

# Action and Reaction

Video interview, Friday 17 April 1998, Institut Français, London

**Q:** *How did you first become interested in sound?*

**DL:** I got into it through painting. I was in Philadelphia at the Pennsylvania Academy for the Fine Arts. And I was just a painter, and I was happy painting. And then I was working on a painting and it was a figure in a garden. It was pretty much all black and this figure was emerging out of darkness. And there was some little bit of green, you know, coming out. I heard a wind and I saw the figure move. And I thought that I wanted to have some movement, some sound in the painting. I wanted to hear that wind over the figure.

**Q:** *Do you have a particular method, or aesthetic, that you use when putting sound with the image?*

**DL:** Sometimes a picture, well, all the time, a picture gives you an idea of what sound should go with it. So that's really the place to start. And then, once you start, its action and reaction and you start seeing the picture change, because of the sounds you put with it. It's a magical thing. I like sounds that are anywhere from specific sound effects to abstract sounds that are really are like music, or they can blend into music. And all these things have to be a certain way; they have to *feel* a certain way, a correct way, and you work until you get that feeling.

When you're working with sound, you begin to realise the more you pare the sound down to what you want, what you don't want becomes more apparent. And

every scene, every shot is talking to you, and you have to act and react until you get in that mood. It's not that there's just one correct sound, there may be a hundred out of a trillion. But you have to open yourself up to, you know, *feeling*. You have to ask yourself if it's exactly what you want and if it's working in the scene. That's a process that you really can't talk about, it's just a feeling inside yourself.

Through experimentation you can very rapidly find a lot of things that don't work. So that points you in this direction, and you go there for a while, and find that's not working. So you go in another direction and see if that works. And by this experimentation you suddenly zero in on something that's now really talking to you. And that opens up a certain avenue and you go down there. More and more you start understanding what's working and what's not working. You begin to see the magic of it in the scene. And it's a beautiful thing.

But I like accidents, too. So you create situations where you can have sound collisions, places where sounds come together unexpectedly, and see what happens. Ninety-nine percent of it could be, you know, baloney, but you might come across one magical thing that leads you into another direction, and that might be the thing you're looking for. Sometimes when you're in doubt or you don't have an idea, creating accidents can break through to some place where you want to be.

**Q:** *Are there particular sounds in your films which you like to listen to, where you can appreciate the sound for itself?*

**DL:** I'll tell you one that thrills my soul. It's in the *Twin Peaks* movie, *Fire Walk With Me*. David Bowie comes in a room and he starts talking about Judy, and things get a little bit crazy and it gets a bunch of static and jumps into a place where this character played by Mike Anderson, 'Little Mike', starts talking about the Formica table. And right about in that Formica table area I – I always get euphoric.

**Q:** *In your films where is the sound coming from? Is it the location speaking or the film itself?*

**DL:** It's a couple of things. It is the realistic background sound, but that realistic background sound also enhances a mood. Then there's another sound above that; that's strictly for mood. It has no meaning in terms of the environment, but it has a meaning for a mood or to give you a feeling. And when you have all that, your sound is making the world feel a certain way. So maybe there's a factory out there, but it may make the wrong kind of sound. And so you have to find a way to alter that so that it's working for you in terms of the overall mood.

You see, once you start down a road to make a film you enter a certain world. And certain things can happen in that world, and certain things can't. Depending on the world, many, many things can happen but still *certain things can't*. So you begin to know these rules for your world, and you've got to be true to those rules. And you feel your original idea that inspired you so much, and you have to go back and be true to that, too. And then you look down into the details; every little

space has a possible sound that will work there, and others that won't. It's just this process of action and reaction as you go along; but it's amazing how the wrong sound will just pop up – and you've got to get rid of it. And the right sound is sometimes really hard to nail down. Sometimes just silence is a beautiful thing. Contrast, too, is so powerful. Everything can't be loud, and it can't all be quiet. The way it's orchestrated is dictated by the story, the characters, the way it's paced. And so it turns into a kind of symphony, and like a symphony it's got to move a certain way.

**Q:** *How do you work with music and composers?*

**DL:** It happens differently. In my mind what's bad is to be forced to get a composer too late in the game and not have a dialogue – a good dialogue – with the composer, so that you could be caught where you're just putting in music that doesn't sit inside the film. It's just an overlay and it's worse than having no music at all. So, it's critical to start talking about the music or have a good relationship with your composer. I've got a great relationship with Angelo Badalamenti. When we work, he wants me to talk to him about mood. He'll start playing one way and I'll say, 'No, no, no, no', you know, and then it's not like I'm putting him down. No. He wants me to say 'no' if we're going in the wrong direction. Then he gets going in the right direction, and I'm starting to say, 'Yes', and then he starts going down that road as if he knows it and has been there a thousand times before. It's a delicate kind of process, early on, to get going in the right direction.

**Q:** *What do you discuss with your composer?*

**DL:** Mood, mostly. And any kind of work that will zero in on a mood. And then it's action and reaction. I'll say, 'You've done this colour, and I really wanted this colour', and he says, 'Oh, I get it', and he comes back and it's closer but it's not quite there – you know what I mean? It's back and forth, back and forth.

**Q:** *Do you like to use music playback on location?*

**DL:** Sometimes. On *Lost Highway* and some of my later films I played music on the set – which means production sound is out the window. But in certain scenes it's there to create a mood like in the silent films when there were orchestras playing on the set. It really helps everybody get into a certain mood. It certainly helps the DP [Director of Photography], because if he hears a certain music, you don't have to say, 'Peter, slow this pan down.' He'll react to the pace of the music. It's just the music that is talking now and everybody's in the same place, the same mood.

I always get together with Angelo [Badalamenti] before shooting to get the moods to use on the set. Even if nobody else listens to them, I sometimes listen to the music while we're recording. It's a real good indicator of how the scene is going, based on what I'm hearing in the music, as well as the dialogue.

**Q:** *So when you use a song like 'Blue Velvet', are you going for contrast or mood?*

**DL:** Both. For example ‘In Dreams’ in *Blue Velvet*, that’s a great song on its own, but it created a beautiful sort of accident. The word ‘dreams’ and, what those dreams could be for, those don’t mean the same for one person as they would for another. When Frank sings those lyrics to Jeffrey, the song takes on a whole different meaning. And then he uses this word ‘love letter’. A ‘love letter’ is a bullet so then there’s this Kitty Lester song, ‘Love Letters Straight From My Heart’. And that has a whole other meaning to it. That’s a beautiful thing, when the song is hitting on all those different meanings.

**Q:** *When you’re casting do you consider the quality of the actor’s voice?*

**DL:** In a way, because through talking to different people, you can tell, by everything they do or say, that they’re correct for the part. And then once in a while you get a character that just happens to have an unbelievable voice. Like the one-armed man in *Twin Peaks*, Al. He had a most beautiful low resonant voice. And it just fed this mood. He could say things that other people couldn’t say and he can make it work, because of that voice.

Voice is like music. Everything, every word, has got to be said in a certain way. It has to do with the timing of a line and how the line strikes you. You find your way by working in rehearsals to introduce an idea that makes the lines come out correctly. But you have to find a way to talk upfront with the actor, so they find a way to talk in the scene.

**Q:** *A final word on the relationship between sound and image in cinema...?*

**DL:** Sound is 50 per cent of a film, at least. In some scenes it’s almost 100 per cent. It’s the thing that can add so much emotion to a film. It’s a thing that can add all the mood and create a larger world. It sets the tone and it moves things. Sound is a great ‘pull’ into a different world. And it has to work *with* the picture – but without it you’ve lost half the film.

It’s so beautiful. It has to do with all the parts coming together in a correct way. And certain stories allow more to happen in terms of cinema than other stories. But with sequences paced correctly, and the sound and the picture working together, it becomes like music. It’s like a symphony where you are conducting with great musicians and everybody is working together. And the ground work has to be set-up in a certain way because it slides into this thing where all you’ve done before is now the payoff. And, because of what’s gone before and the way it’s gone before, this payoff can be unbelievable. Everything is working together and it can transport you. It can give you a feeling that you can’t have in any other way. And it can introduce ideas that are so abstract that you’ve never thought of them or experienced them.

But it has to do with the way cinema can work. It’s really a rare event, because there’s not that many people experimenting with cinema – it’s gone down to telling a surface story. But there’s this form – people, the audience, now know the form.

They know that there's a certain amount of time spent introducing this, then there's something else, and then there's the next part – so they feel the end coming. And so there's not a lot of room for surprises. There are a lot of ways to make the cinema. There are stories that will change the form and those are the kinds of stories I really love. And these stories make you work with the sound. When it works, it's a thrill, it's a magical thing and it takes you to, you know, a higher place.

**David Lynch:** born in Missoula, Montana; Eagle Scout.