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**'SHOW, DON'T TELL' AS AN APPROACH TO FILMMAKING
AND TEACHING FILMMAKERS**

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STRESZCZENIE

Praca doktorska pod tytułem **“Show, don't tell' as an approach to filmmaking and teaching filmmakers”** (“Show, don't tell' jako podejście do tworzenia filmów i nauczania filmowców”) stawia sobie za cel pogłębioną analizę przekazywania informacji, ponieważ sposób, w jaki podchodzi się do odbiorców, odgrywa ważną rolę w tym, jak reagują oni na to, co jest im przekazywane.

Argumentem przewodnim rozprawy jest to, że pionowa dystrybucja informacji nieuchronnie czyni odbiorców odbiorcami biernymi. Ich głos, ich wkład w proces tworzenia informacji nie jest wtedy brany pod uwagę, co może prowadzić u nich do braku zaangażowania, utraty zainteresowania i odłączenia się.

Niniejsza rozprawa dotyczy przede wszystkim zbadania, w jaki sposób zasada pisarska "show, don't tell" może być zastosowana do tworzenia filmów i edukacji studentów reżyserii. Jej celem jest zgłębienie sposobu przekazywania informacji w taki sposób, aby miały one trwały wpływ na czytelników, słuchaczy, widzów czy studentów.

SUMMARY

The dissertation, entitled **“Show, don't tell' as an approach to filmmaking and teaching filmmakers”**, takes an in-depth look at the distribution of information, as the way in which audiences are approached plays an important role in how they respond to what is communicated to them. The overarching argument of the dissertation is that the vertical distribution of information inevitably turns audiences into passive recipients because their own voice, their own input is not sought. And passivity often leads to lack of engagement, loss of interest and disconnection.

This thesis is primarily concerned with exploring how the writing principle of 'show, don't tell' can be applied to filmmaking and the education of filmmaking students. It aims to explore how information can be conveyed in such a way that it has a lasting impact on readers, listeners, viewers or students.

'SHOW, DON'T TELL' AS AN APPROACH TO FILMMAKING
AND TEACHING FILMMAKERS

“After all, the most beautiful films are those that pose questions and allow viewers to answer them for themselves.”

— Jacek Bławut¹

¹ Bławut, Jacek in *Bohater w filmie dokumentalnym* (The Protagonist in a documentary film), Wydawnictwo PWSFTviT, 2010, p. 63 (original Polish: “Najpiękniejsze są przecież te filmy, które stawiają pytania i pozwalają widzowi samemu na nie odpowiedzieć.”) authorized translation by Martin Rath

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to extend the principle of 'show, don't tell' from a writing strategy to an approach that can be applied to various aspects of filmmaking as well as to teaching filmmakers.

To support this proposed extension, I first examine the application of 'show, don't tell' as a writing approach, before exploring it as an approach to photography, and in particular to filmmaking. In doing so, I look at the work of various artists who have inspired my own creative work.

I proceed to comment on the application of my findings to the artistic part of this dissertation, my film essay "I'm in so-called recording mode." Furthermore, I look at the experiences of lecturers I interviewed, as well as my own, to discuss how I apply the 'show, don't tell' approach in my work with students at the Polish National Film School in Lodz.

INTRODUCTION

Oslo

When I first walked into his office, Jacob Cohen simply handed me an address and the keys to a truck, noting only that first gear was not working. That was all. Inside the driver's booth, I checked out the double bunk bed behind the seats, then I put the key in the ignition. While I carefully released the clutch with one foot, I pressed hard on the accelerator with the other. Looking at the city through the huge windscreen was like seeing the world in panorama. I pulled off the yard and into the nearest petrol station, where I bought the cheapest map of Oslo...

Working for Jacob was an experience that left a lasting impression on me. For many reasons. One of them was the way he treated me. Despite the fact that I had no background in working as a furniture mover, Jacob never told me how to do things. He never approached me from the perspective of someone who knew more or knew better. He never saw me as someone who had to carry out his instructions, but as a partner, someone who was capable of finding his own way. Many of my mistakes followed, some of them painfully foolish. But Jacob never got upset with me. His eyes were always trusting and never looked down on anyone.

In this dissertation, I argue that there is an underlying principle that mirrors what Jacob Cohen's approach is all about. The principle of "show, don't tell".

Examining this principle from the perspective of someone who makes films and works with filmmaking students, I aim to explore ways to engage viewers and students, to inspire them, to stimulate their imagination and to touch their hearts. In this dissertation, I seek to identify ways to build meaningful and lasting connections with viewers and students, to instil in them confidence and self-belief and encourage them to unlock their creative potential.

Chekhov

In our Western cultural hemisphere, the concept of 'show, don't tell' is often attributed to the 19th century Russian playwright and short story writer Anton Chekhov. In a letter to his brother, who harbored literary ambitions, Chekhov suggested:

"In descriptions of Nature one must seize on small details, grouping them so that when the reader closes his eyes he gets a picture. For instance, you'll have a moonlit night if you write that on the mill dam a piece of glass from a broken bottle glittered like a bright little star, and that the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled past like a ball."²

According to Chekhov, writers should not simply tell their readers that the moon is shining but describe details in such a way that they evoke images in the readers' minds. In other words, Chekhov proposes a writing strategy that makes the moon shine in the readers' imagination.

² Chekhov, Anton quoted in *The Unknown Chekhov: Stories and Other Writings Hitherto Untranslated by Anton Chekhov* by Avrahm Yarmolinsky, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999, New York, page 14

SECTION 1: 'SHOW, DON'T TELL' AS AN APPROACH TO FILMMAKING

Already the people who painted on the walls of caves or gathered audiences around fireplaces used stories to connect with others. Stories can be an effective way to captivate an audience, move them, and inspire reflection that lasts long after the fires have gone out.

But why do so many stories fail to live up to this potential? Why do so many stories fail to resonate and leave a lasting impression?

It seems to me that the problem is not in the 'what,' but in the 'how.' In most cases, there is nothing wrong with the stories per se, but with the way they are conveyed, the way information is passed on.

In what follows, I will first gain insight by examining the application of the 'show, don't tell' approach to writing and photography before exploring its application as an approach to filmmaking. In doing so, I will examine a wide range of works by artists who have inspired me in my own creative work.

THE PURPOSE OF STORY

According to American psychologist Jerome Bruner (1915 – 2016):

"Stories allow us to make sense of how human beings "tick", what our own and other minds are like, what one can expect situated action to be like, what are possible modes of life [and] how one commits oneself to them."³

Stories offer us an opportunity to understand and make sense of our lives; to question, refine and deepen our perception, to relate to and connect with the world around us and ourselves within it.

³ Bruner, Jerome S., *Acts of Meaning*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1990, page 35

For us to understand of how we "tick," a story needs to explore the meaning of our existence. It must examine our aspirations and failures, and our underlying objectives and motivations. The purpose of story, then, is to dissect and reveal what gives *meaning* to our life.

American mythologist, anthropologist and writer Joseph Campbell (1904 – 1987), author of "The Hero with a Thousand Faces,"⁴ takes it even further:

"People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."⁵

Stories, then, must be more than a means to make sense. They must go beyond offering us a way to know how we "tick," becoming an experience that makes us feel we are "ticking". In other words, stories must transcend telling us information that helps us understand, making us *experience* that information instead.

Commenting on Bruner's work, American cultural anthropologist Bradd Shore (1945 –) notes that:

"Storytelling is not so much our way of communicating meaning as it is the very workshop of meaning-making"⁶

⁴ Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, first published 1949. The work compares and discusses narrative structures of the hero's journey in world myths.

⁵ Campbell, Joseph: "The power of myth" by Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, An Anchor Book, 1991, page 1

⁶ Mattingly, Cheryl; Lutkehaus, Nancy C.; Throop, C. Jason, National Library of Medicine, *Bruner's Search for Meaning: A Conversation between Psychology and Anthropology*. (2010), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2919784/>, Accessed 18 December 2021

Shore's point of view appeals to me. For me, a workshop is an approach that allows us to try something new, take risks, and make mistakes. An approach that allows us to create something.

In any case, a workshop is an approach that encourages us to rely on our own abilities. For every workshop is about us playing an active role in exploring. In other words, a workshop is about *participation*. And participating is experiencing.

The purpose of stories, therefore, is to engage an audience in the process of meaning-making, and thus make them experience the rapture of 'being alive'.

WRITING THAT 'SHOWS'

"[Hermann Hesse] touches the essential; he raises to the light the unborn amorality; I really see, I feel, I experience the supra-moral movements of the soul."⁷

— Alfred Döblin

The concept of "show, don't tell" is widely perceived as a writing strategy. Therefore, I will begin my research into its application by examining the writing of authors from whom I often draw inspiration. In doing so, I will examine a variety of texts ranging from sports reports to autobiographies and novels.

Language

One of the means writing needs to cultivate in order to 'show' is language itself. To explore the role of language, I will share with you some descriptions of Diego Simeone, the manager currently helming Atlético Madrid Football Club.

Diego Simeone, the "conductor"⁸ of the "Atlético orchestra"⁹ is "tooth and bloody nail"¹⁰. He is "the grizzly New York detective, roughing up the bad guys, wondering what the rule book ever did for [him]."¹¹ During a game with FC Liverpool "the Argentinian's heat map was deep red", because "Simeone raised the roof. Up and

⁷ "[...] rührt er an das Wesentliche, er hebt an das Licht die ungeborene Amoralität; real sehe ich, fühle ich, erlebe ich die übermoralischen Seelenbewegungen."

Döblin, Alfred in *Der Neue Merkur*, Munich, July 1919, pages 189 - 202. Quoted in Below, Jürgen, *Hermann Hesse "Der Vogel kämpft sich aus dem Ei"*, Igel Verlag Literatur & Wissenschaft, Hamburg 2017, page 15

⁸ Lowe, Sid, *The Guardian*, *Diego Simeone the conductor as Atlético orchestra finds its rhythm* (2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2020/feb/19/diego-simeone-the-conductor-as-atletico-orchestra-finds-its-rhythm>, Accessed 02 August 2021

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

down the touchline Atlético Madrid's manager went, wildly waving, clenching his fists, urging on the fans."¹²

Another description reads, "*Diego Simeone's Atlético Madrid – a tale of heart, guts and togetherness*"¹³, referring to his team's approach as "*the delight they take in bloodying the noses of Europe's super clubs. Even when they look beaten, they find a way to win.*"¹⁴

Simeone is an ambitious, demanding and passionate coach. Those are the generic statements. This would be "telling" us, the readers, who Simeone is. Instead, authors Sid Lowe and Jacob Steinberg translate these statements into writing that uses figurative language, including figures of speech such as metaphors, imagery, analogies, and symbolism, to evoke images of Diego Simeone in our minds.

A conductor stands between a group of artists and the audience. A person associated with expertise and charismatic leadership. A person that builds a team of individual performers who create magic as a group.

A New York detective who does not care about the rules uses all available resources to achieve his goals. A persistent, fearsome and adamant person.

The phrase 'tooth and nail', enhanced by the word 'bloody', as well as the imagery of a 'deep red heat map' are literary devices that refer to a person who fights vehemently and passionately. A person not accepting defeat.

Further stimuli that give rise to our mental image of Diego Simeone. A 'bloody nose' can be seen as a symbol for failure. According to Collins dictionary, giving somebody a bloody nose stands for overcoming one's opponent in a manner that "*does not cause permanent damage but makes them look foolish and inferior.*"¹⁵

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Steinberg, Jacob, *The Guardian*, *Diego Simeone's Atlético Madrid – a tale of heart, guts and togetherness* (2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2016/may/04/diego-simeone-atletico-madrid-bayern-munich-champions-league>, Accessed 10 October 2021

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Collins Online English Dictionary, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/give-someone-a-bloody-nose>, Accessed 09 January 2022

Our mental image of the soccer manager is becoming more and more complex. The manner of play he 'carves out' of his players is designed to conquer superior opponents. His ambition is to humiliate richer clubs.

Lowe and Steinberg's language breathes life into the person they describe and let him become a persona. It turns a football coach into the character Diego Simeone.

Another method that enables language to evoke images in our minds is the application of strong verbs. Lowe wishes to inform us that Atlético defeated FC Liverpool, their opponents. To do so, he applies a phrasal verb that harbours deeper meaning. 'Defeating' the other team simply concludes winning. 'Roughing them up' encourages us to imagine Atlético's attitude and their commitment to suffering and pain.

In his 2013 essay "Nuts and Bolts: "Thought" Verbs," journalist and novelist Charles Michael "Chuck" Palahniuk goes so far as to urge aspiring writers to avoid certain verbs altogether. In his view, the story of a text becomes stronger if verbs such as he or she *thinks, knows, understands, realizes, believes* – as well as *loves* and *hates, is* and *has*, and a hundred more writers love to use - were omitted.

Rather than using these verbs, Palahniuk commends, writers should *show* their characters through details and physical action, and allow their readers to do the thinking and knowing themselves.¹⁶ His manifesto to abandon certain verbs presumably poses a challenge to any writing practice. Nevertheless, I appreciate his essay as a fresh perspective that underscores the role of language, and an invitation to further examine the influence of detail and action.

Detail

Specific details play a vital part in writing that aims to convey information by "showing" rather than "telling".

In his 2000 memoir *Kitchen Confidential*, Anthony Bourdain writes:

¹⁶ Palahniuk, Chuck, *Nuts and Bolts "Thought" Verbs* (2013), [https://litreactor.com/essays/chuck-palahniuk/nuts-and-bolts-"thought"-verbs](https://litreactor.com/essays/chuck-palahniuk/nuts-and-bolts-), Accessed 20 November 2021

“If I need a favor at four o’clock in the morning, whether it’s a quick loan, a shoulder to cry on, a sleeping pill, bail money, or just someone to pick me up in a car in a bad neighborhood in the driving rain, I’m definitely not calling up a fellow writer. I’m calling my sous-chef, or a former sous-chef, or my saucier, someone I work with or have worked with over the last twenty-plus years.”¹⁷

Chef-turned-writer Bourdain desires to make a point. Even as a celebrated author he still feels fond of being a chef. But that would be *telling*. A plain account of who he is. A dry statement, lacking flavour. Bourdain is a chef and knows how to spice things up. And he claims to be fond of it. To let us arrive at the same conclusion he employs specific detail.

Asking for ‘favours at four o’clock in the morning’ points to working long nights. The ‘sleeping pill’, ‘quick loan’ and ‘bail money’ suggest that sound sleep might be an issue in the kitchen business. And so might be poor salaries. And living according to the rule of law might be another one. Drugs come to mind to help forget some of the problems mentioned before.

A ‘shoulder to cry on’, seen as a coveted commodity, helps us to imagine that spending too much time in the kitchen can put a strain on relationships. An image slowly takes hold of us. This chef business is no piece of cake.

But then, a chef does not work alone. A chef has his or her fellow kitchen comrades to rely on. Any hour of the day, or night. Bourdain deliberately employs words that some readers, me included, might have to check in a dictionary to be sure of their meaning. Terms such as ‘Sous-chef’ and ‘saucier’ are all about detail. They are about communicating that Bourdain is the top figure of a complex hierarchy, in charge of, and responsible for extensive staff employed in restaurants and hotels. And that is what he is proud of. To be one of them. For over two decades.

¹⁷ Bourdain, Anthony, *Kitchen Confidential*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, 2007, p. 3

Bourdain chooses to share his affinity for the restaurant profession indirectly. With specific details that allow us to form an image concerning his attitude, values, and state of mind.

And, his style of writing puts us in a position where we have to deduce information ourselves. A place, where we have to draw our own conclusions about how Bourdain feels about being a chef, as well as what kind of writer he aspires to be.

Sensory detail

Our five basic senses sight, sound, smell, taste and touch gather information that allow us to form a picture of the world around us and relate ourselves to it. Another way to foster 'showing' in texts is for authors to incorporate sensory experiences into their story.

In the introduction to a new edition of his 1996 novel *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk recalls an encounter he once had as a tourist participating in a Haunted Tunnel Tour:

“And pulling the rope he starts down. His cowboy heels hammer a step, then another step, another hard wooden knock into the dark basement. There, in the dark, dragging me, his breath the whiskey smell, the same as the cotton ball in a doctor’s office, the cold touch of rubbing alcohol the moment before an injection.”¹⁸

Palahniuk gives a detailed description of the noise that accompanies him on the way down into the tunnel. The strong verb ‘hammer’ sets our imagination in motion. He mentions darkness twice, which helps us get an idea of what he sees, or in this case, cannot see. Omitting the sense of sight serves a purpose. In events where our vision is disabled our remaining senses sharpen. Any blind person will testify to this.

¹⁸ Palahniuk, Chuck, “There was a book” introduction to *Fight Club*, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, New York, 2018, p. xi

Palahniuk then resorts to describing the smell of the tour guide's breath. To do so he takes us into a doctor's office where he drenches a cotton ball in alcohol. That cotton ball is rubbed against our skin just before an even stronger sensation. An impending injection. A cold needle entering our skin.

The sensual details in Palahniuk's description feed our imagination, in which a tour guide becomes a vivid character.

From another passage of his introduction to *Fight Club*, we learn more about Palahniuk himself:

"The workshop where I started to write fiction, you had to read your work in public. Most times, you read in a bar or coffee-house where you'd be competing with the roar of the espresso machine. Or the football game on television. Music and drunk people talking."¹⁹

The author aims to share some background on the beginnings of his writing career. He involves different sounds and applies the strong verb 'roar' to his description.

Sensory detail turns an environment into dramatic circumstance. Palahniuk draws up a scenario in which sound becomes his main antagonist. His writing against the unforgiving noise of coffee machines, music and drunken customers.

We get the picture of this unjust contest and begin to form an opinion. In such an environment, only the most stimulating writing style will captivate the audience.

Having arrived at such assumptions, I would finally like to take a look at his novel *Fight Club* itself. In chapter five, Palahniuk takes us into the office where his unnamed first-person narrator and protagonist works:

"Two screens into my demo to Microsoft, I taste blood and have to start swallowing. My boss doesn't know the material, but he won't let me run the demo with a black eye and half my face

¹⁹ Ibid. p. xii

swollen from the stitches inside my cheek. The stitches have come loose, and I can feel them with my tongue against the inside of my cheek. Picture snarled fishing line on the beach.”²⁰

The information Palahniuk wishes to convey is simple. The night before, his protagonist engaged in a fight and got his face smashed up. A rather lame statement that the reader will skim over without paying much attention to. During a book reading in a bar it would hardly stand a chance against a roaring espresso machine.

But Palahniuk's writing style is up to the challenge. In the very first sentence, the protagonist tastes blood. With his tongue. Inside his mouth. Would Palahniuk read this in a bar, I presume the drunks would stop pouring beer into their mouths and turn their attention to his story.

The protagonist starts swallowing his blood. It seems to be more than just a scratch. His tongue touches plastic wire. Also in his mouth. Stiches have come loose. Straightway, Palahniuk offers a specific detail. Tangled up fishing line.

The tired customer who just asked for an espresso gets annoyed by the roar his order now makes. A guy in an office with his boss, swallowing blood, feeling tangled up fishing wire in his mouth...? Palaniuk's writing style is immediate and pulls us into the narration. He engages the protagonist's tongue, one of the most sensitive organs of the human body, the only one that can touch and taste.

We share an unfiltered sensation with the character and get to know him more intimately. His sensory experience stimulates our imagination. And our senses. We imagine him in a wild fight the night before and feel a hint of fishing line with our own tongues. And now, that he's in the office with his boss, we follow his every move and empathise with his predicament.

²⁰ Palahniuk, Chuck, *Fight Club*, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, New York, 2018, p. 30 (original work published: 1996)

Action

One of the most significant elements writing needs to embrace in order to 'show' is action. In his 1976 novel "Factotum", Charles Bukowski opens his story with the following passage:

"I had a cardboard suitcase that was falling apart. It had once been black but the black coating had peeled off and yellow cardboard was exposed. I had tried to solve that by putting black shoepolish over the exposed cardboard. As I walked along in the rain the shoepolish on the suitcase ran and unwittingly I rubbed black streaks on both legs of my pants as I switched the suitcase from hand to hand."²¹

Bukowski wishes to introduce his protagonist and literary alter ego Henry Charles "Hank" Chinaski. A poor drifter in a desperate state.

In Bukowski's writing Hank walks in the rain. His suitcase falls apart. Hank had attempted to fix its coating with shoe polish. Now he rubs black stains with it on both legs of his trousers as he switches it from hand to hand.

Action and detail stimulate our imagination. Walking in the rain with a suitcase reveal that Hank can not afford other means of transportation. Hank is poor. The details about the suitcase let us assume the same. Hank even switches hands to carry it. The suitcase must be heavy. Perhaps it contains all his belongings. He is a drifter, we presume. The sensation of the suitcase rubbing on Hank's legs almost allows us to feel it rubbing against ours.

Action, detail and sensory detail help us to deduce information. Bukowski trusts us to rely on our own abilities to create an image of his main protagonist.

Perhaps his suitcase is a metaphor? It feels like Hank is falling apart, too. He feels desperate. We begin to ask questions and arrive at our own answers. We are pulled into Hank's story and join him on his journey.

²¹ Bukowski, Charles, *Factotum*, Virgin Books Ltd, London, 2007, p. 11 (original work published: 1976)

Hands

The hands of a character often assume a compelling role in the performance of actions. Almost any situation a character might be involved in will require the participation of her or his hands.

In his 1970 debut novel *Deliverance*, which he later adapted into a screenplay of the same name, James Dickey begins his story as follows:

"It unrolled slowly, forced to show its colors, curling and snapping back whenever one of us turned loose. The whole land was very tense until we put our four steins on its corners and laid the river out to run for us through the mountains 150 miles north. Lewis' hand took a pencil and marked out a small strong X in a place where some of the green bled away and the paper changed with high ground, and began to work downstream, north-east to southwest through the printed woods. I watched the hand rather than the location, for it seemed to have power over the terrain, and when it stopped for Lewis' voice to explain something, it was as though all streams everywhere quit running, hanging silently where they were to let the point be made. The pencil turned over and penetrated to sketch in with the eraser an area that must have been around fifty miles long, through which the river hooked and cramped."²²

A group of white collar men plan to embark on a canoe trip together. The setting is a wild river running through the mountains. A man's adventure that harbours risk and danger.

That would be "telling" us about the adventure ahead. Instead, Dickey relies on writing that allows us to form our own picture of it.

²² Dickey, James, *Deliverance*, A Delta Book, Bantam Dell Publishing Group, Inc., New York, 1994, p. 3 (original work published: 1970)

The map 'curls' and 'snaps', and the river pictured on it 'hooks' and 'cramps'. Dickey's writing breathes life into a map. It becomes a character. An antagonist that is causing the men trouble. Four beer mugs must be placed on its corners to restrain it.

Then a hand takes center stage. It takes a pencil and works the map. It draws an X, before it stops and waits to let words go by. Then it turns the pencil around and continues to wipe out parts with an eraser.

Dickey encourages us to deduce information and assume meaning ourselves. The wild map provides clues about the setting and themes of the story. Only the combined effort of the four protagonists can wrestle it down.

The X, which is basically a cross, suggests that something, or someone, might be eliminated. A sense of foreboding is triggered. The eraser further stimulates our imagination.

The hand also reveals information about Lewis, the person it belongs to. His hand is confident and masters the elements of the map. First using the pencil and, where necessary, the eraser.

We picture a hand that conquers wilderness. But our instincts also discern the warning signs, the X, the eraser, the snapping and bleeding away. A hand that seems to have "power over the terrain" that the men are about to conquer draws us into the story and gives the adventure ahead the flavour of a nightmare.

In another example, the 1966 genre-defining true crime novel *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote reconstructs a vicious murder and its ensuing investigation in rural America. A prosperous farmer, his wife, and two of their kids have been slayed on their farm. Kenyon is the youngest victim. In the following passage the housekeeper of the family searches for evidence:

"Mrs. Helm had explored every room at River Valley Farm, toured the house in the expectation that she might notice something awry or absent, and she had. It happened in Kenyon's room. Mrs. Helm looked and looked, paced round and round the room with pursed lips, touching this and that - Kenyon's old

baseball mitt, Kenyon's mud-spattered work boots, his pathetic abandoned spectacles. All the while she kept whispering, "Something here is wrong, I feel it, I know it, but I don't know what it is." And then she did know. "It's the radio! Where is Kenyon's little radio?"²³

Mrs. Helm discovered that a portable radio had been stolen. A radio that belonged to the slayed kid. A kid who was like us. This would be "telling" us what happend.

But Capote seeks to "show" us the radio. He wants to evoke an image of it in our mind's eye. And above all, he wants to evoke an image of the boy who used to play music on it.

To successively reaveal clues, Capote involves the housekeeper's hands. He has her hands touch objects that belong to the murdered boy. Objects are details and detail stimulates our imagination.

First, Mrs. Helm's hands touch the kid's baseball glove. A normal boy is revealed. A boy who, like so many boys his age, enjoyed America's favorite game.

The fact that he hung on to his old glove resonates all the more. His dirty work boots indicate that the teenage son of a wealthy farmer was not a spoiled child. His rejected glasses give him a hint of vulnerability, and more importantly, a human face. And then, there is what Mrs. Helm's hands reveal about the teenager by not touching it. He listened to music on a small radio.

The hands of a housekeeper know quite a bit about the house they keep clean and in order. When they start sharing insights about the people who live in it, we pay attention. These are the hands Capote employs to pull us into one of the victims' rooms. These are the hands that guide us to an important revelation. The missing portable radio that is now playing for the boy's killer.

Earlier in his non-linear story, Capote had already introduced us to a portable radio. The new owner listens to music on it now.

²³ Capote, Truman, *In Cold Blood*, Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc, New York, 1994, p. 102

Capote's writing is all about evoking images. In the quoted passage he employs touching hands to evoke the image of a regular teenager. The boy himself conjures up an image of 1960s America. Baseball, hard work, and rock and roll music playing on a radio.

With "In Cold Blood", Capote investigates a murder case. But above all he examines the inner workings of violence that find expression in such hideous crimes.

In this scene, Capote connects the image of a typical American teenager to a missing radio. A radio, he will use to connect to yet another image. That of a hurt and abandoned individual. The boy's killer and main protagonist of the novel.

Lastly, I will examine a passage from Herta Müller's 1993 novel "The Land of Green Plums":

"My father, Georg said, took the bike to the station so he wouldn't have to walk so close to me on the way there, and on the way back he wouldn't feel on his hands that he was walking home alone."²⁴

Georg leaves and separates from his father, who is very sad as a result. This would be writing that "tells". But, instead of explaining what is happening and how the father feels as a result, Müller engages our imagination.

The father accompanies his son to the train station. As they walk his hands push a bicycle. And they push it between him and his son, so that he does not have to walk "so close" next to him.

A picture emerges on our mental canvas and encourages us to derive meaning from it. The father avoids walking close to his son. We begin to "see" their relationship.

²⁴ Müller, Herta, *Herztier*, Fisher Taschenbuch, 2007. Quoted passage is translated from the original German text: "Mein Vater, sagte Georg, hat das Fahrrad zum Bahnhof mitgenommen, damit er auf dem Hinweg nicht so nahe neben mir gehen muss und auf dem Rückweg nicht an seinen Händen spürt, dass er allein nach Hause geht." (Translation by Martin Rath)

To reveal the father's true feelings, Herta Müller resorts to his hands. On the way back from the train station, he does not ride his bicycle home. His hands are still pushing it. The image on our mental canvas evolves.

The father does not take the bike to the station because he needs a means of transportation. He takes it because he does not want to feel emptiness on his hands, he does not bear to "feel on his hands" that he has to go home without his son.

The pushing of a bicycle suggests what is going on beneath the surface of this father-son relationship. An action carried out by hands exposes the emotional landscape of a separation and becomes a mirror of the father's inner world.

"Telling" allows writers to pass on information quickly. It is a matter-of-fact way to communicate. Straightforward explanations can drive the narrative forward to events that writers want us to be more engaged with. Rhythm and tempo of the narrative can be influenced. A summarised exposition provides basic ideas of what is happening and opens up space for more ambiguous events to follow. Stating facts can provide guidance and prevent our imagination from drifting off in less desirable directions. Colourless and one-dimensional characters can help the more important ones to stand out.

An important key to writing that resonates with readers is contrast. Juxtaposing "telling" and "showing" – "explaining" and "suggesting" – makes us pay attention and draws us deeper into the story.

PHOTOGRAPHY THAT 'SHOWS'

At its heart, a story is a sequence of events that constitute some kind of change. But how can a single photograph, a single image, portray a sequence of events? It cannot. As photographer Oded Wagenstein points out, a single frame itself cannot narrate a story. But the person looking at it can. And that is exactly where photographs must evoke their stories: in the viewers' minds.²⁵

Wake People Out of Their Everyday Routine

"I don't believe there's any such thing as objective reality. It's only reality as we experience it."²⁶

— James Nachtwey

"If there is something occurring that is so bad that it could be considered a crime against humanity, it has to be transmitted with anguish, with pain, and create an impact in people – upset them, shake them up, wake them out of their everyday routine."²⁷

— James Nachtwey

"For me, the strength of photography lies in its ability to evoke a sense of humanity. If war is an attempt to negate humanity, then photography can be perceived as the opposite of war and if it is used well it can be a powerful ingredient in the antidote to war."²⁸ — James Nachtwey

²⁵ Wagenstein, Oded, *Stories and Faces. Composition for better stories and stronger portraits*. ebook available on website: <https://www.odedwagen.com/>, Accessed October 2021

²⁶ Nachtwey, James, *Quotes by photographer James Nachtwey*, <https://www.johnpaulcaponigro.com/blog/15590/22-quotes-by-photographer-james-nachtwey/>, Accessed 04 September 2022

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.



James Nachtwey, Bosnia, 1993
Ethnic cleansing in Mostar. Croat militiaman fires on his Moslem neighbours.

James Nachtwey is one of the most influential conflict and humanitarian photographers of our time.

Using his image above, I want to show how to read and decode different components of a photograph and how they can become the building blocks of a gut-wrenching story.

Nachtwey's photograph depicts a bedroom that has become a battlefield. By the window at the far end of the frame we see a gunman pointing his automatic weapon at the street below.

The window is the only light source of the image. The blinds are lowered. The gunman hiding behind them is only a silhouette. His face is not recognisable. His portrayed situation is more important than his identity. The facelessness of war. He could be any of us. He could be our neighbour.

Nachtwey's lense peeks through the bedroom door. The perspective of voyeur. The perspective of a witness. Between him and the gunman, at the centre of the frame, we see a double bed with messy bedsheets and pillows.

About fifty percent of the image is darkness and shadow indicating the power of violence that has taken hold of this room.

The setting is the most powerful aspect of this image. Most people who look at it in an art gallery, a colourful magazine, or on the screen of one of their smart devices can relate to their own bedroom. A bedroom is an important part of our life, a place where we rest and find peace. A place where we connect with ourselves and the people we love.

Two contrasting stories

As we look at this image two contrasting stories are slowly unfolding in front of our mind's eye. One, of the bedroom that used to be. The unmade bed in the foreground looks like someone slept in it not long ago. We imagine a couple spending an evening here together. They lower the blinds, go to bed, relax, and share their experiences of the day. They kiss and embrace each other. We imagine them making love, connecting, building a family.

And then the second story creeps in. This scene we are looking at now. Wallpaper peeling off the wall. We hear screams and gunshots from the street. The window shades are still lowered. But now acting as a camouflage for the gunman who is hiding behind them and pointing his automatic weapon at another human being.

Nachtwey's image hurts the most where the two stories converge. Has the gunman driven the two lovers out of their bed? Has he caused them harm, perhaps killed them to use their room as a vantage point? Or perhaps the gunman himself used to spend his nights with his loved one in this very bedroom? Did he abandon her or him to open fire on his neighbours?

The composition of this image contains stimuli that make us imagine two contrasting stories. Two intimate moments. Both testimonies. One of love, and one of destruction. One brings meaning into our lives, the other should never be repeated.

Nachtwey's photograph not only documents an act of violence. It does not simply inform us of a humanitarian crisis. It engages our imagination, and involves us emotionally. It stirs up feelings of confusion and disbelief that make us become part of the portrayed tragedy.

We ask ourselves questions about the human condition, about our morality, and about the very meaning of our being here. How did we arrive at this moment? How can we humans possibly act like this in today's world? How can we choose violence and destruction over love and connection?

Nachtwey's photograph provides the 'building blocks' we use in our workshop for meaning-making, the workshop that makes us create stories in our minds. And the story we create from this image strikes a nerve deep within us. It is a story that shakes us, wakes us out of our everyday routine and makes us feel alive by evoking a sense of humanity in us.

Experiencing an exchange of energy

"Art cannot be understood. It must be felt"²⁹

— Marian Schmidt

"The talent of an artist manifests itself not only in one's ability to convey one's own living experiences but also in one's gift to move another human being on the deepest level."³⁰

— Marian Schmidt

"A feeling of inner, spiritual truth is what lies deepest within a human being when looking at paintings, listening to music or when reading literature or poetry. It cannot be defined

²⁹ Schmidt, Marian, *Street Photography, Directions of sensitivity in the process of taking photographs* (2017), <https://streetphotography.com/directions-of-sensitivity-in-the-process-of-taking-photographs/>, Accessed 09 March 2022

³⁰ Schmidt, Marian, Marian Schmidt Foundation, *Introduction*, <https://marianschmidt.org/marian-schmidt/>, Accessed 04 September 2022

intellectually. This inner truth is felt - speaking about it does not mean much. In order to experience it, it isn't enough to just look or listen to works of great artists (...). We are also required to look and listen purely: far from any background noises, far from everyday life responsibilities; it requires from us absolute concentration and inner silence - devoid of any unnecessary intellectual associations. Only then is there a possibility for us to experience transcendence in art."³¹

— *Marian Schmidt*

Marian Schmidt (1945–2018) was a photographer who also taught at the Polish National Film School in Lodz. His parents survived the Holocaust and emigrated from Poland to Venezuela when Schmidt was two years old. Referring to his upbringing in South America, Schmidt recalled that his childhood consisted of two worlds which made him feel a split personality. One was the world of his home, the other the world outside, in his school and on the streets of Caracas. Both represented an entirely different "*language, [exposure to] customs, culture, way of thinking.*"³²

At the age of sixteen, Schmidt moved to the United States where he studied at the University of California, Berkeley and at Brandis University near Boston, where in 1969 he was awarded a Ph.D. in mathematics.

After giving up a promising career as a scientist, Schmidt followed his intuition and became an artist. During this time, Schmidt came into contact with the teachings of Jiddu Krishnamurti and the work of Hermann Hesse, to both of whom he has often acknowledged to feeling a strong spiritual connection.

Another important influence on Schmidt's life and work was Romanian conductor Sergiu Celibidache, with whom he studied phenomenology of music. Schmidt was also often inspired by paintings of old masters and classical music and pursued inner peace in meditation.

³¹ Schmidt, Marian, Marian Schmidt Foundation, *Phenomenology of the image*, <https://marianschmidt.org/phenomenology-of-the-image/>. Accessed 12 March 2022

³² Schmidt, Marian, Marian Schmidt Foundation, *Biography*, <https://marianschmidt.org/marian-schmidt/>. Accessed 04 September 2022

In the 1970s Schmidt returned to Poland for the first time in 28 years. He traveled extensively across the country photographing various socio-political and spiritual events, as well as people's everyday life. For the images he took during this period, he chose an approach that was a fusion of photojournalism and a meditative journey in search of something deeper.

On the one hand, Schmidt pursued themes, events and places that were characteristic of the life in communist Poland of the era; on the other hand, he travelled into the depths of human hearts and souls. According to Schmidt,

“what matters is the photographers' inner state, the state of their spirit, their openness towards people, their cheerful mood, their natural ability to create rapport with other people, their respect towards human beings.”³³

³³ Schmidt, Marian, Marian Schmidt Foundation, *Photography*, <https://marianschmidt.org/marian-schmidt/>. Accessed 04 September 2022



Corpus Christi, Łowicz, June 1976

The above photograph by Schmidt depicts a group of believers crowding outside the open gates of a cathedral to attend the feast of Corpus Christi. Their attention is focused on what is happening inside and we see them exclusively from behind. Outside, among the followers, Schmidt waits with his camera. Directly in front of his lens is a young girl whose view of the interior of the church is blocked by the other worshippers.

She turns her gaze away from the proceedings inside, indeed, she turns her whole body away, now facing Schmidt's camera. It is a pose which allows the impression that she is turning away from religion altogether, looking for answers elsewhere. Then a gust of wind blows through her hair. This is the moment Schmidt responds to by releasing his shutter. When viewing Schmidt's photograph, we, the viewers, are offered

a variety of elements that allow us to create a story in our minds and work out its meaning.

There are at least ten people in this image, but only one pair of eyes. The eyes of the young girl. The bright tones of the girl's hair and coat set her further apart from the crowd of worshippers and the walls of the church, which are presented in much darker tones. Her position and luminous appearance also allow us to connect her with the light shining through the window above the altar. Considering that this is a celebration of the body of Christ, the potential for story our mind is invited to create is enormous. The age of the girl provides our imagination with further clues for story. While all the other devotees are adults, she is the only child, which may indicate that there is a new generation of Poles ready to break free of religious doctrines.

But Schmidt is not really interested in providing our minds with clues that can be turned into story. The element most likely to have prompted Schmidt to release the shutter is in the girl's energy. Something is happening deep inside her, in her inner world. And it is this energy that Schmidt senses and responds to with his camera.

An intimate moment

"How do I prepare myself to take photographs? I disconnect from any burdens of everyday reality, freeing myself from unnecessary thoughts and mental associations. I enter another dimension in which I look at my surroundings with a clear mind. I observe people, situations and places. I feel the relationships between all the elements of the actual image in front of me, especially between people and their surroundings. I am able to establish a rapport of mutual trust with the people I photograph. I try to capture authentic emotions, intensive innermost moments in people."³⁴

— Marian Schmidt

³⁴ Schmidt, Marian, Marian Schmidt Foundation, *Introduction*, <https://marianschmidt.org/marian-schmidt/>. Accessed 04 September 2022

Even though Schmidt attaches great importance to composition, what matters most to him is his relationship with his subjects. The way he experiences them.

For Schmidt, the best composition is the one which stirs up the deepest emotional response in the photographer. Above all, he is interested in capturing what he refers to as the “intimate moment” – the moment in which experiences accumulate and peak.

Applying any intellectual approach, rules, concepts, or structure to composition would sacrifice this experience. It would tarnish the emotional connection between photographer and his motif.

Marian Schmidt wants more from his photographs than to convey a story. He wants his images to be an exchange of energy. The photograph of the young girl turning away from a church transcends being the mere document of an era. It goes beyond being a simple observation of a spiritual event and becomes the expression of a flow of energy. The feelings of the girl connect with the feelings of the photographer. And the photographers feelings connect with ours.

“The depth of our work will depend on what we experience ourselves and our ability to express it. It can range from simple, basic emotions to a transcendental experience, where we forget ourselves during our creative activity and open up to receive and release an undefined energy, which we transmit to our audience through work.”³⁵

Schmidt defines such a transmission of experiences as “intersubjectivity” – “*I should find myself in you and you find yourself in me*”³⁶. A concept taken from Husserl’s phenomenology which refers to the author, the performer, as well as the recipient.

³⁵ Schmidt, Marian, Marian Schmidt Foundation, *Phenomenology of the image*, <https://marianschmidt.org/phenomenology-of-the-image/>. Accessed 12 March 2022

³⁶ Schmidt, Marian, Street Photography, *Directions of sensitivity in the process of taking photographs*, <https://streetphotography.com/directions-of-sensitivity-in-the-process-of-taking-photographs/>. Accessed 09 March 2022

According to Schmidt, intersubjectivity may be achieved by "reduction", another concept in Husserl's theory which allows one to reach a state of pure awareness by abandoning empirical subjectivity, by excluding evidence-based analyses when experiencing a work of art.

The concept of reduction tries to exclude any kind of knowledge, associations, judgements, or comparisons from our perception in order to prepare a way for an experience of authentic and profound sensation, for an experience of transcendence.

Transcendence can be described as an experience that surpasses the mental, emotional and physical realms. A feeling of liberation from body, thoughts, and emotions. To reach a mutual experience of transcendence, to be receptive to such a flow of energy, Schmidt asks his viewers to relax, to reduce their inner tensions and mental associations. Viewers should be in a state of pure awareness and perceive his work purely with their soul. Those who look with their soul can get in touch with his soul, with the "intimate moment", the captured soul of the photographed subject, like in this case the photographed soul of the young girl.

When applying Schmidt's approach to the concept of "Show, Don't Tell", a photograph "tells" when evoking feelings such as "curiosity, "liking" and private associations",³⁷ for such notions lack the impact of a universal message. They are concepts spoiled by sentiment, artificial illustrations of ideas, and delusions which are "simple, trivial experiences."³⁸

A photograph, on the other hand, "shows" when it becomes a medium that brings people who are "blessed with something in common" into contact with each other. When viewing becomes an experience, the participation in an exchange of energy that gives us a sense of 'being alive'.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

The concept of Punctum

“My eyes were touched with a kind of painful and delicious intensity, as if I were suddenly experiencing the effects of a strange drug.”³⁹

— Roland Barthes

What is it that makes one image simply interesting, while viewing another is an experience that inspires us or breaks our heart? What is it about a photograph that touches us? That gets under our skin?

Composition and stories that can be derived from it certainly play a role. But are they not just rational answers that try to explain something that is perhaps more irrational? Are they not just an attempt to define what cannot be defined, what perhaps should not be defined?

We are often able to explain what we think, or feel about an image. Our associations, interpretations, why we like or dislike it. But how can we explain the deeper feelings of pain or wonder that an image sometimes evokes in us?

Responding emotionally to a work of art often happens instinctively. As in other areas of our lives, recognizing someone or something extraordinary often happens without our conscious thought. Without our knowing why. A certain feeling embraces us and makes us shiver. A somewhat mysterious energy takes hold of us that cannot be controlled. Nor can it be explained. Is that not precisely where all its power lies? Its magic? And would not any attempt to define it be trivial and in vain? As if we were trying to explain love.

After the death of his mother and the subsequent search for her ‘essence’ in a pile of old photographs, French literary theorist, essayist and philosopher Roland Barthes (1915–1980) made an attempt to offer his perspective on questions like the ones I posed above.

³⁹ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage, The Random House, London, 2000, p. 116

In his last book *Camera Lucida*⁴⁰, Barthes places his emphasis on his experiences as a viewer and declares to stay away from systematic critical approaches, such as “*sociology, semiology or psychoanalysis*”⁴¹. The approaches he feels are “*tending to reduction*”⁴².

Barthes draws on his subjective thoughts and feelings and shares them with his readers instead. In doing so, he introduces the twin concept of ‘studium’ and ‘punctum’. Two terms that aim to capture the way he feels about photography. Two terms that distinguish between the comprehensible and the inexplicable, between the generally interesting and deeply moving.

Studium: Images that can ‘shout’, not wound

The first concept Barthes develops to describe what he thinks and feels when looking at various photographs is: studium.

He points out that the term studium originally did not mean to ‘study’, to acquire knowledge, or to analyse. In its Latin context ‘studium’ refers to the way something appeals to us, our prevailing taste in something, our “*general enthusiastic commitment but without any special acuity.*”⁴³

⁴⁰ Originally published in French as *La Chambre Claire* by Editions du Seuil in 1980

⁴¹ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage, The Random House, London, 2000, page 8

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., page 26



Photograph by Koen Wessing, 1979

To explore his experience of 'studium', Barthes draws on examples of photographs by Koen Wessing taken in war-torn Nicaragua in 1979.

"I understood at once [...] the co-presence of two discontinuous elements, heterogenous in that they did not belong to the same world (no need to proceed to the point of contrast): the soldiers and the nuns."⁴⁴

After examining his feelings when looking at Wessing's Nicaragua images, Barthes concludes that his interest is mainly a response to their cultural context:

"I can, of course, take a kind of general interest, one that is even stirred sometimes, but in regard to them my emotion requires the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture. What I feel about these photographs derives from an average affect, almost from a certain training."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage, The Random House, London, 2000, page 23

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, page 26

Barthes points out that he experiences these images merely on an intellectual level. He appreciates their components, "*the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the action.*"⁴⁶ He understands their connotations, "*ruined streets, corpses, grief, the sun.*"⁴⁷ by viewing them through the filter of a certain practice, a certain expectation. For Barthes, these images are an articulation of knowledge. An expression of "*a classical body of information.*"⁴⁸

But Barthes' gaze sees further. He can see through the images and is aware of the photographer's intended message. A message that makes him understand "*the dignity and horror of rebellion.*"⁴⁹ But such messages leave no significant "*mark or sign*"⁵⁰ on Barthes. Such intended messages do not touch him on a deeper level.

Studium, in my understanding, describes an experience of an image that is triggered by our general curiosity. An experience that makes us pay attention. That makes us think. An interest that benefits from our education, interests and cultural background.

But as an experience, studium lacks depth and conviction. As Barthes notes after looking at several more images,

"I glance through them, I don't recall them; no detail (in some corner) ever interrupts my reading: I am interested in them (as I am interested in the world), I do not love them."⁵¹

Studium, then, is essentially a wide field of average experience. A wide field "*of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of unsequential taste.*"⁵² Guided by our ability to comprehend, to compare, or to explain.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., page 27

⁴⁸ Ibid., page 26

⁴⁹ Ibid., page 25

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., page 41

⁵² Ibid., page 27

Punctum: A symptom of disturbance

The second concept Barthes develops to describe his feelings when looking at photographs is: punctum. Punctum works in relation to studium, but breaks and disturbs it. Punctum interrupts our experience of studium through an "*element that rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces [it].*"⁵³ Again, Barthes refers to the original meaning of the term. In Latin, punctum denotes '*a wound, a mark left by a pointed instrument.*'⁵⁴

An element that derails our intellectual perception of an image and gives it a new dimension. An element that catches us off guard and tears "*a little hole*"⁵⁵ into our experience of studium. An element that makes a photograph 'touch' us.

One of the key aspects for understanding punctum is its elusive nature. It is as unique an experience, as it is completely unpredictable, "*for punctum is also the cast of a dice.*"⁵⁶ An experience triggered by an element neither the photographer nor the viewer has any control over.

It can be a small ingredient, a detail that completely overwhelms the way we read an image, such as a character's teeth, her or his shoe, or a figure in the background. But it can also be the way we experience the work as a whole. Its charisma, its mood, or its aura that cast a spell on us.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Power of expansion



Photograph by George Washington Wilson, 1863

Barthes describes the concept of punctum with the help of numerous selected photographs. One of the examples Barthes reflects on is an image of Queen Victoria by George Washington Wilson taken in Scotland in 1863.

When examining the image, Barthes initially experiences studium. He feels an *"historical interest"*⁵⁷ in the queen. He observes the way she presents herself on horseback. Her gaze from above. The way her massive dress drapes *"the entire animal."*⁵⁸

Feelings that derive from his previous knowledge and opinions about the queen and her *"victorian nature."*⁵⁹ Thoughts that seek to explain the queen's attitude, her

⁵⁷ Ibid., page 57

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

appearance, her demeanour. And thus make the viewing of the picture somewhat predictable and transparent.

The element that breaks the studium and initiates Barthes's experience of punctum is the "*kilted groom*"⁶⁰ standing next to the horse.

While still experiencing studium Barthes "*can see his function clearly: to supervise the horse's behaviour.*"⁶¹ But then the Scotsman releases his hidden potential and sends Barthes's 'thinking' on an entirely new trajectory: "*what if the horse suddenly began to rear? What would happen to the queen's skirt. i.e. to her majesty?*"⁶² The Scotsman securing the horse breaks Barthes's experience of studium and launches his experience of punctum.

Barthes finds himself inventing a story that leaves the depicted reality of the photograph behind. A story unrelated to its historical and cultural connotations. A story that goes beyond the original intentions of the photographer, or those of the the subject, the queen.

Barthes' experience of punctum is triggered by an element that pricks him without warning. A character on the sidelines that launches Barthes's desire to run wild with his imagination. A component that takes him from reflecting on the story inside the frame to imagining one outside of it. A queen could be thrown off her horse and suffocate under her imperious dress.

As Barthes puts it, our experience of punctum is that we animate the photograph and the photograph animates us in return.⁶³

According to Barthes, punctum "*has a power of expansion.*"⁶⁴ It makes the image cease being a mere "sign" for something and lets it become a "thing itself."⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., page 59

⁶⁴ Ibid., page 45

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Expression of truth

In order to make his search for the essence of photography even more profound and find out what distinguishes our experience of one image "from any other image,"⁶⁶ Barthes decides to "descend deeper into himself"⁶⁷.

To do so, Barthes looks at photographs of his late mother, "one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her."⁶⁸ Then he comes across an image of his mother as a child in a winter garden. An image which allows Barthes to experience the "truth of the face I had loved."⁶⁹ An image from which he derives "that thread"⁷⁰, the heart and soul of an image that touches him the most: its truth.

Barthes refrains from showing the winter garden photograph in his book. He points to the subjective nature of punctum and argues that for anyone else "it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'."⁷¹ For us, his readers, it would only be an experience of studium, since we would never feel the "wound" that punctum has inflicted on him.

My mother

To describe my own experience of punctum as well as to fill in for the missing winter garden photo in Barthes's book, I will share a photograph of my mother, who passed away a few years ago.

⁶⁶ Ibid., page 60

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., page 67

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., page 73

⁷¹ Ibid.



My mother, late 1960s

Like all children, I never knew my mother when she was a teenager. As far back as I can remember she had always been a grown-up. She had always been my mother.

When looking at her in this photograph I see a woman with a radiant smile. I imagine her dancing and enjoying herself. I see a woman who has her whole life ahead of her.

That is what I want to see. Happiness and joy. And most likely that is what the photographer wanted to capture when releasing the shutter. Only now there's more to it.

Hanging on my wall the image is slowly fading. My mom is slowly disappearing from it. And this, for me, sets my experience of punctum in motion.

Her fading away is an element that gives a new direction to my thoughts and feelings about my dancing mother. A direction that leads inward, where it confronts me with my own life. With my own ambitions. With my own choices.

This, the photographer had not planned for. It was never part of the initial composition. It was never an intended message. And of course, I did not intend or expect it to happen when I put the picture on my wall. But is that not a way that truth has chosen to express itself? Just like my mother, this image of her is slowly becoming

but a trace of the past, a fading memory. Yet, at the same time, it is becoming a source of motivation and inspiration. A silent message from my mother that makes me feel the 'rapture of being alive'.

But where does such an attempt to explain my feelings of truth lead? Can, or should I even explain them? Do they not cease to be an experience of 'punctum' and become an experience of 'studium' as soon as I shed light on them, as soon as I employ logical reason and thought? As Barthes notes "*what I can name cannot really prick me,*"⁷² since our "*incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.*"⁷³

For me, Barthes's reflections on the nature of photography can be applied to describing our experience with any work of art, be it literature, fashion, dance, music, sculpture or film, to name a but few. In fact, I would go so far as to say that they provide a way to describe all the experiences we have in life.

'Studium' is an experience that "*mobilizes a half desire, [...] the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds 'all right.'*"⁷⁴ An experience that pleases or displeases, that one can like or dislike.

The experience of 'punctum', on the other hand, is about the mysterious way of being touched on a deeper level. An experience that goes beyond our intellectual understanding, that breaks through the armour that our education and culture put around us.

Embracing imperfections

"But perfection has one grave defect: it is apt to be dull. [It] is like a French canal, bordered with poplars, that runs through a gracious and undulating country. Its tranquil charms fills you with satisfaction, but it neither excites the emotions nor stimulates the

⁷² Ibid., page 51

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., page 27

imagination. You go on and on and presently you are a trifle bored.”⁷⁵

— W. Somerset Maugham

“And for once, the so called professionalism about movies will be destroyed forever and it will really become an art form.”⁷⁶

— Francis Ford Coppola

The concept of ‘punctum’ sheds light on our experience as viewers. But how can it inform our practice as filmmakers? What lessons can we learn from an experience that is so inherently intangible? How can we incorporate what is elusive into our creative work? How can we aim for something that by its very nature is inexplicable? How can we evoke an experience in our audience that cannot be evoked by intention?

A common character trait shared and cherished by many directors is our perfectionism. Our ambition to get the perfect performance, location or sunset. Our ambition to implement our ideas exactly as we have imagined them. We push and push and are not willing to relent until we have fulfilled our vision to the last detail.

In our quest for perfection, we do everything we can to avoid mistakes. In fact, we like to think of avoiding mistakes as professional. This is a unfortunate, however, because mistakes can often be the revelation of something unexpected. The articulation of a voice hidden deep within us.

Our quest for perfection often goes hand in hand with our tendency to intellectualise, for perfectionism is often rooted in our heads. We know exactly what we want, what works best for the film we have thought about for a long time. But too much thought silences the voice of our instincts.

To get in touch with the instincts of the audience, we filmmakers must first listen to our own. We need to let go of our need for control and not always follow our all-

⁷⁵ Maugham, W. Somerset, *Mr. Maugham Himself: a Collection of Writings By W. Somerset Maugham*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday Doran, 1954, page 551

⁷⁶ Coppola, Francis Ford, Youtube, *Professionalism about movies will be destroyed*, F.F.Coppola, "Hearts of Darkness" 1991, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqEsceWiG9Q>. Accessed 03 March 2023

knowing mind. For 'knowing' is often the home of clichés and stereotypes. Narrative patterns that our audience will quickly get one step ahead of.

Filmmakers who seek to evoke the experience of 'punctum' in their viewers would do well to embrace imperfections, risk and rough edges. To do so we must learn to refrain from filtering all our decisions through our intellect. We must learn to overcome our fear of the uncertain, unexpected and uncontrolled. Then we might create stories that go beyond the expectations of our audience, stories that will move them on a deeper level.

FILMMAKING THAT 'SHOWS'

"I always find [...] that the more that's left to the imagination of the audience, the better."⁷⁷

— Jodie Comer

"You want to [...] engage the imagination of the audience – suggestion is always more effective than exposition."⁷⁸

— Walter Murch

"Truth has to be given in riddles. People can't take truth if it comes charging at them like a bull. The bull is always killed. You have to give people the truth in a riddle, hide it so they go looking for it and find it piece by piece; that way they learn to live with it."⁷⁹

— Chaim Potok

Since the concept of 'show, don't tell' is primarily considered a writing strategy, in terms of filmmaking, the approach is mainly applied to screenwriting. An application that is limited and disregards other aspects of filmmaking and their potential to "show" a story.

In what follows, I will examine the principle's application to various aspects of cinematic narration available to filmmakers, such as image composition, montage, spoken word, action, details, and protagonists' hands. In doing so, I will explore works by filmmakers that have inspired my own artistic work. But before I delve into the first example, I will take a closer look at the word 'involve', a word that is almost an anagram of 'in love'.

⁷⁷ Comer, Jodie, *Imdb, Personal quotes*, <https://m.imdb.com/name/nm3069650/quotes>, Accessed 10 November 2022

⁷⁸ Murch, Walter, *In the blink of an eye*, Silman-James Press, Beverly Hills, 2001, page 15

⁷⁹ Potok, Chaim: *The Gift of Asher Lev*, Fawcett Books, New York, 1990

Different meanings of the word 'involve'

The Online Etymology Dictionary, which looks at the origins and meanings of words throughout history, has the following entry for 'involve'⁸⁰

involve (v.)

late 14c., "**envelop, surround; make cloudy or obscure**," from Old French *involver* and directly from Latin *involvere* [...] literally "**roll into**," from *in-* "**in**" [...] + *volvere* [...] "**to turn, revolve**."
Mid-15c. as "**concern oneself**." Sense of "**take in, include**" first recorded c. 1600.

Related words:

involved (adj.)

"**complicated**," 1640s, past-participle adjective from *involve*.
Earlier it meant "**spirally curved**" (1610s).

As the above entries suggest, the word "involve" has a number of meanings that are relevant to us filmmakers.

To '**roll into**', '**take in**', and '**include**' means to make something or someone part of a greater whole. For us filmmakers this points to one of the most important aspects of "show, don't tell," namely to make the audience participants in the narrative process.

The meaning of '**concern oneself**' supports this approach for it means to draw someone in so she or he can handle the problem alone.

To '**make cloudy**' and '**obscure**' means that something is concealed, kept in the dark, or presented as uncertain or inexplicable.

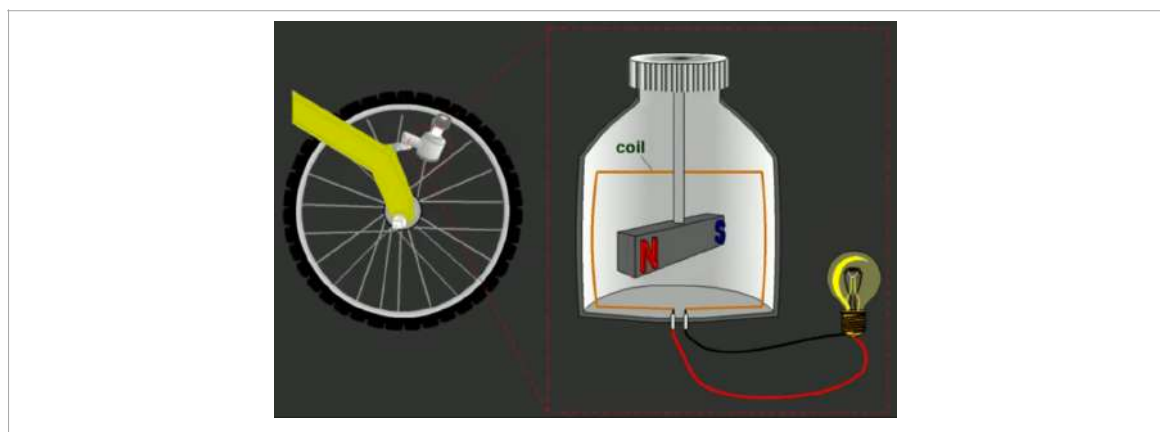
⁸⁰ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/involve> and: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/involve/related>, Accessed 09 October 2022

For us filmmakers, not revealing all the information is a means of creating intriguing protagonists and stories. By disguising some of the protagonists' intentions, abilities and insights, their decisions and actions become unpredictable and thus more complex and original.

By keeping some facts and details initially hidden from our audiences, we can instead reveal them at unexpected moments, making our protagonists and plot points less obvious and trivial. Such moments of surprise arouse interest and keep our audience engaged. Aspects of the story that we keep out of sight, or unexplained behaviour by our protagonists can play an important part in capturing our audience's attention. It can also be a way to convey a sense of foreboding and create tension.

'To turn' and **'revolve'** point to something being in motion, to something being dynamic. To highlight the relevance of those meanings for filmmakers, I would like to briefly discuss the way a simple bicycle dynamo generates energy to power a lamp:

Inside the dynamo, a coil of copper wire is fixed around a magnet. The magnet is connected to a small wheel at the top of the dynamo that touches the tire. When the tire starts to rotate, the magnet inside the dynamo rotates with it. The rotation of the magnet's two opposing poles inside the copper coil produces an electric current that powers the lamp of the bicycle.



Bicycle dynamo with rotating poles of a magnet⁸¹

⁸¹ image taken from: *57 Principle of generator or dynamo*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0fMXsl-yVM>. Accessed 10 November 2021)

The interplay of opposites, of plus and minus, basically describes contrast. The juxtaposition of aspects that are strikingly different from each other.

For us filmmakers, the rotation of contrasting elements is a means to create dynamic characters. And dynamic characters make for compelling stories.

By rotating our protagonists' choices between positive and negative, clever and foolish, successful and failing, we make them less predictable and clichéd.

To stay with the analogy of the bicycle dynamo: the rotation of contrasting character traits generates spark that makes protagonists and their story shine.

Furthermore, dynamic protagonists generate pace and momentum. Their process of growth and change comes alive, giving meaning to their story.

As for our audience, the back and forth of their expectations, the alternation between disappointment and satisfaction, frustration and triumph has a stimulating effect that engages their imagination and thereby draws them deeper into the story.

The meaning '**complicated**' indicates that something features several interrelated and/or contradictory aspects.

For us filmmakers, it is particularly important to equip protagonists with a 'complicated' inner world that presents them with 'complicated' choices.

Whereas interrelated qualities help protagonists to appear coherent, contradictory traits encourage decisions that can be damaging to the characters themselves.

Such decisions expose the vulnerability of our protagonists and become a sign of their weakness. Flaws and imperfections that then become a bridge for the audience to identify with them.

Exposing characters is an important way for us filmmakers to get in touch with our audience's inner world, their vulnerable selves. For it is when we touch the vulnerable selves of our audience that our stories leave a lasting impression.

Conscious frames

“It’s not just what I want them to know, but a way of seeing. The film isn’t telling a story; it’s observing the story. So one of the main components or characters of the film is the consciousness of the film, and I like the films where every frame feels conscious.”⁸²

— Bennett Miller

The opening scene of Bennett Miller's film “Foxcatcher”⁸³ introduces Mark Schultz, a man in his mid-twenties who wrestles with a training dummy.



Clinging to a dummy



Palpable relentlessness

In the first shot after the opening titles, Mark clings to a dummy his own size, smashing his bare arms and hands around its neck. With the medium-wide composition of the shot, Miller places us from the get go within an arm’s length of his protagonist.

The following shot over the doll's shoulder brings us within breathing distance of Mark. We can sense the sweat on his face. Mark's determination and relentlessness become palpable, his rage intimidating.

⁸² Miller, Bennett quoted by Thompson, Anne, IndieWire, *Best Director Oscar Nominee Bennett Miller Unpacks 'Foxcatcher' In-Depth* (2015), <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/01/best-director-oscar-nominee-bennett-miller-unpacks-foxcatcher-in-depth-189286/>, Accessed 20 October 2021

⁸³ *Foxcatcher*, 140 min, director: Bennett Miller, production Annapurna Pictures, USA 2014



Isolated and abandoned



Mark gains upper hand

The next shot reveals the place where Mark is fighting. A large gym that is completely empty, except for Mark. Miller places Mark in the centre of an extreme-wide frame where he appears small, insignificant and abandoned. The colour palette of the frame is kept in desaturated tones, dominated by dark greys and blues. The darkness of the frame is further stressed by the lighting of the scene. The few neon tubes on the ceiling provide sparse lighting and form geometric lines that point us in Mark's direction.

In the next shot, Mark is on top of the dummy. The wide framing allows us to matter-of-factly read the outcome of the fight. Mark has gained the upper hand. Miller places Mark in the centre of the frame where he is surrounded by the dark tones of the gym's floor and walls. The black line on the floor forms a semicircle around Mark and focuses our attention around him.



Longing to belong



Not the type to give up easily

The following shot puts us in touch with Mark's emotions. The framing allows us to closely observe how Mark buries his head in his arms. Even though he is on top of the dummy, it seems he has only defeated himself.

Miller holds the frame for Mark to slowly raise his head. Now he has buried his anger inside himself and directs his gaze forward. He has hit rock bottom, but he is not the type to give up easily.

The shots of the training session confront us with the protagonist without providing any exposition or explanation, their composition provides us with stimuli that make us imagine Mark's predicament. A lonely and abandoned protagonist emerges in our mind's eye. An outcast struggling with himself. A frustrated man who longs to be significant.

Imagining a character's story

In the following scene, the second scene of the film, Mark visits an elementary school to deliver a speech about Olympic values.



Stuck in his shell



The kid he used to be

In the first shot, Mark sits alone in his car and carefully puts something around his neck. We remain outside and see him only through the windshield. The interior of the car is barely lit and stripped of all color except for the ribbon Mark puts around his neck. The composition of the shot creates distance and gives Mark an air of isolation and loneliness. The composition of the shot helps us imagine a man who has created an

impenetrable shell around himself, who is trapped inside himself, who puts a noose around his own neck.

In the following shot we observe Mark inside the school where he is waiting and practicing his speech. Slightly out of focus in the foreground we notice a telephone, a multitude of pens, a small American flag, and a coffee mug. The perspective of the shot places us behind a large desk. This way, we are encouraged to observe the scene from the perspective of a person in control of the room, perhaps from the perspective of the school's principal.

The open door suggests that the 'real' owner of the desk is gone somewhere, which allows us to take her or his place while observing the scene.

In front of the desk, in the golden ratio of the frame, a boy becomes the focal point of our attention. The boy sits on a chair against the office wall inspecting his fingers. Miller's composition, which lacks any further explanation, encourages us to imagine the boy's story.

A boy is summoned by the principal. While waiting to be lectured, he inspects his fingernails. The huge desk that dominates the entire foreground of the frame does not impress him. Withdrawn into his own world, the boy seems to have no interest in studying and perhaps in school in general.

In the same shot, Mark can be seen through the open door sitting in the background. Outside the gym, the powerful wrestler is reduced to a background figure. Clinging to the notes of his speech he struggles to remember what he wants to say. Sitting in a comfortable chair, his powerful body feels disarmed, rendering him insignificant.

Miller's composition of the boy and Mark in one frame encourages us to connect their story. We imagine Mark as a young boy himself. A boy who is too insecure to make friends and therefore loses interest in learning and school. A boy from a broken home whose only home becomes the gym and the sport of wrestling.



And again, without any exposition and explanation, the following scene opens with a shot of Mark holding up his gold medal. Miller frames him in a medium shot against a dark wall making the medal the shining center of the composition. Being the only bright spot in the frame we are encouraged to imagine that the medal might be the only bright spot in Mark's life, too.

Then Miller cuts to shots of Mark's audience. A couple of wider and closer compositions of elementary school kids' faces. Faces that look at Mark with a mixture of fear, wonder and bewilderment. Faces that look at Mark as if he were an alien. And through the reaction of these faces, Miller encourages us to imagine Mark's story.

The story of an Olympic champion whose attitude towards wrestling and America is of no importance to adults. A hero who is deprived of what he craves the most: respect and recognition.

A champion whose achievements impress no one, not even elementary school children. A weirdo who does not fit in.

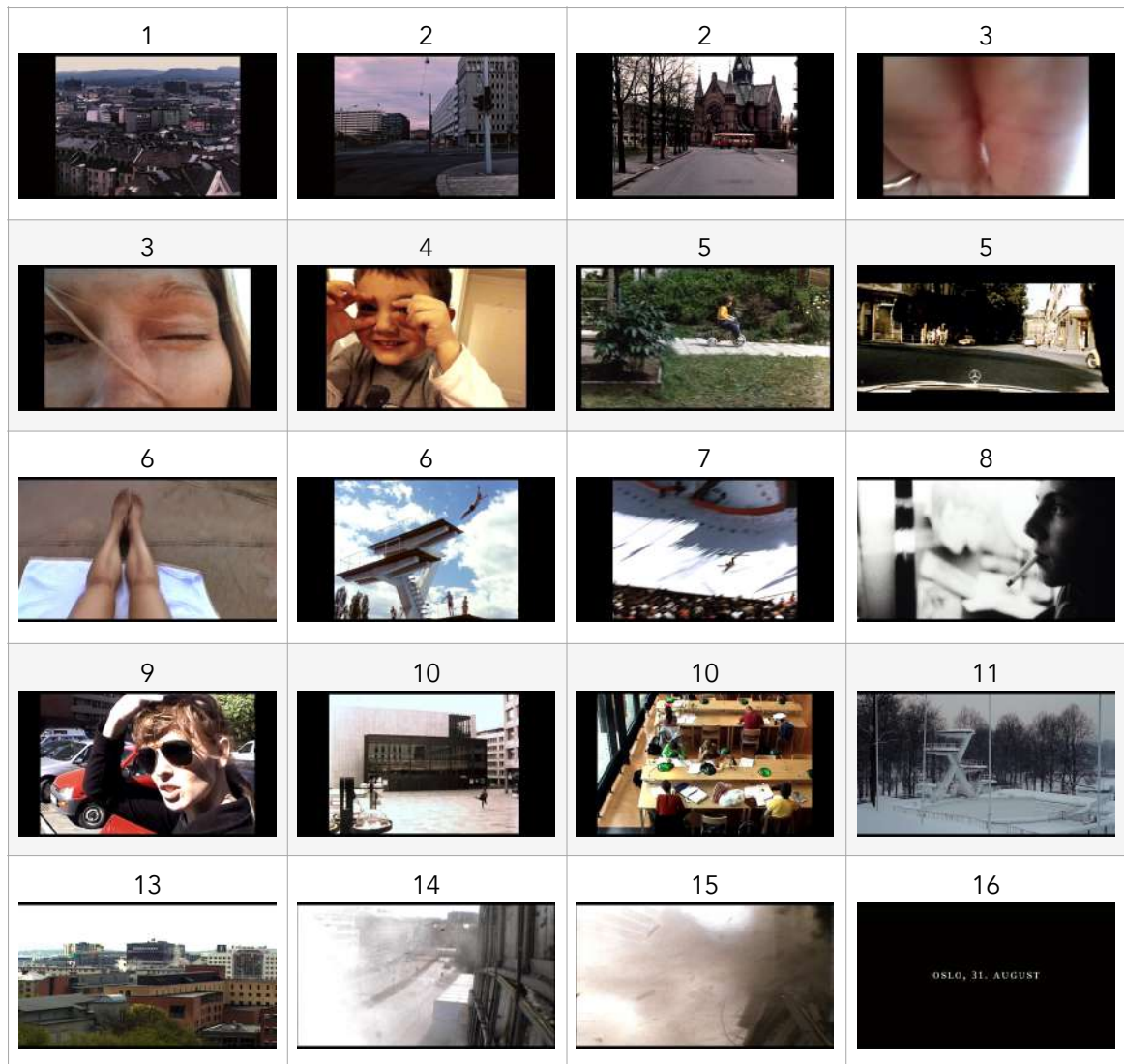
The composition of Bennett Miller's shots feels 'conscious' in that they point us in a certain direction. Rather than explaining Mark's story to us, they provide the stimuli that make Mark Schultz and his story come alive in our imagination.

Montage

"I try to engage viewers by breaking their expectations."

— Jarosław Kamiński⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Kamiński, Jarosław in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded August 2022, authorized translation, author's archive



Jochim Trier's "Oslo, August 31st"⁸⁵ is the story of a man in his thirties who decides to overdose on heroin rather than make a fresh start in life.

The two and a half minutes opening sequence of the film consists of various recorded audio memories, presented as voice-over, and a montage of shots. Each of the shots evokes a story on its own, and together they evoke yet another story.

In the first shots, the city of Oslo appears to be still asleep. The sun is yet about to rise, the streets are empty. Then a bus is approaching from around a corner. A new day is about to begin, life about to be lived. A hand opens the lens cap and reveals a sleepy face. The face of a young woman. Her eyes squint into the camera. A shot of a

⁸⁵ *Oslo, August 31st* (original Norwegian title: *Oslo, 31. august*), director: Joachim Trier, 95 minutes, Norway 2011

little boy pushing his eyes open with his fingers. A little boy rides a tricycle exploring the world.

A shot showing the perspective from a moving car. A drive through the sunny streets of Oslo. The star on the bonnet always in view. Luxury and material prosperity set the direction. The legs of a young woman sunbathing by the fjord. A young man taking off from the diving board of an open air swimming pool. A leap into life. A ski jumper who makes a rough landing. Falling is part of the adventure. The black and white shot of a young man. Cigarette in his mouth. Melancholic facial expression. A shot of a young woman turning towards the camera. The snapshot of a relationship. A young man runs with an instrument case. Life does not like to wait. The reading room of a university library. A shot from above. Students are studying. Passing exams requires commitment and discipline. Life is hard work. An outdoor pool in winter. The same diving tower from an earlier shot, but now abandoned and no longer in use. A wide shot of Oslo. A building collapses on the horizon. A shot from the perspective of the building itself. The floors collapse and dissolve into dust. Title card: "Oslo, August 31st."

On the one hand, many of the shots indirectly continue the previous ones: a boy opens his eyes with his fingers > a boy rides a tricycle > the perspective from a car driving through the city; or they indirectly complement each other: a woman sunbathing on a beach > a man jumping from a diving board in an open air swimming pool.

On the other hand, the shots often contrast each other in shot size, setting, mood or energy: A man runs across an empty square with an instrument case > students study in a crowded library.

The use of different source material: Super 8 mm, 16 mm, VHS, HD and 35 mm, as well as the combination of shots in colour with shots in black and white, create further contrast.

Perspectives are juxtaposed, such as objective observations with subjective points of view and as television broadcasts with private home videos. An extreme wide shot is matched with an extreme wide shot, and then contrasted with a close-up portrait.

The individual shots in the opening sequence are small moments of happiness. Moments that make us imagine our own children or a person we loved or love. Or imagination contributes to the overall feeling that slowly takes hold of us: life is worth living.

The demolition of a building at the end of the sequence can be seen as another memorable event that adds yet another layer to the complex portrait of life in Oslo.

But at the same time, a collapsing building is not what we expected. It counters the narrative of 'life is worth living'. It strongly contradicts the positive images created in our mind's eye and replaces them with darker ones, which we transfer to the following shot, the title card of the film: "Oslo, 31 August".

By means of montage, Joachim Trier makes evokes images in our mind that 'show' the possibilities of a happy life. Then the director confronts these images with darker ones that cast their shadow over everything we have been encouraged to imagine. Darker images that sensitize us to the inner world of the main character: his feeling that life is meaningless after all.

Joachim Trier does not 'tell' us that life is worth living nor that it is meaningless. He does not tell us what to feel. Instead, he uses montage to suggest. He points us into a direction and our imagination follows, until we are caught off guard and confronted with the unexpected. In this way, Trier's opening sequence sharpens our perception and involves us in the narrative process. It sensitises us to the protagonist of the film and gives us a feeling of his predicament even before he appears on the screen.

Spoken words

"The content of what someone is saying is not the words themselves but the image those words evoke."⁸⁶

— Judith Weston

⁸⁶ Weston, Judith, *Directing Actors. Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television*, Published by Michael Wise Productions, California, 1996, page 108

Truffles are a sought-after delicacy. A kind of fungi that grow near roots of trees, hidden deep underground, and to this day resist modern science's attempts at cultivation. No wonder, then, that they are considered a highly prized delicacy. Truffle hunters spend their whole lives working out on which tree's roots truffles grow, when they bloom and reach their maximum size. This knowledge is what sets them apart.

*The Truffle Hunters*⁸⁷, a documentary by Michael Dweck and Gregory Kershaw, portrays a handful of aging men from Piedmont in north-western Italy who comb the woods in search of white Alba truffle.

Inside the first ten minutes of the film, the directors present the audience with a conversation between a veteran and a much younger truffle hunter.

By placing the two men at one table, the filmmakers aim to establish the themes of the film and introduce one of the main characters: Aurelio Contero.



"Can you tell me your secret spots?"



"The best thing is to find a place that you couldn't even imagine."

YOUNG MAN:

You're 84 years old.
You have no wife, no children.
You're the best truffle hunter.
Can you tell me your secret spots?
Or can I go truffle hunting with you?

AURELIO:

Never! Never!

⁸⁷ *The Truffle Hunters*, 84 minutes, 2020, directors: Michael Dweck and Gregory Kershaw

We can go truffle hunting... but in your places...
or in a place that neither of us knows.

We can go to a new place.
For example, that forest over there.
Where no one knows if there are truffles or not.
Maybe there are, but I don't want to go where you go...
nor where I go.

YOUNG MAN:

But if tomorrow something happens to you...
your knowledge would be lost.
It would be a disaster.

AURELIO:

Then I'll tell you what to do.
Worry about yourself and your family.
Don't worry about me.

Remember, the best thing the best thing is to find a place
that you couldn't even imagine.

You have to go with a dog a good dog or a bad dog
better with a good dog.

If you don't trust your dog, you shouldn't go truffle hunting.

It's like when you study...
If a bad teacher makes you pass the exam...
you get your degree, but it's worth nothing!

YOUNG MAN:

I agree, but... let's be practical.
If you pass away, what about your places?
They'll remain hidden for years, maybe forever.

Maybe it's better to find an agreement.

Continuing traditions is really important for us...
and for you as well.
If you had a child, you would teach him.

AURELIO:

No, I wouldn't!

At the beginning, the conversation provides the audience with important facts about Aurelio. He is eighty-four-years old, has neither wife nor children and is considered one of the best truffle hunters in the region.

Although unmistakably straightforward, this information is passed on to the audience in a non-expository manner. It does not serve to explain. The young man does not simply 'tell' the audience about Aurelio, nor does Aurelio himself share information openly.

Instead, the young man pursues an agenda. He engages Aurelio in a conversation that 'pushes his buttons'. He provokes him. He tries to exert emotional influence over Aurelio that has only one purpose: to gain access to one of his most valuable secrets - the spots where he finds truffles.

Both, the young man's cunning attempts and Aurelio's vehement resistance stimulate the imagination of the audience. In our minds, a picture emerges of what makes Aurelio tick and what the truffle hunt is all about.

The exchange of words between the two men suggests that the truffle hunt is like a love affair with unearthing secrets. A love story that is both passionate and mysterious. A pursuit that captivates young and old alike and demands an unconditional level of dedication and commitment from the hunters.

Just as a hunter often has to comb miles of forest to find truffles, in this conversation the young man is willing to go to extremes and use even the most sophisticated psychological traps to find out about Aurelio's locations.

From the very beginning he tries to create a problem for Aurelio, which he then offers to solve. He paints the picture of a man who is an admired hunter, a man who cares about tradition, but also a man who is lonely and soon about to die. Then he

offers Aurelio to accompany him on his truffle hunts and become the keeper of his secrets.

But Aurelio is no fool. He is the best for a reason. Even the young man's provocation that Aurelio would surely pass on his secrets to his child, if he had one, does not make Aurelio change his mind.

Judith Weston and documentary filmmaking

One of the greatest challenges for documentary filmmakers is to find ways to let the inner world of their protagonists shine through, to organically reveal their honest thoughts and feelings rather than illustrate or explain them to the audience. To this end, documentary filmmakers can draw on methods from working with actors.

Judith Weston's book *Directing Actors* offers invaluable insights into working with actors as well as into the DNA of motivation and engagement that are so relevant to the work of directors in general.

"A character's objective for a particular scene can be very specific and very simple. For example: I want him to leave the room; I want him to kiss me; I want him to laugh; I want him to cry. The simpler it is the more playable it is. The most playable objectives have both a physical and an emotional component. The physical component means that, if you achieve your objective, you will know it because of a physical event — the other actor would cry or laugh or kiss you or leave the room, whatever. So you have a point of concentration that is physical and real [...]. Part of the emotional component means that getting this objective, or not getting it, will constitute an emotional event in the relationship, a win or a loss. To be very simple-minded about it, if my objective is to get someone to leave the room, when he leaves the room, I win; if he doesn't, I

lose. In either case our relationship has undergone a small (or a big) change”⁸⁸

— Judith Weston

According to Weston, a character’s thoughts and feelings become visible to the camera when actors are in-the-moment.

A clear objective involves actors - the characters they portray - in an active process. The pursuit of a goal makes their characters engage with each other and influence each other in such a way that their relationship at the end of the scene is different from the one at the beginning.

The conversation between Aurelio and the young hunter is a good example of this approach. From the very beginning of the conversation the young man has a clear and simple objective: he wants to get Aurelio to tell him about his secret places or to show them to him. If Aurelio does that, the young man wins. Then he will soon be the best truffle hunter himself. Aurelio also has a straight forward objective: he wants to hold on to his secrets.

The directors Michael Dweck and Gregory Kershaw have an objective, too. They aim to portray their protagonists without explaining them explicitly, without “telling” us about them, without providing us with ready-made conclusions.

Therefore, they engage Aurelio in a conversation in which he must defend his secrets, in a process that allows him to be ‘in the moment’, in a process that spontaneously brings to light his beliefs and values.

Just as the truffles resist the cultivation attempts of modern science, Aurelio resists the attempts of the young hunter. But by holding on to his secrets, Aurelio is not only protecting his hunting grounds. He protects a way of life that is slowly fading out of existence - the natural balance between gatherer and resource. A deep-rooted connection to nature and tradition, a sense of belonging to the environment, the mountains, the forest.

⁸⁸ Weston, Judith, *Directing Actors. Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television*, Published by Michael Wise Productions, California, 1996, page 45

Screaming at a typewriter

Angelo Gagliardi is another eccentric protagonist of the *The Truffle Hunters*. In one scene of the film, he is observed writing a letter to his friends.



I want to quit for one reason...



there are too many greedy people.

ANGELO GAGLIARDI:

I want to write down why I want to quit truffle hunting.

Right, Nina?

I should finish my cigarette first,
or I can't see anything.

I want to quit...for one reason...
there are too many greedy people.

They don't do it for fun or to play with their dogs...
...or to spend some time in nature.

They only want money.
I want to write that down to explain
the situation to a few friends.

If they want to listen. But who knows!

People use poisons to kill dogs.

If I catch one of those, I'm going to hang them on a tree...upside down.

Because dogs are innocent.
The cigarette went out.

Angelo writes a letter to his friends, but actually the letter is just a pretext for a spoken outburst of emotion. As Angelo types, he shouts his thoughts and feelings into his typewriter.

Angelo is keen to share why he wants to give up truffle hunting, not why he loves it. Its negative intent contradicts our expectations and thus challenges the image we have previously formed of the film's protagonists and their story. In particular, his threat that he will hang any dog poisoner he catches upside down from a tree turns our mental image of the protagonists and the world of truffle hunting on its head.

Angelo's tantrum, however, does not provide any explanations as to why he is fed up. Instead, he shouts mere suggestions into his typewriter that encourage us to draw our own conclusions.

Angelo indicates that his dog Nina may be the only one who agrees with him ("Right, Nina?"), because none of his friends really care about what he has to say ("If they want to listen. But who knows!"). People's interest in money and their lack of love for dogs and nature in general seem to anger him the most.

Instead of explanations and conclusions, Angelo's verbal outbursts provides us with stimuli that encourage us to imagine the darker side of truffle hunting, where sniffer dogs, the protagonists' favorite companions, are poisoned by rival hunters.

Imaginative adjustments

I would assume, that there have been several occasions where Angelo vented his frustrations in front of the filmmakers with no camera present. The task of the filmmakers was therefore to reveal Angelo's boiling interior in front of the camera. And to do so in a

way that does not simply inform us or state facts, but makes Angelo's anger come alive in our imagination.

To expose Angelo's inner landscape, the documentary filmmakers may have again resorted to methods advocated by Judith Weston.

"When the actor or actors are concentrating on a physical problem or task, their concentration can give the scene a sense of its emotional problem. A physical task takes the actor's concentration of the lines, because he lets the lines *come out of* the physical task."⁸⁹

— Judith Weston

"Physical life grounds a performance. An objective can be played through an object, and become a physicalization of the character's inner life"⁹⁰

— Judith Weston

"Objects are wonderful as a way to bring actors into the moment, out of their heads"⁹¹

— Judith Weston

Instead of asking Angelo to explain his frustrations in front of the camera, the filmmakers gave him a physical task.

When Angelo gets behind his old typewriter, what he thinks and feels affects what he does. That is why Angelo does not just write a letter. Rather, he types a kind of manifesto that quickly develops into a verbal rage.

⁸⁹ Weston, Judith, *Directing Actors. Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television*, Published by Michael Wise Productions, California, 1996, page 45

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, page 127

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Another method Weston recommends to directors who aim to convey a particular mood or feeling in a fresh, surprising and insightful way is to work with imaginative adjustments. Such an adjustment can be an "as if".⁹²

Writing a letter is a physical experience, in Angelo's case, the experience of hammering away at the keys. To get Angelo to do that, the directors may have asked him to treat the typewriter as *if* it were someone poisoning dogs.

Giving Angelo such an imaginative adjustment could have been a way to bring him 'into the moment', a state where he becomes so absorbed in punching the typewriter that he even forgets about his cigarette ("The cigarette went out").

"The objects of a person's life are very defining of who she is. [...] It is via objects and activities that a sense of period or class distinctions is grounded. People's needs and feelings are no different throughout history and throughout social classes. It is the activities and objects of their lives that change."⁹³

— Judith Weston

Also, Angelo's resorting to an old typewriter is suggestive of his education, his values, his approach to life. It also foregrounds the sense of a ticking clock, the idea that characters like him are soon to be a mere echo of a bygone era.

The typewriter - not to mention the stacks of books surrounding it - is reminiscent of a poet, an intellectual, un homme de lettres.

It evokes images that "show" an Angelo who stands in contrast to the Angelo who threatens to hang people upside down from trees - a juxtaposition that further stimulates our imagination and only adds to the richness of his portrayal.

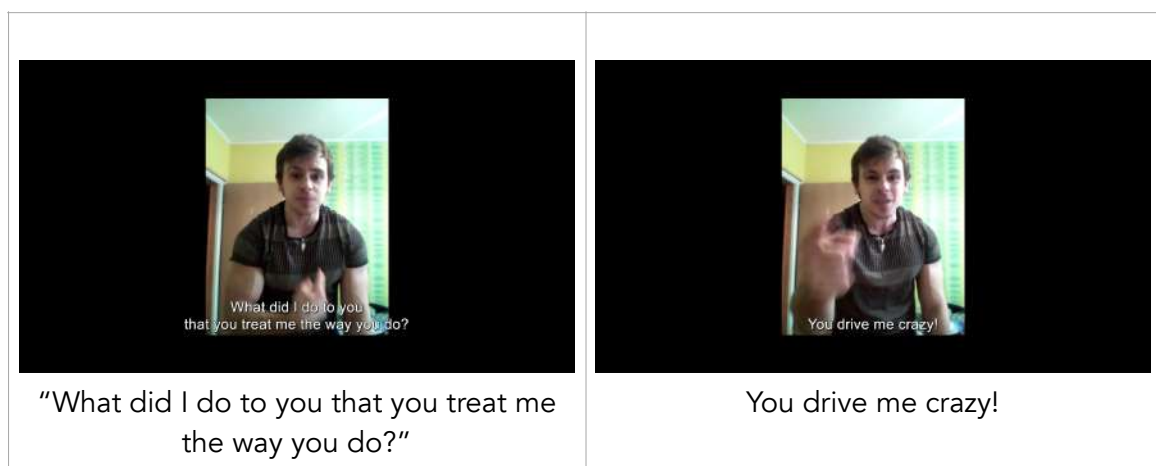
⁹² Ibid., page 15

⁹³ Weston, Judith, *Directing Actors. Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television*, Published by Michael Wise Productions, California, 1996, page 45

Addressing an imaginary person

Klaudiusz Chrostowski's documentary *Call Me Tony*⁹⁴ portrays Konrad, an eighteen-year-old high school student tormented by self-doubt. Despite the fact that he is constantly trying to prove himself, whether it is in bodybuilding competitions or acting classes, Konrad can not shake the feeling that he is letting everyone down - especially his father, who never seems to be around in the small apartment they both share. And even though his father's absence is never explained in the film, the long shadow he casts over Konrad is always deeply felt.

In one of the final scenes of the film, Konrad takes part in an audition for a new television series. Asked to record a self-tape, he has to think of a real person from his private life. Someone he has a problem with; someone who has harmed him in the past and torments his thoughts to this day. Konrad is tasked to imagine this person behind the lens of the camera and record himself giving vent to his emotions for one minute. As far as his means of expression are concerned Konrad is granted creative freedom.



KONRAD:

Do you understand?! I don't give a shit!

It would be better if you disappeared from my life.

⁹⁴ *Call me Tony*, 64 minutes, director: Klaudiusz Chrostowski, Poland 2017

Who are you to me?
What have you actually done for me?
What did I do to you that you treat me the way you do?

Why are you laughing?
Do you have a problem?

You only insult me all the time.
You use me.
Leave me alone!

You show up and try to manipulate me.
I'm not a child anymore, so leave me alone!

Because of you I've had a mess in my head my whole life!
All the time, you just sit around and you piss me off,
you know?
Sometimes I just want to hit my head against the wall.

You drive me crazy!

It's not my fault your wife left you!
It's your own fault, do you hear me?

The questions Konrad asks the 'imagined' person at the beginning indicate that he feels neglected and that he would be better off alone. Then, Konrad accuses the 'imagined' person of insulting him, manipulating him, and only making him feel insecure about himself.

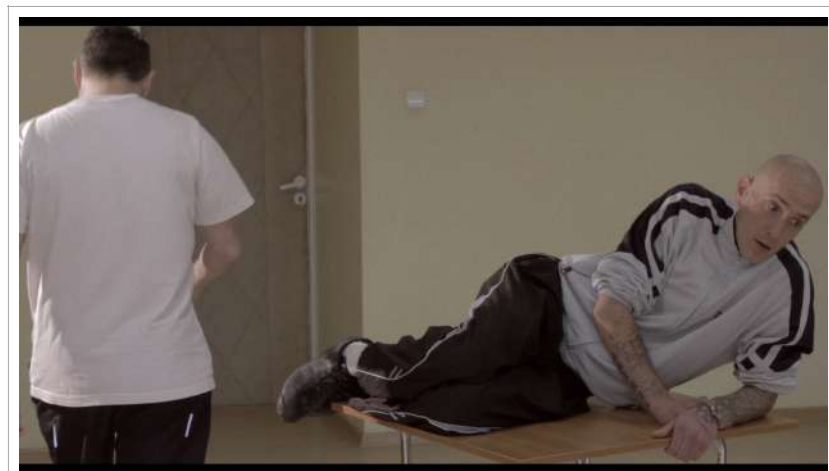
On the surface, Konrad's words and the way he delivers them convey that he is very upset because someone close to him is treating him badly, even though he does not directly say who that person is. However, his demand not to be held responsible for the divorce of the 'imagined' person is very suggestive.

Beneath the surface, the words Konrad hurls at the camera hint at the reason for his destroyed self-esteem: his patronising father. And although his father does not appear in the film and is not directly revealed as the 'imagined' person, we are

encouraged to imagine that a strained father-son relationship is the driving force behind all of Konrad's attempts at self-affirmation. In fact, it is what Konrad's story is all about.

Konrad's words are suggestive of a father-son relationship in which the father looks down on his son, disapproves of him, and bullies him. A relationship in which the father blames his son for his own failures. A relationship in which the father tries to restore his own devastated self-esteem by trampling on that of his son.

Imagination as a key to a person's inner world



Still from my film "Iron Alibi"

"Think of an iceberg. You know they say that what we see of an iceberg is only ten percent; the other ninety percent is below water. People are like that, too; the words that people say represent about ten percent of what's going on with them, what they're thinking, feeling, and doing. The other ninety percent is the subworld. In order to have full-bodied characters, we need access to that subworld."⁹⁵

— Judith Weston

⁹⁵ Weston, Judith, *Directing Actors. Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television*, Published by Michael Wise Productions, California, 1996,, page 62

A way of gaining access to a person's subworld – the vast terrain of their invisible thoughts and feelings, traumas and pains, hopes and dreams – is to tap into their imagination.

For my short documentary *Iron Alibi*⁹⁶ I worked with inmates of a Lodz penal institution. In search of answers to the question why so many inmates take a similar path in life, I was interested in exploring their childhood experiences, especially their relationships with their parents.

But when I started filming, the prisoners would not let down their guard, let alone reveal parts of their 'hidden iceberg' to my camera. They were all masters of self-censorship, which served as a protection from disapproval and condemnation. They all refrained from expressing their real selves for fear of being judged and rejected.

After a couple of months, I changed my concept and organized an acting workshop for the inmates of the prison. I asked them to play 'imagined' characters in improvised scenes, which I then filmed.

Improvising teachers, policemen, mothers and fathers was great fun for the prisoners and encouraged them to use their imagination. And imagination draws from one's own experiences.

In this way, by 'imagining someone else', the prisoners put their own thoughts and feelings into the improvised characters, making them suggestive of relationships and events that they themselves had experienced in their childhood and youth.

"Being "in the moment" means, for one thing, that you follow your whims without any concern about whether people will approve of you — and *then* they approve of you anyway!"⁹⁷

— Judith Weston

⁹⁶ *Iron Alibi* (original Polish title: *Żelazne alibi*), 15 min., 2016, director: Martin Rath, production: Lodz Film School

⁹⁷ Weston, Judith, *Directing Actors. Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television*, Published by Michael Wise Productions, California, 1996, page 64

“There must be freedom and trust for improv to work. Improv is not a frivolous undertaking; it is a sacred tool, a door to the subconscious.”⁹⁸

— Judith Weston

“In the moment” for actors has to do with freedom. It has to do with fearlessness. It has to do with trust. It has to do with the actor not watching himself.”⁹⁹

— Judith Weston

One of the primary tasks for filmmakers is to make the invisible visible. To bring the subworld of the protagonists organically and spontaneously to the surface, where it becomes visible to the camera and suggestive to the viewer.

In order to access the emotional landscape of their protagonists, filmmakers have to look for situations that make their protagonists open up and come out of their protective shell. Situations in which protagonists let go without ‘watching themselves’.

Improvisation tasks induce such situations if certain framework conditions are adhered to. The two most important are creative freedom and safety.

Creative freedom allows protagonists or actors to use their imagination without being locked into a preconceived and externally imposed expectation, direction, or idea. And when protagonists or actors feel protected from judgment or rejection, they can break open their own protective shell and let their inner world emerge.

By letting down their guard and giving free rein to their pent-up thoughts and feelings, actors and protagonists catapult themselves ‘into the moment,’ an emotional state in which the inner, unvarnished self is organically and spontaneously carried outward, where it becomes visible stimuli for the imagination of the audience.

⁹⁸ Ibid., page 264

⁹⁹ Weston, Judith, *Directing Actors. Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television*, Published by Michael Wise Productions, California, 1996, page 59

Visible, not obvious

Chrostowski's character's task of imagining and confronting a real person behind the lens takes this approach to heart. The parameters of his task allow Konrad to express himself in any way he chooses, giving him the creative freedom to delve deep into his imagination and connect to his subworld. Taking out his frustrations on an 'imagined' person also protects Konrad, because it allows him to open up without fearing consequences.

And as Konrad's self-tape indicates, a person's inner landscape is hardly expressed in ready-made statements and explicit information. Rather, it expresses itself for what it is: an unclear, inapparent and ambiguous terrain. An unexplored territory that requires our imagination to work out what it is all about.

And as we feel encouraged to work out meanings ourselves, we are drawn into the story. At the same time we are encouraged to let go and let ourselves fall 'into the moment'. In this way, we can get in touch with our own wounds and scars, our own hopes and dreams, and become emotional participants in the story.

STEVE McQUEEN'S *HUNGER*

In order to examine the role of action, detail, sensory detail, as well as hands in a narrative strategy that seeks to involve the audience's imagination, I will take a closer look at Steve McQueen's feature film debut, *Hunger*¹⁰⁰. In particular, I will examine the first 15 minutes of the film, which are conventionally used for character and story exposition.

On the outside, *Hunger* is a film about the situation of Irish Republican Army inmates held in the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland and their struggle for the status of political prisoners, which leads Bobby Sands to embark on a deadly hunger strike.

¹⁰⁰ *Hunger*, 96 minutes, director: Steve McQueen, 2008

On the inside, *Hunger* is about the universal human urge to exercise power over other people.

Action

“Men’s actions are the best guides to their thoughts.”¹⁰¹

— John Locke

“Every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character”¹⁰²

— Oscar Wilde

“Actions speak louder than words. [...] They describe experience rather than a conclusion about experience.”¹⁰³

— Judith Weston

McQueen opens his film with the observation of a man going about his daily routine. We watch him getting dressed, eating breakfast and leaving his home for work. Each of these actions is suggestive of who the man is and what makes him ‘tick’.



Leaving his house



Checking the street in front of his house

¹⁰¹ Locke, John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1689 - quote retrieved online: <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/locke1690book1.pdf>, page 9, Accessed 27 July 2022

¹⁰² Wilde, Oscar, *The Soul of Man, and Prison Writings*, Oxford World's Classics Paperback, Oxford University Press, 1998, page 96

¹⁰³ Weston, Judith, *Directing Actors. Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television*, Published by Michael Wise Productions, California, 1996, page 29



Checking under his car



Checking her husband

As the man leaves his home for work he puts his bag on the hood of his car. He opens the front gate and steps out into the street. He looks to his left and right, checking for something, without the viewer being told what for. Then he returns to his car, but rather than getting in, he lies down on the ground to take a look underneath it. His actions are monitored by his wife, whose eyes follow him through the window. Finally, the man puts his key in the ignition, starts his car and drives away.

Steve McQueen's observation of the man's morning routine refrains from any kind of explicit explanations or clarifying commentary. Instead, McQueen relies on the actions of his protagonist to make us imagine who he is and what the themes of the film are.

A man inspects the street outside his home to check for a possible ambush. He checks under his car to make sure it is not rigged with explosives. His actions become charged with meaning. A harmless morning routine becomes a mission of survival. And a man who wants to survive has enemies.

The appearance of his wife watching him through the window with a tense gaze is a further indication that the man is involved in a conflict. A conflict where life is at stake.

Assigning meaning to what protagonists are doing renders us participants in the narrative process. We, the audience, have to contribute rather than consume. Protagonists come alive in our minds because we are actively involved in making sense of their actions.

Detail

"Detail is the key to a person and to cinema."¹⁰⁴

— Jacek Bławut

"We see what we see because we miss all the finer details."¹⁰⁵

— Alfred Korzybski

"I always think that if you look at anyone in detail, you will have empathy for them because you recognize them as a human being, no matter what they've done."¹⁰⁶

— Andrea Arnold

In *Hunger*, Steve McQueen uses detail in an exemplary way to let his protagonists and their story emerge in our imagination..



Getting dressed

In another scene we watch the man getting dressed. One of the details McQueen uses to help us form a picture of him are his freshly washed, ironed and precisely folded clothes.

¹⁰⁴ Bławut, Jacek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded July 2022, authorized translation, author's archive.

¹⁰⁵ Korzybski, Alfred, *Science and Sanity, An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, 5th Edition, Second Printing, Institute of General Semantics, Brooklyn, New York, 2000, page 376

¹⁰⁶ Arnold, Andrea, *Andrea Arnold Quotes*, <https://quotesgram.com/andrea-arnold-quotes/>. Accessed 10. July 2022

But the man's clothes are more than just an indication of his character. They are suggestive of the film's story, which revolves around the so-called 'Blanket' and 'No Wash' protest of IRA inmates and their fight to be allowed to wear their own civilian clothes instead of prison uniforms for criminals. What is just a simple morning routine for some makes others put their lives on the line.



English breakfast

The detail of the carefully prepared English breakfast is an indication of the man's culinary preferences and, more importantly, it suggests which side of the conflict he is on. But it is also an allusion to the story of *Hunger*, in which a hunger strike becomes both a cry of desperation and a means of exercising power.



Breadcrumbs landing on his napkin

A napkin on the man's lap protecting his clean shirt and pants is another detail. The napkin catches breadcrumbs that the man then wipes on the floor. Another indication of a person who values cleanliness and order, even if someone has to clean the carpet after him.

Furthermore, this detail draws our attention to the theme of eating and starvation. Breadcrumbs can be a tiny difference. One wipes them away with his hand

while having breakfast, another rejects them as a form of protest, although they might ensure survival.

In our Western culture, breadcrumbs have yet another meaning. They evoke strong associations with Hansel and Gretel, the main characters of a fairy tale. To find their way home out of a dark forest, the two children leave a trail of breadcrumbs. In the fairy tale, the crumbs will be eaten by birds and the children get lost, this man sweeps them aside with his own hand. This tiny detail becomes suggestive of his story.



Key as to which side he is on

At work, the man opens his locker. Another detail is used. A small prop. A Union Jack keychain gives us another hint as to which side of the conflict the man is on.



Tail-end of a joke

Now, changed into his officer's uniform and surrounded by fellow guards he cracks a dirty joke. But the audience only gets to catch the last fragment of it, the final punch line that has everyone in the room laughing.

An indication that there is more to his character than just being neat and correct. Besides, a man who has a sense of humor and makes a room full of prison guards laugh becomes, in our mind's eye, a 'human being', a person who 'ticks' like we do.



Taking a break



Rat turning away

Taking a break in the yard the man smokes a cigarette. A simple moment that McQueen enriches with detail. The grey wall surrounding him suggests that he is a prisoner of sorts himself. The sweat stains on his shirt are an indication of the hard physical effort that his work entails. In the case of *Hunger*, the hard physical labor of beating and humiliating IRA inmates. The detail of a rat roaming around the yard while he smokes is suggestive of negative character traits in our man. This suggestion becomes even more poignant when McQueen makes even the rat turn away from our man.



Room charged with meaning

The shot of an empty washroom. We can hear the sound of slowly dripping water and the fragment of a speech by Margaret Thatcher: "There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing, and criminal violence."¹⁰⁷

Two sound-details that come up against each other. The power of political rule ringing through the fragment of a speech, and the power of a proverb, namely that

¹⁰⁷ Thatcher, Margaret in *Hunger* by Steve McQueen, minute 9'20"

constant dripping wears away the stone. Also, the sound of slowly dripping water is a sensory detail that sharpens and stimulates our perception of the story.

Sensory detail

“New art is sensory violence on the frontiers of experience”¹⁰⁸

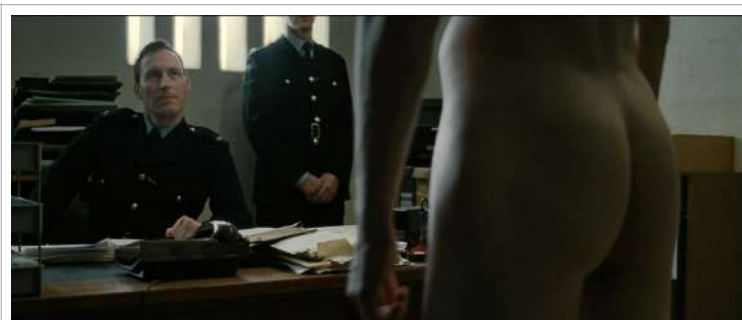
— Marshall McLuhan

“A successful storyteller is one who can make images come alive, who by adding sensory detail can make us feel as if we are actually there where the story is happening.”¹⁰⁹

— Judith Weston

“It is the particulars that make a story real. In examining witnesses, I learned to ask general questions so as to elicit details with powerful sensory associations: the colors, the sounds, the smells that lodge an image in the mind and put the listener in the burning house.”¹¹⁰

— Sonia Sotomayor



Being naked

¹⁰⁸ McLuhan, Marshall, *Culture Is Our Business*, Ballantine Books Inc., New York, 1970, page 186

¹⁰⁹ Weston, Judith, *Directing Actors. Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television*, Published by Michael Wise Productions, California, 1996, page 40

¹¹⁰ Sotomayor, Sonia, *My Beloved World*, Vintage Books, A Division of Random House LCC, New York, 2014, page 211



An open wound



Unimaginable smell

The first prisoner we meet in "Hunger" is a new arrival. Since he refuses to wear the uniform of a criminal, he is made to undress. The detail of the prisoner's naked buttocks reveals that his private parts are exposed to the guards. Being naked in front of people who are dressed is a sensual experience that often evokes a feeling of shame and embarrassment. Besides, the composition of the shot, in which the prisoner's bare buttocks are on the same horizontal level as the warden's head, is quite suggestive in itself.

The consequences of the prisoner's refusal to wear the prison uniform are suggested by a small sensory detail, namely a bleeding wound. McQueen refrains from explicitly depicting violence and instead brings it to life in our imagination.

When the prisoner reaches his assigned cell, McQueen pans the camera along the walls, which are smeared with human faeces. This sensory detail is particularly effective. It stimulates our own sense of smell, which transports us into the world of the story. We experience the stench in the cell in our imagination and form a picture of the intensity of the 'No Wash' protest and the extent to which the prisoners are willing to support it.

What makes the details in *Hunger* so compelling and involving is that they are subtle and powerful at the same time. We are not hit over the head with a hammer, for the details appear quietly and unannounced, and yet they have the power to fire up our imagination. They make the protagonists and their story come alive and step by step draw us into the world of the Maze prison.

The cinematic potential of hands

A gentle hand may lead even an elephant by a single hair.

— Persian Proverb

“A hand is not simply part of the body, but the expression and continuation of a thought which must be captured and conveyed.”¹¹¹

— Honoré de Balzac

“Then I would let my eyes go from his face to his hands. I would then discover Le Corbusier. It was his hands that revealed him. It was as if his hands betrayed him. They spoke all his feelings, all the vibrations of his inner life that his face tried to conceal.”¹¹²

— André Wogenscky

Hands of protagonists hold many characteristics that make them particularly suitable to be used in a narrative style that embraces the principles of ‘show, don't tell.’ But in what ways can protagonists’ hands stimulate the audience's imagination? And why hands, wherein exactly lies their cinematic potential?

¹¹¹ de Balzac, Honoré, as quoted in Juhani Pallasma, *The Thinking Hand*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2009, page 25

¹¹² Wogenscky, André, as quoted in Juhani Pallasma, *The Thinking Hand*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2009, page 26



Soaking hands



Reflection cleansed of emotions



Putting wedding ring away



Fresh bruises



A man refusing to look at himself



Soaking bloody knuckles



Hands awaiting action



Action is done



Looking inwards



Looking out into a dark future



A gentle hand



A hand is a canvas

Hunger begins with the observation of a prison guard's morning routine, in which his hands play an important role.

In particular, the soaking of the guard's hands in a sink filled with water is a recurring action that McQueen uses to build a sense of foreboding about the world of his main character, the prisoner Bobby Sands. For the soaking of bloody knuckles evokes a brutal prison reality in our imagination long before Sands enters the story.

The removal of the wedding ring hints at the guard's life outside prison walls, a life whose moral underpinnings he puts away in his locker before his knuckles get bloody again.

Evolution has shaped our bodies so that our hands are right in our field of vision when performing tasks in front of us. A condition that leads to the close collaboration between eyes and hands, a collaboration that combines our sense of sight and our sense of touch. This connection allows McQueen, for one, to link the soaking of the guard's bloody knuckles with a reflection of the guard's eyes gazing at his hands; for another, the wounds on the guard's hands provide sensory stimuli that allow us to experience the guard's physical pain in our imagination.

In a scene observing the arrival of a new prisoner, McQueen uses the hands of one of the guards to include us in the narrative process. With the succession of shots of a prisoner being forced to undress, a guard's hands holding his truncheon, and the open wound on the prisoner's head, McQueen encourages us to connect the dots, thus evoking a brutal beating in our mind's eye.

In another scene, a prisoner slowly slides his hand through a hole in the metal grating of his cell window, touching a fly with his finger. Thus, the gentle touch of his hand becomes suggestive of his sensitivity as well as his thoughts and desires. And although his facial expression in the following shot is devoid of emotion, it is his hand that reveals his inner world. An inner world that contradicts the brutality of the prison world, of which we have already formed an image. This creates a contrast that makes the story dynamic and further stimulates our imagination.

When Bobby Sands is so weakened by his hunger strike that he needs medical attention, McQueen uses the doctors' hands to suggest how his main character is

treated. While the careful touch of one doctor's hand offers us hope, it is the tattoo on another's that makes us imagine the worst.

These few examples point to the cinematic potential that hands offer us filmmakers. Hands perform actions, hands draw the viewer's attention to details, hands are endowed with the sense of touch. Most importantly, viewers can easily relate to the hands of protagonists when they see them on screen. In other words, hands allow us filmmakers to give clues about our characters in an indirect way. In a way that stimulates the imagination of our viewers, allows them to draw their own conclusions, and thus involves them in the narrative process.

SECTION 2: APPLICATION OF THE 'SHOW, DON'T TELL' PRINCIPLE TO MY FILM "I'M IN SO-CALLED RECORDING MODE"

FACES AS STIMULI

"I think your whole life shows in your face"¹¹³

— Lauren Bacall

"The [...] close-up of an actor is and remains the height of cinematography. There is nothing better. That incredibly strange and mysterious contact you can suddenly experience with another soul through an actor's gaze."¹¹⁴

— Ingmar Bergman

"Someone said to me, early on in film school... if you can photograph the human face you can photograph anything, because that is the most difficult and most interesting thing to photograph. If you can light and photograph the human face to bring out what's within that human face you can do anything."¹¹⁵

— Roger Deakins

¹¹³ Bacall, Lauren quoted by Hughes, Sali, *The Guardian*, *Lauren Bacall: Hollywood's most beautiful face* (2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/13/lauren-bacall-death-beauty-face>. Accessed 20 December 2022

¹¹⁴ Bergman, Ingmar quoted by Barrett, Alex, *British Film Institute*, *How Ingmar Bergman mastered filming faces* (2018), <https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/ingmar-bergman-faces-close-ups>. Accessed 12 December 2022

¹¹⁵ Deakins, Roger, *Internet-movie-database*, *Roger Deakins quotes*, <https://m.imdb.com/name/nm0005683/quotes>. Accessed 18 August 2022

“Everything we do in film somehow arrives at the human face. And we have to be ultra-sensitive to that face, we should be very responsive to it, we should learn, I don't know, to film it with affection, with wisdom.¹¹⁶

— Paweł Edelman

“A person without wrinkles means nothing. It is only the wrinkles that begin to reveal who you are.”¹¹⁷

— Jacek Bławut

“I like to stare at people. It's dangerous, but I like to watch them. It's dangerous because they can and do react differently to it, but I like looking at them.”¹¹⁸

— Leszek Dawid



Leszek Dawid in “I'm in so-called recording mode”

¹¹⁶ Edelman, Paweł in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded March 2023, authorised translation, author's archive.

¹¹⁷ Bławut, Jacek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded July 2022, authorised translation, author's archive.

¹¹⁸ Dawid, Leszek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded December 2022, authorised translation, author's archive.

Identity

As humans, we identify ourselves with our faces, literally and figuratively. It is our face that is displayed on our identity cards, and it is our face with which we present ourselves to others and to ourselves in mirrors. Wrinkles, scars and even the smallest imperfections are part of our facial landscape. Make-up, accessories, jewellery, piercings, tattoos, glasses, beard or shaved skin, our face serves us as a kind of "calling card", a figurehead of our "I".

We humans are wired to read faces, sense faces, and identify the emotions expressed in them. In the first months of our lives, as newborns, we see best what is about twenty-five centimetres away from us, that is, the faces of our mothers who feed us.

What we sense in other people's faces and how we respond to them can have a lasting impact on our mental, physical, and social well-being, sometimes even our survival.

Faces confer a unique aura upon us. People's faces serve us as a window into their desires, thoughts or secrets. A window that allows us to imagine who they are, what their inner world might look like, what makes them tick. People's faces are suggestive of their feelings, and people's faces influence our feelings towards them.

However, whether faces reliably reflect people's inner worlds, whether they are universal messengers of emotional meanings, whether there is enough uniformity in our facial movements to categorically determine what we are feeling is a matter of scientific controversy. The answer to such questions is most likely yes and no.

Culture, context, and intention will always play a role as well. But when we look at faces through the prism of "show, don't tell," do we need a definitive answer to such questions? Do we need faces to be explicit and unambiguous messengers? The principle of "show, don't tell" is all about stimulating our imagination and allowing us to make our own interpretations, and faces certainly provide clues that do exactly that.

Faces and cinema

Let us presume that there are five images in front of us, a wide shot of a forest, an exterior shot of a house, a full-figure shot of a person, a shot of a knife on a table, and a shot of a face. After we scan all the images, it is most likely that we will focus most and longest on the shot of a face.

Faces can capture our attention like a magnet. And it is certainly no secret that intriguing faces are what cinema is all about. Faces that have an X-factor, a real screen presence, a gravitational pull. Faces that resonate in uncanny ways, that get under our skin and strike a nerve deep inside us.

Protagonists of documentary films are not acting, or not supposed to act. And most people, when not acting, try to reveal only very little about their inner world. I would consider that genuine and honest behaviour. Naturally, we all try to protect our vulnerabilities and keep most of our personal thoughts and feelings to ourselves.

The same applies to the protagonists of my film "I'm in so-called recording mode", even though they are themselves filmmakers. However, since their professional habitat is behind the camera, the space in front of was somewhat intimidating - as it is for most people - causing them to be cautious and keep their guard up.

Close-ups of faces

"Good close-ups are lyrical; it is the heart, not the eye, that has perceived them"¹¹⁹

— Béla Balázs

A close-up is a unique cinematic device, one of the most effective tools that film has at its disposal. In fact, early film theorists such as the Hungarian writer and poet Béla

¹¹⁹ Balázs, Béla quoted by Walters, Patrick, Portland Community College, *Closer and Closer: On Close-Ups in Film* (2020), <https://www.pcc.edu/harts/2020/05/03/closer-and-closer-on-close-ups-in-film/>, Accessed 2 January 2023

Balázs¹²⁰ believed that the close-up of the face is what distinguishes cinema from other performing arts, especially theatre, for it allows audiences to experience performers' faces from an unprecedented proximity. "The close-up is the technical precondition for the art of facial expression and hence of the higher art of film in general,"¹²¹ Balázs felt.

A close-up of a face has the effect of a magnifying glass, allowing the audience a deep look into the protagonist's eyes.

It offers an intimate point of view that exposes even the most fleeting facial muscle contractions, the most subtle of wrinkles and marks. A perspective on the face that would hardly be available under normal circumstances.

Sooner or later everyone lets their guard down, if only for a brief moment. And the close-up of a face gives viewers means to be right in front of it when it happens, to witness even the smallest signs of surfacing emotions.

Figures in a facial landscape

A hint of a smile, a tiny tremor of the eyes, a blushing of the skin, raising of the eyebrows, dilation of the pupils - subtle facial muscle contractions become figures in a facial landscape that point to an emotion or perhaps an unspoken thought, to something going on inside the protagonists.

Moreover, these muscle movements are often performed without us thinking about them. They often bypass our conscious thought. They are a way we express ourselves without saying anything directly.

¹²⁰ Béla Balázs, born August 4, 1884 as Herbert Béla Bauer in Szeged, Austria-Hungary, died May 17, 1949 in Budapest, was a Hungarian film critic, writer and poet. His two works, *Visible Man* (1924) and *The Spirit of Film* (1930), are available in English as Balázs, Béla, *Early Film Theory: 'Visible Man' and 'The Spirit of Film'*, Berghahn Books - 1st edition 2011

¹²¹ Balázs, Béla quoted by Noël Carroll in "Béla Balázs: The Face of Cinema." *October*, vol. 148, 2014, pp. 53–62. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24586619>. Accessed 2 January 2023.

The unseen

When looking at a close-up of a face we are also looking at something we cannot see. Yes, we see a face under a magnifying glass, but the countless tiny muscle movements that now become visible suggest that there is an invisible energy behind the face, a soul behind the eyes.

Close-ups of faces have the unique quality to expose an otherwise invisible emotional terrain. The tiniest of twitches become visible and we begin to sense the depth of what lies beyond.

The magnetism of close-ups of faces, it seems to me, derives from what they hide from us. The allure of what lies "behind". The temptation of the uncertain. The seductive power of ambiguity that makes us crave to find out more.

Profiles



Jolanta Dylewska in
"I'm in so-called recording mode"

The profile compositions in "I'm in so-called recording mode" are conceived to deny viewers full access. They are conceived to prevent faces from being fully visible, fully exposed.

Denying viewers full access to faces aims to create a want for more, a want to find out what is kept in background, kept in uncertainty. After all, a key aspect of "show,

don't tell" is "don't". Do not give viewers everything they want. Do not serve information on a silver platter. Do not be too explicit. Although I offer viewers the opportunity to look at faces as if through a magnifying glass, the profile shots help to avoid revealing everything all at once.

During our conversations, the protagonists often move their heads unexpectedly. Something moves them to do so, an inner energy, an excitement, a sensation. Then parts of the profile are revealed that is not facing the camera. In this way, it is the emotions of the protagonists that determine how much of their faces is revealed and when.

Silence

Silence is the most revealing arena for facial expressions. When we exchange glances with another person, when we connect with someone silently, when energy flows between us but we do not speak, it is often our eyes and facial muscles that voice our feelings and intentions.

In interviews people often pack their feelings and intentions into words which keeps their facial expression somewhat restrained. The close-up, therefore, is a way to bring to the foreground even the most subtle of facial movements, the silent whisper behind their eyes.

Engagement

A close-up of a face, especially of a profile, is always an excerpt, an isolated piece in the foreground suggestive of a larger picture beyond. It is always a vehicle for a particular meaning that points to a more complex one. To make sense of that greater meaning, viewers must be attentive and use their imagination.

"I'm in so-called recording mode" asks viewers to take in what is being said in its interviews, and at the same time to engage with its imagery. With detailed and at the same time mysterious facial landscapes. That way, I intend to align viewers with the film's protagonists and stitch them right into the moment on screen.

Moreover, as viewers interpret what is being revealed and imagine what is being kept out of sight they project their own feelings and beliefs, their own personal meanings onto the screen. In this way, facial landscapes of protagonists allow viewers to delve into the depths of their own inner world.

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

"I'm in so-called recording mode" interviews three prominent figures from the Lodz Film School about their approach to filmmaking and teaching young filmmakers.

The heart of a school is its students. It is in them that all teaching approaches and philosophies of their teachers are best reflected. Therefore, in order to offer viewers an indirect perspective on the protagonists, it was important for me to also give them an idea of the students they train.

Filmmaking students, however, are well aware of the exposing effect that documentary film can have, so it is not surprising that they would rather operate behind the camera than in front of it. I therefore assumed that it would be a difficult task for me to get students to participate in my film and open up in front of the camera. Besides, I was concerned that asking them anyway might result in half-hearted participation that would make students feel uncomfortable, self-conscious, and perhaps even embarrassed.

A funny camera

The question that arose for me was: How can I counteract the students' insecurities? How can I get them to put aside their caution and reluctance? What approach would not scare and intimidate them? How can I get them interested in participating in my film?

I decided to film students with a Sony camera from the 1990s. A camera that records on miniDV tapes. A camera that was popular in the sub-culture of skateboarding

at the time. A camera that looks more like a toy compared to the professional cameras students themselves work with.

The camera we used immediately sparked questions, smiles and interest. It immediately broke the ice. Students were not afraid of it because they did not deem it professional. In fact, students thought that it was a "funny camera". It made students drop their guard right from the outset.

Objects

Another question that arose was how to give viewers an idea of students - and by extension, the teachers who educate them - in an evocative way.

Applying some of the findings of my research, I decided to focus on physical tasks and objects. As I argued in the first section of this thesis, objects can provide a great deal of indirect information about the protagonists they belong to (e.g., Hank's cardboard suitcase, Angelo's typewriter, various objects in McQueen's "Hunger").

Approaching students with a disarming camera, I asked them to show me the objects they carry in their pockets.



One student, for example, carries an "interesting" item in his pocket. A small cube that has different properties on each side. On one side a small wheel can be rotated, on another is a small switch, on yet another are knobs, and so on. Each of its sides allows for a different tactile sensation. He uses the cube to click and touch something during theoretical lectures. Keeping his hands busy allows him to be more attentive and able to stay focused.

Another student revealed a colourful purse. A gift from his sister to challenge his masculinity. With a big smile he said that he liked the purse very much and that it would not affect his feelings of manliness in any way.

In yet another scene, a student shows us a cell phone case that does not really fit the phone.... In a GSM store she asked for the cheapest case. A "guy" showed it to her but suggested that it was so ugly that no one would ever buy it, so she could have it for free. Now it is her phone case and, although it does not fit and covers the camera, she likes it a lot.

In section one of this thesis, I explored how Judith Weston's methods - intended for working with actors - can be used in documentaries. The application of these findings has been very valuable for my work on "I'm in so-called recording mode".

The individual objects that students carry in their pockets take on the role of details that point to a larger picture of who they might be, what their lives might look like. As Weston maintains, "Objects of a person's life are very defining of who she is" (see: Section One of this thesis). And as viewers engage their imagination to get an idea of these individual characters, a still bigger picture emerges, a picture of what the Lodz Film School and its teaching approach might look like, hopefully.

Meanings of objects

An "interesting" cube which keeps fingers busy suggests a person with a somewhat restless nature. Someone who likes to solve problems, someone who likes to probe, someone who is constantly looking for solutions. Very fitting character traits for a filmmaker.

Living in two apartments at the same time, but being at home in neither, is indicative of what filmmakers' lives are often like.

Moreover, describing a "dying apartment in class" provides viewers with indirect information as to how classes at the Lodz Film School might look like.

A young man who owns and is proud of a purple, flowered purse suggests a community of open-minded artists who do not shy away from openly confronting stereotypes.

Using and appreciating a cell phone case that does not really fit is perhaps the most symbolic revelation of all. For how many artists have the feeling of being outsiders, the impression that they somehow fail to fit in? Moreover, the story about the student's interaction with the "guy" in the GSM store points to a certain attitude, a certain approach that the student takes to heart. Namely, the contact with other people. To openly engage with another person, to be genuinely interested in her or him is a fundamental aspect of filmmaking. An aspect that is deeply rooted in the Lodz Film School's DNA and touches every part of the education it offers.

Being in the moment

Pulling items out of their pockets and presenting them to the camera also allowed the students to relax. Starting with questions when filming someone can often block people, because most of us are nervous about not being able to answer, about not saying what we actually mean, about not being clever and genuine. Focussing on a physical task and simple objects that belonged to them immediately made students feel at ease. It injected a touch of fun into the situations, made them drop their guard and be themselves. As Judith Weston noted, "Objects are a wonderful way to bring actors into the moment, out of their head" (see: Section One of this thesis).

Comments by students

"'Authenticity' is highly sought after in today's media environment, but impossible to approximate: a real, felt reaction is undeniable, and audiences can't help but respond."¹²²

— Elle Hunt in The Guardian

¹²² Hunt, Elle, The Guardian, 'English flirting': Dimoldenberg v Garfield is real magic (2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/jan/21/english-flirting-amelia-dimoldenberg-v-andrew-garfield-is-real-magic>. Accessed 23 January 2023

Getting anyone to be authentic and share their genuine, honest and spontaneous opinion requires a certain atmosphere, a certain mood and conditions. The approach with a "funny" camera and the showcasing of objects from students' pockets helped to set the tone. Students did not feel the pressure to say something serious or significant. As a result they do not pose in front of the camera. They do not try to answer "well".

Their comments often feel somewhat random, accidental, even silly. But it is precisely their spontaneity and imperfection that make them seem truthful and genuine.

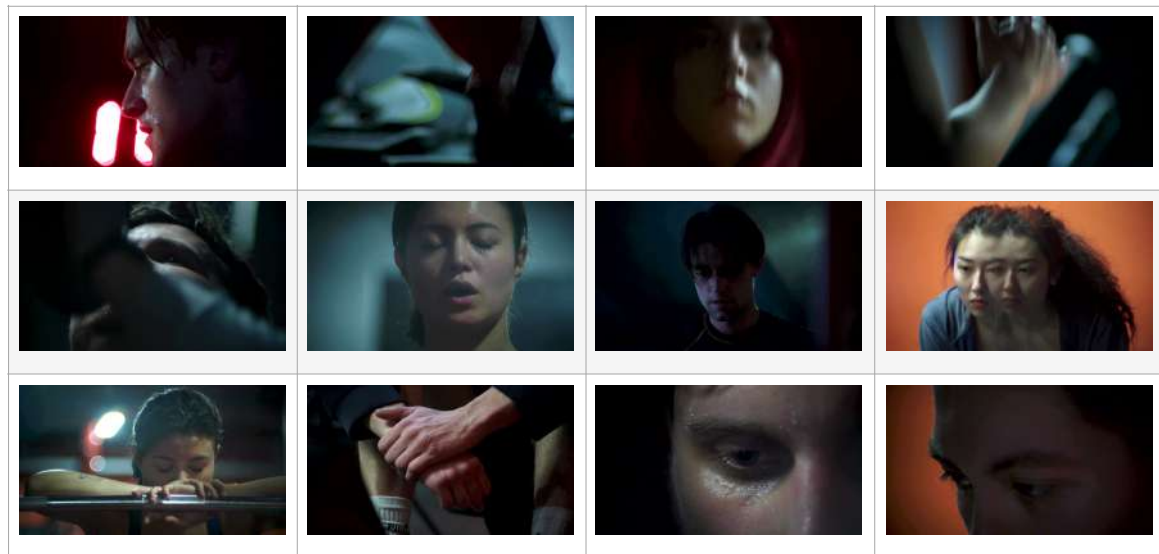
Furthermore, while editing the scenes with the students, I did not avoid to show some of the trials and errors of us, the filmmakers. In some cases, I included parts in which the camera tries to find a frame, the right focus, or tries out different filters during a scene.

As I argue in Section One of this thesis, imperfections, accidents and so-called silly moments can often be moving and inspiring because they reveal a moment that is unexpected, a moment of unfiltered truth.

Thoughtful commentary and polished footage, on the other hand, can often feel explicit and thus lame and boring.

In "I'm in so-called recording mode", authentic reactions and comments from students serve as a stimulus, as indirect information that gives rise to an image not only of who they are, but also of their teachers and the school as a whole.

GYM SEQUENCES



Pain, sweat and tears

The scenes of students working out focus mainly on their legs, hands, faces, profiles or eyes. Sometimes these body parts are out of focus or captured in extreme close-ups.

Instead of explicitly telling the audience about the hardships and strains that filmmakers often go through when working on a film, I aim to offer the audience images that allow them to experience for themselves. Ambition, determination, fear, loneliness, stress, commitment, responsibility, constant judgement by others and adrenaline - these experiences often accompany film students and filmmakers.

With the gym sequences, I aim to add darker tones to the overall picture of the creative process. Just as sweat and tears slowly seep through skin, I intend to allow a more complex truth to slowly seep through the screen.

Contrasting visual approaches

The camcorder recordings capture students in a way that is so spontaneous and unobtrusive that it seems almost accidental. In contrast, the conversations with lecturers

are carefully arranged and filmed in a studio with two professional cameras and anamorphic lenses. The gym sequences on the other hand, filmed with a vintage Angénieux zoom lens, contrast both, the spontaneous sequences with students and the arranged interviews. The tension and dynamic that develops between these contrasting visual approaches aims to catch viewers off guard and draw them deeper into the world of the film school and explore for themselves the challenges that filmmaking entails.

SECTION 3: 'SHOW, DON'T TELL' AS A DIDACTIC APPROACH

"Learning starts when the teaching stops."¹²³

— Otto Salomon

"Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn. The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than learning. His conduct, therefore, often produces the impression that we properly learn nothing from him, if by "learning" we now suddenly understand merely the procurement of useful information. The teacher is ahead of his apprentices in this alone, that he still has far more to learn than they—he has to learn to let them learn. The teacher must be capable to be far more teachable than his apprentices. The teacher is far less assured of his ground than those who learn are of theirs. If the relation between the teacher and the thought is genuine, therefore, there is never a place in it for the authority of the know-it-all or the authoritative sway of the official."¹²⁴

— Martin Heidegger

"I think, a condition where you know everything and proceed to do your job is not very attractive."¹²⁵

— Leszek Dawid

¹²³ Solomon, Otto, GoogleBooks, *The Impact and Legacy of Educational Sloyd: Head and hands in harness*, https://www.google.pl/books/edition/The_Impact_and_Legacy_of_Educational_Slo/jXK_AAAAQBAJ?hl=pl&gbpv=1&dq=Learning+starts+when+the+teaching+stops+Otto+Salomon&pg=PT207&printsec=fro ntcover, Accessed 20 October 2022

¹²⁴ Peters, Michael A. (edited by), *Heidegger, Education, and Modernity*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, page 2.

¹²⁵ Dawid, Leszek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded December 2022, authorised translation, author's archive.

“I share with them my experience, my doubts. I never give them ready-made solutions, because I don’t really have any myself.¹²⁶
— Jarosław Kamiński

MY APPROACH TO TEACHING AT THE LODZ FILM SCHOOL

The main focus of education at the Polish National Film School in Lodz is to teach students practical skills, to encourage and develop their individuality, to make them aware of ethical questions, to instil in them positive social attitudes and to broaden their horizons.

The first-year directing documentary program, created by Grażyna Kędziaławska, which I myself completed as a student and in which I am now involved as a lecturer, introduces first-year students of the directing department to the art of documentary filmmaking.

Its overall objective is to enable students to transfer their perceptions of a given reality to the screen by filtering it through their individual skills, perspectives and sensibilities.

To implement this goal, the program aims to make students aware of the world around them and to awaken in them a genuine curiosity of other people. To this purpose, students are encouraged to let go of preconceived assumptions and to look at people without judging them.

The program is conceived in such a way as to allow students to get to know themselves, their weaknesses and strengths. Further, it fosters an atmosphere that encourages students to be patient and to approach their protagonists and topics gently and gradually. Moreover, it promotes the principle of reciprocity and encourages students to give something of themselves to their protagonists in order to receive something from them in return. The program encourages students to explore one topic

¹²⁶ Kamiński, Jarosław in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded August 2022, authorized translation, author's archive

from their protagonists' lives in depth, rather than covering a wide range of topics superficially.

Every aspect of the program is geared toward encouraging students to develop a cinematic view of the world, a cinematic perspective that progresses from simply recording people and situations to filming meanings. In doing so, it helps students navigate the three most essential aspects of filmmaking: the content, their personal motivation, and the form that is best suited to what they seek to express.

Above all, the program encourages students to explore their own cinematic language and develop their own voice as filmmakers.

Transfer of knowledge

The way in which knowledge is conveyed plays an important role in achieving the aforementioned educational goals.

Therefore, in what follows, I will share insights into my approach to working with filmmaking students. An approach influenced by Grażyna Kędziałowska as well as by, among others, the protagonists of my doctoral film "I'm in so-called recording mode". What is more, my way of pursuing the program's objectives is guided by the principle of "show, don't tell".

In putting my approach forward, I hope to offer a source of inspiration for the implementation of other programs aimed at training aspiring filmmakers.

Information vs. experience

"It's not about me knowing something and telling you, it's about finding out and discovering it for oneself, experiencing it for oneself and beginning to understand."¹²⁷

— Leszek Dawid

¹²⁷ Dawid, Leszek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded December 2022, authorised translation, author's archive.

My approach as filmmaker and teacher is to avoid any form of simply presenting information that concludes “this is how it is,” because there are no standard solutions to many of the problems we face. In my view of the world, there is no “that’s the way it is,” because it always depends on the individual sensibility and vulnerability of each viewer or student to find for themselves the answers that work best for them.

And although as the person running the program I have experience in dealing with many of the issues that arise, my only intention is to share that experience with my students, not to impose it on them.

The concept of the first-year directing documentary program lends itself well to such an approach, as it is built around practical exercises and group discussions that allow students to gain and reflect on their own experiences, rather than merely consuming the experiences of their tutors.

By working on practical exercises and discussing the results, students themselves become the principal protagonists in the information-creation process. It is above all their own decisions that have an impact on the goal they are pursuing, thus giving it emotional weight.

Encouraging mistakes

“You have to crash with some subject matter sometimes, because if you don’t crash, and don’t get that bump on the head, you won’t know.”¹²⁸

— Jacek Bławut

It is no secret that learning and growing is a result of making mistakes. But that is easier said than done, for no one wants to make mistakes. Students try everything they can to avoid any stumble or failure. We are all probably wired that way. Therefore, teaching, it seems to me, should be all about encouraging mistakes. Teaching needs to make students feel that mistakes are a good thing and engage them in a mindset where

¹²⁸ Bławut, Jacek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded July 2022, authorised translation, author’s archive.

mistakes are welcome and accepted. One has to instil in students a certain enthusiasm for making mistakes, to infect them with an appetite that makes them want to get going in order to get it wrong.

Practical exercises set the stage for them to make mistakes - mistakes that disappoint them, anger them, and hopefully inspire them to try again.

Mistakes are not only experiences that have the potential to leave a lasting impression; more than that, the way we deal with mistakes sheds light on what is important to us, how much of what we have tried to do is actually ours, and to what extent it matters to us. Some mistakes motivate us to try again, others encourage us to change direction.

Therefore, engaging students in practical exercises that inevitably lead them to make their own mistakes, and using group discussion to draw their attention to the mistakes of their classmates, heightens their awareness of avenues available to documentary film directors. More often than not, examining the flaws inherent in both the students' own and each other's choices evokes questions about, the topic they chose, the means they applied to express it, and whether or not there might be another solution more in tune with their intentions, their skills, or their character. Solutions that are perhaps more reflective of their own individual artistic voice. Choices that reflect what makes them tick as individuals.

Beyond that, analysing their own and each other's mistakes and solutions allows students to be active participants in the learning process and contribute to sharpening and expanding their own awareness as filmmakers.

Listening

“[I think it is very important] that one is curious about what the students are saying, rather than being curious about what one is saying oneself.”¹²⁹

— Paweł Edelman

¹²⁹ Edelman, Paweł in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded March 2023, authorised translation, author's archive.

“Teaching is quite demanding, but on the other hand I get enthusiasm for it from the students I meet. It's like this job is all about exchange. New generations come, and you learn from those generations, you learn what they have to say.”¹³⁰

— Leszek Dawid

One of my most important tools to working with students is listening. In order to encourage students to explore their own voices as filmmakers, I am one of the first that has to be able to listen to that voice.

As I focus on them and not myself, I aim to instil in them the confidence to open up and bring their own thoughts and reflections to the surface. Moreover, by constantly encouraging students to speak up and comment, I aim to get them in the habit of confronting their work and perspectives, and thereby becoming aware of themselves, their motivations and intentions.

When analysing exercises, I often ask questions about what the students originally intended to express, what they achieved or did not achieve and why. Follow up questions evoke reflections as to what worked in the particular exercise and makes them more aware of what lessons they can take away from it.

Beyond stimulating group discussions with questions, I usually prefer to be a listener, a witness to what emerging filmmakers are sharing. And listening is often an enlightening and inspiring experience for me. For these discussions tend to evolve into vivid exchanges that allow me to learn a great deal about students' sensibilities, their individual views of the world, and also about myself. Thus, we all learn from each other.

¹³⁰ Dawid, Leszek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded December 2022, authorised translation, author's archive.

Recognition

“When the other person feels that you are curious about them, then they open up. It's all about noticing that people are not ghosts around you [...]”¹³¹

— Jacek Bławut

One of the most significant conditions for any person to open-up and explore their vulnerabilities is self-esteem. Trust in ones own worth. Students open up when they feel that they are being listened to, when they feel that their voice counts.

Moreover, I am genuinely interested in students and try to treat them like people who bring as much to the table as I do, if not more. I am interested in their habits or interests, their style of dress or musical preferences, the team they support or the country their grandparents immigrated from. For me, it is the small details that often matter the most.

Being noticed as more than just one of many, more than just a passerby, is often just a small token of appreciation, but these small moments can have a significant impact. Small experiences of recognition encourage us to believe in ourselves.

Furthermore, when someone stops on their path to acknowledge another person rather than looking at them from a distance we feel that our own individuality matters to someone, which in return makes it easier for us to open up and trust. For when we feel noticed, we feel worthy. And when we feel worthy, we feel encouraged to come out of our shell. A good starting point for allowing ourselves to being perceptive and creative.

Paying attention to small and seemingly insignificant details cannot only instil in students the confidence to recognise and embrace their own individuality, but also sharpen their awareness of it. After all, it is their own individuality that should be at the heart of their filmmaking.

¹³¹ Bławut, Jacek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded July 2022, authorised translation, author's archive.

Authenticity

“There is something else, something one can sense. Honesty. Authenticity. That you're not pretending to be somebody, posing or putting on an act for the students. Because everybody is looking at you here. What should a professor, a lecturer be like? I just show up to meet [with students], to talk to them.”¹³²

— Jacek Bławut

“Respect is earned, not imposed. There are Coaches with whom we've won titles. A Coach's ability to manage the dressing room is more important than their knowledge.”¹³³

— Sergio Ramos

Another pivotal aspect of any creative work is honesty. A filmmaker who aims to create work that touches an audience and resonates with them needs to be truthful.

For their work to be truthful students need to be in tune with themselves. Their story, their motivation to tell that story and the form they choose to express it must correspond with each other and with what makes the filmmaker tick. In other words, their work must be authentic. And for a work of art to be authentic, its author ought also to be authentic.

In order to sensitise students to truthfulness and authenticity, I try not to hide any of my own mistakes, flaws, or failures. I try not to play the role of a knowledgeable teacher who passes down information. I build horizontal relationships with my students that allow them to reveal their own questions, doubts and weaknesses.

¹³² Bławut, Jacek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded July 2022, authorised translation, author's archive.

¹³³ Ramos, Sergio, Football Espana Net, *Real Madrid's Sergio Ramos on Antonio Conte reports: 'Respect is earned, not imposed'* by livio, <https://www.football-espana.net/2018/10/28/real-madrids-sergio-ramos-on-antonio-conte-reports-respect-is-earned-not-imposed>. Accessed 12 October 2022.

In fact, I often share with students that I do not know more than they do, because I often do not, but that they can count on me to help them figure something out for themselves.

Paradoxically, sharing one's imperfections with students often sparks confidence in their own artistic abilities and ideas.

Safety and creativity

“School is the moment when you can allow yourself to experiment and be brave. It's where you have the chance to explore yourself, and in my opinion, it's about creating that space of safety so that as a student you can try things out.”¹³⁴

— Leszek David

For students, who are constantly tasked with opening up and filtering ideas through their authentic selves, it is especially important that they feel safe. But often it is precisely a certain sense of security that gets in the way of creativity.

Therefore, I make sure that students have an ally in me. Someone who represents the school's side, while also being someone whom they can trust. I aim to be an ally who does not judge their individual shortcomings and doubts and who does not punish them for trying unconventional ideas while finding their own way.

On the contrary, I even encourage students to venture into the unfamiliar, embrace the uncomfortable, and take chances. Education, especially in the creative arts, is all about exploring uncharted territory, for when we stay within the confines of our comfort zone, we do not gain new experiences and we do not grow.

However, it is of great importance that students themselves have the desire to try something new. That they themselves have the urge to explore the unfamiliar. They themselves have to make their own individual attempt at discomfort. I see it as my role to sometimes give them a little push, but they have to do the walking themselves.

¹³⁴ Dawid, Leszek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded December 2022, authorised translation, author's archive.

Intuition

“Reason protects you from disaster, but nothing more. Intuition allows you to break away, to go into the unknown, to explore [...]. Reason says: Be careful, you've never been there, it could end badly, and intuition says: trust yourself, you'll see, you'll discover something unusual, you'll see something you didn't know [...].”¹³⁵

— Jacek Bławut

“Following one's intuition is being courageous. And as long as you are courageous, you live, you create.”¹³⁶

— Jacek Bławut

Most of us see in being creative something positive. A way to express and fulfil ourselves. A way to make a contribution. We are in awe of artists and often view them as an inspiration for our own lives.

What we tend to forget, however, is that at the foundation of all creative work are ideas. Good ideas, ideas that one believes in. Ideas that one really wants to work for and be committed to. Such ideas are not easy to come by. I would even go so far as to argue that the more we try to have a good idea, a really good idea, the harder it seems to be to find one. For students who are constantly facing the task of handing in creative work, this can be a relentless experience.

But there is hope, as always. For where we all lack good ideas, we have plenty of gut feeling. Intuition. And our intuition is always there for us. We just have to listen to it.

If our intuition is notable for anything, it is for making little obvious sense, for it quite often contradicts general expectations. Our own as well as those of our environment. What our intuition suggests to us, one could almost say, often does not

¹³⁵ Bławut, Jacek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded July 2022, authorised translation, author's archive.

¹³⁶ Bławut, Jacek in conversation with Martin Rath, recorded July 2022, authorised translation, author's archive.

sound like a good idea. And that is why we so rarely listen. Too rarely, I would argue. For it is precisely these suggestions, which contradict expectations, that often are "good ideas". We are just not aware of it yet, and therefore somewhat fearful of them.

For this very reason, I encourage students to listen to their intuition, to the voice of their guts, their belly, however inappropriate and inconvenient the message of that voice may be. To listen to it and to follow through with it. To make an attempt at finding out what is behind it.

When we follow our intuition, we must accept that the outcome will be unpredictable and take a fair amount of risk. Intuition does not always take us where we want to be in the end. Therein lies its appeal, but also its downside.

The potential reward lies in creating work that breaks new ground, work we initially could hardly "have thought of."

The risk is that we often stumble when following a misty trail. But then, the risk is also an advantage. Because stumbling means making mistakes. And as we all know, by making mistakes we learn and grow.

Therefore, I often ask students about their gut feelings, about what their intuition whispers to their ears. By taking an interest in their intuition, I aim to sensitise students to be curious about their instincts, about their inner voice, and to pay attention to it. I encourage them to be brave and embrace that inner voice, to follow it and find out where it takes them.

Defusing pressure

"I was struck by how often they [the students] asked themselves questions: Won't what I say be trivial? Isn't what I am doing naive because it has already been done before?"¹³⁷

— Bronka Nowicka

¹³⁷ Nowicka, Bronka, *Magazyn Filmowy* nr 134, *Porozmawiajmy o edukacji filmowej* (Let's talk about film education) by Dagmara Romanowska, October 2022, p. 35 (translation by Martin Rath).

“I think the best way to a good idea is to start with a silly one. Once something is said out loud it immediately means something else.”¹³⁸

— Jacek Bławut

A few of the constant companions of the creative process are: feelings of uncertainty, of losing sight of one's intentions, the feeling of no longer knowing whether one actually has something to say or why, the fear of being a disappointment, of not being ready yet, of not being sure after all, the anxiety of not being understood, of no longer understanding oneself, the dread that nothing makes sense anymore or that nothing has meaning. As bitter and shocking as it may sound, these are also the companions of my students, who are constantly required to submit creative work.

In order to unblock the creative process that for any of the aforementioned reasons got stuck, I often encourage them to start with a ridiculous idea.

To ask students to come up with “anything” is too abstract a task, precisely because they often feel that they have nothing to say anymore, nothing at all. But to come up with a ridiculous idea is a specific task. A task that can be fun. A task that can often put them back on the path of enjoying creativity.

Especially when we feel blocked or lost, coming up with silly ideas often has an extraordinary ability to restart us imagining again.

Silly ideas are an excellent stimulus because they can shake things up and break them open. Silly ideas trigger more ideas, new ideas, ideas that may not be so silly after all.

What is more, coming up with silly ideas bypasses our expectations to say something worthwhile. It defuses the pressure we often feel to express something relevant or meaningful. Unleashing our imagination inevitably leads us to tap into our unconscious, to move into areas that are part of us, that occupy us.

Besides, silly ideas often lead to questions, which can be a useful compass for exploring interests and themes close to the students’ hearts.

¹³⁸ Bławut, Jacek in conversation with Angelika Cygal, recorded November 2022, authorised translation, author's archive.

Handing out matches

The program, which I am involved in implementing, tasks students with producing creative works - short film exercises - that introduce them to the fundamentals of documentary film directing. These exercises are geared toward engaging students in experiences that allow them to explore their own voices as filmmakers and test their own ways of making documentaries.

For this reason, my teaching is not so much about imparting information and knowledge to students, but about guiding them to extract that knowledge from themselves.

Therefore, my work with students is all about me asking questions and listening to their answers. Questions that generate stimuli. Questions that put a match in their hand and encourage them to use it.

SECTION 4: RESISTING CONCLUSIONS

“The moment you conclude something, by definition, you end thinking about it.”¹³⁹

— Bennett Miller

For my future as a filmmaker and film educator, working on this dissertation has been a revealing experience. It has made me realise that the “show, don't tell” approach to filmmaking and teaching requires a certain mindset, a certain attitude towards readers, listeners and viewers. It requires one's refusal to tell others “this is how it is”. It requires one's refusal to approach others from the perspective of the one who knows more or better. It requires one's refusal to engage in vertical relationships.

Putting ourselves first and claiming our status in front of an audience, our status as providers of information, as those who “know,” who have experience, can make our lives a little more steady and predictable, a little more convenient. But it also makes our lives a little less interesting, a little less inspiring, a little less fulfilling and a little less memorable.

Working on my film essay “I am in so-called recording mode” has expanded my perspective of teaching the creative process and deepened my understanding of students and myself. It allowed me to realise that it is often not the explicit information about a person that enables me to form a picture of their inner self. Rather, it seems to be the small details, such as a seemingly banal habit, an object in a pocket, an unintentional comment, a piece of clothing, a hidden talent, a random thought or a spontaneous idea, that stimulate my imagination about what a person's inner world might be like.

More than that, working on my film essay made me realise that noticing others - the little things that make them special - and spending what is sometimes just a tiny moment with them is what makes me want to get out of bed in the morning. Indeed,

¹³⁹ Miller, Bennett quoted by Swietek, Frank, OneGuysOpinion, *Bennett Miller on “Foxcatcher”* (2014), <https://www.oneguysopinion.com/bennett-miller-on-foxcatcher/>, Accessed 20 May 2023

that is what makes me feel alive, what makes me "tick". Not just as a filmmaker and teacher, but as Martin Rath.

Besides working on my dissertation and film essay I have guided directing students in the process of making their first-year documentary films. A task that gave me the opportunity to question my assumptions and develop them further. I am still at the beginning of my journey and I am looking forward to the process ahead.

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