The French Avant-Garde Tradition and Surrealism

Introduction

In Paris of the 1920s, the French avant-garde filmmakers joined forces with the cubist, Dadaist and surrealist painters to create experimental films that conjured up a cinematic dreamscape, a fantasy world in motion. For the Dadaists, this contradictory relationship of subjective and objective states of mind was a deliberate attack against the materialistic tastes of the bourgeoisie. They were led by Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia and Man Ray, who "liberated" machine-made forms through their nonsensical displacements. The Surrealist movement then advocated the idea of "pure psychic automatism" in the creation of art works. Within this surreal mode of expression, documentary or objective reality is displaced by an inner world of dreams where strange and unpredictable happenings create a multiplicity of viewpoints. The absence of linear narratives in the non-objective or abstract films gave impetus to the development of new methods in cinematographic imagery using camera tricks similar to those favored by Méliès. In rejecting traditional models of film form based upon 19th century literature and drama, these artists advanced ideas from other media and disciplines. As experimental filmmakers, they stressed alternative ways for cinematic expression to interpret the ambiguities and absurdities of the modern world.

For Buñuel and Dalí, desire creates an irrational state of being, one that ignores logic and rationality as depicted in their film *Un Chien Andalou* (1928). Other French Impressionist film directors like Marcel L'Herbier and Jean Epstein followed the concepts of the Italian playwright, Luigi Pirandello, who advanced the notion that illusion and reality are interchangeable. Using this concept, they created moody surreal dramas through camera effects. From this group of filmmakers emerged two dominant French directors, Jean Vigo and Jean Renoir, who carried these avant-garde ideas into the sound films of the 1930s.

The Impact of Dada and Surrealism on Motion Pictures

While the artists in the Soviet Union used motion pictures to advance their cause for a new world and a new economy based upon the positive virtues of technology, the French and German artists who returned to Paris during the 1920s explored the potential of the cinema as a new art form. From Marey's chronophotographs of people and animals at the turn of the century, painters like Marcel Duchamp pursued the dynamism of kinetic actions and multiple viewpoints in the style of Cubism. They were influenced by the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), who in his 1911 book *Creative Evolution* (1998) theorized upon time, motion and change. He employed the cinema as a paradigm to explain that "reality" is, in actuality, the changing perception of a form that can be caught in time and space by an instantaneous snapshot (p. 317). Knowledge, in the modern mind, then becomes a form of thinking related to the process of filming. For humanity, the con-

scious act of thinking processes the memories of a past with a comprehension of the present for an expectation of future possibilities. Thus Bergson concludes, the *"mechanism of our ordinary knowledge is of a cinematographical kind"* (p. 306).

The Italian Futurists also took up the philosophy of Bergson as the authority for their emphasis on the process of filming as a "kinetic dynamism" for synthesizing memories and sense perceptions into a coherent presentation of "simultaneity." In their 1916 manifesto, *The Futurist Cinema,* they attacked the established bourgeois culture and its "misuse" and contamination of cinema. They declared that:

> The Cinema is an autonomous art. The cinema must therefore never copy the stage. The cinema, being essentially visual, must above all fulfil the evolution of painting, detach itself from reality, from photography, from the graceful and solemn. It must become anti-graceful, deforming, impressionistic, synthetic, dynamic, free-wording [Apollonio, quoted in Le Grice 1977, p. 10].

Much of the bravado of the futurist artists remains in their manifestoes as they lost their leadership with the deaths of Umberto Boccioni and Antonio Sant'Elia in the war. In Italy under a new postwar political regime, their ideas were turned into propaganda for the rise of fascism under the dictatorship of Mussolini.

Other European artists were fascinated by the novelty of motion pictures, especially the "trick" films of Méliès, who, as a magician, conjured dreamscapes in his films that appeared to exist simultaneously within a "real" world. For avant-garde artists and poets, the world of dreams and fantasy could combine with the realm of the "marvelous," and through the free play of imagination they envisioned new and revolutionary happenings through the new medium of motion pictures. Yet before attempts to revolutionize art took place, the Dada movement arose and revolted against the art world in protest for horrors incurred by the First World War. Their nonsense activities subverted the logic, rationalism and rhetoric that justified the killings of millions of people. Satire and par-

ody were their major weapons to challenge the dominance of bourgeois art. Their work also critiqued the "fixed" viewpoints of Renaissance art while playfully experimenting with new forms of perception related to the cinema. They used this new technology in an ironic manner to deconstruct the ideological worldview brought into being by European imperialism.

The "gratuitous act," an act that breaks the chain of causality, reveals the paradoxical gesture of Dada. Dada was an indictment of the petit bourgeois society and its faith in modern industrialization. Its manifestoes claimed that this society was directly responsible for feelings of hysteria and shock created by the Great World War. Dadaists produced ironic parodies as artists creatively trapped by this same bourgeois society, and they displayed their anger and frustration as artists and poets in two primary ways. First, some presented a violent and nihilistic attack on reason and rationality that supported this society that they claimed was degenerate. This attack deliberately employed nonsense and antisense as it fought against the propaganda that supported the madness of war. Second, the Dadaists took to performance art using improvisational methods, games, masks and buffoonery to emphasize the absurdity of their situation. Picabia, Duchamp and Man Ray led this attack by taking machine-made products and constructed absurdist art forms to illustrate their uselessness. This nihilistic movement originated in Zurich in 1916 during the final days of World War I, and was led by a Swiss visual artist, Hans Arp, a German theatre director, Hugo Ball, and a French-Romanian poet, Tristan Tzara.

Dada is related in many ways to the theatrical notion of farce, discussed in the next chapter on silent comedy. The main contention of farce is that the artist and poet can retaliate against the logic and reason of their opponent through unrelated and unexpected improvisations and unrehearsed happenings. As a parodic device, the play ironically inverts the situation for comedic effects. The production of anti-art material led by such artists as Picabia and Duchamp became a concerted movement in the early 1920s that frequently outraged bourgeois sensibilities and scandalized the

traditional concepts of beauty and art. The most notorious artist who publically challenged the established art world with his wit and humor may have been Marcel Duchamp. Today, Neo-Dada has reappeared in the work of Andy Warhol, Jim Dine, Roy Lichtenstein, and other Pop Artists to again attack the bourgeois notions of Art.

Thus Dada's central force was a kind of mad humor derived from a cacophony of noise machines, free word associations, nonsense lectures and chance happenings uncontrolled by logic or reason. Dada's intent was the direct inverse of the futurists and constructivists whose artists extolled technology and who believed in mechanization, revolution and war, and the rational and logical means, however brutal, to provide a solution to human problems in an industrial, capitalist world. When Duchamp selected material for his sculptures from ordinary mass-produced objects after the scandal over his painting *Nude Descending* at the Armory Show of 1913 in New York, he deliberately chose them with indifference to their visual appeal or aesthetic values. His first "readymades" were dislocations and displacements that shifted the object out of its normal contexts. A bicycle wheel was mounted on a stool, a urinal was mounted on a wall, signed as A. Mutt, and labeled *Fountain*, and a hat rack was suspended from the ceiling. In each instance, Duchamp intervened in the "normal" aesthetic perception of these objects, in which their renaming suggested that "new identities and relationships" be established to break out of traditional bourgeois habits. These simple dichotomies become the foundation of René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924) featuring Duchamp and Man Ray.

Later, sculptures based upon machine imagery became kinetic art when mechanized by Duchamp. This interaction displayed some form of sexual energy that displaced the mechanical energy usually derived from modern technology. These satiric combinations of sculpture and paintings destroyed the logic of machines and reinstated the mysterious internal forces of the human libido into the framework. The work of Duchamp culminates in the most deliberately obscure painting of the 1920s, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even,*

executed on glass. This complex metaphor of a "love machine" is full of implicit sexual overtones as Duchamp brings his Dadaesque attack into the world of dreams and the Freudian concept of the unconscious. Here the artistic world of Surrealism was born, giving primary significance to the marvelous, the irrational and the accidental or chance coupling of man and woman or machine with machine.

The experimental phase of avant-garde cinema of the 1920s grew out of Cubism, as developed by Picasso and Braque before World War I. Like futurist paintings and sculptures, it explored ways artists could visualize a change of forms in sequential actions similar to motion pictures. Early "abstract" films of this kind were created by Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling, working together in Berlin after the war. Following the Dada experiments of Marcel Duchamp, these filmmakers utilized his idea of the readymade and the concept of displacement. Richter's first film, *Rhythmus 21* (1921), employs the rectangular movie screen as a two dimensional white surface where different rectangular planes of white, grey and black interact kinetically within the screen space. Richter's filmmaking process "liberates" the image or form from its fixed or preconceived physical context and allows for constantly changing relationships following a rhythmical "contrast-analogy," thus providing ambiguous readings. In doing this, Richter redirects the viewer to new visual perceptions and sensations of the image and object. A release of the image and object into new possibilities allows the filmmaker to challenge the preconceived notions held by the viewer as well as assist in locating hidden meanings through displacement. Richter's *Ghosts before Breakfast* (1927) continues his work in the Dadaist mode using various forms of trick photography to capture the escapades of a flight of hats in a dream-like sequence comparable to a René Magritte painting. However, Victor Eggeling's short film, *Diagonal Symphony* (1925), dismisses any presence of Dada. His film depends upon the transformation of basic forms designed to achieve an illusion of movement with a sense of a musical structure and logical precision.

Films and the Irrational Play of Forms in Space and Time

Duchamp, Man Ray, Fernand Léger, René Clair and other Dadaists introduced the concept of film as a form of thinking. They demonstrated as part of the Surrealist movement a seriousness of purpose in search of a new vision for art beyond their desire to outrage their enemies. They intended to critically reexamine the premises, rules, logical bases and traditions which dominated the rational concepts and aesthetic notions of artworks. In 1922 Man Ray moved from New York to Paris with Duchamp to continue his experimental work in photography and film. As a Dadaist, he was seeking new plastic possibilities for art forms created from cinematic abstraction. In *Retour à la Raison* (1923) Man Ray first used various camera angles and close-ups of moving objects framed in a variety of lighting patterns to disengage the forms from their original setting to create an ambiguous identity. Ray then edited the sequences of shots based upon a kinetic relationship, not a symbolic one, hence emphasizing the continuity of kinetic patterns. He also advanced the use of lensless photography with his rayogram technique, drawing attention to the materiality of film and the photochemical transformation of images by light. His short films of the period are truly collages of filmic material in which chance occurrences of images produce shock and novelty in a Dadaist manner. In *Anemic Cinéma* (1927), Duchamp plays in a Dadaist fashion with the sensation of optical perception using two revolving discs made of white circles on a black field that rotate in opposite directions. While the discs rotate, Duchamp adds written material to comment upon the nonsensical action taking place as his phrases mirror the actions of the revolving circles.

In René Clair's first feature film, *Paris qui Dort / The Crazy Ray* (1923), he displays his own fascination with the absurd realities created by the world of cinema. In constructing this motion picture, Clair incorporates cinematic techniques created by stop-motion photography to convert the "real" world into a surreal fantasy. His central character is Dr. Craze, who employs a science-fiction raygun to para-lyze people caught in everyday social activities. Luckily, a group of people atop the Eiffel Tower escape the effects of the raygun and descend to the ground to investigate the situation. Here they find people caught in compromising positions, frozen in acts of robbery or illicit romantic trysts. In some ways the film can be read as a parable attacking the French class system, its artificial social conventions and the desire for wealth at all costs. When the group finally locates the mad scientist, Dr. Craze, they persuade him to turn off the paralyzing raygun. Then Clair has fun bringing everyone back to life, exposing their actions through special cinematic effects.

By 1924, Breton and the Surrealist movement incorporated Dada into its manifestoes, influencing visual artists like Picabia and Salvador Dalí, who acted as collaborators with Clair and Buñuel. Not only did they play with visual forms juxtaposed in a space-time interval, but they visualized surreal dreamscapes of the mind as cinematic possibilities.

Surrealism, as a 1920s art movement, developed in artworks, literature and film in association with the Freudian notion of the Unconscious. The art forms emphasized expressions of dream-like images and free association of visionary subjects that the artist's imagination projected as an interior state of mind. This development of thought processes, as the real function of the mind, was centered around André Breton, a Marxist writer and editor of the Parisian review *Literature* (1919–1924). Breton defined the nature of Surrealism in his *First Manifesto* of 1924 as "pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupation" (Breton, quoted in Chipp 1968, p. 412).

The central principle operating in surrealism, as applied to the film medium, was its recourse to "chance occurrences" created through the use of "pure psychic automatism." In paintings the images more often were of a personal nature but carried certain psychological constants. Whatever the abstract nature of a "sur-real" image of an object within a motion

The fantasy begins in René Clair's *Paris qui Dort* (1925) when Dr. Craze uses a paralyzing ray machine to stop time. A few people escape the rays and decide to meet on the Eiffel Tower.

picture, it always contained illogical juxtapositions to other images to demonstrate a magical, irrational, hallucinatory, dream-like quality in the free association of forms. The surrealist approach to filmmaking was designed to shock the viewer by this visual displacement rather than to establish any logical or plausible explanation of the actions within the context of the scene.

In the film *Entr'acte*, (1924) René Clair, in collaboration with Francis Picabia, offers a succession of apparently unrelated images in an attempt to display the most scandalous and grotesque humor arising from a simple ritual that becomes a prolonged chase sequence. Clair also plays with the notion of chance encounters in the opening sequences as he juxtaposes images with events to subvert our expectations of traditional rituals. He shows us a chess game being played by Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray

but outdoors on a roof of a building, a cannon being set off by Erik Satie and Francis Picabia, a bearded man in a ballerina outfit, and a sniper aiming at a moving target similar to Duchamp's rotating discs. The second half is a chase sequence that exposes a crowd of mourners pursuing a runaway hearse through the streets of Paris. Clair uses a number of different camera angles and slow-motion effects to create a dream-like dance from the otherwise pedestrian forms of pursuit. Further, Clair deliberately assaults the audience with transformations of objects and activities as people simply disappear by the wave of a magic wand, in a manner similar to what occurs in Méliès' trick films. Most of these filmic effects are achieved simply by changing the point-of-view of the image-object or by the use of double exposure, mirror reflections, stop-motion photography and camera speeds.

Entr'acte demonstrates that when a film work deviates from the conventional expectations of its audiences, it rises above its mimetic capacity to explore new directions in human interactions. Picabia's surrealist scenario called upon Clair's knowledge of film techniques to create a world that would simply transform images from an objective reality into a hyper- or sur-reality.

After *Entr'acte,* Clair directed three silent fantasies combining the cinematic tricks of Méliès with the slapstick style of a Mack Sennett farce. Again he used farce as an ideological weapon to attack the dead social conventions that confined a person's own liberty and freedom as in *Le Voyage Imaginaire* (1925) and *Le Fantôme du Moulin-Rouge* (1925). His more farcical attack on dehumanizing social conventions is presented in his social satire *Un Chapeau de Paille d'Italie / The Italian Straw Hat* (1927), in which a young lady loses her hat while engaging in an extramarital affair. The film becomes an extended chase sequence of her efforts to recover the hat, thereby allaying her husband's suspicions of infidelity. With the coming of sound, Clair directed two satires in which he demonstrated his ability to merge musical sounds and noises to augment his farcical sequences, *Le Million* (1931) and *À Nous la Liberté* (1932). In the mid–1930s, Hollywood engaged Clair to direct a number of comic fantasies, notably *The Ghost Goes West* (1936) and *The Flame of New Orleans* (1941) with Marlene Dietrich.

Another non-narrative experimental film that contains absurd humor and surreal displacements is *Ballet Mécanique* (1924). This experimental film was designed and directed by Fernand Léger to demonstrate his fascination with the spirited interplay of industrial forms and

Rare René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924) is a short film filled with editing sequences that serve Dada's goals of breaking away from "logic." In this sequence a ballerina is revealed to be a bearded man dancing in a tutu.
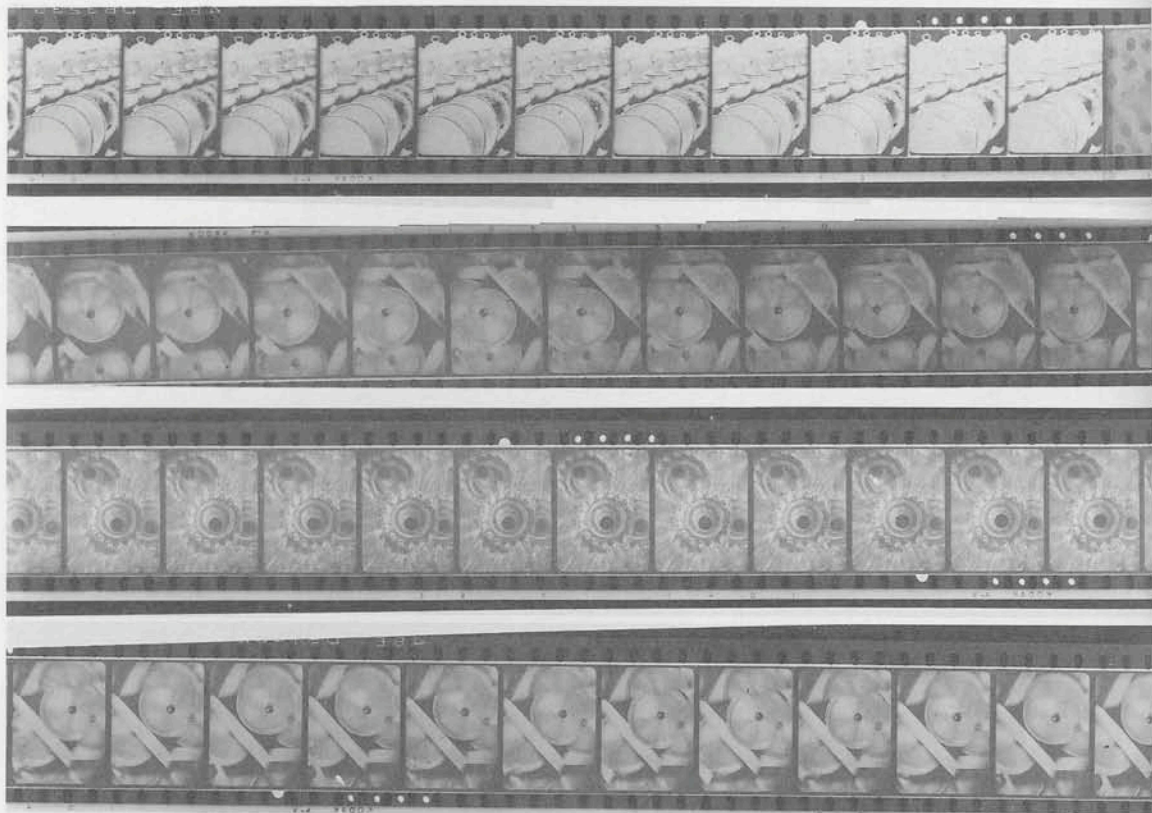
Fernand Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) is an experimental film that transposes paintings into moving abstract forms, stressing the mechanical nature of filmmaking. In part, it takes a cubist view of objects, presenting them from multiple viewpoints without subjective or emotional values.

urban life. Most images are typical of analytical cubism rather than surreal; they capture the activities of people caught unawares of the machine-made world by the expressive force of the camera. Léger's point-of-view reveals "a new process of vision … using a subject matter devoid of emotional or intellectually associative values" (Lawder 1975, p. 67). Léger juxtaposes the aesthetic forms of the new material world with humorous analogies of humankind fragmented into simple geometric shapes. Although the film is rhythmically structured by a musical score, the lighting and framing reveal objects in space isolated from their contexts. By changing rhythms and point-of-view, Léger displaces real action by multiple repetitions of triangles, circles and squares that verge on the absurd in his cinematic world. Hence, inanimate objects are given life through cinematic movement and human beings appear overtly

mechanical, caught in the repetition of work as in the Greek myth about the chores of Sisyphus.

Films and the Creation of Surreal Fantasies of the Mind

The most famous collaboration of surreal artist and film director was the team of Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel. In 1928, they created the surreal fantasy *Un Chien Andalou / An Andalusian Dog*. With the approval of Breton, the film was shown at Studio 28, which specialized in avant-garde films. The film explores how certain visual stimuli dislocate and disorient a person from his or her natural surroundings and transfer the viewer into a dream-like state of being. In this film, one moves from a waking state into a dream state where time and space

In the opening dream sequence of Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou / An Andalusian Dog* (1928), a cloud passing by the moon, followed by the image of a man using a straight razor to slice a woman's eye, startles the audience with the shock of such an act.

are illogically displaced within the scenario. The characters are caught in a pantomime of passion that involves the transformation of commonplace objects into repulsive symbols. The film is a pure fantasy. From the opening shock of a sliced eyeball, a comment on the blindness of perceptions, Buñuel creates a surreal-symbolic universe in realistic images, but one that is both puzzling and shocking. Every image and action undermines viewers' abilities to interpret the images and the attending responses. The result is a film in which appearances are associated with a world of dreams, one that defies the capacity of the spectator to translate the narrative into a rational whole.

Dalí and Buñuel were able to capture the magical, hallucinatory yet

Another surrealist image from *Un Chien Andalou* that expresses the repression of desires controlled by the forces of culture and religion. Buñuel juxtaposes unrelated objects, a priest pulling two pianos that reveal two dead donkeys lying inside them.

enigmatic quality of dream imagery in this film. The film also enjoys an incomparable facility for passing over the bridge of reality in both directions. It accomplishes this first by objectifying most convincingly the mental images of the mind; second, by making exterior reality submit to our own subjective perceptions. In this manner, *Un Chien Andalou* facilitates the kind of release from the mundane events of everyday life that the surrealists sought.

Buñuel, like René Clair, was a social satirist who engaged surrealist techniques to a fuller extent as a weapon in his rebellion against bourgeois culture and the Catholic Church. He rejected camera tricks in favor of actual dramatic content photographed in a neorealistic manner. In his next film, *L'Âge d'Or* (1930), his surreal images and actions shocked the audience as his depiction of erotic encounters disrupts and overturn social conventions. Set up as visual gags, his *l'amour fou* provoked the censure of church and state dignitaries against the dream-like sexual assaults and their repressions depicted in an openly de Sadean manner.

Films and the Poetic Release of Human Passions and Desires

Although Buñuel was involved with themes of sexual desires and social inhibitions, the major concern of the impressionist filmmakers was to use more consistent plot developments and still express the inner anxieties and states of mind of the central character. More influential on their mode of filmmaking was Henri Bergson's notion of duration or time, in which cinema is the mechanism to incorporate the state of time in space. Here the camera can capture dream-like environments through its ability to distort and manipulate real time and space. These film directors would capture a surreal but natural setting through the use of slow-motion effects, double exposures, and moody contrasts in lighting to capture atmospheric "impressions of forms" emerging and dissolving into space. The *mise-en-scène* was constructed to emphasize the ambiguity of the images captured in a time-space construct by the scenario. These visual impressions thus mysteriously liken such images and their symbolic depictions to a surreal yet subjective dreamspace.

Louis Delluc (1890–1924), a French film critic, came under the influence of American films directed by DeMille, Thomas Ince and Chaplin. As the leader of this impressionist group of filmmakers, he advocated a French cinema based upon the Symbolist poets such as Mallarmé and Baudelaire. Filmmaking to him would develop from a feeling or sentiment in correspondence with an object of desire. Usually the story found its dramatic unfolding in a fatalistic erotic relationship. His use of atmospheric settings and photogenic images are seen in *Fièvre / Fever* (1921), *La Femme de Nulle Part / The Woman from Nowhere* (1922) and *L'Inondation* (1922). Here he displayed a visual style in which he projected images as symbols of desire, using selective fragments to represent reality. Careful cinematic dissolves blurred temporal relationships between different events making them puzzling and enigmatic for the spectator. The most prominent directors in this style were Germaine Dulac (1882–1942), one of cinema's first female directors, Marcel L'Herbier (1888–1979), a Symbolist poet who was concerned with the use of Pirandellian effects to create alternate levels of illusion and reality, and Jean Epstein (1897–1953). This style reappeared within The French New Wave with Alain Resnais' *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad / Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). Dulac employed a more expressionist style in rendering a psychological study of a failed marriage in *La Souriante Madame Beudet / The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923). In *Feu Mathias Pascal / The Late Matthew Pascal* (1925), L'Herbier includes surreal elements of chance, accidental encounters and coincidence causing the main characters to attain outcomes contradictory to those that they desired. Jean Epstein directed *La Chute de la Maison Usher / The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) which he adapted from the Edgar Allan Poe story. He employed strong contrasts of light and dark and soft-focus photography to establish a surreal dream-like visual effect. Another impressionist filmmaker

who was more commercial within this mode was Abel Gance (1889–1981). In *La Roue* (1922) he applied Dulac's notion of filming a "symphonic poem based upon images" with surreal techniques of transformational and accelerated montage. His most notable contribution to film history was his six-hour historical drama *Napoléon* (1927), which incorporated a triptych screen process called Polyvision, which enabled simultaneous actions to take place. As was the practice in Cinerama, Gance used three separate screens to carry contrasting and complementary images which could be extended into one panoramic image for the spectacular war scenes.

Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality

Maya Deren was one of the leading American avant-garde filmmakers of the 1940s. Her experimental films alter the inherent reality of the cinematic image by deliberately distorting spatio-temporal relationships in ways similar to the methods used by Marcel L'Herbier and other French avant-garde filmmakers. Her methods include the use of slow motion, reverse motion and freeze frames that break the domination of the space-time continuum. Deren's essay, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," explains how the film medium can filter a spectator's perception of reality through a combination of selection, expansion and manipulation of the moving image. Thus,

an artist can use the authority of the photographic image as a creative art form in filmmaking, one that gains expressiveness through editing and special effects. In this way, the artist can create new associations and meanings that transfigure space, time and causality.

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