

SURREALISM AND *UN CHIEN ANDALOU*

“To encompass both [André] Breton and Le Corbusier—that would mean drawing the spirit of present-day France like a bow and shooting knowledge to the heart of the moment,” wrote Walter Benjamin in his unfinished *Arcades* project. Benjamin was referring to the major opposing artistic trends of his day, surrealism and machinism, using the names of their principal exponents in France.¹ Whereas Le Corbusier advocated rationalism, science, objectivity, and technological progress, surrealism, which emerged in the early 1920s shortly after purism, pursued irrationality, prescientific modes of knowledge such as the occult, the subjective, and what Benjamin called “the outmoded”: “the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them.”² Benjamin praised the surrealists for being the first to discover the “revolutionary energies” in such outmoded forms, which contained, he argued, the “residues” of the “dream world” of nineteenth-century bourgeois modernity, “the wish symbols of the previous century . . . reduced . . . to rubble” owing to “the development of the forces of production.”³

Benjamin (characteristically) never explains precisely why such remnants of outmoded dreams might be revolutionary. Others have conjectured that

what he had in mind, as art historian Hal Foster puts it, was that “the capitalist outmoded challenges [capitalist commodity] culture with its own forfeited dreams, tests it against its own compromised values of political emancipation, technological progress, cultural access, and the like,” and surrealism has often been seen as rebelling against the forces of mechanization and mass production of commodities unleashed in bourgeois modernity and celebrated by the likes of Le Corbusier.⁴ Foster, for example, argues that the figures of the mannequin and automaton, which recur frequently in surrealist art, mock and parody what he calls the “mechanical-commodified,” the machinist affirmation of the mechanized human body and the “beautiful,” industrially manufactured object found in purism and *Ballet mécanique*.⁵

Whereas Léger and company insist on the rational beauty of the capitalist object, surrealism stresses the uncannily repressed of this modern rationality: desire and fantasy. . . . It does so in order to save the object from strict functionality and total objectivity, or at least to ensure that the traces of the body are not entirely effaced. In short, in the (ir)rationalization of the object the Surrealists seek “subjectivity itself, ‘liberated’ in the phantasm.”⁶

Foster concludes that surrealism contested “the modern cult of the machine” promulgated by movements such as futurism, constructivism, and purism, and in general surrealism has been viewed as a liberation of the irrational mind from the rationalism of modern life welcomed by machinism.⁷

In Europe of the 1920s, however, the opposition between machinism and surrealism was not nearly so clear cut.⁸ One person who attempted to synthesize the two was Salvador Dalí, who, along with Luis Buñuel, made *Un chien Andalou* (1929), widely seen as one of the greatest surrealist films. When first officially launched in Paris in October 1924 with the publication of the first manifesto of surrealism and the opening of the short-lived Bureau of Surrealist Research, Bretonian surrealism was primarily a movement of writers. The photographer Jacques-André Boiffard and the painter George Malkine were the

only visual artists on Breton's list of those who had "performed acts of Absolute Surrealism" in the first manifesto.⁹ In the following years, however, the surrealists made a concerted effort to attract painters, photographers, and filmmakers (despite doubts among some surrealists about whether painting could achieve surrealism, because of the conscious control it seemed to require), and Max Ernst, Man Ray, Giorgio de Chirico, André Masson, Joan Miró, Yves Tanguy, René Magritte, and other visual artists became associated with it to varying degrees. Among the older painters surrealism appealed to in the mid-1920s was Picasso, and although Picasso never became a surrealist, for a time (1925–1935) he moved closer to its concerns.

It was in part through the work of these visual artists that Dalí was exposed to the movement. When he had his first one-man show in Barcelona in 1925, he was alternating between cubist still-lives influenced by the purism of *L'esprit nouveau* (which he read), naturalist portraits, and neoclassical figures. But in April 1926, while in Paris, Dalí visited Picasso in his studio and saw Picasso's new, surrealist-inflected cubist paintings with their more elastic forms, which he began employing in his own paintings along with de Chirico's severed heads.¹⁰ Although Dalí denied that he was a surrealist at the time, the influence of the movement on his work became increasingly obvious. Paintings of 1927 such as *Apparatus and Hand* (fig. 4.1) and *Honey Is Sweeter than Blood* depict rotting donkeys, severed hands, heads and breasts, naked female torsos with body hair, veins, mannequins, and unidentifiable organic forms standing on or floating in receding landscapes. Yet they also contain bizarre mechanical forms or "apparatuses" that point to the continuing influence of machinism and purism on Dalí.

His writings of the period are similarly split. In the "Anti-Artistic Manifesto" of 1928, which Dalí cowrote with fellow Spanish intellectuals Sebastián Gasch and Luís Montanyá while still living in Barcelona, Le Corbusier was named along with Breton as a "great artist."¹¹ The authors proclaimed that "mechanization has revolutionized the world" and that a "post-machinist state of mind" was being formed. In good purist fashion, they listed approvingly a number of "new phenomena full of an intense joy and joviality" that exemplified the modern, mechanized world, including "the cinema," "the stadium,

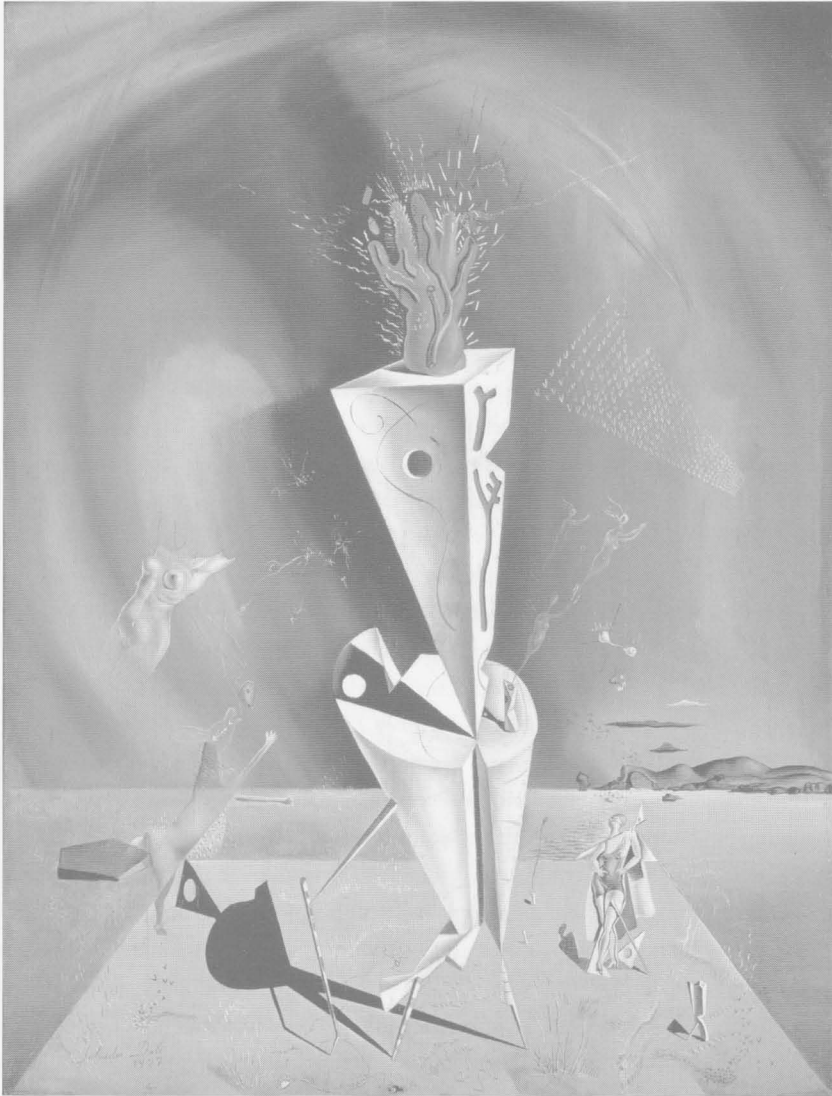


Figure 4.1 Salvador Dalí, *Apparatus and Hand*, 1927. Oil on wood, 62 × 47.5 cm (24.4" × 18.7"). Photograph © Salvador Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida, USA/The Bridgeman Art Library. © Salvador Dalí, Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

boxing, tennis, and other sports,” “the popular music of today: jazz and modern dance,” “motor and aeronautics shows,” and “beach games.”¹² Later that year, Dalí dedicated a lecture he gave to Le Corbusier, whom he called “one of the purest defenders of the lyricism of our time, as well as one of the most hygienic minds of our day”; yet, at the same time, he was publishing texts and creating works that reflected his growing allegiance to surrealism.¹³ How is it that he was able to unite two visions of modernity that, on the surface at least, seem to be so antithetical, and what effect did this have on *Un chien Andalou*?

The answer, as Dalí scholar Fèlix Fanés in particular has shown, lies in Dalí’s philosophy of anti-art.¹⁴ In his texts of the period, Dalí consistently argues against art and for anti-art—although his conception of anti-art is totally different from that of the Dadaists. In an article on an exhibition of his paintings in 1927, he states: “So-called *artistic* painting does nothing for me at all, neither does it move healthy people, people disinfected from art. Only intelligent and learned people are capable of understanding it.”¹⁵ This is in contrast to his own paintings, which he describes as “anti-artistic and direct; they move people and are immediately comprehensible, without the slightest technical training. (It is artistic training which prevents people from understanding them.) There is no need, as in the other kind of painting, for preliminary explanations, *preliminary ideas, prejudices*. They have only to be looked at with pure eyes.”¹⁶ Dalí associates art with a conventional, formulaic, clichéd way of looking at reality that has to be learned and that prevents people from seeing the world objectively in all its poetic strangeness. Anti-art, however, avoids such artistic stereotypes and can therefore be appreciated without aesthetic training. Free of preconceived notions, it reveals the extraordinary nature of the ordinary world around us. “To know how to look at an object, an animal, in a spiritual manner, is to see it in its greatest objective reality. But people only see stereotyped images of things, pure shadows emptied of all expression, pure ghosts of things, and they find vulgar and normal everything they are accustomed to seeing every day, as marvelous and miraculous as these things might be.”¹⁷ Dalí here uses Breton’s word “marvelous” to refer to reality seen without artistic and other subjective prejudices,

but he still at this point (in 1927) distanced himself from surrealism, which he associated with artworks that express their makers' unconscious preoccupations. Though he did not deny the role of instinct and the subconscious in his own work, he insisted that it was rooted in objective facts about the external world. Reality is marvelous, creative, and imaginative enough on its own, he thought, and it is the "unlimited fantasy that is born of the things themselves" that should be the subject of art: "I will not insist on what appears to me today to be absolutely inadmissible, not just the poem, but any sort of literary production which does not comply with the anti-artistic, faithful and objective annotation of the world of facts, the revelation of whose occult meaning we still demand and await."¹⁸

For Dalí, therefore, anti-art primarily meant objectivity in the sense of an art free of artistic and other subjective distortions, rather than the assault on art advocated by the Dadaists, and he saw photography as the most objective art because, as it is mechanical, the human hand "no longer intervenes" in representing reality: "Pure objectivity of the little camera. Crystal lens. Lens of authentic poetry."¹⁹ He celebrated machines and mass production for the same reason. The standardization and anonymity enabled by machines means that their products are free of human subjectivity and therefore objective, Dalí maintained. Much like nature, they therefore possess an alien beauty. In a text from 1928 entitled "Poetry of Standardized Utility," he declared:

Le Corbusier, under the heading *Eyes Which Do Not See*, endeavored a thousand times, starting with *L'Esprit nouveau's* logic—full of sensitivity and finesse—to make us see the simple and moving beauty in the miraculous newborn mechanical and industrial world, as perfect and pure as a flower. The majority of people, however, especially artists and, above all, those with so-called artistic taste, continue to chase away from their illogical and very complicated interiors, the joyful, precise clarity of the unique objects of an unquestionable era of eurythmics and perfection.²⁰

Dalí saw cinema, like photography, as another product of mechanization and mass production capable of representing the world objectively, and in a text he dedicated to Buñuel, his collaborator on *Un chien Andalou*, he applied his distinction between art and anti-art to film, arguing that the “anti-artistic filmmaker limits himself to psychological, primary, constant, standardized emotions, aiming thereby to suppress anecdote.”²¹ The notion of standardization was central to Dalí’s conception of the cinema at this moment, and he praised popular films that cater to the masses with generic emotions and uniform character types, particularly comedian comedy, contrasting their anonymity and freedom from human subjectivity with the artistic pretensions of a director like Fritz Lang, which he decried as “artistic putrefaction.”²² Once again, he made the crucial argument that, compared to the “crude” imaginings of an artist such as Lang in his film *Metropolis* (1927), reality is far more extraordinary and poetic.

It was this philosophy of anti-art that helped Dalí to reconcile his love of mechanization with surrealism as he fell increasingly under its spell. Dalí astutely perceived a resemblance between the automatic methods of artistic creation advocated by Breton, which were designed to circumvent the subjectivity of the artist in order to mechanically and objectively transcribe thought in all its irrationality, and his own desire to escape subjective artistic preconceptions and represent reality objectively in all its poetic strangeness. All that was required for him to align his version of machinism with surrealism was to extend his conception of reality beyond the external, physical world to include internal mental processes. This he accomplished when declaring his intention to do nothing more than document facts, in a series of articles he was commissioned to write for *La publicitat* in 1929 while in Paris during the filming of *Un chien Andalou*:

In effect, documentary and the Surrealist text coincide from the outset in their essentially anti-artistic and more particularly anti-literary process, since not the slightest of intentions, be they aesthetic, emotional, sentimental, etc.,—essential characteristics of the artistic phenomenon—enter into this process. The documentary notes things said of the objective world anti-literarily. In parallel fashion, the

Surrealist text transcribes with the same rigor and as anti-literarily as documentary, the REAL free functioning of thought, of events which occur in reality in our mind, thanks to psychic automatism and to other passive states.²³

As his use of the word “passive” here indicates, Dalí was picking up a line of argument in Breton’s first “Manifesto of Surrealism” that characterizes surrealists as “modest *recording instruments*” who make “no effort whatsoever to filter” their thoughts but are instead “simple receptacle[s]” for them.²⁴ Like Dalí, Breton viewed artistic creativity as it was traditionally conceived as an impediment to the objective transcription of reality, which he defined in the manifesto as “the actual functioning of thought . . . in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”²⁵ Somewhat paradoxically, Breton argued that the poet must actively and rigorously circumvent the conscious shaping of the thought process, which he should instead simply listen to and record: “I would like to sleep . . . in order to stop imposing . . . the conscious rhythm of my thought.”²⁶ Hence, Breton disagreed with the poet Pierre Reverdy’s theory of poetic imagery. He accepted Reverdy’s claim that such imagery must consist of a “juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities”—as in Lautréamont’s famous phrase, “beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella”—for such juxtapositions dispense with rationality and elicit the marvelous by bringing together incongruous objects and concepts. However, Breton rejected Reverdy’s assertion that such images are “a pure creation of the mind.”²⁷ Instead, quoting Baudelaire, he insisted that they “come to [the poet] spontaneously, despotically. He cannot chase them away; for the will is powerless now and no longer controls the faculties.” The poet’s role is “limited to taking note of, and appreciating” such juxtapositions, which occur to him in an instant like a “spark”—he does not invent or control them.²⁸ Once again we encounter here a version of the antisubjectivist subjectivism I pointed to in Dada. The surrealists were another group in a long line of modern artists who sought to liberate the nonrational or irrational dimensions of the mind in order to restore the vibrancy (“the marvelous”) to

life that is supposedly eradicated by instrumental rationality. This subjectivism is simultaneously antisubjectivist because the rational part of the mind must be bypassed in order to access its irrational regions, and the surrealists practiced automatism, in which the writer tries to directly transcribe his thoughts on paper without any conscious mediation, in order to achieve this goal.

Dalí was able to find common ground between his conception of machinism and surrealism because he saw in Breton's advocacy of automatically and objectively recording internal mental phenomena a version of his own desire to represent the external world free of artistic and other subjective human distortions. He also found in surrealism something similar to his conception of external reality. Dalí railed against art in part because he found the world around him much more creative than anything an artist could imagine. In a text about *Un chien Andalou* published in October 1929, he claimed that there are "facts, simple facts independent of convention; there are hideous crimes; there are irrational and unqualifiable acts of violence which with their comforting and exemplary brilliance shed light upon the distressing moral panorama. There is the anteater, there is, quite simply, the forest bear, there is, etc."²⁹ Although he acknowledged that much can be explained about human violence, anteaters, and bears by science, he insisted that they would nevertheless always remain "enigmatic and irrational." Dalí's point is that nature, including human nature, is itself irrational, surreal, and therefore "marvelous," as is evident in inexplicable acts of human violence and bizarre creatures such as the anteater. It does not need the creative intervention of the artist to make it so. Quite the contrary: what is required is an objective gaze free of artistic and other subjective distortions to perceive it in all its strangeness.

Something similar is at stake in surrealist arguments about "objective chance," which Breton defined as "the form making manifest the exterior necessity which traces its path in the human unconscious."³⁰ He meant that certain coincidences in the external world seem at once both "fortuitous" and "preordained,"³¹ "as expressive of both the randomness and the hidden order that surrounds us," as scholar of surrealism Maurice Nadeau puts it.³² For example, in *Nadja* (1928), Breton describes an incident at the opening of one of Apollinaire's plays in which a

young man he does not know mistakes him for a friend killed in the war. A few days later, he begins corresponding with the poet Paul Éluard, and when they subsequently meet for the first time, he recognizes him to be the young man who mistook him for his dead friend at the play. Such a random occurrence reveals a mysterious causality at work in reality—that Éluard and Breton were preordained to meet—one that cannot exist according to a rational conception of the universe, which is therefore revealed to be an illusion. Putting aside one's rational prejudices and self-control allows one to experience objective chance and other equally irrational events in the external world, just as circumventing rational control of the mind enables one to record thought and other irrational phenomena in the internal one. *Nadja* is a compendium of similar events that supposedly *happened to* Breton (in the same way as the juxtaposition of distant realities in the surrealist image “comes to” the poet), all of which, he claims, are “facts” belonging to the “order of pure observation” rather than his creative inventions, and he therefore illustrated his book with documentary photographs of the places where some of the events occurred.³³ Inspired by the similarities between their surreal conceptions of external reality—by 1928 Dalí was referring approvingly to Breton's notion that surreality is contained within reality³⁴—Dalí soon began pointing to examples of objective chance in his own life,³⁵ and in an interview with the artist shortly after they wrote the screenplay for *Un chien Andalou* in early 1929, Buñuel remarked on Dalí's “love” for Breton's *Nadja*.³⁶

As a result of this synthesis of surrealism and machinism, Dalí was able to describe *Un chien Andalou* as if it were a documentary, arguing that it “is about simple notation, the observation of facts.”³⁷ Unlike other factual films, however, the facts it deals with, he argued, are “real facts, which are irrational, incoherent, unexplainable.” As a result of 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.”³⁸ But in truth, thought, like reality in general, is “incoherence itself,” which *Un chien Andalou* depicts as neutrally, objectively, and mechanically as possible. Hence the film, Dalí claimed, was “created without any aesthetic intention whatsoever,” and he

contrasted it in particular with the artistic aspirations of the kind of pure cinema we encountered earlier in this book.³⁹ For Dalí, *Un chien Andalou* in all its surrealism was just as much the product of his distinctive version of machinism, an artistic worldview that celebrated the capacity of modern machines like photography and cinema to bypass the prejudices and distortions of human subjectivity and reveal reality objectively in all its inexplicable, surreal strangeness.

In the interview with Dalí, Buñuel articulated a similar anti-artistic philosophy. Asked by his interlocutor about the relative merits of the “anti-artistic industrial film” and the “art film,” he averred that art did not interest him, and that “traditional ideas about art applied to industry seem monstrous to me. Whether we’re talking about a film or a car. The artist responsible for polluting the purest objects of our time is also the one who understands them the least.”⁴⁰ In the same interview he expressed admiration for the American film industry and the comedians Buster Keaton and Harry Langdon, noting that surrealism was the movement closest to his philosophy of life at that moment. Buñuel, who had known Dalí since his student days, had been advancing anti-artistic views for several years in his film criticism for *Gaceta literaria* and *Cahiers d’art*, views that accorded strongly with Dalí’s. Like Dalí, he criticized Lang’s *Metropolis* in a review of the film, impugning its “stale romanticism” and “theatrical acting”;⁴¹ and in another review he praised Keaton’s *College* (1927) for its lack of sentimentality and the comedian’s “monotonous expression.”⁴² In general his film criticism of 1927–1928 contrasts what he saw as the overly melodramatic, literary, and traditional European art film with the vitality and modernity of popular American film.

Of course, as scholar Haim Finkelstein has shown in his careful study of Dalí’s and Buñuel’s writings, there were important differences between the two.⁴³ Buñuel was a professional filmmaker who had worked in the French film industry for Jean Epstein, among others, since moving to Paris in 1925, and in his writing of the period he is much more concerned than Dalí with those cinematic features that set film apart from other arts, such as editing, the close-up, movement, and rhythm. For this reason, he was not as avowedly anti-art as Dalí when it came to cinema, and in fact many of his views echo those of René Clair and others

who sought to develop the young art of film by liberating it from the influence of theater and literature. In his review of *Metropolis*, he praised those moments of pure cinema in which the movement of machines comes to the fore in place of the melodramatic narrative, much as Clair had celebrated the sequences of the train in Abel Gance's *La roue* (1922) while criticizing its romantic story. He also positively reviewed Carl Dreyer's film *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), expressing particular admiration for the "care and artistry" with which its close-ups were composed.⁴⁴ Dalí associated pure cinema and artistry with subjective artistic distortions that impeded objectivity, and he therefore dismissed them without qualification. Nevertheless, as Buñuel himself remarked in a letter he wrote in February 1929, just after he and Dalí had completed the screenplay for *Un chien Andalou*, the two were "more united than ever," and it is not hard to see why.⁴⁵ Both abhorred the way human prejudices prevented a clear, undistorted view of reality. Just as Dalí pointed to inexplicable acts of human violence and bizarre creatures such as the anteater as examples of "facts" that tend to be masked by human conventions, Buñuel praised the "extreme naturalism" of Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924), a film he greatly admired for its presentation of "abject types, repulsive scenes in which primal and base passions find their most completely realized forms."⁴⁶ Both, in other words, shared a desire to transcend the subjective human biases that prevent reality from being viewed objectively in all its irrational strangeness, and both found in the anonymity and standardization of machines and mass culture, particularly cinema and comedian comedy, an ideal of the objectivity they sought. How, then, did they attempt to put this fusion of machinism and surrealism into practice in *Un chien Andalou*?

One way was by adopting what they considered to be an automatic method of writing the script. As Buñuel explained, "the plot is the result of a CONSCIOUS psychic automatism, and, to that extent, it does not attempt to recount a dream, although it profits by a mechanism analogous to that of dreams."⁴⁷ This method, however, did not consist of the automatic writing employed by surrealist poets. Instead, their approach was much more conscious. Referring to himself and Dalí in the third person, he wrote:

Both took their point of view from a dream image, which, in its turn, probed others by the same process until the whole took form as a continuity. It should be noted that when an image or idea appeared the collaborators discarded it immediately if it was derived from remembrance, or from their cultural pattern or if, simply, it had a conscious association with another earlier idea. They accepted only those representations as valid which, though they moved them profoundly, had no possible explanation. Naturally, they dispensed with the restraints of customary morality and of reason. The motivation of the images was, or meant to be, purely irrational! They are as mysterious and inexplicable to the two collaborators as to the spectator. NOTHING, in the film, SYMBOLIZES ANYTHING. The only method of investigation of the symbols would be, perhaps, psychoanalysis.⁴⁸

Dalí and Buñuel, in other words, used images from their dreams in the film, but in order to circumvent their own subjective prejudices and objectively transcribe the “real functioning of thought,” they consciously rejected anything that could be motivated by rational, moral, or aesthetic concerns, hence making the film as enigmatic to them as anyone else. This included symbols and their dreams (rather than individual dream images), which can be interpreted and explained. Instead, their criterion for inclusion of an image was whether it resonated emotionally—without their being able to explain why—and Buñuel therefore suggested that only psychoanalysis might be able to interpret the film, by identifying the unconscious source of this emotional resonance. It is highly unlikely that the entire script was written using this method, for it is clear that certain choices were motivated by aesthetic and even rational concerns, and a number of the film’s images occur in the authors’ previous work, such as the rotting donkeys and severed hand and ants (Dalí) as well as the slit eye (Buñuel). But the fact that Dalí and Buñuel putatively chose at least some of the material in the film using what they considered to be an automatic method points not only to the influence of surrealism but also to the anti-artistic, mechanical objectivity they

prized so much. It also explains why Dalí could describe the film as if it were a documentary that simply notates facts.

Another, more easily verifiable way in which the filmmakers synthesized their conception of machinism and surrealism was by employing standard conventions of mainstream narrative filmmaking. As commentators routinely point out, the film does not eschew these conventions as do avant-garde films such as *Rhythm 21*, *Ballet mécanique*, and the first half of *Entr'acte*. Instead, they are integral to the film's effects. We have seen that Dalí prized many of the products of mechanized commodity culture because he saw them as free of human subjectivity and therefore objective. It was in part for this reason that he and Buñuel shared a love of popular American film, with its stereotypical characters, generic emotions, and standardized plots. Just as Dalí praised "hockey sweaters manufactured anonymously" as emblems of modernity,⁴⁹ so Buñuel declared in his review of *Metropolis* that "a film . . . ought to be anonymous,"⁵⁰ and the standardized, ready-made language of mainstream filmmaking offered them yet another way to bypass their own subjective and artistic distortions in order to represent the real functioning of thought.

To start with, the film contains characters whose "romantic" aspirations would not be out of place in prevailing film genres such as melodrama, and as film scholar J. H. Matthews has pointed out, it includes "several disparaging allusions to the conventions of the silent movie drama, ridiculing its pantomime of passion and stylized gesture."⁵¹ For example, eight years (according to an intertitle) after the prologue in which a man slits open a woman's eye, the same woman, her eye now intact, is sitting reading a book. She senses the approach of a different man who is riding a bicycle while dressed in a dark suit with white frills and wearing a black-and-white striped box around his neck. Dropping the book, she goes to the window and sees him arrive and topple over onto the sidewalk below. She then runs down the stairs of what is revealed to be an apartment building and kisses him passionately on the face as music from Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* swells on the soundtrack (fig. 4.2). Such melodramatic moments occur elsewhere in the film. The version of the script that Buñuel published in *La révolution surréaliste* in December 1929 indicates that the cyclist "gestures like

the traitor in a melodrama” as he pursues the woman in her apartment (fig. 4.3) while she “watches her aggressor’s little game in horror,” and in general the film’s plot, with its erotic conflicts and shifting objects of desire, is reminiscent of a melodrama.⁵² Having bestowed her affections on the passive cyclist, the woman later rejects his advances as he aggressively pursues her and then abandons him for another man on a beach. Finally, she and the cyclist appear to meet a violent end buried up to their chests in sand.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the film parodies all the conventions of mainstream filmmaking. Although melodrama’s sentimentality and theatricality would have been despised by Buñuel and Dalí and seen by them as a worthy target for parody, they praised other popular genres such as comedian comedy, and in *Un chien Andalou* they make strategic use of many of the standard continuity techniques employed in entertainment films from the 1910s onward. For example, the scene in which the woman sits reading in her apartment begins with an establishing shot that clarifies her spatial position relative to the setting (fig. 4.4) and is followed by a dissolve to a medium shot that renders her facial expressions perspicuous (fig. 4.5). As she looks up, as if sensing the cyclist’s approach, intercutting shows him cycling outside (fig. 4.6). There is a cut on action when she throws down the book and another as she goes to the window. After she looks outside, a point-of-view shot shows the cyclist below and is followed by intercutting between shots of his fall and her reactions (figs. 4.7, 4.8). As she turns to walk to her apartment door, a reestablishing shot clarifies her spatial position anew (fig. 4.9) and is followed by another cut on action to a medium shot as she walks across the room. Meanwhile, continuity of set, light, costume, and music is maintained across the shots. All these continuity techniques, designed to ensure that the viewer can follow a film’s story without confusion from one shot to the next, had long been commonplace in mainstream films by the time Dalí and Buñuel made *Un chien Andalou*, and they function similarly here to enable the viewer to understand, at least to some extent, the characters, their goals, and the time and space in which their actions occur—and not as targets of parody.

The anonymous, ready-made nature of these conventions was not the only reason for their use. We have seen that for Dalí, Buñuel, and Breton, in



Figure 4.2 Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, *Un chien Andalou*, 1929.



Figure 4.3 Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, *Un chien Andalou*, 1929.

their different ways, surreality was not independent from reality, but instead was contained within it in the form of enigmatic and irrational phenomena such as objective chance and anteaters. As film theorist Linda Williams in particular has noted in taking up this idea, surrealist filmmakers tend to represent the true functioning of thought in their screenplays and films by first invoking rational, aesthetic, and moral norms and then transgressing them.⁵³ In other words, liberated thought is made to stand out by placing it against a conventional background upon which it is dependent for visibility, and in *Un chien Andalou* this background is provided by norms of popular filmmaking that are instantiated only to be subverted. These familiar norms elicit expectations in the viewer about what is going to happen in the film, expectations that are then confounded, thereby drawing attention to the irrationality of the film's events and creating surprise and even humor owing to the incongruities that ensue. As Finkelstein has shown, this basic structure, in which "a conventional narrative . . . implying spatial and temporal continuity through indications of setting and temporal sequence . . . is undermined by the frenzied and hallucinatory quality of the actions and images," is one with which Dalí and Buñuel experimented in their creative writings before making the film, and it occurs in *Un chien Andalou* both on the level of the narrative, its characters and their goals and emotions, as well as on the moment-by-moment level of the editing of the shots and their composition.⁵⁴ On both registers, the filmmakers mix familiar forms of continuity that elicit conventional expectations with forms of discontinuity that ultimately frustrate those expectations.

The relationship between the prologue and the rest of the film establishes this pattern in exemplary fashion. The intertitle following the prologue provides temporal continuity by informing the viewer that the subsequent events occur eight years later, and the woman whose eye was slit in the prologue is quickly reintroduced. However, these continuities are mixed with discontinuities—there is no sign of her wound and it is never mentioned again. Nor does the person who slit her eye reappear. The continuities prompt the viewer to try to understand the relationship of the prologue to the rest of the film, but the discontinuities prevent a definitive understanding. This pattern occurs again and again. As the cyclist single-mindedly approaches the woman's apartment on his bike, we

might expect him to rush upstairs to greet her on his arrival. Instead, he falls onto the sidewalk, motionless and expressionless. This is the first of many times that a character's behavior alters abruptly and without explanation, thereby creating a discontinuity between earlier and later actions even while continuity is maintained by the physical presence of the character him- or herself.

The discontinuity between characters' actions is further accentuated by extreme emotional states that suddenly vanish for no reason and are often replaced by their opposites. Furthermore, although characters react conventionally to some things, their reactions to others are unusual. The woman runs downstairs and kisses the fallen cyclist passionately, and we might anticipate from the strength of her affection that she will continue to feel the same way in the next scene. But instead her affections are unexpectedly transferred onto items of his attire, which she carefully arranges, now back in her apartment, on a bed and which she stares at intently, while he seems to have disappeared. Again, continuity, this time in the form of a character's emotional attachment, is combined with discontinuity—the emotional attachment is inexplicably displaced from the cyclist to his clothing—leading the viewer to continue trying to understand the woman's relation to the cyclist to whom the clothes are connected. She suddenly notices him in another part of the room, now dressed only in his suit, mesmerized by some ants crawling in and around a wound on his hand, and she goes to join him. But gone are her amorous feelings toward him and her interest in his items of clothing. Instead, she appears as fascinated as he is by the wound, which is shown in close-up, instead of exhibiting disgust and horror, as one might predict.

As David Bordwell has shown, one of the major differences between "classical" characters and the art-film variety that Dalí and Buñuel for the most part hated is that "the Hollywood protagonist speeds directly toward the target; lacking a goal, the art-film character slides passively from one situation to another."⁵⁵ *Un chien Andalou's* protagonists are definitely of the classical kind, as their emotions and goals are clear and recognizable just as they tend to be in mainstream genres such as melodrama. However, unlike those of classical characters and indeed of human beings in general, these goals and emotions change abruptly

and for no apparent reason, thereby rendering the psychologies of the characters mysterious. As film theorist Murray Smith has argued, our fundamental category of human agency, what he calls the “person schema,” includes “persisting attributes.”⁵⁶ But in *Un chien Andalou*, as we have seen, emotions that are strongly felt and goals that are single-mindedly pursued at one moment, such as the woman’s passion for the fallen cyclist, are abandoned at the next and are frequently replaced by antithetical ones. Indeed, sometimes the contrasting attitudes of characters occur simultaneously, as when the woman kisses the cyclist passionately while he lies inert on the street, thereby creating incongruous, amusing juxtapositions. All human beings are inconsistent to varying degrees, changing their minds about their desires and feeling differently at different moments, but a degree of consistency in basic traits and objectives is a criterion of minimal psychological rationality, and it is this consistency that *Un chien Andalou* so effectively shatters.

In addition, various temporal and spatial discontinuities are prevalent in the film. Objects suddenly appear and disappear, most famously the two grand pianos with rotting donkeys that the cyclist drags into view while pursuing the woman in the apartment. The cyclist on several occasions occupies two spatial positions at once, thereby violating another tenet of the person schema, namely, that a human agent occupy “a discrete human body,”⁵⁷ and intertitles point to gaps in time that are not verified by the image. There are sudden jumps in space from the apartment to a forest and a beach, locations that are chosen for their obvious contrast with the city, and ellipses between different parts of the film are never filled in. Yet these various discontinuities are mixed with continuities of action, character, and *mise-en-scène* that encourage the viewer to try to understand the characters and expect certain outcomes. To cite one more example, as the cyclist’s chase of the woman in the apartment comes to an end, she sticks out her tongue at the man, puts on a scarf, and exits through the door behind her. We cut to the other side of the door as she continues to stick out her tongue at the man before closing it and turning to look off-screen. A reverse shot shows a new man on a beach whom she waves at and then runs toward. Here, a continuous action—her waving at and running to meet the man—occurs across a

spatially discontinuous cut from an apartment building in the middle of a city to a beach.

The same principle, as film scholar Phillip Drummond has shown, is operative in the editing of the film and the composition of its shots.⁵⁸ Again and again, the continuity techniques I pointed to in the first scene in the apartment are mixed with subtle and not-so-subtle discontinuities. To take one of any number of examples, in the sequence in which the woman in the street is run down by a car, a high-angle shot shows a policeman dispersing a crowd, while the woman holds a box (containing the severed hand the policeman has placed inside it) in front of her and stands facing the apartment building (fig. 4.10). We know from previous shots that the couple in the apartment above have been looking down at her, and therefore we might be tempted to construe this high-angle shot as a point-of-view from their position—especially as in previous shots they have been looking down to the bottom right of the screen and the high-angle shot roughly accords with the angle of their gaze (fig. 4.11). In the next medium shot of the woman from street level, however, she is clutching the box instead of holding it in front of her, and she is turned slightly to the right of the apartment building toward the camera (fig. 4.12). We cut back to the cyclist, but he is now looking to the bottom left of the screen instead of the bottom right, even though the woman down below has not changed her position, thereby creating uncertainty about whether he is still looking at her (fig. 4.13). After another street-level medium-shot of the woman and a brief two-shot from behind of the couple at the window, a high-angle shot of the woman with a car passing near her shows that she is now facing to the left of the apartment building (fig. 4.14). Several shots of the cyclist and the woman follow before a point-of-view shot of an oncoming car, seemingly from the woman's position, occurs (fig. 4.15). We cut back to a reaction shot of her face as she notices it (fig. 4.16), followed by a reverse shot through the car's window that shows her with her hands up and the box on the ground (fig. 4.17). But in the next shot she is clutching the box again (fig. 4.18), while in the subsequent one the box is once more on the ground as she waves her arms in the air (fig. 4.19). Such inconsistencies—in the direction the woman is facing and her posture, the position of the box, and the direction of the cyclist's gaze—are nevertheless combined with continuity techniques such



Figure 4.10 Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, *Un chien Andalou*, 1929.



Figure 4.11 Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, *Un chien Andalou*, 1929.

as (approximate) point-of-view shots, shot/reverse shots, and a rough adherence to the 180 degree rule (all the shots of the woman, with the possible exception of the reverse shot from the car, are taken from one side of her). There is also a strong continuity of action and character across these shots.

This systematic combination of continuity and discontinuity has resulted in two diametrically opposed approaches to the film. Emphasizing its continuities, interpreters have ascribed all sorts of latent meanings to it or one of its parts. Williams, for instance, focuses on the recurrence of motifs of mutilated flesh and gender conflation, interpreting the “woman’s split eye as a metaphor for the vagina and the razor as a substitute penis,” in her “rhetorico-psychoanalytic” analysis of the prologue, which she sees, along with the film as a whole, as about the fear of castration and the denial of sexual difference.⁵⁹ Drummond, however, has argued that the film’s manifold inconsistencies and discontinuities render any such interpretation problematic if not impossible. The film is irredeemably “polyvalent,” he claims; though there might be moments when coherent meaning emerges briefly, these are always short-circuited by the kind of incongruities we have examined here.⁶⁰ There is thus no general interpretive scheme that can account for the film unless its heterogeneity is ignored. Both approaches, however, overlook the insight contained in Buñuel’s contradictory statement that “nothing, in the film, symbolizes anything” and that “the only method of investigation of the symbols would be, perhaps, psychoanalysis.” This statement suggests that the film simultaneously lures the viewer with continuities that hint at a hidden logic that can make sense of everything, yet it ultimately keeps this logic just out of reach by way of its discontinuities. In other words, *Un chien Andalou* brilliantly instantiates the conception of surreality as contained within reality, one in which a mysterious order is sensed beneath the surface of reality that is mysterious precisely because it remains forever elusive and inexplicable. Breton articulated this paradox wonderfully in his first manifesto: “It is in quest of this surreality that I am going, *certain not to find it* but too unmindful of my death not to calculate to some slight degree the joys of its possession.”⁶¹

Be this as it may, Dalí and Buñuel borrowed heavily from mainstream narrative filmmaking in *Un chien Andalou*, and they did so both because of their

admiration for the standardization and anonymity of the conventions of popular film and because these enabled them to put into practice their conception of surreality. Rather than employing what Benjamin calls “the outmoded,” or mocking and parodying what Foster terms the “mechanical-commodified,” they valued the mechanized commodities of the modern world for the anti-artistic objectivity they promised, and they saw in the surrealist concept of automatism a complementary notion of mechanization and ideal of objectivity. As with the other avant-garde filmmakers examined in this book, their stance toward bourgeois modernity was one of neither complete acceptance nor outright rejection. Instead, they drew on and celebrated its products while simultaneously undermining the rationality that made it possible.