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Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, and the Age of Digital Media. Adam Lowenstein. Columbia University Press, 2015 (253 pages).

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In order to understand cinema's role and possibilities of expression in the digital age one should return to the visions, practices and theories of the surrealists—that is the provocative and intriguing point of departure in *Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, and the Age of Digital Media*. The book's author, Adam Lowenstein, considers the juxtaposition of the surrealist past and the digital present a useful approach if one wants "to challenge commonplace rationalizations of what technological change means" (4). Lowenstein's position of emphasising similarities and continuities with the past when analysing contemporary phenomena is especially intriguing in an era when most apologists of new media argue that everything is different from the pre-digital. The choice of surrealism as a theoretical support for understanding new media might sound surprising at first, but one has to keep in mind that surrealism had probably the biggest influence on cinema of all avant-garde movements, mainly due to its thin narrative content (Kovács 27–32). However, Lowenstein's goal is not to explore surrealism and its relation to cinema in general, an issue that has been widely researched (see Robin Walz's bibliography for "Surrealism and Film"); he tries, instead, to use the associative logic of surrealism as a comparative tool to understand the nonlinear consumption practice characteristic of the new media.

As one book is not enough to survey all aspects of digital media, the author chooses to work on spectatorship; considering itself as "humanistic film studies scholarship", the book tries to provide theoretical accounts for acts of spectatorship, each chapter investigating a different theoretical model of cinematic spectatorship in the digital era, the goal being "to stage strategic confrontation between surrealism and digital media organized by cinematic spectatorship … to wrestle with the digital present by returning to the surrealist past" (5). Accordingly, all chapters include the term spectatorship in their titles, and all of them are organised in a similar way; they investigate the contemporary aspects of earlier theories and practices through analysis of both older (mostly surrealist) films and more recent films or other types of moving images.

If we regard the book in its entirety, active spectatorial involvement in producing meaning seems to be the main focus of Lowenstein's research. Three chapters of the five deal, from slightly different perspectives, with the issue that both surrealism and (some forms of) digital media consciously create the possibility for the audience to actively take part in creating the spectatorial experience of an artwork. Enlarged spectatorship (i.e. the artwork enlarged with the spectator's associations), interactive spectatorship and collaborative

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spectatorship (these terms appearing in the titles of the three chapters in question) all interrogate the concept of exclusive authorial responsibility in the artwork's final effect.

The idea of using surrealism as a starting point for his analysis, and as a bridge between different approaches to representation, probably first came to Lowenstein whilst reading André Bazin. As explained in the first chapter, Bazin believes that it is the surrealists who truly grasp the potential of all photographic media, where the image of an object is presented in both its rational concreteness and its irrational essence: "the experience of reality made photographic … takes shape for Bazin, finally, as a surrealist phenomenon" (16). The theoretical element of the first chapter is in fact dedicated to the effort of proving, in a similar way to Dudley Andrew in his *André Bazin*, that Bazin and Roland Barthes were not the simple, naive realists they are often mistaken for. The term "enlarged" in the title of the first chapter, "Enlarged Spectatorship: From Realism to Surrealism: Bazin, Barthes, and *The* (Digital) *Sweet Hereafter*", comes from the conviction of both theorists that "in the encounter between photograph and viewer some new form of knowledge, affect, sensation or revelation is added to the world" (20). Enlarged spectatorship refers to an experience where mechanical objectivity and affective subjectivity, factual representation and personal involvement, create an enlarged experience: "the object becomes enlarged through the viewer's response to it" (21). This twofold nature of the spectatorial experience is then considered by Lowenstein as being rooted in the logic and sensitivity of surrealism, and thus he examines what spaces surrealist spectatorship occupies in the cinematic experience today.[1]

Whilst it is clear why surrealism has been associated with technologies and theories of representation and spectatorship, its relation to the specificities of digital media is less evident at first sight. DVDs are the first instance of digital cinema that Lowenstein analyses in relation to surrealist practices. He considers that Lev Manovich was wrong when he stated in *The Language of New Media* that the DVD will change the economics of film production and distribution but will not have a direct effect on film language, instead arguing that the DVD "does indeed offer the potential to change the practices of cinematic spectatorship and thus the texture of cinematic language" (29). Given the importance attributed to DVDs, Lowenstein's first chapter offers an analysis of three forms of *The Sweet Hereafter*: the novel written by Russell Banks in 1992, the 1997 film directed by Atom Egoyan and the subsequent DVD release of the same film. Lowenstein presents a detailed comparative analysis of two scenes and the connection-cut between them in the novel and in the film, and contrasts these with the audio commentary of Banks and Egoyan on the DVD. One of the conclusions Lowenstein draws from this analysis is that the ability to listen to two voices in the audio commentary is a step towards presenting the film "as a collaborative, intermediated authorship" (38)—an attitude that can be related to the surrealists' attempt to erase the author. Beside the arbitrariness of this example (if a conversational audio commentary can be proof for a questioned authorship, then too many similar examples can also be found), it is striking how Lowenstein does not take into account the fact that DVDs have proven to be a short interlude in the history of home-video distribution technologies, so the DVD in itself can hardly be chosen as a primary representative of digital cinema. Additionally, though he refers to Manovich's *The Language of New Media*, Lowenstein unfortunately fails to mention Manovich's experiment with DVD and database cinema called *Soft Cinema*, which could have provided a much better argument, or at least reference, for several of the book's concepts regarding the essence of film in a new-media environment.

The second chapter tackles one of the most discussed issues of new media, namely interactivity, and attempts to locate its roots in earlier cinematic forms, particularly Luis

Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un chien andalou* (1929) and David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999). Though Lowenstein acknowledges that cinematic interactivity is quite different from that of video games, his understanding of the freedom of interpretation and spectator association as a form of interactivity brings to mind Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (which unfortunately is not mentioned in the book). The difference between Lowenstein's approach and Eco's is that the latter clearly delimited the openness for interpretation of every work of art to those works that call for the active participation of the reader/spectator to be finished, while Lowenstein's goal seems to be to prove that the associative logic of surrealism is close to gaming interactivity. Thus, through a bold move, the surrealists' commitment to games becomes a link to the interactivity of video games. The theoretical background for this chapter is provided by Roger Caillois's sociological taxonomy of games developed in his most well-known book, *Man, Play and Games*. Lowenstein focuses primarily on his concept of mimicry: Caillois describes cinematic spectatorship's forms of identification as a degraded and diluted version of mimicry. In Lowenstein's account, mimicry resides at the heart of artistic creativity for Caillois—especially of creativity understood by the surrealists as a matter of surprising associations between different images. Lowenstein goes on to provide an analysis of *eXistenZ* through the concept of mimicry, with the conclusion that the film "presents its invitation to interactivity through the reading strategies of art cinema, where the 'competent viewer' searches the film for the author's 'stylistic signatures'" (61). As we see here, and in the case of *Un chien andalou*, Lowenstein argues that the freedom of audience interpretation should be considered as a form of interactivity, in line with the surrealists' association of images: "this sort of surrealist interactivity, with its emphasis on becoming space, is different from but not unrelated to the action-based interactivity often used to describe video games" (70). In a similar way, the necessity and urge to reorganise and reassemble the chronology and narrative of both *Un chien andalou* and *eXistenZ* is considered a form of interactivity: "This aesthetic of reorganisation and revisiting is a prominent feature of cinema in the age of digital media, but it is also a crucial component of surrealist interactivity" (74). The train of thought of this chapter is thoroughly researched, rooted in Caillois's work, and offers deep insight in the logic of surrealist cinema; however, one has the impression that it takes too broad of an approach to the term interactivity.

Collaborative spectatorship, the third take on active spectator engagement and the core issue of Chapter Five, is exemplified by two works that today would be called mash-up fan videos:[2] Joseph Cornell's legendary short film, *Rose Hobart* (1936) and a YouTube channel titled *Mrs. Rock Hudson* dedicated to Rock Hudson. Lowenstein's reason for choosing Cornell's film is that, in his view, "*Rose Hobart* can be understood … as an invitation to a particular kind of collaborative spectatorship that surrealism often strived for and that digital media continues to struggle with" (150). According to him, Cornell does not rewrite the 1931 film *East of Borneo* (George Melford), from which most of *Rose Hobart*'s shots are taken, but instead transforms it "into a meeting place for surrealist exchange between filmmaker and spectator. … spectator becomes star becomes filmmaker becomes spectator in an ecstatic blurring between objects and agents of fantasy" (158–9). Meanwhile, the focus of Lowenstein's analysis on the *Mrs. Rock Hudson* YouTube channel is the hidden gay identity of a star who has been associated with explicitly heterosexual, masculine roles throughout his career. Besides analysing in detail some videos of the channel, Lowenstein also takes into account the comments left by viewers and by the creator of the channel itself to demonstrate the existence of such a contradiction in the reception of Rock Hudson's work. In addition to Cornell being considered an unofficial surrealist, surrealism is also brought into discussion in this chapter through the concept of "crossing the bridge" developed by Breton in *Surrealism and Painting*, where he used it to refer to surrealism's ability to travel between

rationality and irrationality. Lowenstein, adapting the concept to the topic of the chapter, considers that the nature of collaborative spectatorship offered by the two media products discussed is "an opportunity for the media producer, the media consumer and the media text to reach out across the spaces that divide them" (181). Though it should be pointed out that the concept of collaborative spectatorship is very closely related to the previous two (i.e. enlargement and interactivity), Lowenstein's critical position towards the "homophobic or misogynist blind spots" (181) of the surrealists is to be appreciated. In order to stick to historicity, he always draws our attention to the fact that though gender-related works are discussed from the perspective of surrealism, one should not forget that the surrealist movement was a "men's club".

As we can see, most of the analysis in Lowenstein's book is presented and organised in such a way as to strengthen the supposed relationship between surrealism and digital media. His argument throughout seems to be stuck in a sort of vicious circle: the presented theories are selected to motivate the juxtapositions of his examples, whilst the examples are brought up to validate the selection of the theories. However, the two sides rarely benefit from this interplay. The constant struggle to link surrealism and new media seems to prevent the often-sharp analysis from being fully developed, and from conveying some particularly valuable insights. For example, the argument in Chapter Four that considerable similarities exist between YouTube browsing and Breton's cinematic sampling (entering and leaving screenings randomly one after another) showcases clearly the overdone effort of the book as a whole in its attempt to root as many contemporary practices as possible in surrealism.

The constrained and problematic nature of Lowenstein's surrealist parallel is best exemplified in Chapter Three where globalised spectatorship comes under investigation. The globally successful Japanese horror films of the 1990s and their remakes are used as an example here for a globalised media landscape where influences don't only circulate from the centre to the periphery, but also from the outside in. Lowenstein brings surrealism into the discussion here with the use of a catalogue from an exhibition on Japanese popular culture that begins with a phrase from Japanese surrealist artist Okamoto, some graphic similarities between the videotape images of the famous horror film *Ring* (*Ringu*, Hideo Nakata, 1998) and *Un chien andalou* and, finally, through the presence of a butoh dancer (a practice rooted in the surrealist tradition) in the former film. Besides offering a somewhat naive view of globalisation, the inclusion of surrealism "functioning within globalization's mediated unconscious" (80) seems somewhat out of place, and contributes almost nothing to the analysis here with his use of these tenuous examples.

Instead of studying the most iconic posthuman figure of cinema, the cyborg, in Chapter Four, "Posthuman Spectatorship", Lowenstein deliberately chooses to turn his attention toward the animal by examining a famous YouTube video, "Christian the Lion", and Luis Buñuel's *The Young and the Damned* (*Los olvidados*, 1950). The human-animal relationality present in both works, and generally in surrealism, is the ground on which an analysis of posthuman spectatorship is developed by Lowenstein. These two examples are then put into the theoretical context of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's description of human-pet relationships, and of Bazin's essay and Georges Bataille's novel that showcase a fascination with the phenomenon of the bullfight. He concludes that "we cannot simply understand posthumanism as something that moves inexorably from human to machine, from body to virtuality, from analog to digital. It must also move from human to animal and back again, toward that surrealist territory of sight where we can see the mutually constitutive animal-human" (148). The convincing train of thought in this chapter is made particularly valuable through some involving and revealing

close analysis of a few core scenes from Buñuel's masterpiece.

Dreaming of Cinema is a well-written book that makes use of numerous references and is based on in-depth research that helps the author present theories on interpretation and surrealism in a new light. However, one has the feeling that Lowenstein not just uses, but sometimes also abuses, the book's sources, forcing them towards a pre-established conclusion. There is a fascinating zest in the way he jumps from one theory to the other and moves around between films and media products from different authors and ages that reminds us of the subject matter of the book, as it is so close to the surrealists' associative thinking. Though the parallels pointed out between the surrealist approach and some contemporary moving images are mostly convincing, I am not sure if they are really enlightening in all of the cases, if they really add to a deeper understanding of contemporary phenomena and processes. Ultimately, the book offers a minor contribution to the study of surrealism and of digital media, as scholars of both fields will feel slightly disappointed by the arbitrariness of examples and the lack of their contextualisation.

Notes

[1] The surrealist enlargements of the cinematic experience (as the dinner of Breton in a movie theatre during a projection) brings to mind Gene Youngblood's famous concept of expanded cinema which refers to the installation practices of video artists that expand the cinematic experience beyond the screen and the projected image. Of course, the enlargement in Lowenstein's account refers to the mental-psychical involvement and addition of the viewer, whilst Youngblood refers to the change in the cinematic apparatus—probably this is the reason why this direction has not been explored in the book.

[2] It is somehow surprising that this term is not mentioned by Lowenstein, especially taking into account the fact that the Afterword of the book is constructed around Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010), a prominent example of the genre.

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