

*Anemic Cinema: Dada/Surrealism and Film in the Americas*  
*Introduction to the Cinema Issue*

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In 2015 two *JSA* editors chaired a session at the annual College Art Association conference on the topic of Dada/Surrealism and Film in the Americas. The proposal, reproduced below, attempted to set some limitations on such a broad topic:

No visual medium seems as close to surrealist theory, or as conducive to realizing surrealist aims as film, particularly in its ability to transform photographic reality into signs of dream and desire simulating the psychoanalytic structure of the unconscious. While surrealist inspired themes yield a rich legacy within American filmmaking, the impact of surrealist theory can also be found in more experimental formal considerations and investigations of the potential and limitations of the medium itself. Much of this formal experimentation comes out of the Dada movement with the work of Hans Richter, Viking Eggling and Marcel Duchamp. Marcel Duchamp's six-minute film *Anemic Cinema* (1926) presents a sequence of spinning "rotoreliefs," painted records that create optical illusions of depth and protrusion when spun; the series also features near-palindromes of punning phrases that induce a similarly expansive effect in language. Duchamp's playful interrogation of "depth" and dimension as cinematic illusions— as mechanical by-products of the cinematic process of turning a reel— begins to suggest the critical possibilities of his notion of "anemic cinema." The term, itself a near palindrome, alludes to the productive flatness and limitation of

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the cinematic medium: dimension, depth, and even poetic [or erotic] enjoyment are calculated effects, rather than imaginative wellsprings.

One question this session poses is: to what extent does such “anemia” characterize the work of surrealist film, and Dada or surrealist-inspired film, in the Americas? That is, how might the limitations of the cinematic medium, rather than the illusory all-inclusiveness of its effects, be instrumental to American surrealist filmmaking, broadly conceived? From the early experiments of Man Ray to Luis Buñuel’s work in Mexico and Salvador Dalí’s work in Hollywood; from Maya Deren, Alejandro Jodorowsky, and Kenneth Anger to Guy Madden and David Cronenberg; how does surrealist film approach the conditions of its medium? And in line with recent publications such as Bruce Elder’s *Dada, Surrealism and the Cinematic Effect*, what might be the reciprocal impact of film on the movements themselves? We invite papers that investigate the relation between Dada/Surrealism and film in the Americas, and encourage a wide range of topics, including but not limited to the legacy of Surrealism on experimental film, as well as on the commercial movie industry; films produced by Surrealists or their associates; or the influence of Dada and Surrealist art and thought on the medium.

Despite this attempt to narrow the field, we received an extremely wide range of submissions. Maybe that should not have been surprising. The papers included in this special Cinema Issue of *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* bears witness to this heterogeneity of responses. The three papers published here diverge widely in their methodologies, style, and topics of inquiry, a divergence that poses a challenge to presenting a coherent issue, and indeed, in formulating this introduction. Robert Belton offers an intriguing study of the 1928 filmic collaboration of Man Ray and Robert Desnos, *L’Etoile de mer*. His paper presents a refreshingly candid account of the sometimes tortuous process of iconographic analysis necessitated by the layered symbolism and references in this canonical surrealist film. *L’Etoile de mer* combines surrealist themes such as dream, desire and the Freudian unconscious with Dada visual effects in what Belton calls the opposite of Anemia, a sort of polythemia, a proliferation of meanings including the political. The relevance of the film to the Americas resides not only in the nationality of Man Ray, but also in the surprising results of Belton’s analysis. The other two papers authored by Ana María León and Bruce Elder travel forward in time to the mid-century emergence of Surrealism in a 1948 Argentinian architectural film *La Ciudad Frente al Río* directed by Enrico Gras, and in the works of San Franciscan poets and filmmakers during the 1960s, respectively. León moves from architecture to film to psychoanalysis, demonstrating how each medium played a role in manipulating the Argentinian public to accept

an “image of a utopian Argentina invented by Perón.” Elder also investigates the influence of Surrealism on utopian visions in the experimental film and poetry of American counter-culture. As disparate as these topics may be, some of the links between them emphasize several core elements of Surrealism, including its adaptability and flexibility across disciplines.

If we think of the pulsating disc of Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema* as akin to a kind of focus, adjusting the view of the camera, zooming in and moving back out, each paper enacts a similar movement: honing in on significant details, then expanding outward to the larger social and political context. This telescoping movement emerges as something inherent to the surrealist project. By attempting to link the depths of the individual psyche with cultural, social and political revolution, Surrealism sought to collapse the personal and the political. In all three examples of surrealist or surrealist inspired works analyzed here, Surrealism positions itself in opposition to modernism with its images of order and efficiency—and aligns itself with a series of alternatives: the erotic, the childish, the hysteric, and the mystic. Yet in each case, these subversive elements are not limited to the interiority of an individual psyche, but through film, become public and communal propositions.