

Surrealistic Cinema

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The primary author is the individual who drafted the first version of this section; a section that could have been modified since it was originally published.



The 1920s were a very experimental time for art. Artists of all types, whether it be painters, filmmakers, actors, or writers, were beginning to question conventional forms of expression within their medium. The envelope was pushed as new ideas, themes, and techniques were thought up by many great artisanal explorers.

An interesting style of art that was born in the decade was surrealism. Surrealism was birthed from Dadaism. Dadaism was the primary avant-garde art movement, which means it favors experimental themes and ideas. Dada went against the norm and focused on all things "anti-aesthetic, anti-rational and anti-idealistic" (*Dada and Surrealism Introduction*). Dadaism gave artists a taste of what it was like to step out of line.

Surrealism officially began in 1924 when poet André Breton published his *Manifesto of Surrealism*. This was the first documented work within the category. Breton wanted to create a more focused branch of Dadaism. The genre sought to bring light to the potential of the unconscious mind; it explored many themes such as dreams, sexual ecstasy, madness, and intoxication. This resulted in some rather unusual and sometimes even discomfoting works of art.

Instead of having a purpose or message within a work of art, surrealist works are meant to shock the audience with the use of juxtapositions and illogical imagery. The artist leaves the viewer with the possibility of interpreting the work in their own way. There are not many rules or guidelines within this area of art and that is why it can be argued that Surrealism is not a true genre.

Surrealist film was very exploratory. Instead of making a film to create a work of art or something of beauty, surrealist filmmakers estranged their film's purpose to shock viewers and make them think of the possibilities of the unconscious mind. The films lacked real plot or direction, but usually attempted to follow completely illogical storylines which resembled dreams.

The first film within Surrealism is titled [La coquille et le clergyman](#) [The Seashell and the Clergyman] (1928). It is a French short film directed by Germaine Dulac. The true meaning of the film is unknown, but it is a very interesting watch. Nathanael Hood, a writer of a blog titled *Forgotten Classics of Yesteryear*, puts it this way:

Probably the best answer can be drawn from the film's opening shots. We see a clergyman with a key walking down a dark hallway where he unlocks a door. Through the door is another dark hallway. He walks down it and unlocks another door. Behind it is...another dark hallway with



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Photo Credit: Screen capture from *La coquille et le clergyman* (1928).

another locked door. While this may seem mindlessly repetitive, it probably is the key to the very nature of the film. The hallways represent our minds and the doors are our inhibitions. The film is the key and the clergyman the director. By watching, we are opening ourselves up to new ways to see and interpret the world. (Hood)

Interpretation of this film is very open ended due to its strange imagery. It inspired other filmmakers to try different techniques. In 1929, Salvador Dali, a well-known surrealist painter, wrote a film with the Spanish director Luis Buñuel titled [Un Chien Andalou](#) [*An Andalusian Dog*]. Nearly twenty years later, in 1946, Dali began working on a movie called [Destino](#) with Walt Disney; the project was finally finished in 2003. Many other Surrealist films have been produced since the beginning of the movement.

The acceptance of Surrealism in the young and impressionable film industry was very black and white; surrealist filmmakers were either highly looked up to by others of the same sort, or they were shunned by the more traditional filmmakers.

With the onset of World War II came the downfall of the Surrealist movement. Just as many other experimental art movements, the fire seemed to fizzle out as artists lost touch and interests changed. Some continue Surrealist practices to this day. Surrealism was an important movement for art as a whole, and it was an especially important addition to cinema.

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