

The earlier outlaws

Speaking of Outlaws – shall we? – I thought of our Surrealist predecessors. “The screen’s white eyelid would only need to be able to reflect the light that is its own, and it would blow up the Universe.” – L. Buñuel.

In reading over texts on Surrealism and its connection with cinema, I was amazed: it could be *now*; the opinions, style, prescriptions contemporary! The Surrealists’ appreciation of the power of cinema. – “From the instant he [spectator] takes his seat to the moment he slips into the fiction evolving before his eyes, he passes through a critical point as captivating and imperceptible as that uniting waking and sleeping... It is a way of going to the cinema the way others go to church and I think that, from a certain angle, quite independently of what is playing, it is there that the only *absolutely modern* mystery is celebrated.” – A. Breton – Their appreciation was coupled with disappointment in the use to which this had been put and disdain for much film practice, both narrative and formal. “I have never deplored the incontestable baseness of cinematographic production except on an altogether secondary, subordinate level. When I was at the ‘cinema age’... I agreed wholeheartedly with Jacques Vaché in appreciating nothing so much as dropping into the cinema when whatever was playing was playing, at any point in the show, and leaving at the first hint of boredom – of surfeit – to rush off to another cinema... and so on... I have never known anything more magnetizing...” – A. Breton.

The Surrealist spectator or critic was an active viewer, participating creatively in generating the film’s effect and was called upon not to be manipulated but to demand something else from film. The Surrealist called for a cinema which would enliven the spectator’s imagination and act as an inspirational force. Lois Aragon coined the term ‘synthetic criticism’ to refer to a tangential reading of a film in order to reveal its latent content. For example, one might “extract individual images or short sequences whose poetic charge, liberated from their narratives, was intensified.” – Paul Hammond’s *The Shadow And Its Shadow* (One is reminded here, somewhat, of today’s notions of intertextuality and deconstruction.). Preferring to subvert narrative from within, the Surrealist opposed purely formal, aesthetic or academic art in favour of a practice which connected with the social, the substantive – an ethical aesthetic – but not a puritanical morality! – (postmodern?)

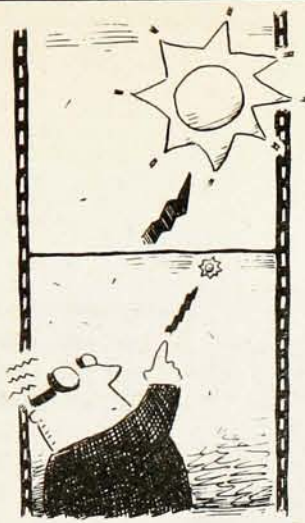
Many strategies were suggested (rework found footage, use sound dissynchronously, purposely employ discontinuity, and have, within the film, self-referential critique) which would subvert expectations of continuity, reposit inventiveness in cinema, maintain the autonomy of meaning in an image and maintain a subjective, creating role of the spectator. Surrealist cinema would unseat the authority of the rational in the apprehension of irrational knowledge and the chance connections of the dream state.

“Already the richness of this new art appears to those who can see. Its strength is impressive since it reverses natural laws; it ignores space and time, upsets gravity, ballistics, biology etc... Its eye is more patient, sharper, more precise. It is therefore the creator’s job, the poet’s, to use this hitherto neglected strength and enrichment, for a new servant is at the disposal of his imagination.” – P. Soupault, Jan. 1918.

“Poetry [for Hegel], then, does not stop, or even start, at the arbitrary limit of reason, at explaining things, but underlines the bond between the universal and the particular, the continuity between them, their expression as functions of each other.” – (Paul Hammond’s *The Shadow and its Shadow*).

“Often enough a film leaves the head of its creator and the hands of his colleagues like a ship in a tempest, as best it may, the bearer not only of what they say, but also of some things no one wished do say. But is not the participation of chance in this clash of wills a fascinating thing?” – J. Brunius.

In the Surrealist’s attitude towards bridging of polarities/unity/the ground between the rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, construction and destruction; in their concern for the position of the spectator; in the emphasis they placed on the popular both as social context and as source; in the notion of cinema as the modern day site of mystery and collective ritual; in their interest in themes of love/desire as a special realm of film; and in their disruptive, anti-authorial practices, I sniff smolderings of many sparks of those outlaws that are being fanned by today’s experimental filmmakers.



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