

“The Omnipotence of the Dream”: Surrealist Ideals in the Sound of David Lynch

In his 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto* André Breton talks of “the omnipotence of the dream”¹ as a core concept of surrealism. He proposes “the future resolution of... dream and reality... into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*”². Salvador Dalí’s *Yellow Manifesto* states “MECHANIZATION has revolutionized the world... established the most profound change humanity has known.”³ Here, in the manifestos of two prominent Surrealists, lie David Lynch’s two most important recurring motifs: industrialisation, and the fusion of reality with the dream. Audio techniques used by Lynch employ an experimental approach to sound in film, relying heavily on Michel Chion’s premises of *added value* – “the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image”⁴ – and *synchresis* – “the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears.”⁵ It is by fully utilising these two concepts, together forming what Chion terms the *audio-visual contract*, that Lynch is able to create convincing Surrealist scenes.

Industrialism and the Dream

The Elephant Man’s⁶ opening scene provides one of Lynch’s most obvious, yet layered, dream sequences; acting as a microcosm for the majority of the plot. The opening waltz theme evokes images of the Victorian circus, Joseph Merrick’s home, with its $\frac{3}{4}$ time, moderate tempo, and classical instrumentation. This quickly changes to a more dreamlike mood as the descending melody transfers to the xylophone and a still image of Merrick’s mother fades into view, highlighting her beauty. The camera pans from a close up of her eyes to her mouth; one of Merrick’s most disfigured features. What follows is an effective example of added value through a stretched use of the principal of synchresis. At first we hear the steady working of machinery as the opening theme fades out, until we are left with a black frame and the increasing volume of industrial noise. Then, dreamlike wisps of smoke materialise and elephants walk onto the screen silently, other than the omnipresent industrial machinery. This succession of events – sound and then image – implies a creation of the second from the first; Merrick’s deformity is a bi-product of the gross inhumanity that comes with increasing industrialisation. The whole sequence is incredibly surreal, establishing the themes of the two manifesto’s previously mentioned. Cementing this is the horrifying

¹ A. Breton, M50: Manifesto of Surrealism, 1924 in: A, Danchev, 100 Artists Manifestos from the Futurists to the Stuckists, Penguin Classics, London, 2011, p.248

² *ibid.*, p.247

³ S. Dalí et al., M52: Yellow Manifesto, 1928 in: A, Danchev, 100 Artists Manifestos from the Futurists to the Stuckists, Penguin Classics, London, 2011, p.257

⁴ M. Chion, *Audio-vision. Sound on Screen*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, p.5

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ D. Lynch, *The Elephant Man*, Studiocanal, USA, 1980

combination of sound and image that follows. We begin to hear the elephants, however they appear aggressive and the shot cuts to the woman seen earlier. She falls and is writhing, appearing to be screaming in pain and fear (fig. 1)⁷, but the sound that we receive is not a scream, it is the sound of an elephant. Through synchresis we match the image with the sound and beauty becomes an object of horror. Through this scene it is implied that the contamination of beauty with the relentlessness of industrialisation is to blame for the human suffering left in the wake of factory closure, with the majority of this being carried through Lynch's use of sound. Moreover, the inclusion of the core plot points in this dream sequence is reflective of Sigmund Freud's theories on dream analysis and the unconscious – "it is only after seeing man as his unconscious, revealed by his dreams, presents him to us that we shall understand him fully"⁸. The theories of Freud were held in high regard by the Surrealists, particularly Breton, and underpin a huge number of their representations and thoughts of the dream, consciousness and memory.⁹



Figure 1: Opening Scene of *The Elephant Man*

Themes of industrialisation are present throughout Lynch's work, whilst the industrial soundscapes he became recognised for are somewhat sparsely integrated in *The Elephant Man*, we can hear them incessantly in Lynch's soundtrack to his first feature film, *Eraserhead*¹⁰. Here they are often unnatural sounds, not feasibly produced by any one object, which leads us to suppose we are viewing a subjective narrative from the viewpoint of Henry. In this way, the soundtrack changes the entire meaning of the film as we are now able to view the abstract scenes and strange manifestations as a product of Henry's own psychology, through a number of audio-visual

⁷ Lynch, 1980, op. cit.

⁸ S. Freud, *Dream Psychology. Psychoanalysis for Beginners*, The James A. McCann Company, New York, 1920, p.13

⁹ Breton, op. cit., pp.244-245

¹⁰ D. Lynch, *Eraserhead*, American Film Institute, USA, 1977

abstractions we are able to see into the depths of his character. In this combination of image and soundtrack, Lynch has created a “resolution of dream and reality”¹¹ with Freudian undertones, especially in regard to the previous example of his thought. The whole film, more than a commentary on industrialisation, is a full realisation of the state of *surreality* that Breton speaks of, sewn together with auditory fabric. As director and film-sound theorist Vsevolod Pudovkin rightly states, “deeper insight into the content of the film cannot be given to the spectator simply by adding an accompaniment of natural sound”¹². Lynch’s work with film-sound is highly regarded, from his original soundtracks and compositions to his sound design. His short film *Industrial Soundscape*¹³ (fig. 2) epitomises a fascination with synthesised sound and industrialisation. We see several abstract objects, not dissimilar in aesthetic to Man Ray’s early and brutal surrealist sculpture¹⁴ (fig. 3), moving to create the throb of industrialisation. Lynch has a high level of interest in sound however this comes, in part, from a source that appears unlikely – Jacques Tati.



Figure 2: The instruments of *Industrial Soundscape*

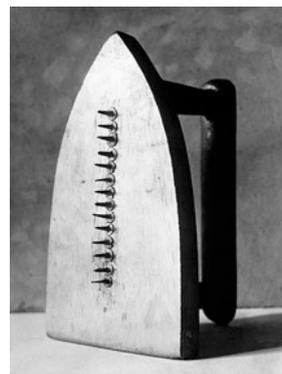


Figure 3: Man Ray, *The Gift*

In an interview regarding Tati’s film *Mon Oncle*¹⁵ Lynch states “If you turned the sound off for a Jacques Tati movie... you’d be losing so much, maybe half of the humour.”¹⁶ Though the genres in which each director has worked are wildly different, they often share the themes of industrialism, as well as a reliance on the power of sound. In the opening scenes of Tati’s *Playtime*¹⁷ we see highly choreographed still shots of many people walking through a crowded airport, yet we only hear a small number of footsteps. The sound, done during post-production, leads our eye through the

¹¹ Breton, op. cit., p.248

¹² V. Pudovkin, *Asynchronism as a Principal of Sound Film*, 1929, p. in: Weis, Elisabeth and John Belton, ed. *Film Sound. Theory and Practice*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, p. 86-91

¹³ D. Lynch, *Industrial Soundscape*, Internet film, Asymmetrical Productions, 2002

¹⁴ Ray, Man, *The Gift*, 1921

¹⁵ J. Tati, *Mon Oncle*, Gaumont, France, 1958

¹⁶ *Once Upon a Time... Mon Oncle*, Television Programme, Enhance TV, Australia, 2011

¹⁷ J. Tati, *Playtime*, Specta Films, France, 1967

scenes, maintaining a level of narrative. Most importantly the sound creates a form of absurdist slapstick humour through a manipulation of synchresis similar to Lynch's, whilst also offering at times a commentary on industrialism in Paris – though the film is set here all we ever see and hear are offices and infrastructure. It is interesting to note that Lynch also uses footstep sound effects unconventionally, through removing them. This can be seen immediately before they find Diane's dead body in *Mullholand Drive*¹⁸; Lynch removes the sound of footsteps whilst maintaining all other naturalistic sound. By doing this he creates an almost subconscious effect whereby we perceive that something is wrong with the 'reality' of the film but cannot recognise what it is, creating a huge level of tension. Tati also uses sound to create characters from objects, for example, the squeaking chairs heard as M. Hulot sits to wait in the corporate office block. The sound techniques used by Tati are described aptly by director Jean Epstein; "In drawing out the detail, in separating the sounds, in creating a sort of close-up of the sound... [we] can allow all beings, all objects to speak"¹⁹. These techniques can also be found in Lynch's films, however rather than satire, they appear as monstrous. For example, in *Eraserhead* the radiator becomes a symbol for all of Henry's fear, becoming increasingly loud in times of stress, pre-empting his fatherhood it causes a nearly unbearable roar of hissing within his mind.

Human perceptions of reality

'Ceci n'est pas un pipe' (fig. 4)²⁰; just as surrealist René Magritte comments on our perception of painting, Lynch does of sound. The painting questions the constructed nature of an image, it is not a real pipe as it cannot be stuffed with tobacco, it is merely the artist's representation. Though audio recording could be seen as more of a mechanical process than painting, John Berger states that this question of reproduction stands in regard to photography, another 'mechanical' medium. The photographer selects one frame "from an infinity of other possible sights"²¹, therefore imposing their gaze on it, just as an audio-recordist selects their acoustic from a variety of others available. Audio recording is just as constructed as painting. Lynch takes dramatic advantage of, and intentionally lays bare, the



Figure 4: *The Treachery of Images* - René Magritte

¹⁸ D. Lynch, *Mullholand Drive*, Studiocanal, 2001

¹⁹ J. Epstein, *Slow Motion Sound* in: in: E. Weis and J. Belton, ed. *Film Sound. Theory and Practice*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, p. 143-144

²⁰ Magritte, René. *The Treachery of Images*, 1928-29

²¹ J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Group, London, 1972, p.10

difference between live performance and recording in *Mullholand Drive's Club Silencio*. The moment Betty and Rita enter the room the announcer shouts "There is no band...This is all a tape recording."²² This is the truth, all we hear when watching any film is an image of sound rather than the sound itself, but we are fooled by Chion's contract. Lynch furthers this notion through Rebekah Del Rio, directly after the announcer has finished. As she begins to sing, the characters are affected by the beauty of the song and start to cry, however halfway through the performance she passes out and the song continues. Betty and Rita look stunned, even angry, and leave; feeling tricked despite the forewarning of the announcer. This is stunning use of, and commentary on, sound in film. At once distorting an audience's perception of reality and making them aware of its constructed nature, all happening in the extended dream sequence that makes up the first two acts of the film; *Ceci n'est pas une voix*.

Influential French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote in Paris during the same years as the formation of Surrealism. His revolutionary thought about the nature of time, which he terms *duration*, bares resemblance to later representations of it by surrealist artists. Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory*²³ (fig 5.) could be seen to consider Bergson's theory, depicting a dreamscape in which time is fluid²⁴.



Figure 5: Salvador Dalí - *The Persistence of Memory*

A key point of Bergson's thinking is that human experience of time is not mechanical, it is "moving, coloured and living"²⁵. It is also dependant on memory, Bergson theorises that experiencing rather than analysing duration is dependent on *intuition*, or consciousness, which he determines is

²² Lynch, op. cit., 2001

²³ Dalí, Salvador, *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931

²⁴ Smarthistory. Art, history, conversation., *Dali the Persistence of Memory*, Youtube, uploaded 11 Dec 2012, accessed Thurs 11 Jan 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mp-fBJNQmU>

²⁵ H. Bergson, *The Creative Mind. An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Carol publishing group, 1992, p.169

(note: *Introduction to Metaphysics* was originally an essay, penned in 1903, *The Creative Mind* was originally published as a collection of related essays and lectures in 1934)

composed of every moment we individually experience, stating “inner duration is the continuous life which prolongs the past into the present.”²⁶. Finally, in trying to summarise the difference between duration and common perceptions of time Bergson theorises:

By an Illusion deeply rooted in our mind, and because we cannot keep from considering analysis as equivalent to intuition, we begin by distinguishing, for the whole length of the movement, a certain number of halts or points which, willy-nilly, we make part of the movement. Faced with our inability to recompose movement with these points we intercalate other points, in the belief that we are thus keeping closer to what mobility there is in movement. Then, as mobility still escapes us, we substitute for a finite and definite number of points a number “infinitely increasing” – trying thus, but vainly, through the movement of our thought, which indefinitely pursues the addition of points to points, to counterfeit the real and undivided movement of the mobile.²⁷

The melting clocks of Dalí’s painting could be seen to represent the fluid, associative nature of human temporal perception. It is as if Dalí has captured one of the “points” that Bergson talks of, and demonstrated that it is impossible for time to reside in this space. Film, although a succession of images and sound in time, has not been made fixed until it has been recorded (demonstrated in the earlier point on *The Treachery of Images*), even then it is possible to manipulate through editing. Therefore, it’s relevance to capturing moments and concepts of duration stands more so in non-linear films such as *Inland Empire*²⁸; which recreates the associative nature of human perception through its multiple twisting narratives, lack of plot, and it’s expanding and contracting within its own temporal universe. It “emphasises allusion rather than progress”²⁹. This is arguably Lynch’s masterpiece, it presents a world in which everything is melding and disintegrating simultaneously, a three-hour feature shot by Lynch on a low fidelity camcorder. It was filmed in Łódź and Los Angeles also including scenes from Lynch’s *Rabbits*³⁰. It is a terrifying combination of associations between timelessness, prostitution, gang crime, death, Hollywood and the deconstruction of the viewer’s perspective. At points there is a metafiction and it becomes difficult to distinguish the ‘real’ scenes

²⁶ Ibid., p.179

²⁷ Ibid., p.181

²⁸ D. Lynch, *Inland Empire*, Studiocanal, 2007

²⁹ R. Martin, *The Architecture of David Lynch*, Bloomsbury academic, London, 2014, p.

³⁰ D. Lynch, *Rabbits*, web-series, 2002

and those of the secondary narrative. Lynch stated “This film is very different because I don’t have a script. I write the thing scene by scene”³¹. His associative process reflects Bergson’s theory. The film often references the fluidity of its own time, using the metaphor of pushing a cigarette through a piece of folded silk. Lynch creates a non-linearity held together through common sound elements. Throughout, we hear the same vinyl record, unsolicited laughter, rain and telephones ringing, used to signify changing narratives. The film sound is used to stitch together the visuals and is indispensable to the fluidity of the work, therefore it’s portrayal of time and relation to surrealism.

In conclusion, Lynch’s films are filled with surrealist sentiment, with a clear portrayal of concepts dating back to Dalí, Magritte and Breton. It is also clear that Lynch is sophisticated in his use of sound, whether thematically, subconsciously, conceptually or practically. He makes full use of Michel Chion’s audio-visual contract and stretches the principal of synchresis to its limit in order to achieve scenarios that would never have their emotional impact or depth of meaning, without the attention to detail and reverence given to sound effects and soundtrack.

³¹ C. Atwood and R. Roth, *A Dog's Trip to the Chocolate Shop - David Lynch*, Healthy Wealthy and Wise, September 2005

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