

Wonder of Dawn

In 1907, at the age of 21, Norman O. Dawn (1884–1975) created the first known matte painting shot for motion pictures. He invented the technique for his first film *Missions of California*, which documented various old religious buildings of the region. The technique, which came to be known as the glass shot process, was used to recreate the early mission buildings which over time had disintegrated. In order to show some of them in their original condition, Dawn placed a sheet of glass in front of the camera, painted the missing or dilapidated portions of the buildings on the glass, and then aligned the painted portions with the actual buildings in the background. Dawn continued to refine this technique and developed many of the special effects that are still used by the motion picture industry. Over decades he worked as a special effects cinematographer, director, writer and producer at nearly every major studio collaborating with figures such as Carl Laemmle, Irving Thalberg, and Erich von Stroheim.

Dawn was a methodical filmmaker and from the time of his earliest efforts, he kept copious notes and examples of his works. Over 800 of his notebooks have survived. Most of the entries in these notebooks are focused on technical developments and on the very ingenious solutions he devised to appease the budding film industry's search for ever more novel illusions and spectacles. In one of these notebooks, there is a series of annotations scrawled on the margins that do not relate directly to the technical writings in the body of the page. They nevertheless appear to relate to each other in a manner that suggests one single text. Together they offer a set of instructions.

His longtime assistant Luis A. Deser (a cousin whom Dawn had brought over from South America in 1913) gave an interview a few years prior to his death, in which he spoke about his prolonged collaboration with Dawn.¹ A couple of sections particularly shed some light on the possible meaning of this peculiar text:

To the outer world you could say that Norman was, by all means, a normal, hardworking individual and, of course, very gifted at his profession. But in his private life, to which I was privy, he was in possession of quite eccentric qualities. You see, he used to carry with him, in his personal luggage and everywhere he went, a small jar. Now, this by itself does not denote anything out of the ordinary, but what did is the content of said jar. Inside he had what can only be described as an amorphous flesh-like substance suspended in thick liquid. Not anything of an edible variety, but something more resembling an unborn fetus, although far more undifferentiated in its characteristics, to the point that it was very hard to identify such things as limbs

¹ This story was compiled from a longer interview in *Radical Horticulture Magazine*. Issue 1. September 1966. A transcript of Dawn's marginal annotations was included with the interview. According to Deser, when read in a particular order (different from the one published) and with a particular intonation, Dawn's text would induce otherworldly visions.

or features, although somehow those things did seem to be present. Even eyes somehow, but only because of the sense one felt of being surreptitiously observed when in its vicinity.

During our shoots, either on location or in the studio, the jar was always there. In fact, many of the decisions that were taken by Norman with regard to a particular shot were previously conferred with the jar. Most of the people that were present on set or on location never got a chance to see what was in the jar, as Norman kept it in a wooden box of shape and size not dissimilar from the motion picture cameras we used back then. If asked, I was told to say it was a measuring device used to determine the viability of the next shot. In private, the jar would stand on a small coffee table and Norman would sit next to it, his eyes lost somewhere far off in the distance, and nod silently as if he were listening to some kind of radio emission from another world that only he could hear. He would never speak to it but it always seemed to me as if they were actually conversing with each other. The one time I dared to ask him about the jar – a topic he never discussed and quite frankly, one no one had ever had the nerve to ask him about – he called it his ‘wonder’. He said it helped him see more clearly. On that occasion, I felt that he would not say much more, and knowing its importance to his work, I feared that any more prying could somehow jeopardize our livelihood. I pretended to be satisfied with his answer and from then on continued my work, assisting him and making sure that his wonder was always safe and by his side. There was only one more occasion many years later, when he again broached the subject. Their relationship appeared to have become more intense by then. One night he said to me, ‘It has dawned on me that I’m a prisoner. But I do not wish to escape. You see, it has helped me perceive more clearly the beautiful, dark contours of my prison. I see nothing, I feel nothing and I’m so very thankful to it for this gift.’

I didn’t pry any further. As always, we continued with our work. Until the day Norman said that he did not need my assistance any longer. By then, I was glad to stop since I had increasingly lost interest in the picture making business and was eager to return home to look after a few acres of land my family still owned.

The interview continues with a long description of the intricacies of growing orchids and after a couple of pages digresses once more towards the topic of Dawn, where another interesting fact about his biography surfaces:

When I was 15 years old, his father was killed in South America over a dispute concerning a tree on a small patch of land that our family had used over generations to grow cocoa. I was the only witness to the death of Dawn’s father, my uncle. You see, this was a big part of the reason why Dawn had recruited me as his assistant.

Time and again, Dawn would ask me to repeat the story of his father’s death. Obliging, I would tell him about how I remembered seeing Dawn’s father getting stabbed multiple times in the stomach. I would describe how I could remember quite clearly an image of a short, stubby man with a disfigured hand, holding a dull blade. More than anything else, I could remember his grip. No fingers as such but with those malformed stubs, a firm grip nonetheless. Firm enough to penetrate the skin again and again, going deeper with each thrust until – and to me this was not an embellishment, but my genuine memory of the event – I saw the wound become a mouth and swallow the knob of flesh as if it were some kind of lowly famished

organism. I could not recall any blood, only the merging of flesh with flesh and the look of almost ecstatic pleasure etched on my uncle's face as he tumbled to the ground.

Apparently, the reason for the dispute had been one particular cocoa tree, which was believed to have special powers, or more precisely, had been the source of powers granted to my uncle to control his fellow town members. Rumor had spread that a creature, living underground among the tree's roots, was providing the tree with contaminated fruit, which, when consumed, would pollute that person's day dreams. Since he was the only grower in town, the townsfolk felt that my uncle was using his cocoa to invade their moments of waking reverie, imposing upon them images that they could not explain and which created a longing that could not be fulfilled. They could not even specify exactly what these images depicted. Yet they couldn't stop consuming the fruit. They felt trapped. Afterwards, my uncle's death was deemed an accident and a large committee was appointed to search for the creature among the trees and – after destroying every one of them – found nothing.

Near the end of the interview when asked how he had come to acquire the notebook, Deser said he came upon it accidentally after it fell from Dawn's rucksack while in the middle of an arduous shoot in the desert. That night, although he intended to return it, some strong force compelled him to peek inside. He browsed over the notes scribbled on the margins and decided to keep it. Strangely, Dawn never mentioned the disappearance of one of his notebooks.