

DADA, SURREALISM, AND THE CINEMATIC EFFECT

By R. Bruce Elder

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Reviewed by John W. Locke

If you have an interest in any of the following six areas, you should read this book: DADA, Dada films, Surrealism, Surrealist films, Lawrence (Larry) Jordan, or logic and mathematics in relation to developments in early twentieth century art. Many books unfold in expected ways. They often contain scholarship, critical insight, and ideas that advance our understanding of their subjects. A very small number of books also propose positions which truly surprise the reader. Elder's book is an example of the latter type. Why would any Film Studies book contain sections dealing with geometry, logic, and formalist mathematics? How can these discussions illuminate DADA, Surrealism, and the work of Lawrence Jordan? This 700 plus page book answers those questions.

A Film Studies reader may be drawn to the book by its title while working on Marcel Duchamp and *Anemic cinéma* (1926). Using the very comprehensive index, a ten-page discussion of the film can be easily found. Beginning to read this, it becomes clear that the treatment of *Anemic cinéma* is located in the chapter "Dadaism and the Disasters of War," which started some sixty pages earlier. This example illustrates one of the valuable aspects of Elder's book: it is about films and filmmakers, but it is also about the intellectual and art world context in which the films were made in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1960s. Just reading the sections about the films would miss the more extensive positions and arguments presented by the book.

Dada, Surrealism, and the Cinematic Effect is carefully constructed to be read from the first page rather than being used as a reference book. There is an introduction in which Elder states his position with such admirable clarity that it would be presumptuous for me to paraphrase it: "In my consideration of the relations between film and the artistic movements known as DADA and Surrealism, I take two approaches. The first is to explore the cinema's role as a model for those movements and to demonstrate that the film medium has had a privileged status for Dadaists and Surrealists, who wanted to reformulate poetry, theatre, music, and painting so that these forms might take on some of the cinema's virtues. The second is to study how the advanced ideas about art and artmaking proposed by the DADA and Surrealist circles, and the advanced artistic practices to which these ideas gave rise, reciprocally influenced the cinema."

There are numerous examples of new ideas in the book. For example, some conventional approaches to DADA see the movement as resulting from the First World War being a protest movement centered on nihilism. Elder points out a spiritual side of the movement and emphasizes its constructive aims. He also discusses the close relationship between DADA and Surrealism, particularly in regard to spiritual and occult interests. For me, and I think for most Film Studies readers, this is a fresh perspective. Also new for me is the book's deviation from the prevalent view that early cinema was judged to be vulgar and "low"

rather than art because of its popular origin. Elder explains at length how and why cinema was considered to be the "optimal or top art" by Dadaist and Surrealist artists.

Perhaps the most surprising component is the opening chapter: "The Fate of Reason in Modernity." It is possible to be well versed in cinema and the arts and to believe that all is well in areas such as mathematics and science. Surely those are stable areas, making steady progress without turmoil. Elder points out ways in which the foundations of geometry, logic, and mathematics were questioned in the early part of the twentieth century. He writes about these developments in a way that permits Film Studies readers to approach understanding these positions without having a significant background.

One example of these discussions of the foundations of reasoning is the attention given to Gödel's proof. Elder's one-sentence statement of the proof's conclusion is that "in any axiomatic mathematical system there are propositions that cannot be proved or disproved within the axioms of the system." This led to a loss of confidence in the certainty of mathematical truth and systems and was a profound blow to rationality. Elder is able to state the situation in a few pages and includes an appendix with an accessible version of the proof for those of us outside mathematics. Reading this book, and in particular the first three appendices, led me to pull off my bookshelf and consider reading again my copy of *Gödel's Proof* (E. Nagel and J.R. Newman, 1958), which I had not opened since the early 1960s when I was in graduate school working on mathematical linguistics and the philosophy of mathematics. Before Elder's work here, it would have been unimaginable that a Film Studies book would have propelled me to think about the foundations of mathematics. Elder believes that Gödel's deep criticism of the certainty of mathematical reasoning is an overlooked aspect of the growth of a sense of irrationality in the arts in general and in cinema more specifically.

Elder presents a convincing position throughout *DADA, Surrealism, and the Cinematic Effect* about the "collapse of calculative reason" in the early decades of the twentieth century. The components of the weakening of faith in reason are carefully outlined and the reader becomes well prepared for discussions of irrationalism in the following chapters. One key question is the extent to which the change of attitudes towards mathematical areas actually influenced DADA and Surrealism. Elder does not use the word "cause," rather he writes of "parallels" and of critiques "resonating." He does not overstate his position, but he makes his point strongly: "We must understand the process whereby reason was dislodged from its place of authority if we wish to apprehend why the irrationalism of the early twentieth century took on the particular character it did." I am regularly skeptical about the extent to which artists are influenced by intellectual developments outside the arts. How would Dada and Surrealist artists have known about mathematics, geometry, and logic? However, Elder's position is about a prevailing or common feel to the period, rather than a direct causal relation.

After Elder has discussed the ascendancy of a sense of irrationalism in the period of DADA and Surrealism, he begins an extremely thorough analysis of these movements. The argument for cinema's importance for these movements is key to his position. He argues that in this period of irrationalism, the value of

art for these groups depended on art's ability to produce "powerful pneumatic effects" or, more simply stated, powerful spiritual effects. He then shows how cinema was judged to be the most effective producer of these spiritual effects, and thus he has the first two premises of his syllogism establishing cinema as the top art for DADA and Surrealism. It is certainly difficult to think of many Film Studies scholars who state their arguments in the form of syllogisms.

One important film for the arguments mounted in the Dadaism chapter is Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* (1926). The discussion is preceded by information about Ray's photography, "Rayographs," and his film *Le retour à la raison* (1923). This discussion includes further comments about how the claims of reason had been undermined by thinking about mathematics and how this led artists to turn towards questions about the operation of the mind. Elder keeps developing his argument as the book progresses, going on to discuss Ray's *Emak Bakia* at length, and he provides the reader with an appendix describing all the shots, with more commentary.

This is, then, a dense book, full of information and ideas. The chapter "Surrealism and the Cinema," for example, is 306 pages long. It is not a chapter that can be summarized, but I will mention that it should become the primary source for anyone interested in the films of Lawrence Jordan. It includes discussions of Max Ernst's collage novels in relation to Jordan's work and detailed analyses of Jordan's film *Duo Concertantes* (1964). Again, there is a separate appendix about the film. This "Surrealism" chapter reads like a history of ideas: Hegel, Freud, Lacan, Apollinaire.

The substance, usefulness, and occasional polemical quality of Elder's apparatus is particularly noteworthy. *Dada, Surrealism, and the Cinematic Effect* has 101 pages of notes containing 876 individual notes. Many of these notes explore topics of considerable interest, with some at a length of more than a page or even two pages. An example would be a note about the Canadian painter and filmmaker Jack Chambers attached to a discussion of the San Francisco poet Philip Lamantia. Another note explains how the young Michael Snow got a letter of introduction to Marcel Duchamp. Reading the notes gives a sense of the exceptional breadth and depth of Elder's research. That effort should certainly allow him the liberty to add a note about the current state of universities: "Older academics will understand that the universities that now direct their labour, channelling it into one life-denying enterprise or another, have not even a smidgeon of resemblance to the ideal of the university to which they decided to devote their lives; others as well will recognize that the neo-liberal, entrepreneurial university has trivialized thinking."

It could be argued that many Film Studies books have become predictable. Someone else's theory is used to analyze a film or a group of films; new historical documents are discovered; filmmakers are interviewed. This book does not fit neatly into any standard category. Bruce Elder's thinking and his book represent an original and profound new approach to an important area of film studies and art. It is a significant addition to film scholarship.

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