



Salvador Dalí and Harpo Marx: A Match Made in Surrealist Heaven



The great 20th-century surrealist artist Salvadore Dalí knew how to put a brush to canvas, but after making fast friends with Harpo Marx of the Marx Brothers, Dalí was inspired to try his hand at writing comedy. Thus was born a surrealist comedy script that was deemed unmarketable—even by Hollywood standards.

Dalí the Filmmaker

Salvador Dalí was never one to paint a dull picture. From melting watches to roses that float in the middle of the desert, Dalí painted the world as he imagined it, not as it was. And Dalí did not limit this dreamlike vision to painting—he designed clothing, furniture, and stage settings in Broadway productions. In effect, Dalí transferred his unique vision to whatever media would hold it. “Painting is an infinitely minute part of my personality,” he said.

From a young age, Dalí had a particular interest in the surrealist potential of film. He grew up watching silent film comedic greats such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Slapstick comedic acts often had a distinct surrealist slant—after all, how many pie fights can a person encounter in a day? Dalí saw the potential inherent in cinema’s ability to place one image right on top of another in time, thus allowing for the juxtaposition of bizarrely disconnected images, such as, say, a slashed human eye followed by a pink teddy bear. Dalí once described the epitome of film as “a succession of wonders.”

At age 25, Dalí set to work making his imagined succession of wonders a sur-reality. He paired with friend and famed surrealist filmmaker Luis Bunuel to make a short film called *Un Chien Andalous* (1929), which is now considered a groundbreaking first in avant-garde cinema. His film career may have begun with this bang, but *Un Chien Andalous* and *Âge d’or, L’* (1930) proved to be the only Dalí films to make it into production. In 1946, he collaborated with Walt Disney on a short six-minute animated film, *Destino*, that was abandoned

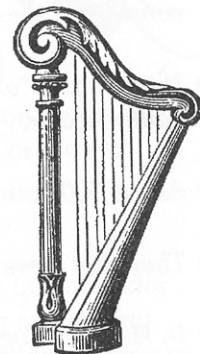


as too strange and unmarketable. Eventually, *Destino* was released in 2003 after Dalí’s death. He also made a short dream sequence for Hitchcock’s *Spellbound*, but for the most part Dalí’s film projects were nipped in the bud.

Dalí the Comedian

The inspiration behind Dalí’s wackiest unmade film script was his friendship with Harpo, the Marx brother who consistently hid crazy gags up his sleeve. Harpo’s very persona was surreal: His character refused to speak, instead relying on the art of pantomime, whistles, and props to communicate. He wore outrageous outfits topped by his wild mat of curly clown hair and was a self-taught virtuoso harpist.

Dalí was enthralled with Harpo. After the two met in Paris in the summer of 1936, they strummed up an appropriately peculiar friendship. Dalí sent Harpo a gift: A gilded harp with barbed-wire strings and teaspoon tuning knobs. Delighted, Harpo returned the favor by sending Dalí a photograph of himself playing the harp with cut-up, bandaged fingers.



The following year, Dalí traveled to California to see Harpo. As he noted in a postcard, “I’m in Hollywood, where I’ve made contact with the three American Surrealists: Harpo Marx, Disney, and Cecil B. DeMille.” According to the always-dramatic Dalí, upon arrival, he found Harpo lying “naked, crowned with roses, and in the center of a veritable forest of harps.” During their vacation, Dalí drew sketches of Harpo at his harp, grinning with a lobster on his head. The two also began collaboration on a surrealist Marx Brothers film called *Giraffes on Horseback Salad*. The film followed the misadventures of a Spanish businessman who comes to America and falls in love with a woman, to be played by Dalí’s wife, Gala. The script also calls for burning giraffes wearing gas masks and Harpo catching Little People with a butterfly net. The film was never realized as MGM, the Marx Brothers’s studio, refused to make it. The script does, however, still exist in a private collection—perhaps someday Dalí and Harpo’s inimicable dream will come to fruition.