

# Close-Up: *Documents* and *La révolution surréaliste* in 1929

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You may wonder what business this essay has in a collection devoted to the borders of surrealism. *Documents* and *La révolution surréaliste* have often provided printed context for the story of surrealism in Paris. The border that interests me here is precisely the luminous border that frames this narrative — the prismatic fringe of the scholarly spotlight on 1929. What can we see if we step into the light alongside André Breton and Georges Bataille?<sup>1</sup> What becomes visible if we refocus our attention on the pages of *La révolution surréaliste* and *Documents*?<sup>2</sup> What happens if the glow of the spotlight takes the shape of a cinema screen?

*La révolution surréaliste* and *Documents* were certainly in very different seasons of their lives as periodicals by the end of 1929, a year which also saw the publication of a special issue of the Belgian revue *Variétés* dedicated to surrealism in June. Breton and what remained of his company of adherents produced a single issue of their journal in the entire year, which would be its last for this particular surrealist publication. Moreover, the final issue of *La révolution surréaliste* opens with the incendiary “Second manifeste du surréalisme” in which Breton airs his grievances with multiple movement members before expelling them — all of this punctuated with a set of cheeky red lipstick kisses (fig. 1). In contrast, the four issues of *Documents* released in autumn 1929 represent a prolific stretch for the

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<sup>1</sup> I want to be clear that my goal here is not to play favorites nor to reconcile how Bataille and Breton conceived of their relationship, publicly or privately, in 1929 or in posterity. Outside the confines of this text, we could examine an entire library of publications and search for an answer. So, although I cannot cover much beyond the prismatic fringes that concern me here, I wanted to mention that there are several publications recommended by my reviewers and cited in full in the bibliography which were particularly helpful as I revised this essay.

<sup>2</sup> For my analysis, I reference original copies of *Documents* and *La révolution surréaliste* and both volumes of the *Documents* reprint published by Éditions Jean-Michel Place. Since *Documents* is continuously paginated from the first through the last issue, parenthetical citations to texts within that journal generally give only the page number. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

periodical. Many of its most frequently cited contents (to be discussed in detail below) were printed during the time when the final issue of *La révolution surréaliste* was in production. Breton even references a Bataille essay from the September 1929 issue of *Documents* in his “Second manifeste” (16). My goal is to reframe this evidence as well as additional examples of direct address and counterpoint in *La révolution surréaliste* and *Documents*. The hyper-focus on the potential rivalry between Breton and Bataille has blinded us to the intricate construction of a visual-verbal line of inquiry that both journals actually share. To notice this more nuanced conversation, we must return Breton’s and Bataille’s pointed words to the more fluid spaces of their respective periodicals.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: André Breton, “Second Manifeste du Surréalisme,” *La révolution surréaliste*, no. 12, December 1929, p. 1. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

<sup>3</sup> The importance of fluidity, and especially marine fluidity, in this analysis struck me—almost too appropriately—as I reread by the shore Rosalind Krauss’s discussion of the oceanic in “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism” (95). Krauss also certainly discusses surrealism elsewhere, for example in the fourth chapter of *The Optical Unconscious* (149–96).

In fact, acknowledging this fluidity in publications printed in 1929 also returns us to the mission of the surrealists in the mid-1920s, when the nascent movement opened its doors to the public through the Bureau of Surrealist Research. First printed in 1924, *La révolution surréaliste*, like *Documents*, is a deceptively crisp record — or perhaps residue — of amorphous surrealist inquiry. Reading and looking more closely at the contents of *La révolution surréaliste* reveals a similarly unmanageable mélange to that found in *Documents* by 1929. The close-up, I argue, serves as a shorthand for invoking the mutable relationship between observation and understanding that occupied surrealist practice during the movement's more nebulous state, in the years prior to the 1930s when surrealism began to discipline itself.

Here, I focus on a smattering of pages pressed in autumn 1929. But I have also enlisted the aid of select stills from motion pictures to help us simulate the durational observation that these printed examples require as their close-up imagery magnifies a tension between visual perception and cognition. The printed close-ups in *La révolution surréaliste* and *Documents* do not merely reference their filmic counterparts but also require readers to rethink how and why obscurely magnified imagery appears within a graphic context that initially presents itself as straightforward.

I read these surrealist periodicals as a form of what I call handheld cinema. Like projected cinema, handheld cinema is a medium that comes into being through ephemeral interactions between makers and observers. Although their material components are displaced from cinema, both *La révolution surréaliste* and *Documents* borrow the use of close-up imagery from concurrent techniques in filmmaking.<sup>4</sup> Both periodicals likewise depend upon reader reception to gain coherence through paracinematic events — however temporary.

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Before positioning the particular function of the close-up within surrealist practice in Paris in the late 1920s, the critical legacy and prevalence of the term deserves consideration.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the literary magazine titled *Close Up* appeared in print

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<sup>4</sup> Not all twentieth-century print culture is a part of handheld cinema. Nor do all handheld cinemas function precisely as these examples. Moreover, because handheld cinema is a subset of modern print culture, it is also technologically distinct from film and therefore paracinematic. See my article "Displaced Maneuvers" for more on handheld cinema's displacement on material level from recognizable forms of cultural entertainment like the magazine and the film.

<sup>5</sup> For an example of a twenty-first-century exhibition that takes up this task, see Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, *Close-Up: Proximity and De-Familiarisation in Art, Film and Photography*. For an article that more explicitly focuses on cinema, see Mary Ann Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema."

between 1927 and 1933. While based in Britain, editor-in-chief Kenneth Macpherson and assistant editor Bryher were devoted to discussing the potential for cinema to reach across borders, their ambitions not unlike those of certain surrealists.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, before the movement coalesced in 1924, founding surrealist Louis Aragon wrote about potential for cinematic magnification to transform the pedestrian into the poetic in his 1918 essay “On décor,” originally published in *Le film* (51).

I would like to spend some additional time with a figure whose writing on the close-up in the early 1920s would have been familiar to the surrealists and perhaps even shaped Breton’s conception of surrealism.<sup>7</sup> Filmmaker and critic Jean Epstein first published “Grossissement” (“Magnification”) in his book *Bonjour cinéma* in 1921.<sup>8</sup> Although Epstein’s text can be summarized simply as an attempted description of the function of the close-up in cinema, the details of his discussion reveal subtle effects of the technique that are worth exploring at length as they include the vocabulary that I will soon apply to the surrealists. In *Documents* and *La révolution surréaliste*, Epstein’s emphasis on the close-up as an undulation in cinematic temporality comes into contact with the magnified material fragments found in texts by Walter Benjamin, a fellow contemporary of the surrealists in late-1920s Paris.

The first, seemingly superficial lines of Epstein’s essay introduce the elusive qualities that he expands upon in subsequent pages as he proclaims, “Jamais je ne pourrais dire combien j’aime les gros plans américains. Nets. Brusquement l’écran étale un visage et le drame, en tête à tête, me tutoie et s’enfle à des intensités imprévues. Hypnose” (93) ‘I will never find the way to say how much I love American close-ups. Point blank. A head suddenly appears on screen and drama, now face to face, seems to address me personally and swells with an extraordinary intensity. I am hypnotized’ (235). Here, Epstein admits the inadequacy of his text while still managing to convey the importance of the phenomenon he has set out to explain. He also introduces two ostensibly contradictory qualities that define the cinematic close-up: directness and intangibility.

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<sup>6</sup> Amidst a discussion that spotlights Bryher’s desire for cinema to “activate the spectator” through comparisons between her film criticism and the approaches of her collaborators H.D. and Macpherson, Susan McCabe suggests that “psychoanalysis itself is filmic: there is ample vocabulary connecting the two fields: close ups, interior monologue, flashbacks, recurrent images” (23). For a thematic overview, also see *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Christophe Wall-Romana’s chapter “Breton’s Surrealism, or How to Sublimate Cinépoetry” in *Cinépoetry*. Also, see Lastra for further connections, including to the film *Un chien andalou* to be discussed in detail later in this essay.

<sup>8</sup> Epstein quotations in this section translated in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Richard Abel.

On the close-up's relationship to the cinematic medium as whole, though, Epstein is consistent, succinctly defining this dynamic late in his essay: "L'émotion cinématographique est donc particulièrement intense. Le gros plan surtout la déclanche [sic]" 'The cinematic feeling is therefore particularly intense. More than anything else, the close-up relates it' (107; 240). The difficulty in describing the process of magnification is thus related to the more complex issue of codifying cinematic affect in general. Nonetheless, a defining feature of the close-up — its fleeting unpredictability — connects magnification to the quality that Epstein argues should shape all of cinema: *photogénie*. Defining cinema primarily in terms of time rather than space, he writes, "La photogénie se conjugue aux futur et impératif. Elle n'admet pas l'état" 'The photogenic is conjugated in the future and in the imperative. It does not allow for stasis' (94-95; 236). Magnification may ameliorate our ability to see surface detail, but the magnified cinematic image should ideally register as pure emotional stimulus rather than material objects.

Still, the emotional stimulus of close looking requires us to ignore, or mentally obscure, portions of our immediate surroundings. This means that magnified vision is always incomplete, always a result of a severing of the continuous picture. Epstein describes the optimal way to incorporate the close-up into a filmic sequence: "Comme un promeneur se baisse pour mieux voir une herbe, un insect ou un caillou, l'objectif doit enclaver dans une vue de champs un gros plan de fleur, de fruit ou de bête: natures vivantes" 'Just as a stroller leans down to get a better look at a plant, an insect, or a pebble, in a sequence describing a field the lens must include close-ups of a flower, a fruit, or an animal: living nature' (99-100; 237). Here, situated within a logical progression from far to near, the magnified image suggests a sort of hyper-presence — altered from the typical "les points de vue recommandés" 'recommended points of view' (100; 237) but still primarily descriptive of an object that we can imagine sharing our space. The affective potential of the projected cinematic close-ups that Epstein describes moreover manifests in the interactivity of the medium I have identified as handheld cinema in surrealist periodicals.

But the close-up imagery in *Documents* and *La révolution surréaliste* also participates in a more general modern cultural fascination with magnified optics. In 1928, Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstrasse* (*One-Way Street*) likened the process of magnification to the selective but randomized gaze of the flaneur.<sup>9</sup> For Benjamin, "Vergrößerungen" 'enlargements' do not place objects in closer proximity to

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin wrote other texts that seem to depend upon the logic of magnification, such as his *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (*Berlin Childhood around 1900*) and the unfinished *Passagen-Werk* (*Arcades Project*), neither of which was published during his lifetime. Benjamin also wrote his essay "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" 'Der Sürrealismus. Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz' in 1929, presumably awash in the same milieu that concerns me here.

allow for scrutiny of their material properties but rather serve to abstract the artifice of the visible surface, allowing us to connect what we see to a grander but more hidden fabric. Benjamin's text is assembled from descriptions of a collection of antique objects and snippets of childhood memories that describe a carnival of attractions that no longer exist. But these fragments replicate on the page a visually-saturated milieu in which certain objects and situations seem to self-magnify — an enlargement triggered by memory, rather than the present situation. Benjamin, for example, describes the quest of an unnamed "unordentliches Kind" 'untidy child,' who is likely a stand-in for the writer, in which the enlargement of his treasured possessions serves as a form of escapism:

Es jagt die Geister, deren Spur es in den Dingen wittert; zwischen Geistern und Dingen vestreichen ihm Jahre, in denen sein Gesichtsfeld frei von Menschen beliblt. Es geht ihm wie in Träumen: es kennt nichts Bleibendes; alles geschieht ihm, meint es, begegnet ihm, stösst ihm zu. Seine Nomadenjahre sind Stunden im Traumwald.

He hunts the spirits whose trace he scents in things; between spirits and things years are passed in which his field of vision remains free of people. His life is like a dream: he knows nothing lasting; everything seemingly happens to him by chance. His nomad-years are hours in the forest of dream. (43; 73)

The printed contexts of photographs in *Documents* and *La révolution surréaliste* at times provide the narrative sequencing that Epstein describes. But in other instances the reader's attempt to connect words and images is also like wandering in the forest of dream that Benjamin describes — or, in other words, the act of reading generates more *fluid* visual-verbal connections. Unlike the regularized progression of a projected film strip, individual observers activate the printed page, so that the context that surrounds the close-up in the handheld cinema of surrealist periodicals can serve as both a catalyst and a barrier to meaning. The sensual, temporal conception of the cinematic close-up in Epstein's account and the structural, spatial potential of magnification in Benjamin's writing overlap in the graphic layouts of word and image in *Documents* and *La révolution surréaliste*. Not coincidentally, confusions between sense and structure, space and time were of equal interest within the surrealist milieu that fomented both journals. Examining the close-up therefore provides an avenue toward a more nuanced view of surrealist imagery that incorporates statements more explicitly related to artmaking entangled with those that address historical, symbolic, and biological concerns.

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*Documents'* text-based cover design remains consistent, listing combined coverage of archaeology, fine arts, ethnography, and either doctrines or, later, "variétés." However devoid of agenda the journal's unassuming packaging might seem, its contents reflect the interests of the editorial board, which included researchers at the Trocadéro and Louvre museums, universities, and other European educational institutions. A survey of the front pages of *Documents'* debut year — those issues produced in 1929 which are of primary concern here — also indicates two additional patterns in the journal's genesis. First, advertisements for contemporary journals like *Variétés*, *Jazz*, *Transition*, and *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (the latter of which most directly spawned *Documents*) point to a policy of inclusivity (Ades and Baker 12–14). *Documents* was not the organ of a specific movement but an illustrated magazine along the lines of those advertised, which all claimed to present some condensation of a "modern spirit." The second pattern that emerges across issue contents contrasts this publicized openness to a diversity of contributors. The frequency with which the bylines of Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, Carl Einstein, and Robert Desnos appear might be read as a matter of practicality, a consistent dependence upon trusted sources. But the repetition of contributors suffuses *Documents* with a consistent perspective that is equally as potent as that of *La révolution surréaliste*.

The particular ways in which images and text interact in *Documents* are symptomatic of the tension between the generalist mission and the esoteric execution of the journal. I am certainly not the first to point to the distinctive verbal-visual conundrum that *Documents* presents. Borrowing Georges Didi-Huberman's term *frottement* or the "rubbing together" of contents in *Documents*, Eric Robertson describes the "friction that unsettles both the aestheticism of artistic forms and the positivism of ethnographic facts" as an "art of connections" (248). Raymond Spiteri, too, mentions Didi-Huberman's *La ressemblance informe* as well as Rosalind Krauss's analysis of Bataille's writing on the *informe* or formless when he describes how image can function "as a matrix of the *informe*" (3). According to Spiteri, "The image stages the movement of contention that describes the *informe*; or, more precisely, it is through the image that the movement of the *informe* manifests itself" (3). As these examples attest, whether we describe a tension, transposition, friction, or *frottement* between the material components of *Documents*, our interpretations of the (anti)aesthetics of the journal tend to return to the same root: Bataille's definition of the *informe* in the final issue of 1929.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As a reminder, I recall Bataille's definition against definition from *Documents*, vol. 1, no. 7, December 1929:

"Un dictionnaire commencerait à partir du moment où il ne donnerait plus le sens mais les besognes des mots. Ainsi *informe* n'est pas seulement un adjectif ayant tel sens mais un terme servant à déclasser, exigeant généralement que chaque chose ait sa forme. Ce qu'il désigne n'a ses droits dans aucun sens et se fait écraser partout comme une araignée ou un ver de

I do not want to discount the sustained prominence of the *informe* as a concept associated with Bataille, but to do some soil analysis, so to speak. *Documents* is fertile ground for digging into the environmental conditions that cultivated formlessness. The “Critical Dictionary” in which Bataille’s definition was printed was a regular feature in *Documents*, after all, and had involved the verbal-visual tensions so frequently invoked in discussions of the *informe* prior to the term’s appearance in December 1929. It is noteworthy for our purposes that the text of Bataille’s definition is printed among a sequence of contributions on cinematic topics that include “Imagerie Moderne” ‘Modern Imagery’ (377–78), with two full-page reproductions of illustrated magazine covers, and “Cinéma d’Avant-Garde” ‘Avant-Garde Cinema’ (385–87), both by Desnos, along with an announcement of upcoming events featuring Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein in Paris. Two images of “Le Seine pendant l’hiver 1870-71” ‘The Seine during winter 1870-71’ and “Un des tableaux du film parlant ‘Hollywood Review’” ‘One tableau from the sound film “Hollywood Review”’ are printed on the page following the December 1929 dictionary’s text, the former more explicitly related to Leiris’s “Débacle” entry than the latter (382–83).<sup>11</sup> But the commingling of verbal and visual material in *Documents*, no. 7 is no more conspicuous than in previous versions of the *Dictionnaire*.

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terre. Il faudrait en effet, pour que les hommes académiques soient contents, que l’univers prenne forme. La philosophie entière n’a pas d’autre but : il s’agit de donner une redingote à ce qui est, une redingote mathématique. Par contre affirmer que l’univers ne ressemble [à] rien et n’est qu’*informe* revient à dire que l’univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat.” (382)

‘A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus, *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.’ (*Visions of Excess* 31)

<sup>11</sup> The fact that Bataille contributes just one definition—of *informe*—to the December 1929 critical dictionary is also of note as he is the primary contributor of entries in previous issues.



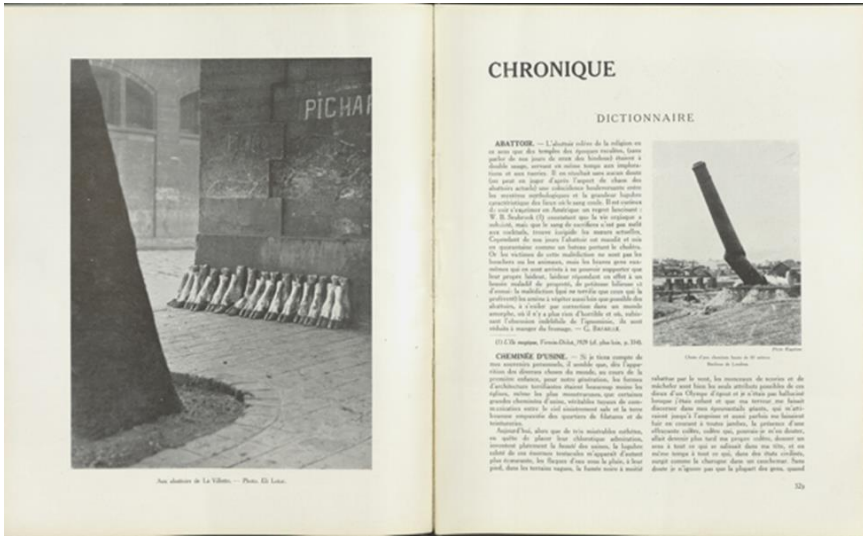


Figure 2: "Dictionnaire," *Documents*, vol. 1 no. 6, November 1929, pp. 328–29. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

It is the dictionary section of *Documents*, no. 6, November 1929, that has been a favorite among scholars concerned with the journal's place in Bataille's cultural criticism (Robertson 253–54). The dictionary's pages in this issue are simultaneously dominated by Bataille's words and striking photographic imagery that interrupts the flow of the columned text (328–34). The first page of entries includes a paragraph-long definition of "Abattoir" 'Slaughterhouse' by Bataille along with the first part of his take on the "Cheminée d'Usine" 'Factory Chimney' (fig. 2). The latter is a photograph that shows, as captioned, the sixty-meter chute of a factory chimney in London, its leftward jutting angle at once suggesting its toppling and pointing backward, and even echoing the angular elements of the full-page photograph on the preceding page. After reading Bataille's blood-and-guilt-soaked definition of "Slaughterhouse," the facing photograph by Eli Lotar captioned "Aux abattoirs de La Villette" 'At the La Villette slaughterhouses' indeed accrues new significance. The row of bone and sinew fragments lined along the stone wall in the mid-ground of the image could almost be a part of the ritualized slaughtering of yore that Bataille describes. But here the action lies outside of the frame, around the corner of the weaving brick path that meanders through the image. Through omission, Lotar's photograph displays a form of reverence for a practice that Bataille brings to our attention in his text. This first page spread of the November 1929 *Documents*' "Dictionary" thus demonstrates the verbal-visual fluidity found throughout the journal, as Lotar's photograph preceding Bataille's "Slaughterhouse" definition carries the textual definition into an optical register that is complementary but not prescriptive.

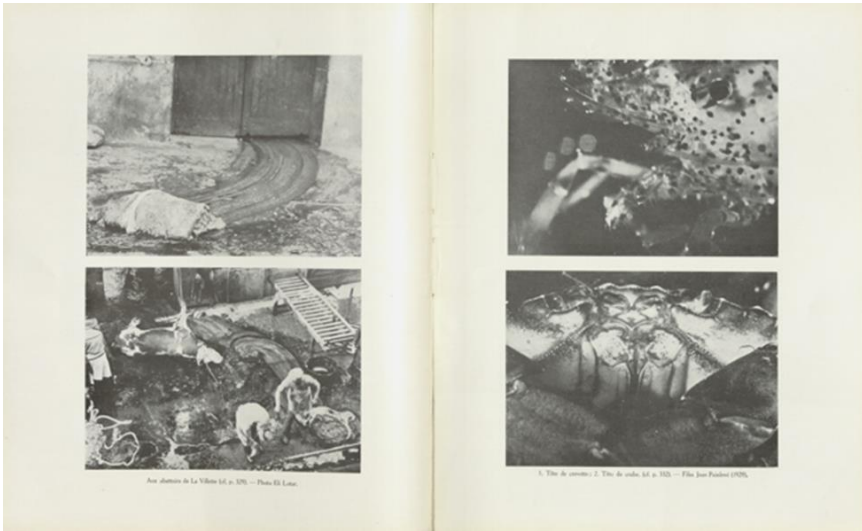


Figure 3: "Dictionnaire," *Documents*, vol. 1, no. 6, November 1929, pp. 330–31. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

A turn of the page, however, further liquefies the definition set forth in Bataille's text. The four photographic images arranged in a two by two grid that covers the entirety of the double-page spread (with the exception of the image captions) presents the observer with an optical task that may be the most challenging in all of *Documents* (fig. 3). The two photographs to the left present their challenge first in the form of a shock. Moving downward, the eye skims the smears of fresh blood, darkened and preserved as almost painterly strokes in the photographs, until the caption at the bottom confirms the images as two more belonging to Lotar, "At the La Villette slaughterhouses."<sup>12</sup> The texture and pattern of the ground no longer stabilizes the gore in these photographs. As it turns out, the first image was not a comprehensive complement to Bataille's entry but an establishing shot. This second couple of slaughterhouse images — one from bird's-eye and the other from worm's-eye view — remove the possibility of an immediate imaging of a human perspective in their making. Their close-up cropping at once detaches them from the sure-footed composition of the first image and provides unblinking focus on the details of slaughter that, according to Bataille's account, cultural conventions have pushed into the unseen shadows for all but an unlucky few. For although human figures are visible at bottom right in the upper photograph, their identities are inscrutable as the camera's gaze hovers from above. One can no more identify with them than with the cow carcass splayed

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<sup>12</sup> Another set of slaughterhouse images by Lotar that appear to be from the same shoot were later published in the French mass-market illustrated weekly *VU* in May 1931 (698–700).

across the top right corner of the lower image or the dismembered piece of unassigned anatomy in the foreground in the upper photograph.

The two images on the right-hand page are likewise unrelenting and inscrutable in their framing. No respite for the eyes here. But we do find a caption near the bottom of the page that provides some clues: "1. Tête de crevette; 2. Tête de crabe. (cf. p. 332) – Film Jean Painlevé (1929)." '1. Prawn head; 2. Crab head. (cf. p. 332). – Film Jean Painlevé (1929).' The indication to consult page 332 leads to a dictionary entry not yet encountered, for "Crustaceans," by Jacques Baron. But as with Bataille's text, there is no direct reference to the Painlevé film stills in Baron's entry. What's more, the composition and placement of the film stills encourage the observer to consider their murky forms alongside Lotar's slaughterhouse photographs even before or perhaps instead of glimpsing the text on the next page. The Painlevé stills, like the Lotar photographs, are at once crowded with information and devoid of fixed points that allow them to be informational. Having lost subtle gradation in their reproduction in print, both stills appear flattened, almost patterned, in their two-dimensionality. With the guidance of the caption, it is possible to make out the polka-dotted profile of a prawn in the upper image and a frontal portrait of a crab in the lower, but only just. Close-up focus again does not allow us to affix an indexical meaning to these sea creatures; they instead prompt the attention to flow across the surface of the page, traveling across frames and images, into a fact-finding flux.

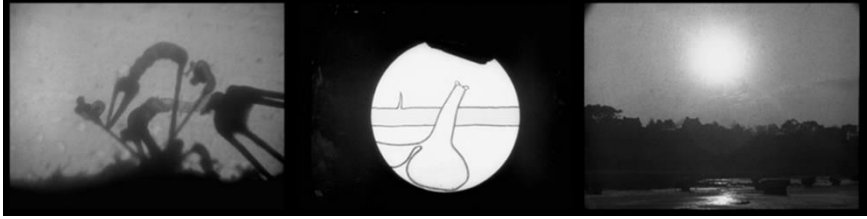
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Painlevé's inclusion in *Documents* as part of the November 1929 *Dictionnaire* is not merely coincidental. Most often remembered as a documentarian, his films, especially in the late-1920s, were also associated with surrealism in the press and through personal contacts with the movement's participants. His strategies as a filmmaker do not simply make prominent use of microscopic technology to capture miniscule aquatic subjects on film. This microfocus also required Painlevé to command his filmic sequences through editing and, eventually, voiceover so that the so-called documentary narratives are a blend of fact and fiction.<sup>13</sup> James Leo Cahill explores Painlevé's documentary methods as a *gai savoir* or gay science drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche's 1882 text of the same name (259). Cahill's designation of the poetic, felt comprehension that Painlevé distinguished at the heart of his pedagogical mission provides a new lens through which to conceive of how documentary filmmaking can be informational. Furthermore, this application of the term *gai savoir* to Painlevé's method also recalls the subtitle of Didi-Huberman's book *La ressemblance informe ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges*

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<sup>13</sup> This blending is reflected in the titles of both the scholarly volume *Science is Fiction: The Films of Jean Painlevé* and the Criterion Collection DVD boxset, which I have consulted in my film analysis, *Science Is Fiction: 23 Films by Jean Painlevé*.

*Bataille*. As both Cahill and Didi-Huberman attest, the documentarian Painlevé and the theorist Bataille each sought to show how, as opposed to the rigidity of objectivist conclusions, the fluidity of gay science more accurately addresses the constant fluctuations of world-defining information systems.



Figures 4-6: Stills from Jean Painlevé, *Les Oursins*, 1927 via *Science Is Fiction: 23 Films by Jean Painlevé*. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Looking at an example from Painlevé's vast oeuvre of documentary films provides an alternative model for looking at *Documents* that will help us to further distinguish how the journal's seemingly esoteric contents open to conversations that question the concept of knowledge writ large. Painlevé's *Les oursins* (*Sea Urchins*) was first screened during 1929 and, not coincidentally, is a film that the documentarian described as surreal (17). At ten minutes long, the black and white, silent film matches the running time and format of Painlevé's contemporaneous projects, which then as now retain their classification as educational documentaries.<sup>14</sup> The didactic function of *Les oursins* may appear at odds with commentary by the critic Émile Vuillermoz, who wrote that "Aucun spectacle ne donne une idée plus troublante de la relativité de nos sensations" 'No other spectacle gives a more unsettling sense of the relativity of our sensations' (6). But this unsettling was a crucial step in the process of learning through comprehension that Painlevé hoped his films would incite.

*Les oursins*, for example, opens with a familiar shot of a lone figure digging on the shore before cutting to a close-up of a hand holding an urchin, the human body dissected and magnified by the camera in a manner that forecasts Painlevé's treatment of the marine creature later in the film. The film continues to shuttle between intertitles that present plainly stated facts about the urchin and shots that frame the anatomy so tightly that it is all but impossible to distinguish due to a lack of surrounding context (fig. 4).<sup>15</sup> Even the intertitle text that explains cinematic magnification capabilities — "200.000 fois sur un écran normal de 2 m. 70 sur 3 m. 60" '200,000 times on a 9' x 12' screen' — does little to prepare the viewer.

<sup>14</sup> The *Science Is Fiction* DVD labels them as such.

<sup>15</sup> According to Cahill, "Painlevé often preferred his films to be screened silently or with his own live commentary" in order to avoid misunderstanding of the visual content (267).

Sequences that abstract the urchin's pedicellaria into a microscopic landscape compete with the shots of the seashore that open and close *Les oursins* so that the spatial terrain of the film fluctuates along with its temporal unfolding. Painlevé's manipulation of the viewer's senses in order to instigate the unsettling he believed was necessary for effective pedagogy indeed extends to the concluding shot of *Les oursins*. Here, the sphere of the sun repeats the round form of the urchin diagrammed earlier in the film while simultaneously mirroring the viewer's own ocular anatomy (though perhaps more discretely than in the surrealist film discussed below, figs. 5-6).

Painlevé's reframing of form as a means to help us see the world anew and subsequent contextualization through narrative thus models the doubled, verbal-visual fluidity of Bataille's contributions to *Documents*. Moreover, Painlevé's filmic structures demonstrate how the observer might gain insight from the journal rather than remaining lost in an unconscious void or reverie. The reader of *Documents* meets obstacles in the form of page-sized, close-up photographs that both repel and compel, like the big toes by Boiffard that interrupt Bataille's eponymous "Le gros orteil" 'The Big Toe' (297-302) or the detached, magnified photographs of plant segments by Karl Blossfeldt that accompany "Le langage des fleurs" 'The Language of Flowers' (160-64). These photographs by Boiffard and Blossfeldt are among the most striking examples of images in *Documents* that seem to conform as visual illustrations to texts but that upon further inspection reveal excess or alternative meaning. One's interest might be sparked by confusion and prolonged by desire to make sense — if only fleetingly — of the unexpected, unresolvable verbal-visual premise that *Documents* presents. While these encounters with Bataille's writing and his visual collaborators on the printed page are puzzling, they are not so troubling as to prevent us from reading further. There is a specific pleasure that one finds in working through *Documents* — even when presented with evidence of entrails and other viscera — that is akin to what Cahill describes as an *amour floué* in Painlevé's cinematic technique. Per Cahill, it is "blurred love, an eroticism sparked not only by the frisson of the unexpected encounter but also by the momentary confusion and interpenetration of boundaries and limits" (274). This language certainly connects Bataille's writings on formlessness to Painlevé's more narrowly defined educational, populist initiative.

But, of course, Cahill derives his phrase *amour floué* from *amour fou* (mad love), a concept that emerged in Breton's theorization of surrealist attraction beginning in the mid-1920s, eventually resulting in a book entitled with the phrase published in 1937. Perhaps, then, we can say that close-up framing produces an optical blur that is conceptually maddening. The blurred signifier creates a purpose for the observer that propels them on a mad search for ever-dissolving meaning, uniting Bretonian desire with Bataille's *informe*.

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To further demonstrate how both *Documents* and *La révolution surréaliste* prompt the enactment of *amour fou* and *amour floué*, let's turn our attention to perhaps the most infamous surrealist close-up — one that magnifies the eye itself. Even now, from my retrospective twentieth-first-century viewpoint, from which I can anticipate the close-up shot that concludes the opening sequence of *Un chien andalou*, I struggle to maintain a steady focus, to *not* avert my gaze. With each sharpening of the blade that will slice through the eyeball in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's film, I blink.

*Un chien andalou* premiered in June 1929 in Paris — in the same year as *Les oursins* — in other words, at a point of confluence for the fluid surrealist phase that interests me here. Because the topic of surrealist painting is outside the purview of this study, Dalí has not been a major character thus far. This does not mean that he was silent on matters of artmaking prior to 1929. Yet, his collaboration with fellow-Spaniard émigré Buñuel on the script for *Un chien andalou* did coincide with his official adoption of the surrealist cause via Breton and, more importantly, the artist's lucid articulations of his conception of "anti-art" in relation to photomechanical imagery. As Malcolm Turvey has pointed out, Dalí identified *Un chien andalou* as a documentary despite the fact that he and Buñuel scripted the illogical, time-bending dream sequence that constitutes the film's "plot" (114). Turvey posits that, in contrast to the non-narrative rhythms of films like *Ballet mécanique*, Buñuel and Dalí's project gains structure from story elements — or, more specifically, from borrowed cinematic tropes, the "ready-made language of mainstream filmmaking" (118). If we can, then, conceive of Painlevé as a storyteller as well as a reporter in the conception of his marine documentaries, can we also say that Buñuel and Dalí played the same dual role? After all, Breton himself had given the directive to surrealists to serve as "les modestes appareils enregistreurs" 'modest recording instruments' (*Manifeste du surréalisme* 45; "Manifesto of Surrealism" 28). What more could we ask of a surrealist filmmaker than to record the crashing waves of their optical unconscious, teaming with cinematic reverberations? Or, to utilize the critical terms of close-up viewing as Epstein and Benjamin have defined them, do Buñuel and Dalí intercut horizontal unfolding with discrete, vertical events in a manner that allows the film's magnification to blur distinctions between cinematic form and individual memory?

Breton's printing of Buñuel and Dalí's *Un chien andalou* script in the final issue of *La révolution surréaliste* represents his endorsement of the project just pages away from the text of the "Second Manifesto," in which the poet-impresario publicly cut ties with many of the surrealist movement's most prominent members. Yet, rather than reproducing even a single film still from *Un chien andalou*, the four-pages of double-columned text culminate in a small reproduction of an image by painter Yves Tanguy, *Tes bougies bougent* (1929). The reader is thereby left in the dark even as they might expect visible references to the film to

illustrate the script. The text does read as a list of shots such that one can envision the film, for example: “La lame de rasoir travers l’oeil de la jeune fille en le sectionnant” ‘The razor blade runs across the young girl’s eye, slicing it’ (34; 162). So, we might theoretically draw upon our filmic memories to fabricate a documentary out of an archive of readymade fictions, as Dalí claims to have done with Buñuel. Since the final issue of *La révolution surréaliste* was published in December 1929, the possibility that even the publication’s earliest audience had attended a screening of *Un chien andalou* in the summer or autumn also exists. In this case, the printed script might serve as an aide-mémoire as it does to those of us who have screened the now widely available silent film. Either way, the script transforms into a version of handheld cinema *sans image*. The absence of reproduced film stills does not deter the reader from envisioning individual shots and sequences. Instead, the absent presence of the film as a whole encourages an improvisation of mental images that stream together through the progression of reading. This handheld cinematic version of *Un chien andalou* therefore asks one to question the separation between interior and exterior images alongside distinctions between fact and fiction, cinematic time and personal memory that its projected filmic counterpart blurs.

A version of *Un chien andalou* as handheld cinema also appears in the September 1929 issue of *Documents*. Bataille’s contribution similarly lacks photographic illustration, though a footnote lists publications where one can find “excellentes photographies” ‘excellent stills’ (216; “Critical Dictionary” 166) from the film.<sup>16</sup> Bataille’s discussion of the film appears in his portion of the multi-authored definition of “Oeil” ‘Eye’ from the no. 4 installment of the critical dictionary (215–18). Following Desnos’s cataloging of idioms that involve optical language and a photo of “Les yeux de Joan Crawford” (216) ‘The eyes of Joan Crawford’ (“Critical Dictionary” 45) in a mid-column break, Bataille’s second section of the entry is titled “Friandise cannibale” ‘Cannibal Delicacy’ and precedes Marcel Griaule’s text concerning the evil eye. As one might expect, unlike in the script printed in *La révolution surréaliste*, Bataille’s discussion of *Un chien andalou* serves as an example in his definition and thus is truncated. There is neither space nor time to envision the scenes unraveling. Before moving on to examples from Victor Hugo as inspired by the imagery of Grandville and the pulp publication *L’œil de la police*, both of which reference illustrations from later pages, Bataille cuts to the center of what he finds compelling in *Un chien andalou* (here as stated in the issue’s unpaginated “English Supplement”): “the young womans [sic] eye cut by a razor in the recent and admirable film by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí; in the film the eye is seen as attracting the blade, both being equally horrible and fascinating.” Bataille’s extremely pointed description of the film within his definition of the eye makes this passage function as if a textual close-up within a verbal montage. As we read, the image that we envision seduces us while at the

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<sup>16</sup> Bataille lists issues of *Cahiers d’art*, *Bifur*, and *Variétés* in his note.

same time pushing us toward “la limite de l’horreur” ‘the very edge of horror,’ just as Bataille argues the eye itself does.

As these two references to *Un chien andalou* in *La révolution surréaliste* and *Documents* show, the makers of both journals did not merely share an attraction to similar materials even as the surrealist movement was in danger of being swept away in the tides of disagreement in 1929. The editorial decisions and design layouts also attest to a confluence of formal choices that take their cues from filmic techniques — even in passages that omit photomechanical reproductions. For the remainder of this text, then, let’s consider how we might read both *La révolution surréaliste* and *Documents* as forms of handheld cinema that dilate the optical close-up so that magnification applies to images and text alike. The removal of detailed visual description from contextual support through cropping in close-up imagery results in an informational absence — even if details appear to present plainly articulated facts. In *La révolution surréaliste* and *Documents*, the observer encounters the absent presence of edifying material not only in photomechanical illustrations but also in passages of descriptive text and in page layouts that fuse visual and verbal magnification.

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How precisely can *La révolution surréaliste* and *Documents* present to us textual close-ups as well as optical? Because surrealist magnification takes shape through individual curiosities, sudden bursts of data might catch one’s attention and befuddle in the same moment. Consider, for example, the passage on “Homme” ‘Man’ that appears in the same critical dictionary as “Eye,” which cites chemist Dr. Charles Henry Maye,

La graisse du corps d’un homme normalement constitué suffirait pour fabriquer 7 morceaux de savonnette. On trouve dans l’organisme assez de fer pour fabriquer un clou de grosseur moyenne et du sucre pour sucrer une tasse de café. Le phosphore donnerait 2.200 allumettes. Le magnésium fournirait de quoi prendre une photographie. Encore un peu de potasse et de soufre, mais en quantité inutilisable. Ces différentes matières premières, évaluées aux cours actuels, représentent environ une somme de 25 francs. (215)

The bodily fat of a normally constituted man would suffice to manufacture seven cakes of toilet-soap. Enough iron is found in the organism to make a medium-sized nail, and sugar to sweeten a cup of coffee. The phosphorus would provide 2,200 matches. The magnesium would furnish the light needed to take a photograph. In addition, a little potassium and sulphur, but in an unusable quality. (Ades and Baker, eds., 186)



In this dictionary entry, an August 1929 quotation from Maye is severed from its original publication context in the *Journal des débats* in a manner that amplifies the disorienting effect of its atomization and commodification. For a not particularly attentive reader who had picked up the fourth issue of *Documents* on a whim, the presence of a direct reference to a chemical objectification of the human body might have been particularly jarring. After all, tailing two articles concerning visual artists Hercules Seghers and Alberto Giacometti with full-page reproductions of select works, the columns of text that begin the September 1929 dictionary are misleadingly plain (215).

The abrupt informational magnification in “Homme” that causes this disjunction is in itself an instance of textual magnification. But Dr. Maye’s breakdown of the human body, to a more astute reader, would also recall another article from *Documents* no. 4. Earlier in the same issue, Bataille meditates on the “Figure humaine,” an essay whose title can be translated into English as either “Human Figure,” “Human Face,” or “Human Countenance” in a slippage that matches the theme of the text. Unlike the text of the “Homme” definition, the relations between visual and verbal close-ups in this passage are not so readily inscribed but present a more sophisticated fluidity suggestive of Bataille’s more generalized thinking on what images can do for us.

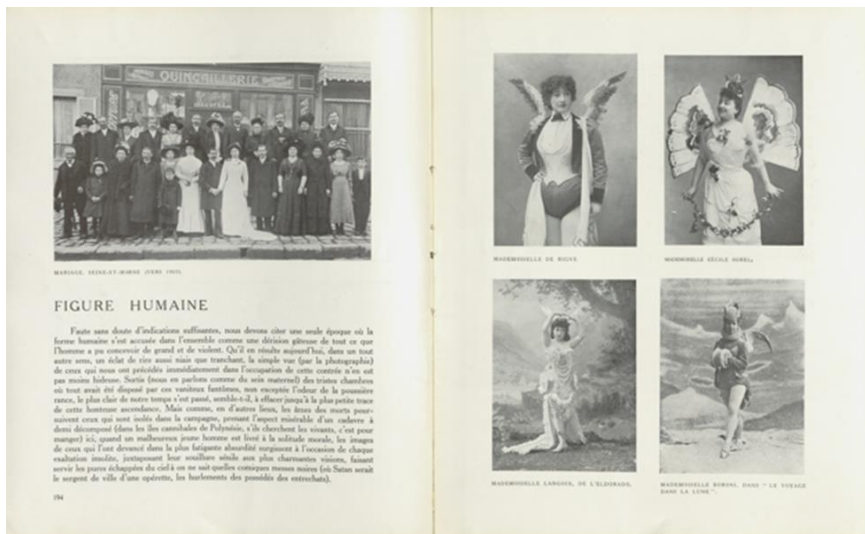


Figure 7: Georges Bataille, “Figure humaine,” *Documents*, vol. 1, no. 4, September 1929, pp. 194–95. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

As one attempts to progress through “Figure humaine,” the text begins with a rare direct acknowledgement of the first of the copious photographs reproduced

alongside the essay (fig. 7). Bataille instills a distrust of the ostensibly innocuous portrait that shares the essay's first page with his reference: "Si nous admettons, au contraire, que notre agitation la plus extreme était *donnée* par exemple dans l'état d'esprit humain représenté par telle noce provinciale, photographiée il y a quelque vingt-cinq ans" 'If, on the contrary, we acknowledge the *presence* of an acute perturbation in, let us say, the state of the human mind represented by the sort of provincial wedding photographed twenty-five years ago' (196; "Human Face" 17). Bataille refers to the wedding portrait to emphasize points about the simultaneous "seduction" and "contaminating senility" of photographic images; the photographs, for him, are not objectifying instruments but instigators of violence and absurdity (17). According to Benjamin Noys, Bataille addresses photographic subversion via the essay's description of the image's "splitting" of containment and chaos (21): "Matter for Bataille is always '*active*' . . . never settling within a frame or an image but always emerging from an image, a word or things" (35). In short, like the close-up, all images and texts are cropped in such a way as to require us to make them meaningful in a participatory act of reading.

Bataille does not restrict himself to a discussion of photography in "Figure humaine," and the repeated arrangements of nineteenth-century *carte-de-visite* portraits of costumed sitters are not mentioned in writing save for a concluding note and caption for the final full-page layout. However, the portraits' presence serves to amplify and mock Bataille's words.<sup>17</sup> The multiplicity of these images coupled with their unflinchingly artificial costuming and props — from butterfly wings to classicized painted landscape backdrops — at once distracts the reader and underscores the series of nested relations that Bataille draws in his essay. The overt artificiality of portraits like those printed in "Figure humaine" are, according to Bataille, the products of a wholly artificial "attribution of a *real* character to our surroundings" that merely satisfies "vulgar intellectual voracity" ("Human Face" 18). The absurdity of photographs thus exaggerates one way in which the definition of personhood has been systematized. Contrary to "*le thomisme et la science actuelle*" 'Thomist thought and present-day science,' Bataille argues against the notion that human subjects are intact entities — that instead "*celle du moi n'a pas sa place dans un univers intelligible*" 'the *self* has no place in an intelligible universe' (196; "Human Face" 18). In their false fixing of the self and encasement of a fluctuating, unintelligible presence through photography, the portraits in "Figure humaine" could be possible catalysts to thinking outside of the system of signification that frames them. So, Bataille envisions in the following scenario:

Si l'on envisage, en effet, un personnage choisi au hasard parmi les fantômes ici présentés, son apparition au cours des series indiscontinues

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<sup>17</sup> Per Baker, "These unintentionally hilarious photographs, originally collected as '*cartes-album*', could be ordered directly from the Nadar studio by perusing the large demonstration boards of their back-catalogue" (*Undercover Surrealism* 189–90).

exprimées par la notion d'univers scientifique, ou même, plus simplement, en un point quelconque de l'espace et du temps infini du sens commun, demeure parfaitement choquante pour l'esprit, aussi choquante que celle du *moi* dans le tout métaphysique, ou plutôt, pour revenir à l'ordre concret, que celle d'une mouche sur le nez d'un orateur.

If, indeed, we consider a character chosen at random from the ghosts here presented, then its apparition during the discontinuous series expressed by the notion of the scientific universe (or even, more simply put, at a given point of the infinite space and time of common sense) remains perfectly shocking to the mind; it is as shocking as the appearance of the *self* within the metaphysical whole, or, to return to the concrete, as that of a fly on an orator's nose. (196; 19)

The miniscule, short-lived, unpredictable insect remains Bataille's rhetorical focal point as he introduces and swiftly refutes Hegelian and dadaist thought on systems via a quotation from Tristan Tzara in the paragraph following this evocative verbal close-up. Bataille even concludes the passage with a reprise, asserting that to accept "the undemonstrable character of the universe of science" is to "reduce the appearance of the self to that of the fly" (19).

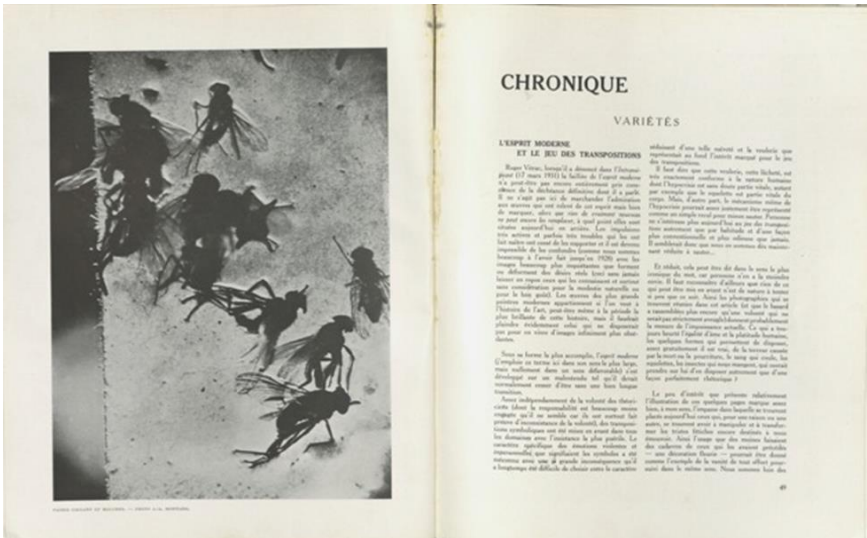


Figure 8: Georges Bataille, "L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions," *Documents*, vol. 2, no. 8, 1930/1, pp. 488–89. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

I dwell on this fly not just because of its potency in evoking Bataille's use of verbal-visual magnification in *Documents*. The inclusion of Boiffard's flypaper close-up with rounded microphotographs in Bataille's final article for the journal, "L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions" (The Modern Spirit and the Play of Transpositions), suggests the consistency with which he used the insect as a motif (fig. 8).<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this proclivity explains why Breton chose to focus on the fly in his mocking critique of Bataille in the "Second Manifesto" in *La révolution surréaliste's* final issue — and why the inclusion of Boiffard's flypaper in the final *Documents* issue more than a year later could be conceived of as a belated rebuttal. Per Breton, "M. Bataille aime les mouches. Nous, non : nous aimons la mitre des anciens évocateurs, la mitre de lin pur à la partie antérieure de laquelle était fixée une lame d'or et sur laquelle les mouches ne se posaient pas" 'M. Bataille loves flies. Not we: we love the miters of old evocators, the miters of pure linen to whose front point was affixed a blade of gold and upon which flies did not settle, because they had been purified to keep them away' (16; 184). This passage speaks to Breton's strategy in denouncing Bataille's project as disingenuous as well as useless.

Still, Breton does not simply cite examples from Bataille's work in *Documents*, though he does mention "Figure humaine" (16). Just as *La révolution surréaliste* imitated the format of the scientific journal *La nature*, Yve-Alain Bois has noted that Breton's "Second Manifesto" mimics Bataille's style and reincorporates the latter's references to Hegel and Tzara in such manner as to demonstrate the logic that in fact structures the *informe* (83–85).<sup>19</sup> To wit, following the sentences that picture miters with blades of gold, Breton states: "Le malheur pour M. Bataille est qu'il raisonne: certes il raisonne comme quelqu'un qui a 'une mouche sur le nez,' ce qui le rapproche plutôt du mort que du vivant, mais *il raisonne* . . . c'est même par là qu'il ne peut prétendre, quoi qu'il en dise, s'oppose *comme une brute* à tout système" 'M. Bataille's misfortune is to reason: admittedly, he reasons like someone who 'has a fly on his nose,' which allies him more closely with the dead than with the living, but *he does reason* . . . he cannot claim, no matter what he may say, to be opposed to any system, *like an unthinking brute*' ("Second manifeste" 16; "Second Manifesto" 184). In short, by continuing to write, Breton argues that Bataille cannot possibly adhere to his own anti-systemic mission. But Breton's critique through selective citation and mimicry of what he identifies as an unsuccessful rejection of reason in Bataille's work actually exemplifies some of the broader points about the relationship between self and self-image in "Figure

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<sup>18</sup> *Documents*, vol. 2, no. 8 does not include a publication year as part of its editorial information page as in previous issues; however, Bataille's reference to a March 1931 text in his article dates it later than 1930.

<sup>19</sup> Both Breton and Bataille's texts mention Tzara in relation to structure and systems, and a poem by Tzara is printed immediately following the former's manifesto ("L'homme approximatif" 18–20).

humaine." Breton's ability to represent his thoughts in the guise of Bataille shows that written signification can be just as vulgarizing and artificial as visual representation in portraiture.

This is not to say that Breton fails to substantiate his thinking in the "Second Manifesto." The ease with which he absorbs Bataille's voice before spitting the words back out at the reader proves that the *Documents* editor helped Breton to diagnose surrealism's fitful condition in 1929, too. The manifesto meanders between sections of specific instruction — dismissing movement adherents by name and calling for "L'OCCULTATION PROFONDE, VÉRITABLE DU SURREALISME" 'THE PROFOUND, THE VERITABLE OCCULTATION OF SURREALISM' (14; 178) — and general motivation for those who have had the stamina to continue on. It is in these ostensibly encouraging passages that Breton betrays the kinship between his project and Bataille's, at least in 1929. For example, Breton concludes a paragraph on the topic of the future potential for surrealist practices beyond the media of painting and poetry by encouraging the reader to seek experiences that may not be representable: "serrant *la vérité* d'aussi près que nous l'avons fait, nous ayons pris soin dans l'ensemble de nous ménager un alibi littéraire ou autre plutôt que, sans savoir nager, nous jeter à l'eau" 'having come so close to seizing *the truth*, most of us have been careful to provide ourselves with an alibi, be it literary or any other, rather than throwing ourselves, without knowing how to swim, into the water' (10; 163). With dicta such as this, Breton suggests that surrealist inquiry can be fluid, unmoored from static ground, as mucky as the *informe* that he dismisses in Bataille's writing. In a manifesto propelled by conflict, punctuated by a small Giorgio de Chirico image full of jagged diagonal juxtapositions titled *La guerre* (17), Breton certainly does not provide a practical solution as to how one might balance a miter hat on one's head while swimming. So, what are we to make of his opaque instructions for the future of the surrealist movement, sealed with kiss-off?

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Some clues can be found in the final issue of *La révolution surréaliste*. As with *Documents*, the close-up acts as a magnifying glass for spotting the details so that we might understand how the journal's hodge-podge supports Breton's free-flowing conception of surrealism's future. For instance, immediately preceding the previously discussed script for *Un chien andalou*, a contribution by René Magritte, "Les mots et les images" (Words and Images), directly addresses the relationship between verbal and visual signification in both form and content (fig. 9). The layout of Magritte's piece follows the publication's standard two-

column format, but rather than reading continuous columns of text, the observer alternates between typed words and line drawings with hand-lettered script.<sup>20</sup>

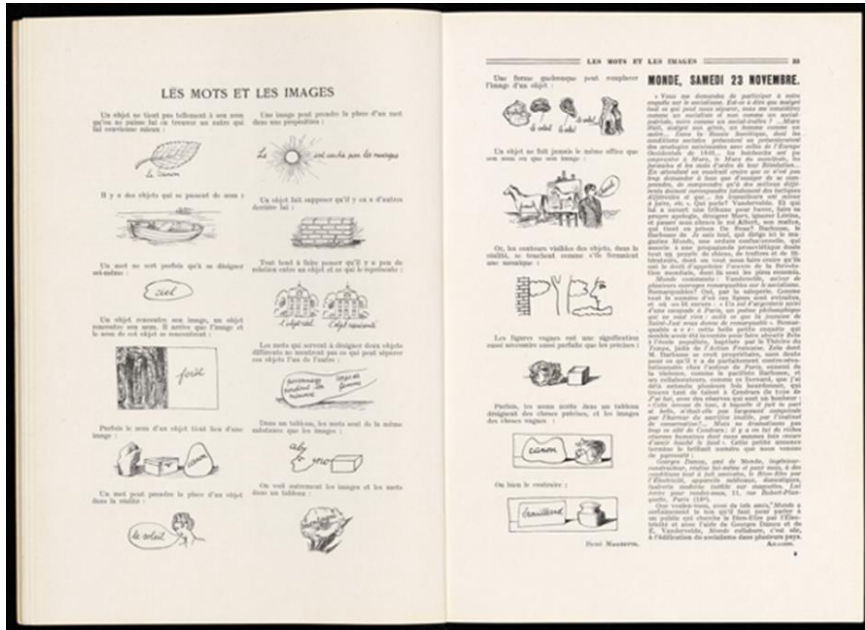


Figure 9: René Magritte, “Les mots et les images,” *La révolution surréaliste*, no. 12, December 1929, pp. 32–33. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. © 2022 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Through these verbal-visual examples, spaced and sequenced, Magritte shows how words and images can translate between sign systems and how these relocations can blur distinctions between representation and reality. At once itemized and reminiscent of a storyboard, his permutations synthesize the fluid relation between sight and understanding in a manner that reiterates the logic of the close-up. And Magritte, moreover, applies this fluidity to visual-verbal images in general. All representations must be as fluid as close-ups if, as Magritte insists through platitudes accompanying visual diagrams, “une forme quelconque peut remplacer l’image d’un objet” ‘any form can replace the image of an object,’ and subsequently “les figures vagues ont une signification aussi nécessaire aussi parfaite que les précises” ‘vague figures have a signification as necessary and perfect as the precise ones’ (33).

<sup>20</sup> Marcel de Bouilly utilizes a similar format in “Le vampire” in the fifth issue of *La révolution surréaliste* (18–19), which Pavle Levi analyzes in “Doctor Hypnison and the Case of Written Cinema” (101–08).

We may interpret Magritte's "Words and Images" as a concretization of Breton's directive to leap without looking into the deep end in his manifesto printed earlier in the issue. But the verbal-visual treatise also neatens Bataille's exegesis on photography in "Figure humaine" and synthesizes the durational effects of handheld cinema in *Documents*. The mutability that both journals share demonstrates the appeal of undisciplined inquiry within the insular sphere of the late-1920s Parisian avant-garde. And the very same mutability also predicts the ephemerality of the equally undisciplined surrealist movement.

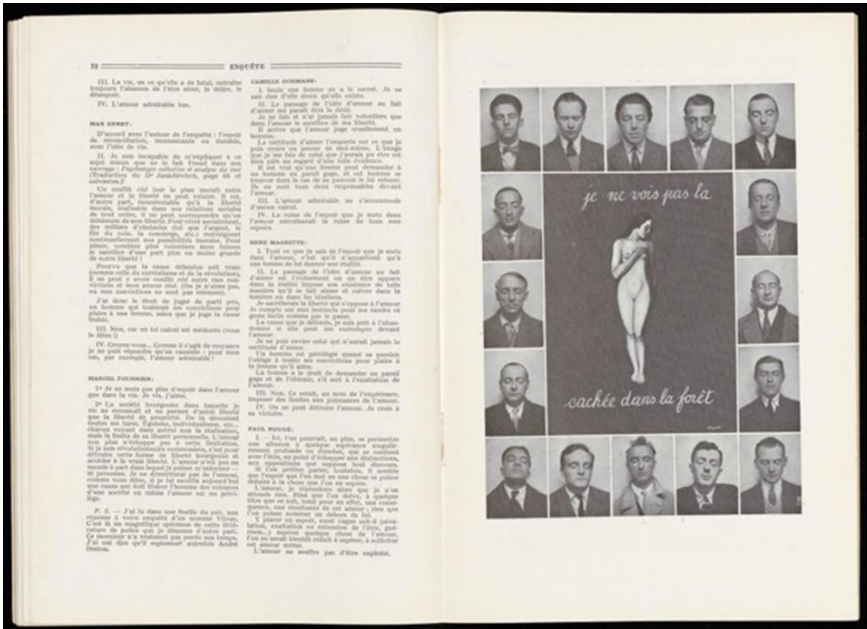


Figure 10: "Enquête," *La révolution Surréaliste*, no. 12, December 1929, pp 72–73.

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. © 2022 C.

Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Another portrait, this time a group portrait of surrealists printed late in the last issue of *La révolution surréaliste*, indeed provides a clue to add to our close-up investigation. The full-page arrangement is unceremoniously wedged in amongst numerous replies to the survey on love, which comprise the final pages of the journal (65–76). Sixteen male surrealists, including Breton, Dalí, and Magritte, appear on the page in separate, rectangular images (fig. 10). All are unobstructed photographic portraits save for the fact that each sitter has his eyes closed. The smaller photobooth rectangles form a larger frame that encircles an image at the center: a reproduction of a painting by Magritte that can be juxtaposed against its frame in more ways than one. The figure in the painting is female rather than male, the full height of her nude body floating on a depthless, darkened background.

She is bracketed above and below by more of Magritte's handwritten text: "Je ne vois pas la cachée dans la forêt" 'I do not see the hidden (woman) in the forest' (73).

The layout is a disjointed mélange that instructs through a mixture of metaphor and medium. The observer's gaze circulates around the frame of photobooth portraits so that it becomes a looping filmstrip, and all attempts to lasso a fixed meaning between the photographic frame and the painting it encircles slip away. Shuttling between center and periphery, between figure and frame, between the media of photography and painting, the discrete subjects who seem to be in plain view remain inscrutable. In this slippage, Magritte's hand-drawn rendering of selective vision becomes implicated in a mixed-media interrogation of visual representation. The answer might be awaiting us if we follow the surrealists and close our eyes. Or it might not. If we cannot see what is hidden in this rather Benjaminian "forest of dreams" how can we expect to expand our understanding? Like the evocative but undefinable stimulation from Epstein's cinematic close-ups, surrealism does not provide a definitive solution but instead spurs us on. It is surely telling that *La révolution surréaliste's* final group portrait blinds its members through photography, a medium so often associated with objective vision. Still, the obscurely painted image in the center of the frame — Bataille's black fly by another name — is always out of view for both surrealism and photography.

Like the assembled group portrait, the collection of close-ups from *La révolution surréaliste* and *Documents* in 1929 assembled in this essay serves as a guide to surrealist sight more generally. And so, after a few blinks to give our eyes a rest, we can refocus our lenses and observe that critiques of the scientism of photographic vision and surrealism have been blurred together from the beginning in *La révolution surréaliste*. Three overlapping photographic images by Man Ray depicting the participants in the Bureau of Surrealist Research on the persimmon-colored cover of the periodical's first issue boldly declare the movement's scientific focus in 1924 (fig. 11).<sup>21</sup> But while the front cover of the journal and interior advertisement for the bureau on its bubblegum pink interior (fig. 12) colorfully parody the staid format of *La nature*, the contents of ensuing pages deviate in a more pronounced fashion. Two tightly cropped images by Man Ray, one a photomechanical version of his *Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (1920) and the other a still of Kiki de Montparnasse's torso from his film *Retour à la raison* (1923), are the first photographic illustrations in the journal and set the tone for passages of verbal-visual magnification throughout. Man Ray's photograph of a hidden, undulating form is in fact placed in the very center of the preface written by Boiffard, Éluard, and Vitrac. The *Enigma* interrupts the co-authored text that tasks surrealism with unearthing dreams and mentions blindness along with multiple aqueous turns of phrase, including a whimsical "pieuvre-horloge" 'octopus-clock'

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<sup>21</sup> For example, see the bureau's records for 22 October 1924 (Thévenin, ed. 139).



(1–2). *La révolution surréaliste's* very first page thus presents a layout in which the play between form and content, word and image encapsulates the fluid mode of thinking that the surrealists seek to propose in contrast to the rigidity they perceived in the academy.

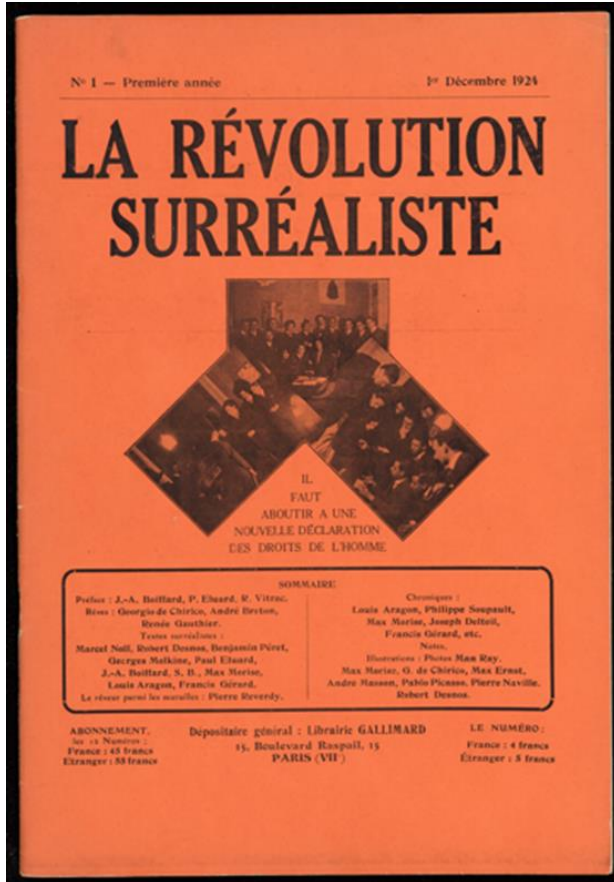


Figure 11: Front cover recto, *La révolution surréaliste*, no. 1, December 1924. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. © Man Ray 2015 Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / ADAGP, Paris 2022.

Throughout this first issue, we encounter photographic images that magnify, crop, or dissect. Images like a quarter-page double exposure with disembodied ghostly hands superimposed on a chair are so infrequently labeled that, by the time we reach the assembled full-page group portrait amongst the “Textes surréalistes” (16, fig. 13), the physical space of the Bureau at 15 rue de Grenelle as pictured on the cover is all but forgotten. If we direct our magnifying glass to the similarities and differences between this group portrait in *La révolution surréaliste*,

no. 1 and the multimedia arrangement in no. 12, knowing what we now know about the handheld cinema of Parisian surrealism, we can piece together a story of the movement's first five years.

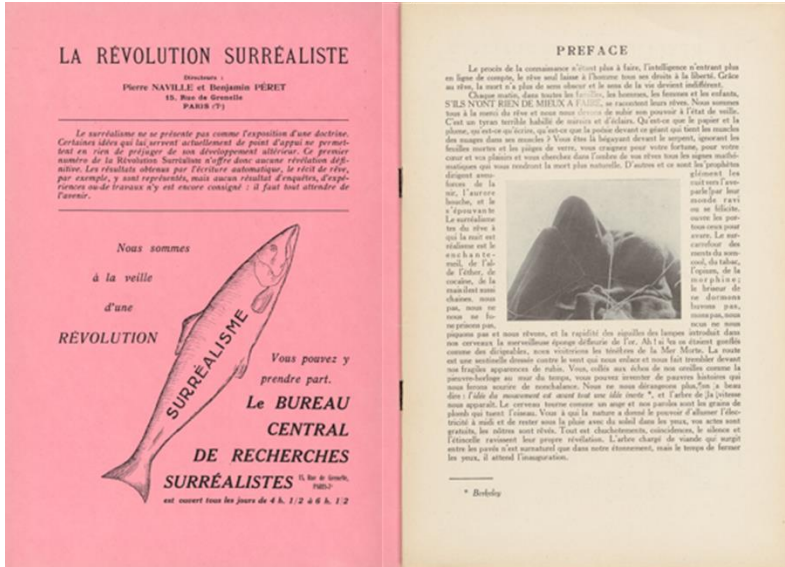


Figure 12: Front cover verso and J.-A. Boiffard, P. Éluard, and R. Vitrac, "Préface," *La révolution surréaliste*, no. 1, December 1924, p. 1. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. © Man Ray 2015 Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / ADAGP, Paris 2022.

Both portraits montage individual photographs together, but the collection in issue no. 1 is less standardized: the sitters' faces are all at least partially visible in their square frames but appear in different lighting conditions, at different angles, and in different costumes. There are also more men pictured in the first issue: twenty-eight versus sixteen in the later portrait. The images, including the slightly larger square picturing Germaine Berton at center, are all spaced symmetrically with white margins between them. These portraits surround Berton but do not encase her as the photo-strip portraits do Magritte's painting. The singular woman at center in issue no. 1 was, furthermore, an anarchist and alleged assassin, praised by Aragon pages prior. Still, although her image stands as a more distinct component, if one glances downward from Berton's portrait to the bottom center of the page, one finds a quotation from Charles Baudelaire that utilizes language similar to Magritte's painting: "La femme est l'être qui projette la plus grande ombre ou la plus grande lumière dans nos rêves" 'The woman is the being who projects the greatest shadow or the greatest light in our dreams' (17). Although

static on the page, the durational dynamic between the peripheral photographs and the images they encircle magnify the two female figures to the same end: to demonstrate the obscure and yet attractive force that unites surrealists and gives the movement a central focus.

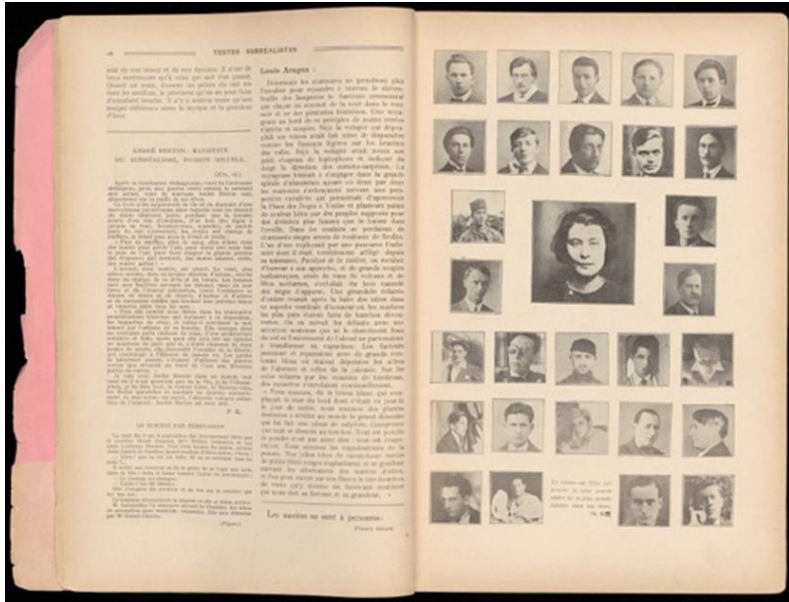


Figure 13: *La révolution surréaliste*, no. 1, December 1924, pp. 16-17. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Despite claims that Breton may have made to the contrary by 1929, the shift from a photographic portrait of Breton to a painted representation of an anonymous nude figure by Magritte shows that surrealist research had changed direction since the closing of the Bureau in April 1925 (Kelly 79). Breton's call to occultation in the "Second Manifesto" is echoed in the tight framing formation of the surrealist photo portraits around Magritte's auratic painting. Mirroring the handheld cinema of *Documents*, even with our eyes wide open, this close-up reminds us of what we cannot see.

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