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Image and Title in Avant-Garde Cinema
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Source: *October*, Vol. 11, Essays in Honor of Jay Leyda (Winter, 1979), pp. 97-112
Published by: The MIT Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/778237
Accessed: 27/01/2010 05:34

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# Image and Title in Avant-Garde Cinema

P. ADAMS SITNEY

When Louis and Auguste Lumière first presented their cinematographic machine to the public, Baudelaire had been dead for twenty-eight years. In the histories of cinema that initial projection in 1895 marks the conventional division between cinema proper and the long protohistory of machines for the representation of movement. Yet Baudelaire had already written on the two fundamental elements of the Lumière brothers' invention. In his review of the Salon of 1857 he recorded his hostility to the influence of photography on painting. What would later be called the indexicality of photographic signs gave them, according to Baudelaire, an illusory authority, a falsely privileged ontological status, over painted representations. While he condemns the aesthetics of photography, in "Morale de Joujou" he extolls the phenekistoscope as a machine of the poetic imagination.[1] What distressed Baudelaire about photography, the seductiveness of its illusionism, was absent from the phenekistoscope. In fact, the mechanics of the toy emphasized the contrivance of its illusion. The child playing with it may be thrilled but not seduced into conferring an ontological stability upon the image he animates, precisely because he animates it himself. Baudelaire's reactions to photography and to synthetic motion machines prefigure a later contradictory response of advanced literary sensibilities to the cinema itself.

The interaction of photographic realism with the language of intertitles was to produce in artists, and particularly in writers, fascinating and complex attitudes toward the cinema. Often these reactions are concealed from readers unwilling to pursue avenues of investigation other than those established by

1. A phenekistoscope is a protocinematic device consisting of a disk perforated by slots through which a viewer looks. The disk rotates around an axle through its center before a mirror. On the circumference of the disk are a series of sequential images—they may be either drawings or photographs—which blend into an illusion of movement as the disk is turned. The phenekistoscope, then, is a machine for the creation of *synthetic motion*. All motion-picture projectors operate on a version of the same principle.

convention. Looking for analytical or theoretical articles directly treating the subject is the most obvious method, but interesting examples are quite rare. Yet there are several ways in which we may discover how photography and cinematography impressed advanced thinkers at the turn of the century. Often a passing reference in a poem, an essay, or a novel can be compared to a parallel statement in the writer's work and thereby made to reveal a nexus of implicit reflections about photographic representation. Finally, the labor of interpretation can be directed to films which incorporate aesthetic decisions in response or reaction to the norms of their time. A film of this sort may systematically bypass a convention of its period, so that we may conclude, at least, that the filmmaker did not find that convention essential to the cinema or to the particular genre in which he was working.

In France, the paradoxes and ironies of cinema's claim to realism were first posed by a poet who made no films. Guillaume Apollinaire, who gave us the word *surréalisme,* for which Breton and his companions were to find a meaning, wrote an early parable—possibly the first—of filmmaking. On December 23, 1907, he published "Un Beau Film" in the journal *Messidor.* Three years later to the month, the same brief text reappeared as a chapter of his picaresque novel *L'Herésiarque et Cie.* The chapter has only nineteen paragraphs. Here are translations of one near the text's beginning and a few from the end. The sinister Baron d'Ormesan is speaking:

> "In 1910 I created the *Cinematographic International Company* together with a few friends. We abbreviated it as the C.I.C. It succeeded in getting films of spectacular interest and then set up film shows in all the important cities of Europe and America. Our program was very well composed. Thanks to the indiscretion of a manservant we were able to get an interesting episode showing the President of the Republic getting up. We have even filmed the birth of the Prince of Albania. But best of all, by bribing some of the Sultan's officials, we were able to capture forever in motion the powerful tragedy of the grand-vizier Malek-Pacha. After heart-rending goodbyes to his wives and children, he drank poisoned coffee by order of his Lord on the balcony of his house in Pera."
>
> . . .
>
> The baron's production company needed a crime story, but they refused to compromise their commitment to authenticity by acting one out. Instead they rented a villa, ambushed first a young couple and then a man in evening wear, and forced them inside at gunpoint. They forced the man to murder the couple, but not before he had persuaded them to let him wear a mask.
>
> "We had our sensational crime," the baron continued. "It created a tremendous scandal. The victims turned out to be the wife of a minister from a small Balkan country and her lover, the son of a pretender to the crown in a principality in northern Germany.

> "We had rented the villa under a phony name, and the renting agent, to share in the excitement, claimed he recognized the young prince as the tenant. The police were on the hook for two months. The papers put out special editions and, since we were showing the film everywhere, you can imagine our success. The police did not believe for a minute that we were showing the real murder in the headlines. Yet we made sure we advertised it as plain as day. But the public wasn't fooled. It gave us a very warm reception, and by distributing the film to the members of our corporation we made three hundred and forty-two thousand francs in six months.
>
> "Since the crime had received too much publicity to go unpunished, the police ended up by arresting a Levantine who couldn't provide a good alibi for the night of the crime. Despite his claims of innocence, he was sentenced to death and executed. Then we really struck it lucky. Through a lucky accident, our cameraman was able to take part in the execution, and we spiced up our film with a new scene, just the thing to bring in the crowds."

Apollinaire's bitter wit underlines the fact that the common moviegoer of 1907 was less of a dupe than the more "sophisticated" audience that would begin to come to cinema a decade or more later. But in the story two blind acts of faith converge. The police, professional detectives of the truth, err in their assurance of the falsity of that which is represented in the film; while the public, connoisseurs of film companies' spiraling quest for snatching true and normally concealed horror, believe in the actuality of that which they see on the screen if only because, like St. Anselm, they know it is better if it is true.

The parable is a good one; it touches upon the problematic of truth and fiction in the unique way in which cinema encounters it. More interesting still is the fact that this story occurs within a literary fiction. It is an early text among many of its kind. Writers highly conscious of the issues of truth and falsehood within literary narrative have used cinema as a metaphor or hyperbole of the ambiguities of representation. A masterpiece of this mode appeared eight years later. Pirandello's 1915 novel *Si Gira!* or *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio, operatore* showed a firmer grasp of the theoretical subtleties of cinematic representation and its relationship to subjectivity than any work of its time, including Hugo Munsterberg's *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study,* published the same year.

The point is one that Jay Leyda has maintained and developed for many years: there is no primitive phase in the history of cinema. The machinery required for moving photographs was invented at a time when the problems of representation in painting and literature were being discussed in terms of a crisis. The ontology of the photographic image had been a vital issue since the time Baudelaire had introduced the issue in reference to painting. It would be naive to think that the new cinema could escape the attention of those most deeply

concerned with the aesthetics of illusion. Rather than a primitive period, the first two decades of filmmaking were a time of exuberance and insight. It is Leyda again whom we have to thank for the vital clue to recovering this moment of intellectual history. Look to the most advanced fiction and poetry of the period, he advised, and you will find recorded the variety and depth of the experience of cinema in that period of intense experimentation.

I have attempted to expand the concept of film theory by examining the attitude toward language in cinema in France during the 1920s. Within this context two well-known films are to be seen in a relationship previously unexamined. They are *Anémic Cinéma* and *L'Etoile de mer.* Furthermore, their relationship to each another is relevant to one of the most strenuously debated theoretical issues of their time: the status of the intertitle in films.

With his development of the rayograph Man Ray drove a wedge between photography and camera work. He placed objects—strings, buttons, tacks, a hand—directly on the surface of photosensitive material before exposing it to light. A positive image gave him a brilliantly outlined white shape on a black background; the negative reversed it. Parts of the surface could even be exposed to a conventional camera negative to create a synthesis of camera and contact imagery.

The rayograph demonstrated that the camera was not a necessary part of the art of photography. Rather, the photosensitive surface was the essential material element. Even though photographic images usually were and continue to be generated by cameras, Man Ray's work stated the claim that the imagery of the lens was a contingent aspect of the art. This theoretical position is comparable to that of the German dadaists, who held that sounds and letters of the alphabet rather than words were the fundamental materials of poetry.

For cinema, the implications of Man Ray's photography were large and complex. In his first film, *Le Retour à la raison,* Man Ray actually applied the rayograph technique: he stuck tacks into successive frames, laid a spring across several feet of film in his darkroom, and sprinkled some granular substance on more undeveloped film. When he exposed this to light and then processed the pieces, the same pure white shapes danced in black space because of the slight variations in the positioning of objects from frame to frame. But even by alternating negative and positive strips of these moving rayographs he could only get a minute or so of moving imagery. A number of conventionally photographed images—a nude torso striped by bands of light and shadow, a twirling grid superimposed asynchronously over itself, night lights, etc.—also appear in this very short film. Much of the same material was reused for his longer, more structured film, *Emak Bakia.*

My concern in this essay is not exclusively Man Ray's contribution to the avant-garde cinema and its theory. This rayograph technique could not effectively cope with the repetitiousness of film frames. The investigation into the irreducible

elements of cinema, of which *Le Retour à la raison* and *Emak Bakia* were parts, proceeded on a much more provocative and profound level in two projects in which Man Ray participated: Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* and his own collaboration with Robert Desnos, *L'Etoile de mer.*

Our understanding of these two films and their theoretical importance requires, however, that we attend to intellectual issues to which they were responding. We are accustomed to consider Soviet revolutionary cinema during the silent period in relationship to the theoretical writings of Eisenstein, Vertov, and Pudovkin, among other filmmakers; and more recent scholarship has extended that consideration to the work of the formalist critics Shklovsky, Brik, and Tynjanov, who were intensely interested in new developments in cinema. The parallel development in France has not, however, attracted the attention of historians of the cinema. One obvious reason for this is that the most respected filmmakers did not write essays on the nature of cinema: from Duchamp, Man Ray, and Buñuel we do not have theoretical texts on issues fundamental to their film practice. And interestingly, Léger and Clair, who did publish theory, have often been ignored.

An insidious distinction between a so-called first avant-garde (Epstein, Dulac, Delluc, L'Herbier) and a second (associated with the dada and surrealist movements) has helped to perpetuate a distorted picture of this period. All of the artists of the "first avant-garde" were active theoreticians, but their theories have been as neglected as their films. The surrealists were at least partially responsible for this distinction and for the rejection of those filmmakers not aligned with influential movements in painting and poetry. But even their polemic occurred within the intellectual arena in which Epstein, Dulac, and Clair worked. The surrealist films were usually shown at the same Ciné-club de France at the Vieux-Colombier theater where others would lecture on theoretical issues.

One of the more intense debates of the 1920s concerned the status of the intertitles in silent cinema. The German director Lupu Pick made *Scherben* with only one significant title and *Sylvester* with none. Charles Ray's *The Ol' Swimmin' Hole,* Murnau's *Der Letze Mann,* and Kirsanoff's *Menilmontant* narrate complex stories without titles. And at the end of the decade Dziga Vertov proudly subtitled his tour-de-force *The Man with a Movie Camera* "a film without intertitles." Claims of cinematic purity and of a universal language were often linked to these films without words. In 1924 Jean Epstein wrote:

> The theory underlying the film without titles is obviously logical: cinema exists to narrate with images and not with words. However, one should never push a theory to its limits: their extremity is always the weak spot where it collapses. Looking at a film completely without titles is undeniably depressing, for psychological reasons; the subtitle is first of all a rest for the eye, a punctuation mark for the mind. A title

> often avoids a long visual explanation, which may be necessary but is boring and banal. . . . Isn't advertising a film as having no subtitles like praising Mallarmé's poems because they do not have punctuation?[2]

This is the context in which *Anémic Cinéma* and *L'Etoile de Mer* acquire meaning.

*

The surrealist poet Robert Desnos published film criticism regularly during the 1920s. In 1923 he devoted an article to "Musique et sous-titres." He saw the title as an integral part of the art of cinema. "Everything that can be projected on the screen belongs in the cinema, letters as well as faces. All means are good when they produce good films, and it is in the mind that the quest for purity must occur rather than in a subsidiary technique."[3]

The first film within the tradition of the avant-garde to claim equality of title and image was Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma.* The very language that appears on the screen owes something to the literary practice of Desnos and to the long-standing friendship between the poet and the plastic artist. In 1923 Desnos published a long poem entitled *Rrose Sélavy.* It consists of one hundred and fifty punning sentences. In a footnote to the title Desnos advises us: "The author regrets that he cannot cite the name of the initiator of Rrose Sélavy without annoying him. Curious minds might decipher no. 13." That verse—"Rrose Sélavy connâit bien le marchand du sel"—links Marcel Duchamp's name with Rrose Sélavy's by means of spoonerism. In general, the puns are aggressive, mocking religion and society and above all emphasizing sexuality. For instance:

> 1. Dans un temple en stuc de pomme le pasteur distillait le suc des psaumes. [In a temple of apple stucco the pastor distills the juice of the psalms.]
>
> 2. Rrose Sélavy demand si les Fleurs du Mal ont modifié les moeurs du phalle: qu'en pense Omphale? [Rrose Sélavy asks if The Flowers of Evil have changed the customs of the phallus: what does Navel think about it?]
>
> 150. Aimable souvent est sable mouvant. [Lovely is often quicksand.]

Rrose Sélavy is the name of a verbal game, an exploration of the potential of the pun, founded by Duchamp and continued by Desnos. The sayings of Rrose Sélavy are all examples of language turned back upon itself, in which new

2. Jean Epstein, "Pour une avant-garde nouvelle," in *Ecrits sur le cinéma,* Paris, Seghers, 1974, vol. I, p. 148.
3. Robert Desnos, "Musique et sous-titres," in *Cinéma,* ed. André Tchernia, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, p. 98.

meanings are found in the redistribution of verbal sounds. The meaning of any of these sayings can be crudely parsed as I have done, but translation is impossible. And the name too is a pun. In French the letter *r* is pronounced *er*, and thus "Rrose Sélavy" strikes the ear as "Eros, c'est la vie!"

Part of the wit of Duchamp's elaborately witty film *Anémic Cinéma* derives from the recognition that by and large the cinematic experience during the silent period was one of an alternation of reading and looking at images in an illusionistic depth. Duchamp carries this to an extreme limit; for every image there is a verbal passage, or between every two images, a title. In all, nine statements by Rrose Sélavy are shown interspersed with nine nonverbal images. This relationship to contemporary conventions of cinema is purely theoretical, for *Anémic Cinéma* does not look like any film that had been made before it. The images are all disks of eccentric circles within circles and spiral lines. The words are nothing more than single sentences (in Rrose Sélavy's manner) printed spirally on disks, winding from outside in. The eye grasps the disks as wholes; their motion induces an optical illusion of three-dimensionality. Some seem to protrude from the flatness of the screen; others look like conical depressions. The viewer's response to this structure affirms the power of optical stimuli to create reflexes within a system of repetition.

A film composed only of spirals and puns is indeed an example of anemic cinema. *Anémic*, the secret epithet hidden within *cinéma*, is not a French form; *anémique* has been corrupted by an English spelling. In at least two of the disks with texts there are similar cases of French infected by English. The title obviously identifies the film we see as a weak, bloodless example of cinema. But it can also be interpreted as a general statement about the art as a whole: cinema is anemic. This is the only film Duchamp ever made, although he experimented with a stereoptical project.[4] It is his one statement in film and about film. It implies that cinema is anemic because it all takes place in the mind of the viewer through automatic responses, as that viewer is duped into believing that the successive still images move, that their flatness is really depth, that they bear a relationship to their titles. The titles seem, at first, unrelated to the images:

> Bains de gros thé pour grains de beauté sans trop de bengué.
>
> L'enfant qui tête est un souffleur de chair chaude et n'aime pas le choufleur de serre chaude.
>
> Si je te donne un sou, me donneras tu une paire de ciseaux?
>
> On demande des moustiques domestiques (demi-stock) pour la cure d'azote sur la Côte d'Azur.
>
> Inceste ou passion de famille, à coups trop tirés.

4. See Jean Clair, "Opticeries," *October*, 5 (Summer 1978), 101-12.

*Marcel Duchamp. Title disk for* Anémic Cinéma. *1926.*

> Esquivons les ecchymoses des esquimaux aux mots exquis.
>
> Avez vous déjà mis la moëlle de l'épée dans le poêle de l'aimée?
>
> Parmi nos articles de quincaillerie paresseuse, nous recommandons le robinet qui s'arrête de couler quand on ne l'écoute pas.
>
> L'aspirant habite Javel et moi j'avais l'habite en spirale.[5]

The final title presents a fingerprint and reads, "Copyrighted by Rrose Sélavy 1926."

At first sight *Anémic Cinéma* would seem to underline the difference between optical and verbal images. Two modes of representation are held together by the figure of a spiral. And as we begin to perceive the puns as implicated in sexual play, that play determines the way in which the spiral images are seen. The abstract gyrating shapes which project and recede from and into the plane of the screen come to resemble the breasts and genitalia evoked by the words. The sexuality is neither in the literal surface of the words nor in the optical illusion. It is an operation of the viewer's reading of one part of the film into the other. Cinema, Duchamp seems to imply, is anemic insofar as it is contingent upon such indirection.

5. Because these titles are puns, they pose obvious translation problems. For their translation with annotations, see Katrina Martin, "Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma*," *Studio International*, vol. 189 (January 1975), 53–60.

The final title describes the position of the imaginary author of the words and of the film. "L'aspirant habite Javel et moi j'avais l'habite en spirale." *L'aspirant* is a candidate. The word is used for a suitor in love and, in a nautical sense, for a midshipman. The sailor as suitor touches upon popular myths of sexual urgency and excess, much as the "esquimaux aux mots exquis" of the sixth title disk hints at the myths of Eskimo hospitality. Javel is a district of Paris. After a beginning which locates the horny sailor in Javel, we should expect a parallel statement of the *moi*'s address with another covert allusion to his sexuality. This is not exactly what we get. *Avoir l'habite* literally means "to have the coat" or "to have the clothes," and the phrase could be construed as "I had my clothes in a spiral." However, another contamination of French usage by English is apparent here; Duchamp is using *avoir l'habite* as if it were *avoir l'habitude,* "to have the habit." Another English deformation had been "une paire de ciseaux"; in France scissors are not spoken of in terms of pairs.

Rrose Sélavy not only wears a spiral suit and has the spiral habit, but he or she has "la bitte inspirale." The phrase contains a vulgarism and a corruption. *La bitte,* which means "bitt," is a vulgar name for the penis. *Inspirale* is a twisting of *inspiratrice.* Rrose Sélavy had the inspiring cock, the spiral cock, and the cock in a spiral. As puns spiral out from this self-identification, the eroticization of the spiral itself finally becomes explicitly thematic, whereas until this concluding title it had been covert.

*

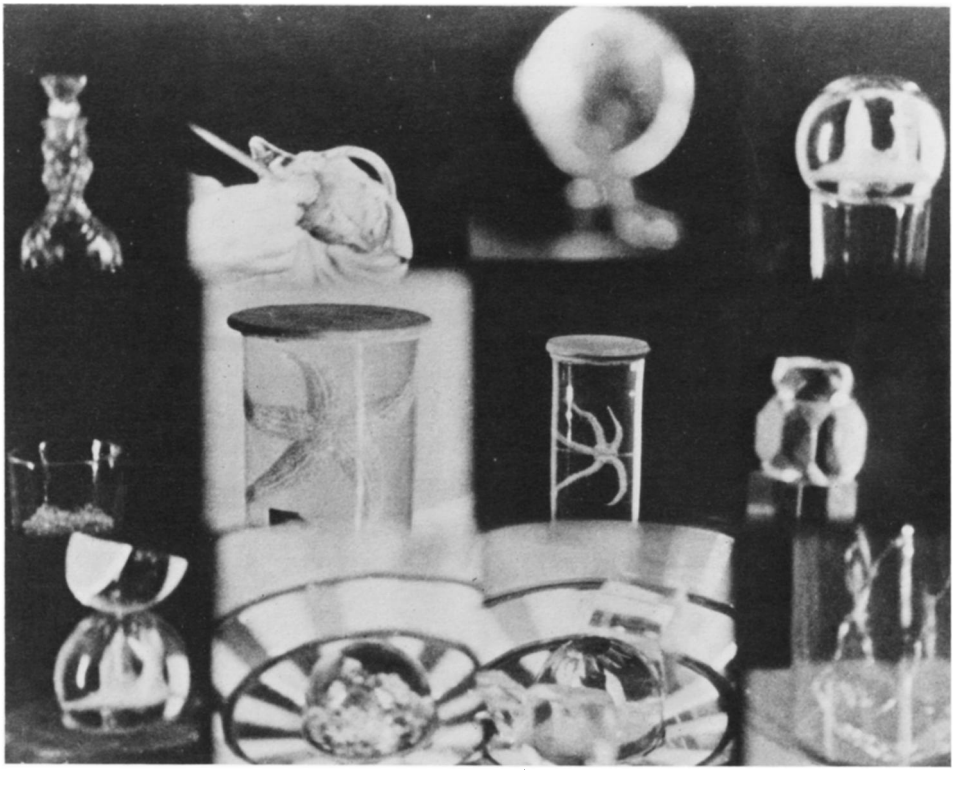
Man Ray's participation in the making of *Anémic Cinéma* was purely technical. Duchamp called upon him together with Marc Allégret to help him record the movement of the disks on film. But in *L'Etoile de mer* Man Ray made his own statement about the interrelationship of words and images in film. The occasion for the making of this work is somewhat obscure. In his autobiography, *Self-Portrait,* he says that Robert Desnos read a poem before a gathering of friends prior to his departure for a conference in the Caribbean, whereupon Man Ray promised to make a film of the poem in the time Desnos was away. The outline of the event is probably true, but one would like to know how Desnos could appear in the film if it was indeed completed in his absence. Perhaps the final scene, the only one in which he appears, was added after his return. Unfortunately Man Ray does not address himself to this detail. A more troubling problem is the disappearance of the poem, which Man Ray tells us was called "L'Etoile de mer," was eighteen to twenty lines long, and contained all the images of the film. Gallimard has published three collections of Desnos's poems, including many previously unpublished. There is no sign of "L'Etoile de mer" in them. The claim has been made that "La Place de l'Etoile," Desnos's dramatic "antipoéme" was the basis for the film. The only point of juncture is the appearance of starfish in both the film and the play, making the claim rather untenable. At this time we cannot

determine the respective contributions of Man Ray and Desnos. Although I assume all the titles that appear in the film are quoted from Desnos, even this may not be the case. Surely the titles do not constitute the whole of the poem; Man Ray's description of its imagery argues that much of the text has been omitted. Here are the titles as they appear in the film:

| | |
|---|---|
| les dents des femmes | Women's teeth |
| sont des objets | are objects |
| si charmants . . . | so charming . . . |
| . . . qu'on ne devrait | . . . that one ought |
| les voir qu'en rêve | to see them only in a dream |
| ou | or |
| à l'instant de l'amour. | in the instant of love. |
| Adieu | Farewell |
| Si belle! Cybèle? | So beautiful! Cybele? |
| Nous sommes à jamais | We are forever |
| Perdus dans le désert | Lost in the desert |
| de l'éternèbre. | of eternal darkness. |
| Qu'elle est belle | How beautiful she is |
| "Après tout" | "After all" |
| si les fleurs | if the flowers |
| étaient en | were in |
| verre | glass |
| "belle, belle comme | "beautiful, beautiful like |
| une fleur de verre" | a flower of glass" |
| "belle comme une fleur de chair" | "beautiful like a flower of flesh" |
| Il faut battre les morts | One must beat the dead |
| quand ils sont froids. | while they are cold. |
| Les murs de la Santé | The walls of the Santé |
| Et si tu trouves | And if you find |
| sur cette terre | on this earth |
| une femme | a woman |
| à l'amour sincère . . . | of sincere love . . . |
| "belle | "beautiful |
| comme une | like a |
| fleur de feu" | flower of fire" |
| Le soleil, un pied à | The sun, one foot in |
| l'étrier, niche un rossi- | the stirrup, nestles a nightin- |
| gnol dans un voile | gale in a veil |
| de crêpe. | of crepe. |
| Vous ne rêvez pas | You do not dream |
| "qu'elle était belle" | "how beautiful she was" |
| "qu'elle *est* belle | "how beautiful she *is*" |
| belle | beautiful |

In Andre Breton's *Nadja* there are two photographs of Desnos taken by Man Ray showing in successive images on a strip the poet asleep. Desnos had a reputation for being able to compose poetry in a sleeplike trance produced by self-hypnosis. Many of his finest poems from the 1920s describe dreams, and they often present the poet as a lover in a desperate erotic situation. A commonplace of surrealist literature is the encounter with a strange, perhaps mad, woman. *Nadja* itself chronicles Breton's meetings with such a woman. In Desnos's poetry the fascinating but impossibly distant female is called "la mystérieuse."

*L'Etoile de mer* presents another version of the encounter with "la mystérieuse." This much of the plot is clear: a man meets a woman who sells newspapers on the street. They go to her apartment where she takes off all of her clothes; he leaves immediately, taking with him a glass paperweight in which is enclosed a starfish. They meet again on the street, this encounter followed by several scenes of each of them alone. At the conclusion they meet in a scene almost identical to their initial encounter, but this time another man (played by Desnos) arrives suddenly and takes the woman away with him.



*Man Ray.* L'Etoile de mer. *1923.*

The film's energy is not concentrated in this elementary plot, but in the depiction of the male figure's mind. The most obvious index of subjectivity is Man Ray's use of a stippled lens which distorts many of the images, especially at the opening. Such distortion as a sign of subjectivity had been part of the French cinema since Abel Gance's *La Folie de Dr. Tube* of 1919. The most surprising aspect of Man Ray's use of it is its apparently arbitrary intermittence. The sequence of the meeting at the opening of the film is by and large distorted optically, but there are details filmed through a "normal" lens. Given Man Ray's skill as a photographer and the manner in which he called into question the status of the camera lens in both photography and cinema, this alternation of optical perspectives cannot be unimportant. The very subtitle of the film, "poème de Robert Desnos tel que l'a vu Man Ray," draws our attention to the difference between text and sight and bids us look for the particulars of Man Ray's vision.

But "tel que l'a vu Man Ray" refers not only to the filmmaker's envisioning of the poem, but also to the very nature of camera vision in general. The alternation of lenses points first of all to the very fact that there are lenses. *L'Etoile de mer* is a film about seeing the world through layers of glass. That is naturally the barrier of the camera which always protects its sensitive film surface from the exterior world with a wall of glass. The implication is that the so-called normal lens is as artificial as the stippled one. This implicit principle of pure theory functions as an essential component of the film's thematics in much the same way as the claim of the impoverishment, or anemia, of cinema in Duchamp's work. Both stress the abstract peculiarity of illusionistic modes of vision; in both, language is poetically reflexive; in both sexuality mediates between the two extremes.

As they walk together early in the film, the woman attracts the man's attention by stopping to fix her garter. The title which interrupts her gesture reads, "Les dents des femmes sont des objets si charmants. . . ." Had we seen an image of her smile this title would have been nothing more than a banal convention. Coming where it does, however, it generates a new level of signification, for the image of the woman's thighs, coupled with a mention of her teeth, brings into play the image of the *vagina dentata.* That image, a synthesis of picture and text, is only figuratively represented in the film and comes to dominate and determine the man's action.

The fascination of the *vagina dentata* compels him to accompany the woman to her room and to watch her strip, but in his fear he then bids her adieu and leaves without making love. Instead, he takes an object: the paperweight she used to hold down her newspapers. Alone in his room, he contemplates the starfish in the glass paperweight. The pun he utters has an ambiguous referent. Is the woman or the starfish "Si belle"? In uttering the sounds "Si belle!" he pronounces the name Cybèle.

Catullus addressed a long poem, numbered sixty-three in the *Carmina,* to the cult of Cybele. It opens in this way:

Upon the fleet ship, Attis rapidly flew
Eager to find the sacred Phrygian grove,
And in its deepest shade, great Cybele drew
Him madly onward till he, shuddering, drove
A flint into his groin, and staggering back
He wailed for his lost manhood, shrieked in a fire
Of pain. The stain of hot blood reddened the black,
Cold earth, and her white hands in maddened desire
Then seized the sacred tambour, Cybele's horn
And trumpet, struck the hollow, echoing hide
With slender hands; to her companions reborn,
She sang, "Now come, who would with Cybele bide
In lofty groves together. . . ."[6]

The frenzied follower of Cybele castrates himself and then, to follow Catullus's usage, she bemoans her deed for the remainder of the poem.

The starfish which holds the attention of the man possessed by the titillating dread of the *vagina dentata* and Cybelean castration is, significantly, contained within a cylinder of glass. Within the world encased in the camera's glass is a man peering into a glassed-in zone. As he peers, the starfish comes alive. "Après tout," the title declares at this moment. "After all" what? It is for the viewer to decide. After all, as it wraps itself around a sea urchin, the living starfish looks like the dreaded *vagina dentata.*

In the more abstract sequence which follows, language and the camera's glass eye are conjoined by a pun: "Si les fleurs étaient en verre." Literally: "If the flowers were in glass." Coming when it does, after the image of a potted flower, the title names, in the conditional mood, the status of the image we have seen, a flower viewed through the glass of the lens. The flower is a sexual organ as well, so that the line refers metonymically to the man's desire to encounter the *vagina dentata* from the same close but protected distance as that from which he studies the starfish. Proximate to this title there is a succession of multiple images of revolving starfish in glass cylinders, roulette wheels, a sword plunged into and pulled out of a scabbard. The composite image in motion is possible only in cinema. And a flower "en verre" or a flower "de verre," as the next title varies it, is possible only in poetry. The pun of *verre* (glass) and *vers* (poetry) fuses the optical and verbal aspects of the film. The space between these two autonomous and reflexive systems is that of figuration in which the dominant but invisible "image" of the *vagina dentata* holds sway.

The invented word *l'éternèbre,* which fuses *éternal* (endless) and *tenèbre*

6. *Catullus,* trans. Reney Myers and Robert J. Ormsby, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1972, p. 64.

(darkness), speaks of the constant and hopeless attraction of "la mystérieuse."[7] Man Ray subsequently introduces two new means of optical distortion. The speed of a train affects the camera's view of a landscape viewed through a window. A fog reduces boats seen by the man in a harbor to eerie silhouettes. The filmmaker is letting us see that a stippled lens is not the only source of modified vision: the very speed of the camera's movement and even the atmosphere through which it gathers its light can determine transformation. To these two kinds of distortion he adds still another, presenting a still life in fluid contours, moving from distorted to conventional perspective by merely turning the focus mechanism on his lens. This establishes that the fluctuation of perspective is built into the glass eye of the camera. And when the still life does come into crisp focus, the two half-sliced bananas on the table beside a wine bottle turn out to be one more displacement of the fear of Cybele's castrating intoxication.

In a reversal of the opening metonymy of thigh and teeth, the first "fleur de chair" we are shown is the woman's face as she removes a mask. The second fleshly flower appears on the man's hands as the lines of his palms appear in dark tracings. In *Self-Portrait* Man Ray laconically mentions that the French censors suggested he remove the title which follows this image of the flower of lifelines: "Il faut battre les morts quand ils sont froids." The censors had obviously perceived—as two or three generations of historians and critics have not—that "les morts" are the genitals of the fetishist, rendered impotent by his fearful fascination. The title is a call for masturbation, defined in *Le Dictionnaire surréaliste* as "the hand in the service of the imagination."

The surrealist hero has chosen to live in the imaginative realm of displacement, fantasy, and mythopoeisis. The scandal of Breton's enthusiasm for Freud, I suspect, was that he was not concerned with psychoanalysis as therapy but with its picture of the imagination, the manner in which it affirmed the lively notion that the dreams of magistrates, presidents of the republic, and archbishops are closer to the visions of Sade than to those of Plato.

Optical distortion and Eros are conjoined in the most elaborate title in the film: "Le soleil, un pied à l'étrier, niche un rossignol dans une voile de crêpe." The complex metaphor derives from the traditions of Provençal troubadour poetry and the code of courtly love. Two elements of the *aubade*, or poem to the dawn, appear here. The courtly lover hates the dawn because it marks the end of his tryst. Desnos portrays the sun as a horseback rider. With one foot in the stirrup, the sun mounts the horse; his radiance can be seen glowing around the horse, but the disk of light has not yet appeared on the horizon; it is the glow that precedes the dawn. With the coming of this light, the nightingale which sings at night and sleeps in the morning and is thus a friend to lovers, goes to its nest. The veil of crepe is the

7. One collection of Desnos's poetry from this period is entitled *A la mystérieuse*; another, *Les tenèbres*.

crepuscular half-light of this moment. With this metaphor the theme of optical distortion seen in the stippled lens, the train-driven camera, the fog, and the turning focus finally appears in the titles. It announces the end of the nocturnal fantasy and the film's conclusion.

The encounter of man and woman, repeated once again, is followed by the arrival of the second man to terminate the chain. As the woman goes off with him the title declares, "Qu'elle *était* belle." The first man still has the starfish to sustain his erotic fantasy. Staring at the fetish-object, he thinks, "Qu'elle *est* belle." The woman now appears in a mirror, the word *belle* printed across the glass seemingly suspended in the foreground. In this brief moment, image and word coincide, only to be denied. A thrown object shatters the mirror, making it clear for the first time that this concluding image is indeed in glass. With this splitting of the two modes of representation—glass and word—from their mysterious and distant object, the film ends.

Desnos seems to have been pleased with Man Ray's film. In his 1929 article, "Cinéma d'avant-garde," this work, together with *Entr'acte* and *Un Chien Andalou,* is spared his condemnation. Of these films he says, "It's not a question of creating a work of art or a new aesthetic but of obeying a new form's deep, original, and consequently necessary movements."[8] That he also takes some credit for *L'Etoile de mer* is apparent in his footnote: "Here the author of these lines assumes a rather modest pose."

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Neither *Anémic Cinéma* nor *L'Etoile de mer* has hitherto been considered as a contribution to the theory of cinema, and to the particular problem of the relationship between images and words in the silent film. Such is the constricted view of film theory. Henri Fescourt's *La Foi et les montagnes* (1959), a gossipy contemporary account of the development of cinema in France, remains the most useful book on French film of the 1920s precisely because the author chronicles the intellectual activity surrounding filmmaking. Future scholars investigating cinema's place in modern intellectual history can take hints from that book which places Blaise Cendrars's *Fin du monde: filmée par l'ange N. D.* and Jules Romains's *Donogoo-Tonka* as contributions to the cinematic milieu beside the actually realized films of Gance and Dulac, for example.

Much work remains to be done before we have an adequate picture of the development of film theory during that period of intense artistic activity. There can be little doubt that the question of the status of language in film was a central issue to which both *Anémic Cinéma* and *L'Etoile de mer* responded. As well, the status of the lens itself was in question. In 1925 *Les Cahiers du mois* devoted an

8. Robert Desnos, "Cinéma d'avant-garde," Tchernia, p. 189.

entire issue to the aesthetics of cinema. Desnos was one of the seventeen writers consulted on the relationship of cinema to literature and modern thought. The same issue presented two photographs by Man Ray with the following editorial comment:

> We publish at the back of this volume some photographs of M. Man Ray, who has miraculously been able to provoke on sensitive paper the illusions and revelations (close-ups, deformations, soft focus, superimpositions, in short simultaneity, abstractions, synthesis) that effect in us the sort of feeling one might be tempted to call cinematographic and which would, so it seems, be an a priori paradox to want to achieve with a still image.

Upon opening the issue containing their contributions, Man Ray and Robert Desnos would have found the first article written by the most active theoretician of their day, Jean Epstein, whose neglected work is crucial to an understanding of avant-garde cinema in the 1920s. That article, "Le Regard du verre" (The Glass Stare) speaks of a mirror-lined spiral staircase as a metaphor for cinema. The filmmaker's experience of shock and depletion as he descends amidst multiples of his own reflection is tied, according to Epstein, to an unmasking of the self and its deceptions which is the fundamental gift of cinema:

> The mission of cinematography seems not to have been understood precisely. The camera lens is an eye that Apollinaire would have called surreal (with no connection to present-day surrealism), an eye endowed with nonhuman analytical properties. It is an eye without prejudices, without morality, free of influences; and it sees in the face and in human movement traits which we, weighted down by likings and dislikings, by habits and considerations, can no longer perceive.[9]

Both Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp deny the transcendental authority of the cinema's glass stare. For them it constitutes only one moment of the cinematic experience. The other is language. The two conjoined reveal the surrealist view of anemia and the power of the erotic imagination.

9. Jean Epstein, "Le Regard du verre," *Ecrits*, pp. 136–7.