

A Cinemahead in Värmland

Daniel Alegi

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"A Cinemahead in Värmland"

I pushed the eject button over Hollywood and landed in Värmland, a region of Sweden roughly between Stockholm and Oslo. Its main city, Karlstad, has about 80,000 people. It's not exactly the capital of Movie World, so I often get asked: "Why did you move here?"

I am a film-maker, a storyteller, not a reporter. My favorite film is "F for Fake" by Orson Welles.

In this story, chapters have their own pace. Some crackle like homemade fireworks, some crawl by candlelight, like a Lucia parade. A few have dialogue but most are silent "raw footage". Each chapter can be viewed as a sequence, a shot, a single frame, or a timeline in progress. The chapters can be connected like dots, or a crossword puzzle, like scenes from an unfinished script.

You be the editor. If a scene is no good, jump-cut to another. Read in any order you prefer.

Daniel Alegi

PS – When you are done, pass this book to someone else. It could make for a nice introduction.

Zoom Out

Years in Los Angeles have numbed my curiosity for Hollywood, which I call "Movie World", as opposed to what the rest of the planet produces, which I call "World Cinema". I look at Movie World with the same enthusiasm I display in front of an aquarium with three old fish. One or two Hollywood films a year are good and, chances are, both were written by Charlie Kaufman or his brother. After "Jaws" and "Star Wars", Movie World seems to have become contented with crafting blockbusters, unoriginal and over-packaged products for kids. If you ask me, Movie World not only doesn't love its growing global audience, but it looks down on it. It sees simply a set of targets, masses of conditioned, dumb or tired folks with predictable tastes, from whose compulsive-buying behavior it can profit in style.

Movie World has all the elements of a religion: high priests, prophets, gods, and a compelling story. The priests are the Studio heads, the executives, the agents, the lawyers and the bean-counters. The prophets are the brands, who slip their product names into every available frame. The story is the tale of any hero who gets called to defeat a terrifying villain, and succeeds. In infinite commercial variations, this is known as "the Hollywood formula".

It must be rather exciting for a movie high priest to choose what stories the public will see this season, what action-hero videogame will hit the market first, what wizards will fly, and what dreams should be worth dreaming. Adoration and adulation of the gods (and the symbols they wear) drives demand for more and more Friday night sameness. The gods of today's Olympus are called Bruce, Mel, Tom, Leonardo, Cameron, Julia, Angelina, Johnny.

Thomas Edison, who said he invented cinema and sued almost anyone who disagreed, understood from Day One that content needed not

be intelligent to attract eyeballs. Quite the opposite was true, in fact. Before stars even existed, he made a fortune showing NickelOdeon one-minute reels in two primal flavors: the boxing match and the ballerina strip-tease. The grandfather of Movie World saw one thing clearly: sex and violence will make the world go around.

Mowgli

I zap through satellite info-tainment channels in a hotel room. The old "warm and fuzzy" feeling of TV is gone. Maybe it's because I am from the 60s. Maybe because for many years I did not own a TV set. The remote control lands me on Disney Channel, and I don't recognize that once so familiar place. Gone are its soft colors, its quiet, clever taste. Where is Mickey? Where is Walt Disney, the legendary grandfather of all kids whose legend says he personally redrew with his own pencil the ending of "The Jungle Book"? And by the way, where is Mowgli in this new corporate and impersonal Disneyland? Last time I saw him he was leaving the jungle and his mentors Bagheera and Baloo behind, and following the cute girl into the global village.

In 1993 I briefly worked in props at Disney Studios in Burbank. My job was to pick and deliver set decorations, anything from period kitchen furniture to a 1953 telephone booth. That's what Studios have that Europe doesn't have: rows of telephone booths, with all the models and phones. Wow, what a sight. But even surrounded by so much make-believe I saw no trace of that little kid Mowgli that once was my hero. Could he be lost somewhere?

What if Mowgli lives in Chicago now, is divorced and plays bass in a part-time punk band that plays Clash cover songs on Thursday nights? Or maybe, thanks to his acting CV, he got a job in a reality TV show in Paris, or perhaps he opened a tattoo joint in Bahia Formosa, Brazil. He could have done some time skateboarding under the Tokyo mono-rail whipping around his rehearsed good looks for foreign tourists, or maybe his eternal jungle-kid moves and vibes got him an honest day job, plus kids. Give or take a touch of urban adrenaline and disco hormones Mowgli could still be in Los Angeles, or have died in a tragic celebrity highway accident on Freeway 110.

Movie World may have lost Mowgli in the city but still speaks kid language, and has a virtual monopoly on what kids dream about, in any neighborhood. How? By jamming feel-good vibrations in between the lines of what's really going on. I think of the film "Husbands" by John Cassavetes and its long, seemingly pointless sequences about what happens when someone close to you suddenly dies. I shut the TV off and go to meet an Italian producer from London. He is also at this festival today and is interested in my latest project. I'll keep an eye out for Mowgli.

Production Schedule

The road I walk on came from following a two-sided map. On one side was a paved road, heading straight up mainstream. I kept a foot on it for some time, but it offered few options and limited opportunities for change, and change is what I seek. The map on the flip-side was blank.

No direction, no home, no indication of "what next?", no predictable outcomes. No sign yet of the Italy-Hollywood-Värmland triangular journey, nor of a sustainable creative career in cinema. I chose the flip-side.

Hey! How about a toilet-paper tie-in for the next Tom Cruise China picture? Movie World is abuzz with global profit potentials, with the beat of a digital clock. Movie World has a flick to sell 86,400,000 milliseconds a day, stories that get the green light because they can turn a healthy profit. In Hollywood drama, the mother of all stories is fear. Fear is inside you! You can't escape it! The Box-Office loves paranoia. On TV, Movie World has its echo chamber, in symbiosis with news and advertising. The aim is to make audiences addicted to the feeling of "not being good enough", to seduce them into modeling inarticulate heroes with guns, and to entice them to shop at the mall for better self-esteem. Cut now to a colorful story about a woman who just won millions in the New York State Lottery. Nike ads. Murder. Vengeful justice. An embedded report from the front, then gossip. On Satellite, cable, Internet, SMS, video mobile-phone, pay-per-view, CNN. Movie World is in constant global control. I stay focused on local cinema.

But what if Movie World was just a distortion mirror placed in front of seven billion humans? What if it was not a must-play poker table, a zoo cage, a "part of life", but a 24-7 self-induced nightmare? Imagine a story in which it turned out good and evil were just Siamese twins battling over an internal conflict for total control of the brain, the very organ that made them inseparable?

Movie World loves battles and the heroes who fight them, celebrities worth of unlimited attention, adulation and imitation. Did Cameron Diaz get three Porsches stolen by the Rome gangs while shooting "Gangs Of New York"? Did Sean Penn lose work because he went to Baghdad and spoke about avoiding unjustified war? Did Julia Roberts punch a paparazzo? Did she marry him? Did they divorce yet? Anything goes as long as there is disagreement. A never-ending war someplace is good news, because money flows. But what's the flip-side?

Crowd Control

Go to film festivals whenever you can. Take a vacation from the Friday-night Movie routine. Surf the net and go spend a week at a film festival in Iceland, or go see thirty-one films in one gulp in Prague. Once I was at a festival in Capalbio, Italy. The outdoor screen was in the town's piazza and the 35 mm projector beamed from a second floor window. You know "Nuovo Cinema Paradiso", so you can picture the scene. I remember among many great films by nobodies, a strong Australian short directed by Alfredo Peyretti, "Brave", about a kid whose hat gets stolen by bullies and how he must find the resources to get it back. With the full moon above, a glass of wine and my girl's hand in mine, I needed no other reminder that festivals are the place to be.

Festivals come in all sizes. The bigger the fest, the more Movie World people around. Just look for self-conscious business folk waiting to surface at some big premiere of a Studio picture, crawling around like caterpillars. Kids are the butterflies. They sample cinema and take chances with unknown film-makers and languages. At the Göteborg festival you can find art shows in the street and sense a tribal component, plus SMS. You don't find many other occasions for free aggregation around, with visual nourishment for everyone. Like a positive political idea, or extraordinary art, festivals bring individuals together to tune into a unifying frequency.

In times like ours, where one wonders about what's really left of freedom of expression and all culture is for sale, a festival can be a surprising antidote to the resigned addiction to predictable, conventional movie stories. For me, a small to medium size festival is a sibling of the rock concert, and both may be distant relatives of the ancient Greek Dionysian carnivals, when citizens danced in the streets for days, forgetting their name, gender, and social class.

Movie World likes masses too, but only one wallet at a time, please. Physical gatherings of large masses run counter to the market idea of parceled individualism, of home-by-home quiet fruition. Hitting the streets is the revolutionary aspect of any film festival, whatever its size. Why not burn "the Man" and challenge Movie World's rule? This is science-fiction! I wrote my first Hollywood project based on this premise, I called it "Standard".

Development

I love to see an underdog film go all the way.

"Natan" is a Karlstad eight minute, one-gulp story about a man sick of hot dogs, who wants a real dog. It is in-your-face like "Rosetta" and hand-held in a Dogma way. The camera buzzes wisely and incessantly until it disappears, the cuts are a half-step ahead of the beat. This film was made for nothing but it is worth a lot to Värmland, which as a region is not on many world cinema maps. "Natan" is a film from Sweden, but also a film from Värmland. What does that mean? Are a film from Wisconsin and one from Pennsylvania not both "American movies"?

In Karlstad, short film and documentary projects are developed and funded under the umbrella of Film i Värmland, one of the nineteen regional film production and development offices in Sweden. Film i Värmland, to me, is like a traditional family doctor, taking the pulse and temperature of local film projects and distributing available public funds to keep them healthy. For an outsider like me this in itself is a noteworthy process. On the one hand is the issue of regional identity,

whereby a film developed and produced in Värmland is a Värmland film before it is a Swedish film. On the other are also issues of vernacular, history and culture that can come to the foreground.

To hope for public film funding in the U.S.A. is like hoping for Americans to elect Michael Moore president. With the exception of some shrinking dollars available for the humanities, non-commercial films are out of the picture. Proper budgets belong – surprise – to the sphere of entertainment. One umbrella is the invisible network of experimental film collectives. Grants and limited monies for the arts drop out of the hat of a Guggenheim, a Soros or a Rockefeller. The other umbrella are the universities, as many low-budget and artfilms are made in conjunction with film-departments. In Europe, directors without a script are rare and there is hardly a system in place for screenwriters to develop scripts; there is less of an industry and more of a lineup of writer-directors outside government funding offices.

In Italy, private winds are blowing. A Prime Minister who calls himself "President" owns five TV channels, plus national TV rights for thousands of movies. Suddenly, the State funds commercial comedies and treats Italian authors like hopeless poets unaware of the market. This, to a certain extent, is true. Therein lie the old dilemmas: can cinema for cinema's sake be funded? Also, who would the producers of non-commercial productions be? Back to Värmland.

Film i Värmland has one major asset on its side: patience. It will fund young film-makers even though they may not arrive at an international festival screening until after several films. Movie World has the heartbeat of a hummingbird, it's in a hurry to generate success stories. Film i Värmland, instead, can fund the development of young film-makers over a longer, slower period of time. It nurtures the organic growth and health of its local film-makers, by supporting their early steps, waiting for rewards in the medium-long term. Maybe even an Oscar?

Developing local talent is a multi-step process, part of which has to do with funding productions, and part with supporting a World Cinema culture to supplement the common Movie World diet.



To lure Karlstad to see forgotten or alternative directors, seeds must be planted. Luckily, there is a longstanding Swedish tradition: the Film Club. Rooted in the 50s, Film Clubs have allowed cinema to remain visible. One could – and can – watch a film not only to escape real life, but also to engage in stories connected to real life. In Karlstad, the Film Club MOWIE was founded in 1969. Here is part of its most recent programming list:

- Station Agent
- 21 grams
- American Splendor
- Taxi Driver
- Afterlife
- Aberdeen

Osama

Can you name the country of origin of each film? The director?

Character Actor

The owner at the New Beverly arthouse theatre in L.A. waves me in from the box office window. A brand new print of "A Woman Under The Influence" by Cassavetes is showing. "How many times have you seen it?" I just go in again. There were four of us in the theatre. The crowds were probably down at The Grove Mall for an iPod demo or a Schwarzenegger premiere.

Later that night, in a Santa Monica bar, I had a drink with Seymour Cassel, a stock actor in Cassavetes's film-making family. He used to help with shooting camera, lighting, even cooking. He said he never knew what side of the camera he was on. He and John would edit together, at night, on a Steenbeck film editor. On breaks they played backgammon. I had seen Seymour speak at Cassavetes screenings before. He talked about John warmly, with a vibration that I cannot describe. He was not only speaking about his best friend who passed away years ago. He was grateful for the ride. John's development method was simple. If a producer was interested, he dictated a script to a secretary in three days, no corrections. Then he played Hollywood actor for a while,

like in "Rosemary's Baby" or "Dirty Dozen". When his acting was done, he invited all his film family over for brunch, and he said: "Let's make another movie."

Close-Up

In Italian high school I studied Latin and Greek, but my favorite subjects were philosophy, art history, chemistry and gym. My heroes were Henri Bergson, Thomas More, Marc Chagall, Timothy Leary and Johann Cruyff. In July 1983 I took the "Maturità" final exam, an adolescent's nightmare, the final gateway to university. In the oral portion I chose philosophy as the subject to present.

I imagined Bergson as the first philosopher ever to watch a movie alone, in the afternoon. He was less into Positivism and the power of science than into memory and metaphysics. I imagined his intellectual friends at the Paris cafés making fun of him. He probably spent his time drawing graphs of motion and exploring time-space relations. He knew there were different ways to look at every thing. He was struck by the revelation that time could be broken down into multiple "frames" per second, into infinite "moments". Isn't that quintessential cinema?

I could have spoken about Bergson for hours, but during the exam I wasn't asked a single question about him. Instead, I had to talk about Kierkegaard! The only answer I could muster was that Kierkegaard was without a doubt a dark Scandinavian loner with suicidal tendencies. Then I went blank. A moment later, I remembered a secret a teacher once told me: "When you don't know it, smile." Out came my teeth,

from ear to ear. Three examiners stared at me, waiting to decide if I was mature enough to go to the University. Then, I began: "Kierkegaard loved to play cards with his aunt, on Tuesdays. What he liked the most was that he could peek at her breasts when she lay down a card." And I went on. This was not philosophy, but they listened. My details got more and more visual and precise, it must have sounded as if I had really read some rare diary or unauthorized Kierkegaard biography. Because of the heat, perhaps, the examiners were too lazy to inquire about my story. The day before I had visited my grandfather and watched him peek at his sister-in-law's breasts, and I told it as I saw it, just changing the names.

Empowered, I added that I could talk at length about Bergson. No luck. What about Thomas More. They agreed. I started by saying that in modern times to be called "Utopian" is almost an offense, like being a "dreamer" or being unemployed. But I had really fallen in love with Utopia, that island where children were the common good, where life was a shared safe-space.

I closed by saying that Thomas More was the John Lennon of his day. I looked up at the examiners. They were no Walruses. I passed the exam with a low passing grade, but no matter. I was admitted to Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island, U.S.A.

At Brown, over the next four years, I met Middle-Eastern princes with armed bodyguards, heirs to famous car-industry dynasties, VIP's daughters, Nobel prize-winning professors, sons of senators and NBA team-owners. When I went home to Rome in the summer, I liked to have lunch at my friend Claudio's. His father had a small car mechanic shop with a greasy kitchen in the back. We ate chopped meat and potatoes, drank Frascati wine and talked nonsense. I will never forget that. I wrote a paper on the role of intellectuals in Latin American revolutions, and graduated from Brown in 1987. In four years, I shot approximately 3,000 still photographs.

Cowboy Shot

Like any American kid, who will sooner or later make something explode or launch a rudimentary rocket, I discovered chemistry, and began to experiment. What I found was Timothy Leary's book "What does WoMan want" at an American garage sale in Rome. It was an autographed, self-printed limited edition, copy number in pencil: 17. Cost: 2,000 lire of the time, or 1.80 Euros, 2.30 dollars, 16 Swedish crowns of today.

Leary was some kind of non-linear interstellar traveller, an "exception to the rulers". His main character, in the Galactic Encyclopedia, was a special agent from the 5th dimension who wants humans to transform and learn to think for themselves. The categories of humans Leary was looking to recruit for his chemistry-driven mental evolution project were among the following: "wizards, sorcerers, magicians, musicians, sound engineers, light artists, electronic composers, yogins, diet-gurus, voodooists, clairvoyants, organic gardeners, tarot card dealers, I Ching throwers, astrologists, light-technicians (projecting colored images fifty-feet high across castle walls), drummers, flutists, computer designers, film-makers, and bio-chemists."

Extreme Close-Up

I play this game on road trips or with my kids. It works well with strangers, too.

One person asks "what do you prefer?" and names two things, or people, or films, or foods that are associated in some way. The other must choose what s/he prefers and answer fast. And it goes on. For example, "what do you prefer, pasta or rice? Harmony Korine or Martin Scorsese?" The key is to respond urgently, like Indiana Jones in the snake pit. Answer with your guts, not with your brain. What do you prefer? Karlstad or Burbank? Moodysson or Bergman? Eisenstein or Tarkovsky? Night or Day? Color or Black and White? Falling asleep or Waking Up? Spinach or Chocolate? You don't need to justify or explain, just choose, in the moment. You have three split seconds to answer each challenge of "What do you prefer?".

Here are some quick sample answers. I prefer Karlstad to Burbank, Moodysson to Bergman, Tarkovsky to George Lucas, Bukowski to Tolstoy, Harmony Korine to Scorsese, Dylan to Elvis, Winter to Summer, Girls to Boys, Catherine Deneuve to Brigitte Bardot, Laurel to Hardy, Buster Keaton to Chaplin, Wide-angle to Zoom lenses, Sam Beckett to Mr. Bean, Tarantino to Howard Hawks, Grateful Dead to Doors, Rome to Paris, Cruyff to Platini, Mastroianni to Laurence Olivier, "Nightmare Before Christmas" to "Shrek", "The Flintstones" to "Jurassic Park", "Jungle Book" to "Fantasia", Godard to Truffaut, Jeunet to Caro, Sergio Leone to John Ford, pepparkakor to Apple Pie, Chocolate to Spinach (but Lasagna above all).

Long Shot

I sit by the window on a SAS flight, jotting down the word Värmland on the back of the 747 safety booklet. I have read that the "a" with two dots above it is pronounced "ae". I shoot a few single-step frames of the dawn on my faithful Super 8. I have accepted to teach the film-making workshop for the film theory department in Karlstad. I have to stop there to sign a piece of paper, it's my welcome to the local bureaucracy. Then I will continue to Vasa, Finland, and lead a short film shoot in the area for a few weeks. The Hostess runs towards me, alarmed: "Sir, you are not allowed to shoot film on the airplane. Sorry. New regulation. Headphones for our movie?"

No thanks. Airplane movies are sour treats, further sanitized and miniaturized versions of "big screen" Blockbusters. So many things are changing, the projection screen sizes get bigger inside private homes and smaller outside. Movies are migrating from theatres to PC monitors, portable DVD players, and mobile phones. A demo I saw at a broadcasting fair in Las Vegas advertised the new Mpeg4 format, which will soon not only let individuals pay to download movies on cell phones, but allow them to click on any object on the miniature screen and get directly linked to the web site where that item can be purchased. The fair was buzzing with excitement.

Spectator

Last April in Karlstad I stepped into a video rental store looking for a Värmland film called "Du ska nog se att det går över" ("Don't worry, it will pass"). The store colors are bright red and yellow in swirling stripes, there is a wall of "lösgodis", assorted candy. There is only one thing worse than tacky American Blockbuster movie stores, and that's their imitation.

I ask for the film in my beginner Swedish, which is how I speak, stopping in mid-sentence to find a past tense. They have no such film. I add that we are in the main city in Värmland and this has got to be the hottest video joint and "Du ska nog se att det går över" won the Guldbagge, the Swedish Oscar. "Never heard of it, sorry." The girl encourages me to redirect my search to the vast selection of new arrivals stacked high up on every side. "Some can be reserved before they are released, like video-games", she reassures me. The store manager offers me a discount on the latest Travolta, Cruise, Steven Seagal and Bruce Willis war movies because I am a film-maker from California.

The next video rental store is 200 meters down the "gatan". It's plastered with "The Passion of the Christ" maxi-posters. Mel Gibson has dusted off the story of Jesus coming to save the world. The streets in Karlstad are empty. I wonder if everybody is on the Internet buying flights to sunny Italy. Maybe they are budgeting a Universal Studios vacation. One and the other destination seem integral to the Swedish dream. I just came from both.

At the Royal, a former bank now pastry shop, I look at the foam in my cappuccino and remember a bartender in Rome who could paint foam shapes in your cup, and ended up in Tokyo competing in the Cappuccino World Cup. No one really checked, when he came back saying he had won.

From Sweden, Rome is very close, and that is a relief. No more 13 hour plane trips from Los Angeles with stops in Memphis, Dallas,

Toronto, Minneapolis. Next week we fly Ryan Air to Rome for 30 Euros. Then we head to a medieval village south of Rome, the place I call home. It is over 1000 years old. There are three restaurants, four hotels, and two movie theaters. Cars have to park outside of town. The indoor theatre is named Augusto, after the projectionist. The outdoor theatre is now abandoned. I went in there last winter and sat in one of the broken old wooden seats. I stared at the gigantic blank screen where my eyes used to spend their summer evenings. I had a fixed menu: "007" for lunch, Spaghetti Westerns for dinner, Peter O'Toole and Omar Sharif for dessert. Once we had a special surprise, a girl friend of ours had played young Liv Ullmann in a film! We all went to see her on the outdoor screen, on a chilly night, slumbering in our sleeping bags. I always remembered scenes, but I often forgot plots. I couldn't tell you the whole story of a film from start to end, but some scenes were unforgettable. I would ask my mother for money to see a film over and over. I saw "Lawrence of Arabia" six times. I would go up to the projection booth and watch a man exchange the 35 mm reels at intermission, or splice out a burn, or add a trailer just before the start. In the winter, back then, the theatre showed mostly Italian porno-comedies, as a social service to the elders, and kids weren't allowed.

Special F/X

I am spending a day with Joe Mahoney. Joe is a product placement guy in L.A., he sneaks brand names into movies so you can see them, and trust them, and buy them. He has a "Bible", a book with detailed descriptions of every scene in a Paramount family picture. Each scene offers opportunities. Luxury items like cars and jewelry have already been handled higher up, but Joe runs the small stuff, from cigarettes to drinks, to what's on the TV in the background of the dinner scene. I met Joe when I was directing a project at CBS Radford and I asked him to take me with him someday. As a former IBM salesman, I was into his process. There is traffic on the 101 Freeway and I switch on my old trusted Panasonic (not just any brand) mini-recorder.

JOE: Guess how many.

ME: How many what?

JOE: How many I can place.

ME: I don't know. Twenty?

JOE: Higher.

ME: Thirty.

JOE: Try ninety.

ME: Ninety? But you said it's a ninety minute show.

JOE: Ok, we shoot for ninety, maybe settle for sixty. Names, mentions, backgrounds, radio, stores. You can't even notice half of them.

ME: Subliminal?

JOE: Think of it as real estate. Billboards on walls. Ads on taxis or buses. Except the property is a huge screen, in theaters everywhere. You know why Tic-Tacs got so huge here? They get mentioned in every other movie. It's all Joe.



ME: How do you choose Pepsi or Coke? Do they bid?

JOE: No matter. The winner is always the dealer. The casino.

ME: Good business.

JOE: Ever heard of the "Universal Pipeline"?

ME: No.

JOE: That's because I made it up: The Universal Pipeline of Global Entertainment.

ME: Nice name. Watch the black Bronco.

JOE: The Pipeline must spin jobs for machines, lawyers, directors, writers, studios, lawyers.

ME: A lot of lawyers.

JOE: It's a money game. We got seven minutes. A lot of movies are flops. Know why?

ME: Why?

JOE: Because flops put food on the table.

ME: Six minutes.

JOE: A Studio makes one Blockbuster every fifteen flops. That's the magic number.

ME: Is that why Movies are so bad?

JOE: Stop that critical analysis shit. Come on. They're just movies, man.

ME: Asses in the seats.

JOE: Look, a flop is a production. Productions keep the Pipeline going. Plus, losses go against taxes.

ME: Bad movies are good.

JOE: Flops are awesome.

ME: Shouldn't we go left on Buenavista?

JOE: Flops are like blockers in football. They block out opponents. If a multiplex has eleven theatres full, no other movies can screen. It's subtle. It's genius. Let's shortcut through Alameda Avenue.

ME: Good driving.

JOE: Smile man, don't be so gray. Smile, for heaven's sake. I hate losers who whine and complain that nothing is perfect, that the world is unfair and all that jazz.

ME: Optimism.

JOE: Grab that ID badge off the dash and flash it to the guard. We're here.

Supporting Actor

As a kid I spent a few summers with my uncle, a Catholic priest. He loved four earthly things: Mass, coaching calcio (football), boiled chicken (with homemade mayonnaise), and a glass of wine. His parish was on a hill in a small town on the Adriatic sea. At my uncle's I was free for a time from my bourgeois family: no more forced bilingual education, no maid, no brothers, and no piano practice in the South corner of our oversized apartment. At my uncle's I was learning the real stuff: death, resurrection, and ping-pong. His sister Onelia instructed me on how to execute chickens. To kill a living thing gave me first an irresistible surge of adrenaline, and then a sense of guilt. I wondered if priests shouldn't be vegetarians, but if my uncle said killing a bird was forgiven, then it was true. He was my direct line to the highest authorities. If my uncle were still alive, I'd ask him to inquire about why humans snap each others' necks.

In the church archives I found the Alegi family roots as far back as 1754. There were no details and no images, just birth, death and marriage dates in faded calligraphy. It was like reading a list of characters with no script attached. Mass began strictly at 7:00 a.m. My uncle was the star and I was his faithful sidekick, the altar boy. In film talk I was technically an extra, since I had no dialogue lines. But my uncle and I were really "The Magnificent Two", he was Yul Brunner and I Steve McQueen, inspired as hell, blessed desperados, tighter than Butch and Sundance. Our timing was perfect: we walked the entry procession in sync step. I had two bells to ring, at specific moments, like the Offering. Since we didn't have an organist, in the evening version I also sang a hymn. I was out of tune and my uncle shot me forgiving killer looks every time. Maybe it is true what they say that, with actors, villains can play saints but not the reverse. The morning Mass had a core

audience, nine older women with veils on their heads, and a man with a hat kneeling in the last row. The story was he still prayed for his son to return from the Russian World War II front.

Kicking a penalty kick can give you an undescrivable feeling, like sleep without dream. There I stood frozen, with a goal to score, or lose. The goalie was Arturo, a twelve year-old second cousin of mine, taller than my dad. I wanted to shoot like Gianni Rivera had done the month before in Milan-Torino, faking a hard kick to his right, then softly touching to the left. I changed my mind half-way to the ball and blasted my kick over Arturo, over the crossbar, past the wire fence and down into the woods. (I suddenly recalled that Rivera's shot had also missed.) The last thing that crossed my mind in that moment was that I knew nothing about sex.

I stumbled down the hill to look for the damned ball. It had to be in that small clearing after the last patch of prickly bushes. Yes, there it was. I went closer, until a sound paralyzed me. It sounded like firemen opening their way through a tunnel of fire, or just someone getting beaten. There was a tree. And from behind there were two legs, with two dancing bare feet attached. The toes were outstretched and pointing at me, telling me to disappear and, at the same time, to check it out. I did. They were whispering crazy things, like "call me a this and that" and "shut up this and that". They were bad words, like when Mrs. Rossi summoned the Lord's name in vain again and again and again! I ran away, and kept my secret, but the village soon found out because gossip grows wild. My uncle went hungry working overtime in the confessional.

Props

In 1973 my brother and I acted in a black and white Italian TV program called "Hello Charlie". The show was not meant to teach American but British English, which I couldn't pronounce too well, struggling to say "I am wolking on the woll" while performing the action. The daily shoots were inside the Rome Cinecittà Studios. One evening, my mother was late picking us up, and we wondered, like the "E.T." kids over to a dirt mound to look at the lights from a film set on the next lot. There was a piazza with only the wooden fronts of each building, and a maze of fake snow in the center. In a field to the right stood one side of a huge wooden ship. It must have been seventy meters long.

For a few weeks I sat on on that dirt mound every afternoon. The man with the megaphone and the scarf seemed to joke with the crew while he gave directions. One day cars raced through the square, and three days later the plastic sheets below the ship started making waves and, pulled by hundreds of workers, they became the sea. I always forgot to ask what film they were shooting, and we never told my mother too many details.

After "Hello Charlie" I did not return to Cinecittà until sixteen years later. When I stepped into the entry booth to get a pass, on the wall I noticed a huge poster with the image of that ship, it was called "Rex". The title on the poster was "Amarcord", by Federico Fellini. In his hometown's dialect it means "I remember". Then I remembered too.

Dialogue Coach

I was invited to a conference in Mississippi to give a talk about World Cinema in the context of a global distribution dominated by American companies. They would also screen "Czar Of Make Believe" since it is a multi-language film. I jotted down a few talking points with respect to how Neo-Realism came and went, since many of those issues are still relevant today.

I would argue that for me, after "Bicycle Thief" by De Sica, Neo-Realism was muted by politics. The Italian government welcomed American movies and musicals to entertain an exhausted nation. (Who needs big doses of reality after a bloody war?) But those roaming young film-makers insisted on despising phony studio sets. The war being over, they now zoomed their grainy black and white gaze onto post-war reconstruction. On one side a scattered lineup of wide-angle lenses pointed at everyday corruption, ready to shoot without budgets. On the other, restored censorship and other government regulations, favoring a cleaner exportable image of the country.

The exact conditions which lead from "Rome Open City" to "Umberto D" will never exist again. Technicolor rapidly set up shop by the Tiber after the war and made neo-realist films look amateurish, underlit and pessimistic. In Italy, still today the culture is that Movie World makes the good movies. This inferiority complex has existed for generations now. In the long run, many countries that once had a national cinema identity of their own, like France, Germany, and Russia will be threatened. Eastern Europe could become simply a "location" for period films, or stomping grounds for new and cheaper Studio facilities. Japan has taken the bull by the horns, buying Hollywood Studios directly.

When my turn at the podium of the Harrisburg conference came, I gave my talk. I was the only active film-maker invited. A professor from

Senegal had just endorsed how Hollywood's clever distribution strategies in West Africa were succeeding in limiting distribution of local productions! I voiced my position against the distribution and cultural monopoly of Movie World and presented my points on Neo-Realism. My take was mostly ignored as alarmistic, one-sided, and unrealistic ("Can't you see that this is the best of all possible worlds?").

At the end, I had a surprise. A professor from Finland asked in passing whether I would be interested in teaching a film-making workshop at his university. His name was John, he taught film theory in Karlstad, a city in a Swedish region called Värmland. I had never heard of it. The name meant "Warm Land", he added, for encouragement.

Transportation Captain

I read an article in The Guardian on why China recycles most of Europe's garbage. There was also a piece explaining why French auteurs may lose public financing next year. I am not surprised. Personal voices are difficult to speak, to listen to, and to sell. The noise of global distribution reverberates over them. In Europe, laws exist that set quotas, so film theatres will show at last a set percentage of national films vs. imports. These quotas are really a joke, they are impossible to enforce. Theatre owners are not in the cultural game, they prefer "Catwoman".

The paper stressed how European state funding is fine-tuning a more Americanized bottom-line approach. Film production will become exposed to market forces for testing and research. Only films that can return profits will get made. I agree with this. In Italy, a lot of money

can be misappropriated through public funding of films that never even get made. However, a balance should be found. How to bestow value upon national films?

All over, people come to learn Movie marketing skills from the U.S. At the AFM (American Film Market) in Santa Monica, companies buy American Movies like water for their wells. The world has learned the prime marketing rule: "Give the audience what they want". Advertising, of course, tells the audience what they want. Markets like AFM sell not only new movies, but direct-to-video titles and flops for all tastes, ideal to fill bargain DVD bins in global malls and gas stations. China will gladly recycle the garbage.

"Under The Tuscan Sun"

American audiences have always known the world through the movies. They seldom travel and don't speak foreign languages. They dislike subtitles and prefer films made in English. The American ethnic landscape is made up of hyphons. There are Italian-Americans, Arab-Americans, Swedish-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Greek-Americans, etcetera. The hyphen is the key. American audiences, who lack direct travel experience, expect foreign films to reflect the Americanization of each ethnic group as they have witnessed in the home melting pot. Today, those hyphenated-Americans mostly hold on to nostalgic memories of the countries they left, but those places are no longer the same.

Europe, eager to sell in the U.S., now makes 80 percent of its films in English. A lot, considering that only in the U.K. and Eire English



is mothertongue. For a Swedish production company, for example, securing U.S. distribution is like winning at Lotto. Following a few simple American packaging guidelines gives a foreign film a better chance for theatrical distribution. The flip side of the coin may mean exporting cultural clichés. For example, Arabs are now typically seen as villains, as Russians once were. Swedish women are dumb blondes, Italians are mafiosi or live in the 50s, or both. It's a recipe based on arbitrary sampling: pre-cooked for audiences with less and less time to explore, travel or learn. Fast movies are like fast food.

Extras

"The Sax Man" was a short film I made in 1994. The premise came from listening to my friend Sebastiano play with his big band on the island of Ventotene, in the Mediterranean. In the middle of a huge jam he hopped off the stage and into the crowd. He became the Pied Piper. He kept on playing, with a remote microphone, all through the town. Dancing men and twirling women paraded behind his horn with their children laughing under the fireworks, honoring the patron Saint of the island, whose name I forget. Also, the saxophone may have been a clarinet, but the music never stopped.

It was 1994 and I had been lucky. In the three previous years I had found mentors and learned a lot. I had been an apprentice, asking for little in return. I had started printing T-shirts with Daniela to pay the rent and finance short films. I got hired as an assistant director for music videos, and a live fashion show. I worked on as many films and commercials as I could. I got a job as the editor of a series of Italian industrial videos. We were promoting ice-cream machines, discoteque equipment, and fitness joints. But the pay was good.

All the time I was "stealing with my eyes" as we say in Italy. I got a job as an extra for one day on an Italian film by Sergio Rubini. I had wanted to see him at work. He had acted for and been mentored by Fellini in "Intervista" and always made intelligent films. I was assigned the role of a hotel guest walking from left to right in the background with a big blue suitcase in my hand. It was a hotel scene in which the protagonist and a woman (Rubini's then wife, actress Margherita Buy) exit the crowded foyer of the Plaza Hotel onto Via del Corso in Rome. In the key moment the girl doesn't want to go, hesitates, changes her mind and spins out the front door, with dialogue. This required a dolly rig and a crane. I had noticed that I could end my walk two steps behind

the video monitors, where the director Rubini (who also starred) was running back after every take to check performances. Instead of returning to my assigned starting position, I just stood there. After Take 16, the director was left alone at the monitor. I was behind him, in my jacket and tie, just playing the extra. Suddenly he whips his head around and looks at me. I am standing there, caught robbing with my eyes, in a suit and tie, from over his shoulder. "So," he said, "was I any good?"

To shoot the "Sax Man" we borrowed a house in Trastevere, the Rome tourists remember. The open window let in the clashing smells of fresh rosette bread and Chinese noodle soup. The actor was my friend Salvatore, who owned a sax and was patient, which had simplified the casting. The sax man was a lawyer who ends up on trial himself. Salvatore was new to sets and lights and monitors and I had a few surprises for him, such as the improvised dialogue. In the end the nightmare becomes a dream, and the jobless saxophonist plays a tune. His first brutally honest "what the hell?" reaction made me feel like an accomplished director! I shouted to him to forget about me, and keep going. What he was reacting to was an electric cable on fire.

Who can say much about dreaming that isn't regurgitated Freud or Jung? For a camera, what exposes film to light is real, period. My idea was to make a documentary of a dream, in black and white. With voiceover. I hoped to lure an audience into letting go of a habitual way of looking at films. I wanted to internalize, but not make it psychological. How I worked with an idea was to eliminate endings and set in motion a circular story. Godard joked that all films need a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order. I started from the middle and backtracked to a start where characters dream of a happy end.

Post-Production Supervisor

I often reshoot during the editing phase. I was impressed with "Nashville" by Robert Altman and Kieslowski's "Decalogue". Their style seemed familiar: an assembly of found footage, a structure of episodes. My work felt like fixing bicycle wheels, adjusting the opposing tensions of the spokes to achieve an organic flow. When the story felt right I would stop and that would be the end of the short film. Initially I would limit shooting days radically, mostly for lack of money. "Open for Closing" (aka "Mr. Pizza") shot over four days, and the whole crew of eleven camped on our balcony. If you shoot film you can do a lot of camera set-ups, because you shoot less takes than on video. You just move the tripod (if you need one) to the next spot and the crew will follow you there.

If you know your story's structure you can do some improvising. It doesn't matter what words people say, so much as what they are in the scene to do. Robert Rodriguez had blown me away in 1991 with "El Mariachi". As a fan of "Some Like It Hot" the gimmick of the guitar case with the machine-gun inside did not surprise me. What killed me was the 16 mm two week "solo" shoot, that freedom from conventional production complications. That's what appeared phenomenal to me then: to shoot a no-budget feature film. An Italian journalist, Paolo, helped me cut "The Sax Man". His wife Anna worked at an Apple computer store. She offered me a brand-new editing station to use for one month, on one condition, that she could use our post-production as a live Macintosh advertisement. So we edited the film for a month in her store window next to the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, in Rome. She sold six editing stations with Adobe Premiere 2.0 software, and I got into film school.

Projectionist

The idea for this short film came from my friend Armando "Melk", to whose memory I dedicate it. He was working as a pizza delivery man and always came over with incredible stories of his encounters with customers. It was stuff that no one could have written, seen from the eyes of the most talented young cartoonist in Italy, standing incognito at the door waiting for a tip.

We had a friend with a restaurant and we transported the beginning of the story there. A restaurant owner shuts down his restaurant for August vacation. He calls another guy from a small village to come and clean it while he's gone. This man arrives, and does the job. After a day or two he notices a kid with a scooter, calls the owner to double-check when he is coming back and opens a bogus pizza delivery business with the kid.

This short is a typical con-man story. "To con" = to fool, to cheat. The word is short for "confidence man", because to cheat a person you must first gain their confidence, their trust. A person must believe the con-man has what s/he needs. The con-man figure for me is linked to illusion and dream. Las Vegas is full of con-men because gamblers believe in the possibility of making money fast. "What would happen if you...", is the con-man's sale pitch. He is a dream salesman, a retailer of possibilities. Humans buy into that.

Take the American dream for example. The rest of the world buys into this con game. Illusions. Special effects. America The King exporting The Dream. It is its highest selling brandname, humans love it. America is hard to reach. Ask Columbus! Or enquire about digital fingerprinting. But this adds to its mystique. To live in America is a rare privilege. Would you buy a dream sold only on TV? Or you can be a tourist, stay in the U.S. for three months. Or you can take a guided

tour, see the New York lights, windswept Chicago, a red bridge in San Francisco, Universal Studios, Elvises in Vegas. You'll love the show.

If you're young you can go Greyhound, stay at somebody's place, grab an illegal job. But the few who have lived in the U.S. long enough to experience that society fully, and have returned to their homeland, could tell about real life there. America is not a one-way trip anymore, more and more emigrants are returning home and telling their story. Not the Movie World version.

"Open for Closing" was shot on 16 mm Vision 500T stock, a high speed film that reduced the number of lights we would need to shoot indoors. The stock looks very grainy. We also used different stocks and the picture has some interesting chromatic random elements to it. We didn't have outdoors shooting permits for Rome and the fine for a single tripod shot was steep. We used a fish delivery truck. We would stop, jump out, shoot the scooter sequences and move on.

I cut the film in the U.S. on a traditional Steenbeck flat-table. It clocks at 18 minutes, the story of a man who thinks he has a chance. He puts an ad in the paper. He pretends to own a pizzeria. He plays a part that he can't get away with, and he is caught. When the real kicks in, imaginary heroes tend to dissolve. "Open for Closing" screened for the first time at the Union Theatre in Milwaukee in December 1995.

Apprentice

In 1994–1995 I worked as an assistant to director Gianni Zanasi, an Italian first-time director. "Nella Mischia" ("In the Thick of it") was about kids in Rome in Tuscolano, one of Pasolini's favorite neighborhoods. The kids are looking to make some cash, and try to steal and resell crates of tomatoes. The shooting schedule was erratic. The producer wanted to quit. The cinematographer suddenly remembered he had a documentary to shoot in Senegal. The crew was falling apart. Total improvisation can be devastating.

"Nella Mischia" stumbled on for 7 weeks, with new scenes added every day. Despite the confusion, at times I felt the story was as good as "Stand By Me" or "400 Blows" or "I Vitelloni". Almost. One day I was asked to play a part because the actor did not show up. Zanasi told me to invent my own character. All he asked was for me not to buy the stolen tomatoes from the kids. Secretly, he told the kids the opposite: if they can sell me the tomatoes during the first rehearsal, they will get "a treat". The rehearsal was shot, it made it to the final cut. I almost bought the tomatoes and the kids made fun of the way I was dressed.

The 48th edition of the Cannes Festival ignored 47 major Italian films, including the latest by Giuseppe Tornatore and Gabriele Salvatores. "Nella Mischia" was the only Italian film selected, by the Quinzaine des Réalisateurs section. I had once heard about Antonioni driving to France in the 50s with the reel of the second half of his film in the car, while the first half was already being projected in Cannes. I had dismissed it as an urban myth, like the one about alligators in New York sewers. But the "Nella Mischia" print was struck the evening before the screening and driven to France during the night. No publicity materials were prepared. At 3 a.m. our 1973 Mercedes pulled into Cannes, and I stepped out on the Croisette, the main street, with

Aliosha (a grip), and his girlfriend. One of the guys started to crack-up laughing. Up on a building was an enormous, phantasmagorical neon-lit marquee: "Nella Mischia, starring Daniel Alegi". They had grabbed the first name from the alphabetical cast list... I tried to set-up a self-timer photo but a French cop wanted to confiscate my camera because I was standing on a telephone booth. Then an open horse carriage trotted by, with flashing paparazzi behind it, and Pamela Anderson waving from inside. We were clear.

At the press conference for the Quinzaine, a French journalist asked a heavy-duty provoking question: "Why is the only girl in the film treated as an object?". Gianni's only answer was to smile. He wasn't equipped for a gender-heavy interrogatory. One of the kid actors grabbed the microphone and asked the girl, who was also sitting there: "Did we treat you badly? Tell the lady, did we do anything to you?" Everybody snickered as she said no, and the vibe changed. The kids were unlikely heroes, in their best Alain Delon stuff (black shirt, sleeves rolled up, sunglasses) and they never let go of the microphone again. Forget the journalists. One of them mused: "The hotel served us stewed apples, in Italy hospitals do that!". It was groovy.

The organizers called to say the jury had included us in the short list for the Camera d'Or prize, given to the best first time director. We waited and saw a great film about a con-man who convinces entire families to live underground and work for their leader, while from above he simulates the sounds of war. It was "Underground" by Emir Kusturica, it won the Palme d'Or. The Camera d'Or prize went to "The White Balloon" a great real-time film from Iran. Three weeks later, Daniela gave birth to our first child, Nelson.

Åmål

A Swedish woman is staring out from a train window. She discourages a tear with a smile. She has done that all her life. You can see her strength in her gaze. Her eyes lock onto something outside, but we can't see what. There is another person in the compartment, a gentleman who comes complete with a cup of water. He offers it to her. The woman refuses politely. She is writing her name with her index finger on the foggy window glass. She looks through it. She has written her name backwards, like ambulances do so rear-view mirrors can render the word straight. The man is now drinking the water himself. He lifts the cup and it engulfs his nose, but his eyes stay curious, gazing at the woman. On the yellow writing pad on his lap I can see a half-finished drawing of a bird with long legs. Maybe he is an ornithologist. Do birds care about ornithologists? Somehow I doubt it. Birds just fly.

As their writer, I would like to join my quiet travellers. Perhaps I could stimulate some conversation, tell a joke. Maybe I could guess something about each of them, where they come from, how old they are. But all I can do is gaze at what they are doing. I can't ask questions, because my characters never answer me. They are busy being whoever they are. They are trying to get where they are headed, urgently. Their lives depend on it, or at least their purpose. Maybe there is a broken heart backstory I should know about. They are still such strangers to me, yet I am writing them! I will keep waiting. The woman is entirely focused on the station platform. The man in the compartment gazes at her while he pencils in a darker shading on a feather. It's all this gazing that is getting at me. I gaze at the two of them and then I gaze at the words in process on this exhausted laptop. You gaze at the space between the lines of this story. Maybe a woman is gazing at you while you read, and someone else is gazing at her. Why won't anybody say a word?

Now I am taken by a suspicion. What if, by letting loose one single, curious, grateful, aware, mysterious, irresistible gaze in an imaginary train station, in the middle of nowhere, I have accidentally set in motion a domino effect, a sequence of gazes all over the place? What is a "gaze"? Maybe it's a moment when information is silently asked to sing from the back row. Maybe it has to do with dolly shots. Gazing is not the same as seeing, looking, noticing, watching, or observing. Gazing has to do with letting go. You gaze when you are locked in a battle to take and let go something with your eyes, at the same time. This process can be painful, yet it celebrates life. It has resignation and hope, it includes the world of ideas and the "world out there", together.

Maybe there is a solution! If I could find that first gaze, on the train station platform, if I could identify who or what is there. Then I could connect it to the second gaze, give it a label, connect it to the third, and so on. This is not easy because I still can't see the platform myself, I am stuck in the compartment scene. Why hasn't the train left yet? I notice a detail: a cigarette burn in the woman's cashmere sweater, by her left breast. What does that mean? Did she notice? I am getting derailed, hunting for information. I want her to do something, now! Instead, the drawing man opens the compartment window entirely. It's freezing out, and the woman's name gets wiped clean. A conductor steps in, there is something wrong with the signal system, but the train will be on its way soon. Shit! I must reach that platform and find out who that first gaze belongs to. The conductor looks at the bird drawing, then at the man's ticket. He double-takes. The woman gazes back out the open window. Apparently, the ornithologist forgot to get off at his normal destination, way before Åmål. The woman leans out of the window, her eyes not letting go. The train whistle blows. The train inches forward. Now I see the platform: a girl is standing there. The girl has one hand in her pocket, and waves goodbye with the other. The ornithologist jumps after his suitcase and off the train, like in the movies. The woman leans her head out the moving train window. The air feels fresh in her hair. The girl lets go of the train, it is gone. She puts her hand back in her coat pocket, and stands there, gazing at the next train coming.

Short Cuts

- A Swedish film-maker who lands in Hollywood will learn its SP mantra: Screw Poetry!
- A Robert Altman script is like a crossword puzzle.
- In Italy a policeman is not really a policeman, just a man in a costume.
- Remote Controls and SMSs. The evolution of the opposable thumb explained.
- Americans work all day, go home, then watch TV shows about Americans who work all day.
- If you write about memory, maybe you're afraid of being forgotten.
- In a Bergman film, if you miss a symbol you're lost. If you get it, goodbye mystery.
- America is built on two pillars: the bible and the gun.
- You can't lie to a movie camera, and you can't lie when you shut up.
- In Sweden, who needs John Wayne?
- If I have to watch a movie about reality, I'd rather look in the mirror.
- Americans idolize their national "dream", but for them a "dreamer" is a loser.
- Everything is either weird or cool. Weird is weird. Cool you buy.
- If Italy wants to export movies to the U.S. it should stick to mafia and spaghetti.
- Nobody ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the American audience.
- Everything is in its place but nothing is in order.
- Peace begins when the hungry are fed.
- If you can't do it, teach it!
- Less is more.

Producer

Something happened in Italy: Fabrica! As the art think-tank of the industrial giant Benetton, a new and unique producer of world cinema emerged. Its operations are ultimately non-profit. With so many other corporations looking for tax-shelters, why not follow Fabrica's revolutionary goal of protecting and nurturing free World Cinema, with a capital C? Fabrica can afford to ignore the Movie World rule book in one clean swipe: no happy pop themes, no huge stars, and no gross cultural stereotypes. On top of that, no great worries about market impact. Result? It won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film and is not stopping there.

The cinema Fabrica produces has subject matter that few could mistake for sheer entertainment: migration, language divides, cultural separatism, human rights. If other corporations realize how sponsoring World Cinema can on the one side benefit their fiscal standing as non-profit promoters of art, and on the other widen the latitude of acceptable mainstream genres, this would be something to celebrate! To help more similar companies to develop, the key is to secure private backing. Cinema with global appeal may neither be packaged only to suit America's taste, nor can it rely primarily on European public funds. Bypassing American distribution is too important a step not to consider emulating it. Most of Fabrica's small local projects with global reach, under the leadership of Marco Muller, are naturally structured as multi-national collaborations. The Oscar-winning "No Man's Land" directed by Danis Tanovic, was a co-production of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, Italy, France, the U.K. and Belgium.

By the way, Fabrica is looking for writers under 25. Check the website.



Color Processor

Chess is a con-game. It makes you believe in equal opportunity and in the fairness of battle with structure and rules. That's of course much easier to grasp when you play Whites. At some point, every game will show you a one-time checkmate solution. Like in a good script, only if you time every beat right will you get it. I have learned a lot of film-making by using the chessboard as a common ground to observe complications, objectives and aesthetics. That's also why I have lost so many games.

In Los Angeles I got into a habitual weekly game over coffee after lunch with a talented photohead, Lorenzo, whom I have known since Italy. We sat on the roof of his mini-studio near La Brea Ave., with a field across the street, and the Hollywood sign on the hills in the distance. Lorenzo's photo subjects were all over the floor, his portfolio constantly rearranged. His portrait photos have an edge: the subjects are vulnerable to his compositional irony; often only part of their bodies are left in the frame.

At night, he sometimes used to wander around L.A. to shoot people washing their cars in Silverlake, or looking for their keys outside a bar, or showed up at our house to take pictures of our kids sleeping. He preferred nobodies to models because he could turn them into real models. He must have figured that in Los Angeles there is not much difference between the two, but few magazines noticed. His miniature studio apartment morphed into a living portfolio of unsold prints until there was no more space for him. So we went to the roof and I played King Gambit openings because they are more risky and the games are faster. After six months, we suddenly realized that an apartment complex had been built where the field was. Families were already moving in. Lorenzo now is married and lives in Rome. When a European fashion magazine sends him on assignment to the U.S., they put him up in fancy hotel rooms.

CanTERS

On Fairfax and Beverly, you will find CanTERS, a well-known around-the-clock diner. Some booths have small copper plaques saying things like "Jim Morrison used to sit here" or "Mick Jagger liked his eggs over easy". The place is not nostalgic, it just has not changed much from the 60s. The waitresses don't mind the tourists, but they don't like to pose in front of the barn doors for their photographs.

I look at my scribbling on the beginning of "Standard". This version should be for Mel Gibson's company. I wonder if it will get any better. They say kids make great art when the parents are wise enough to take the paintings away before they all turn the same color: brown.

Acting Coach

In Renaissance Italy, Commedia dell'Arte was the main entertainment format. It was TV and movies and Theatre, all in one. Companies toured with carts pulled by oxen, and worked for food and lodgings. Most Commedia companies performed the same basic plots, with popular formula structures and stock characters, but they changed names, speech and actions to suit local tradition and culture. So they staged different versions of the same show. Classic stock characters, like the servant Arlecchino or Pantalone, the boss, had dozens of different regional versions and names.

Movie World entertainment is now beamed, canned, shipped and shop-ped in real time. Like Commedia dell'Arte, Movie World has stock stories. Its favorite is the story of Ulysses who gets a call to fight a kidnapper. The hero comes home 20 years later, after a long journey full of perils, his mission finally accomplished. Joe Campbell, a Disney script consultant, wrote a short memo to his executives in the mid 70s. He described an Einsteinian epiphany he had in the shower: Eureka! All action stories are basically re-writes of "The Odyssey"! George Lucas hired him on "Star Wars", and the blockbuster era was born.

Commedia dell'Arte was no more about art or self-expression than Hollywood is today. It desperately relied on audience approval. In the best of cases a show could be performed for a wealthy audience, and then larger rewards could be at hand. But in one way time has dug a ditch between old and new entertainment: Commedia was a mirror raised to the face of the ordinary person. Mirrors, before TV, were a big deal. Comedians told two sides of each story, that of shrewd servants struggling to buy a meal or an hour of love, and that of their masters trying to marry off a daughter or sell a donkey. Neither side won. The audience's laughter at the conflict was enough. The characters had objectives that simple audiences could relate to, the spectators were the same archetypal characters as the actors! No one was conquering Troy or massacring enemies. Although wild improvisations were woven around the basic plots, the stories never strayed far from the truth. Both performers and audience were poor. Instead of one Hero there were lots of non-heroes that people laughed at too. Today, Movie World prefers the idea of global familiarity to local, or popular culture.

I tried to re-write the plot of the Odyssey, for fun, as an absurd Commedia dell'Arte scenario. I started by replacing the word "protagonist" with different Movie World heroes.

Ulysses gets the call to action: "The Nazis have the Grail!" But Rocky refuses to fight the World Champion. Now Rocky II accepts the call and, as Spider-Man, he must abandon his ordinary job and demolish Dark Vader. After all, Luke Skywalker knows victory will bring

awesome rewards. Look, the divorced father commits to his desperate, heroic, mission: Mrs. Doubtfire shows up to babysit. All heroes enter special worlds, even Woody Allen, but hurry, Simba needs a mentor that's not a hog. Maybe Merlin? Or "Q", from 007? Terminator gets ready for political action, but it won't be easy, Harry Potter is about to be betrayed and sidestepped by shape-shifting shadows, like Cruella De Ville. Shadows bring out the worst in you. Now we're "in the belly of the whale" and – surprise! – Indiana Jones is back! He has barbecued the snakes, and has the girl and the Grail. It's do or die, razzle-dazzle, special effects! The goal is in sight. Yesterday the trailer sequences of the final battle were epic! Rocky V will defeat his alien opponent, the Lion King will be respected, and Ulysses can return to the ordinary world of his patient wife and his dog, with a mixed bag of material and spiritual rewards. Justice is done. The ending is upbeat.

Cinemahead

My Macintosh hard drive was full. I could not save a single file, there was no space left. Too much information, too much data stored. Sometimes my head felt the same way: not enough space left to play with new ideas. Information slips away. I had to store and preserve memories and experience, copies of everything, in my head. I was afraid of forgetting, I carried notebooks, took too many snapshots, wrote reminders on napkins first, then, for safety, on a digital organizer. Remembering is a full time job! Later I backed-up my data, plugged-in batteries to re-charge ... and I forget what else.

Maybe it has to do with age, or the chronic bad timing of my generation. We heard about the Beatles after Disco, we had Ronald Reagan but not JFK. We fell asleep in the 90s and missed our turn at the wheel. When we all woke up, an entire Millennium was gone. Now I wake-up in the heart of night, I sleepwalk through the wooden toys and the VHS cases, I stumble into the kitchen and open the fridge. I stare at the freezing white light. There is some taleggio cheese, my favorite. But I am not hungry, actually. I just don't know what I came here for.

Have you ever lost your car keys? I did all the time. I knew exactly what they looked like (I had my mental image) and I scanned the house looking for a match between the information I had and what I needed to find. An orange HARD DRIVE FULL sign started flashing in my head. Too much information to re-process. I had lost my mental image of the keys. I needed a solution. Re-formatting my hard drive, maybe?

You see something: a tree, a door, a mushroom, a kite, an astronaut, the moon, a seed, your brother, the post office, a Värmland cow, Christopher Columbus, a truck. It is natural to want to store that image in your head someplace. "Maybe that's where the storage overload starts" I guessed. So, I went the opposite way: what if I "deleted" some mental images? The problem was I liked those images, I had never wanted to "lose" any of them. Maybe my identity was at stake. Where could I release some stored images? Release. Hmm... The best place to save an image... What could that be? I pondered this dilemma: I spent 14 years in school accumulating information, and now I want to spend the rest of my adult life letting go of my knoweldge? My head was still flashing FULL, and my keys had really disappeared, this time. Maybe I could start by erasing the files that were duplicates, useless mental copies?

As I rode the bus, I saw an old white Volkswagen beetle drive by. It had a smashed-in front left bumper, exactly like my mother's car, when we had our accident in Rome. Was that car matching a mental image of mine or was it a memory that existed on its own, unstored, in the wild? I hadn't thought about that car for years. Could I have let go of that image years ago, without realizing it? A memory on wheels! I felt like Harry Potter.



What I needed to do next was to send other mental images from my head back to their source, the outside world. Return my precious memories. Recycle my information, free the abstract file copies to go store themselves in their original physical sources. I would see them when I see them. Visual games are easy, I closed my eyes and forgot everything. I let every stored mental image go back into its source. This crazy idea only took 10 seconds, like a Zen ritual. My new "attitude" had an official beginning. To remember a tree you don't really need to store a permanent digital copy of the image of a tree in your head. You just need to look at a tree more often. Who needs to store in their head an image of the sun? Maybe Swedish people.

I cleaned out the "old dusty archives" and tore down the Orwellian cubicles where my experiences were catalogued and ready for my mind's microscope, the next time I lost my keys. Once you play with releasing information back into the open, it becomes fun to find it again, right where it belongs. You will be surprised to find a cow to be just like you remembered it. It may feel both familiar and new, like a child's déjà vu. When you are no longer a librarian, an organizer of mental data, you are creative. Your "EMPTY" head will not lead you to the unemployment office anymore than your "FULL" one kept you away from it. By creating room in your head you physically begin to have more hard drive space, a safe space, to entertain fresh ideas. Ideas like to be entertained by you. They need full attention. Did you ever throw a party as soon as you cleaned up your apartment? If you experience the space outside you as the place where your memories hang out, it makes it a friendly space, you can be curious about it without fear. The kicker is that – guess what? – other folks may have started to hang their memories on the same trees, the same buildings as you do. Memories, meet each other! It's a peaceful experience of connectedness. Like Cinema. I considered this little process a solution for the day. I thought about the films "Ghost" and "It's a Wonderful Life", I became a Cinemahead and ordered new car keys.

Publicist

I go to Värmland on a Tuesday in May 2002 and I come back to Los Angeles three weeks later. I sit down with Daniela and we look at photos of the moving forest from the car. I go again a year later. I come back to L.A. and the news is not sweet: war is raging in Iraq and freedom at home is behind bars. An old man was arrested today when the FBI got a tip that someone had heard him call the president an a--hole, in a gym. In our children's public school budgets have been cut further to support the war effort. A lot of seven year-old kids are being forced to take psychoactive drugs to increase their attention span in class. Even if our children were exempt, the addictive drug Ritalin was a villain we did not need to fight.

The Via Veneto restaurant is now run by our friend Fabrizio. Daniela and I sat and ordered a bottle of Morellino di Scansano. Our scene had a theme: "What happens next?"

ME: No more earthquakes.

HER: No more Studios saying your scripts are too intelligent.

ME: Nobody really put it quite like that.

HER: You always make everything up.

ME: No more Bushit.

HER: Let's hope so. How many years has it been, here in the U.S.?

ME: Nine. What do you think of Sweden?

HER: Let's go.

Done. We ate Tonnarelli and shared the wine.

Visual Effects Supervisor

I posted a paper sign in the Santa Monica-Venice area, at street corners between Ocean Park and Pico, between Neilson and 14th Street.

BACK TO EUROPE SALE
1010 PACIFIC AVE.
SATURDAY 8 AM

Here is a list of what we put up for sale:

- Unopened toy weapons (and super-hero junk).
- Guitars (2): \$75 for both.
- Writing Table: \$30. (We can find IKEA in Sweden.)
- Film Scripts: 25 cents each.
- Furniture and cabinets. (Best offer)
- 2 Futon beds, 2 kid beds.
- Clothes: 5 years of kids clothes (all sizes, European styles).
- Wood and metal kitchen utensils.
- Computer equipment: Epson printer, G3 Apple laptop, Via Voice software.
- 1 Jungle Book Movie Poster (original).

Here is some dialogue from the garage sale scene.

MAN: Don't like this?
ME: It still works.
MAN: A film guy that leaves L.A? (beat) For Sweden?
ME: That's it.
MAN: You like Socialism? You like the cold? The dark?
ME: The water pistol is \$5 Madam, unused.

WOMAN: 4?
ME: It is still wrapped.
WOMAN: 4.50?
MAN: How much for the Via Voice? It's the program you speak and it types, right?
ME: It has to learn your voice first. I had to read it all of "Treasure Island".
MAN: How much for the two bicycles?
ME: \$75.
MAN: I fix electronics because nobody fix anything here. I got two kids working with me now, so I figure if I can record while I teach them how to fix alarm clocks, I can write a repair manual at the same time...
ME: Brilliant. 20 bucks.
MAN: Five.
ME: Ten.
MAN: Eight.
ME: Nine.

Co-Writer

I love the ideas behind the American dream: all things can be better, all jobs improved, all lives made happier, all frontiers colonized. To this effect young Americans are taught in school that all objects can be useful, all gadgets can save time, all sale pitches are worth listening to. Every product may be the solution to a problem which separates you from happiness, the pursuit of which drives the Constitution.

In the nightmare version I feel as if the whole American dream is a sale pitch itself, with one country selling it to the rest of the world complete with advertising, heroes, Movies, media, inventions and short-life batteries. The future has become a monopoly of America who, as the teenager country, leads with a sharper brain and hotter hormones than the rest of the sleepy, aging globe.

America dreams of getting younger with anti-aging creams and sexual potency potions. It celebrates and imposes its models of beauty and fitness to countries of different beliefs. It is a "take it or leave it" offer that imposes the new language of good and bad, right and wrong. Speed is good and slow is bad; big is good and small is bad; old is bad, digital is best. The U.S. global bombardment of franchise coffee shops and hamburger joints undercuts millennial local food traditions.

All must give way to American fantasy for export, and its clever advertising loop. First create a need, then exploit it. In China people dump their bikes and borrow to buy cars, and become fat with fast food. Then Happiness Corp. USA will step in and sell 500 million weight loss programs, pills, and much needed self-improvement products.

What has the Hollywood Movie to do with this? Simply, in the modern hyper-corporate version of the studios, the Movies spread the stories that this cultural explosion is coming, it is inevitable and it is god-given. Movies prepare the ground for the razing of traditional cul-

tures by normalizing the cultural values sold and the language used, and to set higher tolerance levels for guns, violence, sex and intellectual content.

This may be subtle at times, as with the flood of romantic comedies which propose models of family relationships most of the world doesn't recognize as their own, but now accepts, thanks to satellite TV etcetera. White America's puritan culture wants all love scenes removed from the screen but invests in a healthy porn industry under the rug. The American gun culture – guns are everywhere – is now taken for granted, even if most people have never seen a gun.

Remember the scene? An Arab prepares for a duel with elaborate and traditional sword preliminaries. Indiana Jones shoots him down cold.

Walk-On

What I know about acting in Theatre I learned from Michael Johnson-Chase. He runs the Lark Theatre Co, a gig that stages international plays in English in New York. As far as acting in film nobody does it better than Martin Donovan. Not the actor. The director of "Apartment Zero" and co-writer of "Death Becomes Her".

If an actor pushes this process far enough, something crazy and magical happens. Some stage performances – i.e. Olivier, Duse – are legends in the collective memory even though they were almost never recorded. An actor feels the exhilaration that the audience exists within the same space, i.e. the theatre, as their own expanded, externalized consciousness. If I or you act along that tightrope to freedom, letting

our respective insides go "out there" in the open, then we may get a glimpse of what a creative head in flow, in flux, looks like: it goes out there, which makes what you see out there look like your inside.

Are Värmland actors any different? What could make a regional culture more or less prone to produce good actors? What do you prefer, actors or non-actors?

Sound Engineer

I am stuck with a morbid curiosity about conversations around me. One of my favorite films is "The Conversation" by Francis Ford Coppola. From this film I learned the important link between editing and sound editing. (Do you remember who did both?) I also learned that if you dress your actor the same way in every scene, it becomes easier to re-shuffle them in the edit, if you need to.

Festival conversation notes from a table next to mine:

Can't remember the last one I saw. Got lost inside a pastel Asian love story. Then the one with the Iranian boy and the three Iraqi brothers. Smuggling tires over the border, same as in the film "Blackboards". It was Italian, the boy I mean. I remember a lot of yellow, and American soldiers. A documentary. World War II or one anti-American one. It was a she, yes. A woman and a gun are all you need to make a film said Godard. It's closing here. I've seen six today.

INT. OFFICE – DAY

Jim sits in the office of a cable channel which is looking for a new series "with an edge", possibly Science Fiction, for its teenage base.

EXEC: Complicated world you created here.

JIM: It's my first.

EXEC: I don't know about one thing. A few things.

JIM: What do you mean?

EXEC: The hero is too old. And these ... kids, all running in the streets?

JIM: The children run free.

EXEC: Wow. But let's get back to this detective. The hero.

JIM: Ok.

EXEC: He's 40 years old! The "who gives a shit" age. Nobody would care. Look, we sell subscriptions to 19 year-olds. Parents pay for the subscription, so we don't discourage cross-generational advertising, pop and daughter sit together and watch the show, maybe calling the neighbors in. Word of mouth, and our subscription base grows. But this mass of kindergartners with missing limbs you created, that has to go. It's way too edgy for this kind of TV. Make them look better, make them models for teenagers in the 18–23 year-old target group. Our ads are there.

JIM: I forgot about that.

EXEC: Don't get me wrong. I like this "new money" idea of yours. Just fix it.

JIM: Fix it.

EXEC: Look. What's the title?

JIM: "Standard".

EXEC: Right. Now, listen. Let me pitch it. "Standard". The year is 2066, the earth is frozen and humans live under city-domes in a forced communal existence for limited resources. This is the story of a man, Milnus, a government detective on a mission. He must find abducted children. He has also lost his 19-year-old son, abducted by those he works for. Make them twins. The detective, who is divorced, has lost a son and a daughter. Maybe he doesn't even know he had the daughter until after he meets her, and there are sexuality issues going on ...

JIM: Incest?

EXEC: That's an idea. Re-write it in five weeks, so I can take it upstairs.

I had seen a lot of movies about movies, from "The Last Tycoon" to "Barton Fink", from "Ed Wood" to "The Player". But now it was my very own script being asked to morph into a device, a TV show, to change its premise, to have elements stretch and deformed in any marketable direction. Before airing or screening to any real audience, the final product would in any case have to be tested before a sample audience. Those over 29 years of age would be kindly requested to return the questionnaire. The prize for all this gambling? Maybe a new story, another script about a script, one in which Jim, an experimental film-maker from Europe becomes Americanized to the bone and succeeds as a Hollywood writer, gets a Writers' Guild union card, and buys a three-floor ocean-front home in Redondo Beach. Ironically, in "Standard", planet earth abandons money and shifts to a new currency, a new standard altogether.



Corman

I met Roger Corman's chief financial officer at a traffic light. We both were witnesses for a bicycle rider who got run over by an SUV. After three e-mails, he invited me to Millennium Productions to meet his boss. I was never a big fan of Corman's films, but I admired how he had taken Movie World by the horns. Now he has total production freedom, and nobody owns his movies. Not even Spike Lee can say that. We talked briefly in his office while he nodded to an assistant about

the quality of DVD covers being paraded on his large glass desk. The release of his film archive was coming up. He had fooled "the system" with the seasoned irony of a gentleman. He understood that the Studios had motives not so different from his own, to make money and to make more movies. Instead of fighting Hollywood, he copied it.

First, he redefined the whole concept of what makes a good movie. A masterpiece could simply be a well done, cheap B-movie that grows into a cult hit without a marketing plan. Corman has always been prolific as both a director and a producer. In his office he caught me looking at a small black and white picture. "That's Marty (Scorsese) and Francis (Coppola) when they worked with me."

That week, Roger Corman sold his company, Millennium, for seventeen million dollars. It was business as usual with a new company name, on a small wooden sign on San Vicente Blvd.

TV

A journalist and his crew ride in my car. They want an interview for a 30 minute program on young directors overseas, for an Italian cinema channel. We get on the 405 Freeway, camera and sound man in the back, the interviewer sits in the passenger seat on the way to my film-making class in Valencia, 35 miles (50 km) North of L.A.

INTERVIEWER: How is life in L.A. when you don't direct?

ME: I teach film-making, do some script doctoring, and translate for subtitles.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of film do you teach?

ME: Non-profit film-making.

INTERVIEWER: Never heard of it.

ME: I just try and give film-makers some tools for survival.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about your script doctoring.

ME: I go to Kinko's copy center on Wilshire Blvd. and I look for writers making photocopies. First drafts are usually printed on the cheap, so I go right to the self-service area.

INTERVIEWER: You're joking! Then what?

ME: Only Woody Allen likes to admit he sees a shrink, you know. They won't tell you, but writers love feedback. The first read is free. I tell them if my comments are no good, amen. But most of them like what I have to say. I met one dude three times and six months later he won first prize and a bunch of money at a script competition. He wrote me a letter. He couldn't believe it.

INTERVIEWER: You're kidding.

ME: No, and he never gave me a cut of the prize money, either. Look, this is my experience, I have kids. A script is like a kid. Great as a baby, a mess when they grow up. You push and pull them so much that they can get real self-conscious and insecure. Story premises are ok, but there is often too much forced dialogue, not enough pauses, and infinite sub-plot machinations. If a script just wants to please, I can't help.

INTERVIEWER: Is it true or is it a myth, that only one in a thousand scripts get produced?

ME: That's a myth. It's actually much less! But rejected scripts can be fixed as good as new years later. I know a writer who pulled a 70s thriller from a shelf, replaced telephone booths with cell phones, and two

months later they flew him by helicopter to Clint Eastwood's ranch.

INTERVIEWER: Did it get made?

ME: No.

INTERVIEWER: You sound cynical.

ME: It's called "turnaround". One star loves it but she's booked for two years, the other wants a Jet Lear to fly to Connecticut every weekend. A Hollywood film is a big puzzle to put together.

INTERVIEWER: And you?

ME: I am shopping a script and still travelling to festivals with my short films.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned "non-profit film-making" before. What's that?

ME: I talked to a top lawyer for Disney. He too needed advice on a script. I asked him if my small film productions could become non-profit. I want to attract financing from art organizations and private museums, who can deduct donations and don't want to own you. Jim Jarmusch raises his money privately, in Japan. The lawyer told me I was crazy, that I would have to teach or something, to justify it. He advised me to make the money first, then worry about starting a foundation.

INTERVIEWER: Like Bill Gates.

ME: Precisely.

Stunt Man

The L.A. Weekly prints the best film reviews, short and direct. It's also free of charge, on account that it's packed with ads: mostly bars, strip joints and premieres. I prefer to read about garage sales and services. This week, I can have the candles in my house rearranged for \$100 an hour. I can hire Santa Claus to surprise me with gifts from Rodeo Drive, and I need an urgent massage for my pet fish. But the best ad read as follows: "30 Second Elevator Pitches. Pitch your movie at any time, in no time. Opportunity knocks once! Price: \$750." I have to admit this struck me as pure con-man genius. It poured salt on your fears. It hung the reward in front of your nose. You could just see yourself there, in between floors seven and eight, lacking self-confidence in the one-on-one, paralyzed, stuttering to improvise the key line as Michael Douglas steps out forever. The ad implied what destiny awaited those blind souls who chose to ignore its career benefits: ego-shattering bottom-floor regrets would escort you, step by step, to your grave on the top floor of the Academy of Arts and Sciences building.

The parasites are hitting low, I reckoned. This was a Mike Tyson blow to any wannabe's sense of Self, making it hurt and bleed. If you are incapable of appearing intelligent on short notice, why are you in town? Don't you know life is a Black Jack table? I wondered how many gullible wannabes would sell off their shirts for an ace to hide up their sleeve. Yet, I could just see folks overcharging their maxed-out credit cards for "professional" 30 second pitch training, which surely would include all the key lines, leaving nothing to chance. "What floor do you need?" or "Nice day today" would be covered thoroughly, as well as the other sneaky small-talk conversation items, those hidden catalysts for Oscar nominations that only the uninformed, the losers, would dare to overlook.

Jean-Claude Carrière is one of the greatest screenwriters of all time. He was the first foreigner ever to be honored with the Writers' Guild Lifetime Achievement Award. I go to the ceremony with Kirill Mikhanovsky, who, after our time in Milwaukee, has also moved to L.A. He is making decent money as a tape dubber for a porno company in Encino, so we easily scored front seats at the VIP ceremony. Carrière talks about his collaborations with several directors, in particular with Luis Buñuel. I like their collaborations because of Catherine Deneuve and I consider Buñuel an example of a director's freedom. He wouldn't think twice about using two different actresses for the same role in the same film. He manipulated logic to the point of practically requiring the audience to surrender, as a condition to connect with his work. My favorite script by Carrière however, is his own. "The Return Of Martin Guerre" is the story of a man, played by Gérard Depardieu, who returns home after a long war. It suggests that whereas a lie can save lives, truth has no pity on anyone.

After the clapping, Kirill runs to his car to grab and hand Carrière a VHS of "Terra Terra", an award-winning short he made. I head for the men's room. Next to me in the vertical stalls an older man with a white beard looks like Saul Zaentz. He is mumbling at the ceiling, the way guys do when they have the world by the balls, or the other way around. Shit. It really is Saul Zaentz! He produced "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest", "Amadeus", "The English Patient" and a million others. He owns the rights to "The Lord of the Rings". He half-steps to the hand-washing area. I follow. I tap my soap dispenser. Without any preamble Zaentz cuts to the chase: "Do you have a pitch?" He really said that. As strange as this is, I think to myself, we are in the Writers' Guild building in Hollywood, and he is Saul Zaentz, he probably gets movies pitched to him in elevators, this can't be as surreal as it feels. The entire thought took 30 seconds, and he was gone.

Executive

Hollywood executives are primitive creatures. As a category, they reminded me of "The Flintstones". They played with high-tech toys and drove dinosaur cars. Execs are middlemen, gatekeepers, toll-booth operators. They sit behind wide marble desks on the road from the world of ideas to the multiplex pop-corn stand and they decide who can go on and who should stop. They are obscenely overpaid, considering they are mostly neanderthals with social privileges. Most execs seemed afraid to me, afraid of not losing what rocks and wood they have already stored in their caves. Execs may be genetically engineered not to take any risk whatsoever with developing films. Any executive knows that if s/he makes a wrong turn in choosing to develop or sink a project, s/he may soon be applying for a night job at an Indian laundromat in Venice.

I land a meeting with Marty, a first-year executive. He wants to be one of the boys. He is confident. He stares at the ceiling, clasping both hands together as if to hold up his chin. Could he be thinking?

MARTY: You called it "Standard" but it isn't.

ME: Why not?

MARTY: Let me be the judge of that.

ME: Do you think it's a decent story?

MARTY: It's a pretty awesome idea.

ME: Thanks.

MARTY: But I can't take it upstairs. They will laugh.

ME: You think so? Why?

MARTY: It's too, how should I put it, too smart for our audience.

ME: You've got to be kidding. It's sci-fi!

MARTY: Look, we don't require a diploma to come see a movie.

ME: It's too smart? What, too complicated?
MARTY: You're here because I know your agent.
ME: Fred.
MARTY: We play racquetball at the Y. He says that you're alright, that you're new.
ME: He didn't even read it.
MARTY: They never do. That's why you pitch it. You write the script and you put it in the bank, then you pitch, like you're writing checks.
ME: Well put.
MARTY: I'll have it covered and read the coverage.
ME: By who? My neighbor while he's doing his laundry?
MARTY: That's funny. Look, how old are you?
ME: 34.
MARTY: Don't worry. We can fix that. Do you have a romantic comedy to pitch?
ME: No.
MARTY: Ok. Let's go with this Sci-Fi.
ME: "Standard".
MARTY: Can we make it a little more upbeat? It's really dark.
ME: What would you suggest I change?
MARTY: Did you even consider a happy ending at all?
ME: Is it a must?
MARTY: People like happy endings.

The phone rings.

ME: (to myself) Well, it could become "Blade Runner" meets "Mad Max" meets ...
MARTY: Hello. Yes.
ME: "The Pajama game". A classic happy ending.
MARTY: Jim. Oh, man I totally forgot ... (to me) do you play golf?
ME: No.
MARTY: Racquetball?
ME: I'm a master.

MARTY: (to the phone) I got a wise guy here, but he says he can hit. (to me) Look. I have another meeting. Let's wait on the Sci-Fi. Think romantic comedy. (to the phone) Hello. Yes. Yes. Yes. (to me) Tomorrow, 10 AM. My club, Pico and Centinela Blvd.

Opening Sequence

What you learn during the first week in Hollywood is to give up the idea that you have anything new and personal to add to show business. I found that you can get the best advice from professionals and colleagues by just strolling your kids down to the beach playground. Here are some of the suggestions I have heard there.

- A) Resign to the fact that at least three other people are writing a story based on the same idea you think is so unique and special.
- B) Accept the fact that the film you wrote, whether you know it or not, is a cross between two recent hits. If your movie is "Mad Max" meets "Blade Runner" you are labeling yourself as old. If you say "Little Big Man" meets "The Sting" you're Jurassic. "Goonies" meets "A Beautiful Mind" sounds better. "Old School" meets "The Rat Pack" has a chance.

When a Studio does "coverage" on your script it will pay a kid \$60 to sit at a Starbucks and reduce years of work to a two-page synopsis and a check mark: "Recommend" or "Do not Recommend".

How did MILNUS
~~And how would the standard pre-select me?~~
~~their guinea pigs~~

BATTIG
 The standard pre-selected humans that ~~chose~~
~~would be physically and mentally~~ ~~able~~ ~~to~~ ~~withstand~~ ~~Bio-Exchange~~ ~~temporal~~ ~~manipulation in order to experiment on~~ ~~their bodies time-consuming options~~ ~~if not the sacrifice~~ ~~promise~~

exceptional
 ZBX's
 not
 only

MILNUS
 And this frame show me?
 But why did you have to

BATTIG
 Guinea pigs typically would be convicted
 murderers ~~that~~ ~~make~~ ~~excellent~~ ~~BX 20~~

MILNUS
 Why even bother with a trial? Why not
 subject ~~guinea~~ ~~pigs~~ ~~?~~
 guinea

Take a look at this.

BATTIG
 It allows me to explain. Have you
 heard of Standard 381

MILNUS
 Didn't have a free moment to read the
 news.

BATTIG
 The new rule. Coming out anytime soon. ~~have~~
 The balls.

MILNUS
 It's a ~~new~~ ~~standard~~. This is not some
 homebrewed bootleg tech-deal, where we
 take your time and give to somebody else
 just to see what happens...

20th century. This is the
 beginning of the
 real thing.

MILNUS
~~What's the deal?~~ ~~S~~

BATTIG
 It's the new system. It's the law.

Warden BATTIG presses his right thumb upon his wrist panel
 and Blue Teleprompter words appear before Milnus's eyes.
 Milnus reads the report and looks at color-changing images of
 his skeletal change.

The blue words disappear as
 Milnus is staring out of a fast moving window.

most
 people
 would
 like to
 kill another
 human
 being, they
 just
 don't
 do it

This is not
 just
 another
 standard.
 This is
 the law.

To turn into a Movie World Director, I would have to hide my short film work, polish my salesman mask, and enter the script-game arena. Scripts are written for the stars. Dealing with agents and executives becomes a piece of cake once you have a star personally involved. For a newcomer in town, to put a script physically into the hands of a Star is the secret door to success.

You could impersonate a Little Caesar's pizza delivery person, so as to show up at Jim Carrey's castle. Parties are not a good choice because everybody else has a script in his backpocket too. Once a Star likes a script, she can usually get so fussy about the director as to get her pick. The longest route is to try and float a script past executives and other mid-level gatekeepers. They treat stories with the humanity of an assembly line robot.

So I go to a party in Los Feliz. There are stucco statues and shopping carts in this living room, which also looks like it doubles up as a bedroom. Then I realize I don't know whose place it is. I'm trapped in a titanic coat-room. Everybody is tanned and younger than me. I can't find my wife. She appears with a producer named Steve, who comes from Hawaii, Italy, and Milwaukee at the same time. Good. We have some common ground to work with. "Do you have a pitch?" he opens.

A week later Steve and I start a tour de force of pitch meetings with "Standard". He tells me not to be defensive about content, that we should just sell the project. He insists he knows the song. "The script will be changed and redeveloped so many times, that one day we will look back at these early meetings and laugh at your naiveté." We meet with a young executive from Gibson's company, Icon. He wants to know why the story doesn't "zoom in more on Mel". I reply that Milnus, the hero, is in two out of three scenes. He wants more Mel moments, more killer one-liners, especially in the second half. But he doesn't seem disturbed by the dark final flood scene. No problem, he thinks. Mel will be back in town soon and, with some fixes, he could be ready for a read soon. Round of thank yous. Next meeting in four weeks.

Next we go to Showtime, a TV channel. The executive feels the

flood ending is idealistic and too expensive, plus: "Our subscription base is families and a mass scene with naked children is out." He suggests I scrap the feature at once and re-write the idea as a TV series preserving my "compelling" premise about the new global currency, but get rid of the underground resistance, come up with something less threatening. A dead end, but Steve says it could have been worse.

We drop in on Egg Productions. All execs are women in Jodie Foster's universe. I am given the hint again, just in case: "Jodie wants a heroine. With a universal mission." Milnus a woman? "Should not be impossible." On the way out someone mentions Danny De Vito and his new house, which used to be Jean Harlow's, and will you go to the party, and that's really cool.

Jerry Bruckheimer's "Pearl Harbor" sound-effects suite. I am only there as an invited guest, but I sneak in a comment and get some attention. The boss comes in. I pitch "Standard" and he has one question about the final scene. "This can be expensive, don't you think?" I take it as a negative mark, but he pushes on: "Maybe we could spend \$150 million on this! Of course we would have to bring in our own writing team."

Three weeks later I have a full plate: four personalized re-writes to do. We're no longer talking about my feature film here. This is the "loss of innocence" part. One version for Mel, one for Jodie, one for TV plus a super special special-effect version for Jerry to do with Tom Cruise. My rewrites should be tailored to suit stars, producers, companies, schedules, budgets, TV programming etcetera. I ask my agent for advice.

"Why complain?" is his answer. "This is the game. Forget about what you feel or want to say. Save that for when you have your non-profit foundation. For now, just fix the damned thing. Shave the excess off on both ends of the stick. Come on. If you imply that "evil" is a diffuse malady then you are... what? An Existentialist? An auteur? What? Go back to Rome or wherever the hell you come from!"

Script Supervisor

"Standard" is a Sci-Fi story set in the future. There, humans are adapting to fewer options and lack of freedom. Cities are covered by glass domes, the outside is frozen. The domes will crack soon, this has been established by science. There is a finite amount of time available, the end of life is like one big alarm clock, ticking. Time is so valuable that it is used as currency, to buy and sell. A sandwich will cost you an hour, a vehicle two years. Money is gone. The government is testing a machine to store time, which presently must be consumed immediately. Children have the most time left, they are the most precious. That may be why they begin to disappear. Standard's "disappeared" children live in cages, aging while staring at the machine that sucks their time away. If the machine were perfected, and time stored, the new Standard would last forever.

The detective, Milnus, is assigned to investigate a bombing of a monorail full of scientists from the accumulator project. He follows clues into the underground wharfs, where he finds an organization of rats, children discarded from the accumulator project because of physical and other defects. In act three, Milnus (Mel, Jodie, Arnold?) goes for broke.

The choice was clear, I could either try and finish several ad hoc versions of "Standard", sell one, finance my first feature, or wait and see. I liked the idea of saving that script for later, when I could produce and direct it myself, à la Corman. I'm tired, I don't want to change any more words or names. I just don't know if I can play this game full time, and risk everything on Movie World, a moody horse. I remember that day as a major wind shift. I didn't like the odds.

Dubbing Assistant

I land at the Broadway Café, which Bob Dylan owns. It's simple, not too crowded, and I don't like Starbucks. I plug in my Mac at the only open table and clean it up. Around me everybody else is doing exactly the same freelance laptop and coffee routine. Joining the sitcom writer ranks may have been a bad idea. These are the hip Hollywood writers; most of them are being paid despite their shorts and flip-flops appearance. This is their office, where they can feed off each other's vibes. You know it when – suddenly – one writer is in the "zone" as they say in theatre: she starts to type faster, her head lowers down on the keyboard and she will only raise it forty minutes from now and leave shortly after.

That vibe zaps across the room. I don't know what part of it is envy and how much inspiration. But when one writer is on, the others sense it. At times the Broadway café is abuzz with chat, at times it feels like a library the night before an exam, writers typing faster, locking their jaws, headphones on. Like bicycle racers taking turns leading the Tour de France pack, writers break to talk, but never about the script. About deals. Who's read what, who's picked up that, did that pilot get picked up? On Tuesdays there were two of the highest paid script consultants in town mentoring their writers right there in the café. I had taught myself to lip-read as a kid, watching TV without sound. My mission became to get some advice for free.

I started to wear headphones and to get there early, to get the right table. I zeroed the volume in my headphones but acted as if into my music. She was a slow talker who did her knitting during the sessions. Her lips were easy to read, the advice for my script started pouring in: make the magic moments pay off, think about timing, make strong cuts. The woman was coaching an African-American writer and she sounded confident his script would sell. Feature writing can be so lone-



ly, just hearing someone telling you "don't stop" and "keep writing" can feel like extraordinary advice. This alone probably justified her \$2,000 consultation fee.

An urban myth says M. Night Shyamalan realized only during the seventh draft of "The Sixth Sense" that Bruce Willis was dead from the start. I realized only in the ninth draft of "Standard" that I had spent six months at the café scribbling endless and useless revisions. Was my film script already dead, too? Bob Dylan has now sold the Café.

Subtitled

On a Monday, I was offered a job translating movies into Italian for the exploding DVD market. Movie World is going digital! Most studio films and TV shows will get subtitled in 30 languages for global redistribution. The DVD system will even give discounted second chances to masterpieces like "Waterworld", remakes starring Sylvester Stallone and teen horror trash that bombed the first time around. There is also a library of classics waiting for a go. Imagine "The Sound Of Music" or "My Fair Lady" with subtitles in Arabic, Japanese, Portuguese, Hebrew, Czech, Swahili, Mandarin, Cyrillic and more.

Welcome to this global corporate hangout. Imagine "Dumb and Dumber" running on tens of miniature windows on PC screens. The Indonesian woman types with three sons under her desk, the Brazilians are singing and the Germans tell them to shut up from over their cubicles. The Russian woman is so short she will trade her homemade potato salad for two extra pillows. The Italians run the gossip, which the French have ridiculed already. The managers are all Americans. They fix the deadlines and decide how long the breaks can be. Lunch is an Ethiopian, Vietnamese, Mexican, Japanese, Italian restaurant. Mix "Big Brother" with "Big Night", "Tampopo", "Babette's Feast" and add an "Oliver Twist". It's a stir-fry.

The deadlines are tight. I get assigned to do seasons of "The Simpsons", "Friends", "South Park" plus features. I specialize in slang 'cause I got the two-tongue jive, mo'fo', in other words I was the only really bilingual person there. I specialize in "director commentaries", because I am familiar with technical production terms in Italian. Subtitles are different from dubbing. In a dub you can change all you want. If the actor talks about football, in the Chinese dub he could be talking about ping-pong. This works fine as long as you don't see an actu-

al football. In Italy dubbing is still big because it's a tradition. Mussolini had all English and American films dubbed for the sake of nationalism.

I worked at home. At night. One time, in a commentary, an established director claimed with conviction that his aesthetic style for the movie had been inspired by "German Neo-Realism". I phoned the supervisor to remind her that Neo-Realism was an Italian thing, Germany had its own pride and joy in Expressionism. Ever heard of "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari"? I suggested a quick unauthorized fix, a bend in the company policy for the benefit of... what, culture? The supervisor said no, nobody would notice the difference. A big-time Hollywood director shot a film with Denzel Washington, inspired by German Neo-Realism! It's on the record.

One day my mother comes to visit from Italy. She is perfectly bilingual, and she offers to help me translate a song. I can't seem to succeed at preserving the rhyming patterns. The animated film is called "South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut". Picture a Catholic Italian grandmother working as a shadow, slappin rap slang on the keyboard, like a sister from the hood. Warner Bros. loved "my" translation of the song. It was entitled "Uncle Fucker".

Continuity

This is how I became a film instructor: I applied to teach directing and cinematography at a college in Valencia, California. At the interview, I made clear that I would be teaching my very own brand of film-making, that my background was mixed. I had been an apprentice with directors

from several countries, from the Ukraine to Argentina. I couldn't say where "I came from" artistically. On top of that, I stressed, I received a Masters in Fine Arts from an experimental film school in Wisconsin and I am not to be counted as a big Movie World – I mean – Hollywood fan. This wasn't looking too good. I suggested watching "Czar Of Make Believe" as a simple way to conclude the interview. The interviewer, whose name was Paul, had already seen it at a festival. He asked me how I liked the pepperoni pizza at "Bodolino's", a Milwaukee bar and grill. He had lived there most of his life. He had also graduated from the same film school I went to. I got the job.

Animal Handler

Agents are like cowboys looking for cows to brand with their ranch's initial. En route to their percentages, agents don't want to lose their cattle anymore than John Wayne and Montgomery Clift did in "Red River". Agents lay by the campfire with their coffees and sleeping bags, and dream of hearing a great story. They would kill for another "Blair Witch". Every year production companies put out informal wish lists, themes they'd like to see. 2001 was the year of scary teen-horror. Why not do it again with only marginal changes? The themes for 2003 were Fantasy and War. That duo will last for a while.

Fred was a lawyer turned agent. He played racquetball and walked a dog. He had a closet full of scripts but made more money with set designers. Not that he was not hoping for new writers or directors to represent, but he was no longer young, and out of practice with his lasso. It

was match-point for Fred against me at the racquet club on Centinela Ave. I had been told to get myself invited there if I wanted to meet "players". I asked a short question.

ME: How long does it take you to read a 120-page script?

FRED: I don't read the whole thing.

ME: How does that work?

FRED: I read the first three pages. If the script hasn't turned me on, I put it down.

ME: The first three.

FRED: Then I read page eleven.

ME: What's on page eleven?

FRED: It's how it works. On page 20 you find the first plot point. On page 60 the second. If I reach page 90, I have already seen the story's underwear, we're close. But I almost never get that far.

ME: That's understandable.

FRED: There are just so many scripts.

ME: What about the one I gave you, "Standard"? Did you read it?

FRED: You wanted a meeting. I got you the meeting.

ME: Did you read it?

FRED: You got some teen horror stuff? Maybe even with a touch of humour, that's what they still want. Kids want to shit their pants while they're laughing.

ME: Do you mind if I stop by and pick up a couple of your discarded scripts to read?

FRED: Grab as many as you want. If you find any good ones let me know. More racquetball on Tuesday?

ME: Ok.

(I move to leave)

FRED: Where do you think you're going? It's still my match-point.

Location Scout

I am looking for my car, and the L.A. skies are clear. Clouds, I am told, have been outlawed here since the "Keystone Cops". I walk by souvenir shops on Hollywood Boulevard churning out "Three for \$10" T-shirts and star maps for \$5. A star map tells you where the movie stars live.

Dude, where is my car? Two cops sip soda and shoot the crap until one dumps his Burger King wrapper out the car window, amen. I left my car here, by this playground, the one that looks pretty bad, without one of the hoops. Maybe they all look pretty bad down here in South Central. How did I end up here? Anyway, I heard that Nike promotional teams strut down here twice a year to give the best ghetto players free pairs of the latest shoe model. Black kids are the ultimate cool in the export version of America, but in the long term, in real life, they don't seem to stand much of a chance. Maybe if someone has a spectacular dribble or can rap, but don't count on it.

There is my car. I drive towards the ocean on Sunset Blvd., past the gated community of Bel-Air, past the Brentwood mansions. "Black" in this area is just the color of a rented tuxedo. South Central L.A. is definitely not on this season's star map.

I get home and kiss my kids and Daniela. I eat warmed-up "penne al ragù" and start reading one of the three scripts I picked up from Fred's. The first is about Hitler using classical music to try and win World War II. By page six I lose interest. I can see Fred's point. I look at the next one, it's about a nun who murders boys in Napa Valley. I reach for my Palm Pilot. Click. While Fred was in the kitchen feeding his dog, I "beamed" the entire address book from his digital organizer into mine. Spielberg's office number is 818.751-3200. The private one is on my web site.



Cameraman

Andrea Carugati, a journalist from Italy, interviews me one night for his news agency, Kikapress.com, after the L.A. premiere of "Malena", by Giuseppe Tornatore, starring Monica Bellucci. We ended up at "Johnny Rockets" at the Beverly Center.

Q: How is it going in Los Angeles?

ME: I sold and directed two TV ads, I wrote two scripts. I teach. I subtitle.

Q: Sounds like me. Did you find any good Italian restaurants?

ME: No.

Q: Try "Via Veneto" in Santa Monica. It's new.

ME: Never heard of it.

Q: Did you meet other Italians here?

ME: There is Barzini, an Italian writer who has made some films.

Q: Did his father write the famous book on Italians in America?

ME: And I met two government people who want me to develop export movies for them, here.

Q: What kind?

ME: Movies with Italian-American heroes: Ferragamo, the shoe guy, Giannini.

Q: Who's Giannini?

ME: He started the "Bank of America and Italy" by lending money from a fruit cart during the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Later it became "Bank Of America".

ME: I bet the movies would be shot as B movies in the U.S. and financed in Italy with lots of margins to chew on.

ME: You said it, not I. These guys also wanted me to develop a story based on Custer's last standing bugler at Little Big Horn! It turns out he was an Italian immigrant just off the boat, who had been offered land to enlist immediately, and went. But I said no, it's not my bag.

Q: You want to know what I did? I never get invited to VIP parties yet, so I started to write stories about this loser journalist who tries to sneak in and shoot glamour photos, but gets kicked out everywhere. An Italian magazine has bought the exclusive! I named my alter ego: "L'Inviato Imbucato" ("The Uninvited Reporter").

ME: I love it!

Animation Director

Six Swedish miles (60 km) North of Karlstad, on the way to Sunne, sits the Alma Löv museum. I stand before its multiple outdoor art pavilions and meet Marc Broos. He created this art space with his wife Karin and I am here to run a workshop on digital film-making. We have set up five Final Cut Pro editing stations and ten video cameras are available for the thirty or so artists invited by Film i Värmland to partake in an experimental week-end, a mix of improvisations and mise-en-scène, an impromptu array of free digital video work by artists of widely different ages and backgrounds. In an open workshop like this, there is no expectation that the work produced will conform to any pre-existing standard, and this is liberating. It is precisely originality and the unexpected which characterize what develops. I wonder if the "Blue Rider" art group might have started like this.

Movies have a tendency to individualize work and to divide work vertically, so that specific jobs are identified with specific people, and the result of such collaboration is heralded as a building block of the industry: Teamwork! Our approach favored the work of a single artist who creates a piece with a digital camera in the middle of the forest, using a process similar to that of a sculptor or a painter, working solo. In Värmland, the doors of film-making seem open to artists from other fields, a cross-pollination of genres and styles is taking place. The outcome could be an interesting surprise.

Second Unit Director

I feel like a tourist. John Sundholm, a Finn who drives like a Neapolitan, offers me a guided tour of the chromatic keys of the countryside around Karlstad. It is May, the sun finally gathers enough rays to bury winter. If myth claims the Inuit have 100 words for "ice", then Sweden must have 50 for the color "green". There is forest everywhere and more layers than Photoshop can handle. Swedes can communicate well with few words. Silence for them is alright, it doesn't imply that you may have nothing to say. It is almost a form of punctuation, of timing. You can keep a conversation going just by saying "Ja" every once in a while. That signals that you agree and that you don't mind being on the quiet end of a dialogue.

I read a Gustaf Fröding poem. Fröding is a Värmland icon and a national hero. Every country has different types of heroes and icons, Sweden has writers! On the 20 crown banknote a little boy, Nils, is flying over Sweden on the back of a wild goose. It's a nice image, and a tribute to another Swedish literary hero, Selma Lagerlöf. I mentally compare that image with the mysterious secret society one-eyed pyramid on the back of American dollars. At first sight, Sweden seems to treat "dream" and "happiness" as simple, natural concepts. In the U.S. they were ubiquitous buzzwords for the machine. In Karlstad, dream is when you sleep, and happiness is something you hope to get a few minutes of, every now and then.

Swedes watch Oprah, soap operas, CNN, the whole American satellite TV package. From afar, despite everything, America still appears resolute, not intolerably unrefined, confident, strong. The further away you live from the U.S., the more that impression is reinforced. Robert Redford in "The Great Waldo Pepper" by George Roy Hill yells to his potential customers: "Who wants to go for a ride?" 85

percent of the world's population has only seen America on TV., and 85 percent of Americans have never been overseas. Wouldn't you raise your hand?

Optical Printer

I went to Avant 2003, a Karlstad conference on avant garde cinema. Is it not a paradox to want to unify unrelated fragments of personal film work into a paradigmatic question, such as "What is avant garde?". Doesn't experimental film defy all rules? And if so, why create a system of rules to define these films at all? But the focus of the conference wasn't only to define theories and borders, to identify or dissect individual niches of film art. There was some "compare and contrast" between Stan Brakhage and Peter Weiss, but the main focus was retro: the contemplation of pristine 16 mm film prints.

For two days the Arenan Theatre became a "Film Club" space where a rare brand of cinema assertively took center stage, thanks in part to Re:VOIR, a traveling exhibitor of experimental cinema, from Paris. Moth wings and other odd objects and shapes danced irrationally on screen: only light, movement and rhythm. These short works revealed their optically-printed faces for the first time to many. Most had never even heard of these titles before.

In today's panorama of commercial cinema and packaged entertainment, it was some kind of wonder to find a twenty-something audience sitting with a Jurassic group of international film academics. Cinema as culture? Maybe ... but can a visual culture – related to both the

world of ideas and the physical realm – survive ephemer-all modernity?

Watching people watching avant garde films is interesting because of the unpredictable range of individual reactions. The films let the personal experience of the author be absorbed by the individual consciousness of the viewer. This smells like the opposite of Movie World, which normally abhors the auteur. Blockbusters prefer to engage in wider, popular, and sure-thing family themes catering to impulse-buying youngsters. The Studio's hope is that kids will play algebra: stars + plots x (market brands x products) / role models + behaviors = cool. For a commercial film to be successful, it must elicit the same reactions in all viewers. One of the formulas of the hyped "collaborative science" of Hollywood is that there be one outcome, no cultural challenges, and no mental homework for viewers. This ambition of producing unanimous readings of films has one goal: fire-burning word-of-mouth endorsements and strong first-week grosses. Movie World just can't afford the lack of consensus.

Walking out of an overdose of experimental film screenings, one enjoys free and often much more radical reactions, difficult to reproduce on a studio test-audience questionnaire. Different opinions and mental associations flow from mostly non-narrative pictures lacking both the mythical hero structures and the moral polarities of good and evil common in popular Movies. For the untrained spectator, this could be bewildering and even dangerous (try it on a first date). To get into avant-garde films takes practice, like quitting smoking, or living without TV. The bother lasts only a few days.

An experimental film requires a first-timer to create her own reference points so as to welcome the unknown. Such interaction is challenging and sugar-free. It is difficult to react to purely visual cinema (Brakhage made mostly silent films) and even harder to find a language to communicate your own reaction, especially if you never suffered through film school. Perhaps this explains why avantgarde films usually pass as food for pedigreed academics and artists. But experimentation in cinema has established an ongoing – if little heard about – legacy;



to navigate these films, you cannot rely on remote-controlled, pre-set channels. You determine which way is front and back. You realign the axis/horizon of your interpretative palette, which is to say: "You are on your own, kid. There are few things Hollywood tries to avoid more than a spectator/citizen making up his own mind. Control, fear and manipulation are Hollywood's subtlest tools. Experimental film – using the same medium – aims at the opposite: individual choice.

In Karlstad, I observed several kids' disorientation after the screenings. "Do you remember ever noticing or remembering specific colors in films? Sounds?" I asked. Leif (24) did not know what to say about "Mothlight" by Stan Brakhage, because it was unlike any other film he'd seen before. Hanna (18) liked "Castro Street" by Bruce Baillie.

The avant garde embraces creation by abstraction and process. Film-makers can control their work more with their intuition and talent, and worry less about major financial issues during production. Experimental films are rooted in individual consciousness and transformation. If you make one, you may find that, in the absence of heroes to cheer for and enemies to fight, you may have only your personal compass to go by. It's not Friday or Saturday night, so I can walk home without having to skip over puke puddles in town. The U.S. and Sweden have one thing in common, for sure: booze.

Box Office Cashier

The film language a country speaks is part of its culture art and heritage. Germany, France, Japan, Italy and the U.S. – yes the United States – would carry a different weight had their films been different, for good or ill. Sweden is in a class of its own, not only because that is how it chooses to be defined as a country, but mainly because of Ingmar Bergman. If you exclude him, Antonioni and Godard, not many Masters are living, but there is a flip side to the legacy of genius that is promised Sweden. It is an inheritance of both pride and anxiety. Bergman's enduring, inimitable presence surely inspires young generations of film-makers, yet, paradoxically, it may not help them find their own voice at all.

When Quentin Tarantino emerged, his voice was unmistakable. He collaged everything he found: video store culture, Shakespeare, and comic books. "Reservoir Dogs" and "Pulp Fiction" also gave new langu-

age to ghetto addicts, losers, pimps, pushers, Jesus freaks and sado-masochists. All petty criminals, crawling into the public's religious and social conscience, covered in blood. Viewers recognized them so well, few could resist fascinating hyper-violence. The devil sells the most frying pans where cooking is forbidden.

"Fucking Åmål" echoed a new Swedish voice. Moodysson's kids are linked to the source of life, and they struggle not to lose it. The power of this premise defies intellectualization, symbolism and abstraction. I appreciate "The Seventh Seal" and I don't mind mind games. But Moodysson rethinks Sweden with a closer, fresher palette, as painful as it is contemporary. Though Bergman has put Sweden forever on the short-list of countries with a National Cinema, change would not mean treason. Some will push for more commercial export films. Others will insist that Sweden remain cast as a "stinger", like a James Stewart character, so independent-minded and witty that no one can reply. A simple solution probably cannot be found. What matters is to fully explore both extremes of the debate, and not rush to a compromise. In my view, Svenska Filminstitutet would find unexpected rewards by supporting new voices for their potential, diversity (and lower production prices!) rather than seeking continuity, at all costs, under the Master's shadow. Should Sweden primarily follow Movie World's low-risk development habits? Or do you feel Swedish cinema is already Americanized enough? Which Swedish cinema do you prefer?

Editor

My father shot Super 8 film. I don't blame those who never attempt to edit family or wedding footage. It is an awesome responsibility. I eventually recut most of the family Sunday outings in chronological order. In the 70s, images still had some value. Collecting film had meaning. My father attributed great value to those images, he was a good shooter. In digital, the word is: accumulation. You shoot first, you think later, you fix it all in post-production. The images of the future are light in your wallet and fit in a portable drive. Originals no longer exist, only digital copies. There are so many pictures that there is little intrinsic value to any one shot. Images are manipulated, the element of truth is gone. Photos may not even be admitted as evidence in court, if I am not mistaken.

Chance Operations

The composer John Cage made multiple recordings of street sounds, layered them and discovered that he liked the unexpected, unplanned result. He called the process "Chance Operations", welcoming the potential of randomly associating elements in his work. Once I connect layers together, even without any blueprint or plan or intended outcome, I can react to new and unintended results. These in turn can move me to new artistic choices and directions.



Analog film editing had chance built in. For example, you could only see the result of a dissolve when the answer print was struck weeks later! The process of optical printing is the epitome of visual chance, of random superimpositions. In double-exposures or step-printing it was exhilarating (or devastating) to find out what the new image looked like, back from the lab. Film grain is another example: the precious, classic "film look" happens on its own. A digital effect can be executed until it is perfect, you can see it in near-real time. Before, this was hardly possible. The concept of "perfection" itself did not exist in the analog, pre-digital domain.

"Chance Operations" is no stylistic extravaganza, no experimental nostalgia, but rather a timeless creative tool capable of turning "mistakes" into surprise revelations.

Line flubs

Hollywood scenes are electronically slated, multiple cameras locked in sync. Scenes are often overfilled with words. This drives sound designers nuts, because scripts rarely specify the sound design of a scene, a fork rattling or feet shuffling. On top of that, directors' re-shoot tens of times only because of minor "line flubs", errors in dialogue delivery. One-liners are Movie World's currency. Dialogue is God. Stars routinely have lines cut from their parts, and re-write or add entire sequences, as their agents advise. One of the first steps towards a film-maker's independence is to separate sound and image.

I tried it.

I cut a 30-minute film without sound and then dubbed it over. The dialogue improved, as I fixed and sculpted words along the way. The first time I went to shoot in Finland, I did the same. The language around me was a marshmallow shower. I stopped trying to understand, treating ten-syllable words as simply "sound". I still don't know what precisely the actors say, but I know the story works nonetheless. "Min Favorit Blomma", ("Flower of Choice") was a collaboration with film students Andrius Dementavicius, from Lithuania, and Peter Gunnarsson, a Swede.

Second Act

Rocky had a mentor, Luke Skywalker had a mentor. Truffaut followed Rossellini for three years. I had a mentor by the name of Dick Blau.

I read Dick's "press promo" in an independent film magazine while I squatted ever-briefly in a porta-john bathroom on a set in Zuma beach, near Malibu. I had snuck in as an assistant's assistant to Mark Lawrence, a novice Disney director.

The piece climaxes with the line: "At UWM we stay out of your way. We just make media here." On this trip I have already checked out a number of American film schools: NYU, UCLA, USC and AFI. I know one thing by now: I won't pay \$30,000 a year to play Movie director. Now I am in Milwaukee, visiting. It's March. It snows. Dick drives-through town quickly. I listen.

DICK: I liked your "Sax Man" film. You know how to tell a story.

ME: Thanks.

DICK: But we have no director chairs here.

ME: I don't need one.

DICK: You pick up your sticks and shoot.

ME: Right.

DICK: What's your idea?

ME: How do you mean?

DICK: What idea do you have, what do you want to make here?

ME: A story part fact, part dream.

DICK: A documentary of a dream.

ME: Something like that.

DICK: I like that. Let me show you my photo studio.

For the rest of the day I see "Tintinnabula", an experimental film, and we talk about DADA and "Moby Dick". We meet Chris Smith, a

student who is making great waves in town, making low budget features and winning prizes. Four years later, he made, with Sarah Price, a Sundance success story which became a cult "Indie" hit: "American Movie". The protagonist, Mark Borchardt, also played a cameo in my "Czar" film.

Make-Believe

A con-man wants trust so he can reveal his version of the truth. In the process he steals something. A mentor wants trust but doesn't steal. He gives back. In "Czar Of Make Believe" the con-man and the mentor are the same character. A Russian immigrant, played by Kirill Mikhanovsky, goes to the U.S. to be an actor, but gets stuck in the Midwest. The only film he can act a part in is a road-movie, mine. Kirill spends a lot of time listening to other immigrants tell their stories. He asks them questions about their wildest dreams. But what he hears, he steals from them. He steals their stories about the jobs they have found, he steals their American dreams. When he finally phones home to Moscow and talks to his mother, he tells her their stories. He talks about his work. He claims to have made it. But, actually, all he's got is a lead role in this Italian film about a Russian actor in Milwaukee.

I set a scene by a rotating bridge. The idea was to shoot this bridge on the Milwaukee River as it rotated to let trains pass. Kirill would walk in the opposite direction, close to the track. With my long-lenses, the flat perspective would create a nice effect, the whole city background



wrapping around this walking man. We just had to wait for a freight train. I had two prosciutto sandwiches and hot water in a thermos. The temperature was 10° C below. The bridge started to shift. Kirill grabbed his jacket and ran towards the train. He gazed back at me, as I was laying down with the camera. He was walking in the middle of the tracks! At the last moment he stepped off, on the camera side, and behind him was this strange shifting background. It was nice. The freight train tooted past me, the guy was furious. Kirill walked calmly back, asking how the shot was and I told him the \$36,000 ARRI SR II was dead. Motor broken, kaput. I got nothing on film.

The scene that followed was an improvisation: the film-maker and his alter-ego actor in a freezing alley, shirts off and fists en garde. A



Almost two years and various festivals later, a knock on my door. A fellow says this is about "Czar Of Make Believe". Apparently he was a judge for a big U.S. festival, which had rejected "Czar" six months before. He complimented the photography, the original narrative, and Kirill's performance. He added the festival didn't appreciate that I had no production company. That was true. I had financed the film with credit cards and used a fictitious company name in the production credits: Nomad Films. Those were the rules: no company, no dance. I was unlisted in Movie World! I was astonished the guy had come such a long way to tell me this, but what was he really after? I realized I was becoming jaded about L.A.

Third Act

week later I returned, to reshoot the sequence with another camera, but it broke down too. I gave up the rotating bridge.

"Czar Of Make Believe" went on to a festival tour. It was welcomed in art-film festivals and smaller venues, while it struggled to get accepted at large, commercial festivals, not that I expected any major mainstream winks to my narrative work. The Siena festival in Italy was the first to screen "Czar". They were excited about it. During the Question and Answer period after the projection, a woman asked: "I can see why this film can be special for you because it is so personal and beautiful. What audience did you have in mind when you made it?" Good question. I had gotten so wrapped up in those two years of solo film-making that I forgot all about audience. I answered from the heart: "I made it for you."

The process of making art will transform you. And any artist will laugh at a statement so banal as that. What in the world happens when you create something and how it is done is not something we can explain to each other and agree on. I could try and tell you in detail, citing examples of specific moments of revelation or experience, or accumulated mistakes that lead to new awareness but you would distrust me. Process is so personal it cannot be learned in theory, away from the practical "hell" of creation.

To the term "Director" I prefer "Film-maker". A director is akin to an orchestra conductor, s/he knows all the instruments and how each should connect with every other in execution, timing and expression. A film-maker is a sort of jazz-musician, writing parts of the music sheet as s/he plays it.

Solo film-making is extreme. Jon Jost used to strap a microphone to his helmet while he shot. He made a number of feature films, alone. Have you seen his "The Last Vermeer In New York"? Normally, rolling credits on most industry films take five to eight minutes now. Make a solo film if you can.

Sebra

If you are looking for film material on the Kontiki Expedition, follow the road to Torsby, take a left at the bridge, a right at the church, and there is Sebra Film. I came looking for regional film archives on a mission from the University in Karlstad, super 8, 16 mm films that preserve splices of Värmland's memory. Sebra is a company involved in peace projects worldwide. At first glance, the office looks like a singles bar. But inside is an amazing archival vault. There is no catalogue, no reference numbers. The hot item is the original negative of the Kontiki Expedition documentary, everyone knows that is in the big yellow cans.

In the equipment room there are two 16 mm cameras, an Aaton and an Arri SR2, plus a Steenbeck film editing table. In other rooms two Avids are momentarily resting under plastic sheets. Sebra's goal is to produce educational, non-profit documentaries dealing with issues of Peace. They seem to make more of them here than in Los Angeles, but it's an illusion of relative size. It's just surprising to find so much documentary material produced in Africa and Asia, here! Sebra's owner shows me video footage of the first reunion of North Korean and South Korean families that were separated for 40 years. Värmland can count on a really important resource.

Regional directors

I saw a very short film from Sweden, "Flytten" ("The Move"). Here is the story: a woman packs her belongings into a van, makes the final arrangements to vacate her apartment. A neighbour peeks at the scene from the window. These are Scandinavian neighbors, they don't talk to each other much, but now she is leaving and the lonely middle-aged man needs to talk. He will, one way or another, even if he has to do the impossible, before she is gone for good. "Flytten" zooms into the moment. This was its magic. The film was written and directed by Jonas Bergergård.

There are few gestures in the story and they are simple. Simplicity is a virtue, so difficult to achieve on low-budget film shoots. But "Flytten" shows no traces of adrenaline, its tone is calm despite the characters' turmoil. The camera remains steady, as life around it rips apart. There are powerful and universal forces in motion, yet the action that reveals them is minute.

A finger scratches a wall that has become too humid. On the page this is a timeless moment. Its core lies in between the lines of unwritten cinematic text. There is no place but the now, the empty, scary now of a vacant apartment, a snow-covered land, and a man spying behind a curtain. Acting is real life, minus the commentary.

I see a lot of short films in festivals. The winners are usually seven minutes long, polished, light-hearted. But "Flytten" works at another level altogether, dense as a small feature. The story expands outward from a core you discover slowly, pushed to find as many more levels as you can sustain. At your own pace.

There is a sense of unmanipulated truth in this fiction. You are drawn close without the plot becoming overly psychological. There are no dreams to be seen here. There is a metaphor of hiding and discovery

at play. You must go into hiding to be later released, you must shed your mask and face the garbage dumpster of your past.

"Flytten" is never overtaken, not for one frame, by the temptation to be sentimental, to want to facilitate in you any specific emotional reactions. There is no point in that. You panic with your survival instincts, you cringe at the paralyzing urgency of the upcoming separation, an urgency that is as palpable as it is patiently visualized. Bergergård is not Tarkovsky, he doesn't want you to contemplate the aesthetic or to transcend it spiritually. He just wants you to stand where he likes to be: with his characters, in the snow, under the apartment building.

In the relative quiet, a race against time. A man looking for a solution in real time. Measured gestures, panic. A beautiful paradox. A woman resigned to leave, as her only solution. A common solution is difficult, and Bergergård basks in that struggle. The man arrives at his choice off screen. Man and woman are equal protagonists. Simplicity is the final solution. And then "Flytten" hits the road. It drives past death in the trash, and keeps on going.

"Flytten" made me grateful for short Cinema. Jonas Bergergård and Jonas Holmström have later made "Natan", a short which ran away with the Grand Prix at the 2004 Clermont-Ferrand Festival. Who knows what else "Natan" will win?

In recent years I noticed that some of the shorts nominated for Oscars were produced by Dreamworks. Is Movie World staking claims to the uncharted territory of short film?

Awards

Regional film offices thrive on awards, prizes, and press. They will accept any publicity, interviews, screenings, newspaper articles as a god-sent reward for the hard work done. Anything helps to get on the World Cinema map. In 2004 "Du ska nog se att det går över", another Värmland film, won a best doc Guldbagge, so it was a good year for Värmland fans.

Most Värmland directors exist within the bubble of Film i Värmland's funding. When they need to explore outside, sometimes they go directly abroad. One point of reference is Prague. Jenny Jansdotter and Daniel Wirtberg both made films in cooperation with Czech productions and crews. Jenny's "Mandala" had its festival run and Daniel Wirtberg's "Julia" will in 2005. Sara Broos has made several short films. So has Kaj Ivanovic.

Slow

It can take years to finish a film. Sometimes, if you are lucky, you have more than one project going at once. Other times you may need a day job and, hopefully, this can be cinema-related. I lead Cinemahead Workshops, group gatherings that last a few days in which we brainstorm and shoot one short film. Every film-maker both acts and directs, so sometimes actors shoot camera in costume! That opens up a lot of good energy on the set, by the way. In Värmland I am also a film consultant, which means I will often travel to a film school or Art institute and work with script development, film editing or just motivate young film-makers.

Most of them face a choice: to go on fighting for a career in film, or give the hell up.

In that respect, Värmland is not so different from Los Angeles. If you are in it only for money and career all you have to do is "get to know people" and "follow the yellow brick road".

Mind you, Hollywood shines brightest and the smart, young or beautiful are all headed that way too. It is uncanny how good-looking people are in L.A. The percentages are abnormal. Everybody is hot, tanned, gift-wrapped in one-of-a-kind fashion statements, or designer tie-dyed rags. When GAP sells a (made in Malaysia) leather jacket with metal bolts and the word ANARCHY printed on the back, and "Che" is an American brand-name, you wonder: does it make more sense if I shut my eyes or force myself to keep them wide open?

Looks

In Los Angeles I resigned to the lack of seasons, to conformity. Everyone looked healthily on display, at their best to go somewhere and be someone, to meet another great-looking type and chat about accomplishments over drinks, quickly, before the next rendez-vous. In Karlstad, people look normal. They are naturally asymmetric and imperfect. Region Värmland is quintessential planet earth, it has all the seasons and many extremes. From extreme day to extreme night, and all the temperatures in between. Someone said directors should not drive. I have retold this line to many others because it holds a truth: stay close to the source. If you take the bus you may have conversations, become aware of a minority group you never heard of before; you also may have to walk a bit, adjust to waiting, be patient, slow down. Värmland people seem not to mind waiting. Maybe it's the Social Democracy culture: if you wait, your turn will come. Maybe I haven't been here long enough, but it seems like that too, regrettably, could be changing fast.

In Värmland, the speed of life still feels normal. Even though some Swedes feel America's breath on their neck, from my perspective "you ain't seen nothin' yet". While on a national level Sweden may at times look to the U.S. for guidance, few societies could be more different from one another. This polarity reflects itself, in stark and clear contrast, in cinema as well.

Värmland film-makers are, on average, on a slower track than their American colleagues, closer to their Italian counterparts. The slow track has a silver lining: it gives you time to travel, try different jobs, see your world from different angles. There are no shortcuts to opening your mind but unmediated experience. Shut off your TV! Have you lived a day as the salesman does, shaving a bit off at every traffic light? Felt

pot-holes from the point of view of a bicycle messenger running late?
Tried Clowning?

Making a first film at 25 is nothing to be ashamed about. Keep your eyes open, and your ears peeled. Antonioni made his first documentary at 39! If you can learn to be on both sides of a wall, a camera, a bridge, a rifle or a bullet then you have already found the flip side of the conventional map. To describe victory you must know about losing. Shoot film. Most technical stuff you can learn in minutes. While you're at it, pick up an instrument and teach yourself to play your favorite tune.



It's a Wonderful Life

In medieval Florence, finding a good mentor meant life-changing luck. A film apprentice needs to be humble, needs time, and a project to focus on. The perfect job is to be an assistant for a writer, an editor, or a director. These jobs are hard to find, and often unpaid. A friend of mine wrote a letter to Walter Murch, editor of "The Conversation" and "Apocalypse Now", asking if she could volunteer as an apprentice. He invited her to help, for six months. Appreniticing is nothing gla-

mourous. You may need a support system, though. I would never have survived without my wife Daniela.

In Hollywood, film schools are everywhere, like hot-dog stands in New York. Most are clones of each other, and industry copy-cats. I find the process derivative, and the role-playing gets old. If your aim is to join the vertical ranks of the industry, the huge tuition fees may be worth borrowing money for. But few make it in Movie World. Directors in L.A. are forced to morph into businessmen. They live in cocoons. Many dropout. 60 percent of Directors' Guild members have made two or less movies in their career. One young director who laughs a lot (he made six features, at 28!) told me he envied me my family, but said in his case a family would kill his social life and career. I asked him when was the last time he rode the subway. He laughed, but his giggle seemed off cue.

Thousands of kids are dying to tell a story, to make media. Very soon a 12 year-old Spielberg will appear. Voices are emerging! When kids learn to read and write they do so in school, but who will teach tomorrow's kids to tell their stories on film? It may be Movie World, masquerading as a substitute teacher.

As young film-making voices multiply and images circulate, issues of content, digital delivery, censorship etc, will hit the fan. Generic templates and Hollywood formula recipes are not voices, they are echoes. You are a voice. You cannot be labeled. What you say may change, but what you do is who you are. I try to empower new film voices.

Superimpose

Almodòvar, Coen Bros., Wim Wenders, Cassavetes and many others always work with the same crews. It's a good idea. Try and work with crews and production people you know well, rather than hiring too many strangers that don't know you. When times get rough you'll be thankful for less misunderstandings. Shooting can be exhilarating and it can be a nightmare. Be comfortable with your shooting schedule. Producers tend to impose high-speed shooting because rentals and crews are expensive.

Kieslowski was famous for stopping for 3–4 months after a first few weeks of production. He would look at the material, then reshoot a lot. Tarkovsky's "Stalker" took five years to complete. I am not suggesting you must take forever as a political statement, but if you have a producer, make sure s/he knows you prefer a flexible shooting schedule. Leave time for discovery and doubt, two sides of the same precious coin.

Also, shoot on film at least one short film if you can. Feel the sprockets run through the gate and plan each shot you are paying for. This may even help the way you do your *mise en scène*. "Shooting by accumulation" and "fix it all in post" could just be unwanted consequence of digital tape, the double-edged wonder that made Sony say in an ad "everyone is a director".

Mad Cow Disease

This poem is an assembly of actual quotations by the current American President. The lines have been arranged, for aesthetic purpose, by the Washington Post writer Richard Thompson. He asked to pass it on. Can anyone script-doctor this masterpiece?

Make the pie higher

I think we all agree, the past is over.
This is still a dangerous world.
It's a world of madmen and uncertainty
And potential mental losses.
Rarely is the question asked
Is our children learning?
Will the highways of the Internet
Become more few?
How many hands have I shaken?
They misunderestimate me.
I am a pit bull on the pant leg of opportunity.
I know that the human being
And the fish can coexist.
Families is where our nation finds hope,
Where our wings take dream.
Put food on your family!
Knock down the tollbooth!
Vulcanize society! Make the pie higher!
Make the pie higher!

Director of Photography

In Europe the word auteur still commands diminishing, yet lasting, respect. For a Studio, the author's personal voice is undesirable, writers should be invisible. For me, if there is no voice, there is no vision, no Cinema. Try and watch a Kubrick film without thinking it has Kubrick tone, Kubrick aesthetics, Kubrick everything. Kubrick knew lenses better than most, and his photographic skills are integral part of his signature, his universe. No Studio technician could imitate the work he did. Put a film-maker in a studio setting and you have a problem, ask Ridley Scott to shoot Dogma (add a shopping cart dolly) and it's a joke. The best film-makers know all the positions on set. They can help, consult, and collaborate when needed. If you take a road trip and know nothing of your motor, you can be fooled by any mechanic, when something breaks down.

When words and images come together, it is a sexy thing. Pleasure plays hide and seek between the lines of each feeble metaphor, seeking sync with the visual climax. Lina Wertmüller, who was used to running her own delicately ironic films in Italy, was signed to direct in Hollywood after the success of "Seven Beauties" with Giancarlo Giannini, and her Oscar nomination. Myth has it that production was progressing at a fifty-to-one shooting ratio. Fifty takes for every "Print!". This was not a proper pace for a Studio Director. After four weeks she was fired and flown back to Rome.

Shooting Script

Fellini's last idea for a film was entitled "Viaggio a Tulum" ("Trip to Tulum"). This is the story of a famous Italian director invited to consider generous Hollywood movie contracts. He is somewhat unsure about the trip. "I would need to know more about America if I was to make a film here." In Italy he would know the subtle ironies, the double-meanings in the language, he could read into people's secrets just by listening. But in English?

The director will be hopeless, he dislikes being an outsider from his first day at the Beverly Hilton. He refuses a juicy Universal Studio offer to remake "King Kong". Instead, he insists on a new film idea, claiming to have "seen it" before; he wants to drive urgently to Mexico and learn about peyote, more than anything meet Carlos Castaneda, the visionary writer. The director and a plump woman in a red hat step into a taxi and race to the border. The woman overflows from her tight dress.

At the Tijuana border, the taxi driver finds out his passenger's plan to scout locations in far away Yucatan. But the taxi driver will drive only down to a point. The trio drives South for five days in the dusty heat. The woman is exhausted and wants to go home at once. In the desert, the taxi driver gets frightened and abandons them. The director promises he will return, heads into the desert, alone, until he finds a cave, and joins an old indian man in his peyote ritual. Out of nowhere the taxi reappears, "I drive you home now, Maestro" says the driver. He is Carlos Castaneda in flesh and blood.

This film was never shot, it remains only as a graphic novel by Italian artist Milo Manara.

Extreme Long Shot

Andrea interviews me again, in his new office, after the 2003 Oscars. He met Michael Moore and is e-mailing digital photos all over the world. For the first time they show flags on fire on Hollywood Blvd, not stars' phony smiles. Something big is going down? Andrea is optimistic, America will wake up. In the meantime, I have other news.

ME: I am leaving

ANDREA: What?

ME: I am going to Värmland.

ANDREA: What's that?





ME: It's in Sweden.

ANDREA: Never heard of it.

ME: I'm going to look at schools in May. It feels right. If not, we'll go somewhere else in Europe.

ANDREA: I would like to go back too. But there is so much work here.

ME: I know. But SUV drivers are flicking my wife the finger because we have peace signs on our car. This trash started in 2000, the air got funny. My landlord ripped down our anti-war sign from the front of the house four mornings in a row, and I put it back up for five nights. She said we disturbed the community. That kind of community started to disturb me.

ANDREA: But what about your scripts and your film?

ME: Maybe Hollywood is the virtual place they claim it is. By e-mail I can be present, and show up once a year for meetings. Let's not tell I'm jumping ship. See who notices first.

ANDREA: They will google you.

ME: I am not going into hiding. I just want my family to live in a safer place, breathe cleaner air.

ANDREA: You curated the Yoko Ono, Jonas Mekas brainchild, Polyphonix?

ME: Just the film part, at the Pompidou in Paris. With Manuela Corti from Italy.

ANDREA: You are not on the star map yet. For one, you don't shoot a lot.

ME: True. My daughter Emma thinks I am a dentist. And I edit slowly.

ANDREA: Why no feature yet?

ME: I just optioned a book, "The Real Mc Coy", by Darin Strauss.

ANDREA: Congratulations. What is it about?

ME: It's about a man obsessed with becoming the best he can be. But to make it, he has to burn all the bridges, he can only reach the top in total loneliness.

ANDREA: Buona fortuna!

ME: Grazie.

Orchestra Director

In Värmland, in between projects, I lead workshops. Every one has the same premise (to create a safe space) and the same objective (to make a short ensemble film). This is not as easy as it sounds. First of all, cinema is a director's medium. Crews are used to follow only one director, with a clear vision. Secondly, cinema takes time. Try and set up a dolly track in the snow on a slope. Finally, cinema is expensive. The experiment of orchestrating flocks of film-makers has a cost. Is it worth it?

In 2003, in an advanced group workshop in Molkom, Värmland, each film-maker contributed a different idea, all apparently unrelated. In two days the group directed and performed a sequence of parallel scenes, edited as one compelling narrative film: "Is This Molkom?"

The "line" is the shortest path between two points. It is a fundamental axiom of geometry, but in physical life, the line is just an illusion. Life is a sequence of coin flips, stories unfold in a twirling weave of zig-zags. A slalom skier constantly adjusts to change (in slope, an ice patch) at the high speed of a race: skiers and actors are trained to react, not to think. How you react with no time to think reveals who you are, by what you do.

Straight lines don't exist. Think of that old Oriental philosophy favorite, the Now. Seen through a microscope, what looked like lines now looks more like a gaggle of cells, miniature bumper-cars in motion. Cinema happens at 24 frames per second. Could a frame be the Now? Why not. As the camera shutter winks open, cells struggle to find their time and place in the light. Motion. Image. I learned from a biologist that by instinct all cells will move as close as possible to their common objective: nourishment, safety. Ultimately, love. By the same token, healthy cells try and run as far away as they can from toxins and other sources of pain, fear and stress. Towards love, away from pain. The bio-



logist concluded that an organism in love has the power to heal itself. Sounds like drama?

In the proper environment, a workshop group will be drawn toward the common objective, a good film. Cinemahed workshops can bring out a film-maker's passion for truth and beauty over personal and artistic fears, insecurity, lack of technical experience, or personal blockages. In my experience, without vulnerability not much art happens.

Act I

If a story has problems in the third act, fix it in Act I.

"F for Fake" is a mock-umentary, a fake documentary about forgery, the professional imitation of truth. The narrator Orson Welles looks at the work of several forgers, artists who replicate the work of the masters without originality, despite enormous talent. The forgers paint several copies of unique, inimitable artwork. Each can then be sold as "the one". Myth has it that when the "Mona Lisa" was stolen from the Louvre in Paris, within three months there were six identical copies for sale on the black market.

For Welles, truth and lie are catalysts to set any story in motion, be it fact or fiction, or both. A story can come from nothing, from found-footage as well as from whispered words stolen from unsuspecting lips. The film-maker behind "F for Fake" honors every frame of this "puzzle without borders" as it were god-sent, absolute material just waiting to assemble-edit itself properly, splicing randomness into the final cut, focusing on the empty spaces in between slalom poles. The story and its paradoxes are for the audience to interpret, there is no clear objective solution. The problems that existed at the beginning, mostly still exist in the end, but the journey has created awareness, has set something in motion.

Orson Welles was a kid from Kenosha, Wisconsin, between Milwaukee and Chicago, where I was born. He moved to Hollywood with many friends from his theatre-company family. At 25, he starred in, directed, and produced "Citizen Kane", the picture American film schools now herald as the best of all time. The revolutionary wide-angle deep focus puts the audience in the center front row of a theater, you sit in front of a stage that never ends, you make your own choices as to what to look at, you draw your own map. There are no fast cuts to

redirect your short attention span. When everything is in focus, from foreground pen to background window and snow, the third dimension is not missing from the medium. You just have to draw your own map.

But Orson's inventions were out of time. Black-balled by Movie World for failure to conform, he was relegated into endless halls of mirrors to witness his own image deteriorate, his film projects break apart, his life turn into a drunken, legendary illusion. After Welles moved to Europe, he collaborated on a series of projects, selling his skills to others with more energy. Like many other film travellers, he lead private workshops in sublet basements. He shared his secrets, he gave them back to the space around him. He enjoyed acting, but happy endings were not his bag.

In Rome, Orson Welles acted in the short film "La Ricotta" by Pasolini, in 1962. He plays the part of an American director trying to shoot the scene of the Passion of Christ. Orson sits comfortably on a high chair with a flask of whisky and yells "ACTION!" into his megaphone, with medium-rare energy. Meantime, the extra playing the good thief, one of the two crucified next to Jesus, was too hungry to bear the wait, and went to grab some ricotta cheese from a woman with a stand one kilometer away.

The other extras, the weeping audience, are asked to move out of the cave they are assembled in, and take a break. The good thief is on the road for his cheese mission, while Orson Welles, master of paradox, barterer of the seventh art for food and lodgings, takes a nap. "La Ricotta" was shot near the cave in Rome's Parco Ardeatino, in the early 1960 park. Later, apartments were built there. In one of them, my children were born. "Take what you have gathered from coincidence," sings Bob Dylan with his unmistakable voice.

Julia

From: daniel wirtberg
Subject: snowstorm
Date: 23 november 2004 00.43.44 MET
To: d@cinemahead.com

hello

I just came back from visiting Bert and Eva Deivert out in Skived, they are helping me refine the piano tune in the beginning of the film. We had some wine and had a great time. I haven't seen them for very long so it was very joyful for me and for them too it seemed. They REALLY liked Julia, and even their 12 year old daughter said she liked it and wanted to watch it again. Man I must say I feel so good about the film now, I really love it, I get this great feeling after showing it to people, it lasts for hours...I'm in love with Julia :-)

And I fall in love with her every time watching it. This weekend I was in Stockholm and showed it to some filmmakers, it was very successful, they liked it bigtime and went bananas over it, started giving me numbers to big producers and all sorts of people. They weren't afraid at all that the film wouldn't end up on print.

Daniel, I can't thank you enough for supporting me on this film, for not letting me give up on the film on version 21, for pushing me, for challenging me, for believing in me and the film, for spending so much of your time on this....I'm so thankful. It was sooo worth every second.

On Wednesday I'm gonna do a full day seminar in Grafiska about Julia, talking about the film, and about the original script, talking about the transformation, my experience with it etc. I'm looking forward.

I'm also looking forward to the book. When is it finished?

daniel

Connect the dots

Can you draw a line in pencil from a title to its director? (Or ask for help)

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| "Du ska nog se att det går över" • | • (Daniel Vigne) |
| "Gummo" • | • (Andrei Tarkovsky) |
| "Husbands" • | • (Cecilia Neant-Falk) |
| "George Washington" • | • (Roy Andersson) |
| "Hair" • | • (Wim Wenders) |
| "La Jetée" • | • (Jean Luc Godard) |
| "The State Of Things" • | • (Milos Forman) |
| "Sångers från andra våningen" • | • (Dziga Vertov) |
| "Rosetta" • | • (J-P & Luc Dardenne) |
| "The Great Escape" • | • (Terrence Malick) |
| "L'America" • | • (John Cassavetes) |
| "The Return of Martin Guerre" • | • (Harmony Korine) |
| "Amarcord" • | • (Federico Fellini) |
| "Badlands" • | • (Billy Wilder) |
| "Le Mépris" • | • (Chris Marker) |
| "The Seventh Seal" • | • (Lukas Moodysson) |
| "Fitzcarraldo" • | • (Gianni Zanasi) |
| "Midnight Cowboy" • | • (Martin Donovan) |
| "Nella Mischia" • | • (John Sturges) |
| "State Of Wonder" • | • (Richard Linklater) |
| "Tampopo" • | • (Werner Herzog) |
| "Trip To the Moon" • | • (Stanley Kubrick) |
| "Delicatessen" • | • (David G. Greene) |
| "The Conversation" • | • (John Schlesinger) |
| "Idiots" • | • (Josef Fares) |
| "The Jungle Book" • | • (Akira Kurosawa) |
| "Barry Lyndon" • | • (Sergio Leone) |
| "Once Upon a Time in America" • | • (P.T. Anderson) |
| "Fucking Åmål" • | • (George Méliés) |
| "Magnolia" • | • (Juzo Itami) |
| "The Apartment" • | • (Todd Soloudz) |
| "Dersu Uzala" • | • (Walt Disney) |
| "Happiness" • | • (Lars von Trier) |
| "Waking Life" • | • (Jeunet & Caro) |
| "F for Fake" • | • (Francis Ford Coppola) |
| "Mothlight" • | • (Ingmar Bergman) |
| "The Man With the Movie Camera" • | • (Stan Brakhage) |
| "Kopps" • | • (Gianni Amelio) |
| "Stalker" • | • (Orson Welles) |

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