to resurrect the cinema:

notes on digital filemaking

jean-pierre geuens

jpgeuens@gmail.com

to resurrect:

to rise again but different

to my students:

along the years you inspired much of what is in this book.


steve diskin, jeff lengyel, peter robinson:

each of you forced me to revisit my thoughts about filmmaking.

i cannot thank you enough.


wheeler winston dixon:

from the beginning you have supported my writing.

that is a debt i cannot ever repay.

starting points

## writer/reader/filmmaker

is it the title that caught your attention?  which part of it?  filemaking?  it couldn't be a typo, could it?  since countless books and umpteen websites have already told us all there is to know about digital technology, does adopting a new moniker for filmmaking really make any difference?  or was it the idea of resurrection that intrigued you?  to be sure, the word connotes both the notion of a cinema in dire trouble and the possibility of breathing life back into it.

either way, you extended your arm and are now flipping through the pages.  you can tell pretty quickly that there is no tech talk in it: nothing about sensors, resolution, exposure latitude, sensitivity, frame rate, or shooting raw.  and the book's general appearance is rather odd.  what is it then?  in truth, no more than a bunch of reflections on the state of film practice: what we are doing that is no longer working and what we could possibly replace it with.

what i'm saying in this book is controversial, sometimes even radical.  but am i to be trusted?  let's face it: there is no way for you to know for sure.  so the text will have to speak for itself.  my hope is that you'll learn to trust my voice over time.  what's more, i would like this book to be not just a bridge between us but a catapult for your own creativity.

writing this book is thus not unlike enclosing a message in a bottle, throwing it into the ocean, and counting on fate that it will end up in the right hands, your hands.  you, because you are still reading this.  you, because i'm certain by this point that we have something in common: we don't follow the crowd and we share a passion for the art.  but let there be no misunderstanding:  i cannot tell you how to make great films.  no one can.  what i can do though is clear up the creative space surrounding movies from the hype that has cluttered it through the years.  most of all, in the following pages, i want to convince you that there is still an open field out there where everything remains possible.  your job will be to venture in this uncharted territory and forge the bold projects that will bring the spirit of cinema back to life.

## rules and conventions

two kinds of film books are relevant for filmmakers.  first off, there are the quintessential textbooks which, unfortunately, take for granted all the conventions found in ordinary filmmaking.  in these books too, the protocol stipulates that nothing should interfere with the smooth transmission of the informational content.  to achieve this, the writing must not only be straightforward, accessible to all, but also impersonal.  put differently, the words on paper must appear to have no origin and no destination.  they should present "facts" alone. these must stand by themselves, cogitations cut off from their human roots.

then there are the film criticism books.  in this case, the author typically attempts to position his or her ideas in relation to the existing critical paradigm.  after a point of contention is introduced, he or she proceeds to unravel the issues at stake.  to bolster the argumentation, as well as the importance of the text for the field, support is marshaled from various influential scholars.  inasmuch as it is addressed to academics, the intellectual content is appropriately a lot more demanding than what is found in textbooks.  the phraseology too tends to be more abstruse, even forbidding.  in fact, coined or cryptic words have come to epitomize the genre.  when a neologism is particularly illuminating, it spreads indeed as mantra as every other academic goes about exploring the implications made possible by the new concept.  although there is much that is valuable in these books, the jargon disenfranchises anyone not privy to it.

the writing in such essays must also follow conventions mandated by this or that manual of style, say, the chicago and the mla guides in the humanities.  authors have no choice in the matter: they must abide by the guidelines if they have any hope to be published by academic journals and university presses.  the formal protocol is meant to reassure potential readers in academia that this is a serious piece of writing worthy of their attention.  albeit the guides' editors would insist the directives are solely concerned with the presentation of manuscripts, they nevertheless uphold a single path for the generation of ideas.  beyond this, to impose a mode of writing on authors who attempt to push the envelope in their essays is paradoxical to say the least.

one last point: despite addressing films from various angles (cognitive and psychological processes, social and political sciences, art and literary theory, linguistics, philosophy, marxism, feminism, etc.), film criticism books are not fundamentally concerned with filmmaking.  they consider films only after the fact.  they also take them as they come, good or bad.  in fact, mediocre films can be used to spawn the most fascinating propositions about this or that aspect of our culture.  in other words, critical writing is produced for its own sake rather than to help revitalize the medium.  it is not concerned with cinema's welfare.


despite these drawbacks, the great advantage of scholarly writing over the more colloquial type is that it elevates the discussion.  readers must give full attention to the text.  when we talk to one another or read a newspaper for instance, the attention is on the gist of the communication.  words and sentences are mere carriers that are disregarded as soon as we access the information.  moreover, each new message or utterance quickly displaces the previous one.  little if anything sticks.  the march forward is what matters.  in short, plain-speaking is unlikely to produce epiphanies.  by contrast, the language in academic writing forces for us to stay with the text, to go over it again, whether to elucidate its meaning, figure out its ramifications, or cross swords with it.  it also makes us think beyond the text, for instance in applying elsewhere the ideas just encountered.  put another way, academic writing helps open a world of thinking.

having been groomed in this way of writing in college, i wrote a book and many essays in accordance with the expected mandates.  over time though, i began to suspect that the academic style was not value-free after all, that the formal presentation tended in fact to neuter or stunt whatever liveliness would otherwise emerge from the text.  right or wrong i felt this style of writing kept me from engaging the topic of film production more directly and the reader more candidly.  i also felt it would be incongruous to wrap in academic prose a text that celebrates the revolutionary nature of digital technology.  on top of that, it would clearly be antithetical on my part to comply with rules and conventions while suggesting that you do away with them.

in this book i will not only delve into the muck of production, i will strive to overhaul it from the ground up.  to help focus the attention, i have altered the text's formatting.  my fixes include no capitalization in the text, no indentation at the beginning of paragraphs, and a casual use of syntax and punctuation.  i adopted this way of writing years ago in my emails so i feel comfortable with it.  i also decided to forgo quotations, notes, and bibliography as they are too closely associated with academic writing.  this said, i have used **boldface** to alert you to a critical or philosophical name, concept, or issue that you might want to explore further.  finally, i have borrowed from bresson the idea of chapters made up of discrete issues as opposed to a long, continuing argument.  all together, i end up with something that is neither a textbook nor a film criticism book.  it is, for better or worse, a hybrid book, a book that uses the tools of critical theory to make sense of and, hopefully, to rejuvenate film production.

to forsake the decorum of a stately style however is not without danger.  despite my best efforts, the writing is likely to miss the denseness and gravity one expects from serious film books.  it may very well be also that my little fixes may be perceived as mere gimmicks that you, readers, will soon tire of.  can the more personal tone demarcate itself sufficiently from the colloquial style one encounters everywhere?  will you brush off my project as more of the same or will it surprise you enough to pay attention and stir you into action?

what to leave behind

## hollywood

1

what can i possibly write about hollywood that hasn't been told already?  so let's recapitulate the main points.

2

los angeles was not always the metropolis it is now.  as for the film business during the classical age, for all its glamour, it could hardly have been called an industry.  it comprised few companies, each ministering over a relatively small pool of actors and technicians. schulberg wrote the book about what hollywood was back then and *the big knife* showed it to us, both as a play and a film.

3

the big change took place when the studios were acquired by much larger business concerns.   the new owners had a lot more in common with exxon mobil and general electric than with the studios of yore.  losing no time, they addressed the question of returns on their new investment.  even though the production and distribution of movies provided steady revenues over time, blockbusters were infrequent and unpredictable.  for the mega corporations, piddling revenues would no longer do.  only blockbusters would have an impact on the bottom line.  as a result each movie needed to be conceived as a las vegas show: it would cost millions but it would be seen by millions.  practically speaking, this meant the franchise films, the super heroes vehicles, the movies with tom cruise, etc.

next a winner-take-all strategy that gave no quarter to the also-ran was enacted.  ninety per cent of the box office was not enough.  films with a different outlook were promptly denied access to the marketplace.

finally, a novel master plan called for synergies between a film and the other businesses within the parent corporation.  in short, the studios became responsible for producing content that could be monetized by these other divisions.  whereas in the past, a film would be green lighted based on its merits, in the new model, its development depends on umpteen companies whose interest in the project is limited to what they themselves would gain were that film given the go-ahead.  beyond that, any project must survive a grueling audit that evaluates its investment appeal to commercial outfits such as mcdonald's and burger king.  in this environment the film itself is no longer important.  what matters is how much these various commercial entities would benefit from their association with any given project.

4

hollywood's blockbuster formula has been extraordinary successful throughout the world. one certainly cannot confuse one of these movies with anything produced elsewhere.  there

is nothing subtle about the way these films occupy a screen.  they come on strong, brassy, full of swagger.  they are made to be big and want to be seen that way.  their aesthetics are aggressive, muscular, even brutal.  one senses a macho mentality at work.

beyond the high-powered narratives and the visual exuberance, what sets a hollywood movie apart from the rest is in the way everything is accented in it (augmented reality is not a new idea in tinsel town).  the stars obviously, but also the supporting actors and even the extras, are sharpened till they become a lot more impressive than their counterparts in daily life.  sceneries too are given a bright shine that makes them look striking.  the world as a result looks more intense, more flamboyant than the one we left behind when we entered the theater.  we want to live in that world, to become part of its imagery.  and we want the film to never stop delivering its fabulous high.

through the world hollywood movies now define what viewers expect when they go to the cinema.  as a result it has become harder than ever to interest people (producers as well as audiences) in projects that are atypical.

5

before anything else, hollywood connotes success which is why no one can resist its appeal.  to work there means you have arrived.  you are now part of an exclusive club, you are a member of the elite.

for directors, the lure is that money will no longer be an issue: you'll be working with, arguably, the best actors and technicians in the world and you'll be able to use all that fantastic equipment.  a similar aspiration ensnares crew members.  they paid their dues working on smaller films, they have proven themselves, and now they have reached the pinnacle.  they are recognized as the best of the best.  each night, they leave the set exhausted knowing that nobody could have done better.  yet, in both cases, all this talent is often made to work on projects that hardly require such savvy.

6

under the surface, hollywood remains a fickle place for the admission ticket does not guarantee permanent access to the table.  each day you must prove yourself anew in order to get the next meal ticket.  look at the credits of older movies, you probably won't recognize many names.  yet, while making that film, each one of these men and women thought: this is it, i'm on my way, my career is taking off, only to remain in the background or to disappear all together afterwards.  when working in hollywood then, one is never more than an extra, hired for a day, dispensable the next.  everyone working there knows only too well that one flop and it's all over.

7

the big deceit about hollywood is that one will automatically work on better and better films.  very few however are able to achieve that.  let's say you made a small good independent movie.  well, is directing an episode in a miniseries a promotion?  think about it: you are not its showrunner, you are a mere executant, hired to apply a visual style that preceded your arrival on the set.  in other words, you must leave behind the personal touches that distinguished your earlier effort.  soon enough what matters most to you is no longer to make good films but to keep working regardless of the project's worth.

what about old timers, those who were lucky enough to have a career?  is *the girl with the dragon tattoo* really a breakthrough in david fincher's career?  did he have to involve himself in *gone girl*, the kind of project normally left to hacks?  or look at jordan cronenweth: you'd think the man would have been number one after *blade runner*.  so what happened?  was it bad luck and there were no good projects on the horizon when it was time for him to go back to work?  or was it poor taste and he chose mediocre projects over better ones?  in the end, people work on films for all kinds of reasons including restocking the pantry.

you don't make your films in hollywood.  hollywood uses you to make the movies it wants to make.

8

behind its glamorous surface, hollywood remains a cold, capitalist enterprise.  it enforces a hardened hierarchy that demarcates people above the line from those under it.  only those at the top of the food chain are trusted with creating the cultural products the system is comfortable with.  in return, they are obscenely rewarded for their efforts.  everyone else is a hireling, a worker on the assembly line.  how many directors know the name of the grips and electricians working for them?  in comparison to those above their rank, the below-the-line people are paid but a pittance.  more crushingly, they know they will never be able to join the creative elite.  in other words, they are stuck pushing the dolly or rigging the lights till they are told they are too old for the job and shown the door.

9

for many in hollywood today, films are only means to an end.  what such people are really after is the money, the celebrity status, the lamborghini, the red carpet, the oscar trophy.  you recognize them easily: they strut in front of the camera as much as behind it.  you hear and see them wherever you turn.  this crowd has polluted the landscape.  trying to make a honest film in such crass environment is difficult.   it is certainly not good for the soul.

10

in the old days hollywood films occasionally contributed to the social discourse (say, *all my sons* and *the best years of our lives* immediately after the second world war). no longer. this job has been left to independents. zombies, extraterrestrials and superheroes have taken center stage. more and more movies avoid talking about the world we actually live in. in its embrace of the global market hollywood cannot even be said to be making genuine american films any more.

11

an industry is concerned with mass producing standardized products. it is not in the business of manufacturing one-off items. general motors produces automobiles under thirteen brands worldwide. the cars may turn up in different showrooms but, underneath the stylistic differences, they share just a few platforms. the movie industry is not any different. films must be like other films, especially successful ones, if they have any chance of being produced. at times an unusual proposal by an eccentric director will get through as long as some money can be expected to come out of it. by and large though, the place is fundamentally hostile to anyone who dares assert his or her unique creativity. so what happened during the1942 academy awards remains a warning for any artist brave enough to challenge the system. as you remember, *citizen kane* which had been nominated nine times won only once. that's not surprising: academy members are not known for their good taste. what is not acceptable though is that, at the biltmore hotel, the hollywood crowd booed each time someone on the podium announced the film's title. this is not something that can be forgotten or forgiven, ever.


## film schools

1

for the longest time hollywood simply ignored the few film schools then in existence. after all, with b-movies, they already had their own in-home training program. left alone, film schools adopted a holistic approach in their teaching. they took for granted their job was to nurture complete filmmakers as opposed to specialists. history, theory, and production were seen as connatural. form was judged as important as content. bold creativity was encouraged. diversity in thinking and execution promoted.

it took the blockbuster age for hollywood to revise its attitude toward film schools. why go to the trouble and expense of training personnel when you can get someone else to pay for it? the teaching however had to be reformed if the schools were to graduate more george lucases and fewer rebels. so professionals joined the faculty en masse, taking control of the instruction process. nothing in the curriculum or the college catalogue was changed but the emphasis in the classroom was now squarely on workaday knowledge. not only are

students pushed early on to pick an area of specialization (cinematography, editing, etc.), they are also expected, within that adopted field, to duplicate the techniques used in commercial movies.  by and large, film schools presently see it as their job to groom filmocrats for the industry.

2

as godard once noted, there are a lot more film schools (300 + in the us alone) than noteworthy filmmakers.  if you are interested in making good, honest films, not *batman 14* or *fast and furious 17*, forget about film schools.  do your own thing instead.  check websites such as nofilmschool.com for background information.  the journey may not be as smooth but you will be working throughout the process with films that mean something to you.

the basics

## identity

whereas actors are able to switch between characters and themselves (as they celebrate after a successful premiere), we are stuck with the part we have created and continue to forge for ourselves till the end.  yet there is nothing special, unique or fated about the persona we have acquired.  had we be born from the same parents in another epoch or another country, we would have fashioned for ourselves a different identity based on the local mores.  although the genetic component would remain the same it would be applied to a dissimilar social and cultural landscape.  as a result, our beliefs, worldview, and expectations would be radically unlike what they are now.  in other words, our "self" is made of putty: it could have been equally at ease in a thousand other roles.

## culture

what matters most then is that, from day one, we are shaped by the culture around us.  not only does it equips us with a conspicuous first or last name, a mother tongue and a preferential way of grooming and dressing ourselves, it also cocoons us in a web of traditional practices and belief systems that soon define who we are, what we think, and how we see the world.  sometimes nationality is the most potent force acting upon us, sometimes it is ethnicity or religion.  insofar as such culture is necessarily sectarian, it immediately positions us in relation to groups that hold different views.  "we" are now opposed to "them".  cultural or real wars follow.

at times, in some countries, in some circumstances—through the chance meeting of an exceptional individual for instance—one can shift allegiance and embrace an option more to our liking.  on the whole though, the culture within which we are born strictly demarcates our options.  do you dare convert to christianism if you are born a moslem?  is someone foolish enough to assert his gayness in iran?  in sum the dominant culture forces most people to spend their entire life in a way beholden to local traditions.  this kind of culture enslaves us.

a subsection of this culture, the chatter of everyday life (the latest in politics, business, entertainment, sports, etc.) is prompted by newspapers, television, and the rest of the social media.  these platforms provide topics of  discussion when we get together.  certain subject matters last quite some time, most flare up then disappear quickly.  these conversations are not necessarily worthless but the orthodoxy of the thinking generally associated with them sooner or later shackles us.

in contrast literature and the arts are thoroughly international and trans-historical.  they provide vistas beyond the here and now.  although they too can be impacted by fads and customs, they are our only means of escape from the local ideology.  through them we are able to discover different ways of living and thinking.  in a flash, the world opens up and choices arise.  this particular culture liberates us.

## art

1

no one goes about making art.  one creates something, a vase, a dance, a film, a house, a musical score, an environment, which may or not be perceived as art by others.

2

why is there something rather than nothing?  **heidegger** once asked.  a similar question could be asked of art.  true, art doesn't start from nothing.  there are always precedents, anterior models, not just in other art works, but also in the world (the landscape painted by the artist).  so why would someone work painstakingly to produce a new configuration out of an already existing entity?  maybe something about it challenges the artist, as mont sainte victoire did for cézanne.  but what that is exactly remains vague.  furthermore it is equally unclear that the goal is ever achieved.  again and again cézanne went back to his favorite spot attempting ever new versions of the mountain ridge.  even in retrospect, the artist is unlikely to know for sure why certain avenues were chosen rather than others.

to some extent then, what happens during the artistic process is not unlike the dreamwork when the conscious self is no longer in charge, leaving the rest of the mind free to meander. although the dream content is impacted by recent events, cast with familiar figures, etc., the material is rearranged through unexpected combinations and startling cuts.  all art then (not just surrealism) involves a free association process whereby what is known is reshaped into a novel figure that makes us pose.

3

the creative process takes a lot out of the artist.  the labor that led from the vague concept to the finished piece is exhausting.  every step, move, or advance on one side requires a quid pro quo from the artist in return.  in the end, the creation forged out of the artist's limbs stands there, full-blown, independent of its drained procreator.  at the same time, something of the artist is now alive in the entity.

4

even when an artist portrays his/her subject as faithfully as possible, the depiction is necessarily disunited from the model.  the dual presence literally opens a space of unfinishedness in the world.  this is so because the duplicate introduces a choice: which version do i prefer, the original or the new rendition?  the world is now more complex than before.  the more adventurous the art, the more room there is for questioning our assumptions about the original in view of the novel interpretation just encountered.

to put it differently, one could say that art is fundamentally at odds with reality.  by bringing alternatives to us, it suggests that the collective construction we call reality is provisional at best.  certainly, art doesn't have the immediate impact of earthquakes or

revolutions.  its significance may in fact not be noticed at first.  nonetheless, its ramifications can be far reaching down the road, not unlike what happens when the weather in one part of the world alters the climate elsewhere months later.

5

art does not exist for its own sake.  it doesn't stand alone, aloof, incommunicado, as was at times asserted.  often enough, art changes those it comes in contact with.  this does not depend on some didactic or utilitarian intention on the part of the artist.  instead, very much like a scientific discovery or a philosophical breakthrough, an art work can open up new ways of apprehending the world.  beyond this, the proposition that things do not have to be the way they presently are makes it possible for us to demand more from society as well as from life in general.

6

the number of people interested in the arts unfortunately remains limited.  most regard art as some kind of highfalutin malarkey that concerns only the elite.  adding fuel to the fire, we have witnessed during the last few decades a relentless attack by those who control the economy against the areas of society (the arts, higher education, mental health, etc.) that were still resisting the commercial imperative.  one repercussion in our field: independent filmmakers have been pressured to adopt a more business-friendly attitude in their work. the penalty for those who refuse to do so is that their movies end up marginalized.  this means we are left with hardly any film daring to challenge the banalization of art and life that is our lot today.

## art/entertainment

1

the problem with art is that no one can define it with any precision.  it can be utilitarian or fanciful, mimetic or abstract, primitive or refined.  experts have never agreed on the value of any given work either.  how can *vertigo* be judged best film of all time in the *sight and sound/bfi* list while rising no better than the sixty first position in the *afi* poll which, adding insult to injury, comprises only american films?  in fact, it is impossible to find a universal criterion that would allow us to compare radically different films, for example *citizen kane* and *titicut follies*, *lawrence of arabia* and *symbiopsychotaxiplasm take 1*, *schindler's list* and *la jetée*.

2

if that is so, are all films of equal value?  don't all films show a certain level of artistry? don't they all do their best to interest viewers?  so, instead of a black and white situation

with commercial movies on one side and art cinema on the other, let's acknowledge the fact that there is a continuum between the two groups with many movies striding both areas.

still, films are built based on very different assumptions.  with commercial films, one of the goals is to immerse viewers in the tale.  lately, the most effective way to do so is to use a filmmaking style peter watkins has called the **monoform**.  *armageddon* and *the bourne supremacy* are manifestations of this über-genre.  from the get go, the narrative is designed to propel us forward at breakneck speed through non-stop action, violence galore, commotion everywhere, rushing protagonists, brisk camera movements, forceful lighting changes, energetic editing, thundering sound effects, and stirring musical compositions.  this bodily-kinesthetic (**howard gardner**) style of filmmaking is meant to meet the global audience's demand for amusement.  more than "speaking" to viewers though, this line of attack triggers continuous hits in the eye/brain system.  even if the story itself is not great, the rods and cones are bound to respond to the stimulations on the screen.  whereas in ordinary life, the circuitry is hardly challenged, it is working overtime when exposed to this treatment.  one exits the theater stunned, not unlike our experience after a particularly challenging roller coaster ride.

for the makers of this kind of films, success at the box office confirms that people want to escape their present condition by fantasizing about characters and situations that have little to do with everyday life.   this thinking nevertheless indirectly acknowledges that people are confronting difficult personal or social issues that need healing.  the cure that is offered however provides only short-term relief.   no attempt is made to equip viewers with more lasting medicine, the kind that could help them once they are back on the street.

3

conversely some films—a minority surely—make more demands on us.  we recognize these films because they offer a practice of cinema at odds with what we are accustomed to encounter at the cineplex.  to simplify greatly, these films can be said to operate more like poetry insofar as they dislocate codes and conventions, forcing us to pay attention to aspects of movies we normally overlook.  the manner through which we discover an action thus becomes as important as the action itself.  long after the movie is over, the mind is still active, thinking and rethinking the film experience.

through their process then, these films tend to set up stumbling blocks that impede our absorption within the story world.  let's take *effi briest,* a middling film by fassbinder*,* as a single example.  from the beginning the director insists on maintaining a certain distance between the camera and the characters.  at times he even stops the action, posing the personages in painterly tableaux.  furthermore, scenes are often reflected in mirrors or observed through gauze or foreground objects.  inevitably we are forced to question this unusual presentation.  why is this scene shown this way?  are the decorous intrusions dispensable extravagances, personal indulgences, that real professionals would quickly excise from the film?  or are they central to the film's project insofar as they allow us to

experience the stifling milieu that imprisons the heroine?  as for the mirror shots, they too bring out a perspective at odds with similar scenes in ordinary movies.  whereas in the latter they tend to disclose a personal, reflective moment for a female character, in *effi briest* the camera is sufficiently away from the mirror to keep us from becoming privy to the heroine's self absorption.  we notice rather that she is caught in a role she cannot escape.  all in all, fassbinder's visual style, far from being gratuitous, provides us with a critical viewpoint that is distinct from the character's own awareness of herself.

in films such as *effi briest,* it is the neurons and the synapses that are working overtime as opposed to the rods and the cones.  this is so because such films make us confront difference and otherness in the way people act, think, and create.  although these films are inevitably entangled in the commercial marketing and distribution of movies, their main purpose is not to make money.  by unfurling unanticipated, more reflective, and more challenging views of the world, these works are not unlike gifts that demand a follow-up on the part of the recipients (**marcel mauss**).  the response in this case consists in living up to the challenge created by the film.  when i  leave the theater indeed, i'm not the person i was when i walked in.  i've just been given some insight that redefines how i see the world.   i'm thinking about the film and what it means for my life.

4

why is it that formal hindrances are rejected by most viewers whereas obstacles to a protagonist's goal in ordinary movies are enjoyed as suspense?  it may be that in the latter, they appear to emerge from within the story itself, and are thus construed as organic to it, whereas aesthetic flourishes are interpreted as being imposed externally, the work of an obnoxious interloper.  like it or not, the majority of spectators regard visual tropes as meddlesome interferences denying them personal, immediate, transparent access to what's going on.  beyond this, there is also a difference in kind between the two types of obstacles.  on the one hand, impediments thrown in the path of a protagonist are dramatic conventions that viewers are familiar with based on prior experience with movie narratives.  they know it is the job of the protagonist to overcome them.  on the other hand, the difficulties they themselves experience while watching more artistically inclined movies remind them of their own frustration when confronting real life stumbling blocks.

5

looking back in time, it is clear that the cultural changes and the technological advances of the last decades have (inadvertently?) undermined the traditional artistic approach.  through new devices for instance, we have been given power over the story's progression.  we can now fast forward through a scene when we feel the director lingers too much on material that doesn't do anything for us.  or we can skip a scene all together.  in other words we have trained ourselves to deal with the film on our own terms.  most often this means responding to the "what" of the story, leaving behind its "how".  the dynamic narrative chain leading from one event to the next is now paramount for our pleasure as

opposed to the formal approach permeating each moment of the tale.  we no longer have the time, patience or willingness to postpone immediate gratification for more solid rewards later on.

in a similar vein, however much mainstream critics like dargis and scott at the *new york times* come out in support of more difficult fare, their voices are blotted out by all those who complain, online or through social media, about how slow and boring these films are.  for hollywood fans indeed, only one kind of movies should be made, the one where everything shows up as expected.

6

even though all movies open a world, what shows up most of the time under the surface gloss is a shrunken scenery exhibiting overly familiar stories, figures and techniques.  put simply, like the natives of old, we are being offered shiny but valueless trinkets.  only on rare occasions, an unusual, more personal imagery emerges.  only then do we find ourselves transported in a realm that surprises us and makes us pay attention.  formal devices in particular disturb ,complicate, and delay the story proceedings.  put more crudely, art mucks up the picture.  it slows down the process.  it frustrates our demand for immediate pleasure.  a tension is created.  our assumptions about life and the movies are shaken up.


## brecht

1

the words usually associated with brecht's theater—the estrangement, alienation, or distanciation effect—are not particularly inviting for the general audience.  they suggest a forbidding, standoffish, unfriendly attitude.  if anything, the german playwright wanted his public to become more, rather than less, involved in the tale.  whereas in ordinary theater one doesn't question the story, in his own work brecht invited the audience to cogitate about the premises taken for granted by the situations they were watching, even question the characters' responses to them.  we should for instance pay attention to the fact that othello is not just a military commander.  he is also a political leader like general franco or general pinochet.  desdemona, for him, is thus more than a beautiful young woman.  she is a token of his power.  for her to be unfaithful would expose him to ridicule, loss of prestige and possibly bring an end to his political career.

judging characters, even criticizing them, has of course remained taboo in our cultural production.  the ploy is said to keep the audience from enjoying the work or, worse, to be preaching to them.  to counteract this prospect, brecht embedded the commenting in movies, music, and songs that were genuinely entertaining.  another tactic involved getting rid of the fourth wall thereby converting passive spectators into implicated parties.  these

maneuvers bolstered his theater, making it more exciting than traditional straightforward productions.

2

to call something cerebral in our culture means it lacks emotion.  it is a kiss of death when attached to a work.  yet why would awaking a response in the brain be perceived so inimically compared to more straightforward sensory feedback?  it is happening in our body after all and we are bodily impacted by it.  in brecht's view then, to be able, as a spectator, to see through the ideological construct that organizes social life (the one in our life as well as that experienced by the characters in the play), that is to say, the system of beliefs and ideas which makes the world what it is instead of what it could be or what it can still become, is a sensation of the first order, a lightning flash running through the mind.

what needs rethinking

## words/pictures

1

words function differently from pictures.  in western languages, as **saussure** taught us, one chooses a word among others in a cluster, each bringing a modulation on the overall theme: say, house as opposed to hut, cabin, duplex, villa, building, or skyscraper.  still, no word is ever precise enough to individuate what it refers to.  one could even say that words are tongue-shy.  each is no more than a temporary, equivocal mark which acquires a more concrete identity only after it stands in line with others in a sentence.  when we speak then, meaning arises out of the invisible bridges we spawn between independent, sovereign words, elucidating them in the process.  nevertheless, because language is inherently impressionistic, we can never be specific enough to avoid a misunderstanding of some kind.

the russian psychologist **vygotsky** goes even farther.  he believes that words are go-betweens at best, agents which are testing the waters, envoys selected by the mind to express some of what just transpired in it.  an inner speech thus precedes actual words and it is made up of unformed meanings as much as concrete thoughts.  in this light then, words become nothing more than mouthpieces standing briefly and incompletely for something that is still in the process of synthesizing itself.

 2

pictures on the other hand immediately show, not a general idea of the thing, but the thing itself.  we see this bench here or this tree there.  but whatever it is we are looking at, it is never that alone.  there is always more to it: what it is composed of and what surrounds it. a picture of an eye includes the eyelid, the eyelashes, the dilated pupil, the circle of the iris, the light reflected in the cornea, the bloodshot veins in the sclera, etc.  an image of a woman includes all she is wearing as well as part of a car next to her, an oak tree just behind her, and an old man walking a golden retriever in the background.  even though we may have the impression of seeing all at once, the eye in fact scans the image one item at a time just as it deciphers words in a sentence or hears them spoken by someone, except that here the sequence is somewhat more open to chance and personal predilection.

3

at times, it is true, a single area in a picture instantly captures our attention.  in the *napalm girl* from the vietnam war, we cannot but immediately focus on the screaming naked child running away from her village.  as a matter of fact we don't need her surroundings (the road, the other children, the soldiers, the billows of smoke in the background, etc.) to respond to her obvious suffering.  we would miss the context but the emotional impact would not be significantly different.  most times though, all the components of an image are vital if we are going to be able to figure out what is going on. in other words the larger view is necessary to make sense of the individual parts.

4

this said, there are instances when an image remains intractably mute.  even though we recognize what it is we are seeing, we do not know what to make of it.  in other words, a picture shows something ("there it is") but what we see remains strangely inarticulate.  this is very much what happens when, looking through an old photo album, we do not recognize the people in the pictures.  the **kuleshov** experiment in film is another case in point. famously, the soviet director juxtaposed a bland close-up of a man looking straight ahead to a body in a coffin, a child playing, and food on a table.  even though the man's expression never changes, a different meaning appears to emerge from his face depending on the image it is juxtaposed to.  as kuleshov intuited, we as viewers project on the man's face our commonplace reaction to these other images.  in this case therefore, the clue that solves the dumbness of the image is to be found not within the rest of the picture itself but in the adjoining image.  as words combine to produce meaning, pictures follow each other on the screen to induce a significance that may not have been in any of them.

one more problem: as **blanchot** suggested, literature arises when the words on the page acquire a reality of their own, that is to say, when they are no longer functioning as mere transparent signposts for the objects they represent.  in the movies however, the comingling of the signs and what they portray is simply unavoidable and the artistry of the medium perforce a more complicated matter.  the predicament may in fact very well be the opposite of what it is in literature, with the sign in film often occluding the object.

overall though, one could say that words never tell enough whereas pictures leave little to the imagination.  is the basic ambiguity of words an advantage or a problem for the screenwriter?  should he or she strive to make the dialogue as explicit as possible?  should characters rather not say everything thus allowing viewers to make up the rest?  is it better strategy to exploit the inherent thereness of images or to withhold things, for instance by defocusing the background, keeping light away from a face, or suggesting the presence of someone off-screen?

5

although words may not have been the best vehicle to bring about motion pictures, professionals, mostly from the theater, quickly took over and screenwriting was born.  one hundred years later, we remain bonded to words to dream up our films.  this dependency on verbal expression to provide the backbone of the film operation is probably the reason why movies have taken so long to evolve.  yes, story-boards eventually showed up but they only illustrate a director's idea about how to shoot a scene.  they are not employed to forge the narrative.

6

the digital revolution can put an end to this practice.  not only is the world full of pictures, people think nothing of taking them.  they communicate with and through them as easily as previous generations used words.  why is it still required then to submit a film proposal on paper when we all spend our days looking at images?  it is high-time we espouse an altogether different model, one using pictures and voices, sounds and music, info graphics, found footage, drawings, photos, clips from movies, etc.

some directors would benefit more than others.  as we know, the new wave promoted the notion of the complete author, the "man of cinema", the hyphenated writer-director.  the problem with this approach is that not many directors are good at writing dialogue.  so the aural-visual presentation i'm suggesting would make it possible for them to concoct the skeleton of the future film before inviting others to flesh it with words.  in this way, the "film" would precede the dialogue instead of the other way around.

painters used to draw sketches outdoors before going back to their ateliers and reconstruct the scene on canvas.  ironically, the former often turned out to be fresher and bolder than the safer, less inventive work that ensued.  screenplays however rarely benefit from such revaluation: who cares about the pit once the fruit has been eaten?  in contrast, audio-visual proposals could be appreciated for their own sake if they happen to show more sparkle than the films they eventually engendered.

7

because movies show images, it is thought that the medium is axiomatically visual.  a film is thus said to escape the show/tell dilemma inherent in literary fiction: should the action be told from a third person, omniscient perspective or should we find out what is happening from the characters themselves as they converse with one another?  put in this context, a film is undoubtedly all show: we see the protagonists, where they are, what they are doing, and we hear what they are saying.

yet isn't there something called film language?  aren't the shots designed and aligned to provide us with an interpretation of the events we are witnessing?  aren't all the components of the image (the casting, staging, lighting, composition, editing, sound, etc.) in cahoots to uphold a favored perspective, with meaning blithely traveling from one shot to the next?  seen in this light, most films tell rather than show.

8

is there an alternative in film to the whole (the string of shots) dominating the parts (the individual shots)?  in *i do not know what it is i am like*, bill viola focuses his camera on buffaloes grazing on the prairie.  in most films a couple of seconds would be enough: buffaloes, we get it, what's next?  here we watch them take their time as they move from one spot to another.  one of them eventually takes a long, strong piss.  so, instead of quickly

abstracting the buffaloes in a mental category, we look at them as they are, in their own time and space.  in a fiction film, *i don't want to sleep alone*, tsai ming liang has a long take in which a migrant worker cleans up the body of a man he found comatose in a street.  the point here is not just to tell us about it but to show the care with which he proceeds: the little bucket of water, the cloth he uses, how he gently turns the body around, the way he wraps the lower body of the man in a sarong before removing the underwear.  no plot point is involved here.  no twist at the end of the scene.  the kindness and humanity of one being for another are witnessed in the time it takes for these attributes to shine through.  in rare scenes like these, films can indeed show rather than tell.

## story

1

how often have we heard that from time immemorial human beings have been fascinated by stories?  the group assembled around a fire at night, hanging onto every word of a fabled storyteller?  the listeners fantasizing about arresting characters, exotic locales, great deeds, fanciful romances, surprising turns of events, etc.?  in our own life the initiation begins with a parent reading to us at bedtime.  all at once, we were able to journey to a world without boundaries, where anything was possible—especially when compared to the limited experience and the confined environment that were then our lot.  in a roundabout way, these stories also told us about the adult world, what happens in it, the causes and consequences of actions, etc.  they provided us with a moral compass with which to evaluate human undertaking.

 yes, the magic worked for a long time but it owed its effectiveness to its rarity.  storytellers after all would come by only so often.  this is no longer the case: books, magazines, newspapers, television dramas, movies, the internet, and the social media have gradually turned what was a novelty into a routine event.  narratives are everywhere nowadays.  we are drowning in them.  they have lost their punch as a result.

another systemic problem: stories more often than not follow a model developed by nineteenth century novelists.  we are typically asked to identify with one character in particular.  this person faces a life-changing situation.  we tag along with him or her as conflict arises between various personages.  after the dramatic issues are sorted out, the chain of events slows down to a state of repose.  it is all so damn predictable.  the prototype smothers us.  one begs for fresh air.

finally, in hollywood films, a vague humanist credo prevails throughout the work: people are alike regardless of epoch or country.  their worldview is no different from ours.  the same goals motivate everybody.  we all aspire to the same things in life.  personal fulfillment is what matters, always.  even though this approach makes it possible to

identify quickly with the protagonists, it disregards radical differences in civilizations and excludes all those in ours who have a different standpoint on society.

2

my take is that storytelling needs a radical overhaul.  on the one hand we are told that a story should allow viewers to escape to a different world.  on the other hand, the model remaining unchanged, the place we are brought to is always the same.  advertised as a unique faraway paradise, we inevitably end up in the local club med.   far from encountering dissimilar human beings and unusual ways of living and thinking, we are constantly reacquainted with characters we know only too well.  even when the purported locals sport colorful clothing and the locations behind them are alluring, we recognize soon enough, under the make-up and the fresh paint job, the prototypical cast and the familiar layout.  in other words, we are stuck in a tourist trap.  most times, we don't even need to see the film to identify the customary machinery: watching the trailer is enough.

in recent years, to make things worse, the fast pace now taken for granted in film compels the creators to eliminate anything not essential for the advancement of the plot.  an unforeseen side effect of this approach has been to make the bullet points that propel the story forward—as well as the order of their appearance—more noticeable to viewers.  put another way, audiences have become privy to the mechanism at the core of storytelling.

3

in commercial filmmaking, plot has become synonymous with story.  each shot is but a building block leading to the next entry.  the whole thing is so tightly wound that actors become like chaplinesque workers on an assembly line: they must bring out in each shot that single task that moves the narrative forward.  they are not given any elbow room to explore their situation.  when this happens, the story, more than the director, governs the film.

4

alternatives do exist however.  they take on various forms.   a familiar recourse is to breakdown the causal factors that typically fuel the story's engine.  this means spending more time with the characters as they worry about some personal issue, embark on some trivial occupation, or do something unrelated to the plot (nordic series are very good at this).  in so doing, you humanize the characters as well as provide a quieter, more textured narrative tapestry.  to some extent, the main action becomes a mere pretext for the real subject matter—the assorted subplots (if one can call them that)—to arise.

5

a second line of attack involves embedding the characters within a non-fiction environment (e.g. *medium cool*, *cleo from 5 to 7*, etc.).  in other words, whenever the protagonists go out

in the world, it is our world they are entering into.  having left the protection of a movie set, they are now subject to the same hazards as the rest of us.  anything can now happen at any time.

6

yet another salvaging approach is to leave things unsaid.  in *the forsaken land*, a film from sri lanka, one scene is particularly memorable.  on a country road two trucks carrying soldiers are facing one another.  maintaining maybe five feet between them, they drive some distance in one direction before reversing course and ending back in the original position.  the whole thing is rather strange: the trucks facing each other like a couple ready to dance, the little trip back and forth…  there is no explanation.  the scene just happens.

this inexpressiveness is disorienting at first.  why is there no effort to help us understand what is going on?  is it meant to represent the seesaw war between government forces and the tamil tigers that ravaged that country for so many years?  maybe but, even if true, the imagery is unusual enough to resist being absorbed by its symbolism.

inexplicitness—leaving something ambiguous or hermetic—is the true antonym of story.  i'm not talking about the conventional mystery that gets progressively unraveled as we proceed, but a presentation of events whose significance or connection to one another is not spelled out for our benefit.

7

one more example.  in *day night day night*, the film opens with a tight silhouette of a woman in a bus.  she appears to be immersed in praying.  in the next shot she retrieves her luggage from the bottom of the bus.  the camera then follows her as she enters the station.  in the concourse, she turns around and we see her face clearly for the first time.  her cell phone rings: she is told to meet someone in a car outside the building.  she gets inside the car without a word being exchanged between her and the driver.  they eat in a small restaurant, still without talking.  next, the camera follows them in the hallway of a hotel.  after they enter a room, the man closes the curtains then leaves.  having switched on all the lamps in the bedroom and the bathroom, the woman obsessively cleans herself in the tub.  back in the bedroom she opens the curtain and takes a look outside.  instantly her phone rings telling her to shut it tight.  later she gets another call asking her to wear what has been placed under a pillow.  sitting on the surround of the bathtub she covers her eyes with a blindfold before slipping her wrists inside manacles.  she then waits quietly.

we know almost nothing about this person and we have yet to receive a clue about what the story will ultimately be about.  probably most viewers at this point would suspect some kind of sexual hanky-panky.  to be sure, in this approach, the indices that are encountered must tantalize, otherwise the audience would disconnect.  the key point though is that this entire sequence is riveting precisely because nothing in it has allowed us to assess the

goings-on.  to put it differently, we don't know yet what kind of movie we are in.  we are still baffled.  the story still escapes us.

and indeed the film ends when the story appears.  from then onwards, the movie may still be enjoyable but the essential mystery is gone.  the protagonist may decide to go left or go right, do this or that, but her choices leave us largely unconcerned for we already know the parameters of the tale she is involved in.

8

one last strategy relates to flaubert's musing over the possibility of writing a novel about nothing, held only through style.  can this feat be managed in film?  tsai's *vive l'amour* comes close to it.  in the film three characters go about their life.  they interact at times, smoke a lot, one of them attempts suicide, but there is no attempt to give them much of a personality or imbricate them inside a compelling narrative.  even the main location is a perfect example of what **henri lefebvre** calls an ambiguous space: a condo for sale that has been "staged" with furniture but is thoroughly lacking a lived-in feeling.  no wonder then that the following is found on the imdb's film page: "it looks like we don't have a synopsis for this title yet"…   still, durkheim's **anomie** could be suggested as a way to connect the dots—anomie being a psychological condition affecting people when the ideals, norms and moral guidance proffered by society are no longer relevant to their life.  as a result, people feel left out, forgotten, their life lacking direction.

9

all in all, pleasure while watching a film does not arise from the story per se.  it is felt only as long as we are kept guessing about the meaning of the events we are given to see.  in other words, we experience pleasure when the events are still taking place in the immensity and unpredictability of our own world as opposed to the rarefied environment of a tale, a genre, or what we take to be cinema.  to put it as plainly as i can, the story kills what is alive in a film.

10

"the story is everything".  what do people who repeat this commonplace actually have in mind?  are they saying that the story precedes not just the film but also the screenplay? that it is located in the writer's mind prior to him/her extracting a screenplay out of it?  the story would then be construed as a **platonic** ideal superior to any actual elaboration of it. or is it argued that the story is the beating heart of any successful screenplay?  if true, it would be enough to read the screenplay to know whether a good film could come out of it and all films would be blockbusters.  in truth every film going into production is assumed by its makers to contain in its core a good story only to find out later that, after all, maybe it didn't.  the problem then is that a screenplay is not a novel of which one can have a definite judgment after reading it because what you read is the thing itself.  the screenplay,

per contra, is by nature incomplete, an inchoate forerunner, a crawling caterpillar that may or not metamorphose itself into a colorful butterfly when the film ends up on a screen.

to take a single example, *the shining* was made into two distinct treatments which became incommensurable projects. were the people who said "the story is everything" after seeing kubrick's film said so again after watching the mini-series sanctioned by stephen king? were they still referring to the same story? in short, a story emerges only after the film is finished. it is the finished film that ascertains what we call the story, not the other way around. so to say, "the story is everything" is the same as stating "this film is great": story and film have become synonymous.

## 11

the actual shooting is thus paramount in delineating the story. even when the work is done by a plodding director, it matters whether the part is played by this or that actor, the living room is painted beige or grey, or the street is lined up with oaks or palm trees. put differently, our appreciation, pleasure, or annoyance with a film is based on a thousand unfathomable details that make up the visible skin of the finished film. all these features, so important for our appreciation of the work, form our real points of entry into the story.

a film is more than a story and filmmaking a more mysterious process than mere storytelling. so to say that the story is everything is as inane as saying the story is nothing.

## 12

peter watkins is a director who has worked very hard all his life to escape the limitations inherent in "the story is everything". in his films he has mixed documentary and fiction, the past and the present, actors and characters, those in front of the camera and those behind it, etc. oftentimes his actors are invited to comment upon the social, economic and political issues that pertain to their characters as well as their own life. in other words, watkins is constantly reconnecting his narratives to our own world. his films thus break through the "no trespassing" sign that keeps ordinary stories claustrophobic and predictable. for watkins, only everything is truly everything.

## screenwriting

### 1

screenwriting evolved as films grew longer and it made sense to figure out, ahead of time, not only what was going to happen to the characters but also how best to show the action through a specific series of shots. by the thirties however, with the microphones and the rest of the recording machinery in use for the first time, writers could no longer anticipate what was technically possible for directors to do. from that point forth, suggestions regarding camera directions, shot scale, length of shots, etc., were left out of the scripts.

this arrangement, which is still ongoing, thus remains oddly indifferent to the future transformation of the screenplay into a film.  put more forcefully, one could say that screenplays remain formulated as if the movies have yet to be invented.  they urgently need to interface with the pictures.

2

as we know only too well, the formatting that is associated with screenwriting is mandatory.  it is supposed to simplify the assessment of the material by readers, actors, producers, etc.  yet, because what is evaluated is embryonic at best, that judgment is inevitably flawed.  no wonder that so many screenplays turn out to be duds once they are converted into the finished product.

this insistence on a single model also signals from the get go that heterodoxy will not be welcome.  the layout is by design as impersonal as legal documents and police reports.  it is unnatural, forbidding, and standoffish.  to write a script this way is not unlike joining the army and having to put on a uniform.  the latter alone now defines you.  you have left behind your personality, what made you "you".  a stereotypical script is likely to ensue.

3

although it is still imperative nowadays to submit a screenplay in the expected format, it doesn't mean the work has to be engendered that way.

chances are you will start thinking about your topic long before there is a need to coalesce your cogitations in writing.  use your cell phone to record your ideas whenever and wherever they come to you.  when you begin shaping the material, it doesn't matter whether you use a pencil or a fountain pen, scratch paper or standard letter-size.  if a typewriter is your thing, use it.  if you prefer a computer, think of using different fonts or colors to distinguish the protagonists so you don't have to write their names time and time again.

insofar as the content is concerned, follow the lead of **marinetti** and think of the page as a creative furnace that welcomes whatever material you decide to throw in.  dialogue doesn't have to be your first concern.  you could start by jotting down visual information if it helps you access the mood or the tension in a scene.  describe what the camera sees or the movement it performs.  don't forget about the rest of the audio either.  what are the sounds connected to the locales occupied by the characters?  what do we hear outside?  jot down the lines of a song that you think would work well with the scene.  finally, add whatever material is helping you catch a feel for a character or a place: a eucalyptus bark, an old photograph, a colorful piece of cloth, a dash of cologne…

my point is that it is important to separate the creative process from the ultimate presentation that goes to an agent.  create the work your way, then and only then "translate" it into the required format.

4

in a screenplay the indented lines are meant to provide all the information needed for a
reader (as opposed to a spectator) to understand the story as it moves forward.  this
concentration on dialogue is nonsensical for two reasons.  first, didn't harold pinter once
remind us that silence is often a lot more revealing than words?  for silence doesn't mean
that nothing is going on.  to the contrary, it can intimate an internal state of being so
agitated or confused that, for a moment, language fails the protagonist.  second, as already
suggested, the words we come up with reflect imperfectly the thinking and emotions that
give birth to them.  or they too may be but symptoms pointing to something more
problematic going on inside the person.  they should thus be taken with a grain of salt.  use
dialogue therefore only when you have exhausted the breadth of information we access by
looking at images: the faces of the actors, what they look at, how they stand, what they do,
the furniture around them, the posters on the wall, the light in the room, the rain falling
outside, etc.  there are thousands of ways to exteriorize what is going on in a tale.
screenwriters are thus in a mire.  what they produce is a necessarily truncated version of
the film's final presentation.  adopted in a different historical epoch, dialogue is counted on,
but fails, to provide the future film with a solid foundation.

5

reading involves more than mechanically translating black dots on paper into words.  the
process requires that we articulate each one "aloud" inside our head as we fly over the chain
that links them.  on top of that, when reading a dramatic piece like a screenplay, one
cannot do so indifferently.  one seeks to own the words, to dance with the text.  reading
therefore is not a flat, objective operation, it involves a performance on our part.  the choice
of words thus matters a great deal, as does the rhythm of the sentence and the incisiveness
of the style.  being restricted to dialogue, screenwriters are naturally impelled to come up
with material that reads well, a verbal exchange more fit for the theater than film.

6

our assumption reading a screenplay is that it tells the truth.  whereas we take for granted
that history is open to updates and revisions, we normally surmise that the events
described in a fictional tale actually happen exactly that way and that what the characters
say to each other is factual.  but that doesn't have to be the case.  if we construe for instance
the lines on the page as a transcript from a hidden microphone, it is possible to direct the
scene with the participants, aware they are being recorded, amending what they say as a
result.  suddenly we would no longer trust what is being said.  facial expressions and
actions would become a lot more relevant.  alternatively, we can imagine that the person in
charge of the transcript turns out to be a dishonest fellow, hired by one of the protagonists
to doctor the original document.  if the case, one could stage a scene in a way that makes
possible a revised version of the event later in the film (à la *the conversation*).

7

we also often take for granted that writing and directing are distinct activities.  in fact, the events occurring in the story, the settings that are suggested, the dialogue for sure, all this constitutes a preamble, a first staging, a mise en place of the future film.  the term is used (among other realms) in the restaurant business.  it speaks of the work of the kitchen staff to make sure that all the ingredients needed for the menu as well as tonight's specials are available.  put another way, the chef will work out her magic only out of what is there: no chilean sea bass with a caper sauce tonight if the fish was unavailable.

the same situation applies to movies.  an example: if the first scenes in a screenplay involve going back and forth between a man's drive to the airport and a woman in a plane landing at jfk, well, regardless of who the director is, we are going to see basically the same images on the screen.  ryan gosling, manhattan, and the traffic on one side, jennifer lawrence, the flight attendants, and the final preparations for landing on the other.  idem in the terminal: it makes no difference whether a steadicam follows him as he barrels his way around passengers or we see him rushing forward through her pov.  regardless of the inventiveness of the staging, we are stuck with components we have seen too many times in films.  would moving the encounter from jfk to grand central terminal help?  not likely.  what about skipping the preamble all together and start the film with a close-up of the two kissing?

the problem therefore is that all too often the mise en place embedded in the screenplay finds its way in the film's mise en scene.  as truffaut once put it, the director then ends up merely illustrating the story.  when this is taking place, the essential process of recreating the story from the film's perspective is forfeited.

8

if you bunch up together all the letters that make up the text in a screenplay page, you end up covering only a small portion of it.  what is left—the blank in the page—is a signifier in its own right.  it provides room for reveries.  it also speaks of all that is left for the director to do.

so, instead of remaining indifferent to the future of the script, the writing should invite the director to touch base.  it should tempt him/her to shake it up, deform it, re-create it in such a way as to release its full potentiality.  in other words, it must call for what is not yet in it. how can this be done?  in *sunrise* carl mayer used question marks throughout his script.  by so doing, he drew murnau into a discussion on how best to proceed.  it may very well be then that the best screenplay would be the one where little or nothing of it is left once the film is complete.  the film devouring the screenplay?

9

"the character wants something".  in the mechanics of screenwriting, these four words are supposed to be the sesame leading to a successful project.  at times the goal is psychological

in nature, for instance to do something that will redeem the character in his/her own eyes (*on the waterfront*).  other times, it is to successfully execute an assignment of some sort (the *mission: impossible* series).  last but not least, our protagonist can also embark on a journey to acquire some physical object (*raiders of the lost ark*).  what it is doesn't really matter: it is just a macguffin in hitchcock's terms.  not so coincidentally, to want something is the expected behavior of consumers in a market economy.  as for the obstacles encountered during the narrative journey, they tend to be other human beings.  it is therefore enough to eliminate them for everything in the world to be fine and dandy again (the end of *schindler's list*).

somehow through it all, we are made to believe that anyone can achieve anything as long as he or she keeps at it.  how realistic is that?  in fact, most of the decisions we make in life are routine.  they follow a personal pattern we are comfortable with.  events that demand more of us are truly exceptional.  beyond that, the "character wants something" model conceals what actually circumscribes even our everyday choices.  indeed, each society, at any given time in history, offers its members a range of options to pursue and goods to purchase. what someone can realistically covet though is governed by one's station in life: social status, wealth, education, connections, class, gender, race,  etc.  whereas in our films the world is presented as a cornucopia available to all, what i am likely to covet is what anyone in my social status would also be expected to fancy.  we may all want a car, but some of us are thinking of a tesla while others can't afford anything more than a used corolla. protagonists in hollywood movies however never have such problems.  they can pursue their goal through thick or thin.  they can take a break from a job and fly to europe on a whim. and they certainly never have to wait for a bus.

10

in hollywood movies, the goal remains steadfast till the end of the tale.  independent and foreign films tend to be more adventurous in this area.  in *l'avventura* , having first embarked on a search for a missing friend, a couple ends up having an affair neither of them anticipated early on.  in *friday night*, whatever the main character had in mind before she got stuck in a massive traffic jam no longer matters.  the bulk of the film deals with what happens to her after she gives up any hope of getting to her destination.  in such films then, unanticipated events force the characters to abandon their plan and go along instead with what life is throwing at them.

11

if goals and obstacles are so important, wouldn't they also impact the very writing of the script?  what does the screenwriter want out of it?  is it money?  recognition?  a career?  the need for a commercial success after a number of disappointments?  doesn't knowing what sells and what doesn't pressure writers to develop only a certain kind of material?  who are the villains that keep them from producing better work?  why aren't they gotten rid of? unlike the fictional mysteries that are cleared up at the end of the film, these very real

interferences remain under wraps.  yet they greatly circumscribe the range of films that end up on our screens.

## directing

1

**bazin** once famously divided directors between those who cajole the image and those who find their inspiration in the world.  put another way, some filmmakers believe their own skills more important than whatever content they must work with.  for others, it is the other way around.  they do not want their own filmmaking to obscure or even compete with the material they are shooting.  they thus pilot their films straight into the bog of the world. whereas the first group always dominated, today it towers over the latter.  this is largely because filmmakers, like everyone else, spend most of their time looking at devices instead of exploring the world around them.  as a result, their inspiration is likely to remain second hand, limited to what has already been turned into images.  soon enough a creative impasse is reached.  in contrast, the world—"reality" in bazin's terms—is welcoming, wide open, and inexhaustible.  it never stops giving itself to us, feeding our imagination with unexpected encounters and new experiences.

2

it takes time to learn a craft.  not in the sense that any aspect of the production process is particularly difficult to master, but coming up with a portrayal of life that is not just believable but compelling enough for others to watch is definitely a time-consuming process.  a single example: even though he had years of experience as a still photographer and had made a couple of shorts, kubrick's first feature was a disaster.  as a novice, he was already skillful with composition and light but maladroit with staging and incompetent with actors.  he had to catch on, then excel in these areas prior to integrating them within the overall visual style that became his trademark.  the continuing encounter with the material is thus what hones your skills.  having more experience under your belt makes it easier to figure out why something is not working and what to do instead.

you'll feel it instantly the first time you get everything right in a shot.  a flush of adrenalin will suddenly electrify your body.  there will be an intense sense of elation.  better yet, something has changed deep inside of you.  you now realize that if you managed this feat once, you will be able to do it again in the future.  in other words, this is the moment when you know for sure you are a filmmaker.

3

learning on the job was thus for a long time the only way to become proficient in filmmaking.  some like kubrick were quick learners.  for others, it took longer: ford made

many, many dreadful movies before *stagecoach* and little in bergman's early films hinted at what was to come.  today the industry no longer grants anyone this privilege.  you have to excel by day one.  this is important because an advice often given to budding filmmakers is to take the plunge and shoot a feature immediately after leaving film school.  if all goes well, the film is noticed at sundance, a distribution contract is signed, and your career takes off.  unfortunately, the strategy doesn't work too often.  many have taken the advice, gambled all, but, rejected at sundance, had to open in one of the 3,000 festivals where distributors never set foot.  afterwards, the unreleased film acts as an albatross around the filmmaker's neck, undermining his or her confidence.  furthermore, actors and co-workers won't expect the next project to do any better and its author eventually gives up filmmaking altogether.

face the fact: unless you are orson welles, it is highly unlikely that your first feature will be any good.  instead, shoot it with a micro budget and learn from your mistakes.  then try your hand at a second one and see how that one turns out.  but, and this is important, make your bad films in private.  don't attempt to release any movie before it is one you are proud of, one that can actually do the job for you.

4

film students often envision a director as a general giving orders that are dutifully carried out by the troops under his/her command.  true enough, blockbuster films require a huge personality at the helm because of the size of the enterprise, the money involved, the large number of people, and the thousands of issues that need immediate answer.  one imagines jim cameron on the top deck of the *titanic* directing his people with a loudspeaker…  in low budget films however, the strict hierarchy that keeps people segregated and demarcates who can speak to whom is mitigated by the quieter, more congenial environment, making it possible for all on the set to contribute to the film beyond their usual activities.  in this way, a shoot can become more like a jazz session with musicians embellishing various musical motifs that are improvised during the gig.  in this case at least, can we talk of the director as a coordinator, a channeler, an ombudsman, someone who contacts the thinking, feeling, questions, suggestions, and resistances, co-workers may have about any part of the project?

this difference between hollywood and independent films explains why the transition from the latter to the former can be a traumatic experience for directors.  at times it is the war-horses on the set who frustrate the newcomer because they are unable to accommodate a different way of shooting (e.g. the director of photography in arthur penn's *the chase*).  at other times, it is a movie star who undermines the novice director by reminding everyone on the set who is really in charge (frank perry's experience while shooting *the swimmer*).  even though they know this, most independent filmmakers still jump at the chance to make a hollywood film should the occasion arise.

5

on the page of a screenplay, all the lines have equal importance.  at this stage of the project the camera is assumed to be looking at whoever is speaking.  this doesn't mean you have to shoot (or edit) it this way.  there are times when the listener is more interesting than the speaker.  an example borrowed from camus: where do you point the camera?  toward the woman drowning in the river or the man who pretends he doesn't hear her screams for help?

sometimes, it can also be more effective to suggest an action than to visualize it.  why show the fate of the general's son in *the hateful eight*?  the scene, made up of uninspired shots, merely illustrates major marquis warren's narration.  staying inside the cabin would have forced us to watch the impact of his words on the general's face, in the end a more harrowing experience.  here, uncustomarily, tarantino lost sight of what makes his cinema so unique.  whereas in most films action is connected with people rushing this way or that, in his, the dueling starts when they sit down and begin to speak.

6

any scene opens a world: what is there, what do we see?  a restaurant, a supermarket, an antique store?  unless you push yourself, these views are likely to remain trite.  so do not select a location solely because of convenience or money.  look at all your options.  is there something about this particular store that caught your eye?  the brick façade maybe or the single palm tree in front of the doorway?  beyond this, remember that your protagonist, just like every other customer, has something in mind when patronizing these places: a date with patricia, a list of goods to buy, or a wicker basket that may look good in the living room.  that goal gives you a direction, a path to follow.  finally, your personage is (hopefully) also likely to notice things others in the same location may not pay attention to: the small stain on the carpet next to the back wall of the restaurant, the belgian shepherd waiting patiently for his master in front of the supermarket, the 1940 film year book discovered by chance in the antique store.  in this way, what would otherwise comes forth as stale perspectives is vivified through uncommon observation.

7

the directing job thus consists in bringing slowly into existence a custom-built view of the world.  exceptional directors like parajanov, tarkovsky, etc., are masters at it.  but all good directors are skillful at transforming things: a plain hotel hallway that suddenly takes on an eerie appearance; a decrepit wall that shows itself the perfect background behind a fallen gangster; a mangy dog meandering its way through a street that speaks of what is happening to the protagonist.

most films however never manage to get this far.  why?  well, the story is recycled from other films, characters behave just as we expect them, actors go through the motions, the lighting is predictable, the décor stale, the images worn-out, and the pace familiar.  in one

word, the whole project is mechanical, spiritless.  at times though, even in an otherwise forgettable movie, a director may suddenly perk up and do something unexpected.  this unforeseen boldness is what made b movies so endearing, for instance the volte-face of mercedes mccambridge in *johnny guitar* or the camera staying on james stewart's back at the end of *the naked spur*.  these moments show wonderful directorial touches.  at other times it is the oddness of a scene that surprises us.  my example comes from a rather conventional film by rossellini, *escape by night*.  the scene takes place in war-torn italy. three escaped war prisoners—an american, a british and a russian—have reached rome in their attempt to rejoin the advancing allied army.  there, they are hidden in an attic by sympathizing italians.  it is christmas eve.  hearing on the radio some festive song, they line up, join arms, then step forward and back to the tune of the music.  the scene is the antithesis of cool.  but that is precisely what makes it touching: it feels like something these particular individuals would do, not the polished version a savvy director would normally come up with.  people rarely do anything that could be seen as hokey in films.  rossellini in this scene dared and succeeded.

8

when you stumble upon a movie scene offhand on tv or elsewhere, the encounter is unlikely to be of interest because one misses the context that makes it meaningful to the participants.   it is no more riveting than bits of conversation heard in the subway or a coffee shop.  for us to pay attention, something has to be there beyond the story.  this something can be located in a surprising camera movement or an unusual staging.  the sighting in turn suggests a presence that stands over and above the story world.  the effect is baffling.  it is as if the text contained a watermark.  you know something is there but, in this case, you cannot make it appear.  to put it plainly, what you experience, filigreed in the material, is the unconventional thinking behind it.  the film as a result emerges differently: it appears to be forged individually, not jerry-built according to well-known formulae.  mise en scene, style and authorship are the concepts typically associated with this phenomenon.

9

in france the term mise en scene was first used to earmark the work of theatre directors in support of a play: the staging of the action, the directing of the actors, the overall set design, the costumes, the lights, etc.  so, even though the term was later broadened to include film directors who must also choose the angle and perspective through which we access the scene, its roots remain linked with the physical staging of the scene more than anything to do with the camera.  with mise en scene then, the action's choreography matters more than its filmic aspect.

let's face it, most mise en scenes are hardly innovative—directors not reaching for anything beyond the basics.  conversely, nicholas ray, anthony mann, samuel fuller and others were eventually recognized as significant directors because their more personal mise en scene far exceeded what was expected in genre films.  one example from a b-movie: in *the shooting*,

monte hellman has a cowboy holding a large sack of flour full of holes. responding to a gunshot, he rushes for cover with the bag spewing out billows of white dust behind him. this is not something you can see in any other film. as for angelopoulos, he is known for his elaborate mise en scenes. one example: in *eternity and a day,* the protagonists are lost on a countryside road near the border between greece and albania. they come out of their car and look at something off screen. a slow pan allows us to see what caught their attention: a detention camp for illegal migrants with the inmates clinging on the barbed wire surrounding the site. because the wires are stretched at different heights all the way up to twelve feet, the men end up looking like flies caught in an immense spider web. the darkness, the rain and the fog contribute to the surreal aspect of the scene. this is mise en scene on a grand scale. time is suspended throughout. one is transfixed. one dares not breathe at all.

kiyoshi kurosawa contends that mise en scene is not limited to the space in front of the camera, that it extends behind it as well. this is an intriguing proposition because in the movies the technicians at times intersect with the actors during their performance. in fact, the way the technical personnel operates and the dance movements it sometimes performs have never been really looked into. oftentimes, when the crew is at work, the actors are still doing make-up. other times, when the actors are rehearsing or performing, the crew may be tranquil. now and then, whenever the camera is on a dolly or a steadicam is used, they carry on simultaneously. should the two groups be on the same wavelength? should the ambience in front of the camera be reflected behind it? this consonance, if one wants to achieve it, is not automatic. it makes a difference where the film is shot (studio or location), who shoots it (the size and make-up of the crew, the individual personalities involved) and what equipment is being used (how conspicuous the camera is, the requirements connected to lighting and sound, etc.). details matter. for instance, kurosawa keeps crew members from smoking during a take because the action could undermine the actors' confidence that what they are doing is compelling. in some way then, the atmosphere behind the camera is no less important that the more eye-catching activity taking place in front of it.

10

style, in the classical sense of the term, is not external to the action, a veneer that lifts an otherwise indifferent content. instead, it articulates a director's distinctive vision. that synthesis between form and content is precisely what defines great directors, each approaching his/her subject in a characteristic manner: ozu through his idiosyncratic camera height, ophuls with his elaborate tracking shots, kubrick with his straight ahead, one point perspective system, etc.

the concept however is used more and more to highlight the purely visual treatment of a film aside from its significance. a good example of this trend can be found in the murder scene that starts the police investigation in *nowhere to hide*. the elegance and sophistication of the shots are matchless. the scene even manages to produce a daylight counterpart of the visual mood noir films were known for. not an easy task for a genre film.

the danger of course is that the stunning handling of a scene becomes the sole focus of the director.  when that happens, style is there for its own sake.  and indeed, in contrast to their predecessors, most contemporary filmmakers want very much viewers (and producers) to notice their work.  so whereas mainstream films used to be rather laid back, today it is difficult to find one that doesn't flaunt its look.

as goethe once said, anyone can copy someone else's style but no one can choose his/her own style.  let it come to you.  in time it will.

11

artists do not work in a vacuum.  they piggyback on each other.  they are transformers (yes) before anything else.  yet directors claim to be the sole authors of their films.  it doesn't matter how mediocre the movie actually is, a title proudly proclaims "a film by…".  prior to the sixties, this would have been unthinkable in hollywood.  the writer wrote the script, the director handled the shooting, and the producer remained in charge throughout.  each person did his/her job.  as they themselves like to put it, it was truly a "collaborative" effort.

the grabbing of the overarching title "a film by …", as opposed to just "directed by…", came as a result of a campaign by foreign critics to valorize what was visual in a movie as opposed to its storyline.  it took time but hollywood, over the vehement objections of screenwriters,  eventually went along with what had already become accepted internationally: the directors' sole authorship of their films.

to become a brand however is not without side effects.  people expect it to remain the same. so, just as actors can easily become type casted, directors can find it difficult to shift gear and attempt radically different projects.  should we admire ozu, kaurismäki, and wes anderson for their unwavering film style or perceive their steadfastness as an inability to grow?  are authors faithful to their style because that is who they are?   or are they afraid to abandon what made them successful?

confusingly, the term "author" has been used to put across radically different values.  at times, it privileges writer/directors whose personality overwhelms an entire project (e.g. tarantino).  at other times it is used to extol those directors who display a consistent personal style even though the inspiration for their films stems from material written by others (kubrick).  lastly, it could celebrate those filmmakers whose work was varied and whose style and interests evolved greatly over time (von trier).

do not put the cart before the horse: don't think of yourself as an author.  if others, later in your career, call you that, that's nice but don't let it go to your head.  your job is to make films.  the rest is just fancy talk.

12

when a procedure on the screen catches your eye, it is unwise to attribute the source of your pleasure solely to that trope. in the same way silver halides were positioned randomly on the film's base, each shot is a one-of-the kind event: the encounter between a distinct sensitivity and a slab of reality. to put it differently, the photographed scenery is made up of unique concrete items, a thousand unfathomable details involving the actors, the costumes, the light, the color, the movement, etc. once these elements are grafted together, they cannot be easily disassembled or duplicated (van sant's *psycho*). sometimes the stars line up, often they don't. *casablanca* is remembered as a film when everything just went so marvelously right.

13

characters belong in screenplays. once actors personify them in front of the camera, they become human beings. because people have a purpose when they get together, what they say and do trying to achieve that goal should arise organically from the developing situation. in other words, nothing fanciful or arbitrary should be pressed upon the actors by the director. the latter's sole job at that moment is to help the actors unearth their character's psychological and physical reaction to what is going on. the dialogue of course provides a clue but words, as mentioned earlier, have to be taken with a grain of salt. what is that person really feeling or thinking inside?

it helps therefore for the director to intuit what is going on within each protagonist. what would i feel and do if i were her and this is happening to me? but then, the director has to move back out again and harmonize this particular performance with the others as well as the rest of the aspects important for the scene in toto.

14

how one shoots a scene depends on its **mode of production**. in the most common approach, the director blocks the entire scene with the actors without worrying about the camera. when finalized, the scene can proceed non-stop as if it were happening in ordinary life. only then does blocking give way to its sidekick, coverage. that is to say, the director now "covers" the autonomous action from various angles and assorted shot sizes. on paper, coverage is infinite. in practice, time and budget constraints limit what can be done. typically, a master is taken first, followed by a medley of mediums and close-ups. more than anything else, coverage functions as an insurance policy. for, regardless of the weakness of an actor or the slowness of the action, the editor will be able to make something decent out of the multiple standpoints.

although this procedure is often taken for granted, it is not without shortcomings. first of all, it is not cheap. insofar as coverage takes longer to shoot, it means more weeks of paying personnel and renting sets, equipment, costumes, locations, etc. inherent in this approach is also the fact that, during the process, one does not presume to know how the

scene will eventually play out, whether it will start with a full shot of the man as he enters the room or with a close-up of the woman looking up from reading a book.  so you shoot it all now and decide later in post which configuration works best.

since nothing new can make its way into the scene once it is blocked (the issue of continuity), it means that one is working the entire time with a corpse instead of a living body.  not a pleasant prospect for the actors who have to go over the same lines and actions again and again.

finally, coverage precludes a narrative voice.  this is so because one essentially follows the character around.  the independent, self-propelled action comes first.  the shooting is subservient to it.  however numerous or diverse, the shots only catch this or that aspect of what's going on.  another way of saying this is that the live event trumps the filmic potential of the scene.  coverage is therefore inimical to authorship.  most times, it makes little difference whether this director or that one is in charge.  as **noel burch** once put it, this mode of representation is institutional rather than personal.  what matters most of all in this instance is the story and it literally tells itself.

15

découpage is an alternative to coverage.  the crucial difference between the two methods is that here no blocking precedes the shooting.  instead of catching various views of an autonomous self-sustained action, the view from the camera determines where the actors are and what they do in the shot.  the narrative is therefore organized along a string of predesigned images.   each shot works as a unit advancing the story forward.  no bit is duplicated.  no moment is recorded from another angle.  needless to say, because fewer shots are taken of each scene, the shooting is faster and cheaper.

simply put, in découpage, narration is given the upper hand over the narrative (the beginning of *blue* provides a good example).  what we access on the screen—the filmic presentation of an action—is filtered through a unique personality.  instead of being stuck in the events, we see them through a distinct point of view.  even though the narrator does not appear in person, he or she is instrumental in our appreciation of the tale.  whereas with coverage the story is the prime concern, with découpage the film comes first.

an additional bonus: if you watch in *400 blows* the scenes where father and son are spending the evening together, you can observe how, with a little thinking ahead of time, découpage allows you to bypass many continuity issues.

an obvious drawback: editors do not have much breathing room to help a scene that didn't turn out the way it was meant to.  découpage also does not guarantee a better film.  if the director's vision stinks…  beyond this, the procedure can be construed as a typical instance of what **barthes** characterizes as western cultural arrogance since descartes: the drive to assert one's power or control over all areas of discourse.  simply put, there is the risk of the director behaving as a little dictator on the set.

16

if coverage postpones the final arrangement of the shots till post and découpage implements a vision of the scene that preceded its actualization during the shoot, improvisation allows those on the set to discover what the scene is about at the very moment it comes into play. cinema—an immensely expensive venture for most of the twentieth century—was not a natural for experimentation. it took **dogma 95** to give us (briefly) a clue of what working this way makes possible.  the specific items found in the movement's "vow of chastity" do not matter.  any prohibition forces you to look elsewhere, that is to say, to find another way to do the same thing.  to exclude a procedure always sharpens creativity.  less is more.  the result (e.g. *the celebration*) is unlike anything we are accustomed to see in traditionally shot movies.

most times, in movies, one ends up with what was first written, then rehearsed with the actors.  to let others—actors or crew—do something that was not coached implies a radical rethinking of our assumptions regarding the directing job.  it is now about discovering where the work organically leads to as opposed to controlling its path every step of the way. it is about giving up the autocratic approach in favor of a truly communal effort.  no doubt about it, it takes guts to undertake a film like *boyhood*, not knowing whether the actors will still be there and willing years from now!  yet, to see something radically new happening under one's eyes is the most exhilarating experience in an artist's life .

improvisation is clearly not for everybody.  most of the films produced under dogma 95 failed to convince critically but this was not because they went too far, it was because the directors blindly followed the rules without understanding what they were meant to bring about.

17

traditionally, directors use numerous takes to sharpen what is at first only an amorphous idea in their head.  so they keep shooting till something clicks.  can we do better than shooting multiple takes of the same action?  why always shoot one for safety?

instead, let's employ one of deleuze's ideas on **difference and repetition** and make each take a variation on the last.  something fruitful might suddenly blossom under your eyes.

yet another tactic: if everyone knows that only one take will be shot of the scene, there will be pressure on all to do it right.

18

a film camera allowed only one person to see what was being recorded during the shoot: the operator.  customarily directors were satisfied observing the action while sitting next to the camera (do directors sit because they want to see the scene as the audience would?).  as soon as video assist technology was introduced however, they relocated themselves in front

of a monitor, away from the actors and the camera.  this move felt right for a generation of filmmakers who were a lot more concerned about the look of their images than their predecessors.  they could also ascertain that the operator did exactly what he/she had been told to do.  at last, they surmised, all their intentions would be implemented.

unsurprisingly, the relocation had unintended consequences.  earlier on, by sitting next to the camera, a director would still access the entire action even though the camera at the time was capturing only a close-up of the female protagonist.  the director could thus notice something her partner just did, or a detail elsewhere, and then introduce that bit as a new element in future takes (at least when shooting découpage).  far from being set in stone, the scene was thus allowed to evolve organically.

on the video screen, the situation is radically different.  the directors' main concern is now the seen of the scene.  and, within that, they are fixated on their directorial intentions, whether they clearly came across or not.  no longer accessing the scene in its global environment, they can only put finishing touches to something that has already been reduced to an image.

looked at from a wider perspective, video assist technology is a manifestation of cold scientific detachment.  it typifies the **cartesian** subject-object dichotomy.  in the same way scientists observe tiny organisms through a microscope, directors inspect and evaluate the worth of a scene after having excerpted it out of its natural environment.  no longer fellow human beings, the actors are treated as specimens to be scrutinized and regulated.

19

the immediacy of digital allows for the editor to show a rough cut of the scenes to the director much earlier than before.  this allows the latter to think of adjustments and retake the shots when everyone and everything are still on deck.  the assumption here, once again, is that the more a filmmaker is in control of the material, the better the film will turn out in the end.  the opposite  viewpoint, which i share, is that mistakes, errors, and miscalculations do not necessarily tarnish a film for they can lead to breakthroughs elsewhere that leave it sharpened.

20

directors are now unequivocally the flag bearers of their films.  all eyes are on them.  actors surely, but also crew members, count on them to guide them successfully through the chaos of production.  if people notice a loss of spirit, they will no longer do their best and the project will collapse.

21

if the screenplay is the caterpillar and the film is the butterfly, directing a film is analogous to the mutation that takes place during the chrysalis process.  despite video assist and the rest of the new digital technology, that process remains as murky as ever.


## acting

1

the face of the actor turns toward us, the eyes look up, the lips open slightly, words emerge from the mouth, the timbre of the voice captivates us.  we may not know at this point what is going on but we are already hooked.  with good actors, even the tiniest moment can have an intensity that leaves us breathless.  look at liv ullmann in *face to face*:  at times she takes you where no one has gone before in a film.

2

yet actors are merely human beings who, more adventurous than the rest of us, are willing to let go their usual self and experience instead the inner life of protagonists who are probably eons away from their own nature.

professional actors are also able to alter themselves physically, using their body, and moving around as they imagine their character would.  and, let's not forget, they are able to remember lots of lines, yet owning the words in a way that heightens the tension in the scene.

there is still more: when they perform, actors join forces to bring into existence a make-believe world.  to put it simply, they concoct a zone for themselves.  sadly in film, as opposed to theater, the spell doesn't last very long as they are constantly brought back to reality by the director's "cut!".

actors are therefore fascinating beings to work with.  it really doesn't matter what technique they use to impersonate another human being.  let them find their own way into the character once you both agree on the general parameters that define the personage.  after that, it's a question of modulating the performance.  never lecture an actor, talk to him/her as one human being to another.  work together to find the truth of the protagonist in that situation.

3

words on paper do not automatically come alive when enacted.  laurent cantet therefore suggests taking advantage of casting for testing some of the dialogue, even letting the actors (some of them at least) paraphrase it or improvise with it to see if something better

can suddenly show up.  rohmer went even further at times, writing only indirect speech in the script, then letting actors come up with the actual lines during the shoot.

4

when casting a film the filmmaker is familiar with the script.  so the omniscient director is likely to select an actor based upon what will happen to the character as opposed to how it is initially encountered.  in other words, someone is picked because he or she "fits the part".  this kind of contamination is naturally difficult to prevent.  yet it might be more interesting to choose actors based on how the characters understand themselves at the beginning of the story.

5

when operating with a micro budget it is unlikely you'll be working with experienced actors.  you'll get beginners or people who have been around but, for some reason, aren't much in demand.  so the job is harder, not so much because they are necessarily bad actors, but because they are unlikely to commit fully to your project for two reasons.  first, they are not getting paid and, second, they will give you what is easiest for them: a formulaic interpretation of the part.  indeed a constant pitfall when reading a script (not just for actors but for everyone) is to relate the role to movie protagonists one is already familiar with.  as soon as this happens, the character is pigeonholed and it becomes almost impossible to flesh it out.

6

as we know, the command "action!" gets the actors going.  the connotation is that some arresting activity, a physical action of some kind, is essential for the scene to be momentous and the characters memorable.

the hitting of the sticks (a sound that brackets the opening of a different universe) may also make actors believe they are responsible for telling the story.  acting then becomes reduced to transmitting signs through words and body language.  this is problematic insofar as characters are supposed to get through their life in real time, unaware they are creating in our mind impressions that will eventually solidify as a story.  so we should do all we can to immerse actors in their characters' present (not their scripted future) in order to make their words and actions as genuine as possible.

 7

beyond this, there is also the fact that in most films the "action" that is performed is the one that has just been rehearsed.  which brings up another question: why are we so fearful that something unpredictable might happen on the set?  in other words, the protocol keeps the open-endedness of the shooting situation in check.  yet, among all the arts, film remains uniquely suited to record life as it happens.

so it is interesting to consider another meaning for "action". `hannah arendt` uses the word to describe a transformative act taken by someone in the political realm. the man holding up the tanks in tiananmen square in 1989 is a perfect example of such individual deed. no one told him what to do. he himself had surely no idea he would do something so momentous that day. with a grocery bag hanging from each hand he was probably back from shopping at a local store when he saw the tanks. outraged at their presence in the middle of the city (this is what the japanese did!), he stood in front of them, blocking their way, not knowing whether they were going to ride over him.

on a much modest scale, actors working in `dogma 95` films can exercise a similar freedom. instead of having to perform the scene as rehearsed, they can originate an action neither themselves nor the director knew was coming up.

8

because most of our life is spent doing mundane tasks, we hardly remember any of them. hence we tend to privilege emotionally charged moments, e.g. when a friend or a loved one opens up and reveals something deeply personal. we also lionize such occurrences in documentaries. who can forget marceline's tears in *chronicle of a summer* or neal at 42 (in apted's *up series)* when he confronts the fact his life has been a failure? we are moved because the immediacy and rawness of the human revelation catches us by surprise. such situations are also the bread and butter of fictional drama. the outcome in this case however is far from guaranteed for viewers are on the lookout for any sign of mendacity in the presentation. something fishy about a glance of the actor, an inconsistency in the face or a false move will be immediately noticed and the suspension of disbelief is gone.

9

to avoid such misstep, the advice often given to actors is to act "real". what do people who say this actually have in mind? surely everyone agrees that when someone's acting is unconvincing it is as painful as hearing a musician play off-key (*to joy*). so actors are encouraged to ground their behavior in the script in some prior, dramatic circumstance that continues to resonate in the character. in other words, a motive (a back-story) is created in order to make sense of a situation. this of course is not unlike reverse engineering: the present shaping the past, the effect, as `nietzsche` told us, generating the cause.

there is more though. in ordinary life we have learned from childhood onwards to imitate parents, friends, and others around us. later on we also imitate what we see on tv and in the movies: in truffaut's *mischief makers,* a kid, an invisible machine gun in his hands, rat-ta-tat-tats other boys who, pretending to be shot, fall to the ground in slow motion. are adults any different? for the sociologist `erving goffman`, role playing is a fundamental component of daily life. for instance, we do not behave identically when interviewing for a position, having a drink with friends in a bar, or reading a book to a child at night. we bring out in each situation a demeanor we have observed elsewhere. we harmonize our

comportment in line with norms we have become familiar with.  these norms, needless to say, are those trotted out by the local culture.

so the real in acting "real" is made up mostly of mimicry.  it is not just that the antecedents imagined by actors have not been personally lived and thus tend to be generic in nature, they actually end up imitating what is already an imitation.  because of this the impersonation is likely to be trite.  it thus helps for an actor to construct his/her character on more idiosyncratic ground.  only then will the behavior, produced organically from within, has a chance of being compelling.

10

if we act all the time, why is it that most of us are inept in front of a camera?  if body builders and professional wrestlers can do it, why not the rest of us?  somehow we freeze as soon as we must "act".  informal acting is easy but a bona fide performance is just too much to ask.  despite this, it pays, at times, to hire non-actors.  casting agencies, unfortunately, are useless in this regard.  bruno dumont's method is to look for interesting faces in the most unlikely places, e.g. the unemployment office or a line at a supermarket.  he says he is not looking for someone whose looks or demeanor would fit the character he has in mind.  rather he seeks individuals who possess a quality that compels people to pay attention.  moreover, knowing that a non-actor will generally have difficulties playing someone else, dumont then adjusts the original character to fit the idiosyncrasies of that particular individual.  you can see the extraordinary result of this strategy in *humanité*.

mixing actors and non-actors can also be stimulating because neither party is comfortable with the other.  for both, the situation is daunting.  the non-actor dreads being found lacking compared to the professional whereas the latter fears his/her portrayal will be shown fraudulent compared to the less affected approach of the former.  this keeps both parties from becoming too cocky.

11

not all directors believe acting "real" is the way to go.  bresson, to take the most famous example, was known to curtail his actors' performance till they became as impassive as possible.  no affected line reading, no underlying emotion.  in his films the actors appear to wear a neutral mask, the same one all the time, regardless of the circumstances.  when someone wears a mask, there is an imbalance between the face we see and the words we hear.  inevitably this style of acting is perceived as stilted by audiences accustomed to visible displays of emotion.  in general, bresson's way of working with actors is best when enacted in sparsely furnished rooms or overtly theatrical settings.

in hal hartley's early films, the actors do not attempt to own the words spoken by their characters.  rather they let the text speaks through them.  put another way, the lines are not embodied as is normally the case.  yet, even though hartley violates well-established

acting principles, the lighter tone and the dry humor in his films help make the presentation more palatable to a large audience.

12

beyond acting "real", to be "there", "present", or "in the moment" are probably the most heard catchphrases in acting classes. although they must be in character at all times (even when the camera is looking at their partner), the actors are naturally most exposed when they deliver their lines. this is when they have to be convincing. this is the moment of truth. the situation thus recalls a court room where the jury's decision is often based on the overall "performance" of those who take the stand. the witnesses or the accused is thus scrutinized during the direct or the cross-examination. is this person saying the truth? is his or her testimony heartfelt? one could easily have given the members of the jury all the relevant material on paper, e.g. the police reports, eyewitness testimonies, even a signed confession by the accused. but these documents would lack the human coloring that is so important in our ability to assess whether someone is truthful or not. in short, we believe that speech comes from the heart whereas writing is removed and dispassionate. for **derrida** however, the language system we use, with its vocabulary, its grammar, its conventions, necessarily preexists any individual speech. to express our thoughts to others, we have no choice but to take up an impersonal communication system. in short, the utterances which we believe are organically ours are mediated (fouled up?) from the get go.

in acting, the situation is even more complex for the hierarchy that conventionally privileges speech over writing is inverted, the written dialogue in the screenplay preceding the actors' speech. hence the presence that appears to emanate from the actors when they deliver their lines, far from originating from an organic symbiosis between what they say and what they experience internally, is necessarily always a counterfeit. not only that, in this state of affairs, the past (the written script) asserts itself over the present. it smothers it. it sucks life out of it. the performers are fated to reenact, time and time again, a dramatic situation that had been waiting for them to arrive on the set. the affair is a cheerless manifestation of **the eternal return**. only with improvisation are actors able to experience the present in unanticipated ways.

13

three additional caveats make it difficult for an actor to be "in the moment". first, as uta hagen once acknowledged, to be fully present as the character is almost an impossible feat to achieve. one always remains aware of how well a sentence came out, whether it was convincing or not, etc. should we then say that performers are doubly conscious, shifting back and forth between their character and themselves? if the case, where is the "there" of an actor? second, since method actors are urged to ground their performance in a personal memory that helps them come up with the right portrayal in the play's own circumstances, they appear to be fully "in the moment" when they are in fact farthest away from it. third, when one asks of actors to be "there", one is in fact encouraging them to put on an act, that

is to say, to dramatize the situation for effect's sake.  this is tricky.  on the one hand the actor needs to be impressive.  on the other hand, one does not want to turn the character into a commodity the actor uses in order to ensnare the audience.

in the end, the emotional gush we respond to when watching an actor perform stems from a ghost that has only temporarily lodged itself in a human being's body.  the offshoot is a mere figure of our imagination.  far from being truly "there", that figure keeps eluding us, always slipping further out of reach the instant we believe we are getting hold of it.

14

in iran, actors cannot touch, kiss, or engage in foreplay with their fellow thespians.  in the west, we are lucky to live without such censorship.  sex scenes however are rarely convincing.  think about it: always the same blue moonlight that illuminates the bed, the intense kissing that starts the lovemaking, the head that explores the other's body, the hand that caresses a breast or a hip, etc.  far from being in character in these moments, actors are performing generic moves.  worse, such scenes are fundamentally fraudulent: there is never a misstep, the synchronization between the partners is flawless throughout, and everyone is always so good at it.  sex in other words is given a hagiographic treatment.  what will it take for actors to say "no"?  even a feeble rebuff might force directors to reconsider and become more creative.  hasn't the history of the medium made clear that to evoke desire is a lot more effective than showing its explicit gratification?

15

to sum up: actors are multifaceted beings, capable of juggling their own temperament as well as the personality of their character, the circumstances of the play as well as real life events, the ideology that infused the writing of the play as well as that impacting the current times.  in this way actors are truly thaumaturges who manage simultaneously not only what is immediately present but also that which, though absent, nevertheless makes the here and now what it is.

## lighting

1

a cave, a long, long time ago.  flames shoot up from a fire.  they surge, retreat, then rise again.  in the flickering light, someone is drawing a bison on a wall.

the expressive power of primeval light: that is still what we must aim for.

2

you cannot touch light but it touches you.  by applying pressure on the retina, light rays imprint themselves in our body.  some of these impressions remain with us through our entire life.

3

there are sources of light, some natural, some artificial,  but darkness doesn't have a source.  even though we don't think of it that way, it is truly our abode, our reference point, our default environment.  even so, we are not self-assured in its midst.  we grope for things, we fumble around.  as our certainties weaken though, our prejudices subside as well.

we often think of darkness as the place of mystery, the unsaid, the unknown, the void.  but it is also where everything springs from, the womb from which beings and objects suddenly emerge in full, resplendent colors.  only afterwards, in the light, do we pay attention to them.  only then do we see each for what it is, in its uniqueness: this man, this cup, this chair, this table.  each reveals itself to us.

if the shot starts and all is lighted, beings and things are taken for granted.  the light keeps them from appearing.

4

light wraps itself imperially on the objects it illuminates.  it blends into their matter, changing their appearance, giving them a color, look or trait that wasn't there before.  under its aegis, the world reveals itself protean, modifiable at will.  it is light that makes the world what it is every time we look.

5

for all its imperial magnificence, light produces its own darkness when its rays encounter an opaque body.  unlike ambient darkness that can be gotten rid of at the flick of a switch, shadows are there to stay.  they are also multifaceted.  they vary their shape during the day.  they multiply themselves in a room lighted by several sources.  while mimicking their model, they can  skew them, e.g. when they intersect perpendicular planes like a wall and a floor.

for **jung**, the human shadow reflects the hidden, dark side of our personality.

6

individualism anchors ideology in the united states.  it is not surprising therefore that lighting privileges the principals on the screen.  their faces are exquisitely chiseled, made to glow as those in george hurrell's photographs.  they are not only lighted preferentially compared to others, they are also individuated in whatever environment they happen to be

in. conversely, because public sentiment in europe is generally more communal than in the umited states (some would say socialistic), it follows that, in films, spaces are lighted first and foremost, the protagonists receiving hardly any supplemental treatment.

7

lighting's seminal moment in film goes all the way back to 1915 when alvin wyckoff put a practical light next to the protagonist in the opening shot of *the cheat.* in so doing, he made lighting dwell in the characters' world. from that point on, films showed people lighted more or less as they would be in everyday life.

this said, movies were still in black and white. the image was therefore not yet entirely realistic. although the contents—people, furniture, streets—looked real enough, the medium somehow transfigured them, giving them a more formal appearance. black and white thus magically positioned all entities at a perfect distance from everyday reality. without ennobling it, the monochromatic image gave the world a stately look.

in that environment, lighting didn't have to be fully lifelike. actors moving through space could be illuminated without having to justify the scheme every step of the way. two shadows behind an actor didn't bother anybody. and no one was troubled by radical lighting adjustments on faces whenever the camera showed the same situation from a different angle. all of that was perfectly acceptable because of the abstract nature of black and white photography.

when color came in, technicolor dominated the scene. because the process favored well saturated, not quite realistic hues (look at women's red lips), cinematographers only tweaked their way of doing things. it is only when kodak introduced the eastmancolor monopack with its much more true-to-life color palette that things started to change. all of a sudden what used to be acceptable looked rather ungainly. still it took nestor almendros to delineate what would soon become a new paradigm in professional lighting. drawing on an approach developed by georges de la tour and rembrandt, he fought against implausible lighting effects in otherwise realistic settings (take a look at the use of candles in dreyer's *vampyr*). in his own images, he therefore aimed at replicating more accurately what would normally happen in our everyday world. although less showy than the gilded illumination found in the classical cinema, naturalistic lighting did not abandon the entire paradigm: it still glamorized as well as described, seduced as well as informed, signified as well as laid bare.

8

since then the naturalistic scheme has been applied mindlessly to countless films. to say that the prototype has become suffocating is an understatement. it doesn't seem to matter whether it is this room or that one, denton, texas or bozeman, montana, a generic

treatment is applied to all.  from the opening image of most films, the lighting in effect tells us that nothing is going to happen here that hasn't happened thousands of times before elsewhere.

9

once this skeletal scheme is in place, adjustments are made based on what happens in the story globally and in each scene in particular.  what this means is that, having read the script, directors of photography (dps) stealthily dramatize the atmosphere in view of narrative developments yet to come.  let us take hitchcock's *suspicion* as an example.  the protagonist arrives at home driving her convertible.  as she exits the car, the illumination suddenly darkens.  a cloud surely must have obscured the sun for a moment.  once inside, she advances cautiously in the parlor while what looks like a gigantic spider web is seen on the wall behind her.  no doubt the pattern originates from a large skylight in the ceiling. naturalistic lighting thus plays a double game.  on the one hand, it justifies the visual phenomena, making them appear aboveboard (the cloud and the skylight).  this is not us— the filmmakers—telling you a story, it is truly happening in the real world.  on the other hand, with the same gusto as casting and music, it effectively (but unnaturally)guides the audience through the events in the story.

from the first shot to the last, naturalistic lighting superimposes conventional visual templates on fresh elements of reality.  what we respond to therefore is not the thing itself but the pointer that is applied to the thing.  as a result we don't have to scrutinize what happens on the screen, look for evidence, or grasp for meaning, the lighting that is encrusted onto the scene does the job for us.

10

although it appears a cinch to implement compared to, say, expressionistic lighting, naturalistic illumination must in fact tread a narrow line between too much and too little. keep it simple and the images will be criticized for their crudeness, e.g. *the libertine.* overdo it and they become too fancy to pass for the everyday world.  for a while, the difficulty of producing a perfect distribution of light values on the set in a short amount of time kept images realistic enough.  it was no small feat indeed to decide on the amount of light which was to fall on a person or object so that the reflectance emanating from that surface would deposit itself on the film in harmonic proportion with all the other reflections filling up the frame.  needless to say, to be able to do this quickly required years of practice. no correction in post could alter the balanced proportions established during the shoot.  the image could only be made lighter or darker in toto, warmer or cooler when working in color.

digital changed all of that.  first, the new medium got rid of the "surface noise" associated with the halides and the grains of film.  digital pictures as a result look universally gorgeous, if glazed over.  second, color grading makes it possible to nestle a scene within an ethereal color overlay, enhancing its look, endowing it with a visual consistency and a

dramatic mood it could not possibly secure in the real world.  third, with full color correction now available, each part of the image can now be fine-tuned in post in terms of both luminosity and hue.  dps and colorists are thus able to work and rework each area of the frame till it is flawless.  these digitally modified images have become as lustrous and ostentatious as those we find in glossy monthlies such as *architectural digest.*  even when grungy locations are used in a film, the lighting sanitizes them till the stench is gone.  this situation is not new.  writing in the late twenties, **walter benjamin** already pointed out how easily it is for superb aesthetics to steal attention away from the content of social documentary photographs, turning, say, poverty into visually appealing forms, patterns and textures.

just as servants used to wax the parquet till it shined, dps and colorists polish their images to please the owners of the movies.  because their work adds surplus value to the film as a commodity, it is well remunerated.  yet i suspect that almendros, were he still alive, would question and ultimately fight back against this development.

11

when everything is beautiful in a film, the disparity that previously made it possible to single out an exceptional lighting scheme compared to less successful ones ceases to exist. beauty needs to be rare to have an impact on viewers.  should a rape scene be as beautiful as a romantic one?  so when every view—whether a living room in the daytime or an alley at night—is stunningly gorgeous, the whole experience becomes unnatural.  most percepts in life indeed are neither beautiful nor ugly: they just are.  as a result, films no longer connect us psychologically to the world we know.  we do not care as much.

let's face the facts: naturalistic lighting is no longer life-like.  the scheme has hit an aesthetic cul-de-sac.

12

there is no point trying to emulate hollywoods's gorgeous cinematography when working with a minimal budget.  the result will always look sub-standard compared to what can be accomplished by the pros.  turn the situation around.  do what they cannot do.  for hollywood cannot do small, cheap, or real.  try your hand therefore at what could be called proletarian lighting.  take a look at *ice*, a film about an underground revolutionary group in the sixties.  even better, imagine you are in a cellar in sarajevo or aleppo with the civil war raging outside and make the most of every available light source.  the light can be trembling, it can be intermittent, and it can move.  don't be afraid to let most of the set go dark for what we don't see is always more suggestive than what is visible.

dogma's constraints are equally fruitful here: stick to the lighting sources you find in your locations.  just move them around to make them more serviceable or increase their wattage if necessary.  there is no need to go beyond that.  remember: no one has ever gone to a movie to watch its cinematography.

13

if you have access to a cheap green screen, you could have memories or reveries appear behind the actors.  till now, there have been only two methods to bring the past into the present: you could superimpose a second image onto the first one—which most times produced a clumsy amalgam—or you could cut or dissolve one picture into the other.  what the green screen technology allows you to do is to incorporate into the present elements of the past or the subconscious in a way that can be dramatically effective.

14

expressionist painters have shown it was possible to depict the world, not as it appears to the eyes, but how they felt or thought about it (franz marc's blue horses).  it may have been shocking at the time but today hardly anyone pays any attention to the animal's unusual attribute.   music video lighting too has accustomed us to accept all kinds of visual disturbances.

yet genuine expressionist lighting in fiction films is hard to find.  in *the cabinet of dr. caligari*—the most famous film of the genre—lighting effects were painted on the set rather than obtained through spotlights.  a good example though can be observed in *ivan the terrible.*  as the czar makes his way into the throne room, his shadow becomes gigantic on the wall behind him.  in most films, this effect would be motivated by strong flames from a fireplace.  this is not the case here.  the towering shadow originates rather in eisenstein's decision to highlight ivan's (and stalin's) absolute power.  whether he is in awe or repulsed by that omnipotence remains ambiguous.

15

unmotivated lighting too is hard to locate in commercial films.  a great example can nevertheless be found at the beginning of *suspiria* when the protagonist gets into a taxi.  all through the ride she is bathed in reds, blues and yellows without any attempt to explain where the colors come from.  in *the conformist*, venetian blinds striate sunlight onto a couple flirting in a room.  common enough but in this case storaro has the stripes of light sensually ascend then descend along the two bodies.  there is no explanation for the effect. it is as if the light had a will of its own and decided to join the couple in the amorous mood. in *american gigolo*, richard gere searches a large room at night.  behind him, on the wall, blue stripes suggest moonlight coming through venetian blinds.  yet, as he moves to other sections of the room, the color given off by the "moon" becomes first yellow then green. again there is no attempt to justify the strange phenomenon.  in *the double life of veronique* a light flutters inside a room.  at first we believe it originates from a reflection coming from a window across the street.  yet, after the latter is shut, the light continues to hover around, maybe suggesting the presence of some spiritual force.  more radically still, in godard's *alphaville,* light rotates around karina's face, it is on, then off, then on again, it shifts from day to night during the scene, etc.

16

what would be involved in reviving a more experimental use of light? one could rethink the relationship between light and objects, for instance by incorporating the former into the latter. in other words, let's revisit *blade runner*'s lighted umbrella shafts and position tiny led bulbs on clothing, objects, floors, walls, etc. we could also play with goethe's **double light**. by this the german philosopher meant having a single source of light (e.g. the sun) produce shadows in opposite directions from one another in different parts of the scenery. alternatively, instead of sticking to a single lighting scheme for a scene, the face of a character could be lighted differently as the scene progresses. the background too could lighten, darken, or change color, in accordance with, or in contrast to, the mood of the character, the scene, the place, or just gratuitously. in this way the osmosis that we take for granted in film between a subject and light would be abandoned in favor of a more dynamic **dialogic** relationship between the two (bakhtin).

17

to go still further we need to engage the discrepancy found at the beginning of the bible when it tells us that light was created on the first day whereas the sun, the moon, and the stars appeared only on the fourth day. based on this, it should be possible to construe film lighting as an autonomous, sovereign medium, unconnected to everyday illumination. in the same way score music does not originate from the world of the characters and is thus different in kind from songs emanating from a device that can be located in the film, "score" lighting could supplement or replace source lighting all together. the change-over could even help revive cinema's aging dramatics.

**camera**

1

the traditional 35 mm camera—the first bell and howell, the mitchell, the panaflex, etc.—was a large, heavy contraption. its bulk dominated the set. like a powerful monarch it sat on a sturdy tripod in the middle of the stage, surrounded by a bevy of attendants, feeding it endless amounts of celluloid, polishing its glass, cleaning its gate, checking the smooth progress of the film through the intermittent mechanism. today the professional digital cameras may be somewhat smaller but their workflow, carefully monitored by dits, is exceedingly tricky. the technical drill is of course necessary because a single glitch would cost the company hundreds of thousands of dollars. hence the lower the budget the freer one becomes: if you drop your cell phone, just get another one.

2

the size of the camera impacts filmmaking in various ways.  because it was not practical to move such ponderous equipment around, the world was brought to them (edison's black maria solution).  only rarely were they allowed to venture outdoors and then only in special zones that had been sanitized for the occasion.

a large camera on the set also isolates the fictional universe from the workplace occupied by the filmmakers.  in front of the camera, there is an active world, a world in the making, a world in turmoil, a world where adjustments continually impact the protagonists and all that surrounds them.  behind the camera, one finds a group of people whose full attention and effort is concentrated on what happens on the other side.  like commandos, crew members carry raids across the line of demarcation before withdrawing and watching their handiwork safely from their side of the border.  at the same time, they are oddly unreflective about their own situation whether it is the socio-economic structure that regulates who does what or the standard operating procedure that is taken for granted.

the large camera is thus is the focal point of the entire production.  it is the physical pivot around and toward which everything, from acting to lighting, is done.  the place that camera occupies at any given moment remains nevertheless a mere position in space (one of several conjectures for the camera investigated by **edward branigan**).  although the successive vantage points are construed as yielding an all-encompassing portrayal of the scene, the views remain prosaic.  this is so because the shooting is such a mechanistic affair.

finally the large camera stands symbolically for what is not present: the banks, the film industry, the system.  it also means that the film being produced has received an imprimatur from those in power, whether hollywood in the us or the party in china.

3

the cell phone is an altogether different creature.  to start with, it neither looks like a camera nor does it act like one.  because it is small and light, the device can even be said to bring off astruc's 1948 dream of the **caméra stylo,** that is to say, a camera no bigger than a pen that would allow filmmakers to express their thoughts with images as easily as writers jot them down on paper.

unlike the large camera, a cell phone is practically invisible on the set.  it is a piece of plastic no one pays attention to.  no line or proscenium divides people into two camps.  the playing field has been leveled.  the hierarchy is gone.  the director, the actors, and the crew share the same space, they breathe the same air, they work together.  the drama is no longer taking place on a platform detached from daily life.  it is now happening in the midst of it, pressing against everyone.  one must respond to it more concretely, more instinctively.  working without the most potent symbol of their authority, directors are induced to operate differently.  their rapport with actors and crew evolves.  they are responding to them not as

professionals but as human beings.  expressed another way, directors are no longer observing the situation from afar (the aesthetic position defined by **kierkegaard**) but are putting themselves on the line.  they take it personally.  they are facing the music.

finally, the camera's symbolic demise impacts its position as well.  it no longer occupies an **archimedean point** in space.  it is now more likely to reflect the director's personal (moral or ethical) stance with regard to the event.

4

film cameras were nevertheless simple to operate.  on most, there was only one thing to do: push the start button.  only a few gave operators control over the shutter's opening.  by contrast the new professional cameras—the reds and the alexas—bedecked with their fancy accessories are anything but simple.  they exude technology.  internally, they are crammed with electronics which make it possible for cinematographers to fine tune their images from the get-go.  externally, they are connected to monitors, electronic viewfinders, follow focus units, etc.  with cables galore linking various contraptions, these cameras end up looking like giant cockroaches, even malevolent aliens.

5

the mindboggling advances in the medium's technology have naturally monopolized everyone's attention.  look online and you'll find articles galore celebrating this or that camera.  in the same way there used to be comparison tests between different brands of lenses, today's cameras are matched one against the other in all sorts of lighting situations, appraising their resolution, dynamic range, skin tone rendering, etc.   in *american cinematographer* too,  dps explain why, for their latest project, they decided that the alexa was the way to go as opposed to, say, the red dragon.  no one today would dare use cameras that were "in" just a few years ago.

the constant buzz gives us the impression that to shoot with the right camera is a must for a film to be a success.  although it is true that significant shooting advantages can be derived from better ergonomics, this is not the case from superior electronics.  yes, there are some differences between brands and it is true that, say, 8k/120fps provides sharper and clearer images than 4k/24fps but spectators access only the images that are on the screen. they do not see what the same scene would have looked like had it been shot with a different capture system.  in other words, one accepts as standard whatever level of sharpness etc., the film offers.

brush aside whatever breakthrough in camera technology will be trumpeted by the time you read this.  it is nothing but a lure that keeps you from focusing on what really matters. and stay away from cinematographers who are trying to coax you into getting a "better" camera.

6

one meaningful difference between film and digital cameras involves the viewing system. deep down, the film camera was nothing but an enclosed dark room. a rotating mirrored shutter in front of the gate nevertheless made it possible to access intermittently the view recorded onto the film. two factors are important here. first, because the eye of the operator was engulfed inside the viewfinder's eyecup (to avoid light leaks), the picture discovered there occupied his/her entire field of view. it became the onlooker's one and only world. second, that picture had little to do with what anyone else on the set saw with their own eyes. it was not a match either for the future image that would eventually be printed on celluloid and projected on a screen. rather than realistic, that picture was ghostly. the scarce amount of light, the grains on the ground glass, the flicker created by the rotating shutter, all these factors combined to produce an eerie impression. the spectral rendering hinted at what wasn't there yet, what was still in the process of becoming. the effect was nothing less than magical.

in contrast, the new technology provides immediately, not just the operator, but all on the set, with a perfect duplicate of the future image. far from being fragile and unsubstantial, this picture is impeccable from the get go. it no longer has to be conjured into being. it always already is. even though it can be tweaked later in post, its first appearance has a discouraging finality about it.

7

a design change between the traditional cameras and the newer kind is equally consequential. in the past it did not matter whether the camera was on a tripod or handheld, the eye of the operator lorded over the picture. with a digital camcorder or a cell phone, operators prefer to look at the larger screen display rather than the viewfinder (when there is one). this seemingly unimportant adjustment is in fact responsible for making possible an entire new way of shooting. how so? when looking at a screen, the camera is held by the hand away from the body. the image thus occupies only a fraction of the eyes' total intake, forcing the operator to continually frame the shot within a living environment as opposed to supervising a pre-selected view of it. even more importantly, contrary to what **benjamin** once suggested, the eye, which has traditionally been the organ most relied on by the mind to gather information, has been largely domesticated over time. it no longer is the querying adventurer it once was. the hand in contrast has retained more of its primitive vitality. it is likely to respond to external stimulations long before the eye/mind combination evaluates the situation and decides what to do. it is now by far the trustier helper. the relevant comparison for the small camera therefore is not a pen (understood as a mere tool for the transmission of the writer's thoughts onto paper) but **merleau-ponty**'s white cane which allows the blind person to feel his/her way into the world. a camera held in the hand away from the body can similarly forage ahead of its owner. it can look around, probe, and investigate. it can find its way under and around things. it functions as a sensory intermediary between the operator and the world.

whereas the traditional camera stands as a large indifferent object between the two, the consciousness of the operator is now located at the very tip of the lens, exploring the surroundings, prowling uncharted aspects of the world. the canonical optic mastery over the image has given way to a haptic approach to filmmaking.

8

the sole purpose of a camera is to capture images. tarkovsky used the analogy of **sculpting in time** to define filmmaking. he is right of course but the "time" he is talking about is not the ordinary time that regulates our life. the latter continually escapes us. its relentless flux makes it impossible for us ever to seize and hold even one instant. as **kierkegaard** put it, life can only be lived forwards. we cannot go back to fix something and we cannot call "time out!" to stop the flow. we have no choice but live in the ever-renewed, ever-changing moment.

in fiction films the situation is different. we can bracket the narrative time that controls the protagonists' life and make all the revisions we think are necessary in order to improve the dramatic yield of a scene. and we can keep doing so until it is good enough for the operator to push the button and shoot it. the fictional protagonists therefore do not share our own space and time. while not sacred, their temporal and physical environment is nevertheless uncommon. it is a transitional space, a limbo. the images we secure therefore are less forthright than they appear.

9

much of what the camera does involves the lens. although it is the face of the apparatus and it is held and manipulated all the time, it has remained oddly impervious to the changes that have rocked the camera. modern lenses may be sharper, have better coatings and fewer internal reflections than in the past but their underlying constitution hasn't changed much. in fact, dps who worked in the thirties and forties would have no problem handling our primes today.

first off, let us remember that lenses were originally designed to confirm our own visual impressions of the world. they were not attempting to duplicate the perceptual system of bees, dogs, or snakes. yet none of the lenses commonly used in motion pictures manages to be a perfect match for human vision. the so-called normal lenses for instance give us a view (how much we see left and right, up and down) that feels unnaturally claustrophobic, especially in pov shots (*lady in the lake*). the wide lenses greatly exaggerate the actual distance between objects in space. as for the long lenses, they optically compress that distance, cramming together people and things that may in fact be quite far apart. why is it that we don't find these inconsistencies problematic when watching movies? the situation is similar to what happens when we come upon the unusual turn of phrases in play by shakespeare or read an old book printed in a disorienting typeface. we may be

bewildered at first but soon enough we get accustomed to the formal disturbance, transcend it, and simply immerse ourselves in the content.

the "sculpting" of the image necessarily involves choices: how do i want to render the scene? to get a close-up for instance, do i come close to the protagonist and use a wide lens or do i shoot his face with a long lens from further away?  although i end up with the same size face on the screen, the look, feel, and overall impression provided by the image will be radically different.  there is no right or wrong here.   the visual formation on the screen reflects a personal inclination, a predilection to see a scene in a certain way.  some directors (ozu, bresson) feel more at home using lenses that approximate our human perspective of the world whereas others (welles, the coen brothers) like the optical distortions caused by wide lenses.

with our lenses we can literally (and oh-so easily!) originate views of the world unavailable to human beings for thousands of years.  that is surely something to celebrate!

10

the problem with focus is that we take it for granted.  one rarely thinks about it (a rack focus is such exception).  when a protagonist exits the frame for instance, the focus puller mechanically readjusts the sharpness onto the far background even if the shot is ending a fraction of a second later.  if we go back to its latin root though, focus speaks of  fire (the hearth symbolizing the continuity of the roman family).  so when you focus a shot you bring fire or lightning onto your subject, you ignite it.  and indeed, at least with film, the image was branded forever onto the celluloid.  another, less exalted, more conventional way to put this is to think of focus as a guiding light, one that selects for the viewer what is of interest at this moment in the scene.  in focusing then we eliminate uncertainty, the questioning one might have about an event.  we are told: look at this person, pay attention to what she says or what she is about to do and you will be enlightened.  when this takes place, we are no longer watching an ensemble where everything is interdependent (**alan watts**).  we are paying attention solely to those noteworthy individuals, the go-getters, the movers and shakers of the story.  as for the indistinct "little people" in the background, they are counted on to keep the world going.

why not use focus creatively as opposed to thinking of it as an indispensable but pesky byproduct.  one could stage a scene for instance with the principal blurred, the focus squarely on various areas of the room or the mountainside seen through the window.  in *deconstructing harry*, woody allen has a character who is out of focus wherever everyone around him is sharp: what a great idea!  what if sharp focus had to be earned?  the focus in a film for instance could be just a tiny bit off (not enough for people to notice) except for special moments, for instance when a character is opening up or is looking directly into the lens.  more generally, whom or what do we really want to see in focus?  does deep focus automatically deliver a democratic image of the world as was once thought?

11

what about composition?  looking at movie images, we assume that filmmakers must have given a lot of thought to their visual arrangement.  yet the formal guidelines which originated in painting and photography (the golden ratio, the rule of thirds etc.) were never explicitly applied to film.  the difference is that in these other media the work remains stationary in front of the eyes.  we are thus able to take our time and peruse the different areas of the image.  the overall artistry is more open to scrutiny.  it can be evaluated.  with film that is difficult to achieve.  not only are the pictures continually changing, we ourselves, looking at the screen, tend to be immersed in them.  we are therefore much less sensitive to the forms making up the images.  a case in point: "big" movies are presently being released in multiple formats and varying framing ratios to fit the varied projection facilities in theaters.  more often than not then a pleasant pictorial organization is all that's required.  only occasionally is an image so striking that it forces us to give it full attention. my example comes from *drums along the mohawk*, a revolutionary war film by john ford. the scene depicts the protagonist's departure for war with the local militia.  his wife, standing on a hill, looks at the ragtag column making its way up a road on the other side of the valley.  as she suddenly grasps that she may never see him again, her legs buckle and she slumps on the ground.  from the start the staging is tremendous because it makes manifest the increasing distance between the spouses.  her collapse though is totally unexpected and it takes our breath away.  it is a great moment of cinema.

12

truly arresting shots such as the one in ford's film are rare.  this does not mean that flat, unimaginative arrangements should be the norm.  here, we should definitely emulate what took place in painting at the end of the nineteenth century.  in *la place de la concorde* for instance, degas showed a man partly cut-off by the surrounding frame, essentially incorporating in his own medium the unusual views of life recently revealed by photographic snapshots.  small cameras can do something similar, bringing into the open unexpected features in our scenes.  so de-compose: break down the false unity that dominates traditional compositions.  reveal the elemental oddness of objects and things once they are no longer seen together with others as a set.  in other words, expanding marinetti's idea about words, let us discover the objects **en liberté**.  one way to achieve this is to shoot "blind", that is to say, don't look at the screen at all, cover it with paper tape if you have to.  let your sensitivity alone guide your response to the action.  another approach is to let each actor wear a micro camera that can be attached to a lapel or a shirt.

the total opposite is equally worthwhile.  in this case, make the composition so present, so visible, that it overwhelms the scene.  a great example of this sur-composition can be found in godard's *my life to live* when, tracking back and forth behind a couple in a restaurant, the camera stops on the back of the man's head at the precise moment it hides anna karina's face in front of him.

13

as the digital image is getting sharper all the time, it is now possible to use post to slow down or accelerate a movement, reframe a shot, zoom inside an image, or, even more radically, extract mediums and close-ups from a larger frame without losing significant resolution.  this trend effectively extends the idea of scene coverage to within the shot itself.  one doesn't have to decide on the spot what is needed.  various new shots can be culled from within the master in post.

this development is part of an overall rethinking of production with post fast replacing shooting as the place where the film is made.

14

digital compositing has typically been used to produce  believable (if astounding) images of reality.  the multiple layers combine so perfectly that our eyes accept without reserve that what we see was photographed somewhere in the world.  compositing however makes possible a different kind of arrangement.  the image for example could resemble a collage by picasso or braque or a work by escher, with disparate forms, textures and colors combining into imaginative new constructs.  mimicking neither human sight nor the ordinary world, such pictorial constructs would not only throw movies into a new direction, it would also force us to explore novel ways to tell stories.

15

there are six available off-screen spaces.  while the left, right, and background areas are used all the time, the other three are not.  in *hard to be a god,* aleksei german repeatedly uses the fourth wall, bringing people into view from behind the camera.  and, in *life and nothing more,* kiarostami surprises us with personages entering the shot from the top and the bottom of the frame.

16

`bazin` once remarked that in contrast to a painting where the image is fenced off by the frame, the world the movie characters live in extends psychologically beyond what we see on the screen.  that of course is true but the off-screen space also includes the world in which we, spectators, reside.  so the so-called fourth wall has two openings, one that extends the fiction behind the camera and another that leads to our own world (e.g. the last scene in *sunday bloody sunday*).  that particular conduit—activated by the player's sudden gaze to the camera—is one of the most dramatic weapons directors have at their disposal.

17

during hollywood's classical age only motivated camera movements were acceptable.  one could pan with or track alongside an actor but no autonomous move of the camera was allowed, for such movement was thought to make audiences aware of the apparatus.  an

amusing, backhanded commentary on this injunction can be found in *blood simple* when the camera, gliding over a bar top, lifts itself to avoid bumping against a drunken customer, then comes down before continuing on its journey.

today, this obscurantist approach to filmmaking has been left behind. as we know only too well, we have gone from one extreme (complete asceticism) to the other (indulgent excess). the camera now cannot stand still regardless of what happens in the frame. it is incessantly panned or tilted, moved forward or back, made to tremble lightly or shaken more roughly. at times it is endlessly trekking behind a protagonist. on the whole, this activity has little to do with personal style or the dramatic needs of the subject matter: it is a fad employed solely to activate the rods and cones of viewers at a time when millions of young people find video games more visually compelling than movies.

the so-called unmotivated camera moves, far from being necessarily gratuitous, could express the taste, thinking and creativity of the director with regard to the situation at hand. *night and fog* remains to date the most inspiring film about the holocaust largely because of its "unmotivated" tracking shots: along the barbed wire fences, the holes in the concrete slab serving as latrines, the cracks in the ceiling of a gas chamber. these tracking shots have come not only to emblematize the film but also to contribute to our continuing reflections about the shoah.

an interesting dogma project: make a film without any motivated camera movement.

18

for the longest time (at least in commercial filmmaking), the job of camera operator was not a particularly creative one. the individual was supposed to record what was happening in front of the lens without really adding anything extra to the scene. how many operators' names do we recall prior to haskell wexler's handling of the camera in *medium cool*? operators were essentially technicians whose expertise resided less in aesthetics than in their ability to pan and tilt a worrall geared head without a hitch. in the last decades however, that attitude has changed, primarily because of the steadicam phenomenon. all at once it mattered to have someone on the ball holding the gear.

one situation demands even more aptitude on the part of the operator. it is related to what cartier-bresson called **the decisive moment**. the concept speaks of what happens when the photographer pushes the button at the very instant the forms within the frame perfectly crystallize the event taking place at the time. in documentary filmmaking however, a decisive moment is more likely to originate in an activity which, despite unfolding beyond the original point of interest, nevertheless relates to it on some level. a great example is found during an interview in *the lovely month of may*. as a man spouts out platitudes, the operator tilts down the camera from his face to a daddy longlegs slowly making its way up his tie.

for this phenomenon to have any chance of appearing in fiction films, four conditions must be met: a long take, a director who is not adverse to letting his actors improvise (rivette), resourceful actors, and a quick-witted operator. here, the unusual entrant is probably an actor doing something on the spur of the moment. when this happens, you don't want a traditional operator behind the camera. you want shooters, people who are mentally nimble, are one with their camera, and are totally involved in what is going on. shooters are not technicians. they are more like midwives: they pay attention to the signs of life around them. they ease their entry into the film. they deliver the shot. in other words, you want a leacock, a pennebaker, or a churchill, to name some. a director operating the camera is also more likely to go along with an actor trying out an exciting mid-course adjustment.

in many films, sadly, nothing accidental ever shows up. the scene takes place bureaucratically as planned. why are we so afraid of vital sparks when shooting a film?

19

today, more and more, the most striking images we come in contact with originate from cctv systems and smart phones operated by individuals during a crisis of some sort. nothing professionally produced comes close to matching the intensity of these views. the upshot: the world asserting itself as the best set anyone could possibly ask for; nothing differentiating those making a film from anyone around them; the antics of production forever left behind; cinema debunked at last.

## editing

1

everybody knows it: editors cut the film. that image of course goes all the way back to a time when film had to be cut physically. although it wasn't the only labor involved (there was the scraping of the emulsion, the layering of the glue, the bonding of the two pieces of celluloid, etc.), the sound of cutting the film on a block had a dramatic finality that the other labors simply didn't have. one of the late splicing machines was even called a guillotine! so the image of a "cutter" at work stuck. yet, if we think about it, the moment when one cuts the film only exteriorizes what took place just before, that is to say, the cogitation during which the editor prefigures in his/her head the future linkage. this said, even the job of selecting the shots and finessing their transition is not as pivotal as it appears at first. it is in fact not unlike what copy editors do when they go over spelling and grammar in a book set for publication. they help smooth the wording, they suggest alternatives when faced with confusing phraseology. likewise, all movie editors are good at "cutting". the challenge arises when a scene or, more globally, the film as it was imagined by the filmmaker, simply does not work. at that point we are no longer talking about tactical skills but strategic decision making. this requires a very different kind of mind.

the typical remedy—adding a voice-over narration or the dialogue track being replaced by a song or classical music —rarely works.  one now desperately needs the equivalent of a max perkins in the editing room, someone who is able to re-configure how to fit the pieces together.  but you cannot count on the magic to work as a matter of course: not even walter murch could salvage *youth without youth.*

to unearth a film that works is what editing is all about.

2

traditional film editing was hampered by the materiality of the celluloid.  for one thing, the cutter had to stop the editing machine and take the film away to a side table in order to perform the required grafting onto another scene picked up from an adjacent bin.  afterwards, it was back to the moviola to evaluate the impact of the cut.  the celluloid too created impediments to the process.  cutting frames off a shot was no problem but adding some of them back, after the fact, was problematic for a frame had been lost in the process and something now needed to be done to keep the sound in sync.  stacking up splices close to one another also risked tearing the film apart when running it through the moviola.  as a result, one was cautious about going too far and then being obliged to reverse course.

these physical roadblocks nevertheless yielded some unintended benefits.  first, because the editing was a hands-on process, one literally felt the film, one was close to it, one became married to its content.  second, one's attention during the proceeding was fully taken up by the job at hand.  no grand scheme here, one issue at a time only.  third, the quirks connected to the celluloid often forced the cutter to come up with unusually creative solutions.  this in turn made the editing more rugged, more idiosyncratic.  fourth, the splicing impacted only the space between frames.  the images themselves were not defaced or harmed in any way.  they kept their integrity.  that is to say, the film was made to look fit but its organics (the scene, the live event) survived whole.  in more ways than one then, the procedure mirrored the approach used by sculptors or painters when they implement an idea on the marble or the canvas, then take a step back to assess the outcome.  working as a traditional craftsmen, film editors chiseled the film one concrete cut at a time.

3

for all the indisputable advantages of digital editing over the now-antiquated film process, some concerns are nevertheless worth mentioning.  for instance, once an assistant has organized, labeled and synchronized the footage, every useful bit of the movie can be randomly accessed either in a list or as thumbnails in a grand gallery.  the shots hang there as standing reserve, ready to serve at whim (**heidegger**).  sure enough, this conspicuousness and accessibility seduce the editor into assembling multiple versions of cuts and scenes.  this development in turn alters the editing process in its very core for the focus has shifted from the implementation of a single idea onto the fabric of the film to the selection of a particular rendition among a potentially infinite number of alternatives.

instead of envisioning in one's head the best way to accommodate two shots, the editor is now confronting a number of very concrete, in-your-face options.  one is therefore more likely to become engrossed in global perspectives, leaving behind the original impetus that motivated one's engagement with the scene in the first place.  this is not unlike being outraged by, say, the pay gap between the executives in corporations and their workers but, when faced with political parties with altogether different programs, one eventually votes for one of them for reasons unrelated to one's initial commitment.  a second noteworthy outcome is that the plethora of possibilities (not forgetting, once again, the absence of resistance from the medium) induces the editor to dance around with the shots.  needed or not, fast cutting has become the norm simply because it can be done effortlessly.

beyond this, what is most striking about the editing software is that, on the computer screen, the images come in almost as an afterthought.  the menus occupy most of the space; they are what matters.  cutting and pasting clips into the timeline (which is the equivalent of what film editors used to do) is now only one the myriad convenient commands available to cutters.  perceived as mere raw material, the images are thus likely to be significantly enhanced before they are judged acceptable for public viewing.  this is feasible because the umbilical cord tying them to the live event captured by the camera has been severed (**baudrillard**).  in other words, the delinking of the images from any physical support simultaneously uncoupled them from the vitals that gave them birth.  the images are now free-floating, without a past or a fixed identity.  their protean nature offers no objection to being given a different look or even a new personality.  they have become mere commodities one can exploit at will.  today's editors are no longer just cutters.  they go about their work as savage capitalists who cannot leave anything fallow.  working at arms' length from the images, they mine their covert resources, they genetically modify their innards.  the visual frenzy involved in the process is nothing short of hallucinatory.

4

editing was quickly recognized as the secret weapon of the new medium.  whereas a spectator in a theatre was stuck looking at the production from exactly the same position throughout a play, cutting allowed the film viewer ceaseless new angles on the action.  this said, the contrast with theater, if appropriate, missed the more crucial comparison.  for, in life too, through thick and thin, we remain stuck with a single perspective.  so it is the disconnect from life, the novel ability to occupy rapidly multiple physical locations that secured the future of the movies.  distances don't matter either: as opposed to life where i have to go through the living room to get to the kitchen or run across the street to catch a bus, i'm transported from here to there instantly when watching a movie.  these thoroughly inhuman adventures are without doubt the forbidden fruits we look forward to each time we plan on going to the cinema.

5

the issue of continuity immediately raised its ugly head.  if i am cutting from a full shot of a couple in a room to a close-up of the male actor, has time gone by between the two shots?  how much time?  the exact time it would have taken for a beholder to go from one position to the next?  if we pretend that no time at all has passed between the shots, the actor better be in the same position.  from this point on, someone was assigned the business of keeping track of continuity: was the glass in her left hand, which fingers were holding it, how much liquid was in it, etc.?  the views may be distinct but the particulars were set in stone.

6

when cutting to an entirely new scene ,the time factor is even more critical.  how do i know how much time, if any, has elapsed between the separate events: ten minutes, half a day, several weeks?  or should i assume instead that both actions are happening at exactly the same time?  griffith of course nailed that technique down in *the lonely villa* when he crosscut from a woman and her daughters besieged by burglars in their house to the husband driving back to the rescue.  his was a simple but effective solution to.  the first time we cut to the husband, we find him in a hotel making a call to his wife.  from that point on, each time we cut between the two, we know for sure that, although miles apart, the two events are simultaneous.

7

continuity involves more than merely cutting between diverse scenes.  there is a centripetal force at work in the process.  regardless of how far characters travel, they (we as well) are inexorably brought back to the main body of action.  although only specific actions and spaces are involved, the connotation is even broader: whatever it is i am discovering in the world will be in cahoots with what i already know of it.

8

in imitation of their leaders who wanted a complete political break with the past, soviet filmmakers rejected conventional editing based on continuity and a smooth transition from shot to shot.  they were naturally attracted to more rugged, bumpier links to build up their scenes.  to disassociate themselves from bourgeois cinema, they experimented with montage.

what is the main difference between standard editing and soviet montage?  hollywood from the beginning adopted what could be called a photographic approach to filmmaking.  practically speaking, this means that everything needed for the scene must be on deck and unified in an ensemble before one can proceed with the shooting.  let us compare for example an identical action in an american and a soviet film.  *revolution* opens with a wide view of the statue of the british king on his horse being toppled by a crowd of american patriots.  we see it all: the large statue on its pedestal and the thick cords needed to pull it

down, all the actors and extras in costumes, the fake cobblestones on the ground and the historically correct façades in the background.

soviet montage by contrast owes more to linguistics than photography.  when speaking or writing indeed, the words used in a sentence do not have to contain within themselves the meaning that emerges from the phrase once it is complete.  in a similar way, one can construct a film sequence using images shot in various situations and circumstances.  in eisenstein's *october*, we find once again a statue being toppled by a crowd but this time the tyrant on his horse is the czar of russia and the rebels are the bolsheviks.  the shots in the scene include some revolutionaries cording the statue, others storming a palace, soldiers and peasants cheering the action.  in contrast to *revolution* however, we never access an all-inclusive view of the scenery.  this is because the various bits were shot in different places and times.  the shots of the soldiers and the peasants in particular look very much like stock footage.  it matters not that in the original situation the soldiers were cheering, say, the arrival of the canteen and the peasants the new year, a new meaning is foisted on them (and us) by juxtaposing them to the toppling of the statue.  so whereas editing picks bits in a pre-unified whole, montage appropriates various  fragments, loading them with fresh significance once they become part of the brand-new ensemble.

conventional thinking has it that sound made soviet montage unworkable.  i disagree.  it is high time we revisit this royal road to filmmaking.  indeed, we continue to be bogged down by the weight and cost of having to gather physically in one place all the constituents of a scene before shooting.  why do so when we can easily mix in material shot elsewhere at a more convenient time as well as bootleg already existing images?  isn't it time also we avail ourselves of all the compositing resources made possible by the digital revolution?

9

if montage revolutionized the filmmaking process, it didn't change standard storytelling insofar as the audience was concerned.  **dialectical** montage however pushes the technique to the limit.  what is it that makes it so potent?  in full contrast to standard editing which assumes a tranquil continuation between the parts being assembled, the connections created by dialectical montage lead viewers to outcomes they would not have imagined based on the initial shot of the series.  in *october*'s god sequence for instance, we cut from familiar symbols of the divinity to representations that are less familiar, ending up with figures that would definitely be called pagan by a western eye.  in this way the soviet director was able to demystify religion as another form of idolatry.  here, in opposition to continuity editing, each succeeding image takes us farther and farther afield and the farther we go the more things are different.  an even more **hegelian** example of dialectical editing can be found in the visual presentation warren beatty is made to watch in *the parallax view*.  in the show, archetypal representations (flag, country, father, mother, etc.) are first discovered in their usual benign association before revealing they could also stand for something a lot less appealing.

10

a further backlash against both continuity and conventional editing took place in france in the late fifties.  truffaut for one shocked critics when he decided not to use the reverse shot of the social worker interrogating the young boy in *the 400 blows*.   at the end of the same film, he further challenged efficient, business-like editing by doggedly staying with the boy running away from the institution in long takes rather than condensing the run in four of five brief shots.  as for godard, he broke all rules when he cut his protagonists from one spot to another in the same location without any change in lens or camera position.  undoubtedly, the technique was a slap in the face of the french cinema establishment known for its conservatism—the long apprenticeship before one could become a director, the insistence on technical excellence, the deference to tradition, etc.—all practices which would have prevented an iconoclast like godard from ever making films.  there was more to his endeavor though than mere provocation.  jump cutting demonstrated that continuity inherently slows things down.  not unlike **nietzsche**'s understanding of history, continuity in film was shown to be a drag on the ability of the protagonists (and the filmmaker) to take wing.  seen for decades as a mistake, jump cutting propelled the narrative forward like nothing since griffith's last minute rescue.

11

editing has trained us to expect a link of some sort between successive shots.  this is very different from life where innumerable unconnected events catch our attention thus keeping us from following a single theme for very long.  only after the fact can one go back and look for causes capable of explaining what we just witnessed.  in a movie however, what is extraneous to the main action has been neatly excised.  a connection between successive events can thus be taken for granted from the get go.  to put it simply, we understand the flow of images as a thought process.  we thus end up tagging along a path deliberately laid out for us by the film's director.  eisenstein was all for it, bazin was horrified.

should everything be explained in a film?  is the cause and effect relationship essential to storytelling?  can a looser connection be good enough to keep audiences interested?  done well, an unsolved mystery stays with us a lot longer than one which got cleared up. *mulholland drive* is the classic example.  but smaller films like *sleeping beauty* are interesting because of what remains unexplained in them.

in *neighboring sounds*, kleber mendonça filho cuts at times just before what most people would imagine to be the main action.   we may guess what that action consists of but we do not know for sure.  in this way, the film becomes an **open work** (umberto eco).  instead of a perfectly mappable series of events, the narrative leaves some plot points unresolved.  one could even go further and expand the idea of jump cutting to the transition between scenes, in effect cutting away from an action before its natural conclusion and joining a second one already in progress.

last but not least, claire denis is known for her ellipses.  far from hurting her films, they set them apart,  epitomizing her unique narrative approach.

12

through practice, cutters have learned to calibrate the exact amount of time each image should remain on the screen in order to maximize the spectators' response to the scene.  as the editing rushes us effortlessly forward, a beat takes over.  that rhythm oftentimes becomes synonymous with our experience of the scene.  the whirling of  images around can however become an end in itself.   this is happening quite often nowadays because the commotion works so effectively on viewers.  in response to a bravura sequence, we become sensorially agitated.  the heartbeat, breathing, blinking pattern, etc., are altered.  moreover this visceral reaction takes place even when we have little interest for the story or the characters.  i may not give a damn about bruce willis trying to save the planet but my eye brain system is working overtime in response to the relentless motion on the screen and the machine gun firing of shots that michael bay throws at me.

13

it has been said that a film is made three times, once preparing for it, again in production, and finally in post.  how often indeed does one realize when editing a film that a scene just doesn't work as expected, that it stops the flow of the sequence and should be deleted entirely, or that one actor should be favored at the expense of another, etc.?  how could this be?  prior to seeing all the images in a scene next to one another, one doesn't yet have to fight what **william morris** called the resistance of the material, in this case, the reality of the action on the screen.  as soon as one lines up a series of pictures then, they don't lie still.  they insist on their integrity.  and, regardless of all efforts, at times they simply refuse to combine nicely.

14

some well-honed editing techniques may no longer be as effective as they once were.  for instance, when viewers know what the protagonist is going to do or where he/she is going, all the intermediary shots between departure and arrival are likely to be perceived as mere fillers.  they no longer contribute anything to the suspense.  this issue is of particular importance in hollywood films which make the most of the race leading to the finish line. but now it is the "let's go" that slows down the action.  another technique, griffith's signature crosscutting, is also showing its age.  graphic match cuts and even cutting on action feel painful at times.

there have been simply too many applications of these procedures for anyone to still find them compelling.  viewers are now ahead of the storyteller.  they no longer want to cut to the chase, they now want to cut out the chase.  in the not too distant future, editors will have to get rid of all this antiquarian baggage.  the challenge will be to find other ways to maintain interest in the film.

15

editors can only work with the footage they have been given.  most times, they use it as intended.  in *the war is over* however, there are bits that take us further afield.  although some material can be identified as remembrances belonging to the protagonist, others are more like his reveries.  it is almost as if we were accessing, not just the character's explicit thoughts, but also those located at the periphery of his consciousness.  although unusual, this is nevertheless still something plotted from the start by the director.

in the same film however, there is a brief moment when a woman walking fast is matched cut to another woman walking at the same pace, and then to a third one, etc.  in this instance it is impossible to construe the brief sequence as originating from the character or the director.  it looks rather as if the editor got bored following the narrative and decided to have fun assembling various images that just happened to cut well together.  the procedure is not unlike "scratching" by disc jockeys.  what else can we think of that hasn't been done yet?

## sound

1

silence is not nothing.  it comprises thousands of tiny, inconsequential sounds fused into a barely audible medley.  this aural environment forms the physical underpinning of our experience on earth.  it gives us the sense of being in the midst of a living world.  yet, it is always space specific and it evolves through time (the sounds at 6 am are not those we hear at 6 pm).  this is not the case for silence in film though.  "room tone", as it is called, is not just the absence of dialogue, ticking clock, footsteps, the rustling of clothes, etc.  it also strives to extirpate from the environment anything that could possibly reveal it, say, as a set occupied by a crew of twenty as opposed to an authentic locale inhabited by the two protagonists.  this silence is thus a counterfeit.   because of this, room tones are largely interchangeable.  so what we take to be indicative of specific surroundings can in fact easily have been borrowed from another habitat or film.

2

although we don't generally pay attention to the matter, the audio track actually comes first when developing the future film.  look at any script: what we will eventually hear monopolizes the writing.  yet this dominance is undermined from the start by a format that rules out thinking about the rest of the audio: ambience, off-screen sounds, music, etc.  quickly too, directors focus their attention elsewhere: the actors, the locations, the light, the mood, etc.  in their view, there will be plenty of time to deal with the sound track later on.  so, whereas production designers and directors of photography are consulted early on, sound designers, to their dismay, are called in only after the fact.  instead of being able to

contribute to the thinking of the film prior to it being shot, they are reduced to fasten the proper sounds onto gunshots, speeding cars, explosions, etc.

3

but what if we take sound seriously?  instead of dishing out images from the start, cheapening their magic, explore the possibility of more complex relationships between the audio and the picture tracks.  how many images do we really need in a film (*letter to jane*)?

4

the fact that audio tracks are made up of the same ingredients and positioned in the same pecking order today as they were in 1930 should alarm us.  at the top of the pyramid we find the dialogue which must be crystal clear and in sync.  conventionally that track alone is responsible for telling us the story.  it is followed by the foleying of all the sounds connected to the action on the screen.  ambient and background sounds are next.  these particular tracks bring a sense of realism to the world we watch.  lastly some source or score music is added as needed, generally to specify the mood or ante up the action.

5

today we take for granted that a film needs no accompaniment of any kind.  but that was not always so.  the benshi in some countries and live musicians practically everywhere were once responding to the action on the screen from within the theater itself, playing up the events, contributing to the viewers' experience of the images.  when the talkies took over however, the system mandated that all the audio had to originate from the screen.  the theater was thus refashioned as a mere container, a vault within which one could observe the show but not to contribute to it.  yet, a disparity immediately emerged between what was seen and what was heard.  the problem, i believe, arose from the need for the spoken words to reach the last row in the auditorium.  not only that, it was also decided that the protagonists had to be heard consistently well whether shown up close or far away (**rick altman**).  two distinct problems emerged as a result.  first, there is a clash between the visual seesaw on the screen (from long shot to close-up etc.) and the constant level of the dialogue track.  the cadence is not the same.  second, even though the principal audio speakers are located behind the screen, the dialogue doesn't seem to originate from the protagonists.  the volume that reaches us clashes with their physical location far away from us.  it is too clear.  it is too big.  in fact the protagonists sound like they dwell in our own world, that they are close to us, somewhere in the theater.  the spectators' visual and auditory operations are therefore in conflict.  on the one hand, our gaze transports us psychologically all the way out there where the story is taking place.  on the other hand, the dialogue cocoons us in our own immediate environment.

why aren't we bothered by this inconsistency?  children are mesmerized by punch and judy shows even though the puppets obviously don't speak.  what happens is that in their mind they reconcile the voices they hear with the action they see.  as long as the voices relate to

it, the grafting will occur naturally (there is a delightful example of this phenomenon in *the 400 blows*).  during the silent era, spectators could easily link the intertitles onto the following scene.  even today, millions of movie spectators have no problem reconciling the dubbing of the original performers by actors speaking the local language.  in all these cases, viewers effortlessly fuse in their head what they see and what they hear.  this *trompe l'oreille* phenomemon is far from universal though: footsteps out of sync are simply unbearable.

so the sync we expect when someone speaks may not be crucial after all.  haven't italian films, martial arts movies, and problems with *skype* technology in news reports accustomed us to accept a gap between images and the accompanying dialogue?  hasn't steven soderbergh shown us in *the limey* that one can take great liberties with sync and get away with it?  how about a film where the dialogue between people is slightly out of sync except for the moment when the protagonists fall in love and words wondrously come out of their mouths in perfect sync?

6

let's go further: why not take advantage of the mismatch between pictures and sound to revive the theater as an active participant in the storytelling?  why not launch for instance a second narrative located squarely in the spectator's space?  a few words at first could be exchanged by characters yet unrelated to those on the screen.  these fragments could progressively develop into a more conventional dialogue.  needless to say the link between the two stories would have to be orchestrated judiciously with the personages on the screen taking a break when something of importance related to those near us needs to be paid full attention to, and vice versa (the kind of balance so successfully achieved between different screens in *time code*).  at one point, as i imagine it, the audio characters would take over the screen while those who used to be there would now carry on as mere voices near us.  one could refer to this kind of film as a split track movie.

7

the production sound mixer and the boom operator are skilled workers, technicians who are counted on (1) to capture the dialogue as clearly as possible whether on the set or on location and (2) to make sure no hint of life beyond the actors' exchange of lines mars the recording.  hence the track that emerges makes it sound like the protagonists were the last human beings left on earth after a cataclysm of some kind.  although these jobs are tremendously important, they are not expected to contribute anything creative to the film.  in return, these specialists couldn't care less whether the lines they are paid to record are actually any good.

alternative models do exist.  in his films, frederick wiseman has often chosen to do the audio himself.  being able to see things from a wider perspective, he could guide the camera operator toward something more interesting suddenly happening elsewhere.  with only a

third person to take care of the cables and the rest of the equipment, wiseman ended up with a perfect crew.  all films should be made this way!  other great documentary teams where the sound operator is as important as the cinematographer include the maysles brothers and the joan churchill/alan barker team.  what does it all mean?  recruit your sound mixer from the documentary field and give him/her a voice in the shooting process. stop thinking of the person as a mere technician: he or she should be your creative partner.

8

typically it is in post that one slowly rebuilds, one sound at a time, a plausible full aural environment.  yet we tend to hear the same sounds time and time again: the pipes in a wall, the drip from the faucet, the clock ticking on the mantel, the wind chimes on the porch, the sprinklers in the garden, the cicadas in the fields, the crows flying over, and of course the police sirens, the screeching tires, etc.

one way to avoid this predicament is to start paying attention to the surrounding sounds in everyday life.  sit in your living room, close your eyes, and listen.  do you hear the footsteps in the hallway?  is the person wearing flip flops?  is it a man or a woman?  ah, a wheezing… it must be the guy in 302.  a new sound emerges from the kitchen: is it the hum from the refrigerator?  is some lumber being dropped in the dumpster outside?  then do the same outdoors: sit on a park bench, close your eyes and start identifying what you hear, where the sound comes from, and how far is it from you.  vary the location each day.  soon enough you'll feel like a child, excited at discovering the immensity and the richness of life all around you.

9

hasn't our aural experience of daily life changed radically since the thirties?  aren't helicopters constantly hovering above us (at least in los angeles)?  don't commercial vehicles beep when they back-up?  don't buses and trucks produce air escaping sounds that weren't there years ago?  what about the loud blowers used by gardeners?  or the beeping that regulates pedestrian crossing at traffic lights?  or the infomercials that arise from pumps at gas stations?

10

sound designers are not unlike historians of the **annales school**.  their interest is not so much the protagonists and their actions (the "great men" of fiction) than the living world beyond them.  this is critical for a period drama.  what were the sounds heard in london during the victorian age?  more commonly, in contemporary films, they like to investigate the sounds connected to a location as well as those happening off-screen.  for instance a meow will make us think there is a cat hiding somewhere in the room.  approaching footsteps cue us that someone is about to knock on the door.  furthermore, murch, burtt and thom—sound designers par excellence—like to delay our identification of off-screen sounds. in *the godfather*, to take a single example, murch makes a magnificent use of a shrieking

sound just before michael shoots sollozzo.  nothing in the restaurant explains where that sound comes from.  murch however plays it safe by introducing the sound of a rumbling train a number of times before the final scraping of the wheels against the rails.  even if we didn't pay full attention to the earlier cues, we probably have registered subconsciously the presence of elevated trains in the vicinity of the restaurant.  all in all, murch not only brought in an imaginary train but he also used it dramatically to heighten our experience of the killing that changes michael's life.

but what if we hear sounds we cannot identify?  i'm not talking here of what happens when several sounds are mixed into one in order to amplify the impact of the original generator (e.g. mixing the revving of a car engine into a lion's roar).  although these composite sounds cannot actually be heard in real life, insofar as viewers are concerned they pass for the real thing.  what i'm thinking of is more use of unnatural, fabricated, synthetic sounds. presently, when used in horror films for instance, these sounds tend to be grating or dissonant.  this does not always have to be the case.  in the same way cubism made us think differently about painting, a comprehensive exploration of this category of sounds could possibly open a dimension of cinema we are not presently attuned to.

11

the sound accompanying images can be deceptive at times.  in *point blank*, lee marvin walks briskly in a long cavernous hallway.  the sound of his footsteps resonates throughout the shot.  it continues however over shots of his wife dressing herself and having her hair done in a salon.  and it persists even though marvin is now driving a car and again as he sits still in the car, waiting for his wife to come back home.  it may have taken a bit of time but eventually we realize that what we took as the sound of his footsteps was actually an expression of inner rage directed at the woman he believed had been unfaithful to him.

12

there are times when picture and audio are meant to collide in eisensteinian fashion, producing an epiphany of sort in our mind.  in *21-87,* none of the sounds we hear hails from the pictures we see.  put another way, the audio decontextualizes the original newsreel situation: models showing clothes on a catwalk are accompanied by church music, people dancing in a club by someone having difficulty breathing, etc.  the disparity between the two tracks allows us to see the subject matter in a new light.

13

score music is odd.  as mentioned earlier, it migrated from the theater to the film when sound was added to the pictures.  the journey however got cut short.  score music managed to get on the film but not in the film.  it thus occupies a position that has remained indefinite to this day.  instead of overlooking this elusory location, let's acknowledge its reality and expand its realm beyond score music and classical voice-over narration.  for instance, why reserve directorial comments to special features on dvds?  reflections about

the fiction and other more general remarks by the filmmaker would amplify in the movies the **writerly** approach that barthes observed in more demanding novels. with a little foresight too, one could integrate images of the conductor or the musicians responding to specific visual cues on the screen.

oftentimes we remember scenes or, more globally, an entire film because we were moved by the score. imagine for a moment the original *star wars* without john williams's music: how flat and lacking oomph the images and the action would be. there is nothing subtle about the way such music works. steiner, rózsa, tiomkin pioneered the method long ago with rich nineteenth century romantic scores that wrapped themselves incestuously onto the images, compounding their impact. `michel chion` has rightly compared this approach to the music that accompanies clowns and trapeze artists in the circus. it magnifies, dramatizes the action. it often gives the protagonists a poise they may otherwise lack. it emotionalizes the events. it makes us feel for the protagonists and what they are going through. if the tune starts at the same time the camera makes a move, the impact on the viewer is doubly compelling.

in action movies, drums, brass, and percussion instruments rally the audience around the action just as military tambours once gave heart to soldiers marching to battle. lately, more and more of these films favor a massive, throbbing rumbling sound. this pounding stuns us into submission. no level of resistance is possible. one must surrender to the aural avalanche. this use of the audio track is at heart profoundly fascistic. had the technology been available at the time, hitler, speer and riefenstahl would have found it irresistible.

14

does score music have an ideological component? who in fact is murmuring (or hollering) in our ears? is music the means by which the hollywood system corrals all films, eliminating whatever difference they might otherwise display?

15

a few directors decline to use any score music in their films. they look at it as a mendacious intrusion from outside the world of the characters. if they want music at some point, they simply originate it from a specific source within the scene: someone playing an instrument or some canned music heard on a device.

16

the beating heart of the soundtrack: an actor, a voice, the timbre of the voice. when we look at someone, all we see is the outside of the person, his or her appearance. the voice however comes from deep inside the body. it is a lot more personal and may be more reflective of who that individual is really like. why not cast a film based on people's voices as opposed to their looks?

## bottom lines

cinema is far from dead but it is changing fast.  to thwart the impact of video games, virtual reality systems etc, the industry is championing a fully immersing, three dimensional visual and aural sensorium for the theaters.  imax 70mm projection systems are already available.  rumbling seats and full recliners are making their appearance, cocktails and gourmet foods are being tested.  it goes without saying that these moves, were they as comprehensive as they promise to be, take it for granted that the only movies playing there will be those devoted to pure entertainment.  would a film like *amour* fit in that environment?  in short, we would be back to cinema as fairground entertainment before it became an art.

no doubt about it, there are incredibly good filmmakers working everywhere in the world.  even though the hollywood juggernaut will make it harder and harder for them to create and distribute their work, some will persist and their films will eventually find an audience somewhere, if not in theaters.

as for newcomers, a few will be (un?)lucky enough to get the call.  they will undoubtedly assign the election to their talent.  it may be so but timing, personality, and the right connections have generally something to do with it.  but what about all those—the vast majority surely—who won't hear from anybody.  this does not mean they (you?) should stop trying and give up all together.  for an alternative to traditional filmmaking has been around for some time:  the digital file.  i am not referring here to datamoshing, the glitch movement, extreme image compression experiments, etc., which are all exciting to watch but are more in line with avant-garde cinema.  the digital file i'm thinking of may lack the hoopla associated with traditional filmmaking but it can, on a very small scale, bring back to life a more intimate, more personal, more idiosyncratic approach to moviemaking, a feature left behind by today's spectacular cinema.  that is a feat well worth pursuing.

what to shoot for

## film/digital

hollywood didn't exactly embrace the new technology from the get go.  unlike the arrival of sound, color and cinemascope which was trumpeted everywhere, advertisements for "shot digitally" were at first confined to trade magazines.  the obvious reason is that most viewers could not see any improvement on the screen.

the mystique of film was also hard to give up.  for one hundred years, the medium had been perceived as an organic and mysterious material necessitating alchemic mutations and arcane rites to see the process through.  meeting that challenge was rewarding for professionals.   so the new entrant was carefully scrutinized: would the images be as good? how would digital technology change the way films are made?  would it put people out of work?  would the film business share the fate of the recording industry?

the overwhelming advantages of digital over film however could not be ignored for long.  in editing, the ease of working with a non-physical medium was quickly acknowledged by everyone.  in special effects too, the ability to integrate smoothly separate images into one took the industry by storm.   in cinematography on the other hand, film was said for the longest time to provide a superior image.  it is only recently that roger deakins, arguably the top cinematographer working in hollywood, declared that digital had finally surpassed film.  in all of this though, the narrative focused exclusively on the efficiency of the new medium, on its ability to do the same things better, without anything else being altered. the workflow may be digital throughout nowadays but one ends up with the same old images on the screen.

## free spirit

my standpoint in this book is that the shift from film to digital involves more than substituting one technological platform for another.  instead of a more pliable system used to produce identical movies, i see digital as a polymorphous organism, the fruit of distinct technologies merging in an unexpected way: video, the computer, the web, the smart phone, social networking, etc.  this heterogeneity in turn makes it possible to think beyond all we presently take for granted when talking about film.  in short it lays the groundwork for a new art form.

## equipment

even though the digital revolution has also impacted the music industry, musicians must still buy the same old instruments as well as use a studio to record their songs.  in contrast, to shoot images one no longer needs a dedicated and expensive apparatus.  a cell phone is enough.  *tangerine* recently confirmed that point loud and clear.  so the big difference between old-style shooting and today's is that the entire paraphernalia of heavy cameras, magazines, batteries, tripods, heads, spreaders, shoulder mounts, prime lenses, zoom lenses, filters, etc., can be left behind.  likewise for the heavy lighting fixtures, stands, c stands, flags, nets, silks, scrims, sandbags and generators.  all that paraphernalia is not

needed anymore.  be inventive and manufacture your own material when needed.  ditto for the labs: no cost for processing your images, printing them,  cutting the negative, etc.

amen.  furthermore, with a cell phone, if you are fast and discrete, you don't need permits since no one would notice you are in fact shooting a movie.  as for cutting, any free editing software is perfectly serviceable.  alternatively (why not?) don't hesitate to cut in the camera.

## distribution

we still take for granted that the place of art is in theaters, galleries, concert halls, and museums.  these locations however are but dignified ghettoes, crypts that have kept art away from social life.   it doesn't have to be this way: in the twenties, the soviets experimented with bringing art to the streets, factories, etc.  more recently an opera, *invisible cities*, was performed in los angeles' union station with the singers and dancers mingling freely among the travelers.  when this is taking place, art becomes normalized.  it also reaches people who would otherwise never have been exposed to it.  today that public sphere for film is called youtube, vimeo, and similar hosting platforms.  whereas big business decides what films are made and distributed in the usual circuits, it doesn't control access to these channels.  you not only have a chance to exhibit your work, you are able to show it to a more diversified group.

consider the difference.  theaters were once the only venue where an audience could see a film.  practically speaking, this meant that an independent filmmaker, with no money left and a perishable commodity on his/her hands, was easy picking for shabby distributors.  once you forgo the theaters, there is no longer any contract to sign, no genre to stick to, no required length for the film, no rules to follow.  you don't have to worry about all that nonsense.  you show your work as you like it.  as for money, it can be left out of the picture altogether.  so, it isn't just that a digital file doesn't have to cost anything, it also makes it possible to leave behind the raison d'être of most movies: the profit motive.

if you think this would be beneficial, a digital project can be a one person operation throughout.  instead of a fully-manned army, a one-man band.  all in all, a digital project can be what it is and nothing else.

## thrift

in hollywood films much effort is exerted toward getting it just right: the best people money can buy, the expensive sets, the top-notch equipment, the numerous cameras, the various angles, the multiple takes, the one-hundred-to-one shooting ratio, etc.

low budget films of course never aimed that high.  b movies were low budget, exploitation films were low budget, everything produced by roger corman was low budget.  the best way to make such a film is still to write a screenplay knowing what you have available and keeping out what you can't afford or aren't allowed to do (*taxi*).  ditto for people and

equipment.  because time is money and most of what you introduce in a film also costs money, you must minimize entries from the get go.  for instance, all other things being equal, a film with three actors will cost less than one with ten, a lean crew is cheaper and faster than a large one, shooting in daylight is a bargain when compared to setting up lights at night, and fewer locations means less traveling time and a tighter shooting schedule.

some obvious tips regarding sound: voice-over is cheaper than dialogue and re-recording lines in post is cheaper than spending time trying to catch a clean audio take when there is traffic nearby.  watch *following* for clues on how to shoot a film when you cannot control the sound.  some self-evident techniques: viewers can't tell what's being said when actors are in a long shot, are wearing an anti-pollution mask or have their back to the camera.  you can also insert a lot of dialogue when it's too dark to tell.  for close-ups, a cigarette in the mouth makes it difficult to connect words and lip activity.

no solution fits all projects.  *cavite* remains for me the best example of a successful film shot for a pittance.  one of the two authors acts in the film and the other shoots it.  all the locations are free.  almost all the dialogue is voiced-over, etc.   yet the action is relentless.  all for less than ten thousand dollars.  to remake this film hollywood-style would cost at least ten million dollars.  would spending a thousand times more money make the film a thousand times better?  i don't think so.

### imperfection

should professionalism and perfection even be an ideal when making a film? **juan garcía espinosa** attacked this notion years ago on the grounds that a technically or artistically perfect film asks nothing of its audience.  all it wants is to be admired and applauded.  put another way, dazzling images shield a film's content, protecting it from potential criticism.  the new cuban cinema, he suggested, should not be afraid of imperfection because the world itself is flawed and one of the purposes of cinema is to expose its shortcomings.  one antonym of perfection is authenticity…

### distraction

what **benjamin** prophesized for film long ago has finally come to pass.  audiences are no longer attentively watching films.  they are no longer fascinated by images or absorbed in the narrative.  in the theater, they eat pop corn, exchange loud comments with friends, or respond to messages on their cell phones.  at home or on the move, on large monitors or ipads, they watch intermittently, distracted by this or that.  the trend has thus been from a mesmerizing center to a beckoning periphery, from centripetal attention to centrifugal diversion.  to combat this turn of events, hollywood has jacked up both the visual intensity on the screen and the audio level in the speakers.  the ruckus in other words is counted on to keep viewers absorbed in the film.

instead of knocking audiences senseless through thunder and lightning, it could be more rewarding to recognize that this generation of filmgoers needs to take a breather now and then and incorporate distractions within the project itself.  how can this be done?  the musical provides the classic model with a protagonist suddenly bursting into a song or when a dance number takes place.  even godard did his version of it in *band of outsiders.* other approaches are possible.  in *attenberg* the two leads provide us with regular interludes, practicing how to kiss, rehearsing quirky leg moves while walking together, etc. another tactic is to make the protagonists rest for awhile while activity takes place elsewhere.  in *sympathy for mr. vengeance*, a detective is interrogating the father of a kidnap victim.  they are sitting facing each other in a van.  since they barely move during the questioning, our attention is taken up by what we see happening between them through the open doors: an ambulance making its way up a hill, policemen looking for clues, etc. one can also renew the attention of viewers by abandoning a protagonist to his fate and refocus instead the interest on a brand new character.  that is the ploy linklater used so successfully in *slacker.*  one can also suddenly shift the story from the events in front of the camera to what is happening behind it, as panahi did in *the mirror.*  finally, if the project is online, one can use hyperlinks to entice viewers to digress and jump from this story to another one.  anything really to refresh the narrative and, in so doing, reinvigorate viewers.

instead of bemoaning the audience's loss of attention, do not shy from disrupting your own work.

## ephemerality

film meant time, effort, and chemicals to bring images into the world.  haven't we all be mesmerized when, processing a sensitized paper, the picture slowly reveals itself in the developing bath?  before our eyes, a perfect record of what took place earlier is coming alive again.  this phenomenon allowed **bazin** to talk of photography as embalming an otherwise evanescent present.  once the photographic image was finalized, it was also meant to stay that way.  similarly, with film, all the prints sent to theaters were meant to be perfect duplicates of the final answer print.  in theory at least, the film could travel around the world without losing its fundamental qualities.  paradoxically it is these marvelously elemental qualities of film that make it look archaic today.

as we know, digital couldn't be further from the materiality, inflexibility, and permanency of film.  what is picked up is a heap of data that never coagulates into a stable, secure formation.  no longer prisoner of long term memory, the new technology naturally embraces changes.  instead of freezing a perfect moment of time that is then endlessly replayed as in *the invention of morel*, digital longs for growth, variations, and transformations.  it begs to regenerate itself, to be on the move, to engender manifold identities.  in short it aspires to a state of permanent metamorphosis.

to sum up: film halides were expected to respond twice to outside forces: light first, the developer next.  after that they were done.  game over.  with digital by contrast, millions of

pixels are primed to burst again and again at any moment.  the brewing magma cannot wait to gush forth.  let the feast begin!

## anonymity

to sign a letter, to put one's name on a book, a painting, a musical composition, or a film is to say: "i did this".  in other words, one takes responsibility for its content.  living in the west in the twenty first century, one is quick to forget how dangerous it was—and still is in some places—to publish material that some would like to ban for moral, political, or religious reasons.  the few who dare make a stand against public opinion or the diktats of doctrinaire clerics and authoritarian governments are courageous people indeed.

in the west, authorship is more prosaically connected to copyrights, contracts, and other financial issues.  think for a moment of all the work, time, and money that is spent authenticating paintings for collectors and museums.  why would acclaimed photographers limit the number of prints from their negative?   why is the authors guild so adamantly opposed to amazon's low book price policy?  in all of this, the artist (followed by his/her legal successors) essentially functions as a monopolist trying to protect the financial value of the original material.

one alternative is to publish anonymously or through a pseudonym.  for a long time no one knew the real identity of "pauline réage" or "elena ferrante".  depending upon the interest the work generates, it can nevertheless be difficult to remain unidentified for long.  leaks develop and the whole matter ends up looking like a publicity stunt.  directors could not be credited under dogma 95 vow of chastity but, when the cannes film festival gave its jury prize to *the celebration*, thomas vinterberg was only too happy to walk down the aisle and receive the award.

the issues of authorship, property, money, etc., crop up because traditional art is something tangible.  a book, a painting, and a film negative are all physical entities.  all could be held in one's hand.  in contrast, with digital, where is your work once you shut down your cell phone or your computer?  linux once made a splash because it was an open source software in contrast to proprietary operating systems such as windows.  a similar operation can be attempted with digital.  whereas the natural tendency is to seal one's work against further changes, why not deposit it on a media platform and invite others not just to "augment" but develop it.  in short, open the file to endless appropriations and transformations.  people are already contributing their own images to popular songs.  others have dubbed new lines onto a famous film scene for comedic effect.  video mashups can be fun and surprising.  what i am suggesting here would push the envelope further.  it would implement a notion dear to **deleuze** and **guattari** that speaks of an endless, non-hierarchical formation and reformation of a prototype through space and time.  once let loose, "your" project, in theory at least, would never cease to undergo mutations, some dreadful and leading nowhere, others electrifying and momentous.  it could be recut, the music changed, scenes added with new actors.  the story could be altered with a voice-over or, more radically, new characters

and a new narrative introduced, turning the earlier events into a flash back narrated by one of the more recently added protagonists.  this of course would mean saying good-bye once and for all to the idea of authorship (which i grant you isn't easy) and accept the transformation of your precious baby into an alien creature.  there are antecedents though: in the middle ages for instance it was taken for granted that a famous tale would be embellished, embroidered with new twists or even restructured by the storyteller, based on that individual's unique abilities or predilections.

digital allows us to leave behind the traditional art object.  the work no longer has to be protected, embalmed, fetishized, or monetized.  let the work go.  part company with it.  wish it bon voyage, then get going on the next project.

## form

as **pasolini** once noted, cinema is largely built on ordinary, everyday signs we learn to identify as we grow up: "this is a bus stop", "this man is jogging", "that's a supermarket". places, events, and artifacts are therefore recognized in film as easily as in life.  along the years though, cinema has added its own language on top of the older, more primary signs. for instance, a car chase shot by paul greengrass adds to the physical pursuit shockingly diverse points of view and extremely fast cutting.  these features, superimposed on top of the speeding car, intensify our response to the film.  today, when we go to the theater, we expect these signs of cinema to contribute significantly to our experience of the film.  the underlying signs produced in the world end up as mere catalysts for the flashier discourse.

if a turbocharged film language is a requisite for commercial filmmaking, it is not essential in small digital projects.  let's go back to basics rather.  as the early soviets once pointed out, you don't need to draw perspective to create art.  collages, for instance, could be made using ordinary materials, paper, glass, wood, metal, etc.  not only that, do not be afraid to be called an amateur.  from its latin root, amare, the word implies that you love what you do, as opposed to professionals who do the work only as a job, for money.  leave therefore behind the idea that you need to make a "film" with all the prescriptions the notion involves: an impressive production design, great cinematography, sharp editing, etc.  you do not need glorious aesthetics at all.  use the change in technology to discover new ways to relate images and sounds.  above all, don't hesitate to challenge film language.   create your own dialect (**bakhtin**).  doing things that are "wrong" can thwart the paradigm that imprisons the production process.

## content

the standard movie length is no longer the gold standard it once was.  on one side of the equation, television miniseries are more popular than ever.  on the other side, the short format—always the underdog in the history of the medium—has come alive on sharing video sites.  along with that, the internet and social media have accustomed us to search for the nuggets we really want.  we thus regularly skip over any material when it takes a

direction away from our own train of thought.  it makes sense therefore that digital stories need some serious rethinking.  do authors really still have to include all the details that propel the protagonists forward?  aren't we familiar enough with stories to guess what these would be?  much of what we see in films is there for two reasons only, the assumption that a story must be clear as well as complete, so we keep justifying and explaining things (the end of *psycho*).

what is distinctive about a short digital project is that it does not have to create an all-encompassing world.  nor does it have to tell a complete story, with a beginning, a middle and an end.  it could instead take its cue from something called "flash fiction".  the idea here is to tell a story as briefly as possible, suggesting a lot, but never filling up the blanks.  hemingway is said to have provided the perfect example of flash fiction with "for sale: baby shoes, never worn".  a film could easily be made of this classified ad in a few shots.  a woman is sitting at a desk, looking at the little shoes in front of her.  her hand goes instinctively toward them.  she stops, holds her breath, then faces the computer.  she opens craig's list and types "for sale, etc."

the key in flash fiction thus consists in identifying a pivoting moment in a character's life, focusing on it, then getting out quickly.  there is no need to involve a before or an after.  in hemingway's example, we don't need to know whether the woman is a single mother or the baby stillborn.  the time passage between the tragedy and the decision to sell the shoes is not important either.  whatever information you want to communicate has to be available instantly.  her social status for example can be revealed through her clothing and the décor in the room.  based on her behavior we could also surmise that she is selling the shoes because she wants to move on with her life rather than because she needs the money.  no matter what, a lot would still be left to the imagination of each viewer.

embrace the idea that your viewer has no more than a few seconds to give you, possibly holding a cellphone while standing in a subway train.  be brief, make each frame count.  think of your "movie" as a burst of images that tell a lot, a jolt that leaves the viewer thinking about what he or she has just come across.

## exploration

essayistic films are very different but equally rewarding to make.  in this kind of films, you ruminate about something.  it could even be about the very film you are presently making.  or it could take the form of a personal diary (real or imagined) that is told through pictures and sounds.  or you could investigate some issue that interests you.  why not be the historian of your building or street, if not your life and times?  in other words, rekindle the spirit of vertov's *life caught unawares*, cinema vérité and direct cinema.  shoot life as it happens.  no blue print, no pre-conceived scheme to circumscribe the shooting.  the particular events matter less in this kind of film than the perspective through which they are being observed.  the voice of the filmmaker is what makes the footage meaningful.

i find this type of moviemaking especially suited for digital projects.  it tends to be more personal than stories requiring actors.  you, yourself, and your thinking make up the node of the work and time is not an issue.  such projects are not without interest from a viewer's perspective either.   instead of getting engrossed in the adventures of a fictional character, one becomes absorbed in the thinking of the filmmaker.  marker, godard, akerman, and sokurov have all used this process quite successfully.

it does not take much to get us to think about film.  kuleshov conducted his seminal investigation of editing using only four shots.  john berger in his *ways of seeing* shows the same painting by van gogh, *wheatfield with crows*, twice.  the first time, with room tone only.  we thus have a chance to appreciate the painting—the landscape, the colors, the brushstrokes, etc.—on our own.  then he shows it again but this time a somber music accompanies his telling us that this was the last painting van gogh completed before his death.  our response is immediately altered.  a work of art open to our perusal becomes loaded with an emotional baggage that is immaterial to the painting itself.  because we are able to experience our own internal turn-around, we are shocked to discover how easy it is to manipulate perception and play with our emotions.  what experiment do you have in mind?

## beingness

the greek root of "cine" implies movement, the setting of motion, something coming alive.  its opposite, acinesia, suggests paralysis or death.  cinema is thus a medium dedicated to capturing life's energy.  yet, very much like ourselves who become acutely aware of our aliveness only after we have been told we have a life-threatening illness, most films are content showing people doing and saying things.  they produce but an ersatz of the real thing.

my first encounter with a vital moment goes back to my days in film school.  we were shown an old, silent french film called *ménilmontant*.  the copy of the film was atrocious, full of scratches and bad splices.  it was hard to pay attention.  but then, out of nowhere, a scene appeared that has stuck in my mind ever since.  a young woman is pregnant.  her boyfriend has abandoned her.  she is alone in paris, destitute, with no place to go.  she is thinking of suicide.  when the scene begins, we find her sitting on a bench next to an old man eating his lunch.  his munching reminds her she hasn't eaten for quite some time.  quietly, he puts some bread on the bench between them.  she notices it, picks it up, and eats ravenously.  next he hands over a slice of salami.  tears flow from her eyes as she bites into it.  little by little she is coming back to life.  throughout the scene, the old man never looks at her.

 it is true that the woman is backlit and her breath is made visible by the cold.  although these factors help, they do not appear delibeate.  there is also something awkward about the compositions and the editing is rather rough.  these shortcomings, far from hurting the scene, help it.  in other words, the moment is revealed to us without the aesthetic buffer that permeates most films.  consequently, our expectations are destabilized, refracting our

attention squarely on the human exchange.  the shyness of the old man is touching, the woman's face deeply moving.  the interaction between them is minimal but compelling. something is happening in front of us, in vivo.

it is not a question of how good an actor is.  de niro and pacino are great ones, yet nothing much happens in the scene they have together in *heat*.  as for the actress in *ménilmontant* , she appeared in other movies, including one by renoir, but in these films she is just a pretty face.  never again was she able to be as impressive as in this particular scene.  so what happened?  put simply, what came through is not connected to the idiosyncrasies of the character or the personality of the actress, it aroused rather from basic humanness.  to put it in a larger philosophical perspective, what we are encountering here, suddenly, without warning, is the face of the other (levinas), a face stripped of  all pretense.  somehow, at that moment, the vulnerable being this woman is at core managed to surge forth and we in turn cannot but respond to the disclosure.

this state of being is not easily accessible.  it demands from the actor to let go of everything. some directors like fincher, wyler, or mann have experimented with shooting umpteen takes to get their players so exhausted mentally that they stop acting and just simply are. but are the performances in their films more convincing than what we experience in more conventionally produced movies?

this is where digital helps.  think about it: the absence of crew, lights, a big camera, all the paraphernalia that turns ordinary moviemaking into an unnatural operation, is absent when shooting digital.  your actors are no longer standing on a formal platform.  they share the same everyday space you are in.  any "acting" in that environment is going to sound instantly over the top.  your actors will have to be convincing at the level of life as opposed to what drama usually demands of them.  the situation gives you a chance to capture what is missing from most films: the livingness of a single moment of time.

## the time is now

to be able to witness a live event has an appeal that canned material simply cannot match. so why not stream your work live online, using whatever technology is available by the time you read this?  when doing so though, do not attempt to replicate traditional dramaturgy. engage the medium with gusto.  make it real.  make it cheap.  make it yours.  each work can be self-sufficient or you can have a series that is streamed on a regular basis.  no titles should precede or follow the body of the text.  promote the piece on social media: some anonymous drama coming out of nowhere, live, in the middle of the night, a one-time affair only.

## envoi

### 1

from its beginning we looked at cinema as an end, not a means.  we were attracted by its wizardry.   we focused on expanding and refining its dramatic and aesthetic potential.  with digital, that battle has been decisively won.  we are now the complete masters of images.  we can make them do and show whatever we wish.  yes, the technology can still be enhanced in the future but the system has clearly reached a plateau.  nothing radically new can be expected for the medium as we know it.  already cinema feels worn-out, a contraption that has given its all, an apparatus that has earned a dignified send-off .

it is time to look elsewhere.  my advice—it should be clear by now—is to go back to basics, to life 101, to what was always taken for granted by the medium, its substratum, its underlying layer, the vital forces that animate all there is in the world.  as a civilization, we have barely scratched the surface in our understanding of life, nature, and the rest of the cosmos.  the (your) challenge is to tackle the depth of our everyday experience, one step, one encounter, one situation at a time.

### 2

as soon as you turn pro, you are stuck in the system for the rest of your working life.  hitchcock mourned the fact that his celebrity status kept him from directing the kind of low budget, more experimental movies truffaut, godard, and others were able to make at the time.  once a pro, you can never go back.  to be an amateur is to be free.

### 3

the danger whenever you make a film, even as an independent, is that you immediately begin stargazing.  in other words, you start fantasizing about a successful showing at sundance or cannes, meetings with producers or distributors, a rewarding career thereafter, etc.  in other words, you are putting yourself where the industry wants you: as a beggar.  you have been tamed, defanged, castrated.  with thousands and thousands in the same situation, you are putting all your hopes on winning the lottery.  don't fool yourself.  most times, nothing happens.

a file however is something else.  hollywood couldn't care less.  so you don't have to kowtow to the big boys.  you don't have to beg.  and you can avoid the foolishness that makes the industry what it is: the trappings, the egos, and the inanity of it all.  keep the endeavor as simple as it can be.  assemble the best sequence of images and sounds you are capable of and ship it out.

filemakers of the world: leave the plodding behemoth behind.  it is time to create an art fit for this century.

4

you are not making a film because it is a job, because you like the work, or even because you are good at it.  you are making a film because there is something about the project that intrigues you: a theme, a character, a location, and you want to discover what that is.  it means you are going out on a limb.  you hope there will be enough to keep you going as well as interest others in the project.  but, and this is important, you are not making a film for yourself nor are you making it for other people.  you are making it because you want to see what this film is like when it's done.  sure enough, there are times when you'll end up disappointed.  but epiphanies will turn up too.  the feeling then is not unlike what you experience when, playing chess, your humble pawn turns into a formidable queen.  these moments, i promise you, will be very sweet indeed.

i bid you godspeed.

hollywood delenda.

i do practically all my research online nowadays and i assume you do too.  all my references can easily be located with just a few clicks on the mouse.  if you want to discuss an issue, simply email me at [jpgeuens@gmail.com](mailto:jpgeuens@gmail.com)  and i 'll get back to you.