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#### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

*The principal purpose of **p.o.v.** is to provide a framework for collaborative publication for those of us who study and teach film at the Department of Information and Media Studies at the University of Aarhus. We will also invite contributions from colleagues in other departments and at other universities. Our emphasis is on collaborative projects, enabling us to combine our efforts, each bringing his or her own point of view to bear on a given film or genre or theoretical problem. Consequently, the reader will find in each issue a variety of approaches to the film or question at hand – approaches which complete rather than compete with one another.*

*Every March issue of **p.o.v.** is devoted to the short fiction film.*

# p.o.u.

Number 11, March 2001

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**Petri Kotwica**

*Las Nueve Vidas*

(Finland, 2000)





## ***Las Nueve Vidas***

Petri Kotwica

(Finland, 2000), 4 minutes, 35 mm, color

### **Principal credits**

Director	Petri Kotwica
Screenplay	Tero Jartti
Cinematographer	Kari Sohlberg
Editor	Petri Kotwica
Sound editor	Kyösti Vöntänen
Production	Gnu Films

### **Lead role**

Martti Suosalo

### **Fiction filmography and awards**

1993 **Panodrama / Panodraama** 16 mm, color, 10 min

1994 **Mother Dearest/ Viiniä, rakas äiti** 16 mm, color, 15 min

1996 **Tunnel Vision / Tunneli** 16 mm, b/w, 47 min

Jury Prize, Tampere International Film Festival, 1997

Jury Award, Kettupäivät, 1996

International Discoveries, Mannheim-Heidelberg, 1997

1998 **The Helmet / Kypärä** 16 mm, color, 22 min

Jury Award, Kettupäivät, 1998

1999 **Force Majeure** 35mm, color, 28 min

Jury Award in directing, Tampere International Film Festival,

1999

2000 **Las Nueve Vidas** 35mm, color, 4 min

### **Petri Kotwica**

After studying drama, philosophy and communication at the University of Helsinki, Petri Kotwica enrolled in a degree program in directing and screenwriting at the Helsinki University of Art and Design, earning his Master's Degree in film directing in 1999. He has also studied directing actors at the Finnish Theatre Academy. His first feature film, *Black Ice*, is currently in preproduction.



## A shot-by-shot reconstruction of Petri Kotwica's *Las Nueve Vidas*

Richard Raskin



**Shot 1** (43 sec.) We see a rhythmic movement of maracas and of the bodies of the two beautiful women who are shaking them, as we hear the music played by a Latin band in a dancehall. As the camera tracks back from the bandstand, we see the base player who, in contrast to the smiling women, seems preoccupied by something.



**Shot 1 (cont.)** The camera continues tracking back, into the crowd of dancers.



**Shot 1 (cont.)** When the band finishes playing its number, the public applauds.



**Shot 2** (7 sec.) The band members take a bow, the base player looking even more worried than before.



**Shot 3** (26 sec.) Outside the dancehall, some people are practicing their dance steps, as the base player runs down a wooden staircase and toward the outdoor toilets. He tries to run into the open door of the men's toilet, without realizing that there is a long line of men waiting their turn. They send him away.



**Shot 4** (10 sec.) He runs down a slope and unzips his pants, preparing to pee, only to discover that he is standing over a bunch of women who are relieving themselves.



**Shot 5** (21 sec.) He runs out onto an icy surface and begins to pee up against a stick with a little red flag on it.



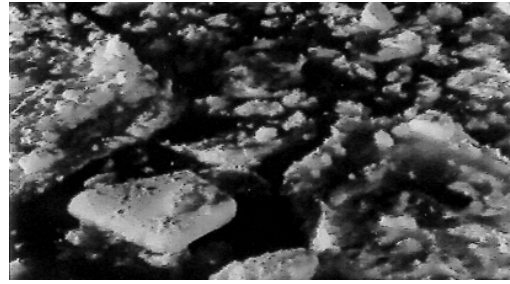
**Shot 5 (cont.)**  
He turns and sees a large passenger ship passing nearby, seemingly only meters from where he is standing.



**Shot 6** (16 sec.)



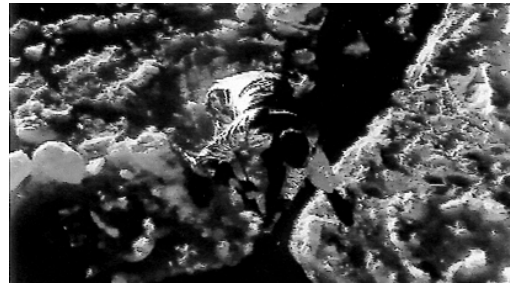
**Shot 6 (cont.)**



**Shot 7 (4 sec.)** The ice on which he is standing has begun to crack.



**Shot 8 (9 sec.)** He holds onto the stick for dear life.



**Shot 9 (9 sec.)** As the ice he is standing on cracks, he loses his footing.



**Shot 10 (20 sec.)** One leg plunges down into the icy water, and when he pulls it out, long fishnet fibers come up with it. As he continues to pull the fibers up, he discovers a fish stuck in them and happily takes it with him.



**Shot 11 (9 sec.)** He runs across the surface of broken chunks of ice, carrying the fish.





**Shot 12** (55 sec.) Back inside the dancehall, the music gets underway once again, and when the base player is within frame, we see that he is smiling radiantly as he plays.



**Shot 12** (cont.) Nearly unable to contain the pleasure he now feels, he turns to look at something: it is the fish, lying on top of the amplifier, and flapping its head and tail a few times.



**Shot 12** (cont.) Smiling at the dancers off camera, he winks flirtatiously at someone as the music continues.



## **An interview with Petri Kotwica on *Las Nueve Vidas***

Richard Raskin

*How did you become involved in the making of Las Nueve Vidas?*

A series of ten short films were to be made about Helsinki in connection with the “European Cities of Culture” program. The production company, Gnu Films, had planned this project for more than a year, and the other nine films were also well on their way... They were all supposed to be filmed in the spring and summer of 1999, and *Las Nueve Vidas* was one of two films that did not yet have directors assigned to them at the beginning of 1999. So Tero Jartti, one of the producers, contacted me two and a half weeks before the first of the ten films was to be shot. He would be directing one of them himself and he showed me the two remaining scripts. And this [*Las Nueve Vidas*] was the only one I could make any sense of at all. So I took it and then began to speculate about what I could do with it, once I had promised to direct.

*And I understand that you changed the original screenplay quite a bit?*

Yes, because all of the films were supposed to run very close to five minutes. And the screenplay that Tero Jartti had written, and that was loosely based on a Finnish short story by Hannu Raittila, “Järngrynnan,” was absolutely too long. If that had been filmed as it was the result would have been at least a twenty-minute film. And I don't think I'm exaggerating at all. So what remains from that Tero Jartti script is the main joke.

*There are few silly questions I wanted to ask. When your main character is out on the ice, was that filmed on location or simulated?*

It was filmed on location.

*Was it dangerous?*

No, there's only one shot that might be seen as dangerous, but that's a stunt man, and he is wearing a diver's suit. And he's a professional life-saver.

*Another silly question. The fish flapping at the end of the film... How did you do that?*

It was supposed to look much more energetic. Anyway, it's of course a dead fish bought at a market. We actually meant to use the ignition motor from a car but it never worked. There was a guy with a car battery and wires behind the amplifier. But we couldn't get it to work as it should have. And if I remember correctly, he only pushes with some metal wire system.

*At the beginning of the film, your main character looks worried as the band plays. And at the end, he can hardly contain his happiness, and even winks at a girl who's off camera. I was wondering: what instructions did you give to your actor as he played his role at those two moments of the film?*

Well, first of all, at the beginning, he's supposed to suffer from the need to relieve himself... But also, you know there's a prejudice about Finnish character or nature: that we are very introverted. The [Spanish] guy has simply not gotten into the Finnish system during his stay. After the journey, getting under the icy surface of the Finnish way of being, he is happy. But of course, the concrete version is that he has to pee, and then he has peed, and even got a fish, and has gotten away [from the dangerous situation] alive. But I

can't remember the instructions I gave the actor, because that was more than a year ago.

*That's OK. What you've just told me is much more interesting than the instructions I was asking about... As you know, I am crazy about this film and it's hard for me to pin down exactly why. I just can't get enough of it, and every time I see it, I like it even more. Can you help me to figure out what is going on in this film that is so appealing?*

First of all, I think it has something to do with the length. And I can't emphasize enough the importance of the actor's capabilities. Every time I've worked with him, something good has resulted.

*Do you have any favorite short films?*

I have to admit that during my years at film school, when I went to festivals, it was almost always a Danish film that impressed me most. The graduation works made at the Danish Film School were excellent both technically and in relation to their stories.

*Is there any advice you would give to student filmmakers about to make their own shorts?*

When I was at film school, I never knew what a short film actually was. That it's important not to choose a story line that is too complex for that form, and that a short is not a compressed feature film.

22 November 2000



## The Finnish Icebreaker

Morten Riis

*Las Nueve Vidas* begins with the Spanish title, two maracas in the same frame as the title, the sound of salsa music, and the cheers of an audience. These four elements give us some idea as to the environment in which the story is about to unfold, and they do so even before we have seen the first picture. The first shot of the film supports the hypothesis that the events in this fiction film could be taking place in Spain or even in South America, because the first thing we see is a band playing the salsa music heard on the soundtrack. The shot is not redundant in relation to the title, but rather anchors the soundtrack and confirms our earlier hypothesis about the location.

To be exact, the first shot doesn't show an entire salsa band playing. Visible from the start are only the hands of three band members. The full picture of these band members and of the rest of the band is revealed afterwards as the camera tracks away from the stage and into the crowd. In the tracking shot we especially take notice of the bass player who is looking uneasy for reasons soon to be revealed. His attitude is contrary to the spontaneous feeling of joy one would naturally associate with almost any kind of live musical performance and perhaps especially with salsa rhythms. The glistening of the 'golden' suit he is wearing further marks his presence in the room, where all the other colors are less dominant. The camera keeps tracking back, revealing more people. Among these are an elderly, almost bald man dancing with a young woman,

a woman dancing with another woman, a man standing with his back to the camera looking at the band, a crewcut man in his late twenties (with a mechanical and awkward dancing style) obviously interested in a blonde girl in a red dress, who is emotionally involved with the music. She is also being watched by another man, who is older than the first and dressed as though he was at a carnival or a New Year's Eve party. She is not taking notice of any of them. The tracking movement has stopped, and so does the music. Everyone turns to applaud the band.

These are highlights from the first of the twelve shots which constitute *Las Nueve Vidas*. We begin with an impression of coherence between text, sound and picture, but as the camera starts tracking, that coherence is questioned by the appearance of various people. Something is not right. Although the people in the audience seem to be having a good time – and therefore fit well in the context – the way their identity is revealed mystifies us somewhat. The tracking camera makes us notice these characters. We do so while wondering why we have been invited to do so. We are given a lot of information through body language and gestures. So instead of a clear introduction, for instance, to the main character of the film, we are introduced to a variety of people, which puts us off as an audience, because we are not sure where the narration is going and which parts of it most deserve our attention.

The second shot confirms with a close-up that the bass player plays a central part in the film. He still has an uneasy expression on his face. However, he thanks the audience for the applause, bows, and rapidly puts his instrument away.

With the following shot, our hypothesis about the location is negated. The film, we now realize, is not set in a warm, southern

part of Europe or America but in a cold, snow-clad Finland, where people obviously just like to wriggle to the music from other parts of the world. That these Finns wish to be somewhere else is understandable on the basis of climate alone.

Some people are dancing in the snow in front of the house where the trumpet player is now having a cigarette on the veranda. Nobody seems to be leaving the place for good, the interruption is only a short break, and people are only going outside to relieve themselves. We don't really know this yet, but another tracking shot of our key figure tells us so. We now know why the bass player, whose 'golden' suit outside looks more like silver, looked so uneasy before, or at least we think we know. Automatically, we try to create coherence between his enigmatic character and his actions. Perhaps we would be right in doing so, but the opposite is also a possibility – not that he doesn't need to relieve himself, this just might not be the whole solution to the enigma that he is.

The truth, which at this point perhaps still seems a bit farfetched, could therefore be that there isn't necessarily any coherence within this series of shots; and if there is, that the coherence primarily arises from the viewer's reading of the film.

The outdoor toilet, to which the bass player goes, is for men only. This was not the case in the room where the concert was held, where both genders were represented as well as different age groups and maybe also different sexual tendencies. With the exception of the 'golden' bass player, who was singled out from the beginning, and some tensions that may or may not exist between some of the other people present, the ballroom seems in some sense to be characterised as a “tolerant” place.

The bass player's urge is obviously so powerful, that he can't wait until the queue of Finnish men between him and the toilet has disappeared, and he therefore tries, without any luck, to skip over the line. The threshold of tolerance has been crossed, the other men send him away, and he has no other option but to relieve himself somewhere else.

Oddly enough, it seems that only men are waiting in line to go to the toilet. There is just one woman waiting her turn in the women's line. Do Finnish women not urinate as much as Finnish men? Are there culturally and nationally defined differences relating to the different ways in which men and women relieve themselves? No matter what the answers to those sociological riddles may be, where are the women? All sorts of questions like these keep popping up, and although this shot ought to clarify some of the problems, the traditional connection between truth on the one hand and clarity and lucidity on the other, is absent. Some coherence and contexts could be claimed to be illuminated in this shot, others continue to be eclipsed or are given to us in impenetrable and obscure connections.

With the fourth shot we are informed of the whereabouts of the women: they are passing water among some trees, which is quite weird considering the short line at the women's toilet and the physical difficulties that this practice involves for women. Without wishing to sound sexist, I would nevertheless suggest that men seem to be better built for this kind of thing. That the women do so anyhow, just emphasizes the reverse and bizarre order of this universe. The rationality of the public toilets is mirrored in the way these women demarcate the area where *they* are peeing, and the bass player, who represents manhood and otherness, is not allowed within this marked-off territory. Neither the males nor the females



accept him on his own terms, and he has to look for a place of his own.

He finds this, an open space with trees in the background, in the fifth shot. This time the shot does not develop as a tracking shot, but the exact place, where he is about to urinate, is immediately shown as another demarcated area. The spot is marked by a small, red flag and even though the bass player is running in the background and the flag is in the foreground, there is, even from the very beginning of the shot, no doubt that this is where he is heading. This scene of the film is a comic highpoint, and it is probably the absurd situation in itself that inspires the laughs. It is absurd that out in the middle of nowhere there should appear a place reserved for him and his waste products. That this place is marked with a flag seems to suggest an intentionality, as though he were meant to do his thing there. The contrast between his impossible situation and the idea of a greater coherence or of destiny creates a cavity, which we fill up with laughter. It is also amusing and maybe absurd, without being unusual, that the bass player - as do most males, by the way - has to pass water *onto* something, as if someone or something had to suffer for his own lack of self-confidence after his previous rejections by males as well as females. While he is in the middle of doing his business, his attention is caught by something off-screen. He looks up, and at this moment, the film's first point-of-view figure has begun.

The next shot shows a big ferry moving forward at great speed. Because the ferry is framed by the picture, it is difficult to notice the zoom-out that the camera performs, but it is likely to be noticed when the bass player appears in what at first appears to be his own point of view. This deviation from the traditional language or logic

of film and of film editing, calls attention to the obviousness of this tradition, and the unproblematic manner in which it works. A similar shot can be found in De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*, where the shot is a unique one because of its contrast to the film's almost self-eclipsing, repressed and realistic form. In contrast to this, *Las Nueve Vidas* demonstrates a general form of exhibitionism, a distinctly reflexive attitude towards the traditional coherence of film editing and - in relation to this - also to film narration.

From this point in the film, that is from shot six to shot eleven, the film's language as well as the main character, skate on thin ice, and among these few shots we find one more "fake" point of view and a match shot which has the same obtrusive effect as a jump cut. Causality hasn't been suspended after all, the ferry still breaks the ice on which the bass player is standing, but the narration of the film is very surprising because new and unknown causes and effects are involved in it. The audience has no way of knowing that the foundation of the place where the bass player passes water is made of ice, and therefore the shot of the ferry takes us by surprise. Form and substance support each other brilliantly, and the formally experimental part of the film supports the narration, too. The surreal fingerprint of the film is not in opposition to the general language of film, but the film establishes a grammar of its own which fits the absurd tale it is telling.

In this unpleasant and dangerous situation in which the bass player has ended, there is, however, still light. At first, everything gets worse. As the ice breaks under his feet, he almost falls in the water and his one leg gets entangled in a fishing net. He nevertheless manages to pull himself up, and he finds, to his great amusement, another creature caught in the net: it is a big fish. As if

he is somehow balanced by this, the bass player cheerfully begins his return to the safe and well-known by jumping from one icefloe to another.

The narrative structure of *Las Nueve Vidas* resembles that of the romantic novel of formation. The story ends where it first began, "home", and between these two points, the key figure goes on a journey into the unknown, so that he can return with wisdom and other goods. The goods often represent wisdom, as in our case the fish represents one of *The Nine Lives* that the bass player originally had at his disposal.

With the last shot the film returns to the interior. We're back at the concert, the dominant colour is red and everything seems to be in better harmony than at the beginning of the film. The film language that opened the short is now used again. We see a tracking shot moving from a "red" woman, who seems to be having a very good time, through the audience and ending with the bass player - the opposite movement of the one that started the film. The bass player's suit has a "golden" look again, and he is looking as if he is now full of energy and in good shape. He is laughing to the audience (to us and to the audience in the film), twinkling with his eye and has his charm turned on. The camera follows his gaze as he looks back, thereby allowing us to see the fish lying on the amplifier and flapping its tale, and the film ends with the picture of him, amused by this remembrance of fate's favour.



## When You've Got to Go, You've Got to Go Aspects of *Las Nueve Vidas*

Heidi Jørgensen and Camilla Elg

*Las Nueve Vidas* (*The Nine Lives*), directed by Petri Kotwica, has a limited narrative scope, namely peeing. The protagonist who is a bass player in a salsa band needs to go for a pee during a job at a party. Not much of a story. According to Peter Brooks – in *Reading for the Plot* – a story is often structured in terms of main plot(s) and detours. He argues that the reader/viewer of the narrative is governed by the urge to know the ending of the story. We are reading for the plot. However, this urge for 'end reading' must be balanced by other energies and therefore, a story consists of 'two antagonistic instincts':

[...] the two antagonistic instincts serve one another in a dynamic interaction that is a complete and self-regulatory economy, which makes both end and detour perfectly necessary and interdependent [...] One must have the arabesque of plot in order to reach the end (Brooks, p. 107).

It is possible to experience *Las Nueve Vidas* as a kind of arabesque or detour *per se*. A detour into a wide range of colourful and beautifully constructed shots, travellings, etc., which we will go into more thoroughly as 'excessive' elements of the film.

This detour, however, can also be regarded as a story in itself which involves essential elements of human life. A story which is structured like a typical 'Bildungsroman' with a dramatic curve of escalating conflict between obstruction and progress: A man needs to pee. He goes through much trouble fulfilling this need. Having

fulfilled it, he is a completely different person. Thus, the film can simultaneously be seen as an existential story of human life and as a small excessive detour, and it is this double quality which creates its subtle irony and makes it amusing. Consequently the film lends itself to two kinds of analysis. The object of this essay is to analyse *Las Nueve Vidas* in these two perspectives.

### **The 'excessive detour'**

The concept of 'cinematic excess' as described by Kristin Thompson is in our view a suitable analytical tool to use in order to explore the aesthetic aspects of *Las Nueve Vidas*. Thompson writes:

Film can be seen as a struggle of opposing forces. Some of these forces strive to unify the work, to hold it together sufficiently that we may perceive and follow its structures. Outside any such structures lie those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces – the 'excess' (Thompson, p. 130).

She is inspired by the essay 'The Third Meaning' by Roland Barthes who argues that the materiality of images transcends the narrative structures of coherence in a film. Thus, both Barthes and Thompson claim the existence of aesthetic elements which do not participate directly in the creation of narrative or symbolic meaning. Some of the shots in *Las Nueve Vidas* seem longer than necessary. This is where excess begins, as excess implies a lack of narrative motivation. Thompson mentions different ways in which the materiality of the film can become excessive. For example, the visibility of an object can be prolonged some time past the point of initial recognition to induce aesthetic rather than narrative contemplation. As Thompson points out:

[...] the minute a viewer begins to notice style for it's own sake or watch works which do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning (Thompson, p. 132).

In *Las Nueve Vidas* the viewer is guided into the first scene by an interesting close shot which introduces the band and establishes the happy mood of the party going on. The close shot shows the heaving breasts of two women dressed in black and gold with red and green feathers in their hair. This shot is not a classic establishing shot and it is too long to serve narrative ends alone. The viewer gets plenty of time to notice the colours, the shape of the breasts which mirror the shape of the maracas the women are playing, the hands of a man playing a drum significantly close to the breasts, and the cylindrical microphone in front of the women. Our attention is captured and held by this stream of images, including that of the microphone, the significance of which we will explore in a wider context later.



This shot is an illustrative example of cinematic excess. The succeeding travelling introduces the bass-playing protagonist, and the rest of the band playing tambourine, quiro, keyboard, trumpet and claves; that is, a classic salsa band playing intense, erotic music. The travelling guides us through the dance hall filled with balloons

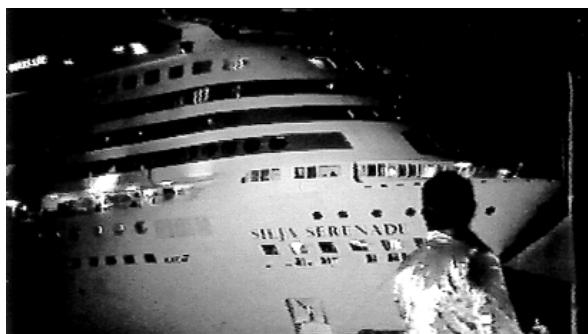
and dancing people dressed in cheerful colours. They are having a good time. At this point the viewer is introduced to some of the people. The film takes time to make us interested in, for instance, a man with a strange beard dancing with a woman dressed in red, even though he is not part of the protagonist's story at all. The only connection between these two men is their being at the same place. This kind of coincidence seems to direct the camera away from the story. On the other hand, as we shall see, this is a film whose narrative evolves because of coincidences.

The travelling is followed by a medium shot of the protagonist. His face expresses that he is in some kind of pain or conflict and for that reason he is unable to enjoy the hot salsa party. When the music stops the scene changes as he runs outside. His unease is explained as he desperately searches for the lavatory. But this shot also serves to distract the viewer, this time by means of creating a bizarre situation which constitutes another excessive element, namely lightly dressed people performing some kind of dance in the snow. The urge for relief makes the protagonist try to jump the queue, which makes the waiting men stare very angrily at him and tell him to wait his turn. This is the first obstacle. The second occurs when he runs to pee at a spot in the forest. Unfortunately, the place is already taken by three peeing women.

The poor fellow manages to find a supposedly undisturbed place at a flag pole on the frozen sea. He is eventually able to take a leak, but a huge ferry passes by quite close to where he is standing. In a full shot the protagonist is almost squeezed between the flag pole on the right side of the frame and the ferry entering from the left. This effect is increased by the zooming of the camera. This shot shows fascinating and remarkable composition, and in this icy, white



scenery the bright red colour of the flag almost draws the viewer into the shot. Its red triangle looks like an arrow, or a marker in a computer game, pointing at our protagonist.



The colour red often signifies danger, for example in traffic lights. In this shot danger is represented by both the ferry and the flag. As the ferry breaks the ice our man clings to the sinking flag. The sound of the ferry is very obtrusive and amplifies the climax of danger. In a high-angle shot we see that the ice floes on which he stands are drifting apart, spreading his legs as they do so. The next shot, a close up, is focused on one of his feet as it is sinking into the water and then caught in a fishing net. In this net he finds a fish; an example of how coincidences seem to form this narrative.

The fish surely makes the protagonist happy. This is how other associations of the colour red, e.g. warm feelings and passion, recur in the film. At this point passion is namely within the reach of the protagonist as he has both taken a pee and found the fish. Furthermore, passion and the happy atmosphere are introduced in the shot as we can hear the salsa music starting again at a distance. He returns to the band, to the golden colours and happy people, as a released man. He is bringing his new companion, the fish, and it is placed on the amplifier where it moves rhythmically – it is dancing!

### **Phallic symbolism and the essentials of human life**

So far we have established the primary drive of the film as the need to go. Still, there would be no problem, no obstacles and no story, if it were not for the complex web of codes and symbols in which the act of peeing is deeply interwoven. Grabbing hold of this web, the film unfolds a narrative structure out of an apparently limited relation between cause and effect associated with having to go. This happens, because the protagonist realises that you actually may not be able to just go when you have to. Before you can (let it) go, there are obligations to fulfil and rules to obey. And taking a pee requires a place to pee. The protagonist of *Las Nueve Vidas* experiences conflicting demands from his own biology, the person he wishes to be and the person he is forced to be. He is entangled in stories of his culture, stories of what it means to be human, to be male, stories of what proper places are, etc. He realizes that nobody escapes culture; even on the barren ice, a location at which one would expect to be alone, the ferry passing by establishes this as an indisputable fact. Thus, a seemingly purely biological problem spreads like ripples in a pond as the protagonist cannot just pee in the dancehall, is not allowed to break the code of conduct by jumping the lavatory line, and can neither make himself pee on – nor among - peeing women. He is therefore driven out to find a place in which a man can pee on his own.

On the ice the act of peeing is the only obligation he has to fulfil. Here nobody expects him to be the silvery cool bass player whose swaying hips match the heaving breasts around him, as he plays the expected part of a male participant in the erotic salsa atmosphere. Here he can get it done. Consequently, escaping from the dancehall means avoiding an existential conflict between personal needs and

social expectations. At the centre of this conflict is his penis which is suspended between being on the one hand a sexual symbol, on the other a tool for peeing.

As mentioned above, the stage is set for erotic connotations already in the beginning of the film. Phallic symbolism is introduced in the first shot as the camera starts travelling only to catch a massive vertical boom in-between female breasts. With an almost caressing movement, the camera shows the viewer the boom in its full height and keeps it in view for a rather long time. This phallic symbol introduces the central matter of the penis. Thus, the story is not only a story of being man, but of being *a* man, being male.

Consequently the protagonist reflects the matter of being male, too. He is wearing a silver suit which literally reflects his surroundings as its metallic surface catches the surrounding light. In the warm colours and golden light of the dancehall, the suit becomes golden and reflects the hot eroticism of salsa, whereas in the winter night under the dark sky it reflects the cold gleam of ice and snow. The silver suit therefore serves to represent the protagonist as a man who has to wear the context on his body. At the same time, however, the metallic quality of the silver suit also connotes hardness. The shiny metal can be seen as an armour symbolic of masculine self-containment. Out of this self-containment the protagonist clearly radiates *Elvisness*. His dark hair is combed back, and he could very well be the potent male star for whom the scene is really set. Ironically, this star can only think of peeing.

Such oppositions dominate the whole film, in which we encounter binary opposites such as hardness/softness, strength/weakness and self-containment/sociality. These opposites are not only thematically important in the story of the protagonist's

identity but also function aesthetically in the use of colour, material, form and pictorial composition.

The dancehall, for example, is the domain of softness and mobility. Apart from the breasts mentioned above, exposure of soft skin, the vast number of inflated (pink!) balloons, feathers and dancing people and last but not least, the motion of the travelling camera convey to the viewer an organic air of movement, an almost liquid atmosphere.

Outside things change and harden. We hear the creaking sound of snow under feet as soon as the protagonist leaves the dancehall. And as he moves further away snow turns to ice, a liquid so hard that you can walk on it. The marker of the longed for place to pee is the pole with the triangular red flag, a static element of a frozen setting. Having run from the woods like a hunted man, the stumbling protagonist sees this pole and his relieved 'Ahhhh' clearly tells us that he has finally found exactly what he was looking for. As would any man, he goes for something vertical and the flagpole with its red arrow points out that this is the proper place to pee on the white sheet of ice, simultaneously symbolising the potent phallus, as does the microphone in the dancehall. As marker and phallic symbol it inaugurates order and firmness, bringing an end to the hectic search for a place to pee. The minimal camera movements visualise this new-found order; as we watch the protagonist come running out of the woods, the camera is statically placed behind the flagpole, and it is only he who moves frantically.

The protagonist pees and his pleasure is obvious as he turns his face upwards, groaning. But neither order, safety, privacy nor pleasure can prevail. As mentioned before, the huge ferry intrudes from the left and penetrates the frame, breaking up both ice and

order. The protagonist clings to the pole, which fails to grant him safety. Stability yields to instability as the hard fundament turns liquid beneath his feet and the sheet of ice is torn to pieces. The pole ends in the depth of the water and reveals deeper truths beneath surface level. It is connected to the fishing net, in which the protagonist's foot is caught. As he struggles to disentangle himself he discovers that he is not alone in having been caught. He finds a fish in the net and frees it, too. The fish is the third phallic symbol and the net signifies the web of cultural choreography, in which the male is at risk of getting caught in a static, self-containing position. Consequently, the freeing of the fish and the protagonist's 'self-liberation' symbolise the possibility of escaping this web. A man like the protagonist, who manages to stay calm in troubled waters and accept instability as a basic condition of life, is capable of finding a way out even when hard things are sinking. Does he abandon his second phallic companion, the pole, in favour of a third, the living fish? His subsequent cheerful jumps from ice floe to ice floe with the fish significantly protruding from the centre of his body clearly establishes a firm link between the fish and the matter of the penis, but this time the phallus is alive – and well!



As in the case of the protagonist, the silvery skin of the fish looks metallic, but it is not stiff. The fish knows how to dance, and it is

capable of living unpredictability in an unpredictable world; it survives removal from its 'proper' element. It survives displacement. With such a companion the protagonist is capable of taking part in unforeseeable changes of contexts as a person who can be both hard and soft, strong and weak. He can live with the fact that we probably do not just live one life since it changes with changing contexts. As the title of the film suggests, we may actually live *nine*. And most importantly, he is able to enjoy company and have a good time.

This film describes the process of (a) man's successful search for a way to navigate in a complex cultural choreography. At the end of the film he obviously feels better than before he managed to empty his bladder and enlighten his mind. He is, however, stuck with the problem of peeing for good. He will have to detour again and again and again. Peeing is an essential condition of human life, and it is a condition which adds still new elements of action and progress to one's life.

*Las Nueve Vidas* uses the finding of a proper place to pee to illustrate the achievement of existential insight, as the protagonist realises and accepts that there may be no such things as proper places and proper persons, and learns to live and enjoy this basic condition – or spice – of life.

To sum up, the structure of the opening shot of the film serves to introduce the viewer to conflict. Conflict and tension escalate during the course of the film as the protagonist meets new obstacles, eventually to overcome them in the happy end of the story. The protagonist returns a different man who is able to flirt and twinkle. As in a 'Bildungsroman' an educational process has taken place, but not all elements in *Las Nueve Vidas* serve this narrative structure.

Some are excessive and aim rather to enrich classic narration, creating an aesthetic and pleasant expression of human feelings.

Symbols play a vital part in *Las Nueve Vidas*, and we have delved into some of them, disregarding the fact that the fish could be seen as a warning against over-interpretation. A scene from Peter Greenaway's film, *Drowning By Numbers*, enters our minds. In this scene the three main characters Cissy, Cissy and Cissy are walking along the seashore, engaged in a bizarre discussion. Suddenly they are interrupted as they find several (red) herrings, of which some are numbered. The viewer searches for some deeper meaning, but in doing so he or she almost drowns in the effort. The same could, perhaps, happen to the viewer of *Las Nueve Vidas*, if he or she takes the matter of interpretation too seriously.

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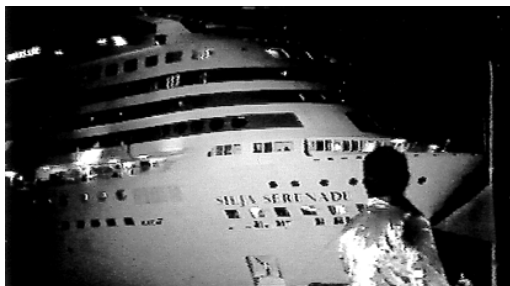
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*And the ship sails on...*  
**Petri Kotwica's *Las Nueve Vidas***

Mark Le Fanu



A party is in progress with live salsa music. The guests seem to be enjoying themselves, and the band looks happy too (trumpet, drums, a couple of pretty girls swaying to maracas); everyone, in short is having a nice time - except the bandleader, a handsome fellow in a shiny gold suit who is scowling behind his guitar and looking as if he can't wait for the current number to be finished.

The reason soon becomes apparent when our hero (in looks, a cross between Nicholas Cage and Bryan Ferry) dashes outside into the snowy evening air searching for a suitable place to urinate. There are a couple of makeshift cabins set up for the purpose; but it's crowded, and being leader of the band doesn't, unfortunately, guarantee a place at the front of the queue.

What can he do but set off into the nearby woods for some privacy. There again, mischance: the spot our man alights upon is already in use – some squatting female revellers scatter at his approach, pulling up their knickers as they go. A polite and modest fellow, evidently, he heads for the neighbouring iceflow. Surely no one will disturb him there? Yet just as, unzipped and in full flow, he breathes a deep sigh of relief, the cruise ship *Silja Serenade*, lit up for

a party, gently glides by – so close one could almost touch the passengers.

Innocent enough you might think (if embarrassing), but in the ship's wake lies danger. The ice begins to crack and, in less time than it takes to blink, our hero is seated on an ice-clump, scrabbling in the shallows, one foot wedged in the ink-black ocean. And what's this he's fished up on the edge of his shoe? A wisp of netting, like organic candy floss, has become tangled round his lower calf, while entangled in it (as he discovers when he pulls further) is a fresh sea-salmon, still kicking.

Surely such gifts from the sea should be taken freely? Erstwhile frustration turns to happiness as our hero bounds back across the drift-ice, salmon in hand. And now we see him back in the dance hall, relaxed on stage in charge of another number. Meanwhile, behind him, on top of the amplifier, and laid out on a pillow of ice, the mysterious fish is flapping quietly in its death throes.

In front of any work of art, the human impulse is to look for a meaning. Before we can enjoy the said object, we need to think we know what the artist is driving at. As a matter of fact this is rather less often a problem than people think it is. Most art after all is made to be understood; the artist, in the majority of cases, goes to considerable pains to be lucid. But sometimes he fails (he can't carry it off; the thing is more obscure than he hopes it is). At other times, on the contrary, he wants not to be understood: it is part of the fun of the exercise. Like a lyric poem, the short film – especially, like this one, a film without dialogues – is a puzzle, a riddle, a rebus. And in this particular case, there is something else that is special. The artist in question is Finnish. Everyone knows (at least they think they do) that Finns are supposed to be odd.

Finnish surrealism, then, with a dash of Latin America; a little bit warm, a little bit *icy*; bracing, astringent, a touch mocking (the film ends with a wink, not into the camera, but beyond it: towards some acquaintance or admirer of the bandleader on the dance floor). Friendly, perhaps, as much as mocking: as if to say *Don't make too much of this*. The movie doesn't need interpreting. Or does it? Can we appreciate it without saying what it means?

A film, in a certain way, is a dream, and it's one of the properties of dreams that they exist, as it were, at the edge of sense. The fantastical series of arabesques that comprise their narrative momentum may always be peeled away, if we are lucky, to reveal a solid, unexceptionable first cause beneath. Or congeries of first causes (*overdetermination*, Freud called it: dreams thrive on mixture and muddle). Supposing this movie were a dream, we could ask ourselves what exactly we have here. The basic anxiety, the primary cause that triggers the incidents that follow, can be attached to the protagonist's overwhelming desire to urinate: a desire destined to be frustrated, of course, as long as he remains asleep, though solvable in the symbolic realm through the handy mechanism of wish-fulfilment. (The film starts with the frustration of not being able to piss; then solves this frustration by allowing the sleeper-protagonist to imagine he's doing so.) Two further classical dream ingredients are likewise woven into the narrative: embarrassment (that one will be seen exposing oneself - a variation on all those dream situations where one discovers that one's naked in a crowded concourse); and disgust, or bodily squeamishness, symbolised by the extrusion of netting that works its way up from under the ice, attaching itself like dogshit to the protagonist's polished party shoes. What is this thing exactly? At one level, of course, merely a fishing net; at another

level, however, we can see it as objective correlative for the mesh of undifferentiated anxieties (physiological as much as mental: having to do with the stomach and intestines) that lurk at the edge of all dreams - making them at one and the same time vague and precise; saturated with meaning, and at the same time utterly trivial.

And what's this that's caught in the netting? A fish: symbol of symbols, prince of signifiers. Any attempt to deconstruct such an obvious rebus is bound to be hopelessly literal. What is this slithery thing other than the unconscious itself? How we interpret it further than this depends on our private dispositions. Freud said the fish was a phallus (all dreams, according to Freudians, are about sex). Christians on the other hand - to take just one example among many - have made of it a symbol of their saviour (that juxtaposition is already surrealist). Different cultures have used different species of fish - the carp, the herring, the bream, the cod, the salmon - to point to different things about their deepest national appetites. (As I write this I become aware that I am, alas, hazy about which fish exactly Finns are supposed to be partial to.) It's not for nothing that animals of all sorts avail themselves so readily to the archetypal symbolising activity which surrounds, in the human world, investitures, crests and heraldry. How we imagine animals in the deepest sense (how we *live* with them, in all senses of the word) is as old as language itself - maybe older. For they are man's companions, and it is not surprising, perhaps, that we should perpetually come back to dreaming about them.

The congruity between films and dreaming which is present more or less in all cinema famously comes to the fore in certain great artists whom we know and love: Bunuel, Fellini, Bergman for example. There are wonderful films by each of these named directors

that are, in essence, nothing but extended dream scenarios; such films live in the world of dream and can only be properly understood as part of this oneiric economy. Yet if there is any difficulty at all about this equivalence, it is that the length of the feature film pushes such objects beyond the usual time-span that dreams, in real life, take to unfold. How long is that? How long does a dream really last? Scientists measure these things by eye-movements, and divide our sleep up into the periods of dream activity flanked by periods of relative dormancy. I think however that our subjective experience of dreams is that they are usually of relatively brief duration (granted: it is often difficult to tell where one dream stops and another begins). And this makes one feel that a short film is somehow a more natural vehicle for dream narrative than a fully developed feature such as *The Phantom of Liberty* (or *Eight and a Half* or *The Hour of the Wolf*). Yes, these things are subjective of course, and no hard and fast rule need to be attached to the matter. There was a time, in the infancy of cinema, when all films were short; and indeed part of the pleasure of seeing extinct and ghostly examples of early cinema (in annual exhibitions like Pordenone's *Giornate del cinema muto*) is that they have about them an atmosphere of fantasy and playful unpredictability that can only meaningfully be glossed as belonging to the realm of the unconscious.

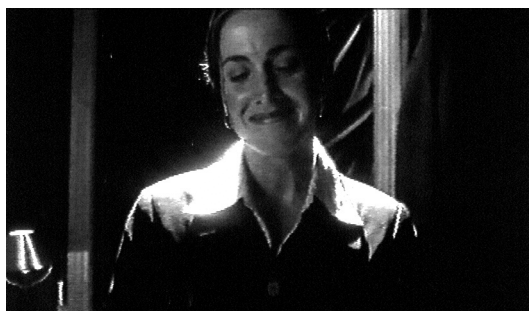
These days, the short film par excellence is the advertising commercial. Coming in at a minute to a minute and a half, such films are shorter, even, than the artistically independent genre of short film that we are dealing with here. (*Las Nueve Vidas* - a short short film - is just over four minutes long.) Are commercials also therefore linked to the dream economy we have been attempting to outline? Are they indeed of its essence? In a certain sense one wants

to say yes: a case could be made for arguing that surrealism, if it lives anywhere at all nowadays, lives, exactly, in the polished, postmodernist experiments which constitute the modern movie commercial. (Incidentally, since commercials are not generally shown in American movie houses before the show, it's one aspect of cinema we Europeans can be proud to call our own.)

On the other hand, the requirement that each miniature masterpiece of marketing should end up endorsing a single commercial product tells against its artistic stature in the long run. Does it not? *Las Nueve Vidas* is not, needless to say, a television commercial (though it remains true that the skills that have gone into making it are not so very different from the skills that would be needed to produce an interesting *one minute spot*). For real art, an audience needs to be free; it needs to be able to wonder; it needs, at times, not to get the point - or not to get the point all at once. So the sea-salmon lying on the amplifier is glimpsed in the background, rather than emphasised in importunate close-up. No propriety brand of fish product is stamped on its flank. In so far as the image may be said to have a function, that function is to *tease us out of thought*, like the frieze on the Grecian urn in Keats's famous Ode. Does the director himself really know what it signifies? And does it matter? There's mischief and fun in the film; and also something just a little bit intriguing.



Charlie Call  
*Peep Show*  
(U.S.A., 1999)







## ***Peep Show***

**Charlie Call**

**(USA, 1999), 8 minutes, 35 mm, color**

### **Principal production credits**

Directed by	Charlie Call
Written by	Damon Jones & Bob Kirsh and Patti Frick
Adapted for the screen by	Charlie Call
Produced by	Charlie Call and Gary Bryman
Director of photography	Eric Haase
Production designer	Jocelyn Bly Fredman
Original music score by	Cameron Penn
Editor	Charlie Call

### **Cast**

Blond-haired guy	Damon Jones
Brown-haired guy	Bob Kirsh
Fern	Jane Leyden
Ticket taker	Matt Cohen

### **Awards won for *Peep Show* include:**

U.S. Comedy Arts Festival, Best Short Film  
Sedona International Film Festival, Favorite Short  
Valleyfest , Best Short Film  
Filmfest New Haven, Best Short Film  
Worldfest Houston, Gold Award - Best Short Subject  
Florida International Film Festival, Audience Award for Best Short  
Film  
Hardacre Film Festival, Best Short Film/Comedy  
Sao Paulo Intl Short Film Festival, Best Short Film  
BBC/British Short Film Festival, Best American Short Film  
Breckinridge Festival of Film, Best Comedy Short Film  
Austin Film Festival, Best Short Subject  
New Orleans Film & Video Festival, Lumiere Award  
Hamptons International Film Festival, Audience Award - Best Short Film  
Hawaii International Film Festival, Blockbuster Audience Award –  
Best Short  
USA Film Festival, Special Jury Award  
Palm Springs International Short Film Festival, Audience Favorite



## **PEEPSHOW**

Screenplay

written by Damon Jones and Bob Kirsh  
& Patti Frick

Adapted for the screen by Charlie Call  
30 September 1998

### **INT - PEEPSHOW LOBBY - NIGHT**

Open on a neon sign which says "Peep Show", positioned above the entrance. The sign flickers and buzzes. The music is "In Your Wildest Dreams" by Horton Heat. Tilt down to the door as FERN enters. She stops, looks around, then advances to the ticket counter. Pan with her as she advances and we see the back of the ATTENDANT, sitting in the booth, but facing away. As she gets closer, the ATTENDANT spins around to face her and we do a FAST PUSH-IN on the ATTENDANT as he is turning and his face is revealed. Bottom lit with an off-color light, he is a scary looking guy and gives a menacing grin as the push-in concludes. Fern, startled. She hesitates, then begins to dig in her purse. Finds \$2, places it on the counter. The ATTENDANT simply nods, grinning, and takes the money. Camera begins to move down the hall as he takes the money; Fern turns to her right and begins to walk down the hall, camera tracking behind her. Still nervous and apprehensive. Pauses at one door, then keeps going. Finds a door that is vacant and opens it. We cannot see inside. She peeks in. Looks around, then enters. Music halts. CUT TO

### **INT - PEEPSHOW BOOTH, FERN'S SIDE**

FERN looks around, hesitant. Takes off her coat. Sits. CUT TO

**INT - PEEPSHOW BOOTH, GUY'S SIDE - NIGHT**

BOB and DAMON are seated in the booth, shooting the breeze. It is not evident that they are in fact part of the Peepshow. The camera starts out low, knees to elbows, and shows their respective activities: Damon is smoking and holding a small toy basketball. Bob is reading "Beyond Uhura", the Star Trek memoir of Nichelle Nichols. Boom up to two shot of BOB and DAMON. Hold for a beat, Damon takes a drag on the cigarette and begins speaking.

DAMON

Man, I lost 50 bucks on the fucking Giants this weekend.

Damon tosses the ball to Bob, who turns to Damon and speaks,

BOB

Well, you're a fucking moron. You're throwing your money away on the Giants. *(Turns away from Damon, lines up shot with basketball.)* They have no running game.

**INT - PEEPSHOW BOOTH, CUSTOMER SIDE - NIGHT**

FERN enters the booth and looks around. It is decorated with red fabric, a bowling captain's idea of fine furnishing. Vase of flowers, various toiletries on the shelf in front of the window. The panel behind the glass is closed, so she can see nothing beyond the glass. On the right side of the window is a selection panel and a small speaker. The panel is about 12"-18" high and 8"-12" wide. There are six buttons, one beneath the other. To the right are the descriptions "BEGINNER - \$1", "INTERMEDIATE - \$2", "DATE FANTASY - \$5", "TAG TEAM FANTASY - \$10", and simply "\$50". Beneath the panel is a dollar bill slot. FERN is nervous, not sure about what she is

doing, looks around before taking off her sunglasses and scarf. CUT TO

BOB and DAMON, from the side, about a 30 degree angle. DAMON is in focus in the foreground, lining up a shot with the toy basketball, cigarette hanging out of his mouth. As he aims, we see that a yellow light has lit up and is casting light on his face. He pauses, looks at the light. CUT TO

SIGNAL LIGHTS. The SIGNAL LIGHTS are positioned in the GUYS' SIDE of the booth so that the customer cannot see them. They are similar to FERN's lights. At the top is a red light with the words "BOOTH VACANT" next to it. Below the red light is a yellow light with the words "CUSTOMER IN BOOTH", and it is this yellow light which is currently lit. Below the yellow light is a series of green lights. The first one reads "BEGINNER", the next "INTERMEDIATE", the next "DATE FANTASY", "TAG TEAM FANTASY", "\$50". CUT BACK TO

DAMON, still aiming the ball. He shoots. PULL FOCUS to BOB.

BOB

Time to go to work. Gimme a drag of that.

CUT TO the ball, circling around the rim, then falling in for a basket. CUT TO

BOB blows smoke, hands cigarette back to DAMON. DAMON then puts out the cigarette in an ashtray that is positioned so that someone looking from inside the customer booth cannot see it. DAMON picks up a small battery-powered fan and clears the air of cigarette smoke.

BOB is buttoning his shirt, checking his teeth in a hand mirror. CUT TO

SIDE SHOT of FERN, fumbling through her WALLET. She puts a dollar in the lot and nervously pushes the "BEGINNER" button. She looks at the window as the curtain begins to go up. The lights on her side of the booth dim slightly. The camera begins curved dolly move from beside her into an OTS looking through the glass into the Guys' side. When the curtain is up and camera has stopped, we see BOB and DAMON, looking sharp, lighting having changed from when we saw them earlier. BOB and DAMON speak only to each other, not looking at FERN. Slow PUSH IN on the window as BOB and DAMON speak.

BOB

So I said "Sweetheart, I'm man enough to admit when I'm wrong – I'm lost, I don't know where we are."

DAMON

So what'd you do?

BOB

I did what she suggested. I stopped the car and asked for directions.

DAMON

And she was right, wasn't she?

BOB nods. A small warning light in FERN's side of the booth begins to flash.

DAMON

You're lucky to have her.

On the third flash of the warning light, a buzz sounds and the curtain closes.

CUT TO side view of FERN, immediately begin to DOLLY across the wall separating her from the guys.

FERN  
Oh, this is good.

FERN digs in her wallet for more money. The wall wipes the frame and we see BOB and DAMON beginning to sit back down.

DAMON  
Yeah, like that'd fucking happen.

BOB  
My wife needs directions to find the fucking kitchen.

CUT TO

FERN, retrieving more money. She puts in two dollars and selects "INTERMEDIATE". We stay with Fern's POV as the curtain goes up.

DAMON  
So I said "Honey, we don't have to watch the Super-bowl. Let's rent *Enchanted April* again."

BOB  
Oh, that's a beautiful picture.

CUT TO warning light begins to flash in FERN's booth. CUT TO BOB and DAMON's side of the booth.

DAMON  
I feel so much closer to her -

BEEP! The curtain closes. Still standing,

BOB  
Enchanted April? Isn't that a porno?

DAMON  
You're thinking *Enchanted April Showers*.

BOB  
Oh, right.

BOTH  
Traci Lords.

They sit.

CUT TO

FERN, delighted.

FERN  
Fabulous!

She looks at the selection menu, and, emboldened, selects "DATE FANTASY - \$5 ". Her anticipation building, she puts the five in the slot. CUT TO

BOB and DAMON standing, FERN's POV. BOB speaks directly to FERN.

BOB  
Hi. What's your name?  
CUT TO MCU of FERN, eagerly watching.

FERN  
Fern.

CUT BACK TO BOB and DAMON, FROM FERN'S POV.

BOB  
So I called Fern on Monday to ask her out for Saturday.

DAMON  
Where'd you take her?



BOB

Well, first I cooked her dinner at home, and then,  
well, you know how she loves to go dancing.

DAMON

But you hate dancing.

BOB

Well, I've been taking lessons for Fern.

FERN reacts.

DAMON

So afterwards, did you take her home?

BOB

Oh, yeah, it was great...we just cuddled all night.

Lighting cue changes again. Soft, romantic. Fireplace gag?

DAMON

Spooning? (FERN moans.) I love that.

BOB

I can't sleep unless I hold her close. And  
she's got these beautiful Laura Ashley sheets,  
it's like sleeping in a country garden.

FERN reacts. Warning light begins to flash.

BOB

And the next morning---

BEEP, the curtain closes. CUT TO

FERN

Oh no! Don't stop now. I don't think I have  
any more...

FERN searches desperately in her purse. CUT TO

BOB and DAMON, sitting.

BOB

Oh, man, we got her with that spooning thing.

DAMON

I'd rather gnaw my own arm off.

CUT TO FERN finds a ten dollar bill and stuffs it in the panel. CUT TO

BOB and DAMON standing. Bob is holding a fireman's helmet. A siren, low, can be heard, and flashing red lights are in the room. Smoke billows.

BOB

Well Fern, I just saved your cat from this burning blaze, and now it's your turn to be rescued...

CUT TO FERN reacts. The men slap five and switch positions as Fern regains her composure. CUT BACK TO

BOB & DAMON, flashing lights are gone, smoke is almost gone, no siren, no fireman's helmet. DAMON puts on a delivery hat and is holding a dozen roses. Brighter light; birds chirp.

DAMON

Delivery for Fern...

FERN

I'm Fern!

DAMON

It looks like a dozen long-stem roses.  
There's no card... OK, they're from me.  
No reason; just thinking about you.

FERN squeals with pleasure.

BOB

Tell us what you want, Fern.

FERN  
OOHHH! Tell me you like my mother.

BOB  
Like her? I want her to live with us!

FERN  
Oh, yes. Take me out somewhere special  
for a change!

DAMON  
Two tickets. Front Row Center. Michael  
Bolton.

BOB and DAMON launch into a series of ad-libbed remarks, the  
pacing going faster and faster, FERN getting more and more excited  
as the pace increases.

BOB  
I made reservations at this great Bed &  
Breakfast.

DAMON  
It's a gift certificate to Bath & Bodyworks.

BOB  
Let's take a ceramics class.

DAMON  
Let's go Shoe Shopping!

BOB  
Don't move! In that light, you look just  
like Audrey Hepburn!

DAMON  
Stay in bed! I baked us some croissants!

BOB  
You look even better without makeup!

DAMON  
I sold my Nintendo...and I bought you a sundress.

BOB

I bought you a teddy bear!

DAMON

I don't deserve you!

BOB

How did I get so lucky?!

DAMON

Let's go wine tasting!

BOB

I want to French Braid your hair!

DAMON

I wish I could carry our child!

BOB

I'd love to go to your niece's christening!

DAMON

You look even better without makeup!

BOB

I want to take your last name!

DAMON

Did you find the note I put in your lunch?

BOB

I wrote you a sonnet!

DAMON

Can I wash your hair?

BOB

Can I...wash your hair?

DAMON

Tell me more about your childhood!

BOB

I'm really ready to commit!

DAMON  
I'm really ready... to commit!

Fern's warning light begins to flash. BEEP! Curtain closes and the men sit.

FERN  
Don't stop!!! I'm almost there. Oh, no!

FERN frantically scrambles through her purse, finds nothing. Then she has an idea, thinks for a moment, and pulls a small folded envelope from within her wallet. It says "Emergency Money" on it. She opens the envelope, hesitates for a moment, then pulls the fifty from inside, tosses the envelope away and jams the bill in the machine. CUT TO

The SIGNAL LIGHTS. The bottom green light is lit. It simply reads "\$50". BEEP, the men stand.

DAMON  
Let's bring it on home.

BOB  
Fern...

FERN  
Come on... give it to me!

The men look at each other, tension building. The cutting gets faster, the music accenting the mounting tension. CUT TO Fern, worked into a frenzy, then back to Bob and Damon.

DAMON  
Fern?

Fern is on the brink...

FERN

Give it to me!

Fern's warning light begins to flash. She squeals.

Then, together:

BOTH

Fern? (*All music stops.*) Have you lost weight?

A silent beat on FERN, her mouth open, her face - is it pain or pleasure? She can't vocalize for a moment, then finally... FERN wails orgasmically.

FERN

AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!

THE END

## **An interview with Charlie Call on *Peep Show***

Richard Raskin

*How did the Peep Show project begin?*

I had been planning to make a short film that would be shot in 35 mm, something I had never done before. And right about the time I had resolved to do that, I went to a comedy show that a friend of mine was performing in – he's one of the actors that was in *Peep Show*. And they did a series of sketches, one of which was called *Peep Show*. So this was a stage performance. I thought it was very funny. At the time, I was busy editing something else, and I couldn't do anything about it right away, but about three months later, I called my friend up and told him that I thought they had made a very funny piece, and that if we reworked it for the screen, it could be very funny on film. So that's how it began.

And I pitched in my idea for how it would need to be changed. Because when they did it on stage, there was no set or production design or props or anything. It involved sort of "space work."

*And was it agreed from the start that the scriptwriters of the stage piece would play the two male roles?*

Yes, absolutely.

*How about the woman, who was also wonderful? How did you find Jane Leyden for that part?*

She was in the same comedy troop as the two men.

*Was she in the original stage production of Peep Show?*

No, but I saw her do it at a time when the original person was not there.

*One of the things you mentioned about the difference between the stage production and your film is the set and the props. I think it is so important in a short film that there be an interplay between what is going on inside the characters and the external, physical things around them. Like the window that rolls up and down, the light that flashes, and so on. Did you give that special attention in your work?*

Absolutely. One of the themes of the film is the difference between what men show women, or the face that they present to women, and the reality when women aren't looking. And my plan was that when the woman looked straight through the glass, these guys looked great and the room they're in looked nice, but once you saw them when the curtain wasn't there, not only did they talk differently and make fun of what they were saying, but you also saw, visually, that the only way that room looked nice was right through the glass. They had a little fan to blow the smoke away and to tidy up their image.

*Were you at all concerned about the way feminists might respond to your portrayal of the woman?*

Yes, actually I was. In fact, when I was working on the film, during the editing stage, I remember watching it and wondering if I would ever get a date again – if women would take it as an insult and feel that it made women look as though they were prone to frivolous flattery. I was concerned about that. But interestingly enough, two people who are professors at universities here in the states, have shown *Peep Show* to their women's studies classes to kick off a discussion. I have not gotten much negative feedback about it. A



little bit, isolated. Surprisingly, women seem to be amused by the film and not insulted.

*I tried your film out on a few Danish women, who told me that they didn't feel offended because the guys were portrayed as so disgusting.*

Exactly! In a way, you could say that the men look worse than the woman, 'cause they're the deceptive, slimy assholes. (*Laughter.*)

*Did your own work with the story evolve through the various phases of pre-production and production? Or did you know pretty much from the start how you wanted to structure things?*

There was only one thing I was unsure as to how it was actually going to play out – I'll explain to you what that is – but for the most part, it was pretty thoroughly planned. Every shot was storyboarded, and there were a few shots about which I wasn't sure in which order they would be edited together. But for the most part, because we worked on a really tight shooting schedule, I knew there was just no time for screwing around and trying to think up something on set. So it was all pretty well decided ahead of time, with one exception.

Basically, the way I've structured it is that there are five segments that the woman progresses through, ending with the big climactic moment at the conclusion. In the fourth segment, where they say a lot of one-liners – "I want to wash your hair," and "Let's go shoe-shopping" – when we were shooting, I had no idea in what order we would use the lines. That was something that was not in the original stage piece. And I realized when I was storyboarding the film that we needed something like that for the pacing, to really bring her almost to the brink.

And what I did was, I sat down with the two guys and with the woman who was in it as well, and I said, "Here's what I'd like to do. We need to brainstorm about 30 or 40 of these one-liners. Just come up with the craziest stuff you can think of. Then what we're going to do is just turn the camera on each one of you, have you say a line, take a moment, say the next one... " And so that's what we did. I just turned the camera on them for like five minutes while they each said all these lines. Basically, I knew that was the one thing I was going to have to play with in the editing room. Which I did. And I actually had to leave a number of the things that they said on the cutting-room floor. But I think I got it exactly the way I wanted it.

*You mentioned the tight shooting schedule. How much time did you have for the shoot?*

We shot it in two days.

*I imagine that Peep Show has done very well at festivals.*

Yes, it's won a number of awards.

*Do you think storytelling in the short film is essentially the same as storytelling in the feature, or that the short film has its own specific kind of storytelling?*

I think the difference between the two is that the short film will focus on a narrower idea, and if executed properly, will take you through an arc – will basically still have a set-up, and something that may be analogous to a three-act structure. So I think there really is a parallel in how the story should be told, in terms of giving a resolution and having people feel like they were taken from one place to another. And I've seen a number of short films which had

promise but for some reason don't end up with a pay-off or don't end up with some sort of resolution that's satisfying.

It's difficult. Just because a short film runs ten minutes, that doesn't mean it's easier. It still has to be thought through, and you still have to know where you're taking your audience from the beginning to the end.

*Is there any advice you would like to give to student filmmakers about to make their own first short films?*

I guess the best advice I could give is to try to do as much preparation and planning as possible before you actually start shooting. With shooting, you never seem to have enough time. And if you have planned what you want to do, and if you've watched the movie in your head, and you know the shots that you need, that's going to give you the comfort level to maybe do some experimenting while you're actually shooting. But I think the biggest danger is to not know exactly what you need when you're on set.

5 July 2000



## **“This isn't what it looks like”: marginal sexual behavior and appearances in *Peep Show***

Jody Pennington

Charlie Call's comic short film *Peep Show* (1999) opens with a close-up of two letters from a red neon light. The electrical hiss from the light, cracks of thunder, tapping rain bring to mind the close-up on the neon lights of the El Rancho nightclub in *Citizen Kane* (1941, Orson Welles) as the camera tracks pass them before descending through the skylight. As the camera pulls back to reveal the words spelt by the neon sign, “Peep Show,” arced over a cashier's counter, non-diegetic music begins playing on the soundtrack to anchor the seediness of the location. Whereas a saxophone playing nightclub jazz conjured the atmosphere of the El Rancho, a Mexican-tinged, reverb-soaked guitar, accompanied by an accordion conjures this disreputable locale. On the soundtrack a singer, the Reverend Horton Heat, sets the tone of the film and the themes associated with sexual desire that seeks its fulfillment beyond the conventional outlets permitted by the middle-class mainstream. Unconventional desires are relegated to peep show fantasies and dreams:

Late at night, and you're sleeping,  
You'll hear my lonesome call...

In an approach similar to that of David Lynch in *Blue Velvet* (1986), Call implies that accessing the forbidden blurs the distinction between dreams and reality. In *Blue Velvet*, Jeffrey's grandmother admonishes him to stay away from Lincoln Avenue, a symbol of urban decadence in Lynch's film, but he goes anyway. The lure of the forbidden draws the camera to this marginalized point of

intersection between something desired and desire's fulfillment where fulfillment must be bought. Commercialized sexual behavior such as peep shows is embedded in the American system of sexual behavior (Schur 29). But they are a marginalized element, from which the middle class averts its attention or participates in surreptitiously. I will briefly examine how *Peep Show* establishes the marginal peep show environment before revealing it to be a comic deceit that allows its to address additional concerns about middle-class heterosexual relationships.

To enter the marginal world of peep shows, the camera pans down the wall beneath the neon sign to reveal the accoutrements of boredom – radio and newspapers – beside a cash register, past small lamps, dim sources of lighting, past the rain, and past a sign for an emergency fire exit. The images draw on motifs traditionally associated with the tattered world of the peep show. It is night, it is raining, and, as the Reverend Horton Heat sings

But it's only as real  
As any dream can seem  
I'll see you,  
In your wildest dreams

Fern (Jane Leyden) appears around a corner bathed in bluish light. She is apparently middle class, dressed in dark blue business attire. She seems somewhat hesitant as she rounds the corner. As she pays her one-dollar admission price and a cigar-smoking cashier (Matt Cohen) slips her a ticket without even looking at her, Heat's lyrics intimate that Fern is emotionally prostrate:

Though I may be now,  
I'm before you on my knees.

Call develops the comic deceit by suggesting that Fern has come seeking emotional restoration in a place where interpersonal

concern will not be forthcoming. This is reinforced by the acute lack of feeling between Fern and the cashier in their purely commercial exchange. They do not share so much as a glance since nothing connects people on these margins of the public sphere, where, ironically, intimate, sexual aspects of private life are made public for a price.

Immediately, we are confronted in *Peep Show* with notions of propriety. The setting, atmosphere and music combine to suggest this is not somewhere a well-dressed, attractive middle-class woman like Fern should be. Her hesitancy implies she knows she should not be there and has not been there before, but something draws her. People drawn to peep shows are typically not women. Peep shows, like other forms of commercialized sexual behavior such as prostitution and pornography, are traditionally a male-dominated and male-oriented domain.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Fern, hesitant and gasping slightly as she first peers past the curtained entrance to her booth and then draws it back to enter, has come to this male entertainment niche seeking satisfaction.

Working within the temporal constraints of the short film, Call skillfully uses both synecdoche, showing us fragments of this border world, and metonymy, using imagery often associated with marginal sexual behavior in its commercial incantations, as Orson Welles did in filming the parlor to Tanya's (Marlene Dietrich) bordello in the film's Los Robles Mexico, in *Touch of Evil* (1958). In *Peep Show*, dated lamp fixtures, an old radio, kitschy flowered wallpaper, and a one-dollar admission price invoke the tawdry

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Andrew Edmond, whose company, SexTracker, provides statistical analysis of the adult entertainment business on the Internet, told Ed Rampell of *Adult Video News* that roughly eighty-six percent of the visitors to the sites are male while fourteen percent are female.

atmosphere of adult entertainment. Call skillfully sketches the closed world of the peep show, an aspect of adult entertainment that has a historical, if tangential, relationship with mainstream cinema in the United States. Given the peep show origins of the film industry in the United States, as well as the importance of sex and humor for early cinema, Call's combination of the two is apt.

When films first appeared in the United States, there were moves to regulate their content and exhibition. During the first decade of the century, many middle-class Americans perceived films as “a cheap show for cheap people” (Knight and Alpert, “The Original Sin” 133). Early censorship legislation came in part in reaction to the “peep show” quality of early films originally shown in vaudeville houses, amusement parks, and fairs. These “public amusements” were largely regulated through theatrical licensing, an inheritance from colonial days. Throughout the nineteenth century, public officials had “used licensing laws to prevent the exhibition of shows that in their judgment endangered public morals” (Wertheimer 164). In the early years of the film industry, these local theater ordinances were occasionally expanded to cover movies; or new ordinances directed at movies were modeled on theater licensing laws.

Throughout the twentieth century as the middle class abandoned cities for suburbs, various local zoning ordinances situated the venues of adult entertainment such as grindhouses that screened films that otherwise would have been censored in “shabby, third-rate houses on run-down streets leading off the main drag” (Knight and Alpert, “The Nudies” 124). Peep shows existed alongside movie theaters called “grindhouses,” as well as “single-room occupancy apartment buildings, cubicle hotels, and other cheap lodging houses that catered mostly to single men... taverns, pawnshops, and rescue



missions" (Ellickson 428). Peep shows were an element of lower-class popular entertainment in the commercial sphere in such urban areas, known as *skid row* in many cities.

Skid row was an area "where a city relaxed its ordinary standards of street civility" as it did in Red Light Districts and thus enabled the police "to informally zone street disorder into particular districts" (Ellickson 429–30). Steven Seidman describes this isolation as an inheritance of "the Victorian era, which ghettoized public sexual expressions – i.e., sex was cordoned off into illicit or stigmatized urban spaces" (124). This marginal, impoverished urban geographical space and its marginal inhabitants buffered peep shows from the constant threat of prosecution. Skid rows supplied peep shows with such a large portion of their clientele, much mainstream public discourse equated those who frequented peep shows with white male lower-class skid-row loners and misfits.

Because adult entertainment has been relegated to the sociocultural margins in the United States and because it has been the province of men, Fern's presence at a peep show contradicts traditional expectations. Those expectations are further subverted by the interior of the booth Fern enters. Such cubicles are normally sparsely furnished, with perhaps nothing more than a chair for the customer to sit in—the austere décor of such a booth in Paul Schrader's *Hardcore* (1979) is typical. This one, though, has lamps, flowers, Kleenexes, a hook for Fern's coat as well as what appear to be a jewelry box and a powder decanter. Apparently, this peep show caters to women not men and because the customers are women (and, presumably, heterosexual), the performers (Damon Jones and Bob Kirsh) are men.

Having established its comic reversal of traditional expectations, the remainder of the film narrative shifts between the backstage banter between the two male performers and Fern's verbal and physical reactions to their monologues and dialogues, including her decisions to spend more and more money to receive greater and greater satisfaction. The themes available for purchase in the peep show booth link the impersonal public sphere of commercial interests with Fern's – women's – private sphere expectation that romance, love, affection be integral aspects of their sexual relationships.

The scene shifts from Fern alone with her positive reactions to what the men say to the men's own critique of what they've just said. Thus, Fern's fulfillment is based on a misperception, perhaps analogous to men's willful misperception that their commercialized sexual experiences have the same meaning for the female performers that they have for them. In other words, the male performers in *Peep Show* perform the romance equivalent of the fake orgasm. The notion that women desire non-sexual emotional fulfillment in order to reach sexual orgasm is, of course, a driving component of the film's narrative.<sup>12</sup> Thus, what the men believe Fern wants is a series of flattering comments; narratives of behavior such as cooking, cuddling, and romantic films chosen above the Super Bowl; and roles such as fireman.

But the scenes are as false as a fake orgasm: the man sipping coffee from a cup is actually drinking beer; he has not seen a romantic film *Enchanted April* (either the 1935 original, directed by

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<sup>12</sup> Eric Koukounas's and Marita McCabe's survey of research into the different reactions of men and women to erotic stimuli suggests that there are differences in sexual response along gender lines.

Harry Beaumont, or the 1991 remake, directed by Mike Newell), which he claims to have seen six times (he thinks it is a pornography film); and he claims his own wife “couldn't find the kitchen with a fucking map,” when he had earlier claimed she had been “right,” and the fireman's uniform is, of course, only a prop.

Seen from the perspective of the men's experience of their work space, the room is littered with signs of an all-male and chauvinistic environment—a basketball goal, photographs of women in swimsuits or underwear, cigar smoke, and so forth. As framed by the window through which Fern sees it, the room appears tidy, almost sterile. Similarly, the men seem uncouth and slouchy behind the scenes but blandly casual as seen by Fern. Call humorously plays the effort to present oneself attractively against the cliché of the inner male slob hidden carefully from view. In so doing, he allows his performers to remain confined to their preconceptions. The men's perceptions of Fern are framed by the window by which her view of them is framed, which provides Call with a nice commentary on the construction of fantasy images in film. Things seen on screen are not what they appear to be.

Surrendering to her fantasy perceptions, Fern slowly works her way up from the cheapest thrills to the more expensive. Her facial expressions indicate her pleasure and satisfaction as she eyes and pays for the “Date Fantasy” and eventually the “Tag-team Fantasy.” In the tag-team fantasy, the men play out roles and spout clichés meant to melt Fern's designer label heart. The fantasy is interactive, as Fern makes requests and the men fulfill them with Michael Bolton tickets, a reservation at a Bed & Breakfast, a gift certificate to Bath & Body Works, all of which consolidate Fern's middle class background, her sentimentality, and her superficiality. The humor

is, then, not only directed at men's assumptions about women and women's (presumed) emphasis on romance and emotion in interpersonal relationships; it is also aimed at the superficial pleasures (and concerns) of the mainstream middle class. *Peep Show* gently critiques the mainstream middle class value placed on surface appearances. Although Fern's desires are not physical, they are no less superficial.<sup>3</sup>

One of the male performers tells her she resembles Audrey Hepburn and that she looks better without make-up. Her reactions to these compliments reveal that Fern's needs do not go deeper. She is satisfied by the images of Laura Ashley designer sheets and bric-a-brac from Bath & Body Works. In her use of commercialized sexual behavior, Fern receives satisfaction from a sexual fantasy that is itself highly commercial, filled with pecuniary offers of sundresses and other gifts. Sexual relationships based on emotional fulfillment, commitment, and communication cannot escape commerce. Tellingly, both men run out of things to say and they repeat each other, demarcating the limits of this game. Fern does not seem to notice, though, and tears into her "emergency funds" envelope to pay for the fifty dollar climax (as she becomes more and more aroused by her experience, she abandons her middle-class practicality (as well as her concern for appearances, as she becomes increasingly disheveled). After Fern pays fifty dollars for the most expensive thrill, the male performers finally (Call uses a delaying

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<sup>3</sup> Claims that sexual relationships outside of long-term partnerships were only, or merely, physical and therefore lacking essential elements of love and commitment, which would provide sexual behavior with a depth, were commonplace charges in debates that accompanied the decline of the dominance of the procreational rationale for sexual behavior and the emergence of the recreational rationale. See, for example, Schur.

ruse that brings to mind the delaying tactics of sexploitation films in the 1920s and 1930s) tell her what she most wants to hear. That too concerns her appearance, and Fern has her final reaction just as the film ends.

*Peep Show* has been widely recognized for its subtle humor, winning the award for Best Short Subject at the 32nd Annual WorldFest-Houston International Film Festival and taking first place for Comic Short at Film Fest New Haven 1999. Although it walks a fine line between humor and sexism at some moments, *Peep Show* is an enjoyable twist on middle-class expectations about the marginal world of peep shows, about men's assumptions about women, and the middle-class's concern with appearances. Concerned only with appearances and gestures, Fern gets what she came for. Like the misdirection of the narrative cues in *Citizen Kane*, Call's comic misdirection insures that in this peep show, in the end, to quote "the little neighbor boy" in Bob Dylan's "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest," "Nothing is revealed."

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## **How to treat a woman or... ?**

Kirsten Wellendorph

In discussing the short film *Peep Show*, I would like to look at the view of women that is expressed through the themes of duality and irony.

### *Duality*

Duality is present throughout the film – in the way the music is used, establishing a sense of space (staging), in the narrator's angle and in the characters. I would characterize the music as soft pop with a text about love. This contrasts with the title, *Peep Show*. There is a hint of the duality in the opening scene, as the soft pop is mixed with the actual sounds of rain and thunder, well-known connotations of danger and horror. On the one hand, the safe and secure soft pop; on the other, the discomfiting and threatening actual sounds. When the woman goes into the cabin, the music and actual sounds stop, and are replaced by silence – a silence that underlines the woman's discomfort. The silence belongs to the woman; the music and actual sounds belong to the men. The duality is established in the story by using music, actual sound and silence. This atmospheric split is duplicated in the physical partition of space. On one side of the wall is the woman; on the other side are the two men. I would call these rooms including the ticket-window, the factual rooms. These rooms maintain a kind of reality in the story.

The rooms and the music/actual sounds create two images: one of a woman, vulnerable and hesitating but still looking for adventure and daring

to explore new territory; the other of the two men, safe and superior on their home ground.

The narrator's angle appears in two forms: the woman and a narrator. The latter is the most important and is used most of the time. Only a few times the story comes from the woman, and when this happens, it is to underline her discomfort in the particular situation: her eyes searching the room, and when she looks for more money in her wallet.

By the extensive use of an external narrator, the woman's role as one that is stared at – she is also an actor in a peep-show – becomes emphasised. Another duality: the spectator in the show is actually herself the object. The distribution of roles has changed. On the surface the woman plays the active part, that of the spectator, but as the narrator lets us get behind the stage to follow the conversation between the two men, their activities and the show they are putting on for the woman – the roles change. The woman is reduced to an object, stared at and evaluated. Instead of playing the acting and active part, she takes on the receiving and passive role: that of an object the two men can talk about, laugh at, and to a certain extent control. The beginning of the story indicates a reversed view of women and their sexuality, but gradually we end up in the conventional story with women's sexuality reduced to enthusiasm for make-up, buying shoes, fitness, nobility and romantic phrases. A traditional view of women and their sexuality. A conformity the woman embodies with her look and behaviour.

Conformity can also be found in the two men. They are negatively depicted in a very conventional way: sitting in front of the TV, watching basketball, drinking beer, smoking and talking in a vulgar manner. On both sides of the wall, we get stereotypic images of men



and women; but when they meet, the situation changes. Again we are confronted with duality.

### *Irony*

We would get quite another idea of the meaning of the story, if strong implementation and use of the second theme – irony, were not present. We are invited to assume an ironic distance throughout the story in the description of the characters and in the particular scenes. Examples are the actual sounds of rain and thunder mixed with soft pop adding an ironic touch, the stout man selling tickets wearing a white coat and reading a newspaper, the way the woman's uncertainty and searching is depicted, the almost classical farce of the men watching TV and drinking beer and finally, for each dollar she pays, the way the two men's dialogue gradually becomes more and more like lines from a soap-opera.

### *How to treat a woman or... ?*

I have used the two themes – duality and irony – to encompass the story's view of women. A view according to which the woman, no matter what, becomes an object you observe/stare at, an object for men's exultant laughter, a “thing” you talk about in nasty terms and whose sexuality is at best synonymous with romantic phrases.

But the mixture of duality, irony, a realistic space, the characters whose behaviour and statements are grossly satirised, gives this story a very special quality; one automatically assumes an ironic distance. This oblique angle allows us – as the audience – to accept the story as it is.



## Whom are we making fun of?

*Lene S. Kristoffersen*

It is a dark and rain-drenched evening where anything might happen and where only those afraid of daylight venture out. The raindrops glow in a red neon light. The neon tube spells the word "PEEP SHOW". Where can all this lead? Our imagination works overtime while we prepare ourselves for exciting and illicit experiences in the following nine minutes. But nothing turns out as we had expected.

I am one of the lucky ones to have seen *Peep Show* in a cinema. It was shown last year at Clermont-Ferrand. Without question it made a deep impression on everyone in the audience. They laughed at the men's offer to spoon and fun was made of the woman's orgasm after the line "*Have you lost weight?*" Yet, who laughed at whom, or more specifically, what did we make fun of? Did the men laugh at Fern and her yearning for romance, her readiness to be cheated and to make them scramble for her money? Did the women make fun of the men because they really did behave so disgustingly when the "curtain" went down? Is the explanation why *Peep Show* is a fascinating film that it unashamedly permits one to make fun of the opposite sex's stupidity? I don't believe the explanation for the laughter is so simple and in this article I will try to explain why. To aid this discussion, I wish to move a little outside the field of the short film and into the discussion of how theories of communication have changed from the idea of exerting an influence on the receiver over towards a communication between the sender and receiver.

In my opinion, *Peep Show* and many other short films are crucial in discussing the question as to why the projected image or film screen fascinates us. The significant feature of the short film is the fact that the film's message as a whole would not function unless the receiver were willing to communicate. In this connection, of course, I am thinking of Richard Raskin's reminder that the short film's simple story contains its depth and that one's expression has to rely on the receiver's own ability to form the impression. My thesis relating to *Peep Show* is, in fact, that we are not only restricted to an unambiguous interpretation, because of the film's unique way of relating its own story of the otherwise rather transparent cliché about man and woman's eternal dilemma, but that we lift the perception of the short film up to a level where we also recognise ourselves and where the cliché has an integrating rather than a fragmenting effect.

It is therefore surprising that the short film is such unknown territory for many a good film analyst. It has never been given the seal of approval: partly because (I think) it doesn't have the cinema's screen as its primary means of visualisation, and partly because many of the feature film's analytical tools would be inadequate when applied to the universe of the short film, in particular the concept of fascination. The closest we can come to the framework of a definition is Richard Raskin's set of seven parameters, a short film's ABC. This definition, however, is primarily a starting point for a story teller's guided tour through the short film's many potentialities for telling his or her story in the best way. Therefore, although it completely describes the short film's many (possible) essential features, it does not provide any direct suggestion for a concrete analytical framework or any direct theory of the sender-

receiver relationship in the universe of the short film. The simplest question, why are we fascinated, is also one of the most difficult to answer.

In order to approach this question, we cannot avoid such heavy analytical concepts as identification and emotions.

Throughout film study's (in fact, relatively short) lifetime, a number of publications have described, or endeavoured to describe, the extent of film's fascination. There have been a number of attitudes and suggestions as to how and why film can capture and move its audience. In particular psychoanalysis has had a strong hand in shaping film study's understanding of such concepts as identification and emotion, both on the conscious and the subconscious plane! Psychoanalysis has provided the paradigm for many critical analyses of film's seductive character. The word "criticism" should be taken very literally, since the central emphasis has all too rarely been an attention to the film's message, but rather a criticism of its attempt to address our secret dreams and latent needs in its pursuit of success. *Peep Show* would be torn apart by many a feminist as the worst form of male-chauvinistic rubbish. The woman is the passive one, who merely accepts (and even pays for) that pleasure and the men are the active party: "*Let's bring this one home*", as they say, while they no doubt laugh all the way to the bank.

The receiver's identification with the actors has been the fascination parameter most analysts have treated. Film was made of the stuff dreams are made of. Therefore the degree of fascination has something to do with the wish to become one with the protagonist on the film screen. This is, of course, a broad generalisation, but if one is to judge from the films which have been popular objects of

analysis and have reached the wide screen in the past 15 years, then it is the mainstream film which has been given all the attention.

The concept of identification has therefore focussed on the receiver's role as the passive one, where the self is eclipsed in favour of the active person external to oneself, that means, after all, to put it brutally, to vanish. Although this rather bold interpretation has long since been under question, it has been barely 10 years since cognitive theory has started to take form. In cognitive theory the receiver's passivity is challenged and preference is given to a far more active role as co-communicator. Many factors contribute to this: partly an improved understanding of human brain function, partly a much more subtle approach to the extent of the media's influence, but certainly partly also to the fact that the receiver is no longer confined to a small number of narrow information channels. The receiver has become a trained perceiver and much more demanding, so that the sender is forced to a much greater degree to take the receiver into consideration. Some will no doubt think that this will lead to poorer television or film, and perhaps they will prove to be right, but in exchange we will be given the opportunity of analysing the visual media in much more detail than was the case just 10 years ago.

Of course this also has consequences for the concept of identification. Carl Plantinga writes in the article *The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film* (*Passionate Views*, ed.: Carl Plantinga, 1999) that the word "*involvement*" describes a much better concept to use, because the receiver does not lose his or her "self", but on the contrary, sets his own self into the story's context.

Another thing, which he did not mention, however, but which I think is important (also seen in light of Raskin's definition of the

concept) is that the word *involvement* in the analytic context allows the receiver to relate to the narrative more as an open story, and not to expect the protagonist to fulfil the desires and dreams one might have wished in the traditional sense, had identification been the film's driving force, that is, to expect that the girl, however romantic she may be, waits for a good and sensitive father on top of the Empire State Building, where he, for good measure, looks like Tom Hanks.

It is therefore far more accurate and more precise to call the degree of immediate fascination the *involvement* with the story. The surroundings and the people, or the person, we follow should involve us by their mere presence. The story should be realistic and make us curious enough to keep us interested in the story. It is true that one should have a definite main character in a short film, but this isn't the same as to insist that one identify with the person in question. What would happen if instead, the pivot of the story were an event, an atmosphere or an object which is responsible for the story's development?

The other important concept in this discussion is the word *emotions*, a quantity which has created many problems for cognitive theory, since it is a very elastic idea. Many have tried to divide emotions into primary and secondary categories. This project is considered to be rather uncertain and vulnerable when applied to a specific film analysis. From the point of view of the short film *Peep Show*, it is difficult to decide which emotions enacted are primary and which secondary.

Therefore there are many people, including Carl Plantinga, who argue for calling it *effect*, that is, the reaction with which the receiver responds to a given situation, depending entirely on which effect

the emotions enacted on the screen produce. Thus the reaction contains many different emotional components. The reaction, that is, the desire to see more and the curiosity aroused because one has become involved in the film's plot, becomes the dynamics of the analysis. At the very beginning of *Peep Show* we already have a definite expectation, in fact, perhaps even a desire, concerning the way the story should develop. There is no doubt that we want to accompany Fern into the red room. The motivation for this desire can vary, but the wish for something to happen is the same. Thereby it is the reaction to the story's continuation which is the centre of importance, and not an attempt to classify the feelings accurately, according to whether they are primary or secondary.

One man who has sought to systematise the effect, and thereby the expectation, about the plot's development is Professor Joshua Meyrowits at New York University. In his capacity of Professor of Communication, he has set up some rules for how we humans communicate and why we choose different strategies depending on with whom and where we communicate. His project has nothing to do with film but is concerned rather with the fact that communication between a human being and the (film) screen can be compared with, as he calls it, face-to-face communication.

The reason he is so important in relation to the concept of *effect* is that he argues that the receiver (of every form of communication) sees, experiences and draws conclusions on the basis of his or her own private background, in addition to the cultural context, in which he or she lives. The fact that one experiences this along with millions of others does not make the experience less private. He therefore sets up rules for communication: what is expected, what may happen and how is one to relate to it. Exactly this thesis is also



a basis for Plantinga as a useful starting point whenever he wants to discuss the concept of *effect*, that is, our reaction pattern. These communications or *effect* platforms are classified in the following manner:

*Forefront stage* is the space which only exists because we, as receivers, are watching or, as senders, require an audience. It is the stage where the audience's reactions are what the stage acts on. It is created when we tell a joke in the lunch break and with dramatic phrases and gestures spice up the story, because we want so much for everyone to laugh.

*Front stage* are the situations we all know about, but where we do not need an audience. That is when we shop in a supermarket, when we have coffee together with our colleagues and speak about what we will have for dinner. Here everyday affairs are discussed in our everyday language and the platform is safe to move on. No unpleasant truths are allowed to arise here.

*Centre stage* is the private scene, which is not so personal, however, so that it might just as well take place next door. Nevertheless, we would be very embarrassed if our neighbour were witness to the situation. It is here where we confront general conflicts and topics, where the majority can express an opinion and the argument is mutually recognisable. It is private because, although it is a public area, we prefer to be on familiar terms with those we speak to here.

*Back stage* describes the situation a level deeper within the private sphere. It is here we keep the door tightly shut. Here we scream at our children and hear their defensive retorts with the slamming of doors and a parting remark which would make a sailor blush. It is the chamber one shares only with one's closest intimates.

This is the place where our attitudes, personality and sexuality can be discussed openly in both negative and positive terms.

*Deep back stage* is neither private nor public, but concealed from both these platforms. This chamber is dark and hidden because what happens or is discussed here is forbidden or morally disapproved both in the private and public context.

As receiver and sender, one will always try to decode a situation, a scene, a person, in order to find out the manner in which one can communicate. If one happens to be in a *forefront* situation, then it doesn't matter if one makes a scene, if one holds forth, but if one does that in a supermarket, then one has stepped out of the situation, that is, one has lost one's situational tact. In this respect the boundaries are not flexible; this is not like a temperature theory. By small adjustments one can in a sense change platforms and hence the premises for communication. Perhaps we are not so shocked to hear about a personal tragedy when friends are visiting us, but when we meet them in the supermarket, our intimate conversation would be misplaced. Here we find it hard to listen and communicate, because there is always a stranger passing by with a shopping cart and the woman beside us can hear what we are discussing. In other words tension arises where boundaries are exceeded and the possibility for reacting is suddenly changed.

It is my assertion that this holds in the case of many short films, and in *Peep Show* it is the very nerve of the drama, that is, by changing the rules of communication in that situation, those events it relates and the scenery chosen for the narrative. This is precisely because it has to economise its expression, and not merely change the "scenery's" appearance or the story's starting point, but it can easily change the "scenery's" rules for the atmosphere and thereby

the communication with the receiver. Nor does Meyrowitz speak of identification as the opposite of communication, but on the contrary refers to involvement in the communication itself. It is crucial that one is capable of deciphering the rules applying in the particular place and the person one is communicating with. This applies also to decoding what is on the film screen. Therefore the key to understanding the narrative and thereby the rules existing in the room and with the people who are acting, is fundamental in order to decipher the story, that is, what is permissible and how the situation may develop.

One can of course encounter a place one definitely does not know, yet somehow ought to recognise! The short film *Peep show* is played in a setting completely alien to us. The camera ventures out into the rain and catches the red neon sign in its lens. In every way we are entering a space hidden from the public and that stimulates our senses. Nor is there very much cutting in the introduction. We, the receivers, are gradually encompassed by the unknown-known. Furthermore it is a woman who pays to come in and that is, of course, surprising. Yet, why couldn't every form of sexuality be satisfied by peeping? Once Fern is inside the red room, the outside world is excluded. The rules we know, the normality of daily life we act in, are unavailable as deciphering parameters. The space is established as a hidden, erotic and perhaps even vulgar place. We do not identify with Fern (which would of course exclude quite a lot), but we involve ourselves in the story because we are curious about what will happen. The film's first minutes are devoted exclusively to giving us this reaction, to making us follow right into the red room and find out why the woman would frequent a peep show.

The first meeting immediately establishes a deep back stage room, where we expect to find exciting immoral things, exciting because that reaction is inseparable from a place, which no one willingly would admit visiting and which we personally are not acquainted with. Seen through Danish eyes, it is also really more or less forbidden and it would be unbearable, if anyone discovered that we had in fact visited such a place ourselves. Just then the scene changes radically, because we are not presented with what we expected. The short film *Peep show* chooses to play on these expectations of the room's ground rules. The music, the lighting, the way the camera slowly approaches the place all play a part in creating an expectation and determine the agenda for which room and which rules are to hold there. However, instead of setting the man's erotic dreams on the agenda, the main focus is directed to the woman's emotions and her husband's lack of understanding for her needs. As observers, we may perhaps shrug our shoulders and laugh at the unusual situation, but we are drawn further into the story, since the question remains: what is it she is looking for in the red room?

We see two men speaking about football and women in a tone reserved only for those who belong to the same club, the men's club. It is the back stage room with its very own rules about what is important, what is interesting and how one speaks to one another. Women are barred admission, whether as partner or opponent for their dialogue, and the men sitting in the audience will no doubt feel themselves exposed, even though they recognise the tone and the clichés just as well as the women do.

Fern puts the first dollar in the machine and the curtain goes up. The very same men now act in a much more sober manner. They

exaggerate their roles and are very sensitive and charming. The contrast is especially striking, since we saw them a few seconds earlier drinking beer, smoking and using completely different language. The men are in the *forefront* room when they perform for the woman. They are only there because she is peeping and because they are hired to carry out a definite job. The men's "tension field" stretches between the hidden back stage room and the diametrically opposite forefront room. The "tension field" and thereby the dynamics in *Peep Show* arise because the rules of communication change. The men obey the rules we use ourselves whenever we perform or converse with understanding intimates. The tension arises, of course, because one can perceive the contradiction between the two rooms, that is, one recognises the cliché.

In the "tension field" between the men's communication sits the receiver, Fern. She only experiences what occurs in the forefront room, where her most burning desires are fulfilled. The men's back stage room is however the reason for her visit to the sinister-looking place. What she receives for her money is fulfilment of her innermost dreams. In order to achieve this she must seek out a murky place.

Her secret desires become completely exposed under the premises of the forefront stage, and it is here that the short film performs a stroke of genius. This is where the essence of the film lies. Its success lies in exposing something personal and delicate in a space and in a form which does not seem vulgar, because the ground rules of communicating have been observed. They have to perform.

The effect of the drama performed there in the red room is naturally that we make fun of ourselves, of our own sex. Fern has seen through men. She knows what men say and what interests

them, because it is the reason for her doing such a drastic thing as to seek out a peep show. On the other hand, the woman is also exposed. Her innermost dreams are performed in public. Nothing is swept under the carpet. In this way the nuance is created, namely, that we can recognise the cliché about ourselves and one another in the battle of the sexes. The cliché is difficult to manage if one were to choose sides in the story, if the dynamics of the film were identification. The question is therefore whether it would be seen as amusing at all. In my view, identification is something very personal, while involvement is open to unexpected turns and comments, when, for example, we can laugh at one another and ourselves. If one sees the film without investing one's own experiences and background in the story, then the film will be misunderstood and turn out to be a noisy, and perhaps even a vulgar film. However, if one can recognise the different communication rules of the rooms, then one can probably supply the overtones to the picture and the film will remain full of clichés, although not without depth and useful truths.

The dark and rain-drenched evening was not an invitation to be a fly on the wall and experience something hidden and secret about other people or to find the hidden and erotic in ourselves. It was an invitation to laugh at ourselves. This makes *Peep Show* one of the many short films which exploit the short film's potentialities to the full. It knows its limitations and economises with its effects. It is committed to its project. The theme it takes up is timeless and it wraps it up in a different and stimulating manner. It is daring because it chooses to make a frontal attack on the clichés. In order not to become a flat cliché itself, it has to rely on its audience. In this respect, it is an example from which quite a number of films could learn.

## ***Peep Show* – reversal and back**

Henrik Bødker

Here is a little sheltered space from where you furtively can cast pleasurable but slightly shameful glances at something private and/or illicit. This is what a title like *Peep Show* promises; and indeed – if much film theory is to be believed – this is also what films in general have to offer (the term "peep show" in fact used to refer to a box containing moving pictures set up for entertainment at fairs or other such occasions). What we have, then, is thus a peep show within a peep show.

Without arguing that this necessarily points towards some sort of meta-film, one could say that this constellation produces a scene or set-up that at least has the potential of being a perfect shorthand for exposing various forms of disclosure – filmic and/or in relation to sexual desire. And indeed, throughout the eight minutes that *Peep Show* lasts, these two levels coalesce into a commentary on spectatorship, a commentary which is largely based on reversal.

This is evident right from the beginning when it is revealed – contrary to expectations – that the visitor to the peep show is a young, well-dressed and "wife-ish"-looking woman: the traditional male gaze aimed at peep shows/film is here seemingly replaced by that of a young female spectator, who simultaneously is presented as a (the) consumer of much contemporary popular culture: throughout we witness her exchange of money – even down to her "emergency money" /housekeeping money? – for fantasies. Despite,

or perhaps rather because of this, the gaze – our gaze – largely remains male (as I will return to below). That this is so is arguably revealed through the range of reversals that follows more or less directly from that of the gender of the spectator, which is the reversal that constitutes the main premise of the film.

First of all, at least in a literal sense, the undressing seems to happen on the wrong side of the window – in the booth of the paying customer. Meanwhile, the “supply” side of the economic exchange remains fully dressed. However, viewed from within, this male space seems almost coated with nudity. As spectators to the filmic peep show, we have access to both of the internal peep show’s adjoining rooms. Yet our access to the thoughts and feelings of the female protagonist is mainly through her bodily reactions to the spectacle that she is witnessing – “I[/we] see you in your wildest dreams”, as the initial song had promised us, and her internal life is thus only indirectly present. She does utter a few sentences, but these merely seem to augment what is already visible. For the men on the performing side, however, there is a marked discrepancy between outward appearance and internal life – at least for some of the time.

As far as humour is concerned, the main premise is thus centred upon the unequal distribution of knowledge which is related to the stark contrast between the dimly lit, plush, stylised, velvety, burgundy and largely silent female side of the window, and the messy, raw, naked and “directly” verbal (or honest?) male side. And what allegedly evokes laughter is the film-spectator alliance created through the situational irony of our knowing the true nature of the created illusion while the female peep-show spectator is kept in the dark (or burgundy). Yet, she might also know the illusion



– why else pay for a fantasy, or why go to a peep show in the first place? On the other hand, like a male visitor to a peep show, she may entertain the notion that what she is witnessing is somehow the true nature or inner fantasies of the opposite sex. In any case, what she sees arouses her.

And here, dressing and undressing is not only relating to the literal level (which of course also could be argued in relation to a conventional peep show). The disclosures that we are offered glimpses of are thus not of the kind that we would expect. What we are offered is an indirect disclosure of the female spectator's "wildest dreams" as well as the "nudity" upon which these are constructed; and, by extension, we are offered a somewhat coarse, but humorous commentary on, first of all, gender-related differences in sexuality and/or arousal and, secondly, on gender-roles in general.

What one first notices about this process of arousal is the progressional scale of the offered fantasies: "beginner", "intermediate", "date fantasy", "tag team fantasy" and an unspecified fifty-dollar option. But why not just a range of different fantasies or (sexual) preferences? Why does she have to be initialised – or indeed "socialised" (as I will return to below)? At the most obvious level, the progressional scale relates to the implied workings, mechanism or logic of female sexual arousal – as a filmic device it functions both as a narrative structure working from beginning to climax, as well as a suspense-making guide that triggers our quest or desire to both know and see. It is through this progression that the contrast of gendered needs is set up: while the female side is characterised by a hierarchy of needs in which emotional well-being and appreciation must be obtained in order for sexual desire to be aroused, sexual

arousal on the male side is much more instant and directly related to the body and its exposure. But what is the actual progression? What are we progressing towards?

Well, as one would expect, on the female side it is a progression towards desire and/or sexual fulfilment; on the male side, it is a progression through longer and longer and more and more "direct" verbal exposures of acceptance, intimacy and closeness. It is a progression from a male acknowledgement of failure and acceptance of a woman's abilities in a traditional male sphere – that of reading a road map – to proclamations of acceptance in relation to the female body ("you look even better without make-up" and "have you lost weight") and commitment – "I'm ready to commit". As the verbal exposures seem more and more elaborate and many-layered in relation to the "nudity" of the male sphere, and as the talk progresses from brain acceptance to that of body acceptance, actual clothing is beginning to peel off on the female side; or, as the male focus on nudity is progressively hidden, female nudity is apparently about to be exposed. Certainly the sound of sexual excitement is suggesting that.

Yet we are constantly aware of the double-ness, the male role-playing, window-dressing or construction. First of all, as spectators to this filmic peep show, we are peeping on the (fooled?) woman from within the peep-show apparatus, if such a term makes sense. I am here specifically thinking about the shots where we – as accomplices – look at her from within the money slot (to peep means to look through a narrow opening into a larger space). Apart from the economic connotations arising from this position, it is tempting to read this positioning as a projection of the traditional,

male peep-show fantasy – the woman as, or seen through, the slot – back into this apparently reversed peep show.

As a continuation of this, it also needs stressing that the progressive acceptance is constantly being undermined by the internal male dialogue, which continuously juxtaposes “real” male (propagative) needs to the staged acceptance of the emotional needs of the female. Immediately after the staged acceptance of the female ability to find directions, one of the male protagonists comments: “my wife needs directions to find the fucking kitchen”. To what extent that actually means *back* to the kitchen is not entirely clear; yet such a reading is entirely possible, and that leads me on to my second comment in relation to the (film’s) progressional scale.

Apart from combining female arousal and narrative development, the progressional scale may also – in keeping with my arguments above – be seen as a comment on larger societal developments in relation to gender. Not only is the woman fed verbal window-dressing in exchange for money, she is also socialised into a position of accepting a seemingly un-ambiguous combination of very traditional gender roles combined with a somehow overdone gentleman-ness and willingness to cater to a range of female emotional needs.

The female protagonist is, in other words, pulled into what must be assumed to be a pleasurable position of felt empowerment. Part of this progressional movement is the “tag-team”-contest, where the males try to out-talk each as far as catering to her emotional needs is concerned, and the choice – although illusive – remains with her. And, perhaps, since these fantasies resemble utopian glimpses into a potential world, there has to be a progression: she has to be prepared, and kept longing for more. Yet

her climax does seem to coalesce with that of the film. It could be argued, however, that what makes her come ultimately is a male acknowledgement of her having advanced along the road of progression towards a beauty standard largely defined by men. The final acknowledgement is thus not of her sexuality. Instead, what we witness – also in actual filmic terms – is the effects of male acknowledgement upon women within a wholly male-dominated apparatus. As much as anything else, it is the woman and her reactions that we are looking at. And this leads on to the question of the implied relations between the portrayed peep show and its social and cultural context.

Initially, one could argue that this peep show is also about attempts at defining behaviour and thus experiencing power. Yet the situation in *Peep Show* is seemingly reversed in the sense that – in contrast to the traditional male peep shows, which largely could be seen as an extension of existing power-/gender-relations – power here is located within the core of that which is being peeped at. Although the gaze of the woman might seem empowering, it is not so. What she is offered at this peep show is rather a glimpse of relations as they can be or could have been – and/or a chance to momentarily feel affirmed that gender-relations are in fact changing. Yet it seems clear that they are not. The comment that one of the men makes about his wife certainly suggests that. In a sense, what initially looks like reversals are perhaps rather upholding the existing state of things.

The reversal at stake in *Peep Show* should thus be seen as an extension of and commentary upon post-sixties liberal attempts at levelling out gender-roles – “I wish I could bear your child”, says one of the male actors towards the end of the progressional scale. It

is a pleasurable and seemingly ambiguity-free portrayal of relations as if certain liberal and/or cultural traits were a genuine part of actual social behaviour – had it not been for the “true” nature of the male, and his position to deliver what might seem tailor-made fantasies.

Obviously, what is gazed at at a peep show is not a reflection of some authentic core of sexuality. What is presented is a projection of a fantasy that fulfils a culturally discredited or illicit need. But that which is presented to the woman at the peep show is hardly illicit or culturally discredited by any contemporary standards. In fact, what we see – together with the female protagonist – is actually public rather than private; this is yet another reversal. The spectacle is, as I have already suggested, an extended, elaborate, caricatured and ironic representation of a (semi-)official cultural discourse about equality in relation to gender.

Normally, the true nature of the people performing at peep shows remains hidden. But not so at this peep show. As spectators to this double peep show we are allowed a view “inside” the constructed performance. And it is allegedly here that the truly illicit or “private” of this peep show is located, and portrayed for us to peep at. As spectators to this film we are the real peep show audience, as I suggested at the outset of this essay. And what we see in the male room of the film’s internal peep show set-up somehow seems to be the real, authentic inner core of relaxed masculinity, a condition whose “reversal” is worth paying to see.

Two interrelated interpretations follow from that: either that “true” masculinity still dominates the surrounding society and thus makes the more polished version a scarce commodity – the thunder in the background in the opening scene certainly suggests a

threatening and unpleasant external world. And, related to this interpretation, that beneath the cultural or liberal veneer of seemingly changed gender-relations, there is a fairly unchangeable, “real” or authentic, even “biological”, core of masculinity that truly longs for more natural and traditional relations and space to unfold its desires and fulfil needs. That this cornered inner male “animal” is capable of rather desperate acts in order to secure his freedom is clearly evident in the sequence following the reference to “spooning”, where one of the male protagonists replies that he would rather “gnaw his arm off” – the lone and desperate fox caught in the trap of a feminised civilisation! But also the film’s lighting and texture point towards some sort of authenticity underneath the liberal veneer: while the “real”, inner core of the male side is very directly and openly lit, the fantasies constructed by the males are toned much more softly, as is indeed also the female side, which is characterised by a thoroughly “dreamy” texture.

Thus in the end, *Peep Show* seems to say more about what men think that women would like to hear, rather than what women may actually wish to hear – and/or get! Indeed, what is exposed for us at this peep show is a nostalgic longing for a true masculinity, that with the appropriate coating may be integrated into the increasing demands of equality. The illicit that we as (male) spectators are offered a glimpse of is what some might think of as culturally repressed markers of the real male: the chance to look at posters of nude women, talk knowingly about pornographic films and sports, drink beer, smoke cigarettes and exchange techniques about how to play the instrument of female arousal. In that sense it is fairly celebratory, and we are invited to join in the celebration. The situational irony – or point of view – invites a (male) bonding

through the alliance that the ironic communication offers, an alliance that “knows” the “falsity” of verbal/emotional female arousal but also knows somehow that this is an instrument that needs to be played.





**Marc-Andreas Bochert**

*Kleingeld*  
*(Small Change)*

**Germany 1999**





## ***Kleingeld (Small Change)***

**Marc-Andreas Bochert**

**(Germany, 1999), color, 35 mm., 15 min**

### **Principal production credits**

Writer/Director	Marc-Andreas Bochert
Cinematography	Eeva Fleig
Production design	Antonia Bergmiller
Sound	Dietrich Körner
Music	Michael Schenk
Producer	Gabriele Lins

A production of the Film and Television Academy "Konrad Wolf."

Based on a story taken from the play "The Philanthropist" by Christopher Hampton.

### **Cast**

Hoffmann	Frank Lienert-Mondanelli
Homeless man	Rolf Fahrenkog-Petersen
Secretary	Kerstin Nikodemus
Colleague	Lutz Michael
Client	Hans Haasis

### **Awards won for *Kleingeld* include:**

Oscar nomination for best live action short, 2000  
Student Academy Award – Honorary Foreign Film, 1999  
Deutscher Kurzfilmpreis, 1999 Filmband in Silber  
Studio Hamburg Nachwuchspreis, 1999 – Sonderpreis der Jury  
Gerling Produzenten Preis, Internationale Studentenfilmtage Sehsüchte, 1999  
Prize of honor, International Film Festival, Karlovy Vary, 1999  
2<sup>nd</sup> prize, Narrative & Cinematography Award, Next Frame, 1999  
Best Student Production, 47<sup>th</sup> Columbus International Film & Video Festival, Ohio  
Audience Award, Filmfestival Münster, 1999  
Audience Award, Filmfest Lünen, 1999  
Official entry (in competition), Clermont-Ferrand, 2000  
Best European Short, International Film Festival Bra, Italy, 2000  
1<sup>st</sup> Prize, International Film Festival Cergy-Pontoise, France, 2000  
Murnau-Kurzfilmpreis, 1999  
Audience Award, Extérieur Nuit, Bordeaux, 2000  
Best Student Film, Aspen Film Festival, 2000  
Deutscher Kamerapreis-Kurzfilm (Eeva Fleig)  
RTP-Award, 28<sup>th</sup> International Film Festival, Algarve, Portugal, 2000

## Marc-Andreas Bochert

Born 1971 in Hildesheim, Marc-Andreas Bochert produced a number of video films in his youth which were shown at numerous competitions and awarded various prizes. He began studying film direction at the Film Academy (HFF) in Potsdam-Babelsberg. During his studies, he directed a number of short films while working as an assistant director on various film productions outside the academy.

In 1999, he graduated with his thesis film *Kleingeld* (*Small Change*), which was awarded the Student Academy Award for best foreign film in 1999 and was nominated for the Oscar for best short film in 2000.

Since 1999, he has directed two TV fictions and also two commercials.



## Filmography

- 1993 **Aljoschas abenteuerlicher Alltag** (Documentary, 16mm, 10 min.)
- 1994 **Das Muster** (Fiction, 16mm, 13 min.)
- 1995 **Der Astronaut** (Fiction, BetaSP, 25 min.)
- 1996 **Schatten der Vergangenheit** (Fiction, 16mm, 13 min.)
- 1997 **"Tag der offenen Tür"** (Spot, BetaSP, 1:30)
- 1999 **Kleingeld** (Fiction, 35mm, 15 min.)
- 1999 **Lotte Primaballerina** (Fiction, 16mm, 25 min.)
- 2000 **Die Spezialistenshow** (Fiction, 16mm, 25 min.)

## **An interview with Marc-Andreas Bochert on *Kleingeld/Small Change***

Richard Raskin

*I see that your short, Kleingeld, was inspired by a play called The Philanthropist, by Christopher Hampton.<sup>1</sup> How did you come to know that play?*

It was performed in Berlin by a student theater group. I just happened to see the play and got the inspiration to make the film.

*Did you change the story at all?*

Yes, a character in the play tells a story about something that happened to him. And that is basically like a plot-outline for *Kleingeld*. But in the film, it's a different character, it's a different setting. And I had to flesh out the story because it was very spare in the play.

*Can you tell me anything about the way your Hoffmann character differs from the character in the play?*

I thought a lot about my father, who is a very typical German office man. And I wanted a character who has difficulty with showing emotions, with dealing with emotions, and who is more comfortable when he expresses himself by giving some money, for example.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hampton, who was born in the Azores in 1946, wrote *The Philanthropist* in 1970. Though he began as a dramatist, he turned to screenwriting and eventually to directing. His screenwriting credits include *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988, directed by Stephen Frears), *Total Eclipse* (1995, directed by Agnieszka Holland), *Carrington* (1995, which he also directed), *The Secret Agent* (1996, directed as well as written by Hampton), and *Mary Reilly* (1996, directed by Stephen Frears).

*Your short is exceptionally well thought through, visually. I was wondering whether every shot was storyboarded and carefully planned.*

It was planned, of course, and we spent a lot of time scouting for the locations and the settings that enabled us to make those shots. And I had a very gifted cinematographer, who had a lot of suggestions that made it to the screen. For example, the first shot which was not planned in the screenplay – it was just something that we thought of when we were preparing the shot during shooting. It was her suggestion, and I said, "Oh, that's wonderful. Let's do it!"

*I wanted to ask about one camera movement that struck me. There's a point where Hoffmann is in the parking lot and you elevate the camera from a low to a high angle shot as he's thinking.*

That's one of the shots I don't really like now. The idea was to have a camera movement illustrate that an idea is emerging in his mind – that of driving the car back and forth through the mud puddle. If I were to do it again today, I think I would do it differently. It was a little too obvious and it was something that never appeared elsewhere in the film.

*The car and glass seem to be closely associated with Hoffmann. Cold, hard surfaces and cool colors. And I noticed that even his aquarium has no plants in it. A sterile, controlled world. Was that all deliberately planned – that even the aquarium should be very sterile?*

Yes. This was a suggestion by the production designer. I wanted to have a plant, just one green point. But he preferred an aquarium because it's a very obvious comparison: the fish in the aquarium and Hoffmann in this glass building. I liked the idea. Of course, it's not

very realistic but that is not the point. It was just a metaphor to get the atmosphere of a very cold space.

*Your actors play their roles very well. I don't know much about the German film scene. Are they well known actors? And can you tell me something about the casting you did?*

No, they're not very well known. The main actor is from the former East Germany. He played a lot in television in East Germany. Then he became a theater director, and has not appeared for a very long time in any film. He was not my first choice. I had other actors in mind that I could not get. And then I thought of him, and thought that he could make it work, and in fact, it worked very well. And maybe it's better now to have an actor who is not so well known in this role...

And the other guy, the homeless man, was easy to cast because he was in fact a formerly homeless man, who had lived on the streets of Berlin for ten years. And then he became an actor. Now he is married, he has a home, he has work. And it was important that he was not homeless when we were shooting the film. That meant he could have some distance and could play with the role.

*Your use of some of the minor characters is also very interesting. Hoffmann's relationship to his secretary, for example. There's a point where he's looking out the window, and she comes over to see what he's looking at. And he says to her something like: "Anything else?" Then she walks away, rolling her eyes. There's also a point later on where once she leaves the office, she lets her hair down. How do you see these moments with the secretary?*

Of course the idea behind that is: he wished he had a relationship with her. In the beginning, there is a brief moment when he looks at her as she walks out of his office and this is a typical man's look at an attractive woman. But he is not able to communicate this. And of

course at the end, he can see that she has a boyfriend, and that makes Hoffmann feel even more lonely. And this was important for me because I wanted to show that *she* has a private life besides work. That's why she lets her hair down, because now she becomes – not the official person, who works in the office, but the private person who goes out and has a friend, and maybe has some fun in the Berlin night life. We never see Hoffmann at home, but we can imagine that he has nothing to do, that he just sits there in his apartment, watching television.

*I also wanted to ask about the scene in which a man comes to apply for a loan and Hoffmann turns him down. How do you see the role of that scene in the story?*

For me, it shows that he is used to dealing with big money and that he is in charge of a lot of money. He can make the decision to give someone 40,000 marks or not. I wanted to have this as a contrast to the 1 mark that he gives to the beggar.

*Your film never lapses into pathos. And it never becomes a didactic political message. I was wondering whether you were aware of these risks and were deliberately protecting your film from them.*

Yes I was aware of that, because a lot of people pointed out in the screenplay that it might be very sentimental and moralizing at the end. It wouldn't bother me if it's moralizing because if it has a moral, I like this. But of course you don't want to tell people how to live. I just wanted to tell the story.

And at the end, we worked very carefully with the music. I tend to the pathetic, but I'm lucky to have a composer who knows that and who understood that it was important to tone down the music



at the end. If an ending is strong, then you don't need to strengthen it with music. Then it can just stand by itself. So I tried this at the end and I'm very glad that we did this. And I'm very happy that you said what you did when you asked this question.

*Were any other short films an inspiration for you?*

I've seen a lot of short films, of course, at many festivals. And I discovered that the shorts I liked the best were the ones that were *little* stories. Not too big. There was one from Poland that I especially liked, made about three or four years ago. It's about a girl and a dog, and the girl falls in a love with a priest. It was also very successful. This short, which I liked very much, influenced me to turn away from just funny shorts and to prefer shorts that tell a story from normal life.<sup>2</sup>

21 November 2000

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<sup>2</sup> The Polish short film referred to here is *Pancia*, directed by Iwona Siekierzyńska in 1996.



## ***Kleingeld: The Banker and the Beggar***

Wolfgang Kleinwächter



On the wall of an old building behind a muddy parking lot next to the rising skyscrapers of the Potsdamer Platz in the center of Berlin, a small advertisement from the old times, when the city was divided and different currencies were used on the two sides of "the wall", momentarily catches the eyes of the drivers, leaving their cars and running hastily to their offices. "Neue Zeit" – "New Times" – says the banner and only former East Germans remember that the "Neue Zeit" was the daily newspaper of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of the German Democratic Republic.

The "Neue Zeit" doesn't exist anymore. The divided city is united and people on both sides of the former "iron curtain" have the same money in their pockets. The only difference now is that some have more than others. The division of a city has turned into a division among people. While some are struggling for their daily survival, hunting for some "Kleingeld" ("small money" or better "change"), others are gambling with millions to make "big money"

("Grossgeld") bigger and bigger. Is this the message the author wants to tell us in his 15 minute short film "Kleingeld"?

The story of the film is simple: Every day, a banker meets a disabled homeless beggar in the street next to the entrance to his office at the Potsdamer Platz. Each day, he gives him some change, one or two Deutschmark, until he discovers that the homeless man is washing his car, on the dirty parking lot. After discovering this, the banker talks to the beggar, explaining that the "change" is not a "salary" for a "service" but a "gift" and that there is no need to wash the car. But the homeless beggar continues washing his car. One day, the banker, who is very busy with a "big Japanese deal", tries to avoid the beggar, and takes another exit when he leaves the office. The homeless man, waiting for the "daily gift", discovers the banker very late when he is already sitting in his big BMW and is leaving the parking lot. The banker backs out slowly while the beggar runs forward and a collision is unavoidable. While fortunately no serious harm is done, the accident changes the relationship between the two men. Next morning, no homeless beggar is waiting in front of the bank's entrance. But the banker, who wants to excuse himself for the accident, searches for him and finally finds him around another corner in front of the entrance to another bank. When the banker offers to give the beggar 100 Deutschmark, the homeless man turns around and moves away without a word, leaving the solitary banker behind him in Berlin's rush hour with a face full of questions.

The film does not need a lot of language. It tells its story directly with pictures and all the clichés needed to illustrate the human and material distance between the two extreme poles which mark the playing field of today's highly developed German society. The 15

minutes of the film are long enough to remind us that the unification of two countries did not overcome the division between individuals. The 15 minutes tell us something about dignity and responsibility. But they are too short to give answers to the film's questions, raised without words.



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## Repeated Space: *Kleingeld*

Edvin Vestergaard Kau

### Defining space

The first shot is a moving extreme low-angle shot, a tracking shot taken from the middle of a street, and showing the open sky between high buildings on either side. But then again, it isn't. The movement, the angle, the perspective are there, but when the camera is tilted, it discloses the reality that the picture does not show the view into the sky. Instead, what we see is a reflection in the hood of a car. Herr Hoffmann is arriving in the city this morning to go to work. We move into the film with him, the open sky enclosed in the shining surface of his BMW. What looked like an extreme low-angle shot, is in fact an overhead shot of the hood. This is disclosed through a tilt moving up and across the windshield, and ending in a look along the street behind the car.

Paradoxically, this upward camera movement has brought us from the sky down into the canyon-like space of the townscape. This initial trick and bit of visual magic draws the viewer's attention to the use of space, and increases the awareness of positions and spatial relations within the cinematic presentation. So, I want to look closely at Marc-Andreas Bochert's use of space in *Kleingeld*, the architecture of his characters' positions and movements, as it were. Of special interest in this respect will be Herr Hermann's position at the end, compared to that of the beginning as described above.

### Changing places

Almost immediately it seems that the homeless beggar and Hoffmann have developed a routine. Every day when he leaves after work, Hoffman gives a little change to the beggar, the latter always standing in the same place with his little paper cup.

Six times we see them meet this way, and part of the story can be found in the variations of the meetings and their construction of cinematic space. (Almost all other shots, locations, and types of camera practice are used in series as well, the variations and intertwining of the different series making the film at this level a beautiful, minimalist, and at the same time emotionally engaging, piece of art.)

The first time, we see that Hoffmann is already taking change from his pocket as he is leaving the building, and before even seeing the beggar. From a long shot, Hoffmann seen from the rear, a cut brings us to a close-up of his hands with the coins, and tracking brings the beggar's hand and cup into the picture, the camera thus ending in a medium close-up of the beggar. As always, he nods without saying a word. This is the raw material for the series of variations that makes it possible to develop the story of the relationship between the two men.

The next example dissolves directly from Hoffmann in his office to a medium close up of him moving past the beggar while giving him the coin. The two locations and actions are linked even closer together by the fact that the dissolve goes from a slow pan right, in the office, to Hoffmann's faster movement, also right, through the frame, and that this shot ends with a little pan right, to the nodding beggar. Same situation repeated in the same spot, but with a new articulation of space material.



The third and fourth occasions are built together in a structure made up of four pans to the right. In a growing rhythm, dissolves bring us from pans in the office to close-ups of hands, cup and, the second time, the beggar's face, the last shot showing him smile and look to the right toward his benefactor. In this way, the director is quickly able to manipulate his use of space and time to show the development and growing convention/understanding between the two. Also, it is important to note that he can rely on the viewer's understanding of these mechanisms, i.e., the cinematic practices and their result: the moving picture of a piece of psychology.

This "Kleingeld-series" shows not only what is happening with Hoffmann's change, it also builds up an understanding of an exchange between the men: of a potentially mutual commitment, which Hoffmann may end up understanding, too. Up to this point, they have at least developed some expectations through their daily routine. This is very effectively shown through a cinematic construction, a spatial variation within shots that simultaneously, through the already mentioned diminishing pieces of time, articulate and draw the viewer's attention to the fact that this period of meetings is fairly long.

### **From meeting to confrontation**

But between meeting four and five, something happens. Already at the beginning of the film, we have seen that fallen leaves and dirt have a tendency to cover Hoffmann's and his colleagues' cars in the outdoor parking lot. Now this is getting worse, and since the beggar has noticed the problem and Hoffmann's annoyance, he begins to exchange work for Hoffmann's change. He cleans and polishes the BMW, which Hoffman notices from his office. But no sooner has he

turned down a request for a loan from a man who wants to start his own business - with the remark that he should rather keep his job and: "In der heutigen Zeit ist ein Arbeitsplatz sehr wertvoll" - than we are shown the fifth meeting. For the first time, Hoffmann confronts the beggar and speaks to him. He doesn't want him to wash the car; according to him it doesn't need washing, and he threatens to call the guard if the beggar continues to wash it.

The break from the usual pattern of their meeting is immediately articulated in cinematic space. This time there are no pans, no dissolves, no tracking shots or close ups. Just a long shot and a fixed camera position, with the beggar in the foreground and Hoffmann coming from the depth straight at the camera and the beggar. This is in direct contrast to the first time, when he was shown from the rear as he approached the beggar, followed by the gentle depictions of the brief meetings. Then the confrontation takes place, in a static medium two-shot. Meeting is replaced by confrontation. Still, the beggar raises his cup towards Hoffmann to remind him of the money. Again, the crux of the matter is repetition - with variations.

Before giving him the coin, Hoffmann feels obliged to stress that it is not for washing the car, but a gift. This is immediately contradicted by the film itself. The very next cut reveals a bird's eye view from Herr Hoffmann's office, showing the beggar washing the BMW very thoroughly and with a lot of car shampoo! Hoffmann starts to call the guard, but hesitates and decides not to. A slight zoom down from his pov suggests a new understanding of the beggar's situation. His facial expression and the music, together with the zoom, point to the beggar's dignity. The variations within the cinematic space are gradually articulating this as a story with a moral.

**On equal terms?**

But the sixth meeting brings another variation in style. In a tracking close-up (revealing his frustration and determination) the camera moves backwards in front of Hoffmann, following him on his way from the door and this time not to, but past, the beggar. A close-up of the beggar turning his face as Hoffmann passes interrupts the tracking shot. The montage and camera movements literally visually dissect their conflict. When Hoffman changes his mind, stops, and returns to the beggar, the camera also stops and tracks with him. In a short repetition of the last confrontation (close two-shot), Hoffmann says: "Aber mehr gibt's nicht!" The beggar nods his head in precisely the same way as earlier – but now important variations in the visual presentation have brought nuances into the description of their relationship and its development, as well as to the way in which the audience can focus its attention on these things.

In spite of his last remark, Hoffmann himself has apparently changed in the course of the narrative and spatial variations. Because the next time we see him park, he returns to his car and drives it back and forth through the mud in the parking lot. What we have seen so far has apparently resulted in a wordless understanding between them. Hoffman is literally creating precisely the work for the beggar that he otherwise has ordered him not to do, and he even follows the work from his office through his binoculars, making sure that the beggar has understood the message.

**Repeated space is never the same**

Then follows the definitive reversal of their mutual relation. That day, Herr Hoffmann has accidentally run out of change, and cannot

routinely give it to the beggar. The situation on the sidewalk is broken down into quite another montage than the earlier meetings. The camera stays with Hoffman and follows his search through pockets and wallet. He finds only a hundred-mark note. Instead of the other, relatively simple meeting scenes, this one is a combination of close-ups, long shots, shot-reverse shots, and cuts on eye line matches. But instead of either explaining his predicament to the beggar – or giving him 100 marks – the situation develops into a game of hide-and-seek, with Hoffmann trying to escape unseen by hiding behind other people in the street.

Herr Hoffmann hurries to his car, the beggar sees him and tries to follow him, only to get behind the car as Hoffmann gets in and backs out, accidentally hitting him. Even at this moment he dares not meet him; instead, he literally drives away and out of the common space they in a way have built around themselves. And of course he cannot find the man after this incident. When he leaves his office the next day, for the first and only time, the beggar's spot in front of the building is shown through a subjective point-of-view shot from Herr Hoffmann's viewpoint, another radical variation compared to the cinematic practice of the other meetings. Finally, at the point when they cannot meet, the situation is described through the protagonist's eyes, and the emptiness has the earlier situations built-in.

His search by car during the last scene of the film, mirroring his arrival at the beginning, does not bring their old meeting back. Although he finds the beggar – and tries to give him, not change but one of the 100-mark notes – the beggar turns away and leaves. This time the visual variation shows a confrontation in close-ups. The

cup, hands, feet, mark note, and faces in extreme close-ups give perhaps the most intense moment of editing in the film. From this variation of the visual theme I have tried to follow, the film turns to the ultimate reversal of the visual pattern of their meetings; the beggar turns his back on his former benefactor, walks away and disappears in the crowd of the metropolis. Hoffmann, in a *plan americain*, puts his money in his pocket, and is left immobile in a static shot, in direct opposition to his movement in the car at the beginning. Unnoticed by anyone in the crowd, he can only passively see the beggar disappear.

The cinematic space that articulates their story is made up of a series of repetitions, but as I have said, this space is shown with many variations. On the one hand, it is repeated, but the variations and the elements of time embedded in the concept of repetition itself make the space – another space. Repeated space is thus not just the same, it is also a result of the workings of time in and between the changes and variations. These are the dynamics from which *Kleingeld* can profit.



## *Kleingeld* and storytelling

Richard Raskin

Although *Kleingeld* is exemplary in a number of ways and could be used to illustrate a broad variety of narrative strategies perfectly suited to the short fiction film, four aspects of its storytelling stand out in particular.

The first is *Kleingeld's* use of **symbolic gesture**, which might be defined as *an act charged with meaning, and expressive of that meaning without the use of words*.

Although symbolic gestures occur throughout the film, and include for example the homeless man's washing of Hoffmann's car, its most dramatic occurrences are found in the final scene, where two symbolic gestures are coupled in an initiative/response figure:<sup>1</sup> Hoffmann, having found the homeless man he had nearly run over and from whom he had fled, offers a 100 mark bill to the beggar, who just looks him in the eye, then turns away.

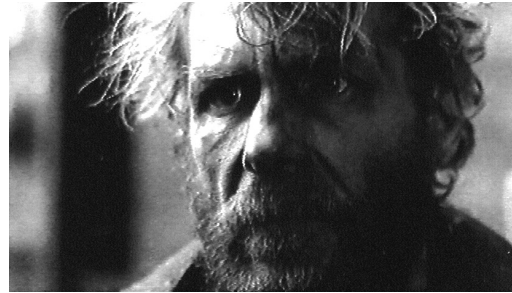
We understand perfectly that each of these symbolic gestures – the offer and refusal of the money – is charged with meaning for the characters engaged in this encounter, and that these final gestures also play a decisive role in defining the meaning of the story as a whole. But that meaning is left for us to explore and articulate as the film comes to an end, and that very activity of making sense of the story in our own thoughts when given significant gestures to interpret, helps to make the closure of *Kleingeld* particularly rich and

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<sup>1</sup> This figure is described in some detail in *p.o.v.* no. 5 (March 1998), in my article: "Five parameters for story design in the short fiction film," esp. pp. 167-169.

satisfying to us, despite the fact that we are left with an unhappy ending.

Especially in the short fiction film, where the essentials are almost always left unsaid, symbolic gestures are an ideal medium for the interaction of characters.



This brings us to a second aspect of the storytelling in *Kleingeld*: **a perfect balance of character-focus and character-interaction.**

**Character-focus** refers to *the clarity with which the film lets us know whose story is being told*. In this case, we understand from the start that *Kleingeld* is Hoffmann's story. And knowing whose story it is helps us to find and keep our bearings throughout and to feel that the film remains centered and on course. At the same time, however, the story never lapses into static portraiture, but rather remains dynamic through **character-interaction** – above all, through Hoffmann's interaction with the homeless man, but also through his interactions with his colleague, his secretary and the man whose request for a loan he turns down.

In *Kleingeld*, interaction keeps the film alive while we never lose sight of whose story is being told. This balance may not be necessary for good storytelling, but whenever it is present in a short fiction film, it greatly enriches our experience of the film.



A third way in which Kleingeld tells its story is through **objects identified with and expressive of the characters.**

Hoffmann is associated with the sterile perfection of hard, cold surfaces – the glass walls of his office, an aquarium unsullied by plants, his car's glossy finish and reflective windshield. His appearance and everything he touches is an embodiment of order, while everything about the unshaven and disheveled homeless man seems improvised, off-center, "unapproved," from the slightly wrinkled paper cup he clutches with the word *danke* scrawled on it, to his attempt to pick the lock on a newspaper vending machine with a piece of wire, when we see him for the first time standing on a street corner as Hoffmann drives by.

Given the economy with which a short fiction film must define its characters, the usefulness of enlisting objects in that process cannot be overestimated.



A fourth quality of *Kleingeld* is its **focus on opportunities that can either be seized or missed.**

Stories in general, and short fiction films in particular, can invest in a given moment a set of opportunities that will come only once, and that the character whose story is being told can either make the most of or allow to slip by irretrievably.

*Kleingeld* is the story of a missed opportunity, which Hoffmann cannot recover. The partnership he had accepted with the homeless man, even to the point of deliberately splashing his own car with mud in order to give the beggar something to wash away, is betrayed in a brief succession of thoughtless moments – trying to sneak away without being seen when he lacks a coin to drop in the paper cup, and driving away without a word after unintentionally knocking the beggar down in the parking lot.

Stories can heighten our sense of opportunities inherent in the moment. Not all stories do this, nor would it be appropriate to suggest that all stories ought to do just this. But when a story focuses on such opportunities, as does *Kleingeld*, and evokes in us a sense of how easy it is to let them slip by, it not only plays out a narrative trajectory that holds our interest, but also serves as a reminder that can do no harm.

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