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Surréalisme Sous-l’Eau:  
Science and Surrealism in the Early Films and Writings of Jean Painlevé

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Introduction

In 1928, French biologist and filmmaker Jean Painlevé screened his first film, *The Stickleback’s Egg*, before a group of scientists from the Académie des sciences in Paris. Painlevé had spent a week filming the embryonic development of stickleback, a small fish native to northern Europe, and he wanted to reveal his findings. The group watched as a spermatozoid entered an egg and the first cells began to divide, forming the digestive tract and heart, while blood began to pump throughout the body. During the screening, a botanist stood up and declared, “Movies are not serious, I’m leaving!” and stormed out of the room.¹

This wasn’t the first time members of the Académie voiced disapproval of cinema’s foray into academia, but the reaction only strengthened Painlevé’s resolve to promote the use of film in science, and in 1930 he cofounded the Association for Photographic and Cinematic Documentation in the Sciences.² By 1982 he had created over two hundred films on a broad range of natural, scientific, and political subjects, though ten of his underwater films created before the outbreak of World War II remain among the most ethereal and poetic works in his oeuvre. Armed with a waterproofed camera, the filmmaker used a breathing apparatus to stay underwater for long periods of time in order to film crustaceans, mollusks, starfish, and octopi in the Bay of Arcachon and other bodies of water around Brittany. Painlevé also filmed these sea creatures in artificial environments, keeping large aquariums that he used for observation and research. With the help of these aquariums, he was able to capture never-before-seen moments such as a male seahorse giving birth.

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Painlevé was a biologist, but his early films strayed from pure science as he experimented with the ideas and imagery of the Surrealism movement. Surrealism had emerged a decade earlier out of the carnage of World War I, leading the Surrealists to challenge the value of rational thought and bourgeois mores which had led to war. Writers, poets, artists and filmmakers aligned with Surrealism sought to revolutionize human thought and action, and strove to free society from the constraints of rationality and reason. Originally a literary endeavor partly based upon the writings of Freud, the Surrealism movement eventually evolved to include
the visual arts and film. Poets searched for strange juxtapositions, artists
delved into the unconscious for erotic and dream-like imagery, and
filmmakers stretched the boundaries of their medium from embracing new
technology to writing puzzling plotlines. Although Jean Painlevé made
films about nature, he was acquainted with many of the Surrealist
filmmakers including Jean Vigo, Ivan Goll, Pierre Naville, Luis Buñuel,
and of course, Man Ray, who borrowed a starfish from Painlevé’s
aquarium for his 1928 film L’Étoile de mer, and used film footage from
Painlevé’s studies of the creature. Painlevé’s early underwater films strove
to bring the dark mysteries of the sea to light—just as the Surrealists
struggled to penetrate the recesses of the unconscious, but his
commitment to science made him an outsider to the movement. His
poetic approach to science resulted in neither the Surrealists nor the
scientific community fully supporting his work, but he preferred to blur
the line between science and art, often saying “science is fiction.”

Painlevé advocated for a unique cinematic approach to the avant-garde
that was firmly rooted in scientific discovery, yet one that also embraced
the enigmatic images and processes of nature. Instead of striving to reveal
nature’s mysteries (the charge of his fellow scientists), the filmmaker
wanted to revel in them and celebrate man’s inability to impose order and
rationality upon nature. Like the Surrealists, he wanted to reveal the
marvelous and challenge the accepted notion of reality, but he did so using
scientific investigation and cinematic devices instead of psychoanalysis,
dreams, and automatic methods.

There is strong evidence to position Painlevé as a cinematic innovator
and participant within the Surrealism movement by assessing his poetic
prose and the aesthetics and techniques of his scientific films. Painlevé’s
innovation with these films was to use subject matter from the natural
world, but film and edit it in ways that heightened the mystery of nature,
rather than explain it away and strip it of its miraculous qualities. Painlevé
was the only Surrealist filmmaker to extract the irrational from nature
without relying on a fictional narrative, but his approach also set him in
opposition to modern science’s established goal and practice of
demystifying nature, reducing the miraculous to the ordinary, and explaining
and rationalizing the natural world.

Biography

Pregnant at the time of her marriage to the accomplished
mathematician and future French Prime Minister Paul Painlevé,
Marguerite Petit de Villeneuve gave birth to their only son, Jean, on
November 2, 1902, in Paris. Soon after Jean’s delivery, Marguerite died
and left the infant in the care of his father.

Because of Paul’s often unpopular politics, Jean was teased and
ostracized at school. For refuge, the young Painlevé turned his curiosity
and imagination toward the cinema, photography, and explorations of the

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sea. In Paris, he would regularly attend the Saint Michel theater on the
Left Bank, where he would watch the comedies of Mack Sennett, the
fantasies of George Méliès, and the popular serials Fantômas, which were
also highly esteemed by the Surrealists. Recalling his own early cinematic
experiences, major Surrealist figure André Breton referred to Sennett’s
comedies as “the most mysterious thing the movies have yet offered us.”

Jean Painlevé’s interest in the sea stemmed from childhood summers
on the Brittany coast where he would look for creatures and keep them
alive in his bathtub. At age eight he began using his first camera, a 4 x 4
Brownie, photographing “anything and everything that seemed curious,”
including his caught mollusks and starfish. These early memories would
inform his later experimentation with filming creatures in both their
natural habitats and in aquariums.

As a young man, Painlevé first studied mathematics at the prestigious
Lycée Louis le Grand, but he soon became unsatisfied with his studies and
decided to pursue medicine at the Sorbonne in 1921. After an argument
with a professor over the treatment of a patient, Painlevé decided to
abandon medicine and study zoology and biology, returning to Brittany
and his early interest in the sea by interning at the Roscoff Marine Biology
Station. It was at Roscoff where Painlevé discovered the two loves of his
life: his long-term companion Geneviève Hamon, who would collaborate
on nearly all of his films, and the octopus, a creature of cinematic
inspiration for Painlevé. He recounts that,

In 1925, during an internship at Roscoff, I would bring an egg to
this octopus at 11:00 every morning. She soon began to recognize
me by my shirt. Whenever she saw me, she turned black; the
three layers of her skin—blue, red, and green—would swell with
pleasure. Then she went off to eat her egg. We got along very
well. But then one day, out of perversity, I brought her a rotten
egg. She turned totally white. In extreme fury, an octopus’s cells
contract and the white of the underlying dermis appears. With
one of her tentacles, she threw the egg back at me over the
aquarium’s glass window. She never greeted me again. Instead,
she’d retreat to the back of the aquarium and turn white. I
realized then she had a memory. This mollusk was as intelligent as
a human.

Painlevé graduated from the Sorbonne with a degree in physics,
chemistry, and biology. Between his courses at Roscoff, he spent his
summers with Geneviève and her family at their family home in Brittany.
The Hamons turned their home into a kind of salon where they
couraged young scientists, artists with controversial ideas, and various
other members of the avant-garde to stay with them. It was here where
Painlevé formed ties with many members of the Surrealism movement,
including Jacques Boiffard, who would later become Man Ray’s assistant;
filmmaker Pierre Prévert; and photographer Eli Lotar, whose images of
slaughterhouses were published alongside Painlevé’s underwater

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photographs in the pages of Georges Bataille’s Surrealist review Documents in 1929 (Lotar also served as Painlevé’s cameraman for a short time). Through these contacts, Painlevé also met Ivan Goll, and later contributed two essays, “Neo-Zoological Drama” and “An Example of Surrealism: The Cinema,” to Goll’s first and only issue of Surréalisme in 1924.

Before Painlevé began directing his own films, he came to the cinema as an actor in Rene Sti’s 1926 film Unknown Woman of the Six-Day Race, and wrote program notes for Jean Vigo’s À propos de Nice. Although Sti’s film was never completed, Painlevé became interested in the techniques of cameraman André Raymond, who manually disengaged the camera crank to allow for one frame per crank rather than the standard sixteen frames per second. This technique gave Painlevé the idea for his first science film, The Stickleback’s Egg: From Fertilization to Hatching, in 1927. By slowing down the camera, Raymond and Painlevé were able to capture seemingly instantaneous biological processes and allowed the viewer to see nature in a way that the naked human eye simply could not. Raymond would continue to operate the camera for Painlevé until 1945 and would invent new devices for filming on an intimate scale.

The influence of Luis Buñuel, co-director of Un chien andalou, and Jean Vigo, director of L’Atalante, encouraged Painlevé to create films that invited viewers to question the world rather than accept it for what it was. The result was the 1928 film La Pieuvre (The Octopus), which set a new standard for Painlevé’s style: mixing poetic images and words with scientific information. The Surrealist connotations in these new breed of films were readily apparent as the avant-garde immediately embraced his work. At the screening of Painlevé’s film on skeleton shrimp and sea spiders at the Les Miracles theater in 1930, Fernand Léger called it “the most beautiful ballet he had ever seen.”

Painlevé made twenty-six more films before the invasion of Paris by the Nazis in 1940. Many featured marine life, though he also made films about physics, a film on Alexander Calder, and a claymation feature titled Blue Beard. During the war he went into hiding in the south of France, but made several clandestine visits to Paris and Nice, and maintained ties with the film community. On one of these visits Painlevé met with the secretary of the Paris film unions, Henri Raynaud, and the filmmaker Jean-Paul Dreyfus, and together they formed the Committee for the Liberation of French Cinema (CLCF). After the end of World War II, the CLCF replaced the Vichy government’s Committee for the Organization of the Cinema Industry, and Painlevé served nine months as its president. Perhaps irritated at Painlevé’s creation of the newsreel service France Libre Actualités (later known as Actualités françaises), which sought to protect French cinema from foreign business and government influence, Charles de Gaulle dismissed him amid raucous protests. But Painlevé soon became head of the French Federation of Cine-Clubs, coordinating the huge growth of clubs throughout France that focused on the study and making of films. During the next forty years, Painlevé went on to make
nearly two hundred films, continued advocating for the French film and science documentary industry, and wrote extensively.

“Joyous Confusion”: Juxtaposing Science and Art

André Breton, who wrote two manifestos for the Surrealism movement, supports Painlevé’s unique position within Surrealism with his 1936 essay, “Crisis of the Object,” in which he investigates the relationship of science and art:

Modern scientific and artistic thoughts present us with identical structures: in either case, the real, confused for too long with given data, splinters in every direction possible and tends to become a component of the possible. By applying Hegel’s dictum that ‘everything real is rational, and everything rational is real’, one may well expect to see the rational follow precisely in the footsteps of the real, and it is certainly true that, today, reason goes so far as to propose the continuous assimilation of the irrational, a process during which the rational is required to remold its own image constantly, both in order to reassert itself, and to develop. That is the sense in which it becomes necessary for surrealism to be accompanied by a surrationalism which will act simultaneously as a stimulant and a restraining influence. Once again, each of these two terms confirms the other, a fact which provides ample proof of the unity and depth of feeling animating all human speculation in our times, just as much in the fields of poetry and painting, as in that of scholarship.17

Painlevé’s words and films may be understood as examples of this so-called surrationalism. Although the means were different—dreams and poetry versus science and documentary—many of the end goals for the Surrealists and Painlevé were the same: to overturn the accepted version of reality and challenge rationality in an attempt to understand humanity’s place in the world. Painlevé embraced Surrealist interests such as the marvelous and the absurd, but he found everything he was looking for by observing nature. For Painlevé, it was in nature that life, sex, and death played out without manipulation, and where the marvelous and mysterious always existed, waiting to be discovered.

Painlevé was able to use the documentary to “close the gap between the real and the surreal,” or in other words, to keep science and art, and the known and unknown, connected.18 In 1931 he stated,

Does the complete understanding of natural phenomenon strip away its miraculous qualities? It is certainly a risk. But it should at least maintain all of its poetry, for poetry subverts reason and is never dulled by repetition. Besides, a few gaps in our knowledge will always allow for a joyous confusion of the mysterious, the unknown, and the miraculous.19
Painlevé’s commitment to cinematically revealing a poetic biology, whether through his choice of cuts and camera angles, or the way he compared subaquatic life to graceful ballets and epic battles, also makes him unique among scientists and other underwater filmmakers, such as adventurer Jacques Cousteau who later gained fame on American television. Unlike Painlevé, Cousteau’s films used big budgets and occasional violence to bring manatees, whales, and sunken ships to mass audiences every week. His “adventurer style” made him a household name, while Painlevé’s “more personal style and lyrical animal behavior studies have been left dangling.” But Painlevé’s films are their own small adventures into microscopic worlds and shallow seas. Part science, part poetry, and part adventure, Painlevé’s hybrid work mends the divisions between genre definitions, bringing Surrealism up from “the cracks between the dislocated narratives, disassociated events and disturbing imagery of horror, science fiction, film noir, animation, documentary and any other genre.”

In 1927, Surrealist poet Robert Desnos stated that, “What we ask of the cinema is the impossible, the unexpected, dreams, surprise which efface the baseness in souls and rush them enthusiastically to the barricades and into adventures; we ask of the cinema what love and life deny us, that is mystery and miracles.” While Painlevé similarly embraced the “joyous confusion of the mysterious, the unknown, and the miraculous,” his interpretation of reality also would become crucial in his conception of the documentary film. In a 1931 Vu article “Mysteries and Miracles in Nature,” he wrote “It’s no wonder the casual observer feels unsettled by the lack of order that seemingly rules over the planet’s millions of animals. Our narrow minds need the comfort of carefully crafted logic and clear delineations.” Purposely aiming to unsettle the viewer, Painlevé hoped to address man’s parochial view of reality by blurring the boundaries between the fantastic and the real.

Jean Painlevé’s first poetic documentary, La Pieuvre (The Octopus), from 1928, elucidates the filmmaker’s interest in finding the overlap between science and art. The ten minute film opens with an expansive shot of the Brittany coast, following a roaming octopus on the beach. Quick successive shots capture an octopus falling off of a window sill, dropping out of a tree, slithering over the body of a female mannequin, and swimming inside of an aquarium where Painlevé has placed a human skull. Raymond takes his time filming the octopus’ large tentacles as they caress the skull, foreshadowing the death of a caught octopus later in the film. These innovative scenes take nature out of context and place it in the urban world of man, embracing the possibilities of the absurd. Later in the film, scenes of flirting and violent octopi interplay with highly magnified images of suckers and interior cavities. Painlevé focuses the viewer’s attention on the magnificent eye of the octopus of which he says, “the open eye, so human.” His continued interest in the eyes of creatures parallels the Surrealists’ own obsession with both the images of eyes and the
concept of the “inner eye,” the gateway to the discovery of unconscious desire and truth.25

The opening scenes of this film are a surprise for those expecting a straightforward scientific documentary; an octopus crawling over a mannequin has little to do with science and everything to do with the juxtaposition of Surrealist imagery. Inspired by a particular line in the Comte de Lautréamont’s 1898 *Chants de Maldoror*, “as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table,”26 the Surrealists established juxtaposition as the primary poetic means for their work. By early 1918, Pierre Reverdy had recognized that “The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be, and it will have greater emotive power and poetic reality.”27 Pushing Reverdy’s idea further, Painlevé’s entire oeuvre can be considered a juxtaposition of poetry and science, thereby heightening the visual, emotional, and educational impact of his films.

Painlevé also explored the relationship between art and science through his writings. His essay “Neo-Zoological Drama” from the journal *Surréalisme* uses the difficult jargon of biology to describe an erotic mating ritual between two microscopic creatures. The issue introduces the filmmaker as “Mr. Jean Painlevé, who yesterday was honored by the Académie des sciences for a very realistic body of work, [and who] reveals himself to be Surrealist as well.” In an excerpt of the essay, Painlevé writes:

The plasmodium of the Myxomycetes is so sweet: the eyeless *Prorhynchus* has the dull color of the born-blind, and its proboscis
stuffed with zoochlorellae solicits the oxygen of the *Frontoniella antopyretica*: he carries his pharynx in a rosette, a locomotive requirement, horned, stupid, and not at all calcareous…the little turbellarian knows the embrace of their mouth; good for *Chironomus plumosus* to outline their intestinal arborizations in red lace….\(^{28}\)

Just as his films marry science and poetry, this essay aims to do the same with words. Here, Painlevé uses scientific jargon as poetic verse, fusing science and poetry while also stylistically aligning with many of the Surrealist poems and automatic writing exercises, which attempted to produce language that did not come from the conscious thoughts of the writer.

**Evoking the Dream-State**

In 1924, several decades after publishing the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* with André Breton, critic and writer Philippe Soupault recalled that “the cinema was for us an immense discovery at the moment when we were elaborating Surrealism…One can say that, from the birth of Surrealism, we sought to discover, thanks to the cinema, the means for expressing the immense power of the dream.”\(^{29}\) For the Surrealists, the darkened room of the theater paralleled the dream state, where streams of unanticipated images flooded the mind and followed their own logic. In the theater, the viewer was removed from his or her natural surroundings in a physical and emotional way, creating *dépaysement*, or disorientation. Breton later wrote, “I think what we valued most in it, to the point of taking no interest in anything else, was its power to disorient [son pouvoir de *dépaysement*].”\(^{30}\)

Painlevé’s film, *La Daphnia (The Water Flea)* from 1928, invokes *dépaysement* and the dream-state with the innovative use of varied cinematic techniques. The thirteen minute film opens with a scene of a stream rushing through a thick forest as Painlevé says, “In all waters…an uncountable number of Daphnae move about.” The next successive scenes penetrate the water, as if Painlevé is inviting the viewer to dive into the stream (and perhaps the unconscious) and see with the eyes of a fish. Through magnification, we are able to see a hidden world of tiny flecks swimming erratically before us. Greater and greater magnification reveals incredible compositions of translucent beating hearts, antennae, and machine-like eyes that, as Painlevé observes, “bear brilliant crystallines and turn in all directions.” Here, the filmmaker has extracted the surreal from the real. Painlevé’s ability to penetrate the hidden world of marine biology parallels the Surrealists’ attempts to access the dream world, though Painlevé used the microscope while the Surrealists would have used trances and Freudian analysis. Furthermore, the film jumps from scenes of the macroscopic to the microscopic and back again, giving it a disorienting quality. Other nature films during this period tended to focus exclusively
on the macroscopic world, documenting animal behavior or capturing the naturalist’s trek into their habitat. Painlevé rejected the expedition travelogue format and gives us something more intimate. He ends the film by coming back to the stream in the forest, it is as if the dream is over, and the viewer must question the reality of what he or she has just seen.

Painlevé’s films embraced Surrealist disorientation through strange imagery, manipulating camera angles, slow motion, and switching back and forth between the microscopic and macroscopic worlds, and his 1928 film *L’Oursin (The Sea Urchin)* continued the filmmaker’s investigation of the dream-state. As if stumbling upon found objects, Painlevé roams the beach finding tiny holes in the sand where sea urchins live. Still shots of the specimens refer to his photographs in *Documents* as he says, “But all this action can be distracting and sometimes nothing is as astonishingly splendid as the most static forms of life, which allow us to dream each moment without imposing coherence on us.” Magnification of the spines makes them look like a forest of limp trees, while later Painlevé cuts an urchin apart with a pair of scissors. At the end of the film, Painlevé puts an urchin back in the sand, where it slowly buries itself and disappears. Again, Painlevé uses devices like magnification and quick cuts to create dépaysement that prevents the viewer from guessing what will be shown next. Although the subject matter is taken from nature, images of the sea urchin’s internal cavities and close-ups of the creature’s body parts were completely foreign to viewers and probably seemed monstrous, likening the scenes to dream imagery. Again, Painlevé’s innovation was to use subject matter from the natural world, but film and edit it in ways that heightened the mystery of nature, rather than strip it of its miraculous qualities.

**The Role of Reality and Myth**

Painlevé’s contribution to *Surréalisme* reflected the journal’s commitment to interpreting reality in new ways. Along with Painlevé, contributors Ivan Goll, Apollinaire, Pierre Reverdy, René Crevel, and others collaborated on the journal’s manifesto and stated that “Reality is the root of all great art. Without it there is no substance.” 31 The group also considered the natural world an important source of Surrealism, affirming that “Everything the artist creates originates in Nature.” 32 In his 1924 essay “An Example of Surrealism: The Cinema,” Painlevé echoed Apollinaire, stating that “the cinema is a creator of a surreal life” and lauded the “superiority of reality.” 33 For Painlevé, the recording of reality could be given a surrealist aesthetic through the imagination of the screenwriter, and through cinematic techniques such as the blur, slow motion, and extreme close-ups. Similar to Painlevé’s desire to redefine reality, the Surrealists were interested in “une réalité rehaussée: reality raised to a new level of significance, more in accord with the inner needs of man,” thus giving rise to the group’s very namesake, *sur-réalisme*, or “super
realism.” Enigmatically addressing reality in the first Manifesto of Surrealism, Breton stated that “What is admirable in the fantastic is that there is no more fantastic; there is only the real;” a phrase considered by French writer and director Jacques Brunius to be a “fundamental cinematographer’s law.”

The desire to create a new mythology for mankind was, on the other hand, one of endeavors that brought Breton, Bataille, Painlevé and others together. According to Richardson, in their minds, society “believed that it no longer had a need for myth, that it had evolved beyond dependence upon a ritual to establish a mediation between mankind and the rest of creation.” Bataille and the Surrealists thought this was profoundly misguided and dangerous, while Painlevé especially disapproved of humanity’s egotistical disconnect from nature, and declared: “So many legends to destroy!” Breton outlined the need to create an appropriate mythe collectif for the twentieth century, which would also become one way of connecting the wide range of Surrealist expressions that were never based on a single style or theme. For the Surrealists, myth “was never a quest for an idiosyncratic personal iconography but the search for a collectively understood means of conveying knowledge.” Painlevé believed that nature could be a source of the new mythology and was the ultimate foundation for the collective understanding of reality; however, he believed that scientific inquiry would have to lead us there.

These ideas are illustrated in his 1929 film Hyas et sténorinques (Hyas and Stenorhynchus), where anthropomorphic metaphors create, in Painlevé’s words, “Japanese warriors” out of strange creatures that seem to battle and perform new mythological narratives under the water. The film opens with Painlevé describing their features: “The stenorhynchus is slender; with long legs and large claws. Like all crustaceans, they are arm-wrestling enthusiasts.” We watch as one of the creatures seems to conquer its territory: a tiny parcel of sandy bottom. Soon the crustacean encounters another creature, “the great fan worm” and Painlevé reveals the worm’s branchiae and vibratory cilia through high magnification. Successive scenes follow the sensual movement of the worm’s fanned plume, and end with Painlevé’s description of the creature’s withdrawal as a “spiral retreat” into “fireworks.” In Hyas and Stenorhynchus, nature playfully subverts humanity’s concepts of the hero, justice, and the erotic with crustaceans and worms acting out the roles.
Natural Violence and the Erotic

Along with the shared need for a *mythe collectif*, the Surrealists and Painlevé also recognized the value of violence and the repulsive. Georges Bataille, who continually sparred with Breton and referred to himself as “the enemy from within” in relation to the Surrealists, especially wanted to embrace the sordid side of reality in order to jolt humanity from its Enlightenment values. Although Painlevé differed from Bataille in his general optimism about humanity, the filmmaker also recognized the cruelty of nature and accepted man’s place within it. He used biology to search, as Bataille did through other means, for “the evidence of man’s literal and metaphorical rise from the animal.” Painlevé comments,

> To me, there is no difference between minerals, vegetables, and animals. They are all linked through evolution. There are parasites everywhere. Among humans: babies and old people. There are also temporary parasites: the ill and the crippled. I’ve managed to fit into both categories. I’m very proud that we live in an era that finally recognizes its dependence on shit. All of genetics relies on colon bacilli, which in turn rely on our feces. All experiments are done on it. We’re deep into the shit.

Painlevé’s views directly relate to Bataille’s preoccupation with shit and to one of his key philosophical concepts—*La bassesse* (base materialism)—in which Bataille sought to bring all phenomena down to a basic level of direct physical experience. Painlevé’s commitment to the documentary and exposing all sides of reality also led to his own investigation of violence through his writings and films. After the war, Painlevé
collaborated with Georges Franju on the film *Le Sang des bêtes (The Blood of Beasts)*, which documented the activities of the Vaugirard slaughterhouse on the outskirts of Paris. Painlevé wrote the accompanying notes in which he describes the atmosphere of detached violence:

> After the slaughter, the horse is hoisted by cable and drained of its blood. It is then lowered to be skinned. The hooves will be used for fertilizer and the bones will serve, among other things, in the fabrication of souvenirs of Paris. The butchers and scalders work amid the deafening noise of pneumatic winches and while surrounded by the gray vapors of the blood of beasts without anger, without hate, and with the simple good humor of killers who whistle or sing while slitting throats. 

This gruesome description spares the viewer no details. Painlevé’s macabre observations reflect his acceptance of, and even comfort with, the violence inherent in the food chain.

Painlevé also sought to film the violence found in nature, and did so with his film *Le Bernard-L’Ermité (The Hermit Crab)* from 1929. The film opens with close-up shots that display the creature’s grotesque qualities: “At certain enlargements, this charming animal is transformed into a monster,” Painlevé narrates. Later, Painlevé films the behavior of a crab whose eyes have been removed, and then he purposely leaves two crabs to fight ferociously over one shell. Here, instead of acting as silent observer, Painlevé instigates the cruel but common outcomes in nature and documents a result of the Darwinian struggle for existence: death.

Jean Painlevé’s most famous and last nature film before the outbreak of World War II, *L’hippocampe (The Seahorse)*, from 1934, highlighted a kind of erotic violence. Challenging conventional sexuality by focusing on the role of the male seahorse as the bearer of offspring, the film, according to Berg, helped to “re-establish the balance between male and female.” The film focuses on the nurturing role of the male seahorse as he protects and nourishes the embryos in his pouch, while the only job of the female seahorse is to deposit eggs inside the male. After waiting for days with his camera ready, Painlevé captured the surreal moment when the male seahorse convulsed violently to force out the baby seahorses from his swollen pouch. Microscopic shots reveal the inner workings of the pouch, interlaced with blood vessels to nourish the embryos, as well as showing the developing stages of the offspring. The film ends with the postpartum male, still agitated by contractions, swimming off alone.
Although Painlevé shared this interest in violence and eroticism (explored further in his 1965 film *The Love Life of the Octopus*) with other Surrealists, his approach was firmly rooted in biology and in the observation of nature, rather than in philosophy. Even Bataille recognized the benefits of examining nature for Surrealist ends, and used his review *Documents* to examine the possibilities of science as a source of raw material. Recognizing the legitimacy of Painlevé’s work, Bataille became interested in the filmmaker’s close-up photographs of strange marine animals and other mysterious creatures such as spiders. Bataille published several of Painlevé’s photographs in *Documents*, which included other science-oriented photographs such as those of flowers by Karl Blossfeldt and of insects and body parts by Jacques-Andre Boiffard. Painlevé’s
magnified images of lobster claws, fish heads, spiders, and shrimp blurred the identities of the objects and often accompanied entries from the Dictionnaire critique (Critical Dictionary), a regular column in Documents that allowed different writers to re-examine words and to offer short essays on their reinterpretation.

Conclusion

Jean Painlevé’s films and writings are their own contradictory forces, existing in-between fixed categories. As summed up in his motto “science is fiction,” Painlevé blurred all boundaries and aligned with the Surrealist demand that “the conventional artificial distinction between art and life in the abstract be dissolved; that every act of creation be absolutely personal; that creator and creation be one.”46 Through his commitment to poetry and science, Painlevé used the tenets of Surrealism for his own ends, believing nature held the same secrets that the Surrealists searched for in the unconscious. In 1929, Breton stated in the Second Manifesto of Surrealism:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now[,] search as we may[,] one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point.47

These words epitomize Painlevé’s work, as he used the camera and the microscope to reveal a hidden world unnoticed by the naked eye: a place where the real and the surreal existed simultaneously. Without subscribing to any particular Surrealist faction, the filmmaker found and fixed the point of Breton’s quest and captured it on film. For Painlevé, the cyclical design of nature resolved the perceived contradictions of life and death.

Painlevé’s words and films serve as a definite link between the practice of Surrealism and the natural world. Although his films have been considered an ill-fitted anomaly, not quite science and not quite poetry, the examination of his work alongside the Surrealist framework reveals their alliance in terms of hybridity and as sources for uniting contradictions. He produced images that extracted the surreal from the real, and did so through using innovative cinematographic techniques and the documentary format, resulting in Painlevé’s own interpretation of the possibilities of Surrealism. In a 1944 article published in VVV, Pierre Mabille testified unequivocally: “The main value of Surrealism seems to me to have been the reintroduction of the marvelous into daily experience. It has taught that if reality appeared deadly dull, this is because man did not know how to see.”48 Through his commitment to science, poetic prose, and the Surrealist imagery of his films, Jean Painlevé
extracted the surreal from everyday nature and indeed showed his audiences a new way of seeing reality.


3 Painlevé has been largely left out of the history of Surrealism, and only recently have scholars begun to examine his life and work. To date, Painlevé scholars Andy Masaki Bellows, Brigitte Berg, and Marina McDougall have framed their scholarship around the filmmaker’s “hybrid roots” and the intersection of science, art, and poetry in Painlevé’s films, but have avoided calling him a Surrealist. Their work has been instrumental in reasserting Painlevé’s importance as a filmmaker; however, the question remains on Painlevé’s place within his Parisian avant-garde surroundings in the late 1920s and 1930s. Michael Richardson has briefly included Painlevé within the discussion of Surrealist film, but there has not been a full examination of Painlevé’s films and writings in a Surrealist context.

4 Germaine André Hesse, Painlevé, Grand Savant, Grand Citoyen (Paris: Éditions R.A. Corrêa, 1933). Marguerite Petit de Villeneuve and her family were part of the “petit noblesse” and had considerable real estate holdings in Paris. Her maternal uncle, Georges Clairin, was a well-established painter best known for his work in the Paris Opera and for his portraits of the actress Sarah Bernhardt.

5 Ibid.


7 “…dans un espirit dépourvu d’amertume comme celui des Mack Sennett Comédies, qui sont ce que le cinéma nous a encore proposé de plus mystérieux.” André Breton, Les Pas Perdus (Paris: Gallimard, 1924), 210.

8 Hazéra and Leglu, 171.

9 Berg, 7.

10 Hazéra and Leglu, 171.

11 Berg, 9.

12 Berg, 17.


14 Berg, 19.

15 Berg, 34.

16 Berg, 34-35.

17 André Breton, “Crisis of the Object,” in Surrealism and Painting, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), 276. Originally published in 1928 as Surréalisme et peinture (London: MacDonald & Co., 1972). Hegel developed a comprehensive philosophical framework, or “system”, to account in an integrated and developmental way for the relation of mind and nature, the subject and object of knowledge, and psychology, the state, history, art, religion, and philosophy. In particular, he developed a concept of mind or spirit that manifested itself in a set of contradictions and oppositions that it ultimately integrated and united, such as those between nature and freedom, and immanence and transcendence, without eliminating either pole or reducing it to the other. The elimination of the categories for matter and mind was thus important for the Surrealist framework.


Painlevé may have gotten the idea of filming an octopus falling out of a window from a real incident: in an interview he recounted one day in his studio when an octopus snuck out of its tank and slipped under the studio door, tumbling out of the window and onto the embankment below to the surprise of bathers.

René Magritte, Max Ernst, Man Ray and others consistently used human eyes in their compositions, while Dalí and Buñuel’s film Un chien andalou opens with the protagonist slicing open a woman’s eye. Breton was especially interested in the subject as relating to the unconscious.


Ramona Fotiade, “From Ready-Made to Moving Image: The Visual Poetics of Surrealist Cinema” in The Unsilvered Screen: Surrealism on Film, ed. Graeme Harper and Rob Stone (London: Wallflower, 2007), 9. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, whose theories of the unconscious mind and the defense mechanism of sexual repression, was a major source of influence for the Surrealists. Although his interpretation of dreams as sources of insight into unconscious desires was immediately embraced, Breton used Freud’s work for his own ends, stating that the doctor had “without knowing it found…in the dream the principle of the conciliation of opposites.” What Freud took in dream interpretation for symbols of the conscious life, Breton and his colleagues wanted to grasp as bare realities, essential to the more complete knowledge of human existence.


Ibid.


Gale, 280.

Hazéra & Leglu, 16.

Bellows & McDougall, 82–85.

Berg, 23.


Sandrow, 33.

“Tour porte à croire qu’il existe un certain point de l’esprit d’où la vie et la mort, le réel et l’imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l’incommunicable, le aut et las bas cessent d’être précis contradictoirement. Or, c’est en vain qu’on chercherait à l’activité surréaliste un autre mobile que l’espoir de détermination de ce point.” André Breton, Les Manifestes du surréalisme (Paris: Editions du Sagittaire, 1929), 56.

References


