Dreaming, Vol. 13, No. 1, March 2003 (© 2003)

Filmed Dreams: Cinematographic and Story Line Characteristics of the Cinematic Dreamscapes of John Sayles

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The authors characterize the filmed dreamscapes of John Sayles though a structured interview with the screenwriter/director and an analysis of cinematographic and story line techniques utilized in creating dreamscapes in two of his films. The filmmaker uses complex techniques to produce believable dreams in otherwise naturalistic films by isolating the dream sequence and altering sound, color, cinematography, story, time, visual perspective and physical properties of the perceived external reality of the dream. This perceptual and orienting framework required to produce a believable dream on film may reflect innate characteristics of the dream state.

KEY WORDS: film; dreams; cinematography; John Sayles.

Filmmakers, starting with their first attempts to create moving pictures, have been fascinated by the similarities between film and dreams. We retain that fascination. Film is a dreamlike medium. Many of us recall our dreams as a series of moving images (Cavell 1971, Kosslyn 1994). Both film and dreaming are comprised of a series of images full of symbols and characters interacting not only with words, but also with thoughts and other images (Chanan 1996, Kaplan 1990). Attending the cinema can be like the experience of a collective dream (Metz 1982, Ullman 1988, Cristie 1994). A dream can be difficult to describe in words, much easier to describe in images. Psychologists and psychiatrists, while emphasizing the imagery characterizing dreaming, focus on written and spoken dream reports in which the image is turned into a verbal portrayal of the dream. Even the first filmmakers realized that film visualizations could be used to emulate dreams (Orwell, 1970). Filmmakers have the facility to reach beyond the verbal story of the dream and create imagery on film that simulates the imagery of dream. The purpose of this paper is to begin to assess that body of knowledge as to why how dreams are used and how dreams are created by modern filmmakers. The authors suggest that the perceptual and orienting framework required to produce a believable dream on film may reflect innate characteristics of the dream state.

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1053-0797/03/0300-0043/1 © 2003 Association for the Study of Dreams

METHOD

While dreamscapes are commonly incorporated into films (eight of twelve screenplays accepted for production at the 1999 Sundance filmmaking labs included dream scenes), there is little written literature describing the use of dreamscape in story or the methods of creation of the dreamscape on film. This paper utilizes an alternative approach, and is based on a structured interview with director John Sayles, who trained in psychology before branching into his role as one of the most successful and prolific independent screenwriter/directors. Sayles has written and directed more than a dozen major independent films, receiving Academy award nominations for *Passion Fish*, *Lone Star*, and *Return of the Secaucus Seven*. Between his films he works as a script doctor (his script for *Apollo 13* received an Academy award for scriptwriting), and writes both fiction and nonfiction. His book *Thinking in Pictures* addresses the perceptual philosophy of filmmaking.

The Sayles interview—"The Use of Dreams in Film"—was conducted by phone in the studio of the Pueblo Community College radio station on May 17, 1999, for National Public Radio. The results were transcribed and the authors selected passages most relevant to the proposed theme of this article. The material presented here, which represents about 65% of what was recorded, was then sent to Sayles for his review and approval in April 2002.

Based on knowledge derived from that interview, the authors dissect and analyze from a filmmaking perspective (sound, cinematographic shots, focus, pace and point of view) dreamscapes utilized in two Sayles films—*Passion Fish* and *Limbo*—considering closely both the requirements of filmic dream portrayal and the role of those dreamscapes in the film story lines.

THE JOHN SAYLES INTERVIEW (EXCERPTS)

Filmmaking Requirements For Creating Dreamscapes

Much of the way we perceive our environment is genetically coded in order for us to make naturalistic sense of the world. We learn the rules, the physical properties of things, for survival, so that we know if something is heavy, not to drop it on our feet. If something is hard, we don't bang our heads against it. There is a very strong subconscious attachment to the natural laws of motion, of weight, of hot and cold, and of the physical nature of human bodies and other forms. The first time you watch a movie, it seems strange and two dimensional, but eventually you become involved emotionally. You accept the filmic representation of reality in part because the filmmakers have shadowed physical properties. The filmmakers manage the film's continuity, taking care so that in the middle of a scene it doesn't start raining during one angle and not in another. In filmmaking one spends a lot of time making those things consistent. When they are not consistent, it bothers the audience. It can physically affect the viewer if the eye lines are wrong. If one character is looking to the left and the other is looking to the right in a conversation, and you cut back and forth between them, and you slip a shot and both people are looking the same way, the viewer will feel viscerally that something is wrong. In a chase scene, if people are chasing from left to right, right to left, you can't reverse directions unless you also have a shot where the two cars chasing each other are going straight towards or straight away from the viewer. Then you can reverse the direction of the chase, but if you skip that middle step, very often the audience is so disoriented that they start to lose their involvement in the movie.

When you have a dream sequence, you have to work to overcome the fact that you are breaking physical laws. The viewer subconsciously and on a visual level can become disoriented. It's necessary to tell the viewer what is a dream. The filmmaker sets the rules of the world that you have entered. In this world that we have entered, Batman can do certain things, or a character with extrasensory perception gets little flashes of the murderer when he picks up a knife. Because of the way that human beings learn and how they survive by dealing with physical laws, it is upsetting and disorienting when the filmmaker doesn't follow those rules.

Dream Mode

In experimental films the whole movie can have a dream-like quality. When using a dream sequence in a naturalistic film, however, you must signal the audience that this not part of the naturalistic flow of events. A film sets up rules and context in the first twenty minutes. With a dream sequence, what you are purposely saying, and usually fairly early in the sequence, is, "something is happening here that can't be literal." The sound isn't right, the picture isn't right, there is something weird about the music. Characters are doing things that they couldn't ordinarily do, therefore, this must be a dream, and therefore we want you to feel about it in a different way than you would feel if this was literally happening to the characters.

You have to be very careful about the rhythm of how you use dreamscapes. If you are making a nonlinear or surrealist film, you don't have to worry as much. You are playing jokes on people's usual expectations of reality in the film, so something can have the discrete charm of Bunuel that is a dream within a dream, within a dream, within a dream. About the third time the character wakes up and realizes that it is just a dream, as an audience, we stop taking what is happening very seriously. Because film is so literal, the longer you stay in a dream sequence and the more you film it in an ordinary way the more likely it is to be perceived as reality by the viewer.

Segregating The Dreamscape

In a literal screenplay, you have to be very careful with any fantasy sequence or dream sequence, if you want people to then come back to the so-called "real" story and care whether your main character lives or dies or fails or succeeds. You have to segregate the dream. There are various strategies for shooting a dreamscape. You may go from black and white to color, or color to black and white. You may make the sound very strange. David Lynch has had people actually act the scene backwards and then reversed it, so it has a very strange sound and style of movement. You do things that are not literal to keep reminding the audience that this is just a dream, and therefore should not be taken in the same way as the conscious action is taken.

The Role Of The Dreamscape In The Story Line Of The Film

"When thinking in pictures, its important to consider whether a certain image will have the same meaning to someone else that it does to you. . . . You build and pick your images so that anybody can get into the story on some level so that maybe people are drawn in deeper than they thought they could or would want to go" (Sayles, 1987).

A dream or any other kind of non-literal story line provides subtext to your characters and your situation. One thing that makes film different from prose fiction is that in film when you have characters explain themselves, especially, explain their inner states, it stops action. For example, you have a scene with a bartender, where your character states that he has always been afraid of the dark because of Uncle Billy, who left the lights off when he was a child. Such scenes stop action. A dream is another way to access the inside of a character. Scott Fitzgerald said that character is action. That is even truer in films than in fiction or plays. Popular films tend to be very literal. You see what the people say and you see what they do. When a character is conflicted, he or she is not likely to divulge fears, or hatreds, or loves. A dream scene can give, sometimes the character, but certainly the audience, information that the character doesn't provide willingly and consciously. That creates a subtext. If you see a bank teller who is dreaming about violence, it can be evidence for later believing the story when the character turns out to be someone who is seriously disturbed. A dream provides information that you can put into the story with a different weighted value than the conscious actions of the characters.

The Filmic Dream – Expanding The Envelope

One of the interesting traits of a dream is that you can do things in the dream that often don't seem that amazing. You take them almost literally. For example, you can fly in the dream. Sometimes you can't do things that you ordinarily can do, e.g., you are on a highway and a truck is coming towards you and your body won't respond. Extraordinary or facetious, being out of sync with physical reality is a property of dreams. Filmmakers have from the beginning been able to create special effects, tricks that are not physically possible. The cinematic dream is an ideal place for the filmmaker to use special effects.

ANALYSIS OF DREAMSCAPES IN *PASSION FISH* AND *LIMBO*

Dreamscapes from two John Sayles films, *Passion Fish* and *Limbo*, were analyzed for the following characteristics: segregation from literal story line of the film; alterations in

sound, lighting, and cinematographic technique; acting technique; alterations in physical properties of dream environment; and contribution to the story line of the film (Table I).

As expected for these naturalistic films, the dreamscapes were clearly segregated from the literal story lines of the films by use of black and white fade-in, fade-out techniques and visual images of the actor sleeping and waking.

Both filmic dreams significantly alter story and character development. In *Passion Fish*, the dream comes from a character who defends herself by being offensive. She is not the kind of person willing to express her fears, anxieties, or wishes. Thematically, the film is about two physically and/or emotionally paralyzed characters who by the end of the film are able to wish again. In the dream sequence, we see that the central character wishes for a romance and for the ability to walk again. That dream clues the audience into the character's emotional life and gives subtext to what she does when she is awake.

Table I. Dreamscape Characteristics of *Passion Fish and Limbo*

	Passion fish	*Limbo*
Segregation from literal story line	Night activity (dark) going to 3 second total white screen	Night activity (dark) going to 5 second totally dark screen
Sound	Initial violin solo—echoing sound	Dubbed with enclosed "muffled" sound
Lighting	Muted light, initial orange filter going to green filter	Underwater lighting, harsh face lighting for main character, 75% shadow on face for boatman
Cinematography	Wide shot F16 to close-up with zoom lens bringing background into close up, unusual character framing	Hot head remote control camera (80mm lens) filmed without horizon, shots confined to water, lens looks up from water to character
Speed	Increased film speed—29 frames/second, giving slow motion effect	Dropped frames induce jerky motions
Film stock	Higher speed film used in second segment resulting in decreased contrast	Same film stock as rest of film
Color	First half dreamscape blends characters, orange tinted clouds suggest sunset; second half includes intense green of folage	Dark shots with harsh lighting induce blue/yellow tones suggesting "hell on earth" theme
Acting	Controlled, follows sound	Agitated, splashing spinning
Inconsistancy with physical properties as defined by the film	Paraplegic character can walk and express sexual urges, dead children reappear	Character appears from beneath the water and disappears back into the water, blows clouds of steam like a dragon (added effect without continuity)
Contribution to story	Develops emotional characteristics of character, pulls in viewer, defines goal for character as reentering the world; pace is incorporated into the rest of the film	Describes this world for character as an unhelpful "hell" where he can depend on no one, not even himself; sets up "Limbo" ending of film where the characters are at the mercy of "Kris Kristofferson"
End of scene	Character wakes from sleep	Character wakes from sleep

Here is a dream where we can see what she wants and what she hopes for. It is something that she doesn't show about herself when she is conscious. In *Limbo*, the dream is used in a much different fashion, to describe the central character's emotional isolation from a waking existence, which has offered him little help and much harm. In the literal story line, he is about to make the choice to trust in an indeterminate and dangerous situation. The dream sequence demonstrates what a heroic move this is for this character whose previous choices, up to now, have proved destructive. Both of these dreams are transformational in the story lines of their respective films. They pull the viewer far deeper into the psyche of each character than is possible with traditional, sequential waking narrative.

The viewer initially notes the dreamlike quality of each dreamscape because of changes in ambient sound. The *Passion Fish* dream begins with the echoing sound of a hammer hitting wood and a short violin solo. As the montage evolves, changing to focus on a mother and child on a distant shoreline, we hear the reverberating echo of their voices resounding like an approaching tide. In *Limbo* the character's voice is muffled, effectively lost in the expansiveness of the ocean scene.

Since most dreams are experienced as images, it is not surprising that Sayles utilizes a multiplicity of visual alterations in his filmmaking technique to create these dreamscapes. Significant changes in lighting, film stock, depth of focus, and color were utilized in order to produce two very different dreamscapes that maintain a dream-like consistency for the viewer very different from the naturalistic world presented in the rest of the film.

Both dreamscapes include characteristics of changed physical law as defined by the film. In *Passion Fish*, a paraplegic can walk; in *Limbo*, the main character appears and disappears from beneath the water and spins rapidly, breathing smoke out from his nostrils—manipulations of postproduction. Other technical alterations that Sayles creates in the perceived external reality of dreamscape are more subtle. Both scenes incorporate a change in pace (sense of time) by being shot at a different film speed from the rest of the film. In the dream scenes, the actors alter pose, facial characterization, and movement. Visual perspectives of character change as camera framings change. In *Limbo*, the camera is operated remotely altering the style and flow of filming, utilizing a point of view only inches above the water.

DISCUSSION

The perceptual distortion and altered orientation in time and space characteristic of many dreams may be easier to portray on film than in the written or verbal report. We, as viewers, can be induced to see on film dreamscapes that mirror the story and perceptual characteristics of our own dreams.

Filmmaking techniques required to produce dreamscapes may reflect innate characteristics of the dream state. The dream state has been described as an hallucinatory state involving the perception of objects or the experience of sensations without external cause (Hobson 1989, 1994). Based on this perspective, the dream state is similar to the waking hallucinations, usually visual or auditory, associated with psychotropic drugs, sleep deprivation, and psychiatric and neurological disease. The primary characteristic of both waking and sleeping hallucinations (dreams) is perceptual distortion.

The filmmaker utilizes a variety of techniques to alter the perceptions of sound and vision to produce a created dream. But more than sensory alteration is required of the

filmmaker. The filmmaking framework utilized to produce a believable dreamscape includes: isolation from literal story line; alteration in cinematographic technique, color and sound; changes in time sense, visual perspective, and basic physical properties of perceived external reality. Such created dreams are impactful, creating a subtext for the character that alters and affects the film story. The filmmaker is required to do more than present a sensory/perceptual hallucination in creating a dreamscape. He must create another world with its own physical laws different from those of the apparent naturalistic world in the rest of the film. We hypothesize that the multilevel process required to create a filmic dreamscape reflects innate characteristics of the dream state, supporting the contention that actual dreams are more complex phenomenon than simple sensory/perceptual hallucinations. The level of complexity involved in producing a filmic dream suggests that dreaming may be better described as a unique state of consciousness.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines how filmic dreams are used and created by one of the premier independent filmmakers—John Sayles. The filmmaker creates believable dreamscapes in his films by isolating the dream and altering sound, color, cinematography, story, time, visual perspective and physical properties of the perceived external reality of the dream. These techniques used to create filmic dreams may reflect innate characteristics of the dream state.

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