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## "The Man of these Infinite Possibilities"

### Max Ernst's Cinematic Collages

Abigail Susik

#### Abstract

On more than one occasion in his critical writings of the 1920's, surrealist leader André Breton compared Max Ernst's collages to cinema. In his first essay on the artist in 1921, Breton aligned Ernst's collages with cinematic special effects such as slow and accelerated motion, and spoke of the illusionistic 'transformation from within' that characterized Ernst's constructed scenes. For Breton, Ernst's collages employing found commercial, scientific and journalistic images approximated the naturalistic movement of film, and thereby contributed to the radical obsolescence of traditional two-dimensional media such as painting and drawing, which remained frozen in stillness. Thus, Ernst's images were provocative witnesses to the way in which modern technology fundamentally altered the perspectively-ordered picture plane. But at the same time that Ernst's collages rendered painting obsolete, they likewise depended upon fragments of outmoded popular culture themselves. For Breton, Ernst was a magician, "the man of these infinite possibilities," comparable to cinematic prestidigitators like turn-of-the-century filmmaker Georges Méliès. By drawing on the influence of recently outmoded popular culture such as early trick films, Ernst provides a crucial early example of the post-war fixation on counter-temporalities and anti-production. At once technologically advanced and culturally archeological, Ernst's collages cannily defy strict categorization as "Modernist."

#### About the Author

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# “The Man of these Infinite Possibilities”

## Max Ernst’s Cinematic Collages

Abigail Susik

Max Ernst’s collages were nothing short of a revelation for Parisian dadaists André Breton and Louis Aragon when they arrived in a shipment of crates from Germany in the spring of 1921 and were eagerly unpacked by a small cohort of associates. The general sentiment toward Ernst’s work that day among this discerning audience was, in Breton’s words, one of “unparalleled admiration.”<sup>1</sup> Like treasure hunters who stumbled across their coveted bounty by chance, there was the sense Breton and friends had discovered something unique in the Ernst works unpacked at

Picabia’s house — something at once unknown and long sought after. The increasingly alienated Picabia, Breton reported in a letter to painter André Derain a few months later, was visibly envious of Ernst as a result of this episode. Perhaps partly in answer to this favorable reception, Picabia soon diverged away from the pursuits of dada. For Breton’s part, he stated with rare enthusiasm in the same letter that Ernst, whom he had not even met in person yet, was “one of the most remarkable minds of the age.”<sup>2</sup>

The magnitude of this first encounter is notable, and raises questions as to the precise nature of the aesthetic rapport between Ernst’s collages and the Parisian dadaists. It seems likely that the profound impact of Ernst’s work upon this facet of French avant-garde that day and long thereafter was not so much a question of the importation of novel representational modes to Paris, such as those that might have been conveyed by the aggressive montage tactics of Berlin dada, for instance. Rather, it is more probable that what was so appealing was the fortuitous intersection of Ernst’s works with ideas and interests Breton, Aragon, and Philippe Soupault were already fostering for a few years since their return from service in World War I. These cultivated predilections were impressively diverse but also highly specific. Along with their research on forgotten or neglected eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novelists and poets, their interest in crime and radical politics, and their taste for the shabbier districts of *vieux Paris*, among myriad other strands of intrigue regarding their urban environment — these war veterans were avid consumers of popular entertainment of diverse kinds. Between the risqué theater houses on the right bank, the swankier dance halls on the left, and the colorful café life that informed nearly all moments in-between, Breton and friends knew the gamut of available diversions intimately. Thus, when confronted with Ernst’s playful collages early in 1921, the group collectively recognized the seemingly predetermined relevance of those works. Ernst’s images engaged the viewer aggressively, performed for the eye — and even entertained the onlooker in some ambiguous fashion that was ultimately revelatory.

The diverse collage tactics employed by Ernst created a distinct kind of illusionism that seemed entirely modern to Breton and friends, but at the same time unmistakably familiar in a provocative way. This recognition of the popular culture import of Ernst’s work was clearly sounded by Breton in subsequent texts written throughout the 1920s. In particular, I will

<sup>1</sup>André Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 64. This book has been translated as, André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), 64.

<sup>2</sup>Breton letter to André Derain, October 3, 1921. This letter was first translated in Werner Spies, *Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, trans. John William Gabriel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 67 and n. 333.

argue that one of the main features of Breton's reception of Ernst's work at this time was the correlation he drew between the collages and popular cinema, that form of modern media which was so highly favored by the circle of avant-garde writers and artists gathered under the masthead of the journal *Littérature* during the early 1920s. Conspicuously however, it was not the popular serial and feature films of the contemporaneous post-war moment that Ernst's *Fatagaga* collages called to mind for Breton. Instead, Breton explains that these hybrid works recalled already outmoded turn-of-the-century cinematic illusions and tricks familiar from his childhood.

Therefore, Breton's reception of Ernst in 1921 is important because on the one hand it ties collage specifically to popular culture, and with that, cinema. On the other hand, it is an early example of the impulse that would later evolve into the theoretical and aesthetic category of the surrealist outmoded. As I have argued extensively elsewhere, the critical paradigm of the outmoded became a central theory of the Parisian avant-garde in the immediate post-World War I period and throughout the 1920s.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the outmoded served as a canny signifier of opposition to various modernist ideologies with which these young veterans took issue. These polemical social narratives included among other things the cultural *retour à l'ordre* so prominent in France at this time, widespread values of progressivism and rationalism, the increasing pressure of a capitalist economic imperative, and the material and psychological destruction wrought by the long war. German critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin was the first to give name to this unique form of alter-modernity in surrealism. Although his notion of *das Veraltete* was explored only in limited fashion in direct correlation to surrealism, it took on epic proportions as a key leitmotif in the rest of his oeuvre, where it gained added significance as a marker for the condition of modernity as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Recently this theme has been expanded in an art historical context by prominent scholars such as Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, among others.<sup>5</sup> Currently, the relevance of issues related to overproduction and planned obsolescence has rendered the outmoded a central term in millennial dialogues about the interdependency of technology, commercial production, and art today.

Without reviewing the full history of the surrealist engagement with this theme, or for that matter the legacy of theoretical dialogues resulting from this field of aesthetic experimentation, I would like to pursue here a single example of one early manifestation of the avant-garde outmoded via André Breton's first encounter with Ernst's collages in 1921. What such a reception reveals is, to begin with, the important awareness that outmoded themes were fomenting in the Parisian avant-garde not long after the conclusion of World War I in a dadaist context — which in turn eventually informed a much more developed

<sup>3</sup>Abigail Susik, "The Vertigo of the Modern: Surrealism and the Outmoded." PhD diss., Columbia University, 2009.

<sup>4</sup>Benjamin wrote about the surrealist outmoded in diverse texts starting in 1925, most notably in his 1929 essay, "Der Sürrealismus: Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz" ["Surrealism: The Latest Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia"]. My translation of the title of this essay differs slightly from that of Edmund Jephcott. See his translation, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in vol. 2 of, Walter Benjamin, "Selected Writings," ed. Michael William Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 207-21. For the original German see Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972-1989). Richard Wolin also argues that "latest" is more appropriate than "last" in the title of Benjamin's essay. See note 66 in, Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin, an Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 292.

<sup>5</sup>See: "Outmoded Spaces" in, Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 157-91. Also see Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 33-35.

surrealist praxis of the outmoded in subsequent years. As I hypothesized in my dissertation of 2009, the fixation that Breton and Aragon in particular had upon cultural entities dating from their own childhood or their parents' and grandparents' generation was certainly a major factor in the movement away from Tzara's largely presentist dadaist program. In contrast to dada, the surrealists favored a paradigm of modernity that evinced great concern for the literary, artistic, and popular culture production of the previous century. Second, the appearance of outmoded themes amongst the *Littérature* group as early as 1921 also communicates something of the fundamentally pivotal nature of World War I as a violent historical marker for the end of an era in the eyes of veterans like Breton and Aragon.

Following the social and historical rupture caused by the war, the acclaimed modernity of the early twentieth-century *belle époque* definitively became a thing of the distant and almost unapproachable past, no matter how recently certain technological advances had appeared. Yet, at the same time, these haunting memories from the turn-of-the-century and preceding decades still held an allure and promise that seemed to fly in the face of what the Parisian avant-gardists saw as the supreme 'farce' of the war. Accordingly, the outmoded overtly resisted the modern even while it was itself a byproduct of modern systems. In the immediate post-war period, the Parisian avant-garde would have been highly aware of the renewed public rhetoric of progressivism and optimism meant to pull France out of the aftermath of the war crisis in more ways than one. Thus, the defeatist position of the outmoded that André Breton so readily perceived in Ernst's collages in 1921 is an important early example of a proto-surrealist fixation on critical revisions of modernist paradigms of temporality. This critical position with regard to historical time and modern materiality would later become a crucial component of the systematic surrealist attack on hegemonic discourses descended from Enlightenment narratives of rationalism and progressivism, as well as a complement to their Marxist-influenced resistance to capitalist drives and imperatives.

In order to begin to unravel some of these issues, let us now turn toward an examination of Breton's landmark 1921 essay on Ernst in conjunction with some of the works shown at the Au Sans Pareil exhibition in Paris that year. Parisian dada was in full swing in 1920 and 1921 when the Romanian-born provocateur Tristan Tzara began to manipulate his prodigious German connections in order to arrange a solo exhibition for Cologne artist Max Ernst in the French capital. Due to increasing tensions with Breton and others, the already over-extended Tzara began to waver in his commitment to this endeavor, and soon Breton became the organizer of Ernst's first Parisian exhibition. This was so despite the fact that Breton still had not met Ernst and had only seen two collages firsthand, as well as a handful of works in reproduction.<sup>6</sup> The Ernst exhibition was just one of a number of eyebrow-raising events planned for the dada roster in the spring of 1921. This program included field trips to venerable Parisian monuments, mock trials, vaudeville-type salons, fresh-air banquets, nonsensical operas, and the like. The spectacle that occurred at the *vernissage* or opening for the Ernst exhibition at the Au Sans Pareil gallery found its appropriate place within this variegated dadaist agenda. Ernst himself was not present, having been denied a passport by authorities in his hometown of Cologne. Nevertheless, the Parisian dadaists spared no effort in their demonstrations of support for their German compatriot at the exhibition opening.

<sup>6</sup>William A. Camfield, Werner Spies, and Walter Hopps, *Max Ernst: Dada and the Dawn of Surrealism* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 1993), 96. The works that made up Ernst's first Paris exhibition consisted of diverse types of collage, photographic montage, overpaintings, and other types of media. Due to the fact that most of these works included paper elements and drawn elements in addition to photographic fragments, I will here call them collectively "collage" for the sake of ease.

Standing at the door, Jacques Rigaut loudly announced the number of automobiles and pearls possessed by the incoming guests. Soupault and Tzara played hide and seek in the midst of the reception. Breton lit matches one after another. Peret and Charchoune repeatedly shook hands. Meanwhile, Aragon meowed loudly in a corner.

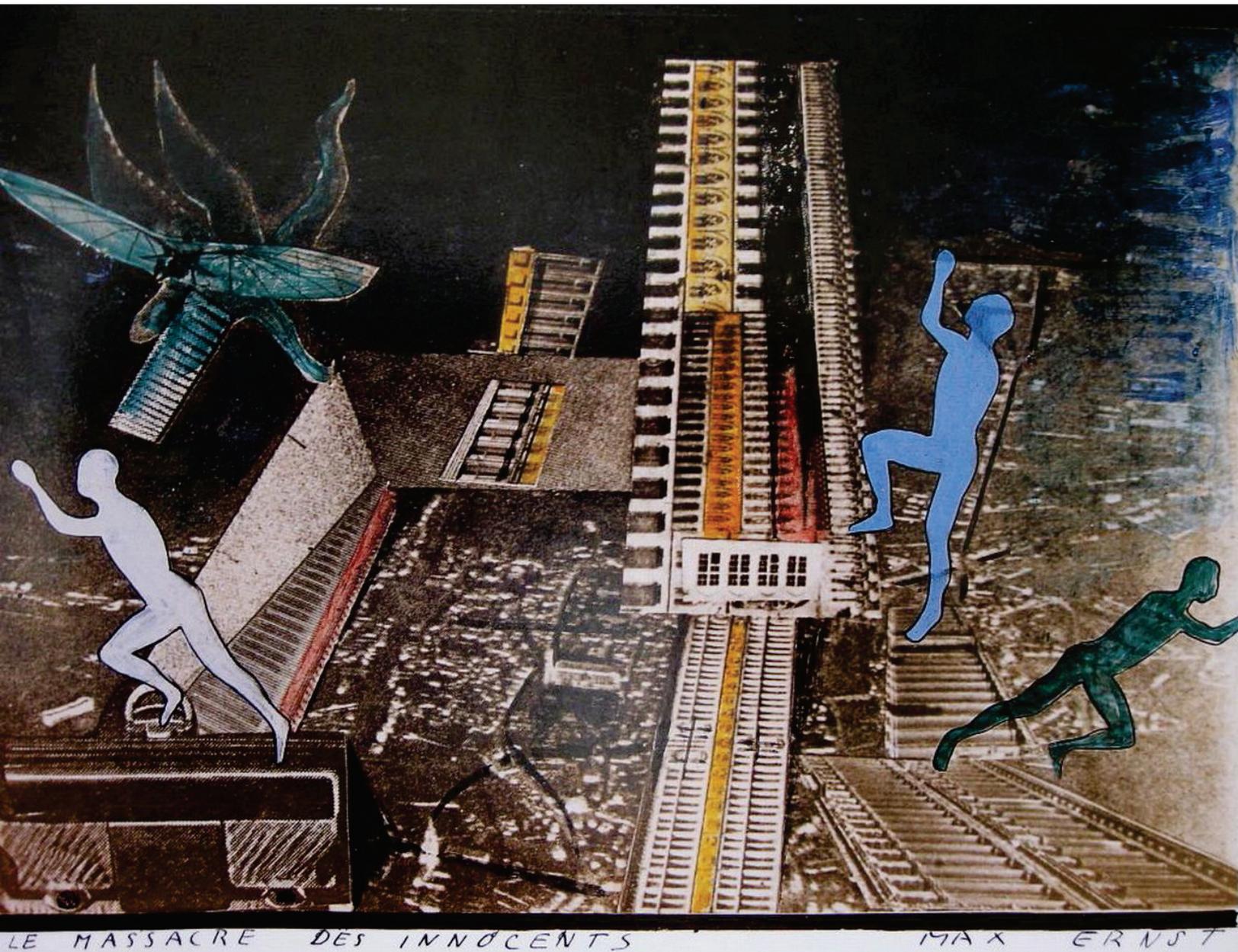
This display of solidarity with Ernst at the *vernissage* of his Au Sans Pareil exhibition in 1921 no doubt constitutes one of the more memorable legends in circulation concerning Parisian dada's reception of Ernst. However, rather than dwell on the significance of this dada display, which in itself evokes the profound similarities between the avant-garde and variety show culture at this time, it is rather the explicit nature of the collective shock generated during Breton and Aragon's first viewing of Ernst's collages that I wish to investigate. In Breton's case, this shock was specifically tied to the notion that collage was akin to turn-of-the-century cinematic illusionism. Ernst had mailed Breton two of his collages a few months in advance of the exhibition, including *Crochet relief* of 1921, which is now lost. Yet the astonishment that occurred when Tzara, Aragon, Breton, Soupault, and Picabia unpacked the shipment of works that arrived at Picabia's house just one day in advance of the exhibition was in no way diminished by these earlier arrivals. Years later, Breton wrote that in 1921 surrealism "was already fully in evidence" in Ernst's constructions of this period, such as *Massacre of the Innocents* of 1920 (fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> This bald enthusiasm for Ernst's unique brand of collages was immediately reflected in the brief essay "Max Ernst" that Breton wrote for the exhibition following the unpacking of Ernst's crate of collages.<sup>8</sup>

Although completed in a great hurry, indeed overnight, this last-minute essay is remarkable from a historical standpoint in a number of ways. In particular it is notable because it compares avant-garde visual art to recent advances in science and technology. Most notably this includes cinema, as stated above. However, as far as I have been able to determine in my research, the comparison of Ernst's collages to cinema in Breton's 1921 essay has not yet been commented upon in scholarship, nor for that matter has the marked presence of this allusion in his later writings on the artist been noted — such as Breton's foreword to Ernst's first collage novel of 1929, *La Femme 100 têtes*, which dwells upon related themes. In this light, Breton's 1921 essay on Ernst encompasses significant implications regarding proto-surrealist theories of the interaction between popular visual culture and the traditional fine arts, a theme which has become so central for surrealism studies of late.

Breton's 1921 essay establishes the avant-garde medium of collage as a response to what he viewed as the *obsolescence* of old artistic modes of representation. Collage is seen as displacing the hegemonic dominance of what might be called mimeticism or naturalism in the fine arts, the "look" of the "real" — and in particular, such valences as they played out in the medium of painting. Although it is well known that a few years after this initial essay on Ernst in 1921, Breton formulated a defense of the medium of painting in his tract *Surrealism and Painting* (written 1925-1928), it is arguable that even while Breton envisioned a continued role for painting in the twentieth-century, he likewise understood this survival to be predicated upon a thorough restructuring of conventional avenues of representation and

<sup>7</sup> André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> This short essay first appeared in the catalog for the 1921 Au Sans Pareil bookstore exhibition in Paris (3 May-3 June 1921) and was then republished in Breton's collection of essays, *Les Pas perdus* of 1924 (Gallimard, Nouvelle revue française). For a reprint, see "Max Ernst" in André Breton, *Les Pas perdus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 81-83. For the English translation see, "Max Ernst" in, André Breton, *The Lost Steps = Les Pas Perdus*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 60-61.



**Figure 1**

Max Ernst. *Massacre of the Innocents*. Circa 1920. Collage: cut printed reproductions, stencils, gouache, watercolor, and ink on photographic reproduction mounted on paperboard. 8 1/2 x 11 7/16 in.

viewing within modernity.<sup>9</sup> Namely, if painting survives on in *Surrealism and Painting*, it is in a thoroughly expanded and transformed guise from the traditional praxis of representational painting with its normatively delimited social import and function. As part of a “total revision of real values,” Breton writes in *Surrealism and Painting*, “the plastic work of art will either refer to a *purely internal model* or will cease to exist.”<sup>10</sup> The nature of this later Bretonian model for the “plastic work of art” is of course extremely complex, as is the role of the “real” in this insular aesthetic sphere. In 1921, however, Breton was more or less still in the thrall of Tzara’s dadaist iconoclasm, and therefore his essay on Ernst takes a much more incendiary stance toward traditional artistic media than is the case in Breton’s later writings on the artist. Therefore, Ernst’s importation of an innovative kind of collage to Paris in 1921 struck Breton as the perfect avenue for an exploration of new aesthetic possibilities and representational strategies.

However, even after Breton’s defense of painting in the face of Pierre Naville’s claim in April of 1925 that there was “no such thing as *surrealist painting*,” Breton continued to focus upon the way in which Ernst’s practice augmented and updated traditional artistic media.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the obsolescence of venerable models of representation in modernity is a theme that became the defining characteristic of both Breton’s and Aragon’s reception of Ernst, and with that, a central part of Ernst’s own self-presentation in later years as an artist who went “beyond painting.” Likewise, the 1921 essay provides the first glimpse of a proto-surrealist conception of the infiltration of traditional artistic media with new modes of representation — modes which cycle back and forth between cutting-edge technologies and recently outmoded technologies of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, thereby creating an interpenetration of old and new, traditional and innovative. In a somewhat bewildering fashion, therefore, Breton’s 1921 essay juggles themes of *obsolescent* and *outmoded*, pitting vaunted methods of traditional representational arts against the already fading popular culture of the turn of the century.<sup>12</sup>

According to Breton, Ernst’s collages are at the forefront of a new form of representation that manifested in the face of the recent obsolescence of a naturalistic discourse in the fine arts. Breton explains that it was the invention of photography and automatic writing in the nineteenth-century which “dealt a mortal blow to old means of expression” [“a porté un coup mortel aux vieux modes d’expression”] by allowing artists to break from the mundane task of mimetic representation.<sup>13</sup> Artists could dispense with empiricism and depart for unknown representational territory: abstraction, or as Breton obliquely describes it, “a landscape in which nothing terrestrial figures.”<sup>14</sup> Despite these recent developments in aesthetics, he argues, even symbolism and cubism remained confined by various “limitations” of representation. Therefore, Breton believes it is up to dadaism to fully come to terms with the obsolescence of old representational hierarchies still lingering on in society. In an early expression of the program of cultural revolution that would later come to define

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 23-32.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>11</sup>Pierre Naville, “Beaux-arts,” *La Révolution surréaliste* 3 (April 15, 1925): 27.

<sup>12</sup>Breton, *The Lost Steps = Les Pas Perdus*, 60-61.

<sup>13</sup>Breton, *The Lost Steps = Les Pas Perdus*, 60. The editors of Breton’s *Complete Works* comment that Breton probably refers to Rimbaud and Lautréamont when he speaks of the invention of automatic writing in the nineteenth century. See note 1 in vol. 1 of, André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet, et al., 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1988-1999), 1266.

<sup>14</sup>Breton, *The Lost Steps = Les Pas Perdus*, 60.

surrealism under his guidance, Breton comments, "We must pass beyond these meanings, so as then to distribute them, grouping them in whatever arrangements we please."<sup>15</sup> For Breton it is not enough to simply "rejuvenate" stale cultural meanings. Rather, it is necessary to supply new definitions for the old words, things, and categories altogether if a collective revelation, as a form of utopian progress, is to be achieved.

In Breton's eyes, Ernst's collages for the *Au Sans Pareil* exhibition serve as the template for this implanting of old signifiers with fresh signifieds. The collages — and here is the sole allusion to the necessary operation of the *retainment* of outmoded contexts in the construction of the new — "disorient us within our own memories" ["nous dépayser en notre proper souvenir"] by "removing our systems of reference."<sup>16</sup> In such a paradigm, the standard framework of an image or message is purposefully preserved, with all its attendant associations intact, in order to internally explode the former content or "system of reference." This then creates a compound of novelty within the zone of the familiar. Breton states that this is a "marvelous ability" ["la faculté merveilleuse"], to be able to "reach out, without leaving the field of our experience, to two distinct realities and bring them together to create a spark."<sup>17</sup> Such a discourse, based in part upon the examples of French authors Pierre Reverdy and the Comte de Lautréamont, found an echo three years later in Breton's first surrealist *Manifesto* of 1924 (among many later surrealist documents), when the luminous spark is posed as the primary goal of the surrealist artist who marries "distant realities."<sup>18</sup> Of course, this aspect of Breton's poetic theory as it applies to both surrealism and collage has already been extensively addressed in contemporary scholarship. Readers are by now familiar with the "spark" of metaphoric and metonymic slippage, which provides the necessary electricity to drive even the most unlikely surrealist comparisons and juxtapositions. However, Breton's brief but remarkable essay of 1921 reveals there were also other strands of culture beyond poetic references that he was thinking of when he spoke of such a disorientation "within our own memories." Indeed, quite suddenly in the midst of his elocution, Breton ties Ernst's collages and the new modes of representation that they reflect to the recent invention of cinema. Somehow for Breton, Ernst's collage methods, as a juxtaposition of distinct realities that create a spark, resemble the projected and continuous images of the filmic apparatus.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> The early publication history of the first *Manifesto* is complex and I will bypass it here. For a still-accessible French reprint, see, André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Collection Folio/Essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 48. For the English translation see, André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 36. In Suzanne Guerlac's discussion of Breton's 1921 essay on Ernst, she points out that that Breton discovered Lautréamont's *Poésies* in the Bibliothèque Nationale roughly a year before he saw Ernst's collages for the first time. Thus she relates Breton's discussion of "disorientation from within" in the 1921 essay to his evolving understanding of what Lautréamont called "plagiarism" during this period. Guerlac argues that Breton was intrigued by the way in which Lautréamont's *Poésies* borrowed from or "cited" an "anterior idiom" or "*parole*" but did not involve a "systematic negation of the original." She then applies this observation to an interpretation of Ernst's collages of outmoded materials as a deracination of signs from their original referents, to the extent that there is no plane of reference at all in Ernst's collages, which become an "entirely synthetic space," and a "space of pure fiction." See, Suzanne Guerlac, "Breton: Angelic Truth," in *Literary Polemics: Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 132-36. In contrast to Guerlac's ambitious thesis, I argue that the references of the outmoded material are retained in order to render the clash between old and new meanings all the more striking.

Recall that film was still a fairly fresh innovation at this time. As is commonly known, this modern media technology appeared initially in a form similar to that which we know today in the screenings held by the Lumière brothers in Paris during 1895, although several related models of projected visual entertainment or sequenced images set in motion had preceded film in the nineteenth century. Indeed, it is arguable Breton refers specifically to one of the most famous Lumière films in his discussion: *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*, which was first screened to a paying audience in Paris on January 6, 1896, about a month before Breton himself was born. Breton comments, "Today, thanks to the cinema, we know how to make a locomotive *arrive* on canvas."<sup>19</sup> Comparing the projection screen to a painter's canvas, Breton renders painting dynamic with his metaphor. Film far surpasses painting in its incredible mimeticism — it displays photographically-rendered motion. Therefore, like the inventions of photography and automatic writing, the advancement of film administered a further blow to the traditional fine arts according to Breton, particularly with regard to the inescapably static nature of painterly mediums. Similar to Albert Einstein's recently publicized relativity theories that revolutionized science, another contemporary event Breton names in this essay, film contributed greatly to the reordering of systems of representation in the early twentieth-century. In contrast to the obsolescent representational language of naturalistic painting, therefore, cinema was a novelty — even though Breton cites a foundational event in cinema history occurring as much as twenty-five years earlier.

In particular among cinematographic effects, Breton refers to the techniques of slow and accelerated cinematography as popular indicators of the "relative time" Einstein's theories posed for this new medium. The techniques of overcranking (slowed motion) and undercranking (accelerated motion) during filming had been known since the early days of cinema at the turn of the century, when they were used among other things to compensate for the changing natural light of many film sets that did not yet have the benefit of electric illumination.<sup>20</sup> However, the best-known director in France to widely use slowed and accelerated motion as an entertainment feature or special effect in his films was Georges Méliès, the famous "cinémagician."<sup>21</sup> Breton's generation had grown up watching the extremely popular Méliès films, but by 1921, Méliès had not produced a film in nearly a decade. In 1917, Méliès's office in the Passage de l'Opéra (itself another important site of the surrealist outmoded) was seized by the army, and many of his films were melted down for their valuable raw materials, much needed in the war. After that, his work was largely forgotten until the early 1930s.<sup>22</sup>

Although Breton does not mention Méliès specifically in his essay, his allusion to the fantastic effects of slow and accelerated motion evokes just the types of cinematic stunts performed by this filmmaker. While the Lumière brothers also used various cinematic tricks

<sup>19</sup> Breton, *The Lost Steps = Les Pas Perdus*, 60 [his italics].

<sup>20</sup> Paul Hammond discusses the general use of fast and slow cranking in Méliès films. Paul Hammond, *Marvellous Méliès* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 31.

<sup>21</sup> John Frazer lists two Méliès films that included accelerated motion as an entertainment feature: *The Apparition* (1903) and *Untamable Whiskers* (1904), although it is likely that there were earlier examples of this effect in Méliès's films, many of which were lost by the 1920s. See, John Frazer, *Artificially Arranged Scenes: The Films of Georges Méliès* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979), 121-22, 136-37. *Carrefour de l'Opéra* (1897) also utilized accelerated motion.

<sup>22</sup> For an overview of the decline of Méliès's career as a film director, see, Elizabeth Ezra, *Georges Méliès: The Birth of the Auteur* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 18-20. Also see the books by Frazer and Hammond.

on occasion, Méliès made a successful career out of it for over a decade (fig. 2).<sup>23</sup> Breton writes, "As the use of slow and accelerated motion devices [des appareils ralentisseur et accélérateur] spreads, people should get used to seeing oak trees surge up and antelopes soar."<sup>24</sup> Antelopes "soar" via the effects of slow motion, while oak trees "surge up" instantaneously under the pressure of accelerated film. Given this description of accelerated motion, Breton's words could also feasibly describe the more extreme acceleration of time-lapse cinematography developed by the Austrian scientist August Musger in 1904-1907, and debuted in popular film around the time of Breton's writing in the early 1920s. However, it seems more likely given the aforementioned allusion to the Lumière brothers that Breton was referring to an earlier cinematic tradition that appeared around the turn of the twentieth-century via popular filmmakers like Méliès.

Moreover, Breton refers to Ernst in a manner that particularly recalls Méliès, who was a great favorite of the surrealists by the early 1930s, if not earlier.<sup>25</sup> Like Méliès, who attempted to create "living pictures" with a performer's smile ever affixed upon his face, Ernst is according to Breton, "the man of these infinite possibilities" (fig. 3).<sup>26</sup> This is so because: "resolved to do away with still-life mystic-charlatanism [mysticism-escroquerie à la nature morte], he projects before our eyes the most captivating film in the world [le film le plus captivant du monde], without losing the grace of smiling even as he illuminates the

<sup>23</sup>Hammond, *Marvellous Méliès*, 30.

<sup>24</sup>Breton, *The Lost Steps = Les Pas Perdus*, 61. I have modified this translation slightly.

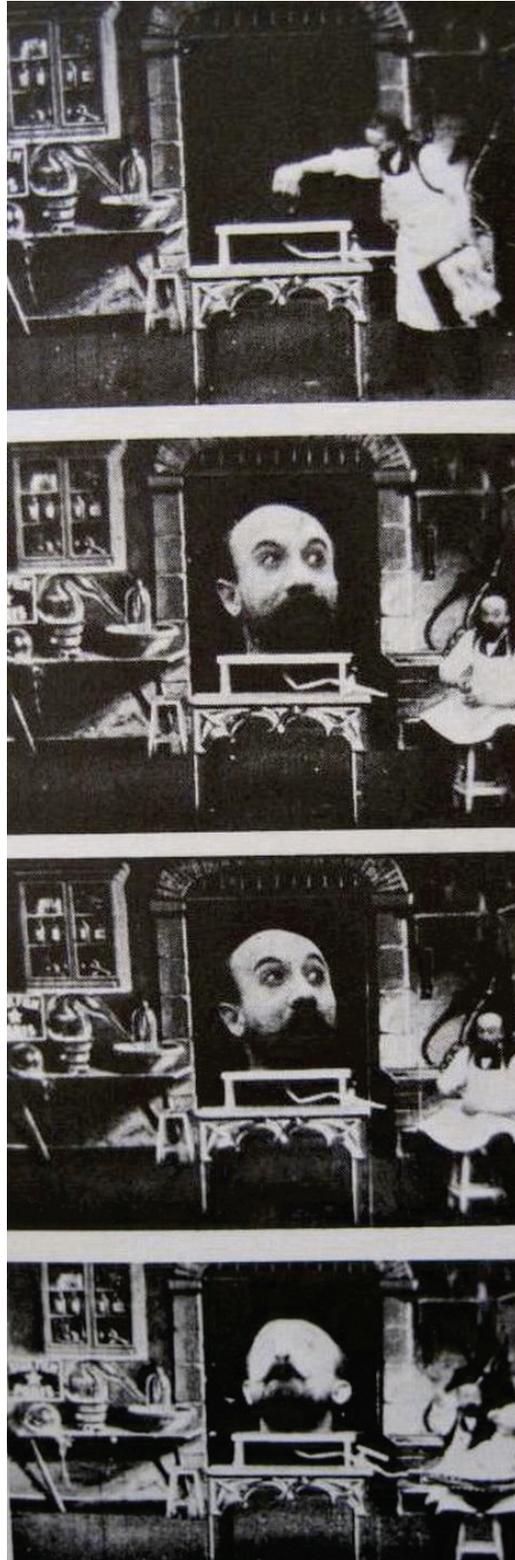
<sup>25</sup> It is quite possible that, apart from the early introduction that the surrealists had to Méliès's fanciful films during their childhood, Aragon and Breton were also aware that Méliès's office was formerly located in their favorite haunt, the Passage de l'Opéra. The earliest reference to Méliès in surrealist writings that I have been able to find is an essay by Salvador Dalí from 1932 entitled, "Abstract of a Critical History of the Cinema." See, Paul Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000), 63. In "Some Surrealist Advice" from the journal *L'Âge du cinéma* in 1951, Méliès is honored while the Lumières are debunked. See, *Ibid.*, 46. The filmmaker and critic Ado Kyrrou did much to popularize Méliès as the founding father of surrealist film in his book, *Le Surréalisme au cinéma* (1952). See, Ado Kyrrou, *Le Surréalisme au cinéma* (Paris: Ramsay, 1985). The former surrealist Georges Sadoul also wrote an important early study of Méliès: Georges Sadoul, *Georges Méliès* (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1961). Elizabeth Ezra states that the surrealists favored Méliès in the 1920s when he was still out of fashion, and also that several surrealists visited him after he was "rediscovered" in 1926. She does not name any surrealists in particular. See, Ezra, *Georges Méliès: The Birth of the Auteur*, 20. Hammond mentions Breton, Ernst, Péret, and surrealism in general in relation to Méliès, but he does not provide any specific citations of a surrealist interest in Méliès before 1935. See in particular, Hammond, *Marvellous Méliès*, 7, 62, 93. Perhaps the surrealists knew of Apollinaire's auspicious comment about Méliès. Apocryphal lore has it that Apollinaire asked Méliès about how he made one of his trick films, *The Eruption of Mount Pelée*. When Méliès replied that he achieved the eruption by "photographing cinders and chalk," Apollinaire commented, "Monsieur and I have the same occupation, we enchant ordinary materials." Frazer, *Artificially Arranged Scenes: The Films of Georges Méliès*, 95. Frazer takes this comment from, Pierre Leprohon, *Histoire du Cinéma* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1961), 36. For an analysis of the ties between Méliès and Italian futurism, see, Wanda Strauven, "L'art De Georges Méliès et le futurisme Italien," in *Georges Méliès, L'illusionniste fin de siècle?: actes du colloque de Cerisy-La-Salle, 13-22 août 1996*, ed. Jacques Malthête and Michel Marie (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne nouvelle, 1997), 331-56.

<sup>26</sup> Breton, *The Lost Steps = Les Pas Perdus*, 61. Spies briefly mentions Méliès and his predecessor, the magician Robert Houdin (whose theater Méliès purchased) in relation the surrealist interest in tricks and Ernst's use of source material depicting sleight of hand. See, Spies, *Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, 71-74.



**Figure 2**

Film still from Georges Méliès, *A Mysterious Portrait*. 1899.



**Figure 3**

Frame enlargements from Georges Méliès, *The Man with the Rubber Head*. 1902.

innermost depths of our internal life with an unparalleled light...<sup>27</sup> Again, possibly suggesting a connection with Méliès, who was a successful variety show prestidigitator and illusionist before he became a filmmaker, Breton poses Ernst as one who manipulates the newest technologies to overcome the “charlatanism” of perspectival representation and naturalistic rendering, thereby divining a new and improved form of illusion. These academic modes of representation are false for Breton not because they fool the eye into seeing depth or volume in a *trompe l'œil* fashion, but rather, because they are “still,” depicting a “dead nature.” The old virtuality of painterly perspective is simply inferior to the riveting optical illusionism of cinematic effects. This is, then, largely a question of technological advancement for Breton. The virtual “projection” that illusionistic paintings achieve with their imposition of three-dimensional space upon a two-dimensional surface is certainly one of the earliest forms of technological projection. Yet, even the most sophisticated form of pre-cinematic projection, that of linear perspective, was rendered obsolete in the face of photographic reproduction. The sleight of hand that is “realistic” painting is therefore a weak hoax compared to the extraordinary feats accomplished by the apparatus of film. For Breton, film makes one “aware of infinitesimal variations” just as it enables the perception of the complete life cycle “without a single blink of an eye.”<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to the false paralysis of traditional representational modes which vainly strive for illusion, Ernst’s collages are dynamic and machinic like films for Breton.<sup>29</sup> Yet, within his brief essay for the Max Ernst exhibition of 1921, Breton does not spell out the precise way in which he perceives a filmic-type movement or projection activated in these diverse types of collages, thus leaving many questions unanswered in the wake of his suggestive meditation. Certainly, the issue of depicted movement in painting was prominent in the decade before World War I, when the cubists considered new modalities of space-time, the futurists in Italy fell in love with speed, and Marcel Duchamp played with the effects of duration from his studios in Paris and New York. Even more importantly than these trends for the sake of this discussion, the topic of cinema was a favorite one at this time in general for the *Littérature* group, all of whom were avid film-goers. Both Soupault and Aragon had already published

<sup>27</sup> Breton, *The Lost Steps = Les Pas Perdus*, 61. As a side note, such a comparison of Ernst as a montage artist to a magician intercepts intriguingly with Benjamin’s well-known metaphor of the painter as magician and the cinematographer as surgeon. However, in a peculiar reversal of Benjamin’s equation of the magician and the surgeon, Ernst’s collages generate shock by employing the magician’s techniques of conservation of the whole: instead of extracting the collage fragments that he uses from their original context, Ernst creates an illusion of totality by retaining the page as a preserved structure. The shock, therefore, is not a shock of the disjuncture of the similar, as exemplified by the photomontages of the Berlin dada group, but rather the shock caused by the *junction of the dissimilar*. Benjamin states in this essay, however, that it was dadaism rather than surrealism that tried to “produce with the means of painting (or literature) the effects which the public today seeks in film” [his italics]. See, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility” in vol. 3 of, Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael William Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 115-16, 118-19.

<sup>28</sup> Breton, *The Lost Steps = Les Pas Perdus*, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Looming in the background of this discussion for the contemporary reader is Adorno’s contrasting claim that Ernst’s collage novels of the late 1920s and early 1930s are the epitome of *nature morte*, a kind of fossilized remnant of a once-living collective history. See, Theodor W. Adorno, “Looking Back on Surrealism,” in *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Horizon Press, 1968), 223.

important early essays on film before 1920.<sup>30</sup> Breton, who cultivated his cinematic tastes while in the company of Jacques Vaché during the war, published his first essay on the subject a year later than his friends. This was the 1921 exhibition text on Ernst.<sup>31</sup> Not surprisingly therefore, his meditations on Ernst reveal just how much those viewing experiences with Vaché influenced his understanding of the ramifications of cinema for the avant-garde.

It is well known that as young soldiers Breton and Vaché were in the habit of creating their own kind of cinematic collages by dropping in and out of multiple films at random over the course of a given night, using the least sign of boredom as their only criteria for cutting the viewing short and moving onto another feature. Although Breton writes about this omnivorous viewing experience with Vaché as late as the 1950s in the essay, "As in a Wood," it is important I think that he employs some of the same words featured in the 1921 essay on Ernst to describe the chimerical effect of this cinematic wandering. The young Breton had "never experienced anything quite as *magnetizing*" as this artificial film sequencing, and the two emerged "charged" for a few days after the experience. Their version of film became as "captivating" as that thin cuticle of experience between sleeping and waking.<sup>32</sup> Encountered in this peripatetic manner, film was a "*marvel*" and "the only *absolutely modern* mystery."<sup>33</sup> Breton writes, "What we saw in movies, whichever they were, was only a lyrical substance that had to be mixed and stirred in bulk and haphazardly. I think what we prized most in them, to the point of being indifferent to anything else, was this capacity to transport the mind elsewhere."<sup>34</sup> Eschewing all narrative fixation and the extended sequencing of longer-length feature films, trends only just becoming palpable in France in the years following World War I, Breton and Vaché instead return to the "short"

<sup>30</sup>See Soupault's "Note I sur le cinéma" and also "Poème cinématographique" in *Sic* no. 25 (1919). This essay is reprinted in, Pierre Albert-Birot, *Sic (Sons Idées Coulers Formes) (1916-19)* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1980). Also see Aragon's "Du décor" published in *Le Film* (Sept. 15, 1918). It is tempting to undertake a digression to review this essay at length here, given Aragon's analysis of the filmic close-up as a novel kind of illusionism that transports the viewer into a state of dreamlike enchantment. However, I will leave that strand of thinking for another article. Aragon's essay is reprinted in, Aragon, *Chroniques, 1918-1932*, ed. Bernard Leuilliot (Paris: Stock, 1998), 23-38. Aragon's essay has also been translated as "On Décor" in, Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, 50-54. Also translated in this volume is a 1924 essay by Soupault, "Cinema U.S.A.," as well as other early surrealist writings on film. I have not provided here an exhaustive list of the proto-surrealist writings on film. Aragon and Desnos wrote other relevant essays before 1925 that I do not list here for the sake of brevity, and Salvador Dalí also wrote on film during the 1920s before and after his contact with the surrealists. Some of these writings are gathered in translation in, Salvador Dalí, *Oui: The Paranoid-Critical Revolution: Writings by Salvador Dalí, 1927-1933*, ed. Robert Descharnes (Boston: Exact Change, 1998). On surrealism and film in general, see in particular three recent texts, listed alphabetically: Graeme Harper and Rob Stone, *The Unsilvered Screen: Surrealism on Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007). Michael Richardson, *Surrealism and Cinema* (Oxford: Berg, 2006). Robert Short, *The Age of Gold: Surrealist Cinema* (London: Creation, 2003).

<sup>31</sup>Breton writes about his youthful love of cinema in his sole essay devoted to film, "Comme dans un bois," published in *La Clé des Champs* (1953). See vol. 3 of, Breton, *Œuvres Complètes*, 294-300. This essay has been translated as, "As in a Wood" in, André Breton, *Free Rein = La Clé des champs*, trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d'Amboise (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 235-40. For Breton in this essay, cinema is placed squarely in the realm of surrealist marvels and *dépaysment*. However, at the end of the essay, Breton also notes with disappointment that cinema has not lived up to its full poetic potential.

<sup>32</sup>Breton, *Free Rein = La Clé des Champs*, 236-37 [his italics].

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, [his italics].

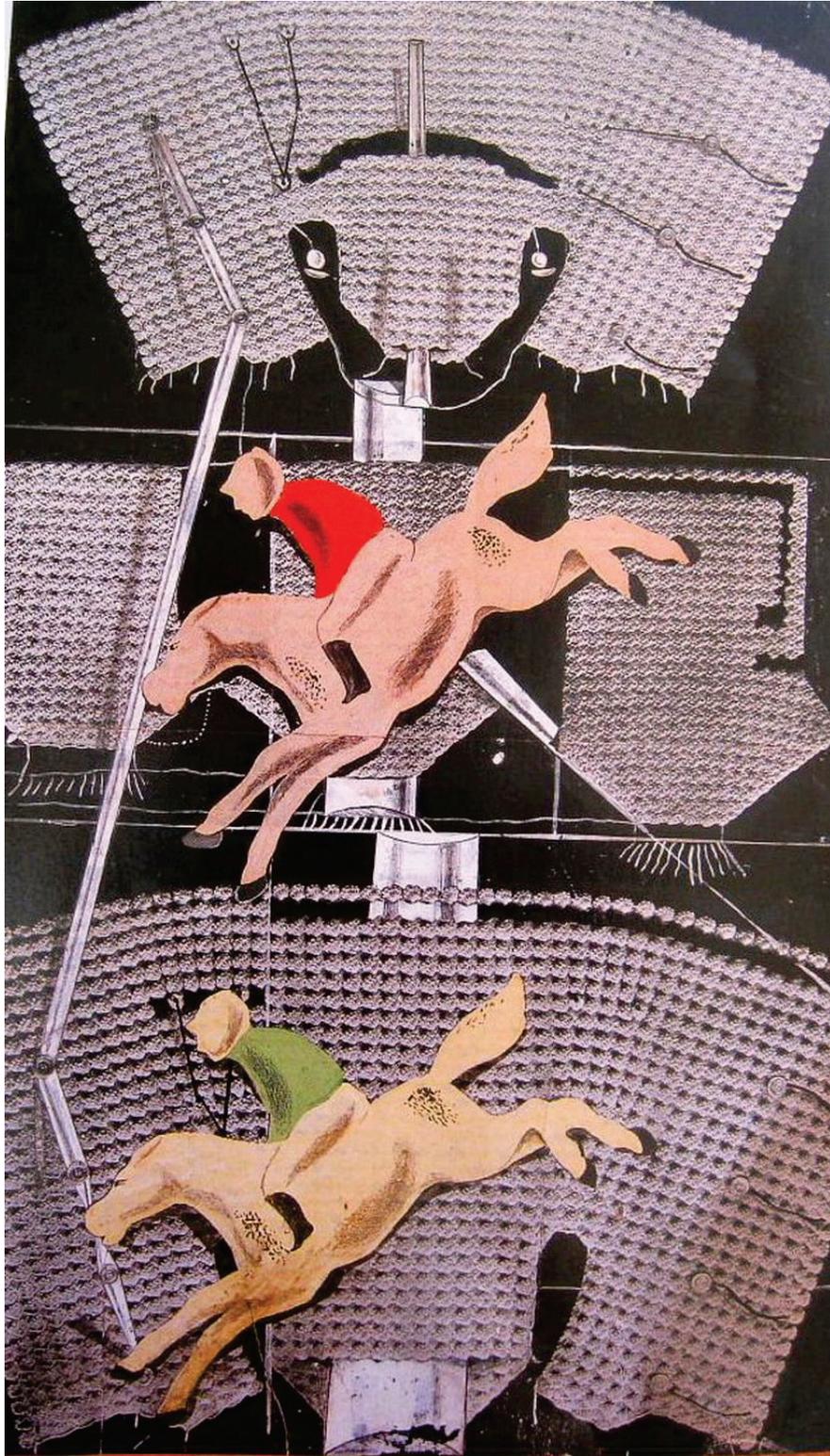
<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 236.

format of earlier novelty films by enforcing this roving form of spectacular consumption. Likewise, they engage in their own kind of montage editing by stringing various films together over the span of an evening. Only certain comic films and older serialized films already out of favor with the general populace could hold their attention for longer periods of duration, such as Louis Feuillade's wartime *Les Vampires*. Otherwise, it is helpful to recall Breton's love of low-budget pulp films such as the now nearly forgotten serial, *The Trail of the Octopus*, as detailed in the 1928 novella *Nadja*.

Considering this account, it is key to recognize that Breton and Vaché did not revere film in general but instead took quite aggressive means to reshuffle and undermine the rise of the feature-length movie in order to extract that carefully cultivated spark of poetic energy. Arguably, Breton recognized a similar effect in Ernst's curious collages. These works certainly employed rigorous montage tactics, but also conspicuously evoked cinematic entertainment forms lying largely outside the mainstream feature-length film market, such as pulp and low-budget productions. However, the allusion must nevertheless be unraveled somewhat further if its relevance for an art historical reading of Ernst's collages of this period is to be distilled — or for that matter, if its significance for a surrealist theory of the outmoded is to be apprehended at all. Arguably, Breton's comparison of Ernst's collages to film was more than just a question of recent trends in aesthetics, or for that matter Breton's bald enthusiasm for many brands of cinema. Nor was this assessment merely tied to the presence of the many photographic source materials in Ernst's collages for the *Au Sans Pareil* exhibition. Importantly, the filmic metaphor would remain a staple of Breton's other writings on Ernst during the 1920s, which discussed Ernst's collage novels of outmoded materials as well as his paintings.<sup>35</sup>

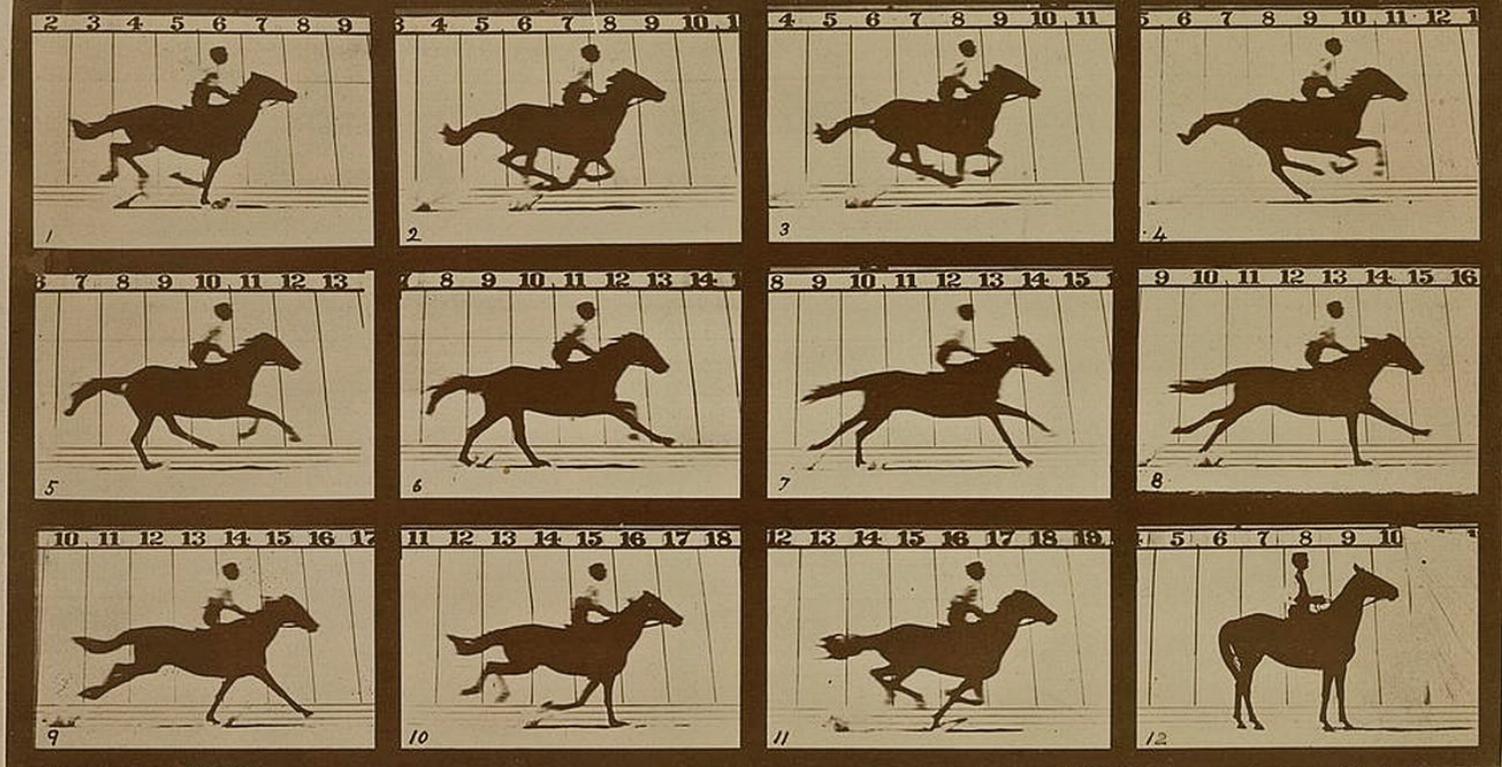
In this regard, the most striking aspect of Breton's filmic metaphor is the ascription of some kind of movement to Ernst's collages. This assessment of Breton's is rather easy to entertain when a selection of the works displayed at *Au Sans Pareil* are surveyed, for most of the collages feature depictions of different kinds of bodies in motion. Or rather, motion is suggested through the presence of gesturing limbs, dynamic poses, and the close succession of nearly identical figures. Specifically, this recurrence of figures across the image space in many of these collages resembles photographic if not cinematic effects. For instance, a work like *Dada Degas* (1920-1921), with its cascading jockeys on horses, recalls the photographic experiments of Eadweard Muybridge with horses during the last quarter of the nineteenth-century (fig. 4). Along with the contemporaneous findings of the French chronophotographer, Étienne-Jules Marey, Muybridge's photography revolutionized the perception of movement (fig.5). However, like the painterly tropes of gesticulation and dynamism of posture, even these last techniques involving the repetition of figures were tricks employed in works of art in various mediums for centuries to convey animation or time passing (think of early Renaissance frescoes which depict one individual repeated in several different scenes, thus read as "time" and "movement"). Therefore, this assembly-line type succession of figures demonstrated in a collage like *Dada Degas* hardly seems to fulfill Breton's claims of the "marvelous ability" of these new, "captivating" forms of representation, even if this tautological framework did pantomime the distinctively gridded contact sheets of still photography.

<sup>35</sup>I refer in particular to Breton's foreword for Ernst's first collage novel in 1929, "Avis au lecteur pour La Femme 100 têtes de Max Ernst," in vol. 2 of Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, 302-306. This essay has been translated as, "Notice to the Reader of The Hundred Headless Woman" in, André Breton, *Break of Day = Point du jour*, trans. Mark Polizzotti and Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 45-50. Also see Breton's extended discussion of Ernst in *passim* in *Surrealism and Painting*. I discuss both of these texts in relation to Ernst and the filmic metaphor in my dissertation of 2009.



**Figure 4**

Max Ernst. *Dada Degas...* 1920-1921. Gouache and ink on printed reproduction mounted on paperboard. 18 7/8 x 12 1/4 in.



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MORSE'S Gallery, 417 Montgomery St., San Francisco

## THE HORSE IN MOTION.

Illustrated by

MUYBRIDGE.

AUTOMATIC ELECTRO-PHOTOGRAPH.

Patent for apparatus applied for.  
**"SALLIE GARDNER,"** owned by **LELAND STANFORD**; ridden by **G. DOMM**, running at a 1.40 gait over the Palo Alto track, 19th June, 1878.

The negatives of these photographs were made at intervals of twenty-seven inches of distance, and about the twenty-fifth part of a second of time; they illustrate consecutive positions assumed during a single stride of the mare. The vertical lines were twenty-seven inches apart; the horizontal lines represent elevations of four inches each.

The negatives were each exposed during the two-thousandth part of a second, and are absolutely "untouched."

### Figure 5

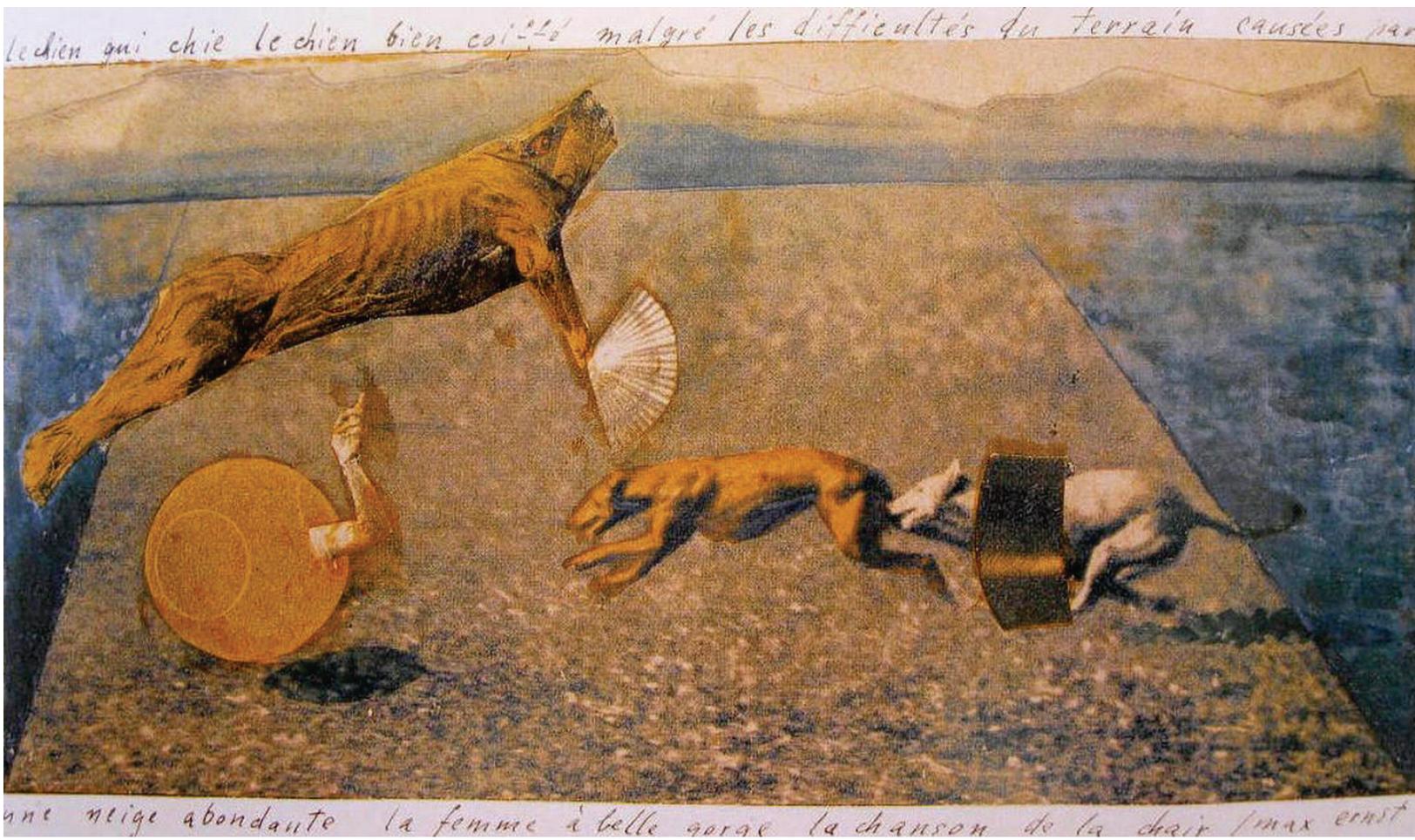
Eadweard Muybridge. Gravures made from his sequence of photographs of the trot and the gallop. Published in *La Nature* (Dec. 1878).

Rather than these more predictable representational measures of naturalistic movement, Breton probably refers to the metaphorical movement suggested by Ernst's baffling operations of photomontage, several examples of which appeared in the *Au Sans Pareil* show. In particular, Breton's reference to antelopes that "soar" via the cinematographic effect of slow motion may have been inspired by the work Breton himself obtained from the 1921 exhibit for his personal collection: *The Dog Who Shits...The Song of the Flesh* (c. 1920) (fig. 6). In this photomontage, Ernst takes a printed photograph of greyhounds racing as his ground image and adds various montage elements, such as the airborne animal carcass and one-armed sphere. He also fashions matching fields of blue gouache and draws various lines in pencil which lend a false sense of continuity to the constructed scene. The speed suggested by the hunched posture and blurred legs of the greyhounds, who barely seem to touch the ground in their race toward the other side of the frame, contrasts with the comparable "slowness" of the gliding animal carcass and the poise of the gesturing sphere, thereby creating the clashing illusionism of slow-versus-accelerated motion referred to by Breton. Thus, it seems likely that one way in which Ernst's collages suggested cinematic movement for Breton was through more or less seamless techniques of jarring juxtaposition, which allowed for contrasts not previously permissible in mimetically-oriented painting. More than just the depiction of movement, or rather the utilization of found elements that depicted movement, the juxtapositions posed in Ernst's collages enforced movement through the violent confrontation of disparate images. In other words, movement was made via *superimposition* of disparate elements which were then concealed into the overall framework of the image. This inevitable image collision creates a static form of sequencing not unlike the continuous linearity of projected film, when slowed down to a halt. *The Dog Who Shits...The Song of the Flesh* is a consummately airless and impossible scene, and yet one perceives a certain pulse of flashing movement within the frame.

While this last collage was one of the most visibly "cinematic" in the *Au Sans Pareil* exhibition due to the dramatic movement instigated by its source images and also its striking superimpositions, other collages such as the Fatagaga construction, *The Chinese Nightingale*, of 1920, may have also approximated filmic effects through other means besides suggested movement, such as the clever tactics of reproductive illusionism (fig. 7).<sup>36</sup> In a distinctly different mode from the greyhound photomontage owned by Breton, *The Chinese Nightingale* combines collage techniques and photographic indexicality in order to create a mock semblance of documentary reality, a seamless montage. Here, Ernst extracted a photographic illustration of an English aviation bomb from World War I as a whole, and collaged into the space of this maquette page a handful of photographic elements gleaned from elsewhere, such as the women's akimbo arms and the splayed fan. Then, Ernst rephotographed the collage so that the seams of his incisions and unwanted gradations in light and saturation were concealed and homogenized by the unified surface of the chemically-fixed paper. Thus, Ernst aimed to create what could be termed after Roland Barthes a highly seductive "reality effect:" an illusion that occurs via the smooth and glossy surface of emulsion, thereby submerging the entire image in "a lustral bath of innocence."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup>I use "illusionism" here, rather than *trompe-l'œil*, due the fact that *trompe-l'œil* is a method by which painting employs illusionistic tricks to make a depicted object appear real, i.e. three-dimensional, whereas the "illusionism" of Ernst's collages is not one of three-dimensionality, but rather of surface coherence and authorial integrity on the strictly two-dimensional representational plane.

<sup>37</sup>See, "Rhetoric of the Image" in, Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 51.



**Figure 6**

Max Ernst. *The Dog Who Shits...The Song of the Flesh*. Circa 1920. Collage: cut printed reproductions, gouache, and pencil on photographic reproduction mounted on paperboard. 4 3/4 x 8 1/4 in.



**Figure 7**

Max Ernst. The Chinese Nightingale. 1920. Collage: cut printed reproductions and ink on paper mounted on paperboard. 4 13/16 x 3 1/2 in.

Along with this unified, denotative surface, the photocollage played with the concept of the “real” through a manipulation of the indexical connotations of photography, just as had been successfully done before by many earlier incarnations of trick photography. Therefore, collages such as these render traditional representational modes obsolescent because they employ illusionism precisely to render *fantastic* rather than *lifelike* scenes more believable, a trait that perhaps causes Breton to wonder in his essay whether, “we are not preparing to someday escape the principle of identity?”<sup>38</sup>

Ernst’s collages of 1919-1921 are radically innovative for Breton because they abandon as their main focus the old game of naturalism via perspective and pursue instead a blatantly filmic brand of illusionism. Their aim is not to give the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane the semblance of depth. Other issues of artifice, such as the concealment of the mass-produced nature of many of the materials and the suggestion of cinematic motion, have instead become the new concern in the collages. In particular, the “reproduction effects” of photographic and printing processes, as anonymous mechanical operations, have replaced methods such as perspective, *chiaroscuro*, and foreshortening as the machine for believability. Indeed, the various collage practices Ernst debuted at the *Au Sans Pareil* exhibition can be encapsulated by the word *illusion*. Despite differences in technique and materials, almost all of Ernst’s collages at the exhibition were constructed toward the goal of cohesion and believability in the face of the naturalistically impossible.<sup>39</sup> Ernst was explicitly interested in fooling his viewers into thinking all of the elements of his works were “handmade.” This was so whether illusion was achieved through the concealment of collage cuts with gouache, line drawings, or rephotographing — as well as various other means. The pointed nature of these illusionistic aims is confirmed in Ernst’s correspondence of this period. In a letter of 1920 in which Ernst sent a selection of Fatagaga collages to Tristan Tzara for publication in the journal *Dadaglobe*, Ernst writes, “I am enclosing a photo...The sensational thing about it is that it is done without any work. That’s my mystery!”<sup>40</sup> Likewise, in another letter to Tzara of the same month, Ernst queries, “Can you show the engraver how to hide the seams in the reproductions of the pasted pieces (so as to keep the Fatagaga secret a secret)?”<sup>41</sup>

This covert operational credo is one of the distinguishing features of Ernst’s collage work, as many scholars have noted, and it arguably inspired much of the specificity of surrealist collage in general. For, in contrast to other avant-garde collage practices, most of which tended to emphasize the destructive nature of the cut and the violent emptiness of the flat, white ground of the sheet underneath, the surrealist trend of collage almost always eschewed such overt fragmentation. For example, compared with a Berlin dada photomontage like Hannah Höch’s *Cut with a Kitchen Knife* of 1919-1920 (fig. 8) — Ernst’s collages meld into compositions more akin to traditional painterly representations of figure and ground. This is not to imply that Ernst’s collages depicting fantastic anthropomorphic objects and impossible hybrid humans were veristic even in a remote sense. Instead, illusionism was most often employed in a starkly naked manner by Ernst. It was illusionism

<sup>38</sup>Breton, *The Lost Steps = Les Pas Perdus*, 61.

<sup>39</sup>Spies’s words for this effect are “plausibility” and “integration.” Werner Spies and Karin von Maur, *Max Ernst, a Retrospective* (Munich: Prestel, 1991), 20, 82, 104. Spies, *Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, 71-74.

<sup>40</sup>Max Ernst, letter to Tristan Tzara, November 2, 1920. Translated in, Spies, *Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, 270.

<sup>41</sup>Max Ernst, letter to Tzara, undated, ca. November 27, 1920. Translated in *Ibid.*, 271.



**Figure 8**

Hannah Höch. *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*. 1919-1920. Photomontage. 44 7/8 x 35 7/16 in.

and “effect” as an end in itself, and therefore reminiscent of various types of pulp shows that sought to provoke shock and wonder in the viewer.

Following Breton’s line of thought, it can be said that these collages evoke cinema largely because they resort to the kinds of visual tricks that had long characterized different forms of spectacular entertainment and print culture in the nineteenth-century, culminating in the invention of film.<sup>42</sup> This turn toward a new form of visual trickery was a progressive replacement of the traditional representational apparatus of painterly illusionism. Perhaps this focus on optical illusion or legerdemain is why Breton refers to the earliest episodes in film history in his essay rather than more recent cinematic innovations such as the extensive use of “cuts” or montage, or even camera pans, which first appeared well after the advent of cinema. Instead, he most likely alludes to the urban legend of the Lumière brothers’ train that “arrived” on screen and purportedly made its spectators scream and run to the back of the room — because it was in the first decade of cinematography that this medium was most closely tied to a popular tradition of spectacular illusionism that had thrived during the latter half of the nineteenth-century. Various mechanical devices and toys such as the Zootrope and thaumatrope appeared in the middle of the nineteenth-century as part of a new category of prefabricated images which were *both still and moving*, depending upon their manipulation. Likewise, lantern slide shows, phantasmagorias, and other media such as Charles Émile Reynaud’s Théâtre Optique of 1892 presented illuminated images to audiences. Only Reynaud’s images actually moved, however, while other media may have incorporated moving light to simulate the effect of shifting imagery, much in the way earlier static spectacles of large-scale dioramas and theatrical *tableaux vivants* relied upon graded lighting to achieve their miraculous techniques. Indeed, the genre of the *tableau vivant*, which posed costumed actors or models within the context of a suspended narrative for a set duration, is of particular interest in this context. Its popularity during the nineteenth-century belies the continuum of interest in both still images that moved impossibly as well as animate beings frozen into picturesque immobility.

The invention of film at the end of the century was closely related to these earlier trends which allowed still images to become dynamic or vice versa (and the reversible or chiasmic quality of this trend of illusionism is arguably key to the effectiveness of the visual interest provoked). Thus it is not unusual that the earliest film directors found themselves in a similar slot with prestidigitators and variety show acts, which in themselves often played with montage-like techniques (as is clearly shown here in this poster for a late-nineteenth-century British magic show, which is not unlike the montage formats of the later avant-garde) (fig. 9). Perhaps the most common place to view films in the first five years of the medium’s existence was at *forains*, or traveling fairs, which featured any number of entertaining spectacles.<sup>43</sup> This was particularly so in the case of Méliès, for whom cinema was an outgrowth of the musical and magical theater he had loved for so long. Méliès was widely known as one of the first cinematographers to frequently employ filmic tricks in the first few years of cinema’s existence, such as multiple exposures, miniaturization, reverse motion,

<sup>42</sup>For instance, another realm of pre-World War I popular culture pertinent here is the popularity of amateur collage and photomontage during the second half of the nineteenth century, which manifested on personal calling cards and other non-professional media, as well as in select areas of commercial postcard production. After the turn of the century, commercial postcards became a major site of collage and montage in Europe. Many surrealists, including André Breton, Aragon and Paul Éluard, collected fantasy postcards. On this subject, see, Clément Chéroux and Ute Eskildsen, *The Stamp of Fantasy: The Visual Inventiveness of Photographic Postcards: From the Collections of Postcards of Gérard Lévy, Peter Weiss* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007).

<sup>43</sup>On this subject, see in particular Frazer, *Artificially Arranged Scenes: The Films of Georges Méliès*, 1-21.



dissolves, suspension in mid-air, and so on — and he did so specifically in the context of the type of illusionistic entertainment inspired by magic shows. Through these techniques Méliès pioneered a brand of filmic legerdemain based on transformations taking place *within the bounds of a single, stationary proscenium frame*, several years before film editing through “cuts” was conceived and widely used.

This area of cinematic manipulation resembles the metamorphosis or “disorientation from within” to which Breton refers in his discussion of Ernst’s collages, wherein the framework of a given paradigm is retained as meaning and renovated *internally and gradually*. The single image appears to transform in identity and thus “moves” in a manner of speaking, by subtly changing its own shape and metamorphosizing — thereby doing away with the old-fashioned “mystico-charlatanism” of painterly still-life as *nature morte*. Though all film had the characteristics of movement and projected light that Breton cites as the heart of the new medium’s dominance over obsolescent representational modes, the optical trickery he celebrates seems to suggest the first decade of French cinema in particular, when the animated nature of film nevertheless maintained some “still” components. At the turn of the century the main “attraction” of film, as the younger relative of magic shows and other illusionistic theatrical genres, was precisely its ability to make inanimate objects “move” or “morph” in ways that confounded logic and understanding, all the while retaining a continuous and anchored frame of reference. In many regards, therefore, the earliest manifestation of cinema was considered at least in part merely an aggressively updated and improved means of achieving the same kinds of illusionistic ends sought through many diverse popular culture spectacles in earlier periods, through both more recent “projected” technologies as well as theatrical and painterly ones.

However, by the time of Breton’s writing in 1921, the innovations of Méliès and the Lumière brothers were a thing of the recent past, and the prevalence of feature-length narrative films confirmed the broad cultural dispersion, assumption, and adaptation of what Tom Gunning has called the “cinema of attractions” — a cinema based upon brief moments of display and novelty rather than the duration of narrative.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, in many ways, the kind of filmic illusion to which Breton refers in his essay was anachronistic from the standpoint of the post-World War I years, excepting its digested and subsumed presence in select moments of popular films and its sustained life in certain demonstrations of avant-garde cinema. Although stop tricks and other such “special effects” were still employed in post-war cinema, the old proscenium frame aesthetic with its emphasis on the atomized and spectacular “moment” of trickery was a vanishing form of independently fashioned entertainment. Such displays were eventually woven into the fabric of much longer narrative films and were thus less conspicuous as moments of spectacular consumption in themselves. Cinema was soon to leave behind its formerly blatant connection to nineteenth-century traditions of lantern shows, variety act prestidigitation, circus entertainment, and so on.

Yet, it is clearly to this earlier tradition of cinema as a momentary display of optical trickery that Breton refers in his analysis of Ernst, “the man of these infinite possibilities.” Although Breton is bound up in a dialogue of progress and innovation in his essay on Ernst,

<sup>44</sup>Gunning’s concept of the “cinema of attractions” has a long and multifaceted history as does the reception of the term in cinema studies. For an excellent series of commentaries on this concept, as well as reprints of the earliest essays by cinema historians, including Gunning, that discuss this concept, see the book: Wanda Strauven, *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006). I also consulted essays in, Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker, *Early Cinema: Space-Frame-Narrative* (London: BFI Publishing, 1990). More tangentially, see the related essay, Tom Gunning, “The Exterior as Intérieur: Benjamin’s Optical Detective,” *boundary 2* 30, no. 1 (2003), 105-30.

he refers to the *old advancements* of his own childhood, and no doubt purposefully so. "Dada does not claim to be modern," he states at one point in his essay.<sup>45</sup> Whether a matter of cinematic taste for Breton or rather a question of montage tactics, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century film traditions (and arguably their popular entertainment counterparts such as the magic show or the earlier phantasmagoria) held the key to the "disorientation from within" Breton felt could still revolutionize culture. He was siding with an older entertainment tradition that focused on visual trickery and optical illusion as a feature fully independent of narrative. Although the relatively "new" discoveries of slow and accelerated motion had already been displaced in popularity by other filmic techniques, Breton demonstrates that these slightly dated filmic methods offer a more convincing *dépaysment* of the senses and memories than do traditional representational methods *and* the recent cinematic developments of rapid montage and feature length duration.<sup>46</sup>

In this regard it is perhaps feasible to conjecture, knowing the operations of the outmoded as defined by Walter Benjamin and subsequent scholars, that Breton was explicitly interested in employing the paradoxical capabilities of novelty and surprise couched within the category of the outmoded. By comparing Ernst's collages to the oxymoronic category of *recently outmoded filmic innovations*, Breton secured the perfect model by which the "old references" could be maintained in order to acquire "new" meanings out from under culture's existing framework all the more unsuspectingly. Likewise, on a double level, early cinematic trickery was largely founded upon the *retainment* of a given familiar context (most often the proscenium frame) as the scene gradually changed or *renewed* from within.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, by employing the reverse-logic of the outmoded, Breton utilizes recently outdated cinematic parlance to battle venerable modes of representation, and also to place the avant-garde securely in the realm of both the popular-technological and the alter-modern.

<sup>45</sup>Breton, *The Lost Steps = Les Pas Perdus*, 60.

<sup>46</sup>Some critics, such as Robert Short, have argued that surrealism was more closely allied with documentary film than special effects films. Short speaks of the surrealist "scorn for special effects so dear to the rest of the avant-garde: their distorting lenses, stop motion, superimpositions, eccentric camera angles..." Short, *The Age of Gold: Surrealist Cinema*, 13. This is an argument which I am largely in agreement with, excepting Man Ray's purposefully blurry, *L'Étoile de mer* (1928). However, whether or not surrealist film is closest to documentary film is another question. Does such an eschewal of special effects in surrealist film necessarily preclude a possible interest on Breton's part in the transposition of such effects into the realm of the 'fine arts'— dependent for so long upon a predictable and limiting bag of tricks, so to speak? Based upon his two essays about Ernst's collages, I argue that during the 1920s some surrealists such as Breton saw immense possibilities in the effects of illusion that early trick film in particular had introduced and updated from older spectacular traditions.

<sup>47</sup>Thus, Breton's discussion of "disorientation from within" is a prefiguration of what Aragon would later term *détournement* in his essay, "Max Ernst, Painter of Illusions," which was written for Aragon's patron and employer Jacques Doucet in 1923. I discuss Aragon's prescient usage of this word in my dissertation, "The Vertigo of the Modern: Surrealism and the Outmoded."



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