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An Inquest into Surrealism: L'Étoile de Mer and the Quest for Surreality

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An Inquest into Surrealism:
*L’Étoile de Mer and the Quest for Surreality*
by Jesse Brossoit

Despite its origin in the earlier twentieth century (anti-)art movement known as Dadaism, Surrealism and its adherents expressed an interest in a much more sophisticated and delineated objective than the mere provocative irrationality of Dada’s antagonistic rejection of Western artistic conventions. Taking the psychoanalytic research of Sigmund Freud as their starting point, the Surrealists attempted to explore, through their art, the workings of the unconscious mind and to discover what André Breton referred to as a state of “surreality,” or an “absolute reality” that was proposed to exist in the resolution of the two opposing states of dream and waking existence (14). This interest in surreality was perhaps most manifest in the Surrealists’ interest in automatism, a technique that purports to favour the spontaneity of unconscious thought over the rigid and repressive adherence to reason that characterizes the expression of consciously filtered thought. Although this process of automatism can be said to be highly representative of Surrealism, a much more interesting work within the general context of the Surrealist movement is surely Man Ray’s 1928 film, *L’Étoile de Mer*. Rather than attempting to emulate the workings of the unconscious mind through an appropriation of a structure reminiscent of a dream—a common feature of many Surrealist works—Man Ray’s film seems to constitute a much more deliberate and interrogative effort than most other Surrealist works. *L’Étoile de Mer* reveals a degree of self-reflexivity that clearly distinguishes it from other Surrealist works, presenting itself as not only a film in the style of cinematic Surrealism but one that constitutes an exploration of the very concept of surreality on which the movement itself is based.

This self-reflexivity is perhaps the most defining aspect of the film, though it may be beneficial here to begin by exploring a potential misreading of the film before proceeding to demonstrate the manner in which the film engages with this self-reflexive exploration of surreality. This misreading (or more appropriately, this inadequate reading) is characterized by the temptation to interpret the episodic events of the film as constituting a dream-narrative. This temptation is, of course, a result of the film’s most enduring visual characteristic: the haziness of the film image (apparently created through the use of a gelatin applied to the camera lens). This persistent (but inconsistent) distortion of the image contributes an element of ambiguity to otherwise very straightforward sequences, obscuring visual details and, at times, even obscuring the subject of the image in its entirety. This ambiguity, especially within the critical framework of Surrealism, seems to suggest that the film be read as a playing out of the unconscious mind at work; the deliberate rejection of visual clarity implicitly connoting here the uncertainty of recalling a dream.

This reading is apparently also substantiated by the disconnectedness of the film’s loosely structured narrative. Apart from the sequences at the beginning and end of the film—which most clearly suggest a narrative structure through their recurrent characters (the unnamed man and woman), as well as plot-oriented action that seems consistent from scene to scene—the majority of the film’s sequences are actually quite non-motivational in terms of narrative. The film features several scenes of travel and mobility that remain un-contextualized within the film’s narrative.
action: the film never reveals which of the film’s characters (if any) is actually doing the travelling, nor does it attempt to resolve the spatial/temporal distance of travel (it is never clear who is going where or for how long). Compounding this confusion is the apparent adoption of a subjective (but non-character-oriented) perspective throughout this sequence, characterized here by the handheld camerawork (as quite distinct from the static framing and stationary camerawork seen throughout the rest of the film).

Following these scenes of travel are several other even more ambiguous sequences, including one in which the film-image is literally divided into twelve separate frames (positioned four wide and three high) that play simultaneously with each featuring a distinct visual action, and another sequence in which a traditionally composed still-life gives way to a woman stepping out of bed onto an open book (first seen out-of-focus and then in-focus immediately after). Sequences such as these seem quite significant in terms of reading the film as a narrative structured around the unconscious mind and the irrationality of dreams. In fact, later in the film, there is even a scene in which a woman is shown reclining in bed with her eyes closed, apparently asleep. This image is immediately followed by an intertitle that reads: “You are not dreaming,” evidently referring to the spectator who is, unlike the woman onscreen, not really dreaming but is merely privy to the workings of a dream as manifest in the structure of the film. One might even read this moment as a playful reminder for the film-spectator that, despite the total immersiveness of this cinematic rendering of a dream, it still remains only that: a cinematic emulation of the real thing.

While this may be an important aspect of the film, and certainly one that should not be neglected, such a reading fails to convey the interrogative tendency that characterizes much of the film. The reading of the scene referred to above, for instance, seems to take it for granted that the “You are not dreaming” statement is in reference to the film-spectator. Although this is one potential reading, the film itself is actually quite ambiguous in terms of specifying a particular referent in relation to that statement. As such, the Surrealist interest in discovering surreality through the resolution of dream and reality is quite literally foregrounded at this moment as the diegetic boundary between the film’s dream-narrative and the external reality of the film-spectator becomes significantly blurred. It is also worth noting that the language of this intertitle is deliberately objective and therefore quite vague: by refusing orientation within the diegetic world of the film through an alignment with a particular character, this intertitle seems to emphasize the relation between the external reality of the film-spectator and the internal structure of the film as potentially equivalent. In other words, the film itself is calling attention to this confusion between spectator and character, between reality and dream.

This use of intertitling as a means of calling attention to an interest in surreality is characteristic of much of the film, though this expression of interest does not always manifest itself in the same way. The film’s first intertitle, for instance, is quite different from the example cited above. This intertitle, which reads , “Women’s teeth are objects so charming...” is intercut with an image of a woman adjusting her stocking. This disjunctive relation between text and image (between “teeth” and leg) early in the film signals the incoherency of the film’s construction of cinematic reality. Significantly, however, this is not only a moment that draws attention to the illogicality of unconscious thought; this is also a moment that parallels the film’s larger project of
interrogating surreality through an interrogation of cinematic reality as a non-representative construct. The film accomplishes this task through a self-reflexive adoption of particular storytelling conventions and, in particular, through an appropriation of the visual connotations of a storybook. The film’s first image—a starfish seen in silhouette, which occurs even before the handwritten titling of the film—can, in this context, be read as a visual cover page for the film. Immediately after this is an image of a closed door opening before abruptly cutting to an image of a romantically involved couple walking along a country road. Not only does this shot of a closed door opening mirror the physical opening of a storybook, it also reflects the film’s self-conscious appropriation of certain storytelling conventions: in this case, the door not only opens inwards into the enclosed physical space of the home but also into the enclosed domestic space of the film’s episodic narrative, reflecting the romantic coupling that characterizes the beginning and end of the film. This interest in toying with narrative conventions in the construction of cinematic reality is clearly indicative of a more substantial interest in the constructedness of surreality. In this sense, L’Étoile de Mer is a clear forerunner of Luis Buñuel’s and Salvador Dalí’s Un Chien Andalou (1929) and its self-reflexive adoption of conventional storytelling tropes (such as “Once upon a time...” appearing as an introductory title) as a means of subversively disrupting the film’s fragmented narrative. By drawing attention to its own construction of cinematic reality, however, L’Étoile de Mer seems quite intent on illustrating and interrogating the very concept of surreality (as the proposed resolution of dream and reality) on which the film itself is based.

One final point worth noting (mentioned already in passing) is the role of the starfish in the film’s interrogation of surreality. Given its prominence throughout the film—and especially when considered in relation to the theme of impotence and sexual non-performance raised by the narrative sequence of the couple in the bedroom—there is a certain temptation to interpret the starfish as an object of erotic displacement. This fetishistic interpretation of the starfish seems to be substantiated even further by the use of certain formal techniques—such as the various iris-ins—that serve to isolate the starfish as an object of spectatorial attention. At the same time, however, there is a certain inconsistency in the visual representation of the starfish. As already mentioned previously, there are certain points in the film during which the starfish is almost or totally obscured by gelatin-filtered camera (or otherwise un-focused composition). This seemingly arbitrary use of (un-)focused composition and isolated framing suggests an obvious irrationality in representing unconscious desire, manifested here in the figure of the starfish.

Although the above point in itself is not particularly revealing in terms of the film’s interrogation of surreality and the unconscious mind, it is interesting to compare this moment of irrationality with one of the film’s other, more overtly conventionalized representations of desire. Toward the middle of the film, there is a short sequence of a man chasing newspapers blowing in the wind, followed by a shot of him reading one that he has evidently caught. After throwing the paper away, the man begins to turn his head toward the camera and momentarily makes direct eye-contact with the camera. At this moment the film cuts to black and then returns a few seconds later with a shot of the man reclining, resting his head in the lap of a woman who lovingly caresses his head with her hand. This moment is especially interesting because it seems to appropriate certain conventions of continuity realism—namely, the eyeline match—in order to convey the workings of the unconscious mind. At the moment of eye-contact, rather than seeing through the
eyes of the character and seeing what he sees in the diegetic world of the film, the audience is instead privileged with a visualization of the man’s unconscious desire for romantic coupling, unhindered by matters of sexual non-performance. This rendering of the unconscious through means traditionally reserved for the construction of cinematic realism reveals an obvious interest in surreality. More importantly, the fact that this conventionalized representation reveals substantially more than the fetishistic figuring of the starfish, suggests that the film is also expressing a certain doubt in relation to the unconscious mind, or at least in relation to the Surrealist project of understanding and discovering a state of surreality through an exploration of reality and dream. In a sense, then, it might be appropriate to suggest that, in this moment of conventionalizing the unconscious mind, the film’s interrogation of surreality reaches a point of culmination that materializes itself as an (at least partial) embrace of the “realistic attitude” that André Breton so evidently despised (6).

Reflecting on the above, it seems appropriate to conclude, then, that L’Étoile de Mer offers much more than a simple exercise in the Surrealist style of filmmaking. The film expresses an obvious interest in surreality, but the film is ultimately much more interested in Surrealism itself. Through a self-reflexive play with narrative and cinematic conventions and through an interrogation of the Surrealist categories of dream and reality, L’Étoile de Mer proffers a cinematic reading of Surrealism that seems to question the very basis of the quest for surreality that André Breton first proposed in his 1924 manifesto. Breton conceived of realism and the “realistic attitude” as “hostile to any intellectual or moral advancement,” proposing that it be cast away in favour of the imagination and the workings of the unconscious mind (6). According to L’Étoile de Mer, it may not be that simple.
Works Cited


*L'Étoile de Mer*. Dir. Man Ray. 1928.