

The Visual Language of Disquiet: Surrealist and Expressionist Aesthetics in Film

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Abstract

This research conducts a detailed analysis of the principal artistic concepts associated with Surrealism and Expressionism. It critically reviews classic films through the lens of "artistic medium determinism" and the criteria of "general display logic." Furthermore, the study systematically compiles and reevaluates the aesthetic principles of Surrealist and Expressionist cinema. It also redefines the artistic traits of films within these movements and aims to rectify prevalent misconceptions in contemporary film theory regarding both Surrealism and Expressionism. This comprehensive examination not only revisits classic cinematic examples but also rearticulates the enduring artistic features and theoretical underpinnings of these influential film movements.

Keywords: Surrealist Cinema, Expressionist Cinema, Graceful Wrecks

Introduction

This paper embarks on an in-depth exploration of two significant movements in the cinematic arts: Surrealism and Expressionism. By examining the philosophical underpinnings and the artistic manifestations of these styles in classic films, the study aims to elucidate the concepts of "artistic medium determinism" and "general display logic." Recent scholarship has revisited Breton's vision of Surrealism, emphasizing its relevance in contemporary film analysis (Magrini, 2007), and is evident in the dreamlike sequences of modern homages to 'Un Chien Andalou' (Kritzing, 2012). The Expressionist aesthetic continues to influence modern cinema, with scholars like Thompson (2022) drawing parallels between the emotional resonance of films like 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari' (1920) and current psychological thrillers.

The concept of artistic medium determinism is further explored in the context of digital media by Hansen & Hansen (2004), who build upon McLuhan's seminal work to argue that the medium's evolution continues to shape cinematic messages. Kracauer's ideas on the "redemption of physical reality" through film are expanded in the work of Hershberger (1999),

who analyze how digital effects in contemporary cinema create new forms of reality. This study also seeks to address misconceptions in film theory, using recent critiques by Feeley & Wells (2015) to challenge Godard's notion of cinema as "the most beautiful fraud in the world" within the digital era. Through a critical lens, the paper scrutinizes the literary claims, filmic representations, and symbolic meanings attributed to both movements, while also highlighting the inherent flaws and challenges they face in conveying philosophical doctrines to a broader audience. The enduring impact of Benjamin's view of art in the mechanical age is debated in the context of digital reproduction by scholars such as Kim (2014), who consider the political implications of art in the digital age.

Problem Statement

This research centers on exploring the philosophical underpinnings and artistic manifestations of Surrealism and Expressionism in cinema. The research aims to delineate concepts such as "artistic medium determinism" and "general display logic" while addressing common misconceptions within film theory. The paper seeks to critically analyze how these artistic movements convey complex philosophical doctrines to audiences, and discusses the impact of digital media on these cinematic messages. It further intends to scrutinize the challenges and inherent flaws in communicating these ideas effectively through film, which may not always resonate or be comprehensible to all viewers.

The Research Significance and Research Gaps

This research makes a significant contribution to the field of cinematic arts by exploring the philosophical and artistic intersections of Surrealism and Expressionism within film. Its research significance lies in its deep analysis of how these movements utilize cinematic techniques to communicate complex philosophical ideas, such as "artistic medium determinism" and "general display logic." This exploration is particularly relevant in light of modern digital media influences and the continued impact of historical cinematic styles on contemporary filmmaking.

The research gap addressed by the study involves a critical examination of existing interpretations and applications of Surrealism and Expressionism in both historical and modern contexts. By revisiting classic theories and applying them to digital and contemporary cinema, the paper seeks to challenge and refine prevailing notions about the influence of medium on message and the portrayal of philosophical doctrines through film. It also attempts to bridge misunderstandings in film theory by critiquing established views, such as Godard's characterization of cinema, within the framework of digital advancements.

In summary, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Surrealist and Expressionist films function as mediums for philosophical discourse, offering new insights into their enduring influence and potential for communicating complex ideas to a modern audience. This addresses a critical gap in the literature by providing a contemporary analysis that connects historical artistic theories with current technological and cinematic practices.

Surrealist Cinema

Some of the films that fall under the category of "surrealist" cinema include *La coquille et le clergyman* Dulac (1933), *An Andalusian Dog* Buñuel (1928), and *The Golden Age*

(Buñuel, 1928). *The Shell and the Monk* is considered the first surrealist film, while *The Golden Age* is considered the last.

Surrealist Literary Claims

In literature, the French writer André Breton (1896-1966) was a notable advocate for the 'unconscious experience of writing.' His encounter with Sigmund Freud, the progenitor of psychoanalysis, in Vienna in 1920, profoundly influenced his conceptualization of creative processes (Gibson, 1987). Breton explained: Surrealism is the purely automatic action of the mind, whether expressed orally, in writing, or in any other way, in an attempt to convey the real activity of the mind. It involves the composition of ideas without any supervision by reason and the exclusion of any aesthetic or moral reflection. Breton noted that the Freudian doctrine served as the philosophical foundation of Surrealism in *Zun Wen* medicine (Del, 2021). He believed that classical art had already accomplished the task of expressing the real world through polygonal art, and that modern art should instead express the surreal world of the unconscious. This world beyond reality is the world of the unconscious. It is important to avoid subjective evaluations unless they are clearly marked as such.

Surrealism's artistic imperatives can be bifurcated into the creative approach of the subject and the expressive content of the textual object. The movement champions 'automatic writing', a method that delves into the subconscious realm via daydreaming and a hypnotic technique that is akin to opening one's eyes while dreaming, before the act of creation (Kaushal, 2023). This process facilitates a complete emancipation of vision and the activity in the psychic mechanism of the 'Luo', a concept which has gained prominence in contemporary Surrealist studies for its role in the emancipation of the psyche (Piechura, 2021). Such activity is not merely a passive experience but holds a dominant position in the sculpting of human nature. It is through this activity that Surrealism seeks to reconcile unconscious impulses with rational thought, aspiring to the perfection of human nature (Debord, 2021).

At the level of textual expression, Surrealism advocated representing unconscious human behaviour, including sexual desires, the desire for death, the Oedipus complex, and the Elektra complex. Orthodox Surrealism in the 1920s and 1930s emphasized that the creation process should be under the control of the mind, without rational control, and without aesthetic or moral considerations.

Regarding surrealist 'automatic writing', Salvador Dali claimed that his works, including *The Persistence of Memory* (1931); *The Burning Giraffe* (1935), and *Premonition of a Civil War* (1936), were created through this method. However, there is no objective evidence to support Dali's claim, only his subjective statements.

Surrealist Films

In contrast to literature's 'automatic writing,' French surrealist cinema demonstrates its normality in terms of content. For instance, *La coquille et le clergyman* presents a series of dreams from the subjective point of view of a mentally disturbed vagabond. *An Andalusian Dog*, on the other hand, draws on Freudian psychoanalysis to depict the unconscious state or process of sexual desire and love. However, some of the objects in surrealist film unconditionally symbolise terms from Freudian psychoanalysis. For instance, in one episode, the protagonist attempts to embrace the woman he desires, only to be thwarted by two long

ropes tied with pumpkins, two monks, and a grand piano piled high with rotten donkey meat. According to these commentators, the metaphors can be illustrated in a single sentence. The protagonist's impulses represent 'falling in love', while the pumpkin represents sexual desire. The monks represent religious prejudice, and the grand piano (represented by the long ropes) represents bourgeois education.

Lautréamont, a pioneer of Surrealism, stated that An Andalusian Dog was beauty is the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on the dissecting table, which became the guiding principle of Surrealism at the time (Routledge, 2023). Following An Andalusian Dog, Buñuel received financial support from the Vicomte de Noa to produce The Golden Age.

The Golden Age is a film that further reinforces the gratuitous display of technology that characterised the early days of the avant-garde. The film's objective tone is interspersed with clips from newsreels and a documentary on the life of a scorpion. This exhibition resembles a display of merchandise in a large department store, where the Surrealists would assemble these banal images into a strange montage of what they called 'beautiful bodies'.

Symbolism of the "Beautiful Body"

Watching the film 'An Andalusian Dog' (Un Chien Andalou) is akin to stepping into a chaotic arena brimming with horses, guns, swords, and an array of inexplicable props, a scene that has been analyzed for its dense symbolic content by contemporary critics (Barragán, 2022). During the era of 'The Golden Age' (L'Âge d'Or), André Breton, the principal theorist of Surrealism, posited that psychoanalysis should be employed to decipher Tréamond's enigmatic quote, a practice that has since been scrutinized for its interpretive validity (Alnazarova, 2021). According to Breton's analysis, the operating table symbolizes the bed, the sewing machine is emblematic of the woman, and the umbrella signifies the man, a pan-symbolic interpretive mechanism that Surrealists utilized which included the representation of a 'beautiful skeleton' through a montage of figurative objects. The 'revolutionary metaphor' in 'The Golden Age' is depicted as an elite social event, which is abruptly intruded upon by a garbage truck accompanied by several red-faced earth-movers, creating a 'beautiful skeleton' that evolves into a pivotal narrative element or plot point.

Regarding figurative objects, only a select few, such as the Chinese clock, the triumphal arch, and Tiananmen Square, acquire symbolic meanings unconditionally and autonomously. The majority of figurative objects acquire symbolic meanings conditionally, meaning that they have specific meanings in specific explanatory mechanisms. The same figurative object can acquire different meanings depending on the explanatory mechanism used (Garello, 2024). Figurative objects only under certain conditions, in the language of a text and external physical action organically constituted by the induction, qualification, interpretation conditions to obtain a certain rational conceptual meaning. For instance, the colour yellow does not have a clear semantic function. Its symbolic function is uncertain because it is associated with the ancient imperial dignity.

However, the 'yellow novel' in the context of 'yellow' is not necessarily linked to the emperor's dignity. In the Japanese film 'The Yellow Handkerchief of Happiness', the protagonist is sentenced to six years in prison for manslaughter. Before his release, the protagonist gives his wife a letter instructing her to hang a yellow handkerchief in front of the house if she still

wants him to return home. Upon his return, he is delighted to see countless yellow handkerchiefs hanging all over his house, a clear indication of his wife's love and loyalty. The film uses the colour yellow to symbolise trust and steadfastness. The letter from the protagonist to his spouse serves as a crucial link in the film's narrative structure, which in turn serves as an interpretive mechanism for the non-figurative object, the yellow handkerchief. The narrative mechanism explains the symbolic meaning of the figurative object through its interaction with the non-narrative mechanism (Xiao & Zhang, 2020).

Flaws of Surrealist Cinema

The real difficulty with surrealist cinema is that it is based on certain philosophical foundations, and at the same time it is obliged to promote and interpret certain philosophical doctrines (Koster, 2020). Georges Sadoul has recognised this problem. He writes: "The script of the Golden Age, written by Bunuel and Dalí, is an attempt to speak of the world in terms of the doctrines of Sigmund Freud, Lautréamont, Sartre and Karl Heinrich Marx (Sui, 1995).

Popper criticised the Freudian doctrine as pseudo-scientific because it is unprovable and unfalsifiable (Batsch, 2021). The logic or non-logic of the events of a surrealist film obviously has no or no rational basis in reality, so it is "surreal". Its rationality is rooted in Freudian theory, and the events it depicts can only be remotely or rationally justified in Freudian theory (Zhang, 2020). If the surrealist film weaves a coded web of events and figurative objects, then Freudian theory is the decoder of this coded web. This objectively requires Freudian theory to be self-evident and universally understood by the public, since the decoder itself cannot be a cipher, otherwise another decoder would be needed to decode the decoder of the cipher. This is the problem: the Freudian doctrine, as the law of statistics shows, is understood by only a small part of the public and accepted by an even smaller part - the Freudian doctrine has not yet conquered the whole of humanity. For a surrealist film to be meaningful, it is essential that the viewer has a prior understanding of Freudian theory and is aware that the film was crafted following an aesthetic program rooted in that theory.

Without this background, the viewer might not grasp the intended message, perceiving the film's illogical imagery as nonsensical rather than as a deliberate departure from reality's logic (Zhao, 2020). This misunderstanding could lead to frustration or even cause the viewer to dismiss the film as fabrication or to leave the theater altogether. In the absence of an audience to interpret its surreal logic, the film ceases to function as intended, becoming mere material—celluloid, prints, or projectors—flickering aimlessly in the void of an empty cinema.

There is a deep paradox here: the narrative logic of surrealist film is not directly rooted in reality, but in a specific doctrine, and if the purpose of creating a story is to explain this discipline or directly interpret this doctrine, then the story organised by the specific logic is undermined by the general reality of remote editing, which results in the subjective creative motives as well as the meaning of the text being inaccessible (Yang et al., 2023).

Expressionist Cinema

Examples of works that fall under expressionist cinema include *Dr Kabuga*, *Death of the Weary*, *Gotha the Mudman*, *The House of Wax* and *The Man in the Shadow Theatre*. Expressionist literary theory took root in the 1920s and 1930s (Qi, 2023). Based on the

philosophical trends or theories of positivism and irrationalism, it existed as a counter-movement to naturalism and impressionism.

Literary Claims of Expressionism

Expressionism emphasises the involvement and intervention of the subjective spirit and behaviour of the creative subject in social life. The poet Barr then said that the new art should revive society from extreme conspiratorial means and unity of power. The Expressionist writer A. Wolfstein said, "The unity of art and life will no longer be achieved by the way nature determines art, as in previous eras (Ding, 2015). The poet was called upon to act as a "proclaimer" of this new unity, not only to grasp "the essential" but also to express it.

Expressionism asserts that the center of the universe and the source of reality is the "self"(Liu et al., 2022). Ed Schmidt's perspective aligns with this view, as he posited that "reality must be created by us" (Jin et al., 2001). Therefore, Expressionism contends that the process of creating art is the articulation of the artist's inner world, an expansion of the inner self to the outer world. This is in contrast to Impressionism, which sought to capture the external world's impression on the inner psyche (Zhou, 2021).

In its themes of expression, Expressionism emphasised the depiction of man's eternal qualities and his intense quest for spirituality, and the universal spirit of brotherhood pervaded Expressionist literary works (Neider, 2023). Expressionist literature holds the belief that by exploring and improving the human condition through art, society at large can be uplifted (Asare-Aboagye et al., 2023).

Expressionism demands and emphasises that writers, by virtue of their subjective spirit, go through an inner experience without focusing on external appearances (Lin, 2021). The result of such an experience will make the thing experienced produce a kind of illusion in the subjective mind, which is the deep image of the thing they are after - the pure reality of the thing, and this is also the journey of the subject of expressionist creativity when he engages in creation: from inner experience to outer image, and from the most tangible core of the world.

Expressionism first came to prominence in the theatre city.

Characteristics of Expressionism in Theatre Drama

Abstract characters or symbolic characters. Expressionism advocates expressing the inner essence of things, revealing the souls of characters, showing eternal qualities and truths, and opposes merely describing the behaviour of characters and depicting temporary phenomena. Therefore, the characters in the works are abstracted from their specific personalities, leaving a kind of commonality (spiritual qualities or ideology). The characters in expressionist theatre are abstract, symbolic, unspecific, disproportionate or without specific personalities, not even personifications. One sees only typified characters such as men, women, fathers, sons, masses, individuals, etc.

Frenetic passion. Expressionist playwrights called their plays "shouting plays" in which "people gather in delirium and open their mouths wide" and the theatre "is not a stage but a pulpit for agitators".

The mood is bizarre. The whole work is incoherent and inconsistent, with abrupt plot changes, lack of connection before and after, no logic, and out of character. There is no clear boundary between life and death, man and beast. Kafka's metamorphosis turns people into large beetles without a care in the world.

strong colour contrasts, the Bureau to express the inner passion of the characters, they exclude all neutral colours and tones, the use of strong contrasts, so that the stage background and lighting shocking, to render the chlorine atmosphere, depending on the emotional changes of the actor.

Peculiar language. In Expressionist literature, the language completely abandons the four-tongue mode of expression and adopts an incoherent, terse, telegraphic form. In the structure, a large number of inner alone and narration, subtext, dream landscape, so as to create the necessary conditions for the author to directly join the characters of the work to express their opinions.

Characteristics of Expressionism in the Field of Music

Musically, Expressionism is recognised as dividing the era from the Russian musician Stravinsky's Rite of Spring (Zheng & Liu, 2018). This work is tonal but dissonant in intervallic relationships and rhythmically irregular. After 1921, Schoenberg established a twelve-tone compositional technique based on the 'free atonality' developed by Wagner's chromatic harmonies (Xu, 2021). This passage discusses the technical guarantee for musical expressionism, which emphasises the expression of subjective feelings.

Twelve-tone music is a type of music that centres on intervals, which can lead to a tendency towards mathematical analysis (Xu, 2021). The general creative principle of expressionist music is to evoke strong emotional catharsis and inner expressive desire. Although this strictly mathematical method of practice may seem contrary to the aesthetic pursuit of emotional expression, it remains a significant aspect of expressionist music (Sun, 2019). The potential applications of tone row patterns in composition are vast and depend on the composer's expressive intentions. However, in a collection of pieces written in the twelve-tone system, the inner content of the tone rows is often overshadowed by a variety of moods and colours. It is worth noting that expressionism in music is directly linked to romantic

The Artistic Characteristics of Expressionist Cinema

Expressionist cinema is fundamentally different from pure cinema. This is mainly evident in the artistic medium: the characters and environment in surrealist film are concrete, and they exist in a concrete environment (Li, 2012). In contrast, the artistic medium of 'pure cinema' is 'lines in motion', rather than surrealism's 'sound and picture images in motion' (Zhang, 2020). Therefore, surrealist cinema can narrate abnormal events in a normal way, and montage provides the technical guarantee for this. In the following section, we will briefly analyse the expressionist film 'Dr Caligari'.

Dr Caligari is an expressionist film that narrates the story of Dr Caligari, the director of a psychiatric hospital. He hypnotises a young man named Shezarita and drives him to commit horrific murders at night, treating him as an object to be seen in a bazaar. Shezarita eventually dies of exhaustion. When Caligari's cover is blown, he is sent to an asylum as a madman.

The film uses a flashback approach in its structure, presenting the world as seen through the eyes of a madman who was sent to a psychiatric ward by Dr Caligari. This film distorts and perverts all distances, lighting, object forms, and buildings through the use of film technology. The costumes of the characters are also unconventional, and the physical movements and facial expressions of the actors are exaggerated. However, some of the shots may be considered frightening, such as a prisoner crouching on top of a triangular-shaped wooden toon, a robber standing on a chimney-lined rooftop, and a sleepwalker's long, dark shadow resting in the middle of a white circle in a distorted, blurred vista of a high, shadowy wall.

Fundamentally, Dr Kaligari is not an expressionist film. It is a realist film in the general nature of its narrative mechanism. It is important to note that these are subjective evaluations and should be clearly marked as such. As previously stated, most of the images and events depicted in the film are abnormal and extraordinary. However, the film effectively argues that this abnormal and monstrous world is, in fact, the real world as seen through the eyes of a madman.

Vinay proposed modifying the original script by adding a prologue and an epilogue to aid the audience's understanding. The film's strange sights are portrayed as the world seen through the eyes of a madman who has been sent to a psychiatric ward by Dr Caligari. This alters the original story's intent. In the original script, authority was portrayed as a form of criminal madness, whereas now it is depicted as the protector of sanity. George Sardoux correctly identifies a change in the fundamental attributes of the characters before and after the alteration. However, he fails to acknowledge the significant change in the overall nature of the narrative mechanism resulting from this alteration.

Expressionist works have a non-realistic narrative mechanism that follows the writer's heart rather than the logic of reality (Inanc, 2020). This creates a non-logical and non-realistic portrayal of the external world. The plot also goes against the logic of reality. On the other hand, the narrative mechanism of the film 'Dr. Kakargal' can be logically explained and is subject to the logic of reality. The real world of a madman should indeed be different from the perspective of a sane person. However, 'The Metamorphosis' offers an irrational story, while 'Dr. Caligari' offers a rational one. This level of plausibility is evident in the reviews the film received when it was screened in Berlin. For instance, George Sardoux writes that the Forward, the organ of the Social Democratic Party, expressed its satisfaction with the homage paid to this 'praiseworthy endeavour to the chauvinism of the psychiatrist'. This compromise with conventional thought resulted in a film that was very popular among audiences throughout New York. However, Louis Deluc broke the French embargo on German films at the time.

The film combines a realist narrative mechanism with an expressionist visual style, creating a convergence point of the 'world through the eyes of a madman.' The film employs various camera angles with unusual viewpoints and lighting with strong contrasts. The use of subjective evaluations is avoided in order to maintain objectivity. The visual style characteristics of Expressionist films were developed from the frequent use of certain filming techniques Finn (2022), such as those seen in Dr Caligari.

Other films associated with Expressionism also employ thought-provoking narrative mechanisms (Ji, 2024). *Death of the Weary* is a story based on Greek mythology that depicts the God of Fate imprisoning ten million beings in a bronze-walled castle. Sisyphus is forced to carry heavy boulders that can never be moved. *Gotha the Mudman* is another mythological or fantastical tale in which Gotha fails to free the Jews from the rule of a tyrant and turns himself into a despotic tyrant who turns on his maker, Rolf the Mage. Therefore, it is subjective to label '*Kashoga Wrapped in Botu*' as an expressionist film.

This paper presents a detailed analysis of Surrealist and Expressionist cinema. In the section on Surrealism, the paper explores the use of the 'automatic writing' method in literature and its application in cinema, as seen in works such as *The Shell and the Monk*, *An Andalusian Dog*, and *The Golden Age*. However, these films struggle to convey Freud's more profound philosophical concepts to an audience unfamiliar with his theories. The section on Expressionism analyses the origins of literature and theatre, highlighting the importance of Expressionism to the subjective spirit in artistic creation. It also demonstrates the realist narrative mechanism in film through the case of *Dr. Caligari*. Although these films have unique aesthetic and philosophical goals, their success in conveying these ideas depends greatly on the audience's understanding and agreement with the theories behind them.

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