñuel et Salvador Dali: *Un chien andalou* et *l'Âge d'or*.⁶

Indeed, the opening shot of *Un chien andalou* – a man slicing open a woman's eye as wispy clouds roll over the moon – is one of the most iconic in film history. *Un chien andalou*'s fame derives from more than mere shock value, however. Of course even the opening shot bears much more significance than the grotesquery it initially suggests, for in it, Buñuel (playing the man with the razorblade) immediately announces to his audience that his film will be an *attack* on the eye; that *Un chien andalou*, his first film, will be something at first unpalatable, perhaps, but also *new* for the cinema, a medium which had already been in existence for more than thirty years.

Un chien andalou arrived into theaters at arguably the most important time in the history of film, other than its birth in the mid-1890s. For just two years earlier, the American film *The Jazz Singer* (1927) had ushered in the era of sound. According to

⁵ Sebbag, Georges. *Le Surréalisme*. Paris, France: Fernand Nathan, 1994: 9. “Surrealism Reaches its First Millennium” (my translation).

⁶ Breton, 26. “Nothing could be more coherent, more systematic or more rewarding than this last phase of surrealist activity, which has already seen produced two films by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali, *Un Chien Andalou* and *l'Âge d'or*” (my translation).

film historian John Belton, “by the end of 1927, just after the release of *The Jazz Singer*, only 157 of the 21,700 movie theaters in the United States could play sound; by late 1928 this number had increased to 1,046...at the end of 1929, 4,000 domestic theaters (and 1,200 foreign cinemas) were wired for sound.”⁷ The astonishing growth of sound theaters both in the United States and abroad would suggest a large obstacle to a silent film like *Un chien andalou*. The rise of American film at the expense of the French was a further obstacle. In fact, even a year before the release of *Un chien andalou*, Britain, France and Germany, responding to stiffening international (esp. U.S.) film competition, had all imposed national restrictions on the exhibition of foreign films. In an effort to support French film production companies like Gaumont and Pathé, France’s Quota Commission mandated that for every French film produced, seven American films could be screened in France.⁸ American film companies – that is, Fox, Loew’s [MGM], Warner Brothers, and Paramount – quickly found an easy loophole in the system, however, and soon began producing what were called “quota quickies” in France, or “deliberately slipshod” films bankrolled by U.S. companies overseas to satisfy European state requirements. While American film thus came to be identified with a larger trend of ‘cultural imperialism,’ made possible via “large economies of scale and capital-intensive technology,” or a veritable Fordist method of filmmaking, European film – and French film in particular – was still being produced in “decentralized artisan-atelier shops.”⁹

Perhaps it is a bit reductive to frame 1920s international cinema in these terms, but the

⁷ Belton, John. “Awkward Transitions: Hitchcock’s *Blackmail* and the Dynamics of Early Film Sound.” *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 83, No. 2 (Summer, 1999): 235.

⁸ Gomery, Douglas. “Economic Struggle and Hollywood Imperialism: Europe Converts to Sound.” *Yale French Studies*, No. 60, Cinema/Sound, (1980): 89. See also, “Pie-in-the-face,” *Time Magazine* Vol. 14 No. 14, September 30, 1929.

⁹ de Grazia, Victoria. “Mass Culture and Sovereignty: The American Challenge to European Cinemas, 1920-1960.” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 61, No.1. (March 1989): 61-2.

sense that America was treating film strictly as a business while France was relentlessly clinging to film's potential as a new art form became more and more pervasive. Indeed, measures like Action Française's 1922 appeal for a *group de défense* on behalf of French films – for “the state to support cinema art and thereby to defend the quality of French culture against the crass quantity of materialist civilization” – were not uncommon.¹⁰

It is therefore significant that *Un chien andalou* was a *French* film, in no way emulating contemporary films in America. Spanish-born Buñuel's aim, in fact, was to launch the cinema into a new – and decidedly artistic – direction. As American films, now having adopted sound, became more and more representational in form, writer-director-producer Buñuel was rethinking the narrative bounds of film in order to strengthen the cinematic dimension of the burgeoning surrealist movement. Unlike traditional (if stunning) films like Abel Gance's epic *Napoléon* (1927), *Un chien andalou* deliberately confuses time and space, often connecting two entirely disparate events or geographical spaces with carefully edited eyeline matches. Intertitles only further serve to mystify the viewer's conception of ‘conventional’ temporality, the most notorious example of which being the very first: immediately following the unforgettable opening sequence in which the woman (Simone Mareuil) seemingly of her own accord allows her eye to be severed out of its socket, comes the intertitle “Huit ans après” (“Eight years later”); and after a brief sequence of dissolves featuring a cyclist (Pierre Batcheff), the woman reemerges, her eye unscathed. Nor is there any shortage of implausible images, perhaps the most famous being of ants crawling out of hands and of men dragging pianos weighed down by donkeys. It is of course ironic that the film should begin with the

¹⁰ Ibid., 63-64.

words “Il était une fois,” the way all French fairy tales begin, for *Un chien andalou* tells anything but a linear, understandable, fairy-tale-like story.

If *Un chien andalou* appears on the face of it to be utterly inscrutable, however, as many film commentators, among them Frédéric Grange, have suggested, there also seems to be an internal contradiction in the film, which J.H. Matthews aptly points out, namely that “nothing in Buñuel’s adaptation of the script or his subsequent comments on his first film entitles us to conclude that *Un chien andalou* says anything less than it was designed to say.”¹¹ Indeed, the question of design seems to be a source of major inconsistency in the surrealist movement. As William Earle waggishly remarks in *A Surrealism of the Movies*, even the surrealist artist “Jean Arp, who made works by tearing up pieces of paper and letting them fall on a canvas at random, later admitted he would make ‘small adjustments.’”¹² Buñuel himself claimed that “Dali and I would choose gags and objects that came to our minds and we would reject without pity anything that could signify something.”¹³ But inasmuch as artistry requires concerted decision-making, the aims of surrealism – ‘psychic automatism’ – are rendered impossible.

On the other hand, Buñuel’s film *Belle de Jour* (1967), made nearly forty years later, strikes a happy medium between surrealist and representational film. *Belle de Jour* is about a beautiful young woman, Séverine Serizy (Catherine Deneuve), married to a handsome young doctor named Pierre (Jean Sorel), who, for a reason never fully explained, is unable to share any physical intimacy with her husband, and thus instead

¹¹ Matthews, J.H. *Surrealism and Film*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1971: 86. See also Tesson, Charles. *Luis Buñuel*. Paris, France: Cahiers du cinéma, Diffusion Seuil: 11.

¹² Earle, William. *A Surrealism of the Movies*. Chicago, Illinois: Precedent Publishing, Inc., 1987: 57.

¹³ Matthews, 90.

works at a brothel during the afternoons to fulfill her sexual desires (hence her work-hours sobriquet, “Belle de Jour”). Dismissed by most critics as prosaic, unsentimental, and borderline pornographic, the film’s tone is at worst incoherent and at best ambiguous.¹⁴ In fact, the novel of the same name by Joseph Kessel, which was first serialized in the weekly political and literary magazine *Gringoire* the year before *Un chien andalou* was released, contains in its preface a desperate plea to avoid misunderstanding:

Le sujet de *Belle de Jour* n’est pas l’aberration sensuelle de Séverine, c’est son amour pour Pierre indépendant de cette aberration et c’est la tragédie de cet amour.¹⁵

Unlike Kessel’s ham-handed novel, Buñuel’s film achieves the novelist’s very aim. But he does so at such a brisk pace – what one author has called ‘a form of impatience’ and another a smooth, ‘sustained legato’ – that he practically compels his audiences to multiple viewings.¹⁶ For one, Buñuel constantly lets drop trapdoors of consciousness in Séverine’s fetishistic fantasy sequences, triggered by the sound of carriage bells. He later admitted, in fact, that in *Belle de Jour*, “the real and the imaginary dissolve into each other. I myself couldn’t say what is real and what is imaginary in the film.”¹⁷ The convergence of reality and dreams makes our perception of the film as fragmentary as the quasi-Cubist shots of Deneuve’s body parts. Séverine’s motivations are left largely unclear. Deneuve drifts between her characters in Jacques Demy’s saccharine film *Les*

¹⁴ Buñuel, Luis. *Belle de Jour*: English translation and description of action by Robert Adkinson. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1971: 18-20.

¹⁵ Kessel, Joseph. *Belle de Jour*. Paris, France: Librairie Gallimard, 1928: 11. “The subject of *Belle de Jour* is not Séverine’s sexual aberration: it is her love for Pierre independent of this aberration and it is the tragedy of that love” (my translation).

¹⁶ Wood, Michael. *Belle de Jour*. London, UK: British Film Institute, 2000: 8. Buñuel, Luis. *Belle de Jour*: “Buñuel’s Golden Bowl” by Elliot Stein: 12.

¹⁷ Wood, 45.

Parapluies de Cherbourg (1964) and Roman Polanski's enigmatic but haunting film *Repulsion* (1965). Its tone is equally ambiguous. As Buñuel himself stated, "*Belle de Jour* is a pornographic film...by that I mean chaste eroticism."¹⁸ Using what Andrew Sarris calls a "probing but compassionate camera" in documenting Séverine's emotional arc, Buñuel veers from the classical Hollywood style, which would mandate (at minimum) frequent shimmering, soft focus close-ups and mawkish music in order to convey the seemingly irresolvable conflict between her feelings and her senses.¹⁹

The question becomes, to what degree is *Belle de Jour* a surrealist film? The fact that the film has a linear – if ambiguous – narrative arc seems in some ways to be a renunciation by Buñuel of orthodox surrealism. After all, anyone who has written a feature-length screenplay can attest to the prodigious amounts of design involved. The fluidity and quickness of the pacing creates a kind of 'narrative economy,' too, bolstering the linear nature of the film. Indeed, as Michael Wood notes, "no sooner does a person mention an address in *Belle de Jour* than we are looking at the street that's just been named."²⁰ That said, the film is interspersed with a number of dream sequences, the beginnings and ends of which, as has already been established, are at times difficult to determine. Moreover, the signature of Breton's double-edged, dialectical surrealism bears its stamp throughout. A good example is the fantasy sequence that opens the film, which begins as a romantic carriage ride and soon devolves into what we must understand to be a fetishistic rape scene. As her husband Pierre looks on, Séverine, bound fast by rope to the trunk of a tree, is lashed repeatedly by one of the two coachmen, while the other lays his gloved hands onto her bare back. And yet, despite the

¹⁸ Buñuel, Luis. *Belle de Jour*: "Buñuel's Golden Bowl" by Elliot Stein: 14.

¹⁹ Buñuel, Luis. *Belle de Jour*: "Belle de Jour" by Andrew Sarris: 27.

²⁰ Wood, 10.

fact that she insists she loves Pierre, and indeed begs him for his forgiveness, Buñuel writes, as the coachmen mistreat – rape? – her, “there is a mixture of repugnance and pleasure in her look.”²¹ Such ambivalence represents one of the core tenets of surrealist philosophy, namely, that truth derives from the synthesis of competing ideas. In this context, given that the film has the elements of both a traditional narrative and a surrealist film, it may be said that *Belle de Jour* is a surrealist film trapped within the literary confines of Joseph Kessel’s novel.

The fact that Buñuel, the indefatigable surrealist, should retreat from surrealism is not surprising. Surrealism had similarly found great success in being only a characteristic rather than a theme of films like Jean Cocteau’s *La Belle et La Bête* (1946), Alain Resnais’ *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), and later, Buñuel’s own *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (1972). At the time of *Belle de Jour*’s release, the French film industry had seen a decline in its aggregate audience by approximately 50% with respect to the year of maximum attendance, its total of 185 million admissions receipts lagging far behind Italy (550 million), the United States (1.1 billion), and even Spain and Britain (280 million and 190 million, respectively). Still, France was producing a respectable 120 national films or majority co-productions per year. *Belle de Jour* was a Franco-Italian co-production, one of some one thousand such co-productions between the two countries over a twenty-year period.²² In response to its declining world market share and thus international influence, France would release many films that bridged the gap

²¹ Buñuel

²² Monaco, “The Financing of Film Production in Europe.” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1974): 18-19. NB: These figures are for 1973, six years after *Belle de Jour*’s release. We can attribute a large part of the lag in film attendance from earlier years – in the United States the drop was as great as 75% – to a commensurate rise in television. Not to overdramatize the point, but one could say that just as the New Wave was breathing new life into film, television was sucking it away.

between the art and business spheres of cinema, perhaps the best example being François Truffaut's *La Nuit américaine* (1973).

And yet, surrealism remains an important – if secondary – film school today. Thirty years later, in 2003, the year of *Swimming Pool*'s release, the French film market remained relatively steady, hovering around the same 185-million-receipt viewership level. In 2003, French films accounted for exactly two-thirds of 185.5 million attendance receipts, while French-speaking films accounted for the other third. Of a total viewer population of 54.85 million in the same year, 32.35 million attended at least one film, making for an attendance rate of 59% and a ratio of 5.4 films per viewer. *Swimming Pool* was one of just 35 films in 2003 to bring in 500,000 to one million admissions at the box office in France, with just over 711,000. Thanks to the savvy distributorship of Focus Features, the Franco-English co-production grossed over ten million dollars in the United States.²³ Had he been alive to see it released, André Breton might have called writer-director François Ozon's *Swimming Pool* 'un surréalisme faux,' but there is no question that the film, even if it is more readily classifiable as a 'thriller' or a 'mystery,' owes much of its inspiration to the surrealist movement. For while *Belle de Jour* drifts between the surrealist and the representational in tone and form, *Swimming Pool*, if it can be characterized as a surrealist film at all, earns such a classification by its tortuous and double-edged narrative arc. *Swimming Pool* is about a burned-out English bestselling detective-mystery novelist Sarah Morton (Charlotte Rampling). Seeking inspiration from a little change of scenery, Sarah visits her publisher's home in the south of France, where

²³ All figures taken from the CNC (Centre National de la cinématographie), <http://www.cnc.fr/Site/Template/Accueil.aspx?SELECTID=614&&t=1>, and imdb.com's box office profile for *Swimming Pool*, courtesy of Fidélité Productions: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0324133/business>.

she meets her publisher's daughter, Julie, who, she quickly learns, is not at all the innocent girl she expected her to be. Sarah rather voyeuristically watches Julie around the house, and soon becomes witness to just about every item on the MPAA checklist – nudity, sex, drug usage, murder, the works. Ozon waits until the very last minute of the film to reveal that the sensual, confident, and possibly unbalanced Julie is simply a literary creation of Sarah, a character in the new novel she is writing, called *Swimming Pool*. Although her manuscript – including the title, at one point – is shown several times throughout the film, the ending, in which Julie emerges from the pool as a pubescent girl with braces and an awkward smile, is nevertheless initially jarring. Ozon often foreshadows the fact that there are two layers to the narrative through the form of the film itself, by racking the focus in scene after scene, signaling that there is a foreground as well as a background to this story. Although some might call the ending predictable, since Sarah is often seen writing, taking inspirational cues from the doings of the clearly sensationalized character Julie, what is more pertinent to this present work is whether or not the ending is surrealist. It would be difficult to categorize it as such, since everything – including Julie's apparently inscrutable behavior – is neatly contained within the narrative. The ending is a revelation toward which the entire film is building, and thus, while *Swimming Pool* no doubt exhibits a surrealist spirit, it lacks any strict adherence to surrealist principles, making it more of an homage to the movement than anything else.

From the very beginning of French cinema, two distinct film movements, the documentary-realist (*d'après les Lumière brothers*) and the fantastic (*d'après Méliès*) grew up alongside each other. *Un chien andalou* and to a lesser extent *l'Âge d'or* (1930), insofar as they stressed dissociation and the synthesis of opposites, were the culmination

of a decade of the surrealist form of the latter film movement. But the future of surrealism in a medium that was geared as much toward entertainment as it was art was uncertain, to say the least. For whereas a painting, say, a viewer can pass by or regard for hours as a matter of choice, a film has a set duration – and in the case of cinema until the advent of the VCR, up to which point the only place to see films were theaters, a set place. One might therefore call requiring a viewer to sit through an hour and a half of surrealist film a mild form of torture, or at least a supreme arrogance on the part of the filmmaker, something with which Buñuel, even after making his 17-minute short film *Un chien andalou*, was very much in tune. He was, in fact, *dismayed* by the popularity of his first film. After all, he was being celebrated for something which he equated to a ‘call to murder’! No doubt because of its incompatibility with cinema’s more accepted use, particularly in Hollywood – that is, entertainment – surrealism soon lost its prominence as a cinematic organizing principle. For while cinema’s truth may in fact derive from that Hegelian dialectic of images and ideas, as Breton would suggest, its power rests with its audience. Surrealism thus found its niche in such films as Cocteau’s *La Belle et La Bête*, but even then only for special effects. In *Belle de Jour*, surrealism plays a secondary role, functioning as a kind of cinematic trope which becomes the wellspring of both the film’s confusion and strength. Thus, Buñuel himself recognized the primacy of the narrative, even over the ‘truth’ toward which his film movement was ever reaching. The fact that Ozon’s film, often characterized as a ‘surrealist’ film, is merely an homage, speaks volumes of surrealism’s gradual decline over the twentieth century in French cinema. Surrealist film is still around; of that we may have no doubt. But it is also clear

that the *pure* surrealist movement, to which Buñuel's first film *Un chien andalou* had lit the spark, had ironically ended with it.