

*Surrealism in the Autobiographical Cinema of Alejandro Jodorowsky*  
Dance of Reality (*La Danza de la realidad*, 2013) and  
Endless Poetry (*Poesía sin fin*, 2016)  
*In Spanish with English Subtitles*

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Depending on your point of view, Surrealism in cinema history was made famous or infamous with Luis Buñuel's *Un chien Andalou*, a 1929 silent short in which a "woman's" eye is supposedly sliced by a razor (it was actually a dead calf's eye). The mixture of implied sadism, theatrical shock value, and editorial magic in this scene set a standard for cinematic Surrealism. These elements were modified and replicated some 85 years later in *The Dance of Reality* (*La danza de la realidad*) and *Endless Poetry* (*Poesía sin fin*) by Alejandro Jodorowsky, who was born in the year *Un chien Andalou* was released. The former film was released in 2013 and the latter in 2016. They are the first two installments of a projected five-part autobiographical series.

Alejandro Jodorowsky was born in Chile and has lived extensively in Mexico and France. He became a cult figure in underground cinema with his provocative anti-Western *El Topo* (1970), followed by the Tarot-inspired psychedelic *The Holy Mountain* (*La montaña sagrada*, 1973) and concluding with the mad horror of *Santa Sangre* (*Holy Blood*, 1989). For a variety of reasons Jodorowsky stopped making films for over two decades, but then surprised his loyal following with the first installment of his cinematic autobiography *The Dance of Reality* (*La danza de la realidad*) whose title is copied from his earlier published memoir. One reviewer exclaimed that "the extinct volcano of underground cinema has burst into life once again..."<sup>1</sup> The octogenarian Jodorowsky used Kickstarter and Indiegogo, two well-known crowdfunding sites, to raise the money to make *Endless Poetry* (the second installment in a projected five-part series). Ever the grand promoter, he proclaimed on Kickstarter that "Jodorowsky thinks that all money should be transformed into poetry," and promised to "exchange your pledge into his brand new Poetic Money (*DINERO POÉTICO*) and

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Film Still, *Endless Poetry (Poesía sin fin)*, Dir. Alejandro Jodorowsky (2016)

send it back to you.” The money could only be spent on acquiring “the poetry of the universe.”<sup>22</sup> It obviously worked. He raised over \$300,000, which was enough to make the film.

The two autobiographical films were both shot in Chile and produced out of France. They cover his childhood and adolescence from 1929 to 1952, at which point he left that country for Paris, which he considered the center of Surrealism. His youthful interest in Surrealism had several sources. First, he had a theatrical orientation (his father had done a stint in the circus), and understood the appeal of fantasy and imaginative creation. Second, he was part of an avant-garde poetic circle in the Chilean capital Santiago that was attuned to the surrealist aesthetic. And third, he experienced surrealist sensibility as a magnet drawing him away from South America and toward a new artistic identity. By moving from the cultural margins to its center and from one language to another, Jodorowsky was able to escape the limitations of provincialism and to find new forms of artistic expression. While in Chile he was a theater director and a poet, but when he went to Paris he tried new art forms, including cinema.

He made his first short film in 1957, which was primarily mime (he had joined a troupe led by the famous mime, Marcel Marceau). Its title was *Les têtes interverties (The Severed Heads)*, the story of a merchant specializing in swapping heads. An emphasis on provocative theatricality and nonverbal communication (costume, gesture, movement) appealed to his non-conformist personality and his desire to communicate primarily at a metaphoric and subliminal level. To challenge the audi-



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ence's attention and its expectations, he had his films display physical deformity, religious symbolism, ideological clichés, and, of course, disturbing manifestations arising from the depths of the human psyche. Over the years film critics have described Jodo's films as "Felliniesque" for their contrapuntal play of aberration and the ordinary. They have also been called "surreal" for their emphasis on the subversion of the moral order, their attachment to personal visions and dreams, and their sexual stream-of-consciousness imagery. Jodo would write, direct, score, produce, and act in his films. They became extensions of himself, both mentally and physically. His desire to blur the distinction between art and reality, between the imagined and the everyday became a trademark. His films were alive with a magic that successfully erased the line between physically and mentality. What makes these auto-biographical films special is their having been born of a whole lifetime of artistic and self-generated psycho-therapies. While the new films lack the raw, Mexican-infused power of his early classics like *El Topo*, they have added the sophistication and insight gained from his lifetime as a theater director, novelist, comic-book creator, poet, theorist and practitioner of psychomagic and psychogenealogy, and accomplished reader and interpreter of the Tarot. Added to this list is his practice of Zen Buddhism, the use of hallucinatory drugs, and his insistence that the filmmaking process engage participants at a visceral, transformative level. His films are a collective happening in which actors and audience are meant to be enmeshed. In this way the film is not just a viewing experience, but a therapeutic one in which everyone involved is transformed at some level or another. This has led to his casting of two of his sons, Adan

and Brontis, as stand-ins either for their authoritarian grandfather (Brontis as Jaime Jodorowsky in *La Danzã*) or their artistic father (Adan as Alejandro in *Poesía*).

Because Jodo sees “acting” as performance within reality and our consciousness as embodied primarily in gesture, costume, and staging, his autobiographical projections are highly theatrical. With a lifetime spent in theater, the literary and graphic arts, filmmaking, and in exploring various kinds of spiritualisms, the illusionary became central to his view of human existence. The drivers of our consciousness are illusions, and this is what he tries to evoke in his films. His films are a blend of the rational and the irrational. He attacks chronology with the symbolic, and historical truth with metaphors emanating from the collective subconscious.

*The Dance of Reality* deals with his childhood growing up in Tocopilla, Chile. The title of the film is taken from his autobiography, but the film itself follows a different trajectory. While the film describes the tyrannical nature of his father in a way that emulates the book, it goes on to create a fanciful plot about his father attempting to assassinate the Chilean dictator. His failure to do so has the father becoming the dictator’s horse groomer. He is then saved from this ignominy by a female dwarf and a St. Joseph the carpenter figure, who set him on a path of redemption. It is a classic mythic hero’s journey. The plot, which is a fantasy, may be a statement of Alejandro’s wish-fulfillment for his father or a projection of his own youthful fantasies. In the end it does not matter. The story is a surreal excursion into personal desire that represents a salvation that never happened and we the audience revel in it as the triumph of wishfulness over reality.

*Endless Poetry* is a fantastical re-creation of his life as a teenager and a young artist living in Santiago. In the film, which begins when he is about 11 years of age, Alejandro continues to be under the tyrannical thumb of his father, who in the first autobiographical film is a Stalin figure, while in *Endless Poetry* he is turned into a figure of Hitler. Outside the family store Jodorowsky positions a midget dressed as Hitler, who marches up and down the sidewalk proclaiming war on prices. Jodorowsky uses dwarfs, midgets and armless beggars symbolically. They represent the power of the abnormal to reveal the hypocrisy inherent in “normality.” This film is his coming-of-age story in which he can no longer contain his adolescent rebellion and strikes out on his own. He discovers his muse in a female poet dominatrix, who initiates him into the mysteries of poetry and sex. They rendezvous after midnight at a café in which all the waiters are octogenarians like Jodorowsky is now. Night is the time for subconscious dreaming. The whole scene is driven primarily by these silent figures in tuxedos and top hats who move mime-like through a staged landscape. They are not people; they are characters or perhaps phantoms of memory. Jodo’s re-creation of that moment of his life is dreamlike; its content emerges from a highly-orchestrated mis-en-scène in which the actors clearly express performance. This overt acting becomes a magnet for the audience, drawing us into its visual narrative at a subconscious level. The scene is psycho-magical.

The scenes in the after-midnight café are constructed to convey the irrational underpinnings of what we consider to be real. For example, there are two parallel scenes staged in the café that mimic each other. The first is a straightforward presentation of reality, while the second is a poetic and philosophical interpretation of the same event. In the first articulation the poet-muse is fully-clothed. As she saunters between the tables she is propositioned and pawed by the drunken patrons. In the re-play she walks among the tables naked, but none of the louts see her. In the first instance being clothed does nothing to prevent voyeuristic desire or fantasizing her nakedness. In the second instance being naked creates a blindness. She has been turned into a symbol of the purity of poetry, something the male patrons cannot comprehend, ergo their blindness.

This film, like the previous one, is not just *about* an imagined transformation of evil into good, it is a transforming event for all involved—director, actors, and audience. It is meant to be life-changing event. The surreal aspects of the film are essential to achieving that end. For example, during the penultimate scene, hundreds of extras dressed in black and white skeleton costumes converge on an equal number of extras dressed as red-skinned devils. When death and the devil meet they become a frenzied dance in which the young Alejandro, now dressed as a white-winged angel, is lifted upwards into the ether of the imagination. The film is tuned into a carnival of symbolic imagery that wipes away the banality of the everyday.

His surrealist's interest in subconscious imagery, in the vitality of subversive play, in macabre visions, and in the juxtaposition of the ordinary and the unusual in the same frame infects all aspects of this and the previous film. When a large form of a penis comes crashing down onto a table or a life-size silhouette of a steam locomotive moves silently down a city street we become part of the delight. We enter the fantasy, abandoning our normative selves for something higher, more profound. Jodorowsky's autobiographical cinema is a dance with reality, pure visual revelry. For him only the surreal is real.



1 Peter Bradshaw, "Cannes 2013: *La Danza de la Realidad* (The Dance of Reality)—first look review," *The Guardian* (18 May, 2013). <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/may/18/cannes-2013-alejandro-jodorowsky-reality-dance>

2 <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/276667448/jodorowskys-new-film-endless-poetrypoesia-sin-fin>