Abandonment of Logic: Surrealism and *Un Chien Andalou* (1929)

Malcolm Montgomery

“Our only rule was very simple: No idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted.”¹ Luis Buñuel had this to say about his first film, *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), made during the heart of the surrealist period. This film came at a time during which the Dada movement was being substituted by the surrealist group, who were more intrigued by a materialist investigation of desire and irrational knowledge, and a de-alienated reconfiguring of the object world. ² The Dadaist works were primarily drawn from automatic writing and painting, psychoanalysis, and hypnotic trance. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali show a melding of the two in *Un Chien Andalou*, a film that toys with the corruption of reality, time, and symbolism. Dali believed that nature, including human nature, is itself irrational and surreal, and therefore “marvelous,” as is evident in inexplicable acts of human violence and bizarre creatures like the donkey. *Un Chien Andalou* is meant to keep the viewer surprised and toy with his or her desire to find closure and meaning where there is none. Buñuel and Dali give a wide array of motifs and recurring images that scream for interpretation with a multiplicity of possible meanings. Several examples will be used to show Buñuel’s and Dali’s subversion of the classic film narrative and their perversion of symbolism, which is seen as an attempt to provide the spectator with an “objective gaze free of artistic and other subjective distortions to perceive [nature] in all its strangeness.”³

**Disruption of Narrative**

The film’s first act of betrayal towards the traditional film narrative begins with the very first title “Once upon a time.” It suggests that there will be some fulfillment of the expectations that are raised by storytelling. “It is the mise-en-scène of a presence that affirms both its intention to narrate a story and power over the elements by means of which—and about which—it narrates.” Just in the nature of its presence, the viewer expects a story with the generally-accepted structure. Moreover, it speaks to the power such elements have on the way we

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This sense of disclosure and digression from the norm is continued in the following sequence. An unnamed man sharpens a razor blade as the clouds blow across the moon. With the same motion as the clouds, he holds a seemingly indifferent woman’s eye open and cuts it in half. The man goes unseen again in the film, and the victim (or accomplice?) returns, completely unscathed, after a title card reads ‘Eight Years Later.’ It is as if this opening is a completely different narrative than the rest of the film. The crime takes place in an unknown time or place with no visible consequences. Immediately the viewer is subjected to a world without the moral or physical confines of customary behavior. This sets the stage for the rest of the film as if to say, ‘Abandon all conceptions and truisms.’

Professor of French Literature and Visual Culture, Elza Adamowicz, notes that *Un Chien Andalou*’s “coherent unfolding of a storyline is constantly impeded by apparently random images, visual tricks and gags; elements that disrupt and displace the narrative and disorient the viewer.” Some of these digressions from the plot include the sequences with the androgynous woman and the severed hand, and killing of the young man’s double. These narrative impediments unsettle the viewer’s inclination to form a story and create some semblance of order out of the events taking place. One is forced to look objectively at what is being seen, and take it for what it is without interpretation. Dali once said that the film is about the observation of facts. Due to human prejudices, most facts are distorted by being endowed with a clear signification, a normal, coherent and adequate meaning. “That the facts of life appear coherent is a result of a process of accommodation much like the one which makes thought appear coherent.” *Un Chien Andalou* depicts this idea that thought and general reality is incoherence itself. Dali adopted a unique view towards modern machines like photography and cinema for their ability to surpass the prejudices and distortions of human subjectivity and reveal reality objectively in all its inexplicable enigma.

It seems the only way to make sense of the random diversions from the plot is to look at these instances through a psychoanalytic standpoint. The random sequences are all packed with emotions that like to rest in the darkest recesses of our minds, and emerge in our dreams. An example of this is during the sequence in which an androgynous woman plays with a severed hand in the road, and then gets yelled at by the police, before being run over by a car. This

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5 Turvey, 114.
sequence raises questions of gender identity, guilt, and schadenfreude (with intermittent cuts to an overly gleeful onlooker as the girl is run over). These feelings tend are seen as immoral and have negative connotations in modern society. Buñuel and Dali exploit these emotions and show them in raw, natural form. This display of suppressed emotion comes up again in the scene following the “At three o’clock in the morning” title. The man (played by Pierre Batcheff) is approached by his “double” and is punished for what seems like abandoning his past dreams. The man later turns on his double and shoots him with books that have suddenly turned into revolvers. The script describes the man’s double as such:

The stranger moves in slow motion and we see that his features are identical to those of the first man. They are the same person, except that the stranger is younger, more full of pathos, rather like the man must have been many years earlier.6

This sequence brings about feelings of regret and contempt of mistakes made in the past. The first shot shows the man defiant and reluctant to face his former self. The stranger then proceeds to rip the man’s clothing off (throwing it out the window), and look longingly at old school books and papers. This suggests a deeper feeling that many people try to suppress; an inability to let go of the past. This secondary plot sequence, though unrelated to the narrative as a whole, is an example of the films fragmentary allusions to real life.

The role of Batcheff’s double, acts as an example of Buñuel’s and Dali’s disruption of characterization. Batcheff has several different roles throughout the film. He is a cyclist, a seducer, a double, and possibly even the man buried in sand at the end. Along with this multitude of roles, Batcheff’s character also has a range of erratic behavior. As the cyclist he appears young and innocent, “between child and adult,” with some ambiguity to his gender based on his nun’s clothing. As the seducer he has a completely different personality. He is no longer in his former attire, and now he seems to be driven by lust and desire. He smiles at the woman being run over by a car, and becomes obsessed with fondling the woman he shares the room with. As the double, Batcheff is a man to be feared, full of drive and ambition. This is contrasted with his passivity as he lies on the bed when the double enters.

The woman (Simone Mareuil) is another character with indistinct roles. Her role shifts from maternal (in trying to help the cyclist) to sexual, passive to active, object to subject.7 She

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7 Adamowicz, 33.
passively allows the man in the opening to slit her eye, yet, rushes to help the man on his bike in the very next scene. This “tenuous psychological substance of the characters,”\textsuperscript{8} draws the spectator to look for dramatic meaning in the objects that recur throughout the film. The goal of Buñuel’s film is to undermine the logic of realist narrative. Buñuel and Dali approached \textit{Un Chien Andalou} in a way that would allow no logical reasoning to be applicable to their film, leaving the audience and themselves in ambiguity.

\textbf{Perversion of Symbolism}

Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali also attempt to undermine realist thought through their use of motif and recurring symbols that drive the viewer to look for a deeper meaning. The constant reoccurrence of stripes throughout the film, for example, seem so distinct that there must be some symbolism behind them.

The motif migrates from Buñuel’s tie, to the man’s box, to the wrapping paper containing the severed hand, and finally to the beach scene at the end. Another instance of this motif is described in the script but not seen on the film during the scene in which the woman runs towards the man who has fallen from his bike:

\textsuperscript{8} Adamowicz, 34.
It is now raining so hard that the rain blots out what is happening on screen. Dissolve to the box: its diagonal stripes are superimposed on the diagonal lines of falling rain… The rain, the box, the tissue paper, and the tie make up a pattern of diagonal stripes of varying sizes.⁹

Through the reading of the script we understand that the presence of the striped motif is very intentional. The question remains, however, whether or not these hold any merit to the context of the film. The repetition of the symbols invites and stimulates interpretation, but the film resists totalizing meaning. Adamowicz states, “The striped box tantalizes the viewer with the possibility of meaning while obstinately refusing to function as a fixed sign.”¹⁰ It holds a number of different roles with no suggestion of interconnectedness. It is first seen around the neck of the cyclist riding toward the apartment (where it is laid on the bed by the woman), next it is used as a container for the severed hand found by the woman in the street. Finally, it is seen destroyed in the end scene at the beach. Buñuel and Dali go so far as to deconstruct the significance of props in film. Props become an obsession and back to props, before being destroyed and abandoned. This process becomes a theme in itself when the props wash up on shore before being thrown away again, like empty props, “reified signs of possible narratives, a return to the banality of the real, signs returning to objects…”¹¹

Believed by many to be Luis Buñuel’s and Salvador Dali’s initiation piece to the Surrealist Group, Un Chien Andalou (1929) is at its core the very essence of surrealism. It works to undermine the realist, machinist ideologies and present an objective view of the world and all of its complexities. It is futile to look for a deeper meaning in the plot or characters in Un Chien Andalou; instead, one must focus on the nature of the events occurring and view the film with fresh eyes free of the associations we place on the things around us.

¹⁰ Adamowicz, 54
¹¹ Adamowicz, 54
Bibliography


