

Still Surviving: The state of the surreal in contemporary cinema

Surrealism is all around us, especially in the moving image, yet rarely if ever acknowledged. There has never been a serious and sustained Surrealist film movement, although there are important Surrealist films which themselves changed the course of cinema history.

The recent death of Ken Russell occasions a consideration of the continued presence of surrealism in cinema, which has been more of eruption into cinema than a tendency of its own. Russell was one of the few English-language film makers who continued to explore surrealist ideas and approaches regardless of fashion. Russell's was a peculiarly British kind of surrealism, leaning toward the Gothic and absurdist side of things and rejecting of any formal theoretical approach to Surrealism, but much of his work was surrealist nonetheless. Most notably his remarkable music biopics, where he uses Surrealism to smash the sacred cows of the classical artists of the canon, who work we are meant to revere. He shows them as artists, in all their neurotic frenzy, from the sexual excesses of *The Music Lovers* to the Nazi imaginings of Richard Strauss in *Dance of the Seven Veils* – a film that was banned upon its release. Russell did not let facts get in the way of a good story and a shocking suggestive image. Other films that owed a debt to Surrealism delved into subjective experience (*Altered States*) and religious guilt and obsession (*Crimes of Passion*). Even in *The Devils*, which a pretty straightforwardly Realist work though heavily stylised, the expressions of sexual desire reminisce those portrayed by Simone Mareuil and Pierre Batcheff in *Un Chien Andalou*.

Though his photographic work is firmly in the surrealist vein, Russell never specifically called himself a surrealist. However, in his use of excessive and juxtaposed imagery conjuring up unexpected (repressed) associations, and his gleeful desire to shock and outrage, he shares a bond with the early surrealists - who not doubt influenced him. In common with many of the French, Belgian, Czech and Latin surrealists, he was Catholic; and his work often explored Catholicism as both a source of neuroses and a source of sur-real unconscious exploration. One of Russell's final public acts was to briefly join the Big Brother house; a place of such grotesquerie that one can only describe as a Surreal act.

Despite the loss of Russell, Surrealism in film - as opposed to visual art – is still a vital force, though there are not so many “Surrealist” films per se, as there are films that refer to, use, or otherwise take on aspects of Surrealism. This happens in mainstream cinema usually on the most vulgar level, or through the use of dream sequences or flashbacks. And of course, wearily, in music videos and advertisement, which appropriate surrealist imagery without any of its powerful purpose: to make us see the world differently.

However, despite starting as music video director, Michel Gondry's explorations of dreams (*The Science of Sleep* 2006) and memories (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* 2004) were effective and well received, and Gondry together with Spike Jonze (*Being John Malkovich*, 1999) and Charlie Kaufman (*Synedoché New York*, 2008) could earn the epithet “Surrealist”. Gondry forthcoming project is an adaptation of the Boris Vian novel *L'Écume Des Jours*. While Vian was not exactly a Surrealist, there are so many elements of Surrealism in his work he can arguably be considered a kind of Second Wave literary Surrealist.

What Gondry, Kaufman and Jonze's films have in common is the Surrealist exploration of the subjective experience. Guy Maddin's body of work, best represented by his quasi-documentary *My*

Winnipeg, also fits into this category.

Although in most films of any genre and type, the main stories are told from an omniscient point of view not a subjective one, subjective experience of mental states appears occasionally in cinema as the total subject of the film, either caused by psychological disturbance (e.g. *The Science of Sleep*) or fragmented memory (*My Winnipeg*) or use of psychoactive drugs (*Altered States*, *Fantasia*). This latter, *Fantasia* by Cosmotropia de Xam (2011), largely dispenses with story in order to present a real-time (45 min) evocation of an LSD trip. The film fuses the hippy-trippy extravaganza style of Kenneth Anger with the darker, more spare approach of David Lynch. Made entirely with digital technology, and deeply hypnotic, the film draws in and transfers an overwhelming sense of being intoxicated through the projection into the viewer. Although it is often questioned (and vociferously denied) whether intoxication has its place in Surrealist practice, it must be acknowledged that experimentation with psychoactive substances (as well as drink) have frequently played a part in the creative process for many artists and film makers. Certainly Rimbaud asserted that poetry only could come out of the irrational: that a "dérèglement de tous les sens" was needed. In any case *Fantasia* is one of the most accurate and most mind-bending explorations of the subjective hallucinogenic state that has ever been presented as cinema.

More successful Surrealist films that go far beyond exploration of subjective experience emerged in 2011, with the long awaited Jan Svankmajer animation *Surviving Life* as the most significant. Svankmajer might be the only film-maker who has consistently worked as a Surrealist and more importantly *developed* surrealist cinema. Svankmajer's Surrealism is aware that the personal and political are permanently interlinked, and so as his films explode the myths and shibboleths of personal life, they also explode our reliance on them to create our political constructs. Take *Little Otik* – Svankmajer's deconstruction of the "given" of the goodness of maternal love is played out to the bitter end as the quest for a happy family leads to the nurturing of a demonic tree-trunk as a baby, who goes on to devour kith and kin. Thus the "family values" were encouraged to espouse, promote and run our societies by, can be dangerous, and need to be examined, not blindly believed in. Svankmajer combines horror with humour: the wooden Otik is surreal and horrible but equally horrible and more surreal is the mother's caring nurture of the monster.

Surviving Life addresses both "mother love" and male-female relations, in a tale that is not as grotesque as *Otik* (which is based on a folk tale.) Here Svankmajer has fun with both fathers of psychoanalysis, Freud and Jung – thinkers which have influenced both Surrealism and our general cultural understanding of the mind. In dispensing with grotesqueries, Svankmajer *Surviving Life* does something different, something rarely seen in Surrealist film until now: he invites us into deep human emotional compassion. So, all of the psychological self examination, the Surrealist encounter with past and present, with half remembered images and shapes, with associations, juxtapositions and dreams – all actually have a point: human reconciliation. *Surviving Life* is one of the most moving films recently made, yet is never manipulative, simplistic or easy. This marks an important development for Surrealism, it could be said to be the coming-of-age of surrealist film.

The other great Surrealist cinema moment in 2011 was a literary adaptation, *Les Chants de Maldoror*; no less. Produced by Anglo-German art collectives, *Maldoror* was actually made over ten years ago, but has been largely hidden since then. It resurfaced at an underground cinema in South London in spring, and again at the Underground Film Festival in winter, presented by one of the film's originators, Duncan Reekie (of Exploding Cinema renown).

Shot on colour super-8 (and transferred to 16mm) *Maldoror* is really cinema: it is coherent, cohesive and sustained, while at the same time being wildly inventive, creative, bizarre and deeply philosophical. This cohesion totally belies the film's mode of creation: different film makers or groups took on the job of filming different chapters of the book. However it is knitted together by a

shared aesthetic of very strong imagery, as befits the book, and a consistency of vision. The collective process is itself interesting; not quite *cadavre exquis*, but closer than anyone has ever got in film-making. Translation through images in this case works better than translations of pure prose: the deliciously bitter-sharp flavour of the book comes through profoundly.

There are plans for a full DVD release of Maldoror - at long last. *Maldoror* reminds us of the startling creativity, strength and power of the artistic underground.

Gillian McIver

originally published in *The Overflowing Milkmaid with Curved Feet*
a publication of the London Surrealist Group 2012