

Film on Radio: The Case of *Procession to the Private Sector*

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Revised Text of a Lecture given at the 1998 Purbeck Film Festival

“The smooth plain with its mirrors listens to the cliff
Like a basilisk eating flowers.
And the children, lost in the shadows of the catacombs,
Call to the mirrors for help:
‘Strong-bow of salt, cutlass of memory,
Write on my map the name of every river.’”

That is an extract from a surrealist poem called “Salvador Dali” by the poet David Gascoyne. This talk is about poetry and film and radio. It is also about surrealism. In June of this year, Radio 3 broadcast my radio version of David Gascoyne’s Surrealist film scenario, “Procession to the Private Sector”, a work originally written in the 1930’s, long-forgotten and then reworked in the 1980’s but never made as a film – never interpreted in any way – until this year, when I approached the Producer Julian May and suggested we attempt it as radio. It was broadcast in the experimental series, *Between the Ears*.”

What I want to do this evening is to talk about the process, to explore some of the problems and challenges of turning visual images into sound, and to set the work in context, both as to when it was written, and in terms of the criteria we adopted in the making of it. In so doing I need to examine a number of things, including the nature of surrealism itself, so I’m going to illustrate my talk with some film clips and with some audio, including extracts from “Procession to the Private Sector” I should add here that some of these are rather disturbing. But then perhaps the very fact you have come here this evening should lead me to guess that you could be prepared for that!

Let me start by saying something about David Gascoyne, and then talk a little about my relationship with him. Gascoyne was born in 1916 in Harrow, Middlesex. He was educated at Salisbury Cathedral School and the Regent Street Polytechnic, London. His first collection of poetry, *Roman Balcony*, was published when he was sixteen, and in 1933 Cobden-Sanderson brought out his novel, *Opening Day*. Both books are extraordinary works, and the young Gascoyne followed their publication with two more dazzling collections, *Man’s Life is this Meat* (1936) and *Holderlin’s Madness* (1938), which established his reputation as one of the most original poetic voices of the 1930s. Gascoyne was one of the earliest champions of surrealism; in 1935 his famous *Short survey of Surrealism* was published, and the following year, the year his *Man’s Life is This Meat* appeared, he was one of the organisers of the London International Surrealist Exhibition. From this period, and during his time living in France in 1937 to 1939, date his friendships with such as Max Ernst, Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, Pierre Jean Jouve, Picasso and Salvador Dali. As well as becoming internationally celebrated as a poet – especially after the publication of his *Poems 1937-42* with its striking Graham Sutherland images – Gascoyne became widely respected as a translator, notably of Holderlin and of the leading French Surrealists. After the war Gascoyne – in spite of periods of severe mental disturbance, and times of excruciating writer’s block, produced *A Vagrant and Other Poems* in 1950, and in 1956, in response to a commission by the BBC Producer Douglas Cleverdon, he

wrote his great “Radiophonic Poem”, *Night Thoughts*. Today David Gascoyne lives at Northwood, Cowes on the Isle of Wight with his wife Judy.

My own friendship with Gascoyne began eighteen years ago, when I was making a programme about his work. Through those years he has shared much of his memory of his remarkable life with me. But it was only in 1995 that he showed me – in a state of some excitement – the text of his 1936 film scenario, originally called *The Wrong Procession* which had lain in the British Library in a notebook until the Gascoyne scholar, Roger Scott unearthed it together with another short unmade film scenario. Gascoyne reworked the piece as a piece of prose in the 1980s, and it was published in a limited edition by a specialist American publisher under the title *Procession to the Private Sector*. David let me borrow his only copy of this book, and I too became excited. I was not in a position to make it as a film, but I saw an opportunity of developing the images in sound: after all, what could be more surreal than a film you can’t see! (Or rather CAN see through the power of the imagination – remember the old cliché about “the pictures being better on radio”?!) And didn’t radio embrace surrealism anyway in the writing of Spike Milligan for *The Goon Show*?

I shall come on to the process of making the piece later, but let me now explore something of its context within the Surrealist movement. My OED defines surrealism as “A form of art in which an attempt is made to represent and interpret the phenomena of dreams and similar experiences.”

Gascoyne’s interest in cinema was one shared by a large number of Surrealists in the 1930s and before. There was a great deal of interest in some of the early silent classics, notably such as *Nosferatu* (1922). Man Ray made *Return to Reason* in 1923, and Dulac *The Seashell and the Clergyman* in 1927; Cocteau’s *The Blood of a Poet* had appeared in 1930, the same year as the second of Louis Bunuel’s famous Surrealist masterpieces, *L’Age d’Or*. Philip Drummond is right when he says that Surrealist cinema draws its inspiration less from “the dominant conventions of the Hollywood text than from the free-form impetus of other expressive media, most notably poetry and painting in the era of high modernism.” Radio has always got on well with poetry, largely because of the direct way in which both media talk to the imagination through image. That was another encouragement for my project. There is also something formal about screen directions that interests me. But I’ll come on to that later. What was impetus for Gascoyne to write his scenario. Well, undoubtedly it was his association with Dali. In the summer of 1935, David Gascoyne arrived in Paris to research his “Short Survey”. Recommended to Dali by Paul Eluard, he began translating Dali’s essay, *The Conquest of the Irrational*, and worked on the text each morning for a week at Dali’s studio. During this time he talked at length with Dali. Andre Breton had just returned from Spain where he had been outraged to find that the censorship laws were stricter than in France, and he had not been allowed to give a public showing of *L’Age d’Or*. Because Dali had collaborated on this film with Bunuel, it was only natural that film should be a major topic of conversation. It is therefore hardly a coincidence that the “Procession” Scenario dates from the following year, 1936, also the year of the London Surrealist Exhibition which Gascoyne co-organised. It was this event which included possibly the most famous incident in Surrealist history, that of Dali giving a lecture in a deep-sea diver’s suit.

It is clear to me that Dali’s influence on Gascoyne led the poet to write his film scenarios. I say that in the plural, because also in the notebooks was found as recently as 1995 another, shorter scenario from the same time, *History of the Womb* directly based on Dali’s 1934 painting, *The Weaning of Furniture-Nutrition* (or *Furniture Food*). In this scenario, occurs the line, spoken by a small boy to an elderly woman: “I

want to stand on your eyelids.” And as soon as one mentions eyes in any context associated with surrealism, one perhaps immediately finds oneself thinking of one of the most significant and powerful images of all, the eye-lacerating scene at the start of the most famous surrealist film of all, the Bunuel/Dali collaboration of 1929, *Un Chien Andalou*.

Even though we may understand the role of skilful editing and the Kuleshov effect, (after Lev Kuleshov, the Soviet filmmaker who in the 1920s experimented with cutting and shooting in such a way that spatial relations were changed by eliminating establishing shots,) this scene still has the power to shock. And also, in the Freudian world of the Surrealists, (again to quote Philip Drummond’s excellent introduction to the Faber edition of the text of “Chien”,) lacerated eyes occur all over the place in surrealist work, and it’s probably no coincidence either that one of Bunuel’s favourite films was *The Battleship Potemkin*, which contains the image of a woman’s eye savaged by a cossack sabre. The idea of the sharp and the soft and fluidly yielding is one in which the knife and the eye seem to have been particularly significant for the surrealists. Max Ernst, in the print for the cover of Paul Eluard’s 1922 book, *Repetitions* shows an eye-ball with two hands passing a cord or flexible wire through it with a sort of Dental Flossing action. Gascoyne himself, in his surrealist poem, “Direct Response” writes:

“Sensitive needle at the extremity of breathing
What can you etch upon the eyes’ quick web.”

And elsewhere his poem “Purified Disgust” he gives us images of rotting flesh –

“How could we touch that carrion?
A sudden spasm saves us
A pure disgust illumines us...”

Dali and film are also notably linked through the dream sequence in Hitchcock’s 1945 movie *Spellbound*. Hitchcock approached Dali because of the hallucinogenic clarity in the painter’s work. Hitchcock wanted the dream scene, but he also wanted to get away from the cliché that in film Dreams were usually shown as being misty and soft-focussed. He wanted vivid sharply defined images. As Ian Gibson says in his biography of Dali, “If Hitchcock could have had his way, he would have shot the dream sequences in bright sunshine, not in the studio, thus forcing the cameraman to stop down and get ‘a very hard image’. In the event, Dali’s nightmare appears in a very watered-down version. Not at all what he or Hitchcock wanted, and the reason of course was cost. Dali’s scenario for the ballroom sequence asks for fifteen ‘of the heaviest and most lavishly sculpted pianos’ possible’ hanging from the ceiling to create an impression of great weight and terror. It was not to be. As he later wrote:

“I went to the Selznick studios to film the scene with the pianos. And I was stupefied at seeing neither the pianos nor the cut silhouettes which must represent the dancers. But right then someone pointed out to me some tiny pianos in miniature hanging from the ceiling and about 40 live dwarfs who according to the experts would give perfectly the effect of perspective I desired. I thought I was dreaming.” Hitchcock didn’t like it either, and the scene was cut.

Surrealist images have persisted in films made under other banners. Some of the French New Wave work of such as Goddard seems to me to carry the flag, (I’m thinking of *Weekend* at the moment.)

Going back to the sordid business of money and film-making, if cost was a factor in *Spellbound*, it becomes somewhat less of a factor when one is filming on radio! Which brings me to the interpretation of surrealism within my radio performing version of the Gascoyne scenario. The **Between the Ears** programme slot is a standard 45 minutes, and I knew very soon in the adaptation process that the space allotted would fit my idea like a glove, and so it did.

Right away I had felt the idea of giving the Camera a voice was the obvious solution. And I had heard from the very start the voice of Simon Callow in that role. It has the clipped, precise almost coward-like quality which seemed to me to fit perfectly into the period of the scenario. (It also helped very much that he like me is a friend and strong admirer of David Gascoyne's work!)

This technique, of using the cool precision of camera or stage direction as the narrative engine has of course been done before. When Radio 3 broadcast Pinter's *Proust Screenplay* a couple of years ago, this idea worked extremely well. And the network's versions of some of Samuel Beckett's plays, in particular *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days* employ the idea of simply reading the stage directions AS A SORT OF omniscient observer chillingly well, and this kind of close-mic'd 'in-your-ear' type of presentation reminds me also of Jarman's *Blue*

So that was definitely what I wanted. I felt that a camera records all action faithfully – but it never gets involved; pain, joy, violence, sex whatever – the camera watches it all. And I wanted the sense of the camera watching ...to create an eerie sense of a voyeuristic partnership between the camera and the listener. Sometimes that raised some uncomfortable issues. After all, when a camera shows us say a sex scene, we watch what we are given. But when a voice TELLS you what it is seeing, the effect becomes strangely voyeuristic, like looking through a key-hole.

In terms of the music used in the piece, Gascoyne's original scenario very specifically proposed works by composers such as Varese and Schoenberg. However when I spoke to David about this, he told me he had since changed his mind, and that I was to use what I felt to be appropriate. In the end, the Producer Julian May and me approached the composer John Surman, who fell upon the project with marvellous enthusiasm, and produced an electro-acoustic score that could be by turns haunting, terrifying and funny – all the things I think Surrealism is about.

And during the time I was making my adaptation Roger Scott approached me with the exciting news that he had just discovered an unknown Gascoyne poem in the British library notebooks, which contained specific instructions linking it to a certain moment in the scenario, so we were able to use it, with David himself reading it.

The use of a cast of actors playing out aspects of the scenario was a difficult thing to achieve, and worked I think only spasmodically. I played you the 'sex and eggs' sequence just now. We simulated the image of eggs dropping from the ceiling quite simply – by dropping eggs from the ceiling! The sound is ambiguous. Some sounds are. So I felt we needed the Camera to explain the sounds. Sometimes though this technique gets in the way, and makes the piece over-literal. Then there were issues of Point-of-View shots. We were constantly asking ourselves during the process of making the programme (a process that took just five days...five VERY LONG days I should add!) "where is the listener now? Are they (for instance) with the Camera, or are they with the subject the Camera is seeing? It became quite mind-boggling at times, and I feel we got it wrong

sometimes.

The policeman on the bridge, the sudden leap into the reflective voice after the old man and the young man have their confrontation. It's when a counterpoint is set up by narrative, music and sound that I think we came nearest to some sort of success.

There are also perhaps problems with the text itself in places. What starts as a strange, random set of dream-like images, seems to end up almost as a pastiche of a cliched Hollywood ending 'moving off into the sunset' (perhaps redeemed by the insertion at Gascoyne's desire, of philosophical texts. Enitharmon press have now published his *Selected Prose*, which makes that text available to a British audience for the first time ever. This book is contained within this study pack. The work was an attempt perhaps for me, rather than a full-blown achievement. It received a mixed but mostly favourable critical reception in the press. The Express radio Critic Ken Garner felt it should get a Sony Award, others were less sure. It WAS an experiment – we created something that at times had a chaos about it, but ultimately hopefully conveyed the mood of unease of the time it was conceived. And within the forty five minutes it also has I hope some symmetry finally I wanted the programme to end as it began. I wanted my 'film' to come out of silence and return to it, just as every film grows out of and returns to, darkness.