

Jacques Brunius

# The Dream at the Cinema

After having analyzed the obstacles for the painter that are generally opposed to the rigorous objectification of his dream on the surface of a canvas and after having pointed out the rare few examples that seem valid to him, Pierre Mabille in his quite remarkable *Luminous Consciousness* concludes:

"If it is not possible to see in painting absolutely true expressions of dreams, we can *hope* that cinema *is* and *will be* richer in this respect."

It is I who underline *hope, is* and *will be*, not for the malicious pleasure of highlighting the grammatical disagreement between the future implied by the verb "to hope" and the present of the verb "to be," but because such negligence of style, whether intended or not, testifies, if not to a contradiction, at least to an underlying restriction in Mabille's thought, a scruple to which I will return later.

The author immediately adds: "It [the cinema] has indeed exceptional powers, firstly, that of representing moving images like those of our minds, and secondly, that of having at its disposal a very rich range of lighting. It is therefore not surprising that the true surrealist program could have been better produced through films than on painted canvas. It is through the ability of cinema to be close to our mental representation that it can penetrate so directly into us."

Thus Mabille deliberately takes the opposite view from the paradoxical affirmation of Salvador Dali: "Contrary to current opinion, cinema is infinitely poorer and more limited for the expression of the real functioning of thought than writing, painting, sculpture and architecture."

There is no need to note the arbitrariness of Dali's claim. We would look in vain in the lines following those quoted above for the slightest demonstration capable of supporting that assertion. The cinematographic work of Dali and Buñuel (too quickly interrupted), to mention only that, also contradicts this judgment.

In a recent article published in *Minotaure*, I developed the ideas that lead me to agree with Mabille's opinion and the so-called "current opinion," of which the least that can be said is that it is not that common as Dali imagines it.

As far as the expression of conscious thought is concerned, it is quite evident that cinema, having images, movement and language, very largely outweighs any visual or literary art. If the use it makes of this virtually unlimited vocabulary is disappointing, it is because of its commercial

infrastructure. If the thoughts it expresses are most often mediocre, it cannot be denied that it perfectly reflects the mental state of those who think them. The flexibility and subtlety of the medium are in no way at issue. Nothing, except the absence of means, would prevent the greatest thinkers from expressing themselves through film, in particular through the documentary. Still they would have to accept to learn the technique of film, as writers learn syntax and painters learn painting.



Georges Méliès, *Baron Munchausen's Dream* (1911)

To tell the truth, with a few rare exceptions, cinema, this double-edged sword, is most often an involuntary mode of expression. While all the other arts tolerate retouching by the artist, cinema, precisely because of its wealth of means, makes it very difficult for a single man to have total control of its images, gestures and movements. A film comes out of the head of a man and from the hands of his collaborators like a ship out of the storm, somehow carrying not only what we wanted to say, but also some other things that we did not want to say. To give a simple example: the ineptitude of a painter

may not be visible on the canvas, while the ineptitude of a film author is inevitably detectable. But there is more: the film almost always constitutes a revelation of the unconscious of its author, and often of its actors. The newsreels themselves bring us each week such testimonies on the great histrions of this world.

These remarks were indispensable before tackling the problem of the cinematographic representation of the dream.



Georges Méliès, *Baron Munchausen's Dream* (1911)

If it is indeed possible to note upon waking up the narrative description of a dream or to achieve the automatic transcription of thought, it is no more possible to fix the dream directly on film as it is to paint it automatically.

It is therefore through the recollection surfacing in conscious thought that it will be possible to voluntarily objectify the dream. The artist's work, starting from there, is no different from that which consists in reconstructing external reality as faithfully as possible. For the film's author, reality, too, is not entirely copied from nature. In both cases, it is a question of staging memories.

This reconstruction is conditioned by the gifts of observation, the lucidity of vision and the memory of the artist. There are very few films in which the dream has been represented satisfactorily. However, since the very birth of cinema, the expression of dreams has tempted most seekers.

The first of them, Georges Méliès, appealed to the dream several times to justify the marvelous, notably in *Les Hallucinations du baron de Münchhausen* [*Baron Munchausen's Dream*].

But Méliès seems to have had only a very conventional knowledge of the dream. Besides, in his films there is no appreciable difference between what is given for a dream and what is supposed to be real or lived. Both share the esthetic of the "Grévin Museum of Illusions," the charm of which I am not insensitive to, but which cannot provide us with any insight regarding dreams. What Méliès did was to develop special effects techniques, which subsequently will become widely used.

The virtuosity of the staging, the density of the action are incomparable, ingenuity mingles with naive freshness, but always, the trick of the conjurer masks the mental representation.

Moreover, during all the years preceding World War I, the cinema was so absolutely incapable of realism, that any voluntary representation of the dream proved impossible. It is indeed necessary to have an instrument as realistic, as concrete as possible to be able to voluntarily copy memories of dreams.

On the other hand, the film, even at this time—especially at this time—very often comes to an involuntary simulation of the dream. Very few people seem to have so far discriminated against what is thus obtained by chance from what is consciously sought.

The very specific conditions which govern cinematographic representation are responsible for this. The darkness in the movie theater is equivalent for the retina to the occlusion of the eyelids and for the thought to the night of the unconscious—the crowd that surrounds and isolates you, the deliciously silly music, the stiffness of the neck necessary for the orientation of the eyes provoke a state very close to half-sleep—on the wall white letters are inscribed on a black background, whose hypnagogic character is manifest. At the time of the silent film, due to operator distraction, these texts appear sometimes backwards, which also contributes to the memory of eidetic images.

Finally, when the dazzling window-like screen lights up, the very technique of the film evokes dreams more than the waking state. The images appear and disappear fading to black, they are linked to one another, the vision opens and closes in the black iris, the secrets appear through a keyhole, not a real keyhole, but an idea of this keyhole, a mental representation of a keyhole.

The extraordinarily concrete, documentary, sensory appearance of the objects presented, and the never-lived circumstances in which they are submitted to the eye contradict each other enough to make the impression of the dream come true for the viewer. In addition, the temporal succession of the screen images is absolutely analogous to the order that can operate in the mind, thought or dream. Neither the chronological order, nor the

choice of the set has been made, no comings and goings inside this setting can be modified; on the contrary, the film, like the dream, like the thought, chooses gestures, reduces or magnifies them, eliminates others, goes over several centuries in a few seconds, accelerates, slows down, stops, or turns back. It is impossible to imagine a more faithful mirror of mental representation.

This is why, despite the will of most film authors, cinema is the least

realistic art, although the elements of representation at its disposal are more realistic. This is why cinema gave us dreams without knowing it.

However, as the language of cinema improves, the habituation to its conventions allows the public a mental transposition that brings the fiction of the screen back into reality.

It is then that the attempts at rendering dreams regain their value. As far as my historical memories allow me (I was eight in 1914), it is especially in American comic films of the World War I period that the dream is again systematically offered to us.

To tell the truth, most of these admirable films revel with such joy in the illogical and the absurd, that they are strictly speaking dreams from start to finish. But beyond a certain degree of absurdity, the unsophisticated public refused to accept any nonsense. That is why the authors sometimes conceded to the current opinion by offering the dream as an excuse for the marvelous, thus introducing, according to a well-known process, the dream within a dream.

Chaplin more specifically used the dream in *Sunnyside*, *The Kid*, *The Gold Rush*, and *Modern Times*.

Buster Keaton in *Sherlock Jr.*, dreamed of bursting through a cinema screen. Thus he confronted, on the one hand, the slow passage of his double from the waking reality to the reality of dream, and on the other hand, the cinematographic convention of shot changes. This unfortunately forgotten film was, without exaggeration, "pure genius."

All of Picratt and Zigoto's films, whether or not they explicitly refer to dreams, can be considered typically oneiric.



Jean Renoir, *The Girl of the Water* (1921)



Jean Renoir, *The Girl of the Water* (1921)



Benjamin Christensen, *The Witches* (1922)

Around the same time, Douglas Fairbanks, in a substantially parallel spirit, realized the dream of the film *When the Clouds Roll By*.

*Le Vieux Manoir* [*The Blizzard*] by the Swedish director Mauritz Stiller, *La Fille de l'eau* [*The Whirlpool of Fate* or *The Girl of the Water*] by Jean Renoir have some rather disturbing dream sequences.

The Swedish school also gave us *Häxan* [*The Witches*], with magnificent dream images. The German school, in search of the "Unheimliche," uses the dream in many films. *Das Wachsfingernkabinett* [*Waxworks*] by Paul Leni is one of the more accomplished German films.



The film *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* [*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*], a tale of a madman, is very close to a dream despite the artifice of the sets; *Nosferatu* is not presented as a dream, but could very well be one.

In *When the Clouds Roll By*, the last image of the hearse followed by a hopping gnome leaves a memory identical to that of a dream.

Beside the comic films, very few American productions contain manifest dreams. Nevertheless, certain scenes recall the oneiric. In *Nuit de folie* [*Walking Back*], a car fight. In *The Man and the Moment*, a nightclub inside an aquarium.

Roy del Ruth's film *Wolf's Clothing*, with the exception of a few images at the beginning and at the end, is just a dream, one of the most strangely disturbing dreams ever seen.

The dream of *Hollywood* by James Cruze is remarkable. On the other hand, the following film by the same author, *Jasa*, which claims to represent a dream, is certainly the most failed attempt of its kind. The means are crude, almost the same as the various distortions that in the time of the French avant-garde were supposed to represent dreams.

*Geheimnisse einer Seele* [*Secrets of a Soul*] by the German director Georg Wilhelm Pabst, is a laboriously psycho-analytic film, that contains however beautiful dream images.

A special mention must be made for Harry Langdon, whose dream sequences from *Three's a Crowd* and *Long Pants* are the most overwhelming and bewildering attempts to realize desires in all the history of cinema.

We must then go to *Peter Ibbetson* to find such an understanding of what a dream is — such a passionate transgression, such an unleashing of the darkest powers.

I believe I have reviewed everything that deserves to be retained in the production of cinematographic dreams. The little that I forgot or that I have not seen must be counted on the fingers of one hand.

No doubt it is necessary, in order to explain this rarity, to take into account the illiteracy that is a general rule in dream matters. Very few people are able to remember or recount their dreams, except by subjecting them to incredible rationalizations and unless they embellish them with perfectly conventional distortions and exaggerations. But we must also think with André Breton that “the organizing powers of the mind are hardly a match for the apparently disorganizing powers” and that “The dignity of a man is put to a

fairly severe test by the content of his dreams, so that he does not feel the need to think about them, let alone recount them ...”

However, if we want to be exhaustive, it is important to note that the majority of the films known as “fantastic” or “horror” use the means of the dream and are often real nightmares. It seems, indeed, that, according to

the currents of thought that each year shape the general trends, one time it is the dream that is used as an excuse for the marvelous, some other time it is the fantastic that justifies the dream or replaces it. *The Lost World*, *Treasure of the Sea*, *Mystery of the Wax Museum*, *The Invisible Ray*, *The Invisible Man*, *The Lost City*, *King Kong*, *The Most Dangerous Game*, *Frankenstein*, *The Bride of Frankenstein* are all dreams showing the anxiety that arouse in man the feeling of his smallness within this hostile and mysterious universe, and his desires of grandeur, which are a residue of childhood humiliations. It is particularly worth pointing out the curious symbol of awakening that appears in *King Kong*, the heavy and gigantic door that separates the realm of dreams from that of reality.

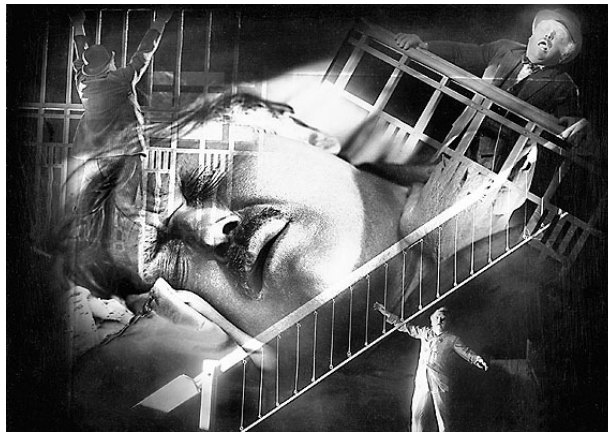
I have so far deliberately left aside the surrealist films of Man Ray and those of Dali and Buñuel. Man Ray's films are closer to poetry or painting, than to the dream.

*Un chien andalou* [*An Andalusian Dog*] is undoubtedly the most penetrating, most lucid cinematic testimony to the dream. However, it also uses obsessive representations that do not seem to come from the imaginative nocturnal game, but from daytime fantasies, such as the rotting donkey, for example. *L'Âge d'or* [*The Golden Age*] doesn't seem to me to be a dream. Here and there, dreamlike themes or day-dreams arise, but the scenario functions on a moral, not a poetic, level. The ethical concerns that violently arise in the film are generally foreign to the dream, at least not in the form of an explicit and subversive claim that is meant here.

In any case, no film seems to me to better contradict Dali, who proved to be, together with Buñuel, one of the men most capable of expressing himself concretely by the means of cinema.

And if the small number of successes in the field of oneiric explorations justifies the implicit restriction from Mabille's text, at least we can already assign to the present and even to the past the hope that it expresses.

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Georg Wilhelm Pabst, *The Secrets of the Soul* (1926)



Paul Leni, *Wax Works* (1924)



Victor Fleming/Theodore Reed, *When the Clouds Roll By* (1919)



Victor Fleming/Theodore Reed, *When the Clouds Roll By* (1919)





Henry Hathaway, *Peter Ibbetson* (1931)



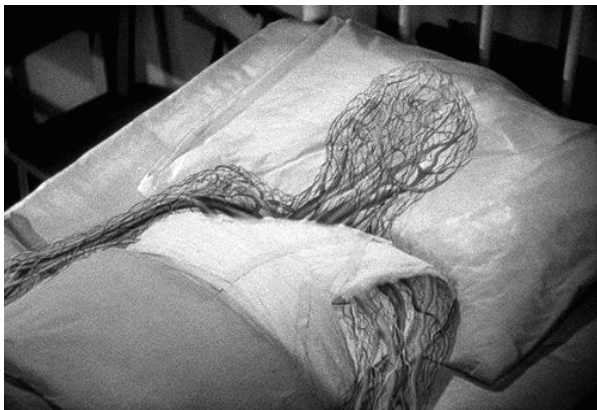
Henry Hathaway, *Peter Ibbetson* (1931)



Michael Curtiz, *The Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933)



Irving Pichel/Ernest B. Schaedsack; *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932)



James Whale, *The Invisible Man* (1933)



Lambert Hillyer, *The Invisible Ray* (1936)

## Un Chien Andalou



"*Un Chien Andalou* came from an encounter between two dreams. When I arrived to spend a few days at Dali's house in Figueras, I told him about a dream I'd had in which a long, tapering cloud sliced the moon in half, like a razor blade slicing through an eye. Dali immediately told me that he'd seen a hand crawling with ants in a dream he'd had the previous night."

Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh* (1982)



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