

## *Dalí and the Specter of Cinema*

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The *Dalí + Film* exhibition on view at the Tate Modern in London focuses on ten cinematographic projects.<sup>1</sup> Among these only a few (2) were realized; when they were, one cannot pretend that they were Dalí's. It is well known that Dalí collaborated with Luis Buñuel on the scenario of *Un Chien Andalou* (1929, 16 min.), and to a minor degree on *L'Age d'or* (1930, 63 min.). He also drew the dream sequence for Hitchcock's *Spellbound* but did not have complete artistic freedom. The sequence he fully conceived, a ball, was cut from the final montage. The only movie that Dalí conceived from A to Z—*L'histoire prodigieuse de la dentellière et du rhinocéros*, written and shot from 1954 to 1964—represents a compendium of Dalí's ideas on painting, a kind of cinematographic diary of his creativity. However, since the Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation refused to allow its screening, shot by Robert Descharnes, the Tate show lacks this significant work.<sup>2</sup>

One of the films the viewer is invited to watch is the animation *Destino*, which has received numerous awards and was shown in the Disney exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris last fall.<sup>3</sup> This film is also problematic, since of the 22 paintings and 135 drawings that Dalí made for the project, only five original canvases remain in the actual animation “by” Dalí.<sup>4</sup> This posthumous work, designed by D. Montfery in the French Walt Disney studio, differs considerably from the sketches and paintings that fortunately are on display in the show; these studies, rarely shown, are one of the strongest aspects of the exhibition.<sup>5</sup> In the *Destino* made in 2003 (7 min.), the Dalinian notion of space is not respected, in the sense that the director used contemporary technology, thus giving the original project a more three-dimensional quality. The double images that characterize Dalí's paranoiac-critical method are present—but not in their original complexity.

Overall, one leaves the exhibition with a sense of failure. First because Dalí's

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involvement in cinema remains virtual, and second because the paradox on which the exhibition is based is not problematized, but rather masked by the retrospective of 58 paintings. These seem to be presented in order to alleviate the weaknesses of the show, since few substantial connections are made to the seven films (except for *Destino*). To better understand the interaction between the paintings and these almost non-existent films, one has to read the catalogue, which I discuss below.

The rest of the “films” are centered on Dalí and are not pure fictions, as are the rest of his projects. The longest and most interesting piece, the made-for-television *Impressions de Haute Mongolie* (1975, 70 min.), is not well-known to Anglophone viewers. It is a delirious exploration of a pen that Dalí urinated on. Symbolic of Dalí’s writing skills, the acid reaction transformed this object into the famous stained wall deciphered by Leonardo da Vinci. This French film provides the best example of the immense role played by narrativity in Dalí’s films. As several essays in the catalogue evidence, Dalí was more interested in narrative than in the language of cinema. This is another problematic aspect of the show’s focus. His so-called “scripts” are devoid of close-ups, pans and technical terms proper to the medium. Is it perhaps for this reason that Groucho Marx rejected the scenario for *Giraffes on Horseback Salad* (1937) with no explanation other than “it is not a movie”?

The second video in the last room of the exhibition is *Chaos and Creation* (1960, 16 min.), previously shown in the retrospective exhibition *Dalí: Mass Culture* (2004). This performance is mainly an interesting and entertaining monologue, in which Dalí expresses his dislike of Mondrian and of abstract art in general. Another much longer piece of this sort could have been shown: *L’auto-portrait mou*, by J-C Averty (1967), which would have provided a more complete historical rendering of Dalí’s use of television. The archives of the French Institut National de l’audiovisuel (INA) possess major works, including a performance by Dalí at the Foire du Trône in Paris, in 1966. This homage to Lorca is a clear salute to popular culture. Instead, the London show ends with a video of Dalí’s upside-down head, shot in real time by Andy Warhol (*Screen Test*, 1966, 4 min.). This is “counterbalanced” by the display of Halsman’s photographic portrait series of Dalí’s moustaches, raised up and employed for various purposes: fly-traps, clock’s handles, and so on.

As I have indicated, there is not much new material displayed in this show, with the exception of eight drawings for unrealized films<sup>6</sup> and seven manuscripts in which Dalí jotted down his association of cinema with oneiric images based on hallucinations, whether as a result of madness (*Wheelbarrow of Flesh*, *Impressions de Haute Mongolie*), hysteria (*The Soul*), or intoxication (*Moontide*). Strangely enough, this aspect is not analyzed by scholars in the exhibition catalogue. Their essays draw upon

the only two texts that Dalí wrote on cinema in his early surrealist period, the first of which precedes the invention of the paranoiac-critical method.<sup>7</sup> One is surprised that so much emphasis is placed on the alleged objectivity of photography, when it is more obviously delirium that nourished all of Dalí's scripts. Another interesting document shows Dalí's understanding of dream and cinema to be very Freudian, that is, rooted in language. One of his "scripts" is composed of the shifting of words from the area of the conscious to that of the unconscious.<sup>8</sup>

The merit of the catalogue lies in its detailing of the historical context (circumstances, contacts, key cinematographic references) that surrounded Dalí's projects. One regrets that the incomplete status that characterizes most of Dalí's projects is not probed. In his guide to Dalí's virtual cinematographic involvement, Elliott King strove mightily to summarize the challenging plots that Dalí built.<sup>9</sup> He ends this compilation with an interview by Amanda Lear, who observed that Dalí did everything possible to prevent the films from being made—by means of the excessive payments he demanded, for example. This statement provides the beginnings of an answer, but the paradox remains. Why did Dalí's involvement in ballets in the forties, which resemble some of the scripts, succeed, especially in their choice of music?<sup>10</sup> All had dance sequences and were also based on hallucinations—of Louis II de Bavière, or Mad Tristan. In contrast to the realm of the stage and to the art of choreography, which fits so well with Dalí's unstable images, was the screen a medium that was too fixed and too flat to harmonize with Dalí's aesthetic?

In his latest book, *The Screen in Surrealist Art and Thought*, Dalí scholar Haim Finkelstein demonstrates the importance of the screen device in mapping the Freudian conception of the mind.<sup>11</sup> He interrogates the surrealist notion of the real conceived as a surface behind which a mystery is to be pierced but never revealed. He studies different painters, and among them he presents Dalí as an historical rupture significant enough that the art historian uses him to conclude his book.

Finkelstein's thesis is that Dalí's works represent a "dissolution of the screen paradigm" in both his work and theory. One can then begin to understand why the cinematographic screen was problematic for Dalí, and that it could not simply be treated as a surface on which to project his fancy, or used for the transposition of some of the topics of his paintings. The screen had to be breached: cut by scissors in *Spellbound*, or pierced by a baseball—a metamorphosed head—in *Destino*. It is undeniable that the Surrealists were interested in the new medium of cinema, but their approach was critical and violent: the act of blinding introduces *Un chien Andalou*, and the beheading of a female dancer concludes *Destino*. These scenes are not simple sadistic fantasies on Dalí's part. Rather they support an aesthetic vision

shared by numerous surrealists who powerfully deconstructed the notion of screen in their writings.

- 1 *Dalí + Film*, Tate Modern (1 June - 9 September 2007) (London: 2007). The exhibition will tour the United States in 2008 (Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Salvador Dalí Museum of St Petersburg; Museum of Modern Art, New York).
- 2 On this work, see the French Arte documentary by Tana Förster, 2004. See also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXqo0TBn0-Q>.
- 3 *Il était une fois Walt Disney* (16 September 2006-15 January, 2007).
- 4 For an analysis of that short-movie, see my “*Dalíto destiné aux enfants : Destino*,” to be published in 2007 in *Dalí Medienspielen*, a collection of essays edited by Nanette Rissler-Pipka, Bielefeld.
- 5 Two oil paintings and 13 studies are presented.
- 6 These drawings concern the project of *Cinq minutes à propos du surréalisme* (1), the Marx Brothers’ project (4), *Les mystères surréalistes de New York* (1) and *Moontide* (2).
- 7 The articles by Dalí, “Art Film, Antiartistic Film” (1927) and “Short Critical History of Cinema” (1932), are reprinted in English in the Tate catalogue, *Dalí and Film*, 72-75.
- 8 *Dalí and Film*, 112.
- 9 Elliot King, *Dalí, surrealism and cinema* (Hertfordshire, England: Kamera, 2007).
- 10 In my forthcoming book (to be published in Fall 2007 by Editions Notari), *Dalí/Béjart : danser Gala. L’art bouffe de Salvador Dalí*, co-written with Isabelle Roussel-Gillet, I demonstrate the importance of choreography in Dalí’s art and provide a detailed historical presentation of the Dalí ballets whose librettos are fully his (in contrast to his collaboration on the films).
- 11 Haim Finkelstein, *The Screen in Surrealist Art and Thought* (London: Ashgate, 2007).