

Buñuel, Bataille, and Buster, or, the surrealist life of things

To my knowledge, Georges Bataille was the first serious critic to recognise Buñuel and Dalí's *Un chien andalou* (1929), when he praised it in the pages of the journal he edited, *Documents*.¹ It should come as no surprise, then, that his 1928 pornographic novella *The Story of the Eye* is a crucial intertext for that film. Given that they are known as two of the foremost Sadean modernists, finding a link between the two is hardly remarkable; it simply reinforces a familiar story about modernism – that film modernism would inevitably take its cue from so-called 'high' modernism. However, in addition to the more predictable influence of Bataille, *Chien* wears another set of modernist influences on its sleeve – the influence of Hollywood and especially of the slapstick film. I want to suggest that Buñuel understood better than nearly anyone the ways in which the two modernisms – high and low – formed a complementary system of reflection on the transformation of experience wrought by modernisation. Buñuel learned something similar from both Bataille and Buster Keaton – something about *things*.

Un chien andalou remains obstinately the place where one begins an assessment of Buñuel's career. In a way, this is surprising since *Chien* stands out markedly from the rest of Buñuel's films by virtue of its constant manipulation of the image. Full of slow motion, soft-focus, dissolves, double exposures, and disorienting spatio-temporal constructions, *Chien* contradicts the modest craftsmanship of Buñuel's features, which bear a closer relationship, both formally and morally, to his third film, *Land Without Bread*, a documentary. All of these features might argue against using *Chien* as an exemplary case, but it is the purpose of this essay to move beyond these apparent inconsistencies in order to identify a series of subterranean continuities defining Buñuel's film practice as a whole. Those continuities are marked by Buñuel's taste for citation, but a citation of a specifically photographic kind, and in the spirit of a surrealism that might, itself, be understood as photographic.

While recontextualised citations appear in all of Buñuel's work, *Chien* is marked by their sheer density, their extraordinary range of reference, and the force with which they assert their borrowed status. Indeed, the aggressiveness with which these fragments are collected

and thrown together constantly threatens the coherence of the film's narrative – a narrative that, nevertheless, is remarkably smooth. The images come from all over, and pull the viewer in every direction, yet we wind up – inexorably – on a beach with a pair of lovers. We retain our direction in spite of citations that try to lead us elsewhere. I would like to begin with one such citation and, for the moment, let it lead me where it will.

The viscerally off-putting quality of the hand swarming with ants is curiously prefigured by Pierre Batcheff's odd posture, which in its quiddity begs to be read as a reference to some particular source (fig. 1). In point of fact, the hand finds several indirect precedents in Dalí's work, both as part of a thematic obsession with masturbation, and also as a motif (increasingly prominent after *Chien*) associated with crucifixion and putrefaction. This sort of evidence has been used to argue for Dalí's influence on the film (and by now there can be no doubt that Dalí was far more involved than legend suggests), yet even such relatively clear-cut examples fail to account for the complexity of the film's system of references.

A more striking parallel is Magritte's 1928 painting, *Darker Suspicion* (fig. 2). So similar are the postures that it would be difficult to discount its role in the genesis of the film, yet here, too, questions of pedigree



Figure 1 *Un chien andalou*.

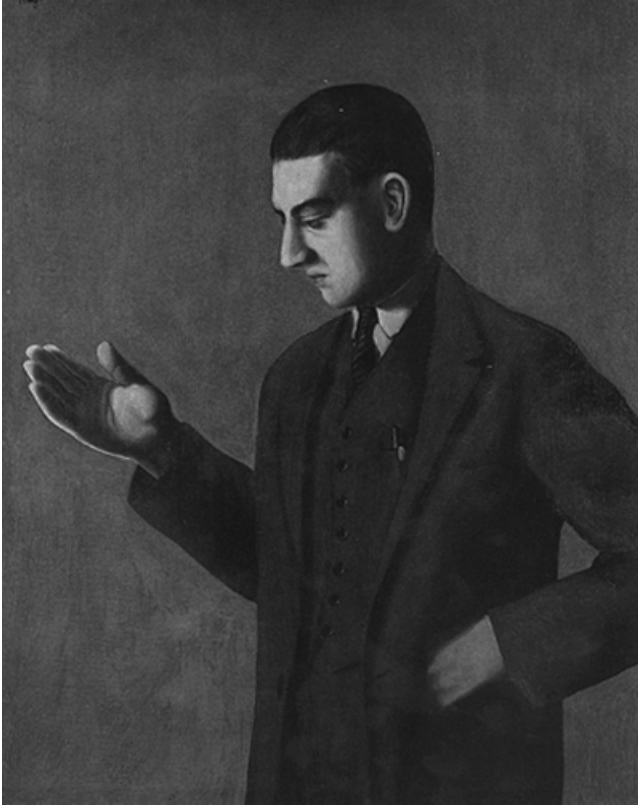


Figure 2 Magritte, *Darker Suspicion*.

and 'influence' are not particularly illuminating. One might even argue that citation (even of a vanguard artist) is an exceedingly odd strategy for filmmakers so allergic to established aesthetic standards. Buñuel and Dalí's very vocal denunciations of self-consciously 'artistic' filmmakers, artists and poets evince a sensibility wholly unsympathetic to any striving for aesthetic respectability and therefore any simple quotation of prior works. Indeed, when Buñuel the critic was faced with the prospect of avant-garde films he spoke up, instead, for American comedies.² Fittingly, American film comedy can help us unpack the specificity of Buñuel's strategy in *Chien*, and suggest another citational logic as well.

This pair of hands (figs 3 and 4), from *Chien* and from Harold Lloyd's 1923 film *Why Worry?*, could hardly be more striking in their similarity. However, Buñuel's reference to the Lloyd film seems to be of



Figure 3 *Un chien andalou* (Buñuel, 1929).

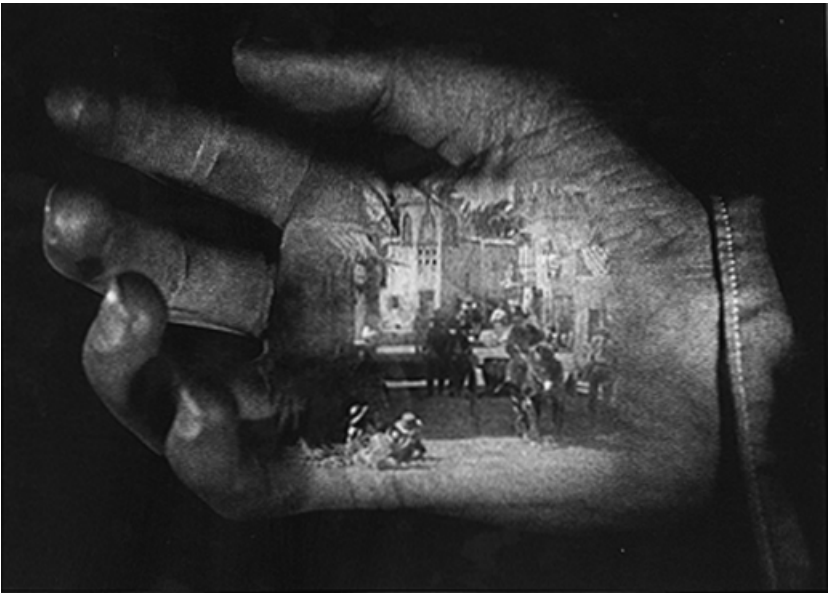


Figure 4 *Why Worry?* (Lloyd, 1923).

a different character from his citations of Vermeer, Millet, Wagner, Péro, or Desnos elsewhere in the film. For one thing, it carries a great deal less prestige – even in its own milieu. While a minor gem, *Why Worry?* is often criticised for favouring gags at the expense of narrative. In this respect, it shares a great deal with Buster Keaton's *College*, to which Buñuel devoted his greatest critical essay. Something in these supposedly inferior works attracted Buñuel with as much force as the acknowledged masterpieces of the fine arts. Stated baldly, both Keaton and Lloyd embodied the unpretentious and thoroughly modern style that Buñuel had come to champion as the advance guard of the cinematic art. But *why* did he value them above all other films? What made them seem particularly *modern*? While his later films would frequently exhibit the economy of technique he associated with Lloyd, Keaton, and Harry Langdon, in his early films he found something equally as important as an unpretentious style. Comedy, in a manner of speaking, 'solved' particular formal and even 'moral' problems created by a surrealist approach to the cinema, and opened up new avenues for Buñuellian narration – avenues that would intersect the *Rue Bataille*.

Buñuel's first two films overflow with citations and delirious juxtapositions. In fact, a key element of Buñuel's style in this period is his tendency to range over all cultural levels, giving all equal prominence, and treating all with the same respect or disrespect. An ad may evoke a passionately erotic moment, while Wagner may serve as a bawdy punchline. What's more, slapstick and Wagner may appear side by side in hilarious or poignant counterpoint. Indeed, nearly every element of the films can be seen as a radically displaced fragment of another text, and each fragment is energised by its own palpable dislocation. Like *objets trouvés*, the citations emerge from the realm of the everyday, but are radically displaced and consequently given an autonomy and an attention that renders them at once mysterious and suggestive.

Even before making their first film both Buñuel and Dalí had already developed tendencies toward both serious and parodic reworking of existing works. Dalí had, for example, burlesqued the figure of Venus in a series of variations, as Buñuel had *Macbeth*, with his incestuous, comedic version, yet each was also energised by those predecessors they believed to be true artists. The pair showed a deep devotion to Vermeer, Goya, Velázquez, Galdós, Huysmanns, and others whose lack of sentimentality and fearless pursuit of reality they admired. Under the increasing influence of surrealism, they developed an aesthetic devoted to the raw expression of facts exempt from artistic and moral formulas. Under Buñuel's tutelage, Dalí came to regard film

as the medium through which to express this anti-art aesthetic. The lens, when turned on everyday objects, Dalí argued, would be anti-artistic by its very nature because it circumvented artistic invention in the traditional sense. 'The possibilities of the cinema reside in that unlimited fantasy which is born of things themselves.' Pushing his admiration for films further, he extolled the virtues of repetition, monotony, and standardisation resulting from their embrace of the naked objectivity of lens. As he would write in 'The Photographic *Donnée*', 'nothing proves the truth of Surrealism so much as photography', because each could wrest an unknown reality from the realm of the ordinary, by virtue of what Buñuel called 'that eye without tradition, without moral, without prejudice'.³ Machine vision prevented the invasion of poetic subjectivity and allowed the object to take precedence. Here they both crystallised and defined the surrealist interest in cinema: an interest devoted to deliberate fragmentation, an apotheosis of the object, of the detail, of everything except character, plot, and psychology. The shot, in essence, became a species of found object and, itself, a *thing* to be manipulated.

Buñuel's lifelong friend André Breton celebrated the almost hallucinatory power of the found object as a way of both externalising and objectifying one's desire. The uncanniness with which the discovered object could become the defining focus of one's existence seemed to reveal a kind of unconscious order of things, which was accessible only after the object had been torn from its familiar connections. Breton extended this logic to the *cinema*, too. According to legend, Breton and Jacques Vaché would wander in and out of movie theatres at random, leaving just as soon as the images began to bore them, which is to say, when they began to make too much sense. Breton reports that liberating images from narrative in this way left him poetically 'charged' for several days afterward.⁴ Breton was not alone in preaching the gospel of the fragment. French film critics of the period developed a related, but more general and systematic, critical principle centred on the concept of *photogénie* – the photogenic. Louis Aragon's early essay 'On Décor' (1918) gives this emerging concept a decidedly surrealist flavour *avant la lettre*. Deriding stale (but 'artistic') conventions, he condemns films that 'draw the elements of their lyricism from the shabby arsenal of old poetic ideas', praising instead

those dear old American adventure films that speak of daily life and manage to raise to a dramatic level a banknote on which our attention is riveted, a table with a revolver on it, a bottle that on occasion becomes a weapon, a handkerchief that reveals a crime, a typewriter that's the horizon of a desk, the terrible unreeling ticker tape [etc.]⁵

He likens this effect to the inherently surrealist sensibility of children. 'Poets without being artists, children sometimes fix their attention on an object to the point where their attention makes it grow larger, grow so much it completely occupies their visual field, assumes a mysterious aspect and loses all relation to its purpose.'⁶ What is more, he saw the cinema as upsetting the relationship between self and world. In Chaplin's films 'each inanimate object becomes a living thing for him, each human person a dummy whose starting handle must be found'.⁷ Several years later, Jean Epstein would elaborate and codify the principle, whereby decor – objects – might assume the importance traditionally ascribed to humans. Focusing his attention on the power of the isolated object, Epstein writes, 'The close-up is the soul of the cinema. It can be brief because the value of the photogenic is measured in seconds ... the photogenic is like a spark that appears in fits and starts.'⁸ Describing its ability to overwhelm our attention, he notes, 'I have neither the right nor the ability to be distracted ... I haven't the right to think of anything but this telephone. It is a monster, a tower, and a character.'⁹ In short, the camera and, in imitation of it our perception, shatter the world into fragments of space-time and, in isolating the objects of ordinary existence, give them the power to look back at us, to command our attention with the power of their own gaze. The displacement of the human by the object defined the cinema in other ways, too, as when Epstein argued that 'the Bell and Howell is a metal brain ... a subject that is an object without conscience ... an entirely honest artist ... the model artist',¹⁰ or that the cinema is capable of a kind of 'animism', giving life and even a soul to things that subsequently impose their will upon us, confusing the inner and outer worlds as surely as any surrealist synthesis of dream and waking world.

In all these instances, one 'discovers' the photogenic by both serendipity and aggressive acts of attention. The fragmentation implied here is twofold: the camera tears an object from the world by way of the close-up, and the spectator tears the momentary image from the flow of the film. And absent from all this is any sense of the primacy of narrative; narrative is even, arguably, the enemy. Recognising that in the cinema narrative functions to provide coherence and continuity to a series of discontinuous shots, these critics sought to restore the power of the isolated, insolent image. Restoring the image or fragment to its autonomy simultaneously repurposed the cinema toward the pursuit of individual desire, while it simultaneously liberated the energy of the fragment from the goal of coherence and directed it toward revelation. Like Breton, these critics expressed a desire to return wonder and awe to the everyday world as well as a confident resolve that the familiar

ordering of that world was no more than accidental, and therefore subject to revolution. *Photogénie* substituted the act of spectatorship for the cinema-hopping of Breton and Vaché, but retained its impulse to collect images for one's own devices.

If Buñuelian citation thus found fertile soil in the period's taste for aggressive fragmentation and recontextualisation, the method was not without its costs. Every act of fragmentation was also an act of de-narrativisation, and therefore an invitation to formal stasis and atomisation. Buñuel took this as a challenge, and sought to harness the power of the fragment, to prohibit its narrative assimilation, and yet simultaneously to allow for a temporal development of form. How he did so is hinted at in his film criticism. Buñuel, of course, offers his own amusing and idiosyncratic take on *photogénie* in essays like 'Variations on Adolphe Menjou's Mustache', where he notes that

It is often said that the eyes are the windows into the soul. A mustache like his can be as well. As he leans so often in close-ups above our heads, what can his eyes tell us that his mustache hasn't already said? A trivial gesture or an almost imperceptible smile acquires, beneath the magic shadow of the mustache, an extraordinary expressiveness; a page of Proust brought to life on the upper lip; a silent but nevertheless comprehensive lesson in irony . . . In the display windows of the future, Menjou's mustache, which embodies the cinema of his time, will replace Napoléon's insufferable and inexpressive hat.¹¹

What Buñuel playfully elaborates here is a surrealist principle of the highest order: a faith that objects and details can match the human in their ability to reveal and to express. Like the ethnographic surrealist, the spectator can see in the commonest everyday item a complete world, a reality as total as that defined by science, but one that finds its coherence in the unconscious or in the fantasies of the individual. Even more important, Buñuel professes his faith in the cinema's ability to displace humans as the centre of the world, and to elevate objects to a level of unprecedented equality with them. Menjou's moustache usurps his face, and in so doing, the camera puts a face on the world of things.

It is precisely to the face that Buñuel turns in order to unpack the importance of Buster Keaton and American film comedy. The face, for Buñuel, does not grant privileged access to an inner life, or only does so by mystifying the nature of man's place in the universe.

In cinema, we always contrast Keaton's monotonous expression with the infinitesimal variations of a Jannings. Filmmakers overdo it with Jannings, multiplying his slightest contortions to the *n*th degree. For him, suffering is a prism cut into a hundred facets. That's why he's

capable of acting in a close-up from 150 feet, and if one were to ask even more of him, he'd manage to show us how an entire film could be made of nothing but his face, a film that might be called *Jannings's Expression*; or *the many combinations of M wrinkles raised by the power of n to n*.

Buster Keaton's expressions are as modest as, for example, a bottle's; the dance floor of his pupils is round and clear, but there his aseptic spirit does pirouettes. The bottle and Buster's face have infinite points of view.¹²

While not written for a surrealist audience, this review clearly takes the levelling of distinctions between subject and object to be a wholly surrealist effect. As he argued in the programme notes for his first 'anthology of comedians' for the Cineclub Español,

People are so stupid, with so many prejudices, that they think that *Faust* and *Potemkin* are superior to these buffooneries which are not that at all and what I would call the new poetry. The equivalent of surrealism in the cinema is to be found *only in those films*, far more surrealist than those of Man Ray.¹³

What is surrealist in Keaton's films is in part, obviously, their joyful embrace of absurdity and their correlated rejection of the arbitrary rigidities of the social world. It is also their rejection of the elevated and poetic in favour of the base and prosaic. More deeply, however, it is their intimate harmony with the world of things, resulting in the complete negation of any distinction between the world of brute fact and the dream world of the protagonist. However, the slapstick object is not reducible to the character's (or even the narrative's) view of it. Buster's unorthodox and unprejudiced relation to things allows him to grasp both their fundamental alienness and irreducibility, and their nearly infinite inventive potential. Praising Keaton's seamless, and wholly functional, technique to the detriment of more arty films, Buñuel says, 'Keaton arrives at comedy through a direct harmony with objects, situations, and the other means of his work. . . . The superfilms serve as a lesson to technicians; Keaton's films *give lessons to reality itself*'.¹⁴

Giving lessons to reality. What Buñuel has in mind here, I would argue, is the spontaneous way in which Buster can transform the nature of things and reveal their fundamental mystery and otherness. Buster's is a world of enchanted objects – enchanted because when removed from the slumber of habit they cease to be means to an end and become ends in themselves. Divorced from the familiar context of use, their materiality asserts itself, and unleashes new potentials. Slapstick objects are never containable by the subject. Neither science nor ideology can overcome their thingly intransigence. The otherness of the world of things given historical form in the alienations of

capitalism had become uniquely visible through the camera's not-quite-human, not-quite-mechanical eye.

Through slapstick, Keaton found a way to structure entire narratives around de-centred objects rather than around subjects, as well as a way to acknowledge the cinema's photogenic transformation of the world into an animistic realm where the self becomes a thing among things. In Keaton, conventional psychological plots are beside the point. No one ever doubts that Buster will get the girl, just as no one expects him to undergo great psychic upheaval. All the same, no one can predict what Buster will make of oil, water, soap, a car and some tyres, except that it will follow logically from their thingness. The delirious opening scene of *The Garage* takes just those elements and runs through nearly every formal permutation one can imagine. Buñuel certainly appreciated the same formal elaborations in *College*. He admired Keaton's films, in part because they suggest a way to solve the problem raised by the tension between narrative and fragment, between subject and object. Comedy undercuts the primacy of telling and its tendencies toward psychology, and emphasises a showing that gives a kind of surreal agency to the decor.

College suggests the role that American comedy might play in a surrealist aesthetic. The plot – boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy wins girl back – is comically simple. The gags, on the other hand, merit a dissertation. In order to impress his sweetheart with his athletic prowess, Buster tries his hand at the various events of track and field. Sprinting, hurdling, high jump, shot-put, hammer throw, javelin, long jump, and pole vault all defeat Buster, and through his failure, each apparatus becomes the basis of a gag or a series of gags. With the thoroughness of an engineer, Buster discovers all of the ways in which a long stick, a high barrier, a sawdust pit, and a fast-moving person can *not* successfully complete a vault. Similarly, with every sport and every job Keaton is thwarted by his inability to engage with equipment in the expected manner. He can no more master ice cream scoops and glasses than he can a bat and ball. Each object asserts its independence of his will as if animate and self-determined (fig. 5).

While it sounds a bit silly or unnecessarily complicated to describe it in this manner, it seems to me important to note that each gag is structured around a series of logical possibilities inherent in a limited set of things. This, in essence, is the structural principle of the film. Although Buster fails to get each object to function as it should, his thwarted encounters nevertheless always reveal something about the nature of things themselves, and through them Buster's relationship to the ordinary takes on the character of enchantment. In *College*, even as Buster becomes less and less able to relate to people, he becomes more

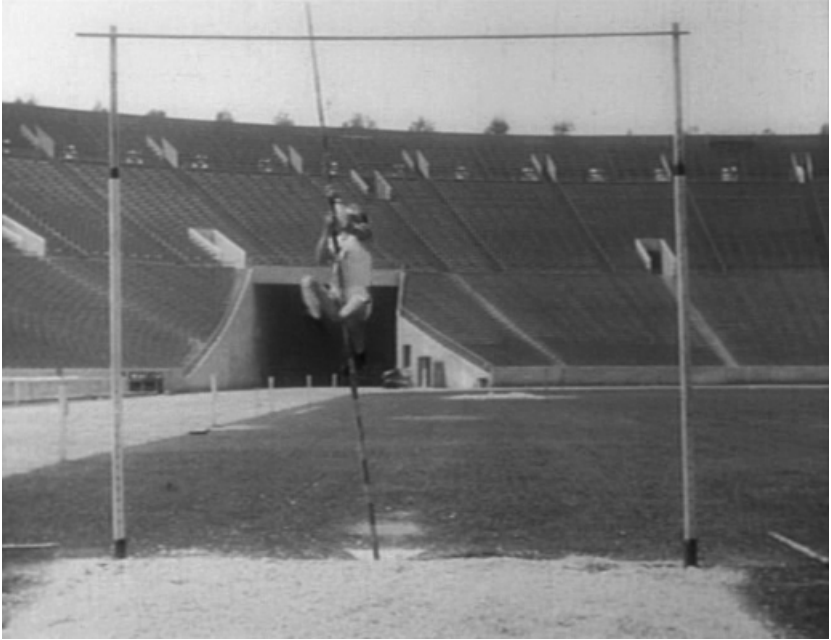


Figure 5 *College*. Buster is defeated by things.

and more intimate with things – so intimate, in fact, that he finally succeeds as an athlete by literally becoming a thing – a piece of equipment – when he lashes his body to a piece of wood in order to serve as his crew’s rudder, and improbably steers them to victory (fig. 6a–b). His alienation from himself as a subject clears the way for him to achieve a new mode of personhood as an object. As Buñuel suggests, there is hardly any difference at this point between Buster and a bottle. And that’s a *good* thing, it seems. Initiated thus into the secret society of things, Buster is a man reborn. Spurred by a cry for help from his beloved, Buster suddenly becomes the athlete par excellence. While real hurdles, long-jump pits, vaulting poles, and javelins defeat him, he is able to transform the utterly mundane – a hedge, a stick, a lamp – into the equipment of an Olympian. In the race to the rescue, Buster lives the surrealist ideals of fusing the realm of dream and desire with the realm of reality and of re-enchanting the mundane world, of discovering the marvellous in the everyday (fig. 7a–b).

But what is the precise connection with Buñuel’s film? There are several. First, *Un chien andalou* and *L’Age d’or* are films that might



Figure 6a–b *College*. Buster Keaton as the rudder.



Figure 7a–b *College*. Buster Keaton pole vault.

accurately be described as structured around gags. A manuscript of Buñuel's even uses the term 'gags' to describe the kind of episodes we now think of as quintessentially Buñuel.¹⁵ A few even appear in his films. Even *Land Without Bread*, for all its extremity and seriousness, is a series of gags – very, very dark gags, but gags nonetheless. Both *College* and *Chien* treat their couples with the same detachment, letting them hurtle toward the grave following the same unsentimental trajectory of a javelin falling to earth – both filmmakers recognising the nature of the machine in which their characters are enmeshed (figs 8 and 9a–b). We simply observe them as we would a pair of scorpions, not worrying about their morals, and admiring the precision of their natures. Finally, like the comedies as well (although in a different register), *Un chien andalou* is structured around the formal permutation of a few central objects. Like *College*, it eschews conventional narrative subjectivity through a construction that barely acknowledges the role of a narrator, offering instead a tale told from the side of things that displaces the human by allowing the world to assert its otherness, and its agency, without recuperation by plot or psychology.

Starting with the eye, and moving through a series of graphic matches and chains of substitutions, we find ourselves back at the



Figure 8 *Un chien andalou* Happily ever after.



Figure 9a–b *College*. Happily Ever After.

image of the hand. What follows is a series whose coherence derives primarily from a similarity of shape. The hole in the hand becomes an armpit, which becomes a sea urchin, which becomes a circle of onlookers, which focuses on the top of a woman's head. At the centre of the circle, the woman pokes at a hand, bringing us full circle (appropriately enough). Other aspects of this chain (the gaze, hair, orifices, forms of substitutability) will ultimately serve as connections to other parts of the film, preparing us for the moment when the man's lewd caresses move indiscriminately over breasts and buttocks, as if identical. The graphic logic of these images can be followed across the body of the entire film, providing a continuous (if unexpected) erotic circuit.

Odd though it may sound, this is, refracted, the logic of Buster Keaton – a narrative following out the logical permutation of objects rather than the psychological motivations of characters. It is also the logic of my third interlocutor, Georges Bataille, without whom our picture of Buñuel is incomplete. Briefly, Bataille's work appealed to two tendencies in Buñuel, his distaste for abstraction, symbolism, and idealisation, and (as in the case of the comedians, but without the humour) his desire to develop a narrative form that did not render impotent the insubordinate fragments that threaten the unity of every whole. Like an ethnographer who knows better than to judge the objects of another people by his own beliefs, Bataille allows the detail to challenge the coherence of every system as inevitably disrespectful of otherness.

This is arguably a version of the problem that Buñuel was trying to identify and resist when he asserted of *Un chien andalou* that 'NOTHING in this film SYMBOLIZES ANYTHING'.¹⁶ His emphatic insistence on the materiality of images was an attempt to head off the idealising and normalising tendencies of metaphor and symbol – in short, of the elevated and poetic. Buñuel sought a concrete formal strategy, a technique to produce an irrecoverable negativity, and found a model in Bataille's 'Materialism' – a cultural stance advocating the 'direct interpretation, *excluding all idealism*, of raw phenomena'.¹⁷ Although Bataille may never have succeeded in developing such a theory, his project did, indeed, set the stage for Buñuel. *Chien's* prologue offers a vivid example of what this might mean in practice, and especially how Buñuel's film sets up an aesthetic of surface and literalness rather than of depth and figuration. In contrast to his mentor Jean Epstein's *Fall of the House of Usher* (1927), which strives to deepen both the psychological atmosphere and the aura of symbolism and metaphor, *Un chien andalou* refuses at every step to give up its visceral, material facticity and achieve poetic sublimation (figs 10 and 11).

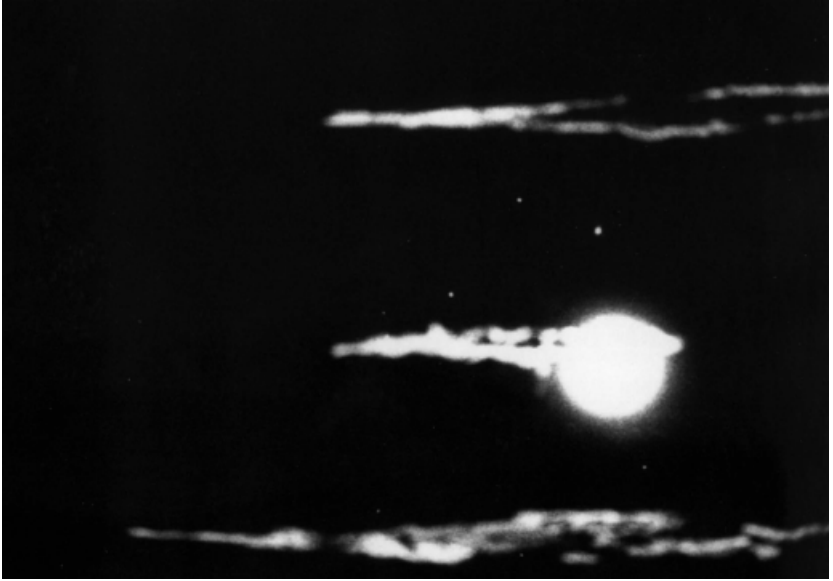


Figure 10 *Un chien andalou*. The metaphor.



Figure 11 *Un chien andalou*. The reality.

As if to underscore his refusal to play the games of figuration and aestheticisation, Buñuel first appears to offer us a metaphorical respite in the form of a cloud crossing the moon, but then hammers us with the insistence that this is not recuperable as poetry, but remains stubborn fact. In the rest of the film he works in a similar way, although with less violence. As the film explores desire, violence, and eroticism, we are denied the kinds of images that might become metaphors or even abstractions, getting, instead, objects that insist on remaining objects, and images that never cease to be images, so that the protagonist's desires are satisfied by basely groping the woman's body indiscriminately, and drooling, 'like a leering moron', rather than through a romantic union of souls (fig. 12).¹⁸ Buñuel's resistance to poetic or even narrative assimilation takes other, more subtle, forms that are especially clear in light of Buñuel's complex relationship to Bataille's similarly anti-poetic *Histoire de l'oeil*.

As they do in Bataille's book, both the eye itself and acts of looking drive *Chien's* formal and narrative development. From the oft-noted succession of round shapes (eye, moon, hole in the hand, sea urchin, armpit, circle of onlookers, etc.), which mimics a corresponding but even longer chain in the novel, to the explosions of desire occasioned by voyeuristic and sadistic glances, the two texts ask to be understood as different realisations of the same project. Beyond the obvious fact that each work features a prominent enucleation (Bataille includes an



Figure 12 'I was overcome with bloody spasms, my lower lip drooling and my teeth bared like a leering moron', Bataille, *The Story of the Eye*.

episode where a matador's eye is gored), the two share important iconography and formal mechanisms in common.

Consider this passage from Bataille's story, which powerfully evokes, or rather anticipates, the prologue of *Chien*. The narrator turns to his lover and asks her about a pair of their obsessions.

Upon my asking what the word urinate reminded her of, she replied: *terminate*, the eyes, with a razor, something red, the sun. And egg? A calf's eye, because of the color of the head (the calf's head) and also because the white of the egg was the white of the eye, and the yolk the iris. The eye, she said, was egg-shaped. She asked me to promise that when we could go outdoors, I would fling eggs into the sunny air and break them with shots from my gun, and when I replied that it was out of the question, she talked on and on, trying to reason me into it. She played gaily with words, speaking about broken eggs, and then broken eyes, and her arguments became more and more unreasonable.¹⁹

Playing gaily with words is a pastime of Bataille's as well, and the first chapter of his book ends with an appreciation of Simone's buttocks, whose crevice produces in the narrator the image of a slit eyeball. Buñuel's version of the 'broken eye' makes a similar allusion to the buttocks by graphically linking the eye and the moon.

Similarities across the two texts at the level of what might be called semantic detail (drooling protagonists, collapsed cyclists, erotically interchangeable parts, auto accidents that fuel erotic frenzies) (fig. 6b) are far more abundant than I can convey here, but pale in importance compared with what might be called their shared syntactic mechanisms. Indeed, the fact that both texts use and reuse elements without regard for their places within a pre-existing plot structure seems unimportant in comparison with the other kinds of relationships they develop. In the book, plot is of little intrinsic importance, but serves instead as a pretext for the systematic transformation and permutation of the titular object – an eye. The eye, and what is more the *word* 'eye',²⁰ are linked to and become interchangeable with eggs, buttocks, testicles, the sun, etc. The couple (and their various partners) displace their desire from one object to the next, through one fluid to the next, transforming them to the point where, as the narrator claims, it is no longer a case of breaking eggs and poking out eyes, but of 'breaking an eye'²¹ where two aspects of desire are commingled to produce a new erotic form. In fact, by the end of the novella the body and its fluids have been radically divested of what we might normally think of as intrinsic erotic hierarchies, so that eyes = eggs = the penis = the vagina = buttocks = testicles, and so that pissing = looking = light = semen = tears = blood. In the end, the desire for objects and the desire to *become* an object are indistinguishable.

Chien enacts a nearly identical series of transformations, again beginning with an eye, although not following them to the same, logical conclusion as Bataille. As many writers have noted, the eye is linked explicitly with an image of the moon, with a hole in a man's hand, an armpit, a sea urchin, an androgyne's head, and the crowd who encircle her.²² Through the link forged between eye, moon, and buttock, by treating words as objects and vice-versa, the eye ultimately becomes interchangeable with breasts, the mouth, the vagina, and through these back to the armpit, etc. In neither book nor film does what is logical, expected, or promised by intuitions about character psychology or plot have any precedence over purely graphic developments or variations on the specific qualities of objects. Both texts are primarily structured by the transformation of objects, or words considered *as* objects, rather than by coherently arranged cause-and-effect narratives, and in each excessive desire and gratuitous violence (both motivated by objects and situations more than by character) are the motors driving that transformation. Even more important, the narratives in question are centred not on characters, but on *objects*, and on objects almost at the *expense* of characters. The anti-poetic refusal of figurative *depth* typical of both entails a related attenuation of the possibility of *subjective* depth as well. Neither work (and for that matter none of Bunuel's first three films) can be understood adequately, and even less, be recuperated, as the subjective experience of any character, whatever has been said of the film's oneiric character. In other words, both artists level the supposedly intrinsic hierarchy between agents and objects while still retaining the possibility for narrative – or temporalised formal development – of some sort.

And this is what Buñuel seems to have discovered both in Bataille and in filmmakers like Lloyd and Keaton – a form or narrative centred on objects rather than on characters or plot, which recognised the searing critique of subjectivity launched from both quarters. However different in tone, Bataille's and Keaton's works are structured around a practical critique of the self, which is lost in the explosive and largely involuntary releases of sexual ecstasy or laughter. If it makes sense to say that *Un chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or* are structured as a series of gags, it is almost a corollary to note that their narratives are based on the comic unfolding of possibilities implicit within things rather than within characters and their motivations. When the man in *Chien* winds up with hair replacing his mouth or the woman blind and buried in the desert, or when Simone concludes her debauchery by digging out the eye of a priest and inserting it in her vagina, the outcome is as rigorously determined by the logic of *objects* as it would normally be by

the motivations of a character in a classical Hollywood film. Just as the action in a Buster Keaton film is often determined by the logic of a particular object – a train, a boat, a camera, a rope, a piece of athletic equipment – the development of these texts and, ultimately, I would argue, a large number of Buñuel's films, is determined by a logic of things, where the internal logic of an image, a character, or a scenario is extrapolated with a rigorous disregard for distinctions between people and objects or between discrete image and narrative.

Keaton, Bataille, and Buñuel each realise the central hope of surrealism when, by dissolving the boundary between inner and outer life, they obliterate the self – or, rather, radically de-centre it and imagine it anew. Keaton succeeds when he becomes 'a thing among things', showing us how the movies rehearse our experience of a world of human alienation and technological sovereignty. Likewise, Bataille's relentless drive away from order and system, and toward formlessness, achieves its ecstasy by merging with the world in a variation on Freud's death drive. Along the way, his pitiless and distanced view of his characters becomes a kind of moral principle. Buñuel takes the equivalence of people and things, glimpsed in the concept of *photogénie*, and elevates it into an aesthetic and philosophical system. The infinite respect he showed for the radical otherness of the world – how it can never be exhausted or assimilated by us – emerges out of his encounter with the cinema.

Everything, from his almost entomological refusal to judge characters or situations – you don't judge a beetle, do you – to the environmentalism that poignantly colours his late interviews, reflects, I'd argue, a primal encounter with the camera, whose unblinking, utterly selfless embrace of people and things alike allows for the utopian revelation implied in the moment of *photogénie*. And if the equanimity with which he views people and animals may seem to treat people like bugs, that, too, may be redeemed for us when a goat suckles a child and becomes more human than the society that has abandoned its most vulnerable members. We do not have a monopoly on understanding. For Buñuel, the world *exists* first and foremost; it is only secondarily 'our' world. But in addition to a philosophy there is an aesthetic as well. Just as it might be said that Buñuel puts his faith in the world more than in individuals, he similarly puts his aesthetic faith in the image more than in psychological narrative.

Finally, it is neither Bataille nor Buster alone who can serve to explain the logic of Buñuel's film, but, crucially, only a combination of the two. Keaton gives Buñuel a form, but without the corrosive materialism and 'ethnographic' reshuffling he found in Bataille, Buñuel might have become a comedian. Combining insights from both (or put

another way, by teaching us to see both through his own work), Buñuel confirms Benjamin's intuition that 'the surrealists are less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things'.²³

Which leaves us with a riddle. What do you get when you cross Georges Bataille with Buster Keaton?

Notes

- 1 Georges Bataille, 'l'Oeil', *Documents*, 4 (June 1929), 216.
- 2 Luis Buñuel, 'Lo cómico en el cinema', *Gaceta Literaria*, 56 (15 April 1929). Buñuel's article devoted to Buster Keaton's *College* also apparently cost him his job at the prestigious *Cahiers d'art*. As with his split from Jean Epstein's tutelage, this episode carries overtones of a staged confrontation with aesthetic authority.
- 3 Salvador Dalí, 'The Photographic Donnée', in *Salvador Dalí: The Early Years*, trans. John Loudon (London: South Bank Centre, 1994), 227, and Luis Buñuel, 'Découpage, or Cinematic Segmentation', in *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, trans. Garrett White (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 132–3.
- 4 André Breton, 'As In a Wood', in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, ed. Paul Hammond (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), 83–4.
- 5 Louis Aragon, 'On Décor', in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, vol. 1, 1907–1929, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 166.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, 167.
- 8 Jean Epstein, 'Magnification', in Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism*, 236.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 239.
- 10 Jean Epstein, 'The Senses 1(b)', in Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism*, 244–5.
- 11 Luis Buñuel, 'Variations on Adolphe Menjou's Mustache', in *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, trans. Garrett White (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 112.
- 12 Luis Buñuel, 'Buster Keaton's College', in *An Unspeakable Betrayal*, 110.
- 13 Luis Buñuel, 'The Comic in Cinema', in *An Unspeakable Betrayal*, 124.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 111.
- 15 Luis Buñuel, 'Gags', in *An Unspeakable Betrayal*, 172–7.
- 16 Luis Buñuel, 'Notes on the Making of *Un chien andalou*', in *The World of Luis Buñuel: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Joan Mellen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 153.
- 17 Georges Bataille, 'Materialism', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 16.
- 18 Lord Auch [Georges Bataille], *The Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (San Francisco: City Lights Press, 1987), 34.

19 *Ibid.*, 38–9.

20 See, for example, Brian T. Fitch, *Monde à l'envers/texte réversible: la fiction de Georges Bataille* (Paris: Minard, 1982) and Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Pornography, Transgression and the Avant-Garde: Bataille's *Story of the Eye*', in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

21 Lord Auch [Georges Bataille], *The Story of the Eye*, 39, 48.

22 Linda Williams's *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981) offers an exemplary reading of this passage, which she interprets as embodying the metonymic displacement of desire from one object to the next.

23 Walter Benjamin, 'Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927–1934, trans. Howard Eiland, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 4.

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