

The City and the Critique of Labour in Interwar Cinema: The Surrealist Background of René Clair's Early Films

Jésica Domínguez Muñoz

Investigadora independiente ✉ 

Carmen Sousa Pardo

Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria ✉ 

Irene Valle Corpas

Universidad de Granada ✉ 

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Abstract: This article examines René Clair's contribution to interwar cinema and early Surrealism through a study of his film productions from the 1920s and 1930s. For this purpose, we examine some of his emblematic films as well as other lesser-known works, through various essential categories of Surrealism, drawing on both Walter Benjamin's interpretation of the movement and testimonies from some of its members. We delve deeper into the image of the modern city as portrayed by the avant-garde, seeking similarities and points of divergence between Clair's films and other European cinematographic and photographic contemporary movements. Ultimately, the aim is to determine the politics of time, space, desire and work defined by Clair, and to explore the key strategies he employed when filming the urban phenomenon.

Keywords: René Clair; Surrealism; cinema and city; cinematographic time; historical avant-garde; Walter Benjamin; desire.

ES La ciudad y la crítica al trabajo en el cine de entreguerras: el trasfondo surrealista de las primeras películas de René Clair

Resumen: Este artículo examina la contribución de René Clair al cine de entreguerras y al primer surrealismo a través del estudio de sus producciones cinematográficas de los años veinte y treinta. Para ello, revisaremos algunas de sus películas más emblemáticas, así como otras menos conocidas, mediante diversas categorías esenciales del surrealismo, basándonos tanto en la lectura que Walter Benjamin hace del movimiento como en los testimonios de algunos de sus miembros. Profundizaremos en la imagen de la ciudad moderna que procura la vanguardia buscando similitudes y puntos de divergencia entre las películas de Clair y otras corrientes fílmicas y fotográficas europeas contemporáneas. La intención, finalmente, es determinar qué políticas del tiempo, el espacio, el deseo y el trabajo definió Clair y explorar las principales estrategias que desplegó a la hora de filmar el fenómeno urbano.

Palabras clave: René Clair; surrealismo; cine y ciudad; tiempo cinematográfico; vanguardia histórica; Walter Benjamin; deseo.

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1. Introduction

The expression "avant-garde cinema" represents the topical image of a fast-paced film, distorting points of view, daring editing, stylized and excessive forms or mechanized bodies. The latter would walk around through industrial cities crossed by countless cables, trains and agitated crowds or moving through phantasmagorical spaces designed to prefigure a chimerical, desired or feared future. Likewise, when avant-garde cinema is invoked, it becomes difficult not to think of an accelerated temporality and a collective subject shaped by

the cadences imposed by works and machines, by the rush of modern life, and by the urgencies of revolution. This is what happens in some of the titles signed by Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, Walter Ruttmann, László Moholy-Nagy or Fritz Lang, in prodigious 1920s, a decade of cinematic creativity both in commercial and in avant-garde film.

From a socio-economic perspective, the 1920s and 1930s were years of change and transition. Europe tried to recover after World War I but the economic instability and the fragility of democratic governments led to the rise of dictatorships and the onset of a new era of total war. In this context, a tension arose in the approach to technological progress and mutations: between those who valued the forces of the future (Constructivist avant-gardes) and those who conceived of time as much more bifurcated between past and present (above all Surrealism in all its variations). Surrealists' temporalities became more subjective, with softer cadences, not abstract or segmented, but closer to memory or emerging from a walk through the city. Likewise, in this movement, the experience of the urban space would not reproduce the dynamics of the machine. Even when operating in a city full of all the progress of modernity (from cars to the telegraph), the gaze would always search for the unusual, the ludic, the instinctual or the supernatural, through walks that follow free association, the dictates of chance or instinctive desire. Then, other names could come into view, those that strongly influenced the emergence of that interwar cinema, such as Jean Cocteau, Alberto Cavalcanti, Jean Vigo, Joris Ivens, Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí or Germaine Dulac.

Among the plethora of authors who gave rise to Surrealist cinema, the French filmmaker René Clair stands out, as his early works fully capture the political aspirations that guided the movement and set him apart from the rest. However, most studies have often sidelined Clair in favor of figures like Cocteau or Buñuel, known for a more dreamlike style. This may be because some of Clair's films from his early stage—we are referring to *The Phantom of the Moulin Rouge* (*Le Fantôme du Moulin-Rouge*, 1925), *The Crazy Ray* (*Paris qui dort*, 1925), *Under the Roofs of Paris* (*Sous les toits de Paris*, 1930), *The Million* (*Le million*, 1931) or *Freedom for Us* (*À nous la liberté*, 1931)—present conventional, linear and logical narrative appearance at first glance, far from that enigmatic assortment of images coming from the unconscious that are offered by his companions. It may simply be that his name was entirely reduced to *Entre'acte* (Clair, 1924), probably the most well-known Dadaist film. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the extent to which the rebellious energies that Dadaism and Surrealism imprint on this author persist well into the 1930s. The clarity of some of his lesser-known works has also been overlooked when considering the group's political positions, particularly in their critique of everyday life, work, and the interwar city. The purpose of this article is to fill this historiographical gap by analyzing some of Clair's films and relate them to the broader artistic context (photographic, pictorial) of the Surrealist movement. From a historical distance, we might even argue that these films function as archives of resistance against the dynamics of labor exploitation today and neoliberal subjectivities.

2. Against vital and temporal alienation, the singularity of Surrealism

To this end, it is necessary to make a few brief preliminary notes on some of the poetic and political presuppositions of Surrealism. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, while calling on the testimony of several of its main protagonists, we approach the revision of these films in relation to the idea of Surrealist liberation. To this end, we will draw on Benjamin's ideas about the movement—and in particular on the Surrealist concept of liberation—as well as on the accounts of some of its key figures. Walter Benjamin discovered Surrealism in 1926 and was fascinated by it. So much so that he dedicates a text to the enchantment that arouses in him: *Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia* (1929). It is a poetic essay meant to be a proclamation in which the philosopher celebrates the practices of this group of poets. Benjamin finds in their experimental, magical and libertarian dimensions of life an essential quality for producing a true revolutionary consciousness, that is, one that does not forget any aspect, much less those that concern the psychic and corporal dimensions, conscious and unconscious, of the subject. Love, language, emotions, affections or the experience of time and other elements of the "life of the spirit"—as Georg Simmel would have written in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903)—are decisive for any project of social transformation. They had been historically neglected by much of the Western theoretical tradition but not by this clique of eccentric intellectuals. Benjamin saw in Surrealist works a huge dialectical potential based on their capacity for the real liberation of the subject: "To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution— this is the project about which Surrealism circles in all its books and enterprises" (1979, 236). The Surrealists' desire to place creation at the service of liberating human potential—a conception of freedom that went far beyond the bourgeoisie's restricted understanding—led Benjamin to argue that they were the only ones who truly grasped the tasks set out in the *Communist Manifesto*. In his writings, the philosopher mentioned various forms of drunkenness (*Rausch*) such as dreaming, loving, reading, walking, pessimism, drugs or old-fashioned objects. Through them it would be possible to destabilize the present by identifying it with the repression of unconscious impulses. Any political effort would be nothing if life was not changed and the desire to experience the pleasures of life was not awakened: "There are no solutions outside of love" synthesized André Breton (1955, 81). "There is only one thing in the world that I have never been able to ridicule, and that is pleasure", admitted Jacques Rigaut (cited in Dupuis 1999, 51).

In essence, Benjamin saw in the work of the Breton circle a way to disrupt the alienation imposed by commodified life, discerning a new anthropological materialism. Through friction with the world and its objects, man was driven to intoxicating actions that helped awaken him. The problem, already raised by Karl Marx and redefined by Benjamin, is that capitalism reduced people to mechanical bodies entrapped by economic value and utility. In this rationalized system, there was little room for imagination, play, dreams, or other non-functional human expressions.

This is precisely the question that the Surrealists denounced and that led them to distance themselves from the different national communist parties but also from the rest of the avant-gardes, most of them involved in the cult of the modern world and its fast speeds but blind to its most sinister aspects. In the *First Surrealist Manifesto*, Breton lamented:

Man, that inveterate dreamer, daily more discontent with his destiny, has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use, objects that his nonchalance has brought his way, or that he has earned through his own efforts, almost always through his own efforts, for he has agreed to work. [...] This is because he henceforth belongs body and soul to an imperative practical necessity. [...] It is pointless to add that experience itself has found itself increasingly circumscribed. It paces back and forth in a cage from which it is more and more difficult to make it emerge (1969 3, 4-10).

Breton's followers opposed the prosaic character of bourgeois life and its sacrosanct values (work, family, morals). Their warning about the threat of destruction looming on the horizon of progress was based on the mistakes of World War I. Benjamin and the Surrealists held divergent views on time—and on other matters, such as sleeping and waking or the mechanisms of “profane illumination”—but they shared a common critique of progress and the empty temporality characteristic of capitalism¹. For their part, with the intention of addressing the crisis of the individual (his alienation, his existential loneliness, his powerlessness in the face of machines and the reification of social relations), the Surrealists, unlike the utopian vision of Constructivism or the Bauhaus, distrusted utopian, political or metaphysical projections of the future. They preferred instead to operate with what was at hand, reusing ordinary objects (old or new), sometimes simply stopping their usual function or assigning them a new use. This distrust of the future, in favor of a faith in the revolutionary reach of magical experiences in the present, made them notice the violent component that was hidden behind development. Development was based on rapid cycles of production and consumption and on the sinister conversion of body into merchandise (hence the systematic work in Surrealism with the automaton, the doll, the mannequin or the dismembered body, as opposed to the heroism of the mechanical and rational man of other avant-gardes). Their conception of revolutionary change did not imply a flight forward but, rather, an arrest of history:

Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake (Benjamin 2003, 402).

Since the Surrealists keep on confusing moral non-conformity and proletarian revolution, instead of following the train of the modern world, they seek to roll back to a historical moment in which this confusion was still possible (Benjamin cit. in Ibarlucía 2017, 153).

Although Benjamin's view is not entirely identical to that of the Surrealists, he finds in them an enrichment of Marxist culture by introducing other dimensions of time into the revolutionary cause, rather than limiting the struggle to a futuristic utopia as the possibility. In Surrealist works, time is anti-progressive and experiential, as Surrealist artists conceive the subject's true life as emerging from the encounter between two causal chains: the self in contact with the world, in a concrete here and now of experience, from which an instantaneous spark—the marvelous—arises. For both André Breton (1924) and Louis Aragon (1926), the “marvelous” is the irruption of a higher reality—or “surreality”—into the everyday world, which breaks with Cartesian and utilitarian logics. Thus, the images Surrealists produced were full of stopped, broken or diluted clocks, useless to regulate time. They also included relics of bourgeois luxury that were satirized to show their reverse or emblems of industry and science they appear converted into dysfunctional gadgets or pointed out as the origin of the neurosis suffered by citizens. Like the portraits of Francis Picabia and Hannah Höch in which body fragments merge with machinery to depict human depersonalization and machine anthropomorphization, or Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, which use everyday objects. Duchamp used tubes, grinders, and bicycle wheels not to glorify progress, but to allude to sexual drives or the simple pleasure of manipulation. He claimed he composed his works for the delight of “seeing it spinning... a kind of opening of avenues towards other things far from everyday life” (cited in Ramírez 2006, 31). This indicates, in the words of Juan Antonio Ramírez, a desire to propose a “utopian-burlesque alternative to the physical-chemical sciences, and their productive manipulation after the Industrial Revolution” (2006, 194).

¹ Perhaps the main difference is that Benjamin emphasizes the need for dialectic of awakening. Throughout his life, Benjamin would develop a complex philosophy of time. In Benjamin's work, the sources for articulating a philosophy of time include, among others, the Jewish tradition—a deeply religious conception of time—which is absent in the Surrealists. For more on these differences see Michael Löwy (2005).

3. The dream city, time and desire. The surreal background of René Clair's early films

The first works of René Clair are completely soaked in this atmosphere of mistrust towards the world born in interwar capitalism. Thus, one by one, all these core elements of the Dadaist and Surrealist ideology can be found. At first, the insignia of bourgeois positivism and its exaltation of industrious work also take on a threatening aspect in his films, often related to war scenes. When this is not the case, those aspects will be mocked through characters who incite rebellion against their aggressive discipline or cry out for laziness, cacophony or eroticism. As Paul Lafargue, the philosopher and son-in-law of Marx, who was extolled by this group of artists, said: "This delusion is the love of work, the furious passion for work, pushed even to the exhaustion of the vital force of the individual [...] The impulses of men will be given a free rein" (2000, 5-6). Following this feeling, a good part of Clair's films, at least those from the 20s and 30s, are a celebration of freedom, happiness and life, understood as an experience of shared enjoyment of the gifts of nature, such as states of intoxication and reverie in which to let oneself be carried away by love (even when it turns out to be tragic). What his works are about—and a hint of this may be the fact that some of his cinematography is based on the musical genre—is forces and relationships that are considered genuinely human: love, friendship, partying, camaraderie, and the imagination; yet, in those times of utilitarianism, these were falling apart under the pressure of utilitarian values. As for the conception of time and the look at the city, they will consequently find themselves with these desires for liberation. As Nancy Watanabe has argued, Clair's films present a world enslaved by chronological time, yet his characters can experience "extra temporal moments" in which they liberate themselves from clock time to achieve freedom and self-realisation (1969, 428, 436).

As said, in relation to the first of these coordinates:

In his films [...] the world is a slave to chronological time; it sets its schedule of thought and action according to the persistent tick of the time machine [...]. The individual has no control over the time machine, but he can experience certain extra temporal moments in which he liberates himself from the world and its clock time to achieve freedom and self-realization (Watanabe 1969, 428, 436).

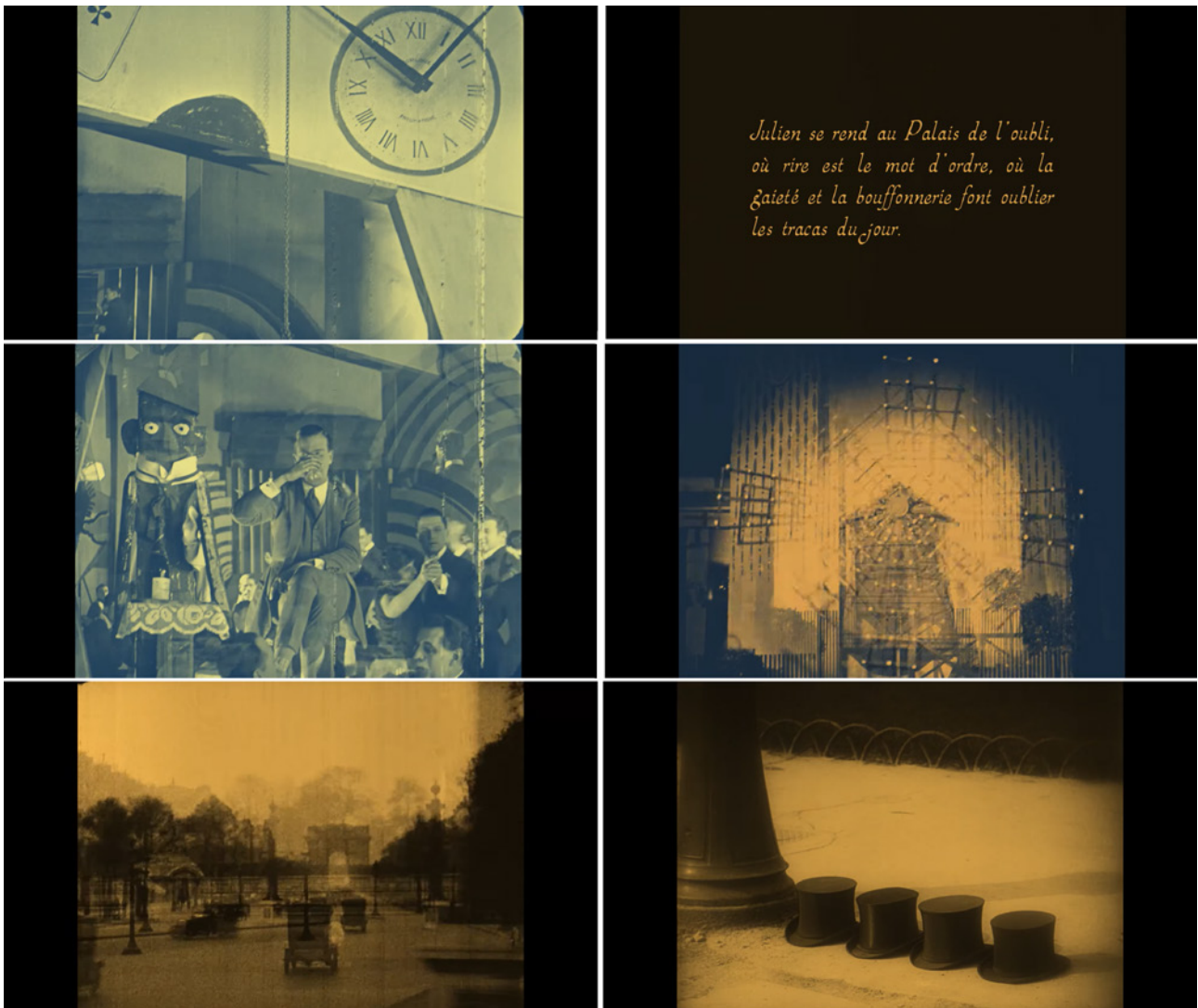


Fig. 1. Frames from *The Phantom of the Moulin-Rouge* by René Clair, 1925.

Finally, the space where these moments of epiphany take place, these marvelous encounters (frequently provoked by humor or desire) is the changing Paris between the wars, the setting for much of Clair's cinematography throughout the 1930s until his arrival in Hollywood in 1940. In the Paris depicted by Clair, all the brilliant icons of the *belle époque* modernity are present. However, they are invoked to provoke burlesque jokes, impossible situations or fantastic atmospheres. Actively, the Eiffel Tower, to which he dedicates a short film, *La Tour* (1928), will be the epicenter of the games and loves of the band of friends who are the protagonists of that Paris that sleeps, which we will comment on immediately. Or the *Moulin Rouge* concert hall which appears repeatedly in *The Phantom of the Moulin-Rouge*, from 1925, a silent comedy that narrates the ups and downs of a man who goes to a spiritualist to cure his depression. The pseudo-psychologist manages to detach his body from his soul, so that the latter, now freed, gives itself to the most dissolute fun in the capital's bars, where the soul finds all sorts of nonsense: two guys play chess with plates, cars walk alone as well as hats, which multiply by some infused science, a fish tries to survive in a cage, a man argues with a doll that seems to have come out of any Cabaret Voltaire performance, while the blades of the windmill the well-known party room move madly as if they were a clock gone mad, intoxicated by the maddening atmosphere that is lived in the room. Between cars and trams, the phantom soul of the protagonist wanders through the boulevards of a hallucinated Paris.

Next to the Tower or the Moulin Rouge, numerous views of squares and streets of the noble areas are also recorded by his camera. In *Entre'acte* (1924), the emblems of the most bourgeois Paris will be the perfect setting to vent incoherent actions: a clique of bourgeois pompadours runs jumping for no apparent reason through the Champ de Mars, another entourage does the same through other avenues following a coffin pulled by a camel, at the risk of their top hats being blown off and at almost the same speed as cars, planes and ships² are advancing, boxer's fists shaking against the background of the Opera House, the body of a dancer moves in a powerful low angle, while on a panoramic view of the city, different aggressive gadgets emerge, cannons, targets or shotguns that, critically, "serve to create a metaphor of war" (Lope-Salvador 2018, 158). On those rooftops, with the hours upside down, eccentric characters appear who play chess on them, jump or fight vigorously—as will happen later in *The Imaginary Voyage* (*Le Voyage imaginaire*, 1926), in which two bank employees they chase themselves out of control through the vaults of Notre Dame to win the love of a lady. As it is known, *Entre'acte* was conceived to be included in the Dadaist-inspired ballet *Relâche* (meaning rest or postponement) by Picabia.

The pleasure of laughing, aimless movement paralysis, the discrediting of the value of the purely utilitarian and this kind of systematic deconstruction of the elements of the bourgeois city reached a paroxysm in the second great title, *The Crazy Ray* or *Paris Asleep* (*Paris qui dort*, 1924). This medium-length film, like *The Phantom of the Moulin-Rouge*; and so many other films of the period, could be described as a science fiction story set against the great metropolis. As in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, Robert Wiene, 1920), in *Nosferatu* (*Nosferatu. Eine Symphonie des Grauens*, Friedrich Murnau, 1922), in *Metropolis* (*Metropolis*, Fritz Lang, 1927) or *Aelita* (Yakov Protazanov, 1924), they also appear here the ticking of the clock or machines and mad scientists, although Clair's approach contrasts with that of these authors.

Paris Asleep is a fable that tells the story of a night guard at the Eiffel Tower who wakes up one morning to discover that the entire city has fallen into a deep sleep. The clocks do not work, and everything appears to be still—something common in Surrealism.



Fig. 2. Above left: *The Persistence of Memory*, Salvador Dalí, 1931; Up in the centre: *Hôpital des Quinze-Vingts*, Eli Lotar, 1928. Top left: *Enigma of the Hour*, Giorgio de Chirico, 1911. Below left: *Frames of Under the Roofs of Paris*, 1930, and *The Crazy Ray*, 1924, René Clair.

² Years later, Luis Buñuel will use the metaphor of a race to depict the bourgeois desire for progress and competition, through wealthy men walking down the middle of a road in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (*Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie*, 1972).

The guard quickly comes down to see what could have happened and what he finds, shocked, are empty streets, abandoned buildings, parks and squares that are disturbingly quiet, deserted. After a while, he finds five other people who, having just arrived from a plane trip, have not been affected by the strange phenomenon and who, as him, find themselves the only inhabitants of this ghostly city. They soon realize that the absence of people is equivalent to the absence of rules, to the suspension of the law (of the moral law that, for example, regulates marriage relations, of the law of circulation of money and of police rules). They can do whatever they want without assuming any responsibility for their actions. Dispensed from obedience, they embrace chaotic sensual impulses, embodying the idealized freedom cherished by Dadaists and Surrealists. They are free to give up rational self-control.

The film functions like an anarchist performance. Characters invade private space, they come and go, they play, they run around and everything takes on the aura of a dream. As if they were children again, they spend their first days dancing, holding hands to laugh and jumping in circles, they forget their jobs, go to various restaurants to feast without paying a franc or indulge in all kinds of entertainment anywhere that they fancy. This childlike play embodies what Benjamin called *Rausch*, a state of intoxication that disrupts the alienated rhythms of capitalist time. Thus, they play cards, kiss each other or get some fresh air between the framework of the Eiffel Tower, which they climb then jump down one of its irons as if it were a slide or enjoy its wonderful views. There is a moment when, resting on one of the landings, a woman, the only one among this group of lucky ones, cleans her tunic and throws the loose threads into the air, in a gesture of lassitude or total *ennui*.

The Eiffel Tower, once an emblem of France's industrial and military power, is reimagined as a type of playground, stripped of functionality. It would not be the last time that Surrealism speculated on the tower stripped of its functionality. In 1939, Raoul Ubac depicted Parisian monuments like the Eiffel Tower and the Opera as fossils of a lost future.

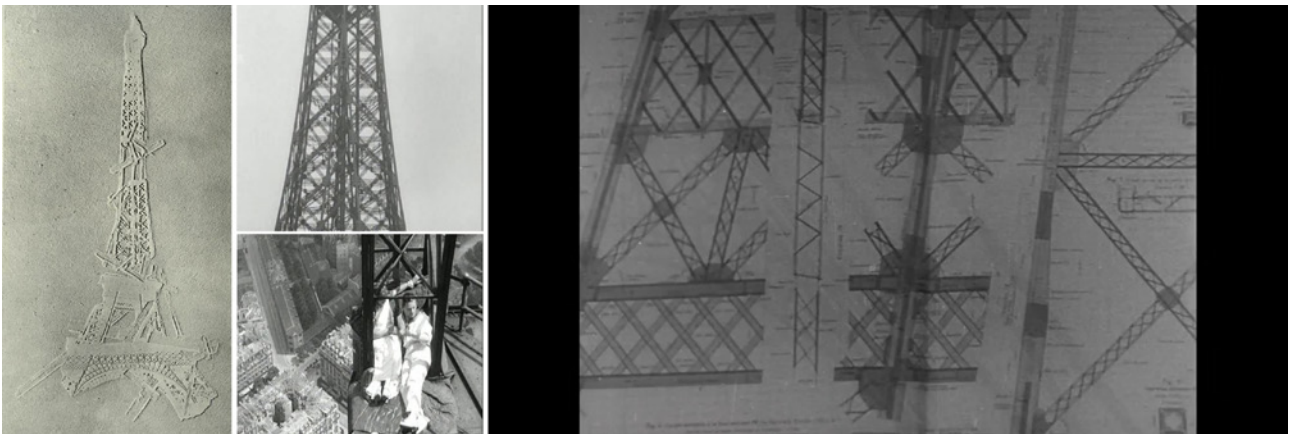


Fig. 3. On the left: Raoul Ubac, *Fossil of the Eiffel Tower*, 1939. In the middle and on the right: Frames of *The Tower*, 1928, and *The Crazy Ray*, 1924, René Clair.

Likewise, the petrified squares and streets are reminiscent of de Chirico's claustrophobic scenes where time stands still. This temporary detention is what makes the heart of the technological city crumble:

The tower and the technologies that converge in it work not as sites of intoxicating speed but as islands of englaciation from whose summits even the unfrozen city slows to a crawl. [...] When the clock is stopped in the film, money becomes meaninglessly plentiful [...]. A general equivalent is shown to depend on its temporal analogue clock time, so that when the clock no longer provides a common and transactable reference for time and velocity, money loses its character as supermedium of exchange. [...] Clair's crazy ray is not just the camera's onscreen avatar but also the materialization of capitalism as the ultimate speed technology (Saint-Amour 2016, 228-230).

Nevertheless, once the impostures of work and modern life (represented in all those machines, cars, bicycles, factories and authorities now suspended) are stopped, the energies are discharged. The most aggressive impulses don't take long to appear: two of the men who are members of the group feel strongly jealous and fight over the only woman left "alive"; a few others are hopelessly bored and want to wake up from this lethargy. Together, they find out that a strange scientist has found the solution to put the city back on track in a beam that is activated through a lever. Only, having restarted the urban movement and the circuit of monetary exchange, they realize that the old problems (the prevalence of money, moral hypocrisy, boredom or social inequality) emerge unscathed and, from time to time, stop it again. This device that controls time, in addition to functioning as an allegory for the mechanism of cinema itself, speaks to us of a dialectic between movement and stillness. And perhaps also between the erotic and the thanatic, desire and violence, the organic and the inorganic which again links this film with the central musings of Surrealism.

At all events, it will not be the only case in which Clair thinks about human alienation understood as surrender to the crudest materialism. Subsequently, he will reflect again on this *promesse de bonheur* in relation to dogmas, morality or work in *Freedom for Us* (1931). This work narrates the escape of two convicts from prison that end up in another prison: the factory. The two protagonists will put all their efforts into freeing themselves from the many ties that await them, also in “jobs, offices, homes”, as one of them complains. Even in schools, where an authoritarian teacher teaches that “work is compulsory” because “it means freedom” (terrible anticipation of the “Arbeit macht frei” in Auschwitz), the viewer understands that the children are being molded into future workers, unless they rebel. This is what happens to the little ones in *Zero for Conduct* (*Zéro de conduite: jeunes diables au collège*), the film that Jean Vigo will sign two years later, infected with a similar anarchist spirit. That is why, against all of them—teachers, mayors, businessmen, foremen or bankers—the two friends in *Freedom for Us* decide to rebel, either by escaping from the production line to follow in the footsteps of their beloved or by going to the meadow next to the factory and then sleep for a while (where they are arrested). They also dissent it by plotting riots in the courtyard or throwing eggs at the director’s image and other such antics. For one of them this is a rebellion against himself, given that the director is, in fact, one of these two friends, who had become a great capitalist. He also feels that all his luxuries produce boredom, that the machines are ready to work and that it is preferable to leave everything behind and return to the fields and rivers with his friend, to sing, to fish, to dance: “Soon we will taste the fruit. Friends, let us enjoy our laziness among sunny skies. Wander and sing. Let’s get carried away by this infinite euphoria. Just a kiss to start. My whole being is exalted”. This image of the dance, the riot and the kiss was dear to the Clair of these years. In *The Million* (1931), which begins and ends with the same image of an entire neighborhood dancing and singing, Michel, a debt-ridden painter, finds himself immersed in a bizarre adventure to retrieve a winning lottery ticket. His job is never enough to secure his future and it constantly gets in the way of his love for his girl. In Clair’s films, it seems as if work is irremediably opposed to the joys of life.



Fig. 4. Frames of *Freedom for Us* and *Under the Roofs of Paris*, 1930, by René Clair.

Without actually offering a solution, the rejection of the excesses of work, the real opposite of those libidinal and creative excesses, runs completely through the Surrealist movement. From the writings of Roger Caillois or Georges Bataille in defense of parties, passions and unproductive spending—“Eroticism cannot be

treated independently of the history of work” (Bataille 1987, 12)–, to the Duchampian consideration of eroticism as the only essential affection for existence, as obsessive as his desire to never hold a salaried job. Like Clair's heroes, Duchamp always showed rejection of the organization of life time according to work:

Might it be possible to live as a mere occupant, paying nothing and possessing nothing? [...] This brings us back to the right to laziness suggested by Paul Lafargue in a book that really struck me around 1912. It still seems to me today quite legitimate to challenge the forced labour that even new-borns are subjected to. [...] You cannot afford to be a young man who doesn't do a thing. Who doesn't work? You can't live without working, which is a terrible thing (cited in Lazzarato, 2014, 10, 5).

Besides sustaining the plot, the rejection of work shapes the portrayal of the city in Clair's early films. Compared to the feeding frenzy of speed, his works film urban tours shaped by chance or desire, focusing on everyday details and the experience of space, which is labyrinthine and not hierarchical. From *Entre'acte* to *The Crazy Ray*, Clair offers a solid alternative to the urban symphony model. This genre, which was so prolific during the 1920s and 1930s in experimental cinema linked to constructivism or expressionism, was born as a way of accounting for the organization of daily life in the great metropolises. These films proposed a trip through the different parts of the cities depending on the work activity: always making a stop at the factory, the warehouses, the skyscrapers, or the large squares where a compact crowd was concentrated and ready to take a transport back home after the working day (Dimendberg, 2003). With unusual angles and mechanical movement, these types of films used to be celebrations of the new era of industry, in which the city was perceived as a constellation of gears that never stops. In films like the aforementioned–*Metropolis*, *Berlin. Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin. Die Symphonie der Großstadt*, Walter Ruttmann, 1927), *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kino-apparatom*, Dziga Vertov, 1929) or *Dynamik Der Gross-Stad: Ein Filmisches Experiment* (Moholy-Nagy, 1927) to mention the most influential–the model of the machine city made for production is imposed, as Manuel Delgado notes:

Using the same narrative scheme as James Joyce's *Ulysses*–the cycle of any given urban day–, all these films deal with the passage of time, the rhythms of the day, the succession of hours, hinting at the cataclysm that it would suppose that the urban cadences stopped suddenly, in the way that happens in *The Crazy Ray*, by René Clair (1999, 71).



Fig. 5. Top left: Frames from *Aelita*, Yakov Protazanov, 1924; On the right and the middle frame on the left: *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang, 1927 and below left: *Berlin. Symphony of a Great City*, Walter Ruttmann, 1927.

If time is the inexhaustible ticking of the working day, the gaze in urban symphonies is not human, but that of the disembodied camera eye. From above, amidst traffic, trains, cables, and smokestacks, individuals are scarcely visible, mere parts of a hectic mass that constitutes a living body before its inhabitants: “This concatenation of daily activities produces the city as a transparent, unified organism with a circadian cycle, thereby constructing it as a subject” (Stein 2013, 3).

As previously mentioned, Clair and some of his colleagues, close to the Surrealist group, filmed the city in a distinctly different way, as a place ready for experimentation (visual, psychic, erotica, politics). The city becomes an anthropological environment, inhabited by diverse beings, including the most disadvantaged and observed from unusual perspectives, attentive to the singular, the different or what can create a poetic effect: the drops that fall to the ground and deform the profile of the buildings or the Magrittian agglomeration of umbrellas in *Regen* (Joris Ivens, 1929). In the shots of these films, always anchored in a human point of view, we find the same peripheral suburbs and Baudelairean beings that, according to Andreas Huyssen, Aragon evoked in his writing:

Aragon’s Paris experiences are highly self-conscious, eroticized, and full of social commentary about urban planning and the transformation of Paris. [...] Aragon sought out a modern mythology not in the glittering commercialized new arcades of the Champs Élysées or in the new technologies but in marginal urban spaces destined for destruction and rife with political protest (2015, 186-7, 190).

This other perspective seeks to pose the camera at all the points of the urban geography that may have some poetic or political interest echoing the Benjaminian figure of the “ragpicker,” who gathers the discarded remnants, the leftovers of Modernity. Markets, slaughterhouses or rubbish dumps are the settings of his works—as in Georges Franju’s short films. In that regard, Clair’s affiliation with this trend leads him not only to propose completely irreverent plots when dealing with the icons of the Parisian center, but also not to neglect the popular districts—proof of this are *Under the Roofs of Paris* or *The Million*. In the way of photographers Eugène Atget, Brassai or his friend Eli Lotar, Clair walks around (or evokes in the study) these neighborhoods looking for those exceptional moments of life. He films them between reality and fable, from risky angles (from the ground or the picturesque roofs emerging in the middle of an enigmatic fog). He also isolates details that are very popular with the symbolic Surrealist (shoes, hats, gloves) to denaturalise them or follows a couple in love in the footsteps.



Fig. 6. First two images on the left: frames from *Under the Roofs of Paris*, 1930. Third from the left: Photograph by Eli Lotar. On the right: Frame by *Ménéilmontant*, Dimitri Kirsanoff, 1926.



Fig. 7. The two columns on the left: frames from *Under the Roofs of Paris*, René Clair, 1930. Two images on the right: photographs by Brassai and Eli Lotar.

This perspective is shared with the photographers of Surrealism, who transformed the urban document into an inventory of the uncanny. This is evident, for instance, in the 1929 postcard collection organized by the Surrealist group, which used photography to rescue mundane spaces from various European cities. By de-contextualizing these trivial squares and corners, photography does not merely document the city, it transforms it into a catalog of poetic revelations. Thus, the urban space unfolds and becomes eroticized, as surrealism prioritizes inner desire over objective reality. It is a question of seeking “perception of the internal object and the external object” (Breton & Éluard 1990, 101). Therefore, Margaret Flinn assures that “it is thus fairly easy to suggest that Clair made his mark on cinema history precisely because of these retreats from reality, the willful construction and representation of the non-real” (2014, 40).

4. To conclude

Among the essential keys to understanding that particular aesthetic that germinated around Surrealist cinema are freedom and ennui, passions and the re-enchantment of the city, the ephemerality of pleasure, and the powers of sleep or the suspension of temporary normality. Also central to this aesthetic were satire with the hallmarks of the bourgeoisie and fables involving machines that serve purposes contrary to their original functions. And at its core: desire as a force against the material alienation of life. René Clair was actively involved in this movement for a longer period than the brief moment that gave rise to *Entre'acte*. This attitude can easily be traced throughout the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, it is a gaze that, although rooted in the past, has had several afterlives (Ross, 2002). This longing to stop everything and start a more pleasant life will reappear in the France of 1968, political and cultural phenomenon influenced by Surrealism. During the 1960s, a golden age for “history from below” and for a form of Marxism focused on studying everyday life, these questions about how productivity or the capitalist city—designed to facilitate the flow of workers and consumers—shape the experience of time would resurface in the writings of E. P. Thompson, Henri Lefebvre, and Guy Debord. But it is interesting to note that the latter two were very close to Surrealism during their formative years. In 1968, one of the chants sung by the insurgents was, in fact, “We stopped everything and think”. “There were not a few possibilities that opened up by retaining time: starting to play, to wish or delight in a surrounding reality that with the delirious daily rhythm of work had passed unnoticed, and thus recover a lost erotic of existence” (Valle Corpas, 2023, 585, 590). Even today, this idea holds great potential for our present, likewise afflicted by productivity, alienation, the fragility of time and a lack of collective experiences. The poetic and political value of Surrealism can be reclaimed as a form of resistance to the oppressive modes of capitalist life today. It becomes clear that the desire for emancipation that hides behind Clair’s cinematography continues nowadays, unscathed, because the major problem to which it points (the theft of life time for the time of work) has not yet been resolved. In fact, it is these very complaints about the precariousness of time, the meaninglessness of history, and these very calls to stop the machine—the machine into which neoliberalism has turned each of us, where our bodies, attention, and desires, everything, have been put into production today, pushing exploitation one step further—that mark the pages of numerous current essays³. Formulating a cure for time, dreaming of another era, slowing down, these are gestures inherited from surrealism. It is therefore worth returning to these old images, and paying attention to these attempts to create a different time, due to their critical nature and their ability to bring up issues that are still very much ours.

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³ From Byung-Chul Han to Bernard Stiegler, Marc Augé, Jacques Rancière, Wendy Brown, Remedios Zafra, Eduard Espluga, Marina Garcés or Jonathan Crary. Also, Amerindian perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro, Ailton Krenak) or queer studies (Elizabeth Freeman, Renate Lorenz, Sarah Ahmed) among many others horizons have addressed this topic.

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