



A Cinematic Artist

The Films of Man Ray

Kim Knowles

'Kim Knowles's reassessment of Man Ray as a film-maker is a comprehensive, lucidly argued and scrupulously documented study, written in a clear and lively style. It will provide the reader with an invaluable critical resource on Dada, Surrealism and the 1920s avant-garde cinema.'

Elza Adamowicz, Queen Mary, University of London

'Man Ray challenged the norms of cinema, to explore the erotics and poetics of the eye. Kim Knowles's detailed and original account of surrealism's most enigmatic film-lyricist puts Man Ray in context and traces the lasting influence of his filmic vision.'

Al Rees, Royal College of Art

The American artist Man Ray was one of the most influential figures of the historical avant-garde, contributing significantly to the development of both Dadaism and Surrealism. Whilst his pioneering work in photography assured him international acclaim, his activity in other areas, notably film, is to this day both unknown and undervalued.

During the 1920s Man Ray made four short experimental films and collaborated on a host of other projects with people such as Marcel Duchamp, Fernand Léger, René Clair and Hans Richter. These works, along with a series of cinematic essays and home movies made during the 1920s and 1930s, represent the most important contribution to the development of an alternative mode of filmmaking in the early twentieth century. This book explores Man Ray's cinematic interactions from the perspective of his interdisciplinary artistic sensibility, creating links between film, photography, painting, poetry, music, architecture, dance and sculpture. By exposing his preoccupation with form, and his ambiguous relationship with the politics and aesthetics of the Dada and Surrealist movements, the author paints an intimate and complex portrait of Man Ray the filmmaker.

KIM KNOWLES is Lecturer in Film Studies at Aberystwyth University and Experimental Film Programmer at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. Her writings on the films and photography of Man Ray have been published in *French Studies* and *History of Photography*.



A Cinematic Artist

A Cinematic Artist

The Films of Man Ray

Kim Knowles

Peter Lang Oxford

Peter Lang Ltd
International Academic Publishers
52 St Giles
Oxford OX1 3LU
United Kingdom

www.peterlang.com

Kim Knowles has asserted the right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988 to be identified as the Author of this Work.

© Peter Lang Ltd 2012. First published by Peter Lang AG in 2009.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form, by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without the prior permission, in writing, of the Publishers.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Still from *Emak Bakia*. Image courtesy of Man Ray Trust. Copyright Man Ray Trust/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2009.

ISBN 978-1-906165-37-6

ISBN 978-3-0353-0308-7 (eBook)

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologises for any errors or omissions and would be grateful for notification of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

Printed in the United Kingdom
by TJ International.

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
An interdisciplinary artist	2
Beyond Dada and Surrealism	8
CHAPTER 1	
Between chaos and order: <i>Le Retour à la raison</i>	15
Dada, film and performance	20
Pro-visual/anti-narrative	30
Chance, logic and order	39
Visual structures	47
Approaches to representation	55
CHAPTER 2	
The light and the lens: <i>Emak Bakia</i>	63
Between Dada and Surrealism	75
Optical explorations	90
Light and movement	102
CHAPTER 3	
The filmmaker and the poet: <i>L'Etoile de mer</i>	113
Man Ray and Robert Desnos: A fusion of sensibilities	117
From page to screen	127
Form versus content	145
Musical accompaniment	156

CHAPTER 4

Film, poetry and architecture: <i>Les Mystères du Château du Dé</i>	163
From architecture to film: The villa and the commission	168
Situating <i>Les Mystères du Château du Dé</i>	176
Un coup de dés ...	184
Spatial relations	194
(In) animate transformations	207

CHAPTER 5

Collaborations, experiments and home movies	213
Collaborative projects	217
Home movies and cinematic essays	229
Conclusion	247
Notes	255
Bibliography	285
Filmography	295
Works cited	297
Index	299
Illustrations	307

Acknowledgements

This book grew out of a passion for early avant-garde and experimental film, for which I owe sincere thanks to the late Dietrich Scheunemann. I also benefited greatly from the many discussions with my good friends and fellow avant-garde scholars Monika Koencke, Anna Schaffner and Ruth Hemus. I am especially grateful to Barbara Brown, John Glending, Alan Whyte, Fiona Carmichael and Peter Glasgow at the Language and Humanities Centre, University of Edinburgh, for years of invaluable support and assistance. Elza Adamowicz and Ramona Fotiade offered their expert advice on the first draft of the manuscript and gave me the confidence to put it into print, and Pip Chodorov set me on the right path in terms of illustrations. Thanks to Laura Ward-Ure at DACS, Sophie Perrot at ADAGP, and Raphaëlle Cartier, Caroline De Lambertye and Vladana Jonquet at Réunion des Musées Nationaux for all their help with obtaining copyright, film stills and photographic reproductions. Sincere thanks to Hannah Godfrey and Mette Bundgaard at Peter Lang Publishers for their patience and advice with practical issues, and to George May for the French translations. Special thanks also to Marion Schmid for her friendship and encouragement and to Dee Atkinson for moral support and health-boosting herbs. Much respect and gratitude goes to Martine Beugnet; I would not have got this far were it not for her unwavering faith and guidance over the years. Finally, to Laurence for unconditional love, companionship and, above all, for sharing my passion for film.

This book was published with the generous assistance of The Carnegie Trust and the University of Edinburgh Moray Endowment Fund.

Introduction

In the preface to the only comprehensive study of Man Ray's cinematic activity Jean-Michel Bouhours draws attention to the relative lack of interest shown towards the artist's films in comparison with the rest of his oeuvre. As he points out, although Man Ray was one of the key figures of the cinematic avant-garde of the early twentieth century, his work with the medium of film remains relatively unknown.¹ Indeed, the name Man Ray is not immediately associated with the cinema, but rather with photography, admittedly the domain in which his creative talent was most effectively realised. Beginning his career as a painter, he turned to photography in 1915 with the simple aim of creating reproductions of his paintings for commercial purposes.² A fascination with the technological basis of photography and a desire to explore, master and push the boundaries of the medium led to him becoming one of the most innovative photographers of the twentieth century.

This interest in photography and its mechanical apparatus gradually led Man Ray into the field of cinema, and between 1923 and 1929 he made four short experimental films: *Le Retour à la raison* (1923), *Emak Bakia* (1926), *L'Etoile de mer* (1928) and *Les Mystères du Château du Dé* (1929). In addition to this body of works, his cinematic oeuvre also comprises a number of films that were made privately without the intention of being publicly screened. Discovered only from 1985 onwards, these films range from home movies to short visual experiments, featuring both friends (Paul Eluard, Pablo Picasso, Roland Penrose) and lovers (Lee Miller, Ady, Juliet). Although critics and historians generally acknowledge the existence of Man Ray's films, they are seriously undervalued and misrepresented within the broader context of his artistic output; and whilst there exist a number of essays dealing with individual works, the edited volume *Man Ray: directeur du mauvais movies* by Jean-Michel Bouhours and Patrick de Haas remains the only full-length study of the subject. This is particularly

surprising considering that these films constitute a large proportion of French avant-garde filmmaking of the 1920s. Aside from the significant contribution they made to the development of experimental film, paving the way for new forms of cinematic expression, Man Ray's films are also intricately linked to his broader artistic approach, and demonstrate the aesthetic problems with which he was occupied.

This book is the first monograph on the cinema of Man Ray, which employs a systematic and unified approach that complements the essay collection by De Haas and Bouhours. It aims to provide an understanding of the development of one film to another, as well as to situate Man Ray's filmmaking within the broader context of his artistic sensibility by tracing links between concerns expressed in different domains. It hopes to make a significant contribution to the study of this influential figure of twentieth-century art by bringing into the spotlight perhaps the most ambiguous area of his creative output. It is also an exploration of a particular moment in film history, which saw the emergence of avant-garde film activity and the development of a dialogue between film and the other arts.³

An interdisciplinary artist

The art of Man Ray incorporates a wide range of media, sometimes mixing different forms of expression within a single work. Like many of his contemporaries, notably his friend Marcel Duchamp, he moved fluidly from one art form to another, choosing the one that would most effectively express a particular idea. This interdisciplinary approach has made him a difficult artist to assess, as Neil Baldwin states at the beginning of his biographical study:

The problem of Man Ray begins with the matter that he cannot be classified as an artist in any one genre. Painter, photographer, filmmaker, printmaker, object-maker, poet, essayist, philosopher – his eclecticism flaunts the grounded rules of art history. Man Ray is a chain of enigmas. Paradoxes characterise each phase of his long and complex career and combine to make him the quintessential modernist personality.⁴

If we use this trans-artistic approach as a starting point, Man Ray no longer poses the problem to which Baldwin refers, but instead offers new perspectives from which to view his work. This diversity must be embraced rather than overcome if we are to understand and appreciate his very distinctive form of expression. If Man Ray seems to move unpredictably from one mode of expression to another, evading categorisation and constantly reinventing himself, the incorporation of film into his repertoire also demonstrates a logical progression from the static arts to the art of movement.

In an interview with Pierre Bourgeade, Man Ray highlights his initial resistance to the medium of film, stating, 'j'ai résolu de ne jamais m'occuper du cinéma, sauf comme spectateur de temps en temps.' [I vowed I'd have nothing to do with cinema except, from time to time, as a spectator.]⁵ Yet, as Patrick de Haas observes, 'Plusieurs oeuvres plastiques témoignent du fait qu'avant même de toucher une caméra Man Ray était concerné par le cinéma.' [Several of Man Ray's sculptural works show that he was interested in cinema long before he ever laid his hands on a camera.]⁶ This can be seen either through direct references to film in other art works or in the move towards a kinetic form of expression. *Admiration of the Orchestrelle for the Cinematograph* (1919), produced using the aerograph technique,⁷ demonstrates both tendencies. As De Haas points out, the left-hand side of this painting is a segmented, numbered column bearing a strong physical resemblance to a film strip, whilst the abstract combination of disks and lines and the suggestion of three-dimensional space gives the impression of suspended movement – a dynamic feature that will later play a key role in Man Ray's films.⁸ An early collage piece entitled *Theatr. Transmutation* (1916) also points to an interest in the medium of film. It features a sheet of newspaper turned on its side and over which are pasted the almost imperceptible letters 'THEATR'. At the top of the page can be seen the title of the column, 'Cinema Ideas To Have a Chance', indirectly referring to Man Ray's own cinematic ideas that would be expressed some years later. In this work, then, narrative and movement are brought together in a visual collage based on text.

As we shall see, Man Ray's films all deal to some extent with the relationship between text and image, with this theme becoming a major concern in those produced towards the end of the 1920s. These works therefore

not only demonstrate the use of cinema (and theatre) as a thematic reference, but also reflect some of the formal and visual concerns that were later incorporated into his explorations into the moving image.

Man Ray was certainly not alone in his references to the cinema in his static works, and the above discussion reflects a more general fascination with the medium amongst artists and writers at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁹ Movement itself is a central theme of Man Ray's art around this period, and stretches across a range of disciplines. *The Rope Dancer Accompanies Herself With Her Shadows* (1916), another aerograph piece to which subsequent chapters will return, incorporates the art of dance in a static medium and attempts, through a juxtaposition of vibrant shapes and colours, to suggest dynamic relationships.¹⁰ The photograph *Moving Sculpture* (1920) features the simple everyday scene of sheets hanging on a washing line, which manages to create compositional complexity purely by capturing the movement made by the wind. Again, the title of the piece is significant since, although it overtly refers to the idea of movement, it simultaneously emphasises the limitations of its expression in a static medium. The photograph asks us to imagine the movement that is present at that particular moment in time, whilst commenting on the discrepancy between the event and its photographic representation.¹¹ The title is thus an effective interdisciplinary reference as the subject of the photograph is neither a sculpture in the traditional sense of the word nor is it moving. Yet, in its transformation through the photographic freezing of time, it takes on the static, suspended qualities of a sculpture. Elements of sculpture and movement are combined in a number of Man Ray's objects of this period. *Lampshade* (1917) (see figure 1), an unravelled lampshade in the form of a spiral, incorporates the elements of suspension and perpetual movement in the same way as *Obstruction* (1920), a pyramidal arrangement of coat hangers.¹² Neil Baldwin has also suggested that the rayographs – photographs produced by placing objects directly on or above the photosensitive paper – testify to Man Ray's interest in movement as an artistic tool. The unique quality of these static works, argues Baldwin, owes much to the movement of objects above the photographic paper coupled with the movement of the light source. This has the effect of adding depth and tone to what is essentially a two-dimensional medium.¹³

These observations are crucial in the context of Man Ray's relationship to the cinema in the way that they point to his gradual progression towards the art of the moving image. In the works prior to his experimentation with film he explores the way movement can be expressed in different domains. Yet he also uses movement as a basis for exploring the limitations of particular art forms and as a way of crossing artistic boundaries. One of his first experiences with film was in assisting Marcel Duchamp with his explorations into cinema optics and his attempts to create depth and perspective through movement. In 1920, Duchamp constructed *Rotary Glass Plates (Precision Optics)*, a machine consisting of a motor attached to five glass panels, the ends of which were painted white with black curves, and which, when set in movement, 'produced the illusion of a series of continuous circles.'¹⁴ During an unsuccessful attempt at filming the machine, Man Ray barely escaped being injured by one of the plates that detached itself whilst in movement.¹⁵ A later machine, *Rotary Demisphere (Precision Optics)* (1925), was conceived by Duchamp with the intention of producing 3-D effects. This was to culminate in the making of the film *Anémic Cinéma* (1926), on which Man Ray collaborated along with Marc Allégret.¹⁶ These explorations with Duchamp into optical illusion are particularly important in understanding Man Ray's own approach to the moving image, especially from the perspective of interdisciplinarity. They represent a natural progression from the works discussed earlier, where movement, or at least the impression of movement, is a key concern. Man Ray's use of film to create moving versions of his photographic compositions thus seems to derive partly from Duchamp's marrying of his mechanical constructions (works of art in themselves) with the unique spatio-temporal characteristics of the cinema. As we shall see, *Le Retour à la raison* and the later *Emak Bakia* involve the animation of a number of Man Ray's works and often play on the element of optical illusion and distorted vision. Most important, however, is the overriding presence of mechanical intervention in Duchamp's optical experiments, a factor that is also clearly evident in Man Ray's film work, where an awareness of, and fascination with, the technical apparatus becomes an integral part of his cinematic vocabulary.

Man Ray's interest in the cinema is clear from a number of other films of the period that bear his stamp. In René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924), written

by Francis Picabia to accompany his ballet production *Relâche*, Man Ray is seen playing chess on a rooftop with Duchamp. He also had a key influence on *Ballet mécanique* (1924), a film that is commonly attributed to the painter Fernand Léger and the cameraman Dudley Murphy. The issue of authorship in this film has been widely debated, with numerous accounts of its creation offering differing version of events and making it difficult to ascertain the extent of each artist's input.¹⁷ Nonetheless, judging by the similarity of some of the images with parts of Man Ray's own films, along with the presence of Kiki de Montparnasse (his lover at the time), it is clear that he was involved to a large extent and that some sections were either created or suggested by him.¹⁸ Of his own four films Man Ray has stated:

Tous les films que j'ai réalisés ont été autant d'improvisations. Je n'écrivais pas de scénario. C'était du cinéma automatique. Je travaillais seul. Mon intention était de mettre en mouvement les compositions que je faisais en photographie. Quant à l'appareil photo, il me sert à fixer quelque chose que je ne veux pas peindre. Mais il ne m'intéresse pas de faire de la 'belle photo' au cinéma. Au fond, je n'aime pas les choses qui bougent. Peut-être est-ce parce que je suis devenu paresseux [...] Il faut que ce soit le spectateur qui bouge.¹⁹

[All the films I made were just so many improvisations. I didn't write any screenplays. It was a sort of automatic cinema. I worked on my own. My intention was to set in motion my photographic compositions. As for the camera, it enables me to fix something I do not want to paint. But I have no interest in making 'la belle photo' in the cinema. Basically I just don't like things that move. Perhaps it's because I've become rather lazy [...] It's the spectator who should be doing the moving.]

This statement incorporates many of the questions surrounding Man Ray's filmmaking and also highlights the element of contradiction that characterises the comments he made about his art. What emerges as a key concern here is the use of film as a way of creating moving photographs, a theme to which the following pages will return.

Cinema played an unquestionable role in the development of Man Ray's visual ideas, allowing the qualities of one medium to feed into another. It is precisely this artistic cross-fertilisation that characterises his working method and which provides a valuable starting point for any evaluation of his work in the cinema. Yet surprisingly few connections have been made between the concerns expressed in his photographic works and the

content and form of his films. In Emmanuel de l'Écotais' book dedicated to the study of his extensive activity in the field of camera-less photography, little reference is made to his first two films, *Le Retour à la raison* and *Emak Bakia*, both of which involve the exploration of the rayograph in motion. This exclusion seems particularly striking since it was only in the time-based medium of film that Man Ray was able to create clear juxtapositions between the rayographs and the more traditional camera-based images, establishing a visual discourse that stretches beyond that of his work in still photography. In the context of an historical study of the photogram, Floris M. Neüsuss makes a fleeting reference to this aspect of *Le Retour à la raison* and notes additionally that the film 'appears to be the only photogram movie in film history.'²⁰ Man Ray's early cinematic works therefore illustrate an important dialogue between the techniques of photography and film and, as such, demand a corresponding theoretical approach. Ramona Fotiade has recently drawn attention to the relationship between Man Ray's rayographs and his films through a concentration on the notion of the 'spectre', linking the indexical traces of these photographic images with the techniques found in *Le Retour à la raison* and *Emak Bakia*, such as superimposition, double exposure and the creative use of light and shadow.²¹ The theme of presence and absence that is to varying extents worked into the four films on both a formal and thematic level demonstrates a common point of interest between the two media, which, up to now, remains relatively unexplored.

If these formal connections have been generally overlooked by critics of Man Ray's films, it is largely due to an insistence on artistic categorisation that characterises many accounts. Existing discussions demonstrate a tendency to isolate individual works and to read them exclusively in terms of either Dada or Surrealism and the more general literary and artistic tendencies related to the movements. Very few analyses actually question the usefulness and relevance of such frameworks or attempt to explore how Man Ray's cinematic works either present unique and individualist interpretations of Dada and Surrealist principles or merge these principles with other artistic approaches of the period. I would like to look briefly at the origins of this critical framework before going on to outline the ways in which this book will show Man Ray's films as both engaging with, and going beyond, Dada and Surrealism.

Beyond Dada and Surrealism

The period during which Man Ray produced his films represents a crucial moment in the history of twentieth-century art, which saw the dissolution of the Paris Dada group led by Tristan Tzara (see figure 2) and the gradual emergence of André Breton's Surrealist movement. Man Ray was involved in both groups and became a key asset to both Tzara and Breton, especially in creating new methods of photographic representation that seemed to give visual form to their literary ideas. However, his idiosyncratic personality and his dislike of any kind of artistic doctrine led him to occupy a relatively marginal position in relation to both movements, a position that allowed him both a sense of belonging and an element of artistic freedom. Despite his declared willingness to participate in the activities of the groups, he also acted as a kind of documentor, giving him a certain objective distance that he maintained throughout his life. Thus, he was not only a photographer *within* the Dada and Surrealist movements, but also *of* them, and many photographs of their various members bear his name. Yet presence behind the camera meant absence within the frame and, as a result, a large number of these images do not include Man Ray himself – a symbolic illustration of his relative marginality. In one comment he suggests that his involvement was more a case of being appropriated by the groups rather than a straightforward affiliation: 'the Dadaists and the Surrealists called me a pre-Dada and Breton called me a pre-Surrealist [...] they saw certain things, they didn't accept everything of mine any more than they did of Duchamp's philosophy. But certain things we thought seemed to fit in with their ideas, so I was accepted.'²² Throughout his recollections of Dada and Surrealism, Man Ray refers constantly to being accepted in spite of his divergent ideas and artistic approaches. In his conversations with Pierre Bourgeade, he evokes his contribution to Surrealism, stating, 's'ils choisissaient certaines oeuvres qu'ils trouvaient s'identifier à leurs idées, j'étais flatté; si on m'a invité à participer à une exposition, ou à écrire dans une revue, c'est très bien. Je trouve que ça ne change pas ma personnalité.' [if they chose certain works that were in accordance with their ideas I was

flattered, and if I was invited to participate in an exhibition, or write in a journal, that was fine. I don't think that this changed my outlook.]²³

Yet despite his individualism, the films are generally perceived as demonstrating a fundamentally critical and negativist attitude that relates them to both Dada and Surrealism. J.H. Matthews states, for instance, that, 'Man Ray's experiments with film were never intended to do anything more than express dissatisfaction with the cinema as an art form and curiosity to see how difficult it might be to resist the influence of art on movies.'²⁴ This description does little to account for the visual richness and diversity of expression contained within the works. It also ignores the fact that each film was made within significantly varied circumstances and that Man Ray developed a different approach to the medium with each production. Furthermore, rather than 'express dissatisfaction with the cinema as an art form', it would be more accurate to suggest that he tested the adaptability of film to his own artistic ends.

Paradoxically, the general lack of understanding about the way these films alternately relate to, and diverge from, the practices of Dada and Surrealism can be seen to stem from the content of Man Ray's autobiography *Self Portrait*. First published in 1963, this captivating and at times amusing account of the artist's life and career has come to dominate scholarly research in the field. Nowhere is this more evident than in discussions of his cinematic work. This is perhaps due to the relative absence of written commentaries by Man Ray himself that would explain and contextualise what initially seems to be an extremely diverse and disparate body of works. Unlike other artists who turned to film for the expression of their ideas, such as Hans Richter and Fernand Léger, Man Ray did not take a defined theoretical stance in relation to the cinema.²⁵ His comments on film are sparse and he is often at pains to point out that he was never particularly interested in the medium as an art form, a view that, as the following chapters will demonstrate, seems to contrast with the actual content of his films. Except for programme notes and occasional passing references in interviews and questionnaires, there are frustratingly few instances in which he engages seriously with the content of his cinematic work. In the programme notes for *Emak Bakia*, he positively dissuades any critical assessment of the film: 'In reply to critics who would like to linger on the merits or defects

of the film, one can reply simply by translating the title “Emak Bakia,” an old Basque expression, which was chosen because it sounds prettily and means: “Give us a rest.”²⁶ Aside from a number of brief comments, Man Ray’s autobiography is the only example of a sustained discussion of his films, and, as such, remains a valuable source of information. However, it is by its very nature an anecdotal description of remembered events, characterised, as autobiographies tend to be, by a nostalgic perspective of the past and, above all, a theoretical reticence.

The major problem here is that, although Man Ray’s autobiographical account does not provide a theoretical background, it has nonetheless been used by many writers in the field as a basis for their interpretations of the thematic and formal characteristics of the films. This is evident in the frequent and lengthy quotations from the autobiography that feature in most studies.²⁷ What is most problematic about the over-reliance on this text is that Man Ray describes his films largely within the parameters of Dada and Surrealism, often restricting his discussion to sequences or procedures that most effectively demonstrate the principles of either movement. This is particularly the case with *Le Retour à la raison*, where the connections with Dada nonchalance are constantly reiterated, obscuring the more considered formal approach and clearly defined plastic concerns. He also remembers *Emak Bakia* in terms of a compliance with the ‘rules’ of Surrealism and *L’Etoile de mer* as a visualisation of a Surrealist poem, yet makes no real connection between the films and offers little explanation as to how and why his formal approach developed from one film to another.

In the recollections of his filmmaking period, Man Ray seems to present himself as simply following the paths dictated by the movements of Dada and Surrealism, an outlook that contrasts starkly with those comments referred to earlier, in which he emphasises his individualism. Indeed, it is well known that his position was not straightforward, and that his artistic sensibility consisted of a complex mixture of approaches that could be assimilated into both movements without ever completely giving itself over to either mode of expression. Jane Livingston’s examination of Man Ray in the context of Surrealist photography highlights some of these issues, arguing that although he played a major role in the movement, his own artistic principles diverged from those established by Breton: ‘Man Ray was