



Soon, Or Never

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This video essay seeks to explore the confluence of theatrical presence in *Hour of the Wolf* and *Mulholland Drive* in a poetic mode derived from an audio 'remix.' It becomes a videographic deformation of the binary archive sources in which time appears in suspension.





Creator's Statement

Hour of the Wolf (dir. Ingmar Bergman, 1968) and *Mulholland Drive* (dir. David Lynch, 2001) strip their protagonists of identity in critique of a creative crisis. Johan Borgs' (Max von Sydow) insidious repressions overwhelm him, and Betty Elms' (Naomi Watts) desire for fame sublimates her. Both characters eventually drown in a phantasmagoria of fragmenting personality and become trapped in fugues of *becoming*.

Provoked by remixing music from the two films, this video essay seeks to interrogate the sequences in a poetic mode and symbolic style. It becomes a videographic deformation of the binary sources. The grain of refilmed video announces a stress test that invites us to interrogate the materiality of the subject and act as an equivalent of the film-editing anagrams of Peter Tscherkassky and Martin Arnold. Tscherkassky's deformations of sources turn them into flickering syntagms; Oliver Dickens (2021) calls it a "filmic language that engages psychoanalysis and semiotics whilst exploring the physicality of the medium and its potential to overwhelm both visually and sonically." Martin Arnold loops his source material into hammering timeline manipulations that suffuse it with a sense of anachrony: "Using repetition of these 'single cells' and a new rhythm—a kind of cloning procedure—Arnold then creates an inflated, monstrous doppelgänger of the original cuts lasting many minutes" (Schaefer 1998).

Adapting these approaches, my audiovisual essay "Soon, Or Never" aims to deliver a pronounced feeling of suspension and fugue as stuttering micro-loops and durational drones in the audio remix transform time-slipped picture, finding their visual counterparts in slow motion, superimposition and image decay.

The live “performance” in remix using a Kaos Pad live looper mirrors the layers of performance explored in the chosen clips, an indication of original presence that the recording of sound and image ultimately renders as an illusion. The viewer can negotiate the nexus of experimental film poem and video essay by accepting the emotional and atmospheric exploration of theatrical spaces in the material and by recognising the connections delivered by audio-visual repetition and juxtaposition.

Theatre stages induce mania in both *Hour of the Wolf* and *Mulholland Drive*, becoming triggering portals that bring about psychological change, a *passage à l’acte*. This cinema is haunted by the theatre stage, which “makes explicit the performativity of all identity, including gender” (Aronofsky Weltman 2007: 21), and the expectations of what theatre *is*, taken from the Victorian age—“the red curtain, the limelight, the solid three-dimensional set, the darkened hushed atmosphere” (Palmer and Poore 2016: 4). Bergman’s puppet theatre is an antecedent to Lynch’s rarefied stages; both filmmakers deal in phantasmagoria, which, as Terry Castle suggests, is “the spectralization or ‘ghostifying’ of mental space” (1988: 29). The phantasmagoric experience of these sequences is concentrated in this video essay. Lynch’s playful critique of the technology of recording and the effects of the *acousmètre*, or the uncanny effects of sound from elsewhere, is almost reversed here to phantasmagorical effect: the ghost trumpet trick is the opposite of “de-acoustmatization” (Chion 1990: 130)—the trick “de-visualises” the sound: in Club Silencio we *think* we know where the sound is coming from, but it is an illusion.

“Soon, Or Never” came about when DoP James MacDonald and myself made a film for The Tyne Theatre by combining images of the stage with sound derived from film soundtracks from its time as a cinema (1919–1974). In experimenting with the sound design, I used the Puppet Theatre scene from *Hour of the Wolf* to make a soundscape (by playing the soundtrack live through a Kaos Pad). “O Ew’ge Nacht” from *The Magic Flute* suffuses the scene, turning Johan Borg into a lost Tamino. Angelo Badalamenti’s narcotic slow jazz from the Silencio scene in *Mulholland Drive* combines in the remix to remind us of the trick of prerecorded sound as an illusion or ghost echo: “it’s ALL recorded.” Repeating/looping the soundtracks, time stretching and adding reverb explodes and reforms them, fixating on key elements and concentrating the effects.

Both sequences enter into the rarefied ‘temenos’ of live performance as stages within stages. In *Hour of the Wolf*, Lindhorst (Georg Rydeberg) is the grinning puppet master who initiates the invocation of sublimation. Borg endures the artist’s dilemma; his art is at the whim of patrons who threaten his sense of self. As Lindhorst appears above the box, his face made grotesque by lighting and the shadows of the stage flies, his face recalls the supercilious grimace of Lynch’s many magicians such as *Lost Highway*’s (dir.

David Lynch, 1996) *Mystery Man* (Robert Blake) and Club Silencio's MC (Geno Silva). These are tricksters that set into motion terrible ruptures in identity, if not for their own entertainment, then for ours. Enraptured faces, especially the eyes of Alma Borg (Liv Ullmann) fill the screen *instead of* the performance itself. Lindhorst's analysis of the opera's scene emphasises the endless longing and the refrain that apotheosis will come "soon, or never": an aching binary that denies fulfilment.

The music remix seeks to elongate the tonal feeling and repeat loops in stasis ("Soon, soon, soon") echoing the anagrammatic deformations of Martin Arnold and reiterating key music phrases, adding to the sense of suspension of time, of "bated breath." In keeping with the audio effects, the two film sources find themselves draped over each other in reframed superimpositions drawing attention to the general similarities one would expect from scenes of stages being watched; silent faces hypnotised by spaces made ethereal through lighting and framing ... stage machinery, light and curtains. Red lips rouge Johan Borg's own in a promise of his potential transformation and dissolution, and the mouthing of "*Llorando (Crying)*" turns into lip-syncing of "Pamina." All surfaces become insubstantial through superimposition.

"Soon, Or Never" uses over-exposure to make the Silencio microphone bloom out of focus and deform to reveal these clips are re-filmed from screens. In doing so, the camera re-frames to make these associations, and follows action by closing in on images like Alma's eyes. The live reframing literally mimics the movement of the audience's own eyes or rather *puppeteers* their very gaze, its aim to concentrate of effect.

"Soon, Or Never" seeks to deform the source material (audio and visual) to take advantage of time and textural manipulations to emphasis the sublimated identity tropes drenched in a sense of presence in live performance. Through the live remix and camera framing movements, it emphasises the suspension of time and heightens the atmosphere of performers trapped in the perpetual presence of the phantasmagoria.

References

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Film Sources

Hour of the Wolf (1968) dir. Ingmar Bergman

Mulholland Drive (2001) dir. David Lynch

Biography

Robert Jefferson is Programme leader of Film and TV Production at Northumbria University. He began his career as an animator with work in traditional cut-out style that sought to evoke the atmosphere of the puppet theatre, which screened at festivals including Annecy, Edinburgh and Ottawa. Experimental sound-based films were screened at a Sonic Arts Expo, and he retold Northumbrian folklore in *The Dark Lantern* for ITV 1. Most recently he has created music scores for short films and developed content for transmedia. He is currently working on a film for Tyne Theatre.

Reviewed by Cormac Donnelly, Liverpool John Moores University

In "Soon, or Never," Jefferson brings together Bergman's *Hour of the Wolf* (1968) and Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), binding them in a looping fold of re-filmed screens and repeated sounds. In his accompanying statement, Jefferson invites the viewer/auditor to 'negotiate' the work as videographic, as poetic, and as experimental, and as a viewing and listening experience; it is possible (particularly on repeated viewings) to cycle through these modes of engagement, at once feeling immersed in the 'liveness' of the looping soundtrack whilst subsequently appreciating the careful edit, which places us spectators (participants?) in these theatrical moments of change.

The looping soundtrack, which partners so well with the refilmed video textures, often feels fugitive here, even as it seeks to capture us in these moments. It feels appropriately 'conjured' into being through the use of a Kaos Pad looper and is eerily reminiscent of Hollis Frampton's experimental film *Critical Mass* (1971) as a listening

experience. In both cases it is possible to appreciate the transition between elements, where repetition extrapolates each moment to a point of appreciation without necessarily restricting the momentum of the piece. Transition and change are evident here, and the work perhaps holds us on the precipice of these, as Jefferson suggests, “trapped in fugues of becoming.”

The deformation of the soundtrack is almost so complete as to render it a new form, divested from its origin, while the refilmed elements retain an important link with the source films. This visual deformation reveals the phantasmagoric elements, something that might have been achieved in the editing software but would have lacked the textural impact it has here for us as viewers, just as it might also have mitigated the poetic impact this embodied form of making has had on the finished video essay.

Reviewed by Daniel Humphrey, Texas A&M University

Critics have remarked on the obvious connections between Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966) and David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001). As obvious as it might appear in retrospect, however, Robert Jefferson may be the first to note the strong parallels between *Mulholland Drive* and Bergman’s follow up to *Persona*, *Hour of the Wolf* (1968). In juxtaposing two scenes, one from each film in a manner closer to the experimental cinema of Peter Tscherkassky than to the traditional videographic essay, Jefferson prompts the viewer to see their common function while also offering something more original and profound than a standard comparison/contrast exercise or an even more complex dialectical engagement might expose.

The scenes are, arguably, the most memorable in each of the two films: one offers *Hour of the Wolf*’s puppet theatre performance, in which a curator at an aristocratic family’s estate recreates a haunted and haunting scene from *The Magic Flute* with recorded Mozart and on a stage smaller than the average television monitor. In it, a tiny human materializes before our eyes where we expected a small puppet appear. Sounds humorous? It is actually deeply unsettling. The Club Silencio scene in *Mulholland Drive* features Lynch’s detective heroines attending a late-night performance of such impact that the film jumps to a different reality. Rebekah Del Rio sings Roy Orbison’s “Crying,” before dying, but what turns out to be a pre-recorded vocal performance (“No hay banda! It’s all a tape!”) continues to echo throughout the cavernous theatre oblivious to the loss of life we have just witnessed. Neither Bergman’s nor Lynch’s scene seems closely related to the core themes of the film that contain it, whatever one may finally decide they those themes are, but each is so powerful that they seem to hold a central truth their creators want to impart.

In his abstract, Jefferson correctly notes that “time appears in suspension” in the “binary archive sources” he has appropriated. His stated goal, to explore the “confluence of theatrical presence” in the scenes he has intertwined, is both (seemingly) misleading and a thought-provoking, finally illuminating clue for us to ponder. Each scene’s *presence* is, of course, unmasked as an *illusion*. In *Hour of the Wolf*, we see a human actor (fun fact: he is played by 50s Swedish heartthrob Folke Sundquist) dwarfed by what, only moments before, appeared to be a small, flimsy puppet theatre, one where, in reality, only a tiny marionette could be placed. In *Mulholland Drive*, we hear a passionate performance by “la Llorona de Los Angeles” (the great Rebekah Del Rio) only to learn with a start that it, too, is essentially an illusion. The absent presence that art gestures toward and attempts to embody comes up once again as only smoke and mirrors, and we are left with the realization that what moves us more profoundly than anything, art at its most sublime, actually is not there. Bergman and Lynch reveal the profundity we discern in the presence of art to be only a phantom. And Robert Jefferson, giving special attention to the diegetic spectators captured by Bergman’s and Lynch’s cameras in his essay, shows us that they, and by implication we, are also ghosts.

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