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Este programa internacional está dirigido por un equipo franco-brasileño de investigadores en Ciencias Humanas, Ciencias Sociales, Artes y Literatura. Su objetivo es la realización de una plataforma virtual de historia cultural transatlántica, editada en cuatro idiomas, y que analice las dinámicas del espacio atlántico para comprender su rol en el proceso de mundialización contemporánea. A través de una serie de ensayos sobre las relaciones culturales entre Europa, África y las Américas; el programa enfatiza la historia conectada del espacio atlántico desde el siglo XVIII.

## Soupault and USA: cinema and Surrealist poetry in the Roaring Twenties

[Charlotte Servel](#) - Université de Paris Cité

- Atlántico Norte - Europa - América del Norte
- La consolidación de culturas de masas

In the early 1920s, French Surrealist Philippe Soupault saw in American film a new form of modernity capable of regenerating French poetry. This article analyzes the Americanization of an avant-garde movement by examining the role that idealization played.

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“Charlie Chaplin fulfills the conditions that I would like to see insisted on,” Louis Aragon wrote in “Du Décor” (“On Decor”), an article about American cinema published in *Le Film* magazine in 1918. “If you need a model, take inspiration from him!”<sup>1</sup> In 1923, poet Philippe Soupault (1897-1990) noted the influence of American motion pictures on French poetry in [“The ‘U.S.A.’ Cinema,” an article published in the American avant-garde magazine \*Broom\*](#): “I thoroughly believe that all French poetry underwent a profound transformation therefrom.”<sup>2</sup> A year later, he published the same article in French as [“Le cinéma U.S.A.” in the journal \*Théâtre et Comoedia Illustré\*](#).<sup>3</sup> The title of his 1930 essay “The American Influence in France” struck an even more affirmative note.<sup>4</sup> Soupault expected nothing less than for American film to breathe new life into French poetry.

Yet, as Pascal Ory pointed out, the term Americanization, coined in France by Baudelaire and the Goncourt brothers during the second half of the nineteenth century, had negative connotations. “The idea,” he wrote, “is intrinsically connected to technical and economic advancement, a specific state of modernity and a certain diagnosis of materialism.”<sup>5</sup> The Surrealist poets, on the other hand, perceived it in a positive light. American film appeared as the vehicle of a modernity capable of regenerating poetic creativity stuck in the mold of old classic French literature.

Through Soupault, this article will examine the Americanization of Surrealism by looking at the part imagination and idealization played in the process. What made the Surrealists think that American film could regenerate poetry? Based on an analysis of Soupault’s texts, we will explore what it did to French poetry. Lastly, we will show the ambiguity of the high stakes the Surrealists put on Americanization, since American culture as they imagined it may not have coincided with the views of avant-garde American artists.

### Soupault’s U.S.A. cinema

The Surrealists liked to say that they were born at about the same time as cinema, i.e. in or just after 1895, and grew up with the new invention: Paul Éluard was born in 1895, Antonin Artaud and André Breton in 1896, Aragon and Soupault in 1897, Benjamin Péret in 1899, Robert Desnos, Marcel Duhamel, Jacques Prévert in 1900 and Raymond Queneau in 1903. Fascinated by cinema, André Breton remarked that he had “never seen anything more magnetizing.”<sup>6</sup> Young poets flocked to movie theaters and walked out of them “charged up for days.”<sup>7</sup> As Soupault’s article “Le Cinéma U.S.A.” attests, they were particularly enthusiastic about American motion pictures. Soupault reused the text four times in the 1920s, which demonstrates how important he thought

it was. The article first came out in English in 1923 in *Broom*.<sup>8</sup> A French translation appeared in a film magazine supplement in 1924.<sup>9</sup> The same year, a slightly modified excerpt was published in an issue of the literary review *Le Disque vert* devoted to Chaplin.<sup>10</sup> It was then incorporated into a long article entitled “Charlie Chaplin” published by *Europe* magazine in 1928, the translation of which took the form of an essay called *The American Influence in France*.<sup>11</sup>

The grip the United States had on Soupault's imagination is apparent in the title of the article's first French version, where he kept the term “U.S.A.” english words had been creeping into the French vocabulary since the turn of the century, and they can be found in works by other Surrealist poets. “Corned beef” and “banknote” crop up in Aragon's article “Du décor”;<sup>12</sup> Desnos used the word “policeman” in one of his short stories.<sup>13</sup>

In “Le Cinéma U.S.A.”, Soupault wrote about how his and his friends’ discovery of American film during the First World War shook them out of their torpor:

The ennui of evenings which trail like the smoke of cigarettes and which stretch the arms to sleep took flower in the ardent life led by the younger people, my friends. We walked in the cold and deserted streets looking for an accident, a chance meeting, life. [...]

One day we saw great long bill-posters stretched along the signboards like serpents. At each corner of the street a man, his face covered with a red handkerchief, threatened the peaceful passers-by with a revolver. We heard galloping horses, chugging motors, screams and death-rattles. We dashed into the movie houses and realized that all was changed. The smile of Pearl White appeared on the screen, that almost ferocious smile announcing the upheaval of the new world. <sup>14</sup>



A man, his face covered with a red handkerchief, threatened the peaceful passers-by with a revolver. Poster for *The Exploits of Elaine* (*Les Mystères de New York*) (Louis Gasnier Seitz, 1914)

Fuente : © 1914 - Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé



Pearl White's smile. Poster for *The Exploits of Elaine* (*Les Mystères de New York*) (Louis Gasnier, George Seitz, 1914)

Fuente : © 1914 - Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé

The poster Soupault described was for a serial starring Pearl White, *The Exploits of Elaine*, released in France in 1915 as *Les Mystères de New York*. From the outset, Soupault emphasized the speed and intensity of American films, as evidenced by the listing of terms in the plural. These characteristics seeped into his and his friends' lives: "We lived swiftly, passionately," he wrote.<sup>15</sup> Soupault associated this energy with simplicity: "the light it [U.S.A. cinema] projected was so simple, so natural, so little affected that it was hardly noticed."<sup>16</sup> The qualities Pascal Ory described are found here:

Movies and comics "made in the USA" are cheaper than their French competitors because they have already cleared a profit on their home market. But the decisive point is undoubtedly formal, as these products offer Old World readers new configurations and always have the same qualities: simplicity, frankness and dynamism.<sup>17</sup>

American movies also offered a new view of the world: "The 'U.S.A.' cinema has thrown light on all the beauty of our time, all the mystery of modern mechanics."<sup>18</sup> For Soupault and his friends, American film embodied modernity, and celebrating it was their way of rejecting the Old World's Beaux-Arts tradition.

In the 1920s, film was still gaining legitimacy in France. Not everyone had recognized it as an art form yet and some continued to express loathing for the new medium. In his 1930 book *Scènes de la vie future*, translated into English in 1931 as *America the Menace: Scenes from the Life of the Future*, Duhamel called cinema "entertainment for helots"<sup>19</sup> and scorned everything the Surrealists worshipped. "First, the images," he wrote. "They pass, that is the word. While any art work worthy of the name seeks to remain, they pass."<sup>20</sup> He criticized the speed of what he called the "image faucet",<sup>21</sup> which made it impossible for the viewer to concentrate: "These pleasures follow one another at a pace so feverish that the audience almost never has a chance to understand what is being slipped under their noses."<sup>22</sup> In his opinion, the "speed of cinema rips away images on which our imaginations would like to dwell."<sup>23</sup> Rejecting American film amounted to rejecting the United States, perceived as a young country without a past or culture and, therefore, inherently mediocre.

But its youth is precisely what the Surrealists liked. The United States did not seem to have been perverted yet by an old, desiccated culture, allowing it to have a simple, frank relationship with the rest of the world. For them, poetry was no longer found in the old artistic forms, but in cinema, especially the American kind, as Soupault proclaimed in the introduction to his article:

American film has been scorned by some “intellectuals” but understood by the people and the poets. It is in the film of the United States that the cinema appeared to us as one of the most powerful poetic forces. Poetry, as at its birth, directly touches the people, thanks to the cinema. Let the poet Philippe Soupault thank American film for this miracle of modern times.<sup>24</sup>

Soupault returned to this idea in the article itself: for him, the light cast by “U.S.A. cinema” on modern beauty is “one of the greatest and most important artistic discoveries.”<sup>25</sup>

## American cinema’s influence on French poetry

“Everything was revived with a single stroke.”<sup>26</sup> American cinema inspired Soupault and his friends to revitalize language, which had come under suspicion in the aftermath of the First World War and its atrocities, when an entire generation was confronted with unspeakable horrors. Breton and Aragon were so appalled that they considered giving up writing. In 1918, Soupault expressed the idea in a “cinematographic note” published in the avant-garde review *SIC*. While the piece was about cinema in general, he stressed characteristics that recurred in his future writings on American film:

For those who know how to see, the vibrancy of this new art is already clear. Its power is formidable because it defies the laws of gravity, ballistics, biology, etc. Its eye is more patient, more piercing, more precise. It is up to the creator, the poet, to harness this hitherto neglected power and richness, because a new servant is at the disposal of his imagination.<sup>27</sup>

Cinema’s groundbreaking technology changed the way people viewed the world. American directors took full advantage of this while eschewing antiquated artistic forms, which French novels, plays and certain films still relied on. In “Du décor”, Aragon explained how American movies helped to reignite the poets’ imagination with the close-up:

It is neither the eternally similar spectacle of passions nor — as one would have liked to believe — the faithful reproduction of nature, which the Cook Agency puts within our reach, but the magnification of objects that, without artifice, our weak minds could not raise to the higher life of poetry. The proof is in the pitifully boring films that take the elements of their lyricism from the dingy arsenal of poetic, already tried and true old things: historical films, films where lovers die of moonlight, mountains or oceans, exotic films, films born of all the bygone conventions. But our emotions are stirred by the dear old American adventures that tell everyday stories and raise ordinary objects to the level of drama through the close-up: a bank-note, a revolver on a table, a bottle that occasionally turns into a weapon, a handkerchief that solves the crime, a typewriter that is the horizon of an office, the terrible tape of telegrams unfolding with magic figures that kill bankers or make them rich. [...] To endow an object with a poetic value that it did not possess before, and restricting the visual field to intensify expression, are two properties that contribute to making film decor the appropriate frame for modern beauty.<sup>28</sup>

The same idea reappeared in Soupault’s 1924 article:

This novel beauty, discovered so easily, so naturally, was accompanied by a hitherto unknown technical perfection. American filmmakers understood the drama hidden in a lock, a hand, a drop of water. [...] The influence of this new power made itself felt immediately. I thoroughly believe that all French poetry underwent a profound transformation therefrom.<sup>29</sup>

The poets’ fascination with American films does seem to appear in various texts they wrote during this period. In 1918, Soupault followed up his cinematographic note with a cinematographic poem entitled “Indifference.”<sup>30</sup> Several others followed, written at a time when, by his own admission, he “went to the cinema nearly every day.” They were

published in 1925.<sup>31</sup> Aragon wrote two poems about the Little Tramp,<sup>32</sup> Soupault three.<sup>33</sup> It was not just that a tragicomic character alone could breathe new into poetry, but that some of Chaplin's films inspired a new way of writing. Péret and Desnos also seem to have undergone the Americanization of their poetry in their scripts and stories.<sup>34</sup>

Soupault's "Gloire" ("Glory") and Aragon's "Charlot mystique" ("Mystical Tramp") are two examples of Americanization through cinema. "Gloire" strangely foreshadows scenes that would later appear in the opening sequences of Chaplin's *city lights* (1931) and *modern times* (1936). Soupault's short, brisk, simple sentences seem to evoke editing techniques and the speed of moving images. The presence of various means of transportation is a sign of the temporal and spatial acceleration praised by the Surrealists.

#### GLORY

The crowd cheers a statue, I step down from the pedestal, escape and run into an adjacent street. I cross a bridge; a kneeling beggar holds out his hat. I stop to give him a coin. A streetcar pulls up; I get on and it passes the statue's pedestal, where the crowd demonstrates its discontent. I am recognized and forced to flee as the crowd runs after me. I walk back across the bridge. The beggar stands up, stops me and throws me over the parapet. I land on a tugboat sluggishly towing heavy barges. I cut the cable and the speeding boat crashes into a bridge arch and starts sinking. I swim to the quay, where the crowd is waiting for me. Some men grab me, drag me and make me climb back up onto the pedestal. The crowd cheers.<sup>35</sup>

In "Charlot mystique", a disjointed, irreverent poem in the image of *The Floorwalker*, the film that inspired it, Aragon takes liberties with syntax and versification.

#### Mystical tramp

The elevator always going down breathlessly  
The escalator always going up...  
The lady cannot hear them speaking: She is a dummy.  
I, who was already thinking of talking to her about love!  
Oh the floorwalker so comical with his fake moustache and eyebrows!  
He shouted when I took them off.  
Strange!  
What did I see? this noble stranger...  
—Sir, I am not a wanton woman!  
Oh how ugly!  
"Fortunately we have pigskin suitcases that can withstand anything."  
This one?  
Twenty dollars.  
It contains a thousand!  
The system is always the same: No moderation, or logic, bad theme.<sup>36</sup>

The sequences retained from the film are disconnected; the juxtaposition of fragments recalls the editing in Chaplin's earliest one and two-reelers. Their brevity, between two and six verses, gets a quick beat going that echoes the speed with which the shots follow one another. The variety of fragments seems like a way for Aragon to recall Chaplin's different shots: medium, three-quarter and close-up. The poem does not flow smoothly: the narrative and the message are intermingled, the different added-on comments multiplied, the tenses discordant. The use of all kinds of sentences accentuates the disjointedness. All of these stylistic elements create a textual discontinuity that plays to the extreme with the possibilities of the ellipse, which cinema makes possible through editing.

Aragon also echoed the Tramp's irreverence and free-spiritedness by upending the rules of versification. Humble sounds or words are rhymed or form false rhymes. Meter is also disrupted. The verses are increasingly cut up, their length varying from two to 12 syllables, their layout on the page changing: the lines of some verses are indented one, two or three times. These irregularities give the poem its vivacity and echo the speed of the action on screen. Sometimes a verse consists of a single word as if it had leapt out of the previous one, perhaps to evoke the real-life conditions of watching movies and the frequent jumps in them.

## Fantasies about American cinema and ambiguous

## Americanization

The Americanization at work in the Surrealists' poetry took a somewhat ambiguous form. First, the cinema they pinned their hopes on to revitalize poetry was not *the* American cinema, despite the title of Soupault's article ("Le cinéma U.S.A"), but the specifically American genre of slapstick comedy. Soupault and Aragon explored the absurdity and poetry inherent in the body movements of protagonists at odds with the social milieu in which they find themselves. *That* cinema is what, as Desnos and Artaud put it, acted as a "stimulant" on the Surrealists.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, American cinema eventually left the Surrealists somewhat disappointed. "It must be stated... that at the present time, the 'U.S.A.' cinema, although it has preserved all its charm, has made no further progress," Soupault wrote at the end of his 1924 article. "It remains itself, but at the same stage."<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, he concluded, "The 'U.S.A.' cinema remains and will remain the 'biggest in the world' [*translator's note: in English in the original text*], as we say in French."<sup>39</sup> Soupault had quite a different opinion when he went to the United States in 1931. Reality fell far short of his expectations. An article he wrote for *La Revue du cinéma* had the pessimistic title, "Is the Reign of American Cinema Over?"

In New York, Philadelphia and smaller cities, I saw about forty of the "best" American films of 1931. I must say that the experience greatly disappointed me. I will review the most characteristic films and those that claimed to be sensational, but first it must be said that we in France cannot assess Hollywood's production in all sincerity and in full knowledge of the facts because we see only a selection that has been more or less carefully chosen for Europe. Mediocre or merely average films do not reach our shores. Yet these are the films that can really help us measure the progress or decline of a country's cinema. To illustrate my point, I will mention the case of Americans who believe that French cinema is making great headway because the only film they saw last year was *Under the Roofs of Paris*. Looking over my notes and gathering my memories, I was forced to come to the conclusion that American cinema is no longer a veritable force, that its prestige and influence will wane for the simple reason that it is incapable of doing anything new. It is running out of breath.<sup>40</sup>

While the Surrealists partly romanticized "American cinema," just as Europeans later idealized "[American photography](#)," the avant-gardes in the United States also had a singular vision of their own culture that did not exactly coincide with the Surrealists' view. Published between 1921 and 1924, the avant-garde magazine *Broom*, where "The 'U.S.A.' Cinema" appeared in 1923, provides a glimpse into these misalignments. As Ambre Gauthier wrote, *Broom's* editors turned to Europe for inspiration. That is why they moved the publication there, although economic considerations also played a role. The word broom appears in the review's stamp: "[Its] dynamic symbolism is well suited to the young little magazine, which aims to sweep away the backward-looking conventions and influences of American art and send it in the direction of something new, turning its back on pervasive puritanism."<sup>41</sup>



Cover of issue 2, volume 5 of *Broom* (September 1923) in which Soupault published "The 'U.S.A.' Cinema"

Fuente : © 2012-2021 - Princeton University Library

The references to puritanism and retrograde conventions are absent in Soupault's article and other Surrealist writings. On the contrary, French Surrealist poets looked up to American films for their modernity and exhibition of bodies, notably through the use of close-ups. The image of a reactionary, puritan United States arises all the same in "Hands off love," a text that they wrote in defense of Chaplin during his controversial divorce from Lita Grey in 1927.<sup>42</sup> Two opposing Americas appear in the text: the freedom-loving land of the Tramp, which the Surrealists identified with Chaplin, and the narrow-minded one of those who attacked their idol.

The dichotomy between America and Europe, modernism and the avant-garde, occupied a central place in *Broom*. "The review," wrote Gauthier, "sought above all to define a new American art that would not keep out European influences if they enriched American roots without leading to a nefarious acculturation."<sup>43</sup> It was intended as "a place of open dialogue between the United States and Europe?"

Defining the other is useful in defining the self. So it was for the magazine's American writers and the Surrealist poets when they set their sights on American cinema. A good illustration is Soupault's 1931 biography of the Tramp. Writing about the screen persona was a roundabout way for the poet to speak of himself. Biography became autobiography. Focusing on a slapstick character allowed him to express the issues that a French avant-garde author had on his mind. Soupault pictured the Tramp gazing up at the stars and the moon. Yet hardly any of Chaplin's films have night scenes, except a handful that were shot indoors, where it is impossible to see the sky. Soupault's Tramp seems like a way for him to evoke his own loneliness and the nighttime walks he described in his twilight publication *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* (*The Last Nights of*

Paris).<sup>44</sup>

One of the Surrealists' goals was to promote the fusion of art and life. They were poets in every circumstance, in their writings as well as in their daily lives. While they looked to film, or at least to a certain kind of American cinema, to regenerate poetry, it also influenced their lives. They asserted this several times. Did their lifestyle become Americanized? To answer that question, scholars must explore new fields of research, looking at what they ate, wore, had in their homes and so forth, which would require tapping into new sources, not just the Surrealists' writings.<sup>45</sup> Some photographs suggest that the Surrealists copied the poses and demeanor of the slapstick stars they held in such high esteem. Prévert and Tanguy play in a sandbox like Fatty Arbuckle, Queneau imitates Harold Lloyd's gangly look. According to Desnos and Soupault, Breton smiled like Lloyd and wore the same eyeglasses.<sup>46</sup>



*Clowning around*, photograph of Raymond Queneau and Max Morise in 1928

Fuente : © Collection Succession Raymond Queneau





*André Breton's smile*, Breton with Simone Breton and Denise Lévy

Fuente : © Archives Sylvie Collinet-Sator



Harold Lloyd in all his moods... Photoollage of Harold Lloyd and Mildred Harris

Fuente : *Who's who on the Screen*, 1er avril 1920



Fatty with his bucket and pail

Fuente : *Fatty à la fête foraine* (Coney Island, 1917)



Yves Tanguy and Jacques Prévert in 1925

Fuente : © Collection privée Jean-Pierre Briois

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## **Autor**

- [Charlotte Serval](#) - Université de Paris Cité

Charlotte Serval est ATER à l'université de Caen Normandie. Agrégée de lettres modernes, elle a soutenu en 2020 une thèse en cinéma et littérature intitulée *Le Cinéma burlesque, une autre origine du surréalisme*. Les pratiques des surréalistes analysées au prisme des films burlesques pendant les années folles. Elle est en charge de la mission du CNC « Sensibilisation à l'écriture sérielle ». Elle est membre du CA de l'AFRHC. Elle a publié plusieurs textes notamment dans *1895*, *Demeter*, *Double Jeu*.

Agrégée of modern literature, Charlotte Serval is a graduate assistant at the University of Caen Normandy. Her PhD dissertation on *Cinema and Literature* defended in 2020 is titled *Slapstick Cinema, another Origin on Surrealism*. The Practices of Surrealists analyzed through the prism of Slapstick Films during the Roaring Twenties. She leads the "Series writing" project for the CNC. She is a member of AFRHC's board of directors. She published several texts most notably in *1895*, *Demeter*, *Double Jeu*