

Concrete Irrationality: Surrealist Spectators and the Cult of Harry Langdon

Seth Soulstein, Cornell University

Which comes first: the star or the spectator? Followers of film stars have existed as long as the medium itself has, and have not simply served as wide-eyed observers of a star's cultural output. They have also contextualized the star's creations and public persona for the broader public, provided feedback and criticism for a star, helping to mold stars' careers and guide their future creative choices, and indeed prolonged a star's legacy and cultural influence by creating new art as an expression of their reception of the star's work. In recent decades, this concept of the viewer serving not only as a consumer of meaning, but also as its creator, has entered the conversation of film scholarship. Consider the case of Harry Langdon. Ask the majority of the twenty-first century film-going public to name a silent comedy star, and you will likely be inundated with the same three answers: Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd. Much lower on the list, if at all, would be Harry Langdon, the oft-forgotten fourth clown of the silent era. Yet Langdon was an A-list star for multiple years in the 1920s, and enjoyed an international reputation as well as a devoted fandom. As Greg Taylor writes in *Artists in the Audience*, "cult appreciation exploded as a tactical response to the very growth of mass culture" (1999: 15). In the early twentieth century, as new film technologies allowed for an unprecedented spread of mass culture across classes and continents, a small subset of film enthusiasts developed what Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton call, in *Cult Cinema*, a "cult connoisseurship" (2011: 50) of Langdon and his oeuvre – repeatedly viewing his films, writing essays in praise of his artistry, and even making films of their own that included subtle but consistent tribute to his works. They called themselves the Surrealists. Viewed through a certain lens, their cultural output during the late 1920s (and beyond) can be seen as being littered with cult appreciation of Harry Langdon. The Surrealists were spectators before they were stars; it would not be unreasonable to argue that the Surrealists might never have become stars in their own right had they not first felt a need to find a variety of ways to express their feelings as audience members first.

Beginning with the Dadaist movement in the post-World War I era, young European artists and cultural critics found solidarity with each other in a

Soulstein

common appreciation for aesthetics and politics, sharing notions on how to effectively enact societal change. First and foremost in their creed was an anti-bourgeois sentiment – they held no regard for unnecessary value systems created by separating art into class structures. Art made to titillate bourgeois sensibilities and reinforce the self-importance of the avant-garde was therefore considered useless. As Robin Walz notes in *Pulp Surrealism*, for example, “the dada and surrealist movements had been nearly alone among the Parisian avant-garde in their nonconformist ire and anti-establishment diatribes” (2000: 146-147). Instead, they found value in popular, lowbrow cinema, specifically Hollywood “entertainment” film. Luis Buñuel, a core member of the Surrealists, described two schools of cinema in a 1927 essay: a European school, filled with “sentimentalism, a bias toward art and literature, tradition, etc.,” and an American school, notable for its “vitality, photogenia, [and its] lack of noxious culture and tradition” (Buñuel, 2000b: 62). Salvador Dalí, another infamous early Surrealist, also praised popular American/Hollywood film over its transatlantic counterpart. As Elza Adamowicz notes, “[I]ike Buñuel, he expressed his preference for [...] the naturalism of popular films over the aestheticism of the avant-garde cinema. For Dalí, Hollywood film reflected popular fantasies” (2010: 73) while, by contrast, avant-garde “art” film was “deliquescent, bitter, [and] putrefied” (Dalí, 1998: 8). Richard Maltby elaborates, noting that the factory-like production of American movies, “with no deference to tradition or hierarchies of taste,” led them to be received as “unselfconscious, underdetermined, spontaneous, authentic, primitive” (Maltby, 2011: x). **[1]**

Not only was Langdon undoubtedly a member of the American school, he was also emblematic of a subset of the school of comedy of which the Surrealists were especially fond. In the Dadaist tradition, a core tenet of Surrealist thought was a revolt against, and distrust for, logic. As André Breton wrote in his foundational 1924 text, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, “I believe more and more in the infallibility of my thought in relation to myself” (qtd. in Goudal, 2000: 86). Individual thought, feelings and dreams were considered to reveal truth, while a reliance on systems of logic would only obfuscate it. “Everything that is foolish about cinema is the fault of an old-fashioned respect for logic” (Ibid.: 90), wrote Jean Goudal in 1925, and the Surrealists saw comedy film stars as the world’s most outspoken champions of the illogical. Michael Richardson writes in *Surrealism and Cinema* that the Surrealists gravitated towards various genre films, since the conventions of each genre served in different ways

to upend notions of a solid, stable reality – but of all the genres, he notes, comedy was the most highly regarded. He continues,

[t]he surrealists adored Charlie Chaplin long before it became fashionable to do so, but their special affection was for Buster Keaton, Harry Langdon ([mid-twentieth-century Surrealist Petr] Král regarded *Long Pants* as the only film that bears comparison with *L'Age d'Or*), Fatty Arbuckle. [...] What united all of these comedians was their taste for anarchy and insubordination, and it was this as much as their humor that attracted the surrealists. (2006: 62)

Dalí himself claimed, in a 1932 essay entitled “Abstract of a Critical History of the Cinema,” that the only forms of cinema that “merit being considered” are Communist propaganda films (“justified by their value as propaganda”), Surrealist films, and “a certain ‘comedy’ cinema.” (Dalí, 2000: 67).

Before creating any of their own cultural material, Dalí, Buñuel, and others attended as many American comedy screenings as they could, and arranged others if what they wanted to see was not already being shown elsewhere. Buñuel worked as an assistant and an extra on some film sets in Paris before briefly finding work as a film critic, a position that allowed him to spend his days watching movies. As Elza Adamowicz tells it, “[t]hanks to his press card, Buñuel would see up to three films a day, including private screenings of American films” (2010: 71). Eventually, in 1927, Buñuel set up the first Spanish film club, at the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid, where he and Dalí had both studied. Dalí, too, was an avid watcher of films before he ever thought of making one himself (Ibid.: 72). In the public screenings, these films were often exhibited together as a group of pulp American offerings – comedies or comedy shorts, westerns, crime dramas – which Peter Stanfield, in *Maximum Movies: Pulp Fictions*, describes as being not just a “lowbrow’s distraction” but instead “the raw materials of a modernist’s dramaturgy” (2011: 191). Through their avid attendance at such events, Dalí and Buñuel were amassing a treasure trove of raw material.

Their repeated viewings and film club meetings generated discussion about which films they had seen and the relative merits of each film’s stars, themes, and techniques. The Surrealists, who by the mid-1920s had multiple magazines dedicated to their writings of cultural critique, started putting their thoughts about film on paper and publishing them as essays. These essays became what Mathijs and Sexton call “the first form of cult connoisseurship” (2011: 50). According to them, the Surrealists were connoisseurs of American comedy in the sense that, through their essays they showed that they possessed “the skill and talent to be an arbiter of taste, to deliberately pitch expertise against mainstream and middlebrow conventionality” (Ibid.). Moreover, they

Soulstein

claim, the Surrealists were *cult* connoisseurs because they lauded material “whose reception trajectories put them at the margins of what is culturally acceptable” (Ibid.). Greg Taylor calls this “oppositional connoisseurship,” (1999: 16), which he sees as a major aspect of cult spectatorship.

“As literary and artistic provocateurs,” Walz notes, “part of the surrealist project was to illuminate the extraordinary in a mass culture that might otherwise pass as quotidian” (2000: 9-10). It is in this “oppositional” sense that we can understand the Surreal enthusiasm for American comedy as a form of cult appreciation. In “Toward a constructivist approach to media cults,” Philippe Le Guern writes that “the cultist relationship with texts frequently presents itself as a cultivated response to a noncultivated culture (that is, a culture with little legitimacy)” (2004: 8). Thus, when we read Buñuel's claim, in relation to American comedies, that “[p]eople are so stupid, and have so many prejudices, that they think *Faust*, *Potemkin*, and the like are superior to these buffooneries, which are not that at all, and which I would call the new poetry” (2000a: 124), we can see him in the cultist act of “putting into perspective judgments of value and taste” (Le Guern, 2004: 10). By naming their group, they established the boundaries of their “interpretive community” (a term used by Janet Staiger, in both *Interpreting Films* [1992] and *Perverse Spectators* [2000]), and in focusing on and writing about American comedy films as “the new poetry,” they confirmed their group as “a community, a commonality of congregation that sees itself at odds with normalized culture” (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011: 19). In other words, a cult. Put simply, “the Surrealists were perhaps the first cinephiles with an interest in bad cinema” (Sconce, 2008 [1995]: 112).

“Much has been said about technique in films like *Metropolis* and *Napoléon*,” wrote Buñuel in 1927. “No one ever talks about technique in films like [Buster Keaton's] *College*” (Buñuel, 2000b: 61). The two major comedians to inspire a notable connoisseurship among the Surrealists, at first, were Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. In a prelude to an upcoming film club event, Buñuel referred to the favorites on a first-name basis: “to these two-reel films, chosen very selectively, one could add a two reeler by Charlie and another, again two reels, by Buster” (Buñuel, 2000a: 123). Through their essayist criticism, they made their enthusiasm well known – to the point that by 1932, American film critic Harry Allan Potamkin could write that “[f]ilm cultism had its inception in France. [...] Chaplin was the key cult” (Potamkin, 2008 [1932]: 26). Meanwhile, two of the first poems written by Surrealist Louis Aragon are “Charlot sentimental” and “Charlot mystique” – odes to Chaplin (Kovács, 1980, 34). In 1925, Paul Guitard wrote in *Clarté*, a Surrealist review, that Chaplin “always knows how to be TRUTHFUL within fantasy, real within the unreal. He is the first among our Surrealists” (qtd. in Hammond, 2000: 31). The extent of such praise, and the conviction with which they trumpeted it towards Chaplin and Keaton, has led many current scholars

to conclude that “[t]he films of Charles Chaplin (‘Charlot’) and Buster Keaton in particular were put forward as works of genius” (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011: 51).

While he never achieved the first-name basis infamy of “Buster” or “Charlie,” Langdon eventually eclipsed them in the Surrealists’ eyes, due, ironically, to the notoriety that Keaton and Chaplin achieved. By the end of the 1920s, Buñuel had changed camps, claiming that “[t]he Charlie of a decade ago could give us great poetic joy. Today he can no longer compete with Harry Langdon. The intellectuals of the world have ruined him” (Buñuel, 2000a: 123). Indeed, what cemented Langdon’s fate as the new star of cult appeal for the Surrealist set, and set his off-screen persona apart from that of the other comedians was his quick shift from superstar to underdog in the film industry. William Schelly charts Langdon’s fast rise from notable asset in Mack Sennett shorts of the mid-1920s to “bona fide film star” (Schelly, 1982: 53), when he signed a three-feature deal with First National in 1925, to his professional fall from grace in the autumn of 1927 (after the release of *Three’s a Crowd*, his first self-directed feature), from which he never fully recovered. Schelly cites *Photoplay* reviews from the period to show us how popular sentiment went from declaring Langdon “the favorite comedian of the movie colony” (qtd. in *Ibid.*: 77) in August 1926 to “a feeble glow-worm” (qtd. in *Ibid.*: 112) by October 1927. Langdon spent the rest of his career trying to reclaim the status he had held for a few brief years, and was never quite able to – in large part because of his stubborn, unyielding deference to his own artistic vision. Yet it is precisely this fact that might have endeared him all the more to the Surrealists. In Guitard’s 1925 *Clarté* piece, in praise of Charlie Chaplin’s onscreen persona, he notes that “done down by law and by social conventions [...] [he is] an irreducible enemy of the law. He is, logically so, in permanent revolt against this law’s representative, the policeman” (qtd. in Hammond, 2000: 31). The Surrealists repeatedly espoused this anti-authoritarian, anti-law, thus anti-logic stance – and who are the writers of *Photoplay* but the “policemen” of the entertainment industry? Surrealism stood against the professional arbitration of taste, considering it bourgeois and classist; their “oppositional connoisseurship” (Taylor, 1999: 16) was born out of a similar opposition to hegemonic taste-making.

Langdon’s continued output of comedy films aimed at a popular audience, in spite of the negative criticism he was receiving from the industry, could only have made the Surrealists admire him more. It is precisely this underdog status that separated Langdon from the other comedians as a figure of cult interest to the Surrealists. Praise for Langdon in particular amongst the comedians abounds. Dalí wrote an essay entitled “...Always, Above Music, Harry Langdon,” and heralded the Little Elf as “one of the purest flowers of the screen and of our CIVILIZATION as well” (Dalí, 1998: 80). Later, in his “Abstract...,” he simply called Langdon a “genius” (Dalí, 2000: 66). Buñuel, for his part, wrote of Langdon’s films that they

were, “the new poetry [...] the equivalent of surrealism in cinema” (Buñuel, 2000a: 124) – at that point, the notion of surrealism in cinema was just a twinkle in his eye. He also claimed that Langdon’s works were, “far more surrealist than those of Man Ray,” (qtd. in Short, 2002: 61) at a time in which Man Ray had produced some of the only “official” Surrealist films to date. Together, they generated vast amounts of written material, in the form of essays, lists (Langdon is listed as one of the five directors “sans peer” in a Surrealist Group list [qtd. in Hammond, 2000: 47]), and manifestos, much of it in praise of Langdon and his work.

Meanwhile, “Buster” and “Charlie” fell out of favor. “Chaplin no longer makes anyone laugh except intellectuals. [...] [L]et’s save him a turd full of pity. And never go see him again,” suggested Buñuel (qtd. in Dalí, 1998: 88). “Compared to [Langdon] Keaton is a mystic and Chaplin a degenerate,” noted Dalí (Dalí 1998, 80). Langdon, by contrast, was lauded consistently not only for his work, but also for his off-screen demeanor and existence *as a star*. As Buñuel proclaimed, “[t]he star, in the public’s understanding of the term, is completely undesirable. But when a star is as modest as Harry Langdon, it seems the most important of all the indispensable elements of a movie” (qtd. in Dalí, 1998: 88). In Taylor’s framing of the term, true cultists express their enthusiasm as “*resistant* activity, one that keeps them one step ahead of those forces which would try to market their resistant taste back to them” (1999: 161). Langdon’s star persona had just the right combination of factors to inspire a cult spectatorship, in that conception, among the Surrealists: he was a popular comedian from the American school with a high output of films that certainly would have been screened to international audiences, who worked within the system to please popular audiences, yet almost *in opposition to the same system*, as he fell out of its favor.

The Surrealists’ respect for Langdon as a star would have meant little, though, were it not for their cult connoisseurship of his work as an artist. His on-screen aesthetic, as well as the themes he comes back to again and again in his films, are in conjunction with many aspects of Surrealist art from the same period. Langdon’s claim, in a rare appearance as an essay-writer in a 1927 *Theatre Magazine* piece, that “[t]he four greatest stimuli to laughter are rigidity, automatism, absentmindedness and unsociability” (Langdon, 1995 [1927]: 234) seems ripped from the pages of *Clarté*.^[2] The first thing to note upon viewing multiple Langdon films is a constant referral to, almost bordering on an obsession with, sleep. Langdon’s plots are riddled with dream sequences, and his character’s regular responses to adversity, rather than fight or flight, is simply to collapse into a stupor. In a show of triumph for the dream state, this tactic generally ends up working. As Schelly writes,

Harry was constantly stunned by various sleep-inducers. Often, a clunk on the head (with a brick in [1924 Sennett short] FEET OF MUD) would do the trick. His eyes would mist

over, his smile would flicker momentarily and his legs would grow rubbery. Sometimes he would curl up on the floor in the fetal position. He never seemed very far from the womb. (1982: 40)

His characters are remarkably consistent in their drive towards sleep as solution to life's onslaught of predicaments. For example, in 1926's *Saturday Afternoon*, another Sennett short, Langdon, who for a variety of reasons is in a stupor, hides from further danger between two parked cars. Moments later, the cars have both started driving, and he finds himself precariously balanced between the two cars' running boards – seated on one, with his feet resting on the other. Rather than react with horror, and try to rectify the situation, the only thing he does is adjust his position a little in order to comfortably fall back asleep. His is quite possibly the only high-speed car scene in a film that the protagonist solves by falling asleep. And he does in fact get what he wants by choosing sleep: the cars drive on either side of a telephone pole, which he is left gently wrapped around, thus ending with him escaping danger.

Time and again, Harry walks through his films in a half-asleep haze, yet always manages to come out on top. His character is the archetypal sleepwalker, walking in and out of danger unharmed, all of the time unaware of the very real peril he is in. This scenario, enacted repeatedly in his films, was the result of a deliberate positioning of his character, as the man who Schelly refers to as the "Little Elf" (1982: 23). The Little Elf, as opposed to Chaplin's Little Tramp or Lloyd's "Glasses Character," both of whom were heavily dependent on their own resourcefulness, relied simply on providence to see him through sticky situations. This conceit, Schelly claims, was coined by Frank Capra [3] to be the "Principle of the Brick," as he explains,

Langdon might be saved by the brick falling on the cop, but it was verboten that he in any way motivate the brick's fall. [...] [O]ne of the bases of their concept was that Harry's universe would be (essentially) benevolent. [...] Faith was all that was necessary to win – complete surrender. (Schelly, 1982: 27)

This principle fits perfectly in line with Surrealist anti-logic sentiment. Rather than respond to a predicament with ingenuity or cleverness, Langdon-as-Little-Elf simply yields to fate, and ends up on top. In "Doing Nothing: Harry Langdon and the Performance of Absence," Joanna Rapf expounds on Langdon's continued use of this tactic, making the connection between Langdon's inaction and Surrealist sensibilities explicit. She writes,

[h]e incarnates our alienation from reality. His surreal evocation of absence is a rejection of the so-called "real" physical world in favor of a fantasy world of dreams. If

Soulstein

Surrealism is all about visualizing the impulses of the unconscious, an investigation of dreams, an expression of repressed desire through various forms of violence and sex, then Langdon may rightly, as [film critic and author Raymond] Durnat and [Surrealist filmmaker Ado] Kyrrou both suggest, be claimed by the Surrealists as one of their own. (2005: 31)

Rapf's invocation of the violence in Langdon's work is worth noting. Although the universe that the Little Elf inhabits is generally benevolent, that is not to say that it is free of violence. In fact, it is rife with violent imagery, a significant portion of which is incited by Langdon himself. Even his dream scenarios are not always knight-in-shining-armor successes (though they sometimes are). In *Long Pants*, we find him on his wedding day, hoping to escape the upcoming nuptials. We follow him into a fantasy, in which he leads his fiancée out into the woods and kills her. He comes back to reality disappointed, and proceeds to re-enact the dream in reality, bringing his fiancée out to the woods and only stopping short of killing her through a series of mishaps. No moral judgment is ever laid on his attempt; in fact, he drags it out to such an extent that he seems to be begging the audience to scream at the screen, "just pull the trigger already!" Much has been written about Langdon's unique penchant for violent imagery and dark humor. In the space of fifteen minutes in *Long Pants*, he attempts to murder his fiancée, helps to break a drug-dealing vamp out of prison, and throws a brick at a police officer, [4] hitting him in the head – yet these scenes of violence are treated with the same light touch as when we see him doing tricks on a bicycle to impress a girl earlier in the film. Rapf writes that,

[i]n his amoral world, murder may be no more sinister than reading a library book and fantasizing that he is Don Juan. This kind of innocence, oblivious to the expectations of civilized society, puts the Langdon persona squarely in the Surrealist camp, seemingly capable of the archetypal Surrealist act of shooting people randomly in the street. (2005: 28)

This constant shift between violence and calm, dream and reality, right and wrong, leaves the viewer ultimately in an ambiguous, or – for lack of a better word – *surreal* place. In Langdon's films, logic and order are thrown out of the window.

"A baby-faced innocent with monstrous potential," Rapf comments, "Harry Langdon enacted a dark, subtle humor that seems alien to the fast-paced slapstick tradition that dominated visual comedy in the silent era" (2005: 35). At the same time as he populates his films with violent or potentially violent scenarios, he capitalizes on his chubby cheeks, smooth skin, and innocent eyes by presenting his Little Elf character as a sort of man-child,

unaware of moral codes that govern the behavior of those around him, yet somehow still managing to coexist, and even find success, with others in society. The Surrealists' interest in amoral, as well as pre-moral, behavior found expression in Langdon's Little Elf. His man-child persona also resonated with their interest in exploring the neurotic aspects of sexuality. Robert Short, in *The Age of Gold: Surrealist Cinema*, writes that,

[c]ommon to all three [Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, and Federico Garcia Lorca], it seems, was an extreme form of adolescent anxiety about sexuality – in the forms at once of uncertainty about their own gender, fear of women and of impotence, along with a residual sense of the sinfulness of sex. (Short, 2002: 54)

Langdon put those anxieties on screen again and again in his Little Elf, who, while still fighting for love (another Surrealist favorite), avoided sex at all costs. He fights against sexual advances from women more often than he instigates them himself. When faced with a lustful woman, he often "would seem to prefer to return to the womb rather than enter into a heterosexual relationship" (Rapf, 2005: 30). Sleep (and its womb-like appeal) trumps sex for the Little Elf every time. In *Soldier Man* (1926), Langdon ends up in the bedchambers of the Queen of "Bomania," who plans to seduce him and then stab him while they kiss (for reasons too complicated to explain here). At first he is more interested in a royal spread of food, but she is finally able to lock him in an embrace, only to then drop the knife and faint, seemingly overcome by his sexual ability. Does he take advantage of this opportunity alone in the bedroom with the willing and beautiful Queen? No – instead, "[o]bserving the body of the Queen on the floor, Harry decides that making love is exhausting work. He lays down on the royal bed and instantly falls asleep" (Schelly, 1982: 46).

In both *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* (1926) and *His First Flame* (1927), Langdon takes the man-child metaphor as far as it can go by also acting as his own baby in comic cameos. These are not presented as dreams, either – we the viewers are meant to believe that Langdon actually is at once both himself as the Little Elf and himself in baby form, and ultimately, to realize how similar the two are. Schelly considers these scenes "at once hilarious and grotesque" and "perversely fascinating" (1982: 65). Meanwhile, in *The Crazy Mirror*, Raymond Durgnat points out the effect that this half-sleeping man-baby character can have on the audience, writing that "Harry Langdon gropes, from some virginal limbo, over the threshold of our mad, half real world, opening up weird spaces and emptiness all around himself, and within us" (1969: 92). Through his blurring of the boundaries between man and infant, we are thrust back into a newborn state, unable to control our limbs, unable to control our eyelids, unable to differentiate fully between sleep and waking.

Langdon's films are full of seeming impossibilities -- a man being his own baby, for example -- in which a realistic world is suddenly turned quite unreal. Dalí referred to this as "concrete irrationality" (Dalí, 2000: 65), which Paul Hammond, in *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, defines as a scenario in which "a quantitative squandering, a kind of potlatch, is linked to the singular quality of certain objects -- false beards, Model T Fords, hose pipes -- to form an irrational system" (2000: 38). Examples of these scenarios exist throughout silent comedy films, but Langdon brings the irrationality of it all to an extreme that few others do. In *Smile Please* (1924), when a disgruntled child that Langdon, as a professional photographer, is trying to take a portrait of puts a skunk under the hood of Langdon's large-format camera, not only do Langdon's legs buckle at the smell, but, impossibly, so do the legs of the tripod that holds the camera. Consistently, the reality of Langdon's situation is undermined by some aspect of his interaction with it. The climactic scene of *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* (1926) finds a cyclone tearing a small western town apart. Houses are uprooted, street signs blow away, and we spend several minutes watching the major characters of the film being tossed around by high-velocity winds ripping through a town and its buildings. Finally, Langdon stops as he runs across the street to a new shelter, plants his feet firmly on the ground, stares straight at the cyclone, and begins throwing stones at it. The cyclone immediately retreats. In other instances, the irrational aspect is simply one of scale. Earlier on in *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp*, Langdon finds himself dangling over a precipice, held aloft only by an errant nail in a fence. The gag is simple enough, but the magnitude of the scenario is somewhat staggering -- the sheer vastness of the space he inhabits lends an unreal feeling to the very real, very dangerous situation. Of course, the Little Elf does nothing (intentionally) to actually rectify his situation. He removes nail after nail from the fence, hammering them into his clothing to secure himself against it. This inadvertently causes a section of the fence -- the one he is attached to -- to come loose and fall down the cliff. It happens to slide neatly under him, and he rides it down to the bottom. He is safe yet again, not through any ingenuity on his part, nor by any other use of logic, but by a simple act of providence.

By the end of the 1920s, following what was to have been the height of Langdon's career, the Surrealists started making movies of their own. Buñuel and Dalí made two films together, in 1929 and 1930, *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or*, respectively -- which Linda Williams, in *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film*, calls "perhaps the only unquestionably Surrealist films" (1981: xiv). In "'Get a Life!': Fans, Poachers, Nomads," Henry Jenkins writes of a "participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community" (2008: 442). By embedding certain images, themes, and techniques that they had previously praised or simply noticed as being strengths of Langdon's work

into their own films, they were in effect producing their own art, in part, as an expression of their cult reception of him and his work. Through the entry point of their "artistic spectatorship" (Taylor, 1999: 15), they were participating in, not merely absorbing, the culture around them. As early Surrealist Louis Aragon wrote in a 1918 essay entitled "On Décor," "films are the only film school" (2000: 52). Having spent years developing opinions about film while watching Langdon's work, those opinions had evidently started to manifest in celluloid form.

One of the first images in Dalí and Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* is that of a razor being sharpened (by Buñuel himself) in preparation for the slicing of a woman's eye, in what is often considered the most written-about two minutes in the history of film. While mention is often made of this scene as being a reference or homage to the pioneering film work of Georges Méliès, with the image of a moon bisected by a cloud seen as calling to mind his *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902) (Adamowicz, 2010: 64, among others), Harry Langdon's outrageous interaction with a straight razor in his 1924 Sennett short *The Luck o' the Foolish* is never suggested as a possible influence. In the scene, Langdon is looking over a man's shoulder in some sort of grooming compartment of a quite bumpy train, expertly shaving himself while the man looks on, impressed. What transforms this moment from a typical comedy routine into an example of the "concrete irrationality" that Dalí so praised is when Langdon spots some errant shaving cream in his ear, and deftly spins the razor around inside it to clean it out, as the other passenger looks on in horror. To top it off, Langdon has a deliciously sinister look in his eye as he completes the motion. Considering how popular these short films were, and how frequently Dalí and Buñuel sought out Langdon films, specifically, it would be hard to believe that they were not familiar with this scene, and that it did not in some way inform their use of a razor to such devastating effect in the opening scene of *Un Chien Andalou*.

Similarly, the next scene features an androgynously dressed Pierre Batcheff riding his bicycle around town, and eventually falling off of it, and onto the street, for no clear reason. Critics have noted the inspiration of this material to be Buster Keaton, and a play Lorca wrote about him: "the idea for the male cyclist recalls Lorca's short play *El paseo de Buster Keaton/Buster Keaton's Outing* (1925), in which an effeminate Keaton falls off his bicycle and has failed heterosexual encounters" (Adamowicz, 2010: 73). Equally possible, however, is that the filmmakers drew inspiration from Langdon's very successful feature-length film *Long Pants*, in which he, a largely sexless man, having just put on a pair of full-length pants for the first time in his life, fumbles about on a bicycle for no reason in an extended, but failed attempt at heterosexual courtship. Again, the filmmakers surely had seen *Long Pants* before making *Un Chien Andalou*, and most likely quite recently before, at that. Langdon frequently appeared on a bicycle in his films, and often had trouble staying aloft.

Other examples of Langdon-inspired imagery and themes abound in *Un Chien Andalou*. Most notably, the sudden appearance of two dead donkeys attached to a rope is very reminiscent of a scene in *Long Pants*: while Harry is in the woods trying and failing to murder his fiancée, he drops the gun in a pile of leaves, searches for it and mistakenly picks up a gun-shaped stick, to which is tied a rope that is attached to a horse, that inexplicably appears nearby. Both are scenes of men planning violence against a female companion that is suddenly and inexplicably delayed by the appearance of a hoofed farm animal, tied to a rope. Later, when Batcheff finds himself cornered, his books suddenly turn into guns, calling to mind Capra's "Principle of the Brick" for the Little Elf: providence provides. Finally, Simone Mareuil grabs whatever is near (a tennis racket on the wall) to defend herself from a sexual predator – just like Langdon did in *The Strong Man* (1926) three years prior. The shot is even composed in a strikingly similar way: we see Langdon/Mareuil from the knees up, near the center of the frame, with their left arm pointed downward, and their right arm raised but not fully extended, grasping their makeshift weapon. There are simply too many similarities between this film and Langdon's work to attribute it all to mere coincidence.

L'Age d'Or, made by Dalí and Buñuel in 1930, and often cited as the "key film of surrealism" (Richardson, 2006: 29), is another excellent example of the Surrealist reception of Langdon's films as expressed through their creative output. The obsessive focus on bug-stomping calls to mind a similar bug-stomping scene in Langdon's *Fiddlesticks* (1926), while the comically prolonged staring and grotesque kissing that go on between Gaston Modot and Lya Lys exemplify a common Langdon technique, which he employs to great effect in, for example, *The Strong Man*. The overhead shot of the hustle and bustle of modern Rome in *L'Age d'Or* can be seen as a visual echo of a strikingly similar shot of the newly modernized, fictional town of "Cloverdale," again from Langdon's *The Strong Man*.

As with the bicycle scene in *Un Chien Andalou*, most critics see Charlie Chaplin's pillow-disemboweling in *The Gold Rush* (1925) as the referent for Gaston Modot's similar action in *L'Age d'Or* (for example, see Hammond, 2000: 31). What those critics fail to mention is Langdon's analogous scene of a disemboweled pillow (and mattress) from *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* (1926). Both Langdon and Modot are characters that enter their bedroom full of sexual frustration, and end the scene in a flurry of feathers.

One final comparison I would like to make is the fetishistic toe-sucking Lya Lys engages in with a marble statue in *L'Age d'Or*. As Robert Short describes it, in this instance, "[t]he fetish/simulacrum wins out over the real thing" (2002: 131). In seven separate films, Langdon fixates on a

dummy/mannequin version of a person, representing everyone from potential love interests to policemen. In *His First Flame* (1927), for example, he saves a female dummy from a burning building. A full minute of screen time elapses before he realizes she is not real, during which time he speaks to her, caresses her, and gazes at her lovingly. In *Long Pants*, the dummy is a policeman, who enjoys close to five minutes of screen time before Langdon realizes his folly. It goes without saying that this is longer than is reasonable, and borders on a fixation with the inanimate, which Lys clearly displays as well in *L'Age d'Or*. This is yet another example of his "concrete irrationality," of Langdon taking something that exists very clearly as a physical object, and using it in ways the object was never intended to be used, to surreal effect. Buñuel's decision to have Lys fixate on the statue, particularly for as long as she does, seems indebted to the influence of Langdon.

Recent reception scholarship sheds new light on old dynamics within the world of art. This is especially true for cinema, with its propensity as an art form for creating stars upon whom to fixate. As Janet Staiger wrote two decades ago, "the history of cinema might very well be radically rewritten if you pursue it, not solely from the perspective of the production of films, but equally from their reception" (Staiger, 1992: 12). If we look at different texts, films, and other creative works as having been heavily influenced by their artists' reception of previous works, we can begin to break down old concepts of a one-way creation of culture, in which an "artist" delivers meaning, and an "audience" receives and consumes it. Instead, a cyclical model emerges, in which both artist and spectator create and receive meaning, to varying degrees at varying times. Even the more solid notions of artist and audience thus begin to dissolve. Indeed, in the case of Langdon and his Surrealist fans, who can ultimately say whose work had more value? Does it matter? Would *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or* have existed without Harry Langdon? Would we now be able to appreciate Langdon's surreal humor without the cultural creations of the Surrealists as reference points? Which comes first: the star or the spectator?

Acknowledgements

The majority of the work for this essay was completed at the University of British Columbia. I am deeply indebted to their entire Department of Theatre and Film, and most especially to Ernest Mathijs, for its existence.

Notes

[1] In *Pulp Surrealism*, Walz also explores an interesting interplay between the work of the Surrealists and the liminal space created through

Soulstein

the rapid technological/cultural changes taking place during the first years of their movement. “[T]he surrealists,” he writes, “drew inspiration from currents of psychological anxiety and social rebellion that ran through certain expressions of mass culture” (Walz, 2000: 3). A focus on American creations, then, especially highlighted the “transgeographic” (Ibid.: 3) nature of incipient technologies.

[2] Though, of course, it is hard to tell which came first. Did the Surrealist aesthetic become what it was because of inspiration they found in Langdon’s work? Or did they enjoy his work so much because it fit in line with their already concretized aesthetic values? The truth, most likely, is that both scenarios are accurate, to varying degrees.

[3] Capra was a member of Langdon’s creative team during his most successful years, moving steadily up from gag man to director. Capra later claimed to have been the chief creative force behind Langdon’s onscreen persona, an assertion that many dispute, but one that has often been taken as fact, doing irreparable damage to Langdon’s legacy as a creative artist.

[4] While this might at first sound like a blatant contradiction of Capra's "Principle of the Brick," it is actually an example of a moment that is quite in line with the concept. The officer in this scene is not incapacitated by having been hit by the brick; quite the contrary, it is Langdon's decision to act (i.e. throw) that gets him in trouble with the law. Had he simply done nothing, he would have prevailed.

Bibliography

Adamowicz, Elza (2010) *Un Chien Andalou*, London: I.B. Taurus & Co.

Aragon, Luis (2000) On Décor, in Paul Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*. 3rd Ed. San Francisco: City Lights Books, pp. 50-54.

Buñuel, Luis (2000a) *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, trans. Garrett White. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Buñuel, Luis (2000b) Buster Keaton’s *College*, in Paul Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*. 3rd Ed. San Francisco: City Lights Books, pp. 61-62.

Dalí, Salvador (2000) Abstract of a Critical History of the Cinema, in Paul Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*. 3rd Ed. San Francisco: City Lights Books, pp. 63-67.

Dalí, Salvador (1998) *Oui: the Paranoid-Critical Revolution: Writings, 1927-1933*. Ed. Robert Descharnes, trans. Yvonne Shafir. Boston: Exact Change.

Durnat, Raymond (1969) *The Crazy Mirror: Hollywood Comedy and the American Image*. London: Faber & Faber.

Goudal, Jean (2000) Surrealism and Cinema, in Paul Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*. 3rd Ed. San Francisco: City Lights Books, pp. 84-94.

Hammond, Paul, ed, (2000) *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*. 3rd Ed. Trans. Paul Hammond. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Jenkins, Henry (2008) "Get a Life!": Fans, Poachers, Nomads, in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (eds.) *The Cult Film Reader*. New York: McGraw Hill, pp. 429-444.

Kovács, Steven (1980) *From Enchantment to Rage: The Story of Surrealist Cinema*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses.

Langdon, Harry (1995 [1927]) The Serious Side of Comedy Making, in Richard Dyer MacCann, *The Silent Comedians*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, pp. 233-235.

Le Guern, Philippe (2004) Toward a Constructivist Approach to Media Cults, in Sara Gwenllian Jones and Roberta E. Pearson (eds.) *Cult Television*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 3-26.

Maltby, Richard (2011) Foreword, in Peter Stanfield, *Maximum Movies—Pulp Fictions: Film Culture and the Worlds of Samuel Fuller, Mickey Spillane, and Jim Thompson*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, pp. ix-xii.

Mathijs, Ernest and Jamie Sexton (2011) *Cult Cinema*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Potamkin, Harry Allan (2008 [1932]) Film Cults, in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (eds.) *The Cult Film Reader*. New York: McGraw-Hill, pp. 25-28.

Rapf, Joanna E. (2005) Doing Nothing: Harry Langdon and the Performance of Absence, *Film Quarterly* 59 (1), pp. 27-35.

Richardson, Michael (2006) *Surrealism and Cinema*. New York: Berg.

Sconce, Jeffrey (2008 [1995]) "Trashing" the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style. in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (eds.) *The Cult Film Reader*. New York: McGraw-Hill, pp. 100-118.

Soulstein

Schelly, William (1982) *Harry Langdon*. London: Scarecrow Press.

Short, Robert (2002) *The Age of Gold: Surrealist Cinema*. London: Creation Books.

Staiger, Janet (1992) *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Staiger, Janet (2000) *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*. New York: New York University Press.

Stanfield, Peter (2011) *Maximum Movies—Pulp Fictions: Film Culture and the Worlds of Samuel Fuller, Mickey Spillane, and Jim Thompson*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Taylor, Greg (1999) *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Walz, Robin (2000) *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Williams, Linda (1981) *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Filmography

Fiddlesticks. 1926. Dir. Harry Edwards. Facets Multimedia, 2007.

His First Flame. 1927. Dir. Harry Edwards. A2ZCDs, 2005.

L'Age d'Or. 1930. Dir. Luis Buñuel. Kino Video, 2004.

Long Pants. 1927. Dir. Frank Capra. Kino Video, 2000.

Smile Please. 1924. Dir. Roy Del Rught. Facets Multimedia, 2007.

Soldier Man. 1926. Dir. Harry Edwards. Facets Multimedia, 2007.

The Luck o' the Foolish. 1924. Dir. Harry Edwards. Facets Multimedia, 2007.

The Strong Man. 1926. Dir. Frank Capra. Kino Video, 2000.

Three's a Crowd. 1927. Dir. Harry Langdon. Kino International, 2008.

Tramp, Tramp, Tramp. 1926. Dir. Harry Edwards. Kino Video, 2000.

Un Chien Andalou. 1929. Dir. Luis Buñuel. Transflux, 2004.

