

CREATION AND I; ME AND MY WORK

The Personal Relationship Between Film and Filmmaker

By Erik Knudsen

Drift, Wait, Obey

For the film ‘artist’ or film ‘poet’¹ the relationship between the filmmaker(s) and the works produced is likely to be a personal² one, in that the process of action and reflection is part of a finely balanced evolutionary process. While much study has been made of the relationship between films and their audience little, in relative terms, has been made of the intimate process that exists between creator and their work. The language of film, its socio-political and cultural contexts and its cultural heritage can all provide valuable insights to the student of filmmaking. But what of that often delicate, intimate and, perhaps, mystical relationship between the creator and the created?

This paper does not seek to put forward a thesis, nor to pose an academically driven question. In my experience, it is relatively easy to engage in a discourse about the work of others, particularly when dealing with the socio-cultural contexts of its language and representation, compared to analysing one’s own work, especially that intimate mystical relationship one has to the work and the process.

In fact I would contend that it is not desirable to seek to do so³. Certainly in my case, the use of intellectual discourse is a direct contradiction to all that I try and achieve in my work and as an educator, this is a challenging dilemma. Yet reflection is an important part of my work and its ongoing development.

This reflection can of course take many forms and in the current debate about media practice research the question of what that form is goes to the heart of the issue. Arguably, traditional university research relies heavily on such key ingredients as ‘proof’, ‘qualification’, ‘quantification’, ‘rationality’, ‘dialectic’, ‘argument’, ‘conclusions’ and other such ingredients which are then usually presented in the

¹ I use these terms to distinguish between the filmmaker primarily driven to create out of an inner necessity, largely independent of market demand, as opposed to the filmmaker primarily creating to satisfy the perceived demands of a market place. Most filmmakers do, of course, think of their audience, but as I hope will become clearer later, the role of the audience and its needs can be identified differently.

² Perhaps the word intimate might be more appropriate, for by personal I do not mean it in terms of possession or as the I, but more what C G Jung might call the Self. As Andrey Tarkovsky points out: ‘If we look at the greatest works of art we see that they exist as part of nature, part of truth and independent of author and audience.’ (Sculpting In Time, Bodley Head, 1986, p 166).

³ I was once advised by a tennis player that whenever playing someone better than myself I should stop the game for a moment and get my opponent to explain to me some of the techniques they use. My friend insisted that once my opponent started playing again, they would be self-conscious of what they told me and their rationalisation of what they instinctively do would start to interfere with their performance, thereby giving me an advantage.

written form. A Zen philosopher would describe such an approach as essentially dualistic⁴. In contrast, for me, the key ingredients in artistic expression are centred around its ‘irrationality’; its attempt to express ‘feelings’ and ‘emotions’⁵ and even, the ultimate of all irrationalities, the grace, or otherwise, of ‘God’.

Add to this the problem of methodology. The process of creation and the process of reflection are not necessarily definable, nor necessarily logical. Indeed, inspiration is in itself a mystical experience, as is the whole issue of necessity and drive⁶. The process of reflection is often a retrospective part of the process of creation and is meant to be a living part of the overall creative process. More often than not, I am overwhelmed by my creations, which take shape largely without my intellectual intervention. And when I then reflect, my first thought is “did I really create that?” This is not very ‘academic’ and as a filmmaker, I would not want it to be so. It is therefore with great care that I intellectualise my creative activity.

Nevertheless, the intellect is of course part of my whole experience. There are practical problems to solve, things that must be explained to others working on a project and so on. However, the core of the process is intensely intuitive. Reflection serves to help become aware of that intuition, to help me develop some conscious understanding of the process, while at the same time ensuring that my rational intellect does not interfere to such an extent that it smothers the life out of what is created.

In the following sections of this paper, I have presented some edited extracts from notes I have taken as part of my reflective process while making films. I have excluded many notes that would only make sense to me – such as dreams, notes on specific problems, impressions and incidents that would make little sense out of context and observations so personal I would feel embarrassed to have them generally revealed. Nevertheless, I hope, through these examples, to highlight the fact that filmmaking is not merely some objective process of craft, but a living experience

⁴ ‘To experience means to become aware of, but not in the way in which we become aware of the world of sense-and-intellect. In the latter case, we always have a subject that is aware of something and an object of which the subject is aware, for the world of sense-and-intellect is a dichotomous world of subject and object. To be aware of *sunyata*, according to Zen, we have to transcend this dichotomous world in such a way as not to be outside it.’ D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of...* (Image Books, 1996, p 261).

⁵ When I distinguish between feelings and emotions, I do so in the physiological sense: feelings, as belonging to our participatory emotions (such as rapture, longing, grief, awe, love and so on), usually associated with our para-sympathetic nervous system; and our self-assertive emotions (fear, anger, lust, excitement, jealousy and so on) usually associated with our sympathetic nervous system. See Arthur Koestler’s *The Act of Creation* (Picador, 1970, Part 3).

⁶ It is interesting to see Stanley Burnshaw’s impressive list of quotes from prominent creative artists concerning the issue of how work emerges. “My ideas come as they will, I don’t know how” (Mozart); “When your Daemon is in charge, do not try to think consciously. Drift, wait, and obey” (Kipling); “All truly poetic thought begins to sing by itself, unless the poet is clumsy enough to prevent it from singing” (Spire). S. Burnshaw, *The Seamless Web* (George Braziller, 1991, p 53-54)

which cannot necessarily be qualified or quantified rationally. Later in the paper, I will try and briefly illustrate how these reflections impact upon my teaching.

Notes: Creation and I (A)

1. I have a definite notion, a strong drive, a restless craving to search for an abstraction, a spirit, an energy, a force - whatever - that animates me and my world. I somehow want to trace, to feel, to handle, to experience this abstraction in its purest form. This is not a drive I seem to have any control over.
2. A mystery is not necessarily there to be solved; but there to make you think, experience, feel and seek. And out of all of this, perhaps emerges a living creation.
3. I feel the sense of crisis in my culture; as if my culture is trapped in a rigid cage of definitive notions, bursting dangerously at the seams. So many of humanity's problems cannot be adequately or fundamentally tackled because of our narrow and rigid perception of life. It is an invisible crisis... slowly creeping in on us. How often have I found myself unable to solve a problem simply because of the limitations of my perception?
4. As in a mother, my imagination is the womb within which a work is conceived and developed. The more I can allow this work to grow and mature without my conscious intervention the better. When ready, labour begins⁷.
5. I am moved by those people and their creations who have learned to discover their unique characteristics and have created inimitable creations. These are not just people in the arts and sciences, but so called ordinary people who have forged a life and vision only they could have done. Learn to articulate with the very qualities that separate me from others. The paradox that only this way can I hope to discover what we all genuinely share.
6. Being born of mixed cultural and social parentage and raised and educated in four countries on three continents, it seems to me that I was not born into a particular culture in which there were specific problems and conflicts that I, as an artist, would address. I seem to have been born nation-less with no particular cultural identity which would provide me with either comfort or my driving source of conflict. Why...? Being suspended between cultures, as I am, will I inevitably be concerned more with the ethereal, the spiritual, the invisible things that connect people and cultures? I am like a spider, connected to different points, living in thin air between one solid thing and another.
7. Experience, not meaning... Meaning suggests something static, something finite and final.

⁷ Arthur Koestler has explored what he calls the 'ripening effect' in the context of scientific developments. See *The Sleepwalkers* (Arkana, 1964).

8. Articulation: the process of materialising experience, to give feelings shape and form, to create a language which expresses that which is in itself beyond language.
9. By continually trying to articulate myself, I discover more about myself and my Abstraction. Those first grasps at indefinable objects, or uncertain steps, of a child, or its first sounds, are the yardsticks by which it explores further. Those first steps into the unknown are what gives a child a taste of its own destiny. Don't hold back; there are times one leaps without feeling ready; feeling ready is only something one can feel in retrospect.
10. If I can truthfully say that an articulation came from the depths of my being, filtered through all the experience and aspirations of which I am made, it doesn't matter if it seems simplistic and incomplete. Say it, articulate it. Allow it to the surface; it is probably a first step in a larger articulation, the end of a string to which other things are tied.
11. If I fail to in some way expand a given language, I cannot claim to have fully discovered what is unique within myself. The expansion of the language need not be conscious, nor drastic. The only way I can be sure, is to constantly be pushing myself into perpetual change, to be constantly on the edge of uncertainty which constantly challenges my faith and courage, only for them to be strengthened in the end.
12. When I think of experience, it's not necessarily what happens to me that is important, but what I feel about it... Look at your subjects this way.
13. Accept that everyone's conscience demands different things of them.
14. I am ultimately not responsible to my ego, anyone else's ego, laws, conventions and moral codes: my deepest conscience, the one that goes beyond social indoctrination, is what I must follow. This conscience is my intuitive voice whispering in my ear, in an effort to steer me through my experiences. I must learn to hear this voice, to recognise it amongst the bombardment of the voices of prejudiced morality.
15. Without humility towards my subject, I will fail to see its essence. My subject will become polluted by my own arrogance.
16. How can I fail to be humbled by the overwhelming feeling of the presence of an omnipresent spirit - life itself? How can I fail to be humbled by the means to articulate the inarticulable, to reveal the hidden, to touch the untouchable? How can I fail to be humbled by the presence of another human being moved by something I have created?

Notes: Me and my Work (B)

1. Confusion can be a positive sign of an inquiring mind which is constantly re-appraising. If confused, I shouldn't be discouraged. Quite the contrary, I must take it as a healthy sign and make the most of it⁸.
2. Vision is the result of the hard, and at times painful, work I have put into gaining a higher awareness through exploration. And the more refined my vision becomes, the more I will feel like a child discovering a new world for the first time.
3. The more possessions I have, the more of my life is concerned with keeping these possessions working. It is the same with filmmaking: it is easy to become a slave to the complex machines, to the mechanisms of finance and the routines of the trade.
4. People often think of children as particularly creative. Why ? Could this not be that children often juxtapose what for us adults are unrelated ingredients, only to be pleasantly surprised when such a combination makes us see afresh? Never lose this sense of childish exploration, in which I might combine elements which conventional wisdom tells me should not be combined.
5. Sound and image are different dimensions of the same experience. They must co-exist and be inextricably entwined.
6. "To be, or not to be", that is indeed the duality of light and sound as our senses perceive them: light and dark, sound and silence. But this principle goes beyond the basic elements to the mood, the movement, the emotional and intellectual aspects; all governed by their own duality. Only the spiritual qualities of the film - that formless "white light", the heart and soul of the film - is not subject to laws of duality.
7. The primary purpose of constructing images and sounds is not to create meaning, but to create the means to an experience. The experience will then trigger associations in the audience from which they can then construct their own meaning (if they need to or want to).
8. Make the everyday experiences of daily life epic in scope: life is full of small, momentous moments; seek to discover these, to reveal their beauty and power. The microcosm and macrocosm are one.
9. Do not underestimate the simple fact that becoming familiar with a face is also to become familiar with a person⁹.
10. Explore the spaces that characters are about to occupy or have occupied; it may be in these spaces that you will discover things about them and their

⁸ An interesting development of this theme can be found in Robert Graves' poem In Broken Images.

⁹ Travelling on the tube late one evening from north to south London, I remember how I was alone with one other man sitting opposite me ? For over half an hour I looked at his face. Not a word was exchanged, yet I felt I knew him well.

destinies. Also, our eyes and ears have become so accustomed so seeing and hearing action, without understanding what is happening beyond the events or the action.

11. Do not think of events following a straight cause and effect line. Think of them as electrons, protons, neutrons, planets, suns, galaxies, clusters and so forth.
12. Structure my scenes and sequences like a Cézanne painting: with strokes of pure colour, which only make sense in the context of the whole¹⁰. He creates perspective and image to reveal the soul of a landscape, which we would otherwise not have seen. Create my imagery, scenes and sequences to specifically fit into a whole, without which they would be meaningless.
13. When in Zen they talk about paradoxes being at the heart of truth¹¹, so work with the paradoxes of image, sound, movement. The paradox of looking at something, yet not seeing; hearing when there is no source; the view being still in the face of movement, a character willing action but not acting¹². All help to reveal a truth about a situation.
14. Juxtaposition is at the heart of the film language. Think of nature: the basic building blocks of nature are few in variety, plentiful in quantity and relatively simple. Yet when juxtaposed in different ways, we end up with an array of infinite numbers of variations - like, for example, the human face.
15. When exploring a theme, don't necessarily commit yourself to a particular genre. Free yourself from these imprisoning definitions, so that your theme and subject can freely find its own unique genre – each film different, each film free and responsible.
16. In a film, what you see and hear is all you get. The world to which you respond is there in image and sound. These images and sounds are not symbols through which you perceive something else. Nor do you need to rely on performers to convey this world; people are people, dogs are dogs, wooden horses are wooden horses. The machines take their imagery directly from our physical reality, as close as is possible to achieve with a machine, in order to present them, re-arranged. The artificial comes across as artificial, the real as real. People acting come across as people acting, while people who are, are people.

¹⁰ 'To look upon nature is to discern the character of one's model. Painting does not mean slavishly copying the object: it means perceiving harmony amongst numerous relationships and transporting them into a system of one's own by developing them according to a new, original logic'. Paul Cézanne from *Cézanne By Himself* (ed. R Kendall, McDonald Orbis, 1988, p 298).

¹¹ See D T Suzuki, *Ibid*, p 115.

¹² A good example being the ending of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*.

Sankofa

If conscious reflection serves to help develop an awareness of unconscious processes, then when I reflect on the processes and outcomes of my filmmaking I start to see patterns: patterns of concern, patterns of interest, patterns of expression and so on. These patterns include what can only be described as fortuitous events and influences on my work which only become apparent when looking back. With an increased awareness of these patterns, I think it is possible for the filmmaker to make incredible strides in their art by being simultaneously conscious and unconscious of their practice, without one negating or conflicting with the other. Interestingly, in Ghana there is a common symbol called Sankofa¹³ – a bird twisting its neck round so that it can pick up an egg positioned on its back. It is meant to signify the belief that in order to move forward, one must look back to take with one the essential values of the past into the uncertainty of the future.

Similarly, my reflective process allows me to become more aware of the key essences that I must carry forward into uncharted territory – a future which I do not feel is in my power, or indeed my interest, to control as an individual ego somehow separate from that essence, but a future which I must live in and play my part in shaping as an individual within a greater whole. Paradoxically, I feel it is the uniqueness of my experience, my feelings about that experience and my articulation of that experience which will be of greatest value to everyone else.

Sharing

How does one translate such ephemeral processes key to creative expression into teaching? The short honest answer is: I don't really know.¹⁴ Nevertheless, teaching is an important contribution anyone can make to an ongoing development of new generations and is, as such, crucial. Furthermore, I have found that the process of reflection required to teach, and the consequent interaction with students and their work, has been instrumental in shaping my own practice through a process of 'enforced' reflection and articulation. Consequently, the process of my own learning and development as a filmmaker and that of my students are one and the same.

For me there is an inherent contradiction between higher education's need for institutional transparency, accountability and scholarship, and the needs of creative expression. Of course many of my scholarly colleagues will argue, quite rightly, that scholarly research is a creative activity which educational institutions encourage. While I have no doubts that there are creative energies within educational institutions, my point is that the procedures, traditions, conventions and expectations of scholarly activity often work against creative expression and that whatever does emerge out of

¹³ See, for example, Dr Mohammed ben-Abdallah's essay *Bobokyiky's Lament* (School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon, October 2000).

¹⁴ I am reminded of a conversation I had with the director Bill Forsyth, in which he explained that the first time he taught a group of film students he had no real clue what he was going to teach. Only once he had begun, did he start to realise how much he actually knew and then quickly evolved a way of disseminating this, which he could not have imagined in advance.

such institutional structures is usually in spite of the structure, and is the result of the insatiable commitment of individuals (see my note in ‘Creation and I’ A1).

My journey into education has been, at times, a painful one in this regard. Essentially, I have felt my way forward (see my notes A9 and A10) to developing a teaching practice which revolves around certain key principles and features that lie at the heart of my own practice, and which I hope some of my notes allude to. I’m not sure it is possible – or indeed should be possible – for a creative person to separate her inner drives from the acts she carries out.¹⁵ What follows is a sketch of a few things that I have attempted to include in my teaching, with references to how they might be rooted in the reflections of my practice.

Passion

Passion for the subject is a crucial ingredient in any teaching. What the source of that passion is (see A1 and A16), I do not believe it is necessarily directly relevant to the student; nevertheless, the fact that it is present is essential. It has a palpable effect on student enthusiasm and engagement in the various learning processes, while also helping to shape, for example, the content of materials used for teaching, such as films being shown and discussed and the depth of any insights being offered. The decisions I make as a teacher, with regard to emphasis, does relate directly to what I feel to be important in my own understanding of the subject and is not guided by my assumptions of what I might think is expected (A5 and A14). This is not with a view to encouraging similar passions, but to help the student allow their own passions to emerge (A13).

Student Aspiration

The quality of the student’s learning experience and their achievements are largely determined by their own aspiration. For me as a teacher, I see one of the first and most important steps in this process as helping the student establish a sense of what their aspiration is (and their reasons for seeking learning) and then to establish a connection between this aspiration and the practicalities of the content and delivery of the course.¹⁶ This connection also goes as far as the details of tackling particular creative and technical problems, where students are able to contextualise the challenges they face within their overall aims and objectives, which in turn will vary from student to student.¹⁷ In practice, this process takes the form of regular tutorials, from which the student develops a ‘learning agreement’ in which they identify key aspirations, learning objectives and challenges. The student is guided and invited to identify their prior experience and creative achievements, qualify where they feel their strengths and weaknesses lie and chart what and how they intend to use the course of learning to develop their creative and technical skills within the context of their overall aspirations. This document is referenced at key stages through their academic year, as well as being referenced during assessment.

¹⁵ If I were to single out one key feature which I believe permeates most of our western civilisation’s problems, it would be the separation of our nature (and nature) and our acts. But that is a whole different debate.

¹⁶ Also see my article, Fear Eats the Soul: Working with Creative Content and Purpose in Media Practice Education, *Journal of Media Practice* (vol. 1, no. 3, 2000).

¹⁷ Perhaps it is worth mentioning at this point that my particular experience relates to postgraduate study.

The quality of the outcomes of student study can also be related to this approach to targeting their aspirations, in that the student's expectations of herself is an important factor in raising the standard of her own work. A sense of ownership of one's own learning is hopefully the impetus with which the student drives themselves forward (A9, A10 and A11).

Creative Challenges

The greatest challenges are usually the barriers of the mind (A3, and 'Me and My Work' B1, B2 and B3). As I hope my notes may generally suggest, this is where I see the key challenge of all my teaching. The process of learning is as much about un-learning as about learning (B1, B2 and B4). However, as the mind does not exist independently of the body, and visa versa, so the creative substance does not exist independently of the craft and form (A8 and B6). It is the interplay between reflection and action that creates a living work. It is therefore crucial for me that theory and practice are not seen as separate elements, but two aspects of the same thing (B5), inextricably linked.

The theory of practice and the practice of theory should, in my view, be based primarily on the student's own experience. With key objectives in mind, I will tend to set specific exercises around problems and challenges which allow the student, through a process of practice and reflection, to gain an understanding of their own limitations and then through that process begin to challenge assumptions, habits and prejudices which are often the main barriers to successful articulation (B4). The key is to always have objectives, even if the experience and the discoveries vary from that objective. I try to design exercises in ways that they demand reflection, and create reflective objectives which demand practice. I also feel it is important for me to explore ways of looking at the form reflections take, in that I question whether the written 'analysis' indeed is always the most appropriate form of reflection. One may look to presentations, parallel practice, discussion, referencing to other works, identification of influences and, indeed, the work itself as alternative modes of reflection which the educational system needs to be able to accommodate.

There are times when a process of learning can lead to confusion in the student, but I take this as a positive sign (A2 and B1). Outcomes may therefore not necessarily truly reflect the progress a student is making and one needs to look at this in assessment procedures and criteria. Assessment is a problem area when dealing with creative content. It becomes necessary, with the kind of approach I take, to find ways of incorporating the student's aspiration, their progress against this aspiration and their own evaluation into account.¹⁸

Ideas

With reference to my earlier comments about the separation of individual aspiration and the acts they carry out, I believe this is often a problematic area when it comes to generating ideas. I often see students trying to generate ideas in an objective fashion, as if they and their subject are fundamentally separate (A2, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A9,

¹⁸ Note my earlier comment about incorporating the learning agreement into assessment processes.

A12, A15, B8). Later problems in a project and the quality of a work are more often than not affected by the original seed having essential shortcomings.

Here, again, I think it important to take the student through a process of linking subject and themselves in order, on the one hand, to establish a perspective which may have some element of uniqueness, while on the other also being able to engage fully with the themes and approaches being taken. The key to a unique and innovative approach to a subject often lies in the nature of the relationship or connection between subject and filmmaker. Indeed, this can also be approached from a collective point of view. A group of students can be encouraged in seminar situations, for example, to identify and discuss shared thoughts and feelings about a theme or subject, with a view to developing an idea.

The emphasis of identifying the connection between student and subject also helps to strengthen the student's feeling of ownership and empowerment, which in turn relates to the comments I made earlier about passion.

Final Thought

I hope that these few pages of thoughts, reflections and postulations will help to encourage a debate about creative expression within the context of higher education. I have not sought to catalogue specific teaching practices, but merely to create pointers towards issues which may underpin teaching practice. In the ongoing debates about assessment, the nature of practice research and approaches to pedagogy we should perhaps not forget that the moving image medium is, in relative terms, a young medium and the formal education within this medium even younger.

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