

Institut for Informations- og Medievidenskab  
Aarhus Universitet

**p.o.v.**

**A Danish Journal of Film Studies**

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Tobias Wolff's short story, "Bullet in the Brain," is reprinted here by permission of International Creative Management, Inc. Copyright © 1995 by Tobias Wolff. First appeared in *The New Yorker*.

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<http://pov.imv.au.dk>

The contents of this journal are indexed in the *MLA International Bibliography*, the *International Index of Film Periodicals* and *Dansk Artikelindeks*.

#### 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 Aarhus University. 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.*

*March issues of p.o.v. are devoted to the short film. And as December 2007, all issues of p.o.v. are anonymously peer-reviewed.*

**p.o.v.**  
**Number 27, March 2009**

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**David Von Ancken**

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**Eduardo Chaperó-Jackson**

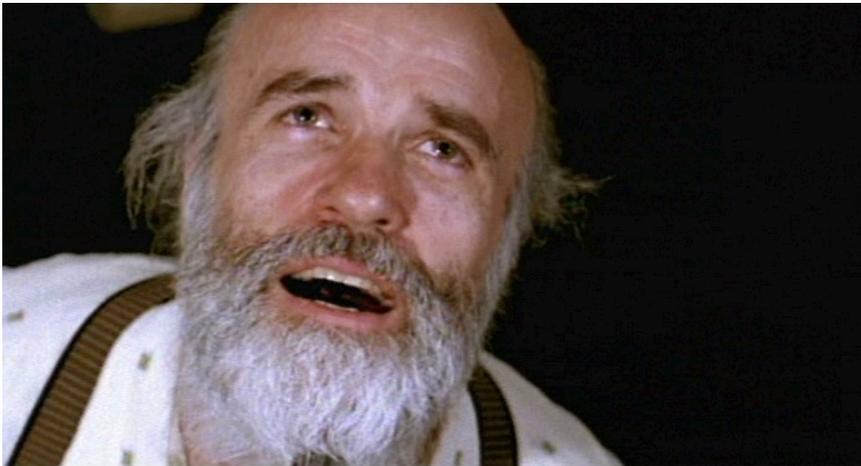
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## ***Bullet in the Brain***

(USA, 2001), 14 min.

David Von Ancken



Based on the short story by Tobias Wolff, "Bullet in the Brain," first published in *The New Yorker* on September 25, 1995.

### **Principal crew**

Director and writer: David Von Ancken  
Director of photography: Peter Konczal  
Non-memory/street cinematography: James Fideler  
Film editors: Brian Fassett, Bill Gerstenmaier  
Produced by CJ Follini  
Line producer Mark Shuman  
Production designer Ryan Cooper

### **Principal cast**

Anders: Tom Noonan  
Bank robber: Dean Winters  
Voice-over narration: George Plimpton  
Woman on line: Cecelia Antoinette

### **Awards and distinctions include:**

Nashville Independent Film Festival - *Best Short*  
Seattle One Reel Film Festival - *Best Live Action Short*  
Stony Brook Film Festival - *Best Short*  
St. Louis Film Festival - *Best Short*  
Hypnotic/Universal Million Dollar Film Festival (CA) - *Winner*  
The Method Festival (CA) - *Best Short*  
Deep Ellum Film Festival (TX) - *Best Live Action Short*  
Festival of Nations (Austria) - *Silver Bear Award*  
USA Film Festival (TX) - *Special Jury Prize*  
San Francisco International Film Festival - *Certificate of Merit*  
Selected by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston for a special month-long screening engagement.

## Relevant links

The full text of Tobias Wolff's short story, "Bullet in the Brain."

<https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/ro/www/LiteratureandMedicineInitiative/20080304/bullet.pdf>

Tobias Wolff reads from "Bullet in the Brain."

[http://fora.tv/2008/04/01/Tobias\\_Wolff\\_Reads\\_from\\_Bullet\\_in\\_the\\_Brain](http://fora.tv/2008/04/01/Tobias_Wolff_Reads_from_Bullet_in_the_Brain)

T. Coraghessan Boyle reads Tobias Wolff's short story "Bullet in the Brain" and discusses Wolff with *The New Yorker's* fiction editor, Deborah Treisma.

[http://www.newyorker.com/online/2008/02/11/080211on\\_audio\\_boyle](http://www.newyorker.com/online/2008/02/11/080211on_audio_boyle)

David Von Ancken's short film, "Bullet in the Brain."

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abFe-VBokOY>

## David Von Ancken



David Von Ancken has been directing film and television for twelve years. In 1997 his first short *Box Suite* won awards at three film festivals including the International Surrealist Film Festival. In 2000 he made *Bullet in the Brain* which was screened at twenty festivals and won best short film in five of them. Over the last seven years he has directed over twenty-five one hour dramas for network and cable TV in the U.S. These shows include: *Oz*, *The Shield*, *Without a Trace*, *Cold Case*, *Californication*, *CSI:NY*, *Gossip Girl* and *Saving Grace* among others. In 2005-6 he wrote and directed a western called *Seraphim Falls* which starred Liam Neeson and Pierce Brosnan. He is currently developing two feature films and a television series.

## Filmography (as director)

*Box Suite*, 1997

*Bullet in the Brain*, 2001

*Seraphim Falls*, 2006

*The Equalizer*, 2009

plus numerous episodes of TV series listed above.

## Bullet In the Brain

Tobias Wolff

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Copyright © 1995 by Tobias Wolff. First appeared in *The New Yorker* on Sept. 25, 1995.

Anders couldn't get to the bank until just before it closed, so of course the line was endless and he got stuck behind two women whose loud, stupid conversation put him in a murderous temper. He was never in the best of tempers anyway, Anders – a book critic known for the weary, elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed.

With the line still doubled around the rope, one of the tellers stuck a "POSITION CLOSED" sign in her window and walked to the back of the bank, where she leaned against a desk and began to pass the time with a man shuffling papers. The women in front of Anders broke off their conversation and watched the teller with hatred. "Oh, that's nice," one of them said. She turned to Anders and added, confident of his accord, "One of those little human touches that keep us coming back for more."

Anders had conceived his own towering hatred of the teller, but he immediately turned it on the presumptuous crybaby in front of him. "Damned unfair," he said. "Tragic, really. If they're not chopping off the wrong leg, or bombing your ancestral village, they're closing their positions."

She stood her ground. "I didn't say it was tragic," she said. "I just think it's a pretty lousy way to treat your customers."

"Unforgivable," Anders said. "Heaven will take note."

She sucked in her cheeks but stared past him and said nothing. Anders saw that the other woman, her friend, was looking in the same direction. And then the tellers stopped what they were doing, and the customers slowly turned, and silence came over the bank. Two men wearing black ski masks and blue business suits were standing to the side of the door. One of them had a pistol pressed against the guard's neck. The guard's eyes were closed, and his lips were moving. The other man had a sawed-off shotgun. "Keep your big mouth shut!" the man with the pistol said, though no one had spoken a word. "One of you tellers hits the alarm, you're all dead meat. Got it?"

The tellers nodded.

"Oh, bravo, " Anders said. "Dead meat." He turned to the woman in front of him. "Great script, eh? The stern, brass-knuckled poetry of the dangerous classes."

She looked at him with drowning eyes.

The man with the shotgun pushed the guard to his knees. He handed up the shotgun to his partner and yanked the guard's wrists up behind his back and locked them together with a pair of handcuffs. He toppled him onto the floor with a kick between the shoulder blades. Then he took his shotgun back and went over to the security gate at the end of the counter. He was short and heavy and moved with peculiar slowness, even torpor. "Buzz him in," his partner said. The man with the shotgun opened the gate and sauntered along the line of tellers, handing each of them a Hefty bag. When he came to the empty position he looked over at the man with the pistol, who said, "Whose slot is that?"

Anders watched the teller. She put her hand to her throat and turned to the man she'd been talking to. He nodded. "Mine," she said.

"Then get your ugly ass in gear and fill that bag."

"There you go," Anders said to the woman in front of him. "Justice is done."

"Hey! Bright boy! Did I tell you talk?"

"No," Anders said.

"Then shut your trap."

"Did you hear that?" Anders said. "'Bright boy.' Right out of 'The Killers'."

"Please be quiet," the woman said.

"Hey, you deaf or what?" The man with the pistol walked over to Anders. He poked the weapon into Anders' gut. "You think I'm playing games?"

"No," Anders said, but the barrel tickled like a stiff finger and he had to fight back the titters. He did this by making himself stare into the man's eyes, which were clearly visible behind the holes in the mask: pale blue, and rawly red-rimmed. The man's left eyelid kept twitching. He breathed out a piercing, ammoniac smell that shocked Anders more than anything that had happened, and he was beginning to develop a sense of unease when the man prodded him again with the pistol.

"You like me, bright boy?" he said. "You want to suck my dick?"

"No," Anders said.

"Then stop looking at me."

Anders fixed his gaze on the man's shiny wing-top shoes.

"Not down there. Up there." He stuck the pistol under Anders' chin and pushed it upward until Anders was looking at the ceiling.

Anders had never paid much attention to that part of the bank, a pompous old building with marble floors and counters and pillars, and gilt scrollwork over the tellers' cages. The domed ceiling had been decorated with mythological figures whose fleshy, toga-draped ugliness Anders had taken in at a glance many years earlier and afterward declined to notice. Now he had no choice but to scrutinize the painter's work. It was even worse than he remembered, and all of it executed with the utmost gravity. The artist had a few tricks up his sleeve and used them again and again – a certain rosy blush on the underside of the clouds, a coy backward glance on the faces of the cupids and fauns. The ceiling was crowded with various dramas, but the one that caught Anders' eye was Zeus and Europa – portrayed, in this rendition, as a bull ogling a cow from behind a haystack. To make the cow sexy, the painter had canted her hips suggestively and given her long, droopy eyelashes through which she gazed back at the bull with sultry welcome. The bull wore a smirk and his eyebrows were arched. If there'd been a bubble coming out of his mouth, it would have said, "Hubba hubba."

"What's so funny, bright boy?"

"Nothing."

"You think I'm comical? You think I'm some kind of clown?"

"No."

"You think you can fuck with me?"

"No."

"Fuck with me again, you're history. *Capiche?*"

Anders burst out laughing. He covered his mouth with both hands and said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," then snorted helplessly through his fingers and said, "*Capiche* – oh, God, *capiche*," and at that the man with the pistol raised the pistol and shot Anders right in the head.

The bullet smashed Anders' skull and ploughed through his brain and exited behind his right ear, scattering shards of bone into the cerebral cortex, the corpus callosum, back toward the basal ganglia, and down into the thalamus. But before all this occurred, the first appearance of the bullet in the cerebrum set off a crackling chain of ion transports and neurotransmissions. Because of their peculiar origin these traced a peculiar patten, flukishly calling to life a summer afternoon some forty years past, and long since lost to memory. After striking the cranium the bullet was moving at 900 feet per second, a pathetically sluggish, glacial pace compared to the synaptic lighting that flashed around it. Once in the brain, that is, the bullet came under the mediation of brain time, which gave Anders plenty of leisure to contemplate the scene that, in a phrase he would have abhorred, "passed before his eyes."

It is worth noting what Ambers did not remember, given what he did remember. He did not remember his first lover, Sherry, or what he had most madly loved about her, before it came to irritate him – her unembarrassed carnality, and especially the cordial way she had with his unit, which she called Mr. Mole, as in, "Uh-oh, looks like Mr. Mole wants to play," and "Let's hide Mr. Mole!" Anders did not remember his wife, whom he had also loved before she exhausted him with her predictability, or his daughter, now a sullen professor of economics at Dartmouth. He did not remember standing just outside his daughter's door as she lectured her bear about his naughtiness and described the truly appalling punishments Paws would receive unless he changed his ways. He did not remember a single line of the hundreds of poems he had committed to memory in his youth so that he could give himself the shivers at will – not "Silent, upon a peak in Darien," or "My God, I heard this day," or "All my pretty ones? Did you say all? 0 hell-kite! All?" None of these did he remember; not one. Anders did not remember his dying mother saying of his father, "I should have stabbed him in his sleep."

He did not remember Professor Josephs telling his class how Athenian prisoners in Sicily had been released if they could recite Aeschylus, and then reciting Aeschylus himself, right there, in the Greek. Anders did not remember how his eyes had burned at those sounds. He did not remember the surprise of seeing a college classmate's name on the jacket of a novel not long after they graduated, or the respect he had felt after reading the book. He did not remember the pleasure of giving respect.

Nor did Anders remember seeing a woman leap to her death from the building opposite his own just days after his daughter was born. He did not remember shouting, "Lord have mercy!" He did not remember

deliberately crashing his father's car in to a tree, of having his ribs kicked in by three policemen at an anti-war rally, or waking himself up with laughter. He did not remember when he began to regard the heap of books on his desk with boredom and dread, or when he grew angry at writers for writing them. He did not remember when everything began to remind him of something else.

This is what he remembered. Heat. A baseball field. Yellow grass, the whirr of insects, himself leaning against a tree as the boys of the neighborhood gather for a pickup game. He looks on as the others argue the relative genius of Mantle and Mays. They have been worrying this subject all summer, and it has become tedious to Anders: an oppression, like the heat.

Then the last two boys arrive, Coyle and a cousin of his from Mississippi. Anders has never met Coyle's cousin before and will never see him again. He says hi with the rest but takes no further notice of him until they've chosen sides and someone asks the cousin what position he wants to play. "Shortstop," the boy says. "Short's the best position they is." Anders turns and looks at him. He wants to hear Coyle's cousin repeat what he's just said, but he knows better than to ask. The others will think he's being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar. But that isn't it, not at all – it's that Anders is strangely roused, elated, by those final two words, their pure unexpectedness and their music. He takes the field in a trance, repeating them to himself.

The bullet is already in the brain; it won't be outrun forever, or charmed to a halt. In the end it will do its work and leave the troubled skull behind, dragging its comet's tail of memory and hope and talent and love into the marble hall of commerce. That can't be helped. But for now Anders can still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball, time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant, *They is, they is, they is.*

## A shot-by-shot breakdown of *Bullet in the Brain*

Richard Raskin

*NB. In several montage sequences, including the one which opens the film (and which I am calling Shots 1-14), boundaries between individual shots can be difficult to detect. The shot breakdowns in these montage sequences should therefore be seen as approximations.*



Shot 1



Shot 2



Shot 3



Shot 4



Shot 5



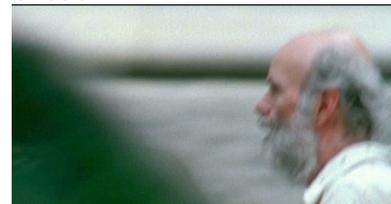
Shot 6



Shot 7



Shot 8



Shot 9



Shot 10



Shot 11



Shot 12



Shot 13



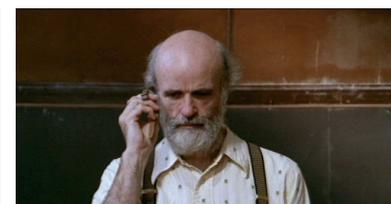
Shot 14



Shot 15



Shot 16



Shot 17



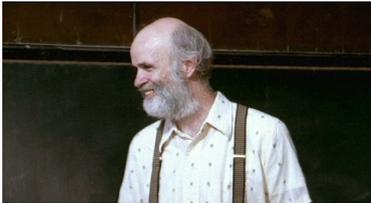
Shot 18  
ANDERS: It's not so much that what you've written is contemptibly bad. That's almost a given.



Shot 19



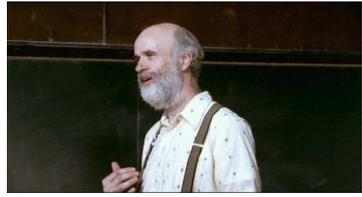
Shot 20  
What surprises me...



Shot 21  
...is that you are able to find your way here every week... without assistance.



Shot 22



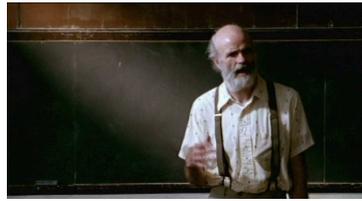
Shot 23  
'Cause on my way here today I actually had a thought. I realized that when the bulk of you fail ...



Shot 24  
...as writers,....



Shot 25  
...only then will you really be able to understand the characters...



Shot 26  
...you now blithely paint with these broad, smug strokes.



Shot 27



Shot 28  
ANDERS: I brought a present for you all. Look familiar?



Shot 29



Shot 30  
ANDERS: Picasso.



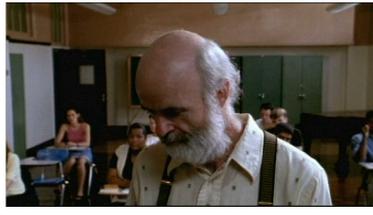
Shot 31  
See you can't sell us cubism or a blue period or any of that shit without the base.



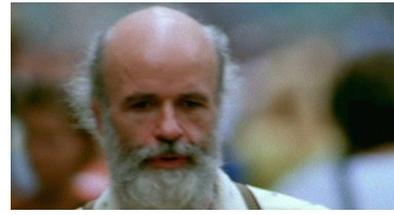
Shot 32  
Without the ability to tell it how it really is first. Without the ability to show us beauty on its face.



Shot 33  
ANDERS (off): You have the right to do what you want. More or less.



Shot 34  
ANDERS: And attempt to sustain yourself in our collective vacuum.



Shot 35  
ANDERS (off): And since we're on the topic, people, going forward do me a favor...



Shot 36  
ANDERS: and do not accost me with such a soulless arrogance as to think I should take your hard work as anything of value.



Shot 37  
Work you could conceivably be paid to perform.



Shot 38  
If you take nothing from here, understand that slipping the rough into the polished has to call you, not you it.



Shot 39



Shot 40  
I'm fairly certain I cannot teach you anything.



Shot 41  
Yet at the same time I'm fairly certain you'll keep showing up here each week of your own volition.



Shot 42



Shot 43



Shot 44  
ANDERS: Do you believe?



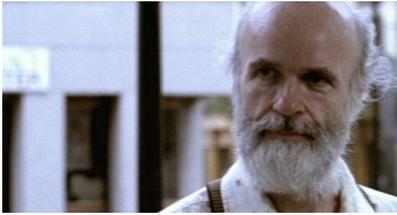
Shot 45



Shot 46  
ANDERS: Do you believe in the chance that you could be changed by something as timid as a word? The chance to move and be moved? The chance at salvation from the rational? Do you believe?



Shot 47  
*A bank guard closes and locks the door to the bank as Anders rushes forward toward it. Anders tries the door and finds it locked.*



Shot 48



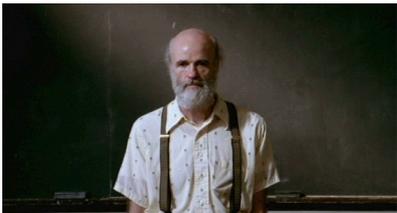
Shot 49

GUARD: Sorry sir, 3 o'clock.



Shot 50

GUARD: Bank's closed.  
ANDERS: Do you read?



Shot 51

ANDERS: I am begging you. It is as important to know not to write as it is to write



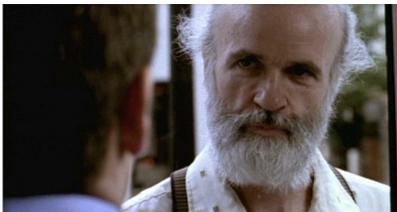
Shot 52

ANDERS: Can you read?



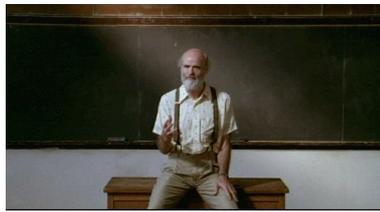
Shot 53

ANDERS (*putting his wrist watch back on*): There has to be an honesty, a truth in your words. They have to scream out to be read and that is the only thing that interests me. And I'm telling you now: I do not hear it!



Shot 54

ANDERS (off): There is a difference...



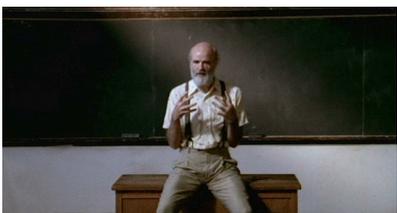
Shot 55

ANDERS: ...between "The king died and the queen died" and "The king died and the queen died of a broken heart." And to you that is everything. And you're showing me you do not even care to know the difference.



Shot 56

Anders knocks on the glass door demonstratively staring at the guard on the other side.



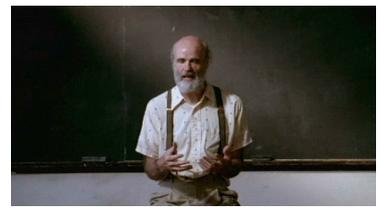
Shot 57

ANDERS: Your story must be wrought.



Shot 58

Again Anders knocks on the glass door demonstratively staring at the guard on the other side.



Shot 59

You must layer that broken heart. So the fabric of what you tell cannot exist without it.



Shot 60  
ANDERS (off): And if you have nothing to say...



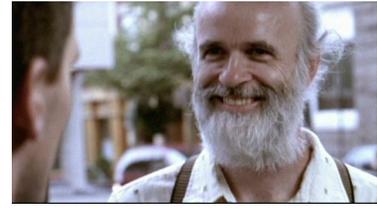
Shot 61  
ANDERS (*beginning to gather up his papers*):... you can just tell me and I'll arrange for you to get into some medical school. But do not make me suffer shit like this again. (*Anders heads quickly toward the right.*)



Shot 62  
*The guard opens the door for Anders, who enters the bank.*



Shot 63  
ANDERS (*speaking with his back to the students as he opens the classroom door and stands in the doorway*): And remember. No matter what they tell you. Life happens without applause. (*He walks through the doorway.*)



Shot 64  
*Anders triumphantly enters the bank.*



Shot 65  
*Anders gets on the end of a long line inside the bank.*



Shot 66



Shot 67  
The teller closes her counter.



Shot 68  
WOMAN ON LINE: Oh that's nice. Just one of those little human touches that keeps you coming back for more.



Shot 69  
ANDERS: Damned unfair. It's tragic, really.



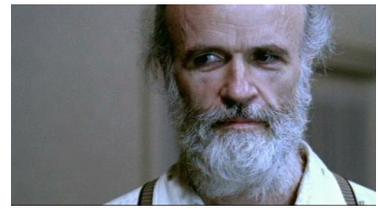
Shot 70



Shot 71  
ANDERS: You know if they're not bombing your ancestral villages, they're closing their positions.



Shot 72  
WOMAN ON LINE: Well, I didn't say that. It's just a pretty lousy way...



Shot 73  
WOMAN (off): ...to treat your customers.  
ANDERS: It's unforgivable, really. Heaven will surely...



Shot 74  
ANDERS (off): ... take note.  
WOMAN: You know...  
*A commotion erupts off-camera.*



Shot 75  
WOMAN ON LINE: Well, I didn't say that. It's just a pretty lousy way...



Shot 76



Shot 77



Shot 78  
ROBBER: Got a wife? Huh?  
GUARD: Yeah. ROBBER: Do you love her?  
GUARD: Yeah.  
ROBBER: She love you?  
GUARD: Yeah.  
ROBBER: You be fucking smart.  
*The robber roughly pushes the guard away.*



Shot 79  
ROBBER: Okay people.



Shot 80



Shot 81  
ROBBER: One of you tells...



Shot 82



Shot 83  
ROBBER: ...presses an alarm button, you're all dead meat. Got it?



Shot 84  
ROBBER: Got it?



Shot 85  
ANDERS: Oh bravo. "Dead meat." How do you like that?



Shot 86  
Great script, eh?



Shot 87  
ANDERS (off): You know, the stern, brass-knuckled poetry



Shot 88  
... of the dangerous classes.



Shot 89  
ROBBER: Buzz him in.



Shot 90



Shot 91  
*Without a warning, Robber 2 hits the bank guard in the face with his rifle butt.*



Shot 92  
*The guard reels from the blow.*



Shot 93  
*A customer gasps.*



Shot 94



Shot 95  
ROBBER: Uh, uh.



Shot 96  
*Robber 2 again strikes the bank guard...*



Shot 97  
*...who now falls to the floor, unconscious.*



Shot 98  
ROBBER (off): Whose empty spot is that?



Shot 99  
TELLER: Mine.



Shot 100  
ROBBER: You? Okay good.  
Get your ugly ass...



Shot 101  
ROBBER (off): ...over there  
and fill up that bag.



Shot 102  
ANDERS (turning again to the  
woman on line): There you go.



Shot 103  
ANDERS (off): Justice is done.



Shot 104  
ROBBER (to Anders): Hey.  
Bright boy.



Shot 105  
ROBBER (off): Psst, psst.  
Anders turns to look at him.



Shot 106  
ROBBER: Yeah. I'm sorry  
but... was I taking to you?



Shot 107  
ANDERS (turning back to the  
woman): Did you hear that?



Shot 108  
*She shakes her head "no."*  
ANDERS (off): "Bright boy."



Shot 109  
ANDERS (off): It's right out of  
"The Killers."



Shot 110  
WOMAN (pleading): Please  
be quiet.



Shot 111  
*The robber approaches Anders.*



Shot 112



Shot 113  
BANK: Are you deaf or what?



Shot 114



Shot 115  
ROBBER: You think I'm playing games here, because I'm not playing games.



Shot 116  
ANDERS: No, no. "Thou speakest wiser than thou art aware of." (Anders laughs.)



Shot 117  
*Anders laughs again.*



Shot 118



Shot 119  
ROBBER (almost whispering): What the hell you lookin' at?  
ANDERS: Nothing.



Shot 120  
ROBBER: No, the hell you were. You were looking at me



Shot 121  
ANDERS: No.



Shot 122  
ROBBER (almost whispering): Yeah. Do you like me, by the way? Do you want to suck my dick?



Shot 123  
ANDERS: No.



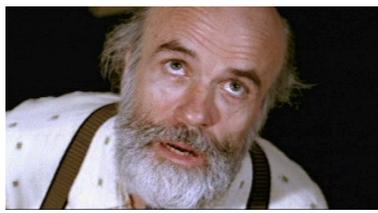
Shot 124  
ROBBER: Then stop looking at me. Okay?



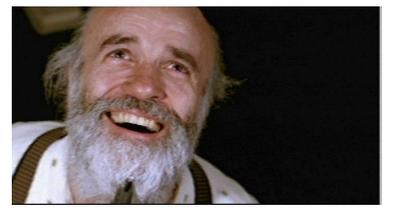
Shot 125  
ROBBER (putting his gun under Anders's chin): Uh, uh, uh. Not down there.



Shot 126  
ROBBER: Up there, right.

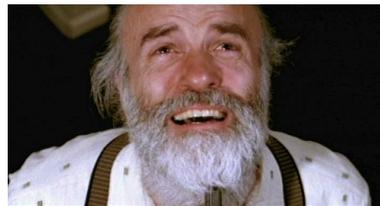


Shot 127  
ANDERS (off – a statement made earlier): Do you believe in the chance that you can be changed by something as timid as a word? (Anders quietly laughs.)





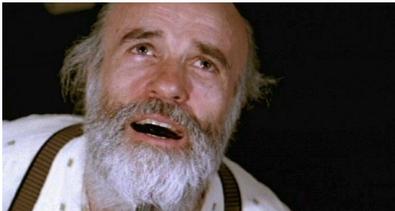
Shot 128  
ROBBER: Oh. What's so funny, bright boy?



Shot 129  
ANDERS: Nothing.



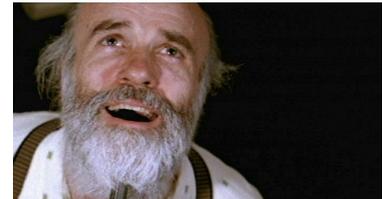
Shot 130  
ROBBER: Do you think I'm comical? Do you think I'm like...



Shot 131  
ROBBER: ...some sort of fucking clown or something?  
ANDERS: No.



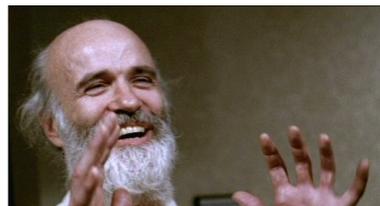
Shot 132  
ROBBER: Then don't fuck with me. You fuck with me again...



Shot 133  
ROBBER (off): ...and you're history.



Shot 134  
ROBBER: *Capiche?*



Shot 135  
ANDERS (*bursting into irrepressible laughter*): I'm sorry, sorry, sorry.



Shot 136



Shot 137  
ANDERS (off): Sorry, really.



Shot 138  
ANDERS: "*Capiche*"?



Shot 139



Shot 140  
ROBBER: *Capiche?*



Shot 141  
ANDERS (off): Jesus Christ, you know...



Shot 142  
...sorry, "*capiche*"?



Shot 143



Shot 144



Shot 145

Voice-over narrator: And at that, the man with the pistol shot Anders right in the head.



Shot 146



Shot 147



Shot 148

*Explosion and reverberation of the gun shot.*



Shot 149



Shot 150



Shot 151



Shot 152



Shot 153



Shot 154

V.O. The bullet smashed into Anders' cheek and plowed through



Shot 155



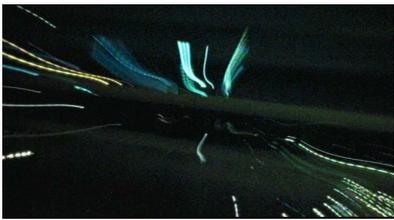
Shot 156



Shot 157

his brain and exited behind his right ear.

After striking the cranium, the bullet was moving at 900 feet per second. A pathetically sluggish, glacial pace...



Shot 158  
...compared to the synaptic lightning that flashed around it.



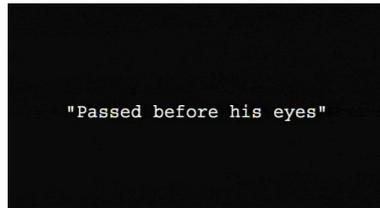
Shot 159  
Once in the brain, the bullet came under the mediation of brain time...



Shot 160  
...which gave Anders the leisure to contemplate a scene...



Shot 161  
in a phrase he would have abhorred:



Shot 162  
"Passed before his eyes."



Shot 163  
...which gave Anders the leisure to contemplate a scene...



Shot 164  
Fade to black.



Shot 165  
Given what Anders did remember, it is worth noting what he did not remember.



Shot 166  
He did not remember his first lover,



Shot 167  
Sherry, or what he had most madly loved about her before it came to irritate him – her unembarrassed carnality, and especially the way she had with his unit, which she called...



Shot 168  
..."Mr. Mole."  
Fade to black.



Shot 169  
He did not remember his wife whom he had also loved before she exhausted him...



Shot 170  
...with her predictability.



Shot 171



Shot 172  
He did not remember standing just outside his daughter's door as she lectured...



Shot 173

...her bear about his naughtiness and described the truly appalling punishments Paws would receive unless he changed his ways.



Shot 174

He did not remember his dying mother saying that she should have stabbed his father in his sleep.



Shot 175

None of these things did he remember. Not one.



Shot 176



Shot 177-180 montage



Shot 181



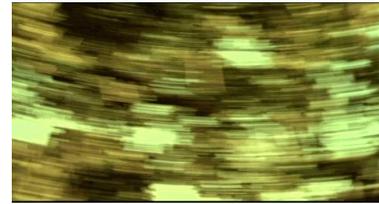
Shot 182

He did not remember Keats, or Shakespeare or Herbert. He did not remember a single line of the hundreds of poems he had committed to memory so he could give himself the shivers at will.

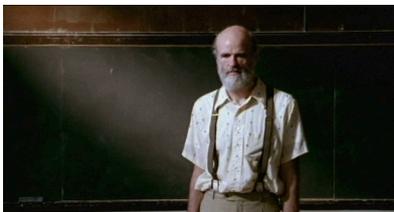


Shot 183

Nor did he remember seeing a woman leap to her death from the building opposite his own, just days after his daughter was born.



Shot 184



Shot 185

He did not remember when he began to regard the heap of papers on his desk with boredom and dread.



Shot 186

Or when he grew angry at the students for writing them.



Shot 187



Shot 188

He did not remember when everything began to remind him of something else.



Shot 189



Shot 190



Shot 191

Of all this he remembered nothing.

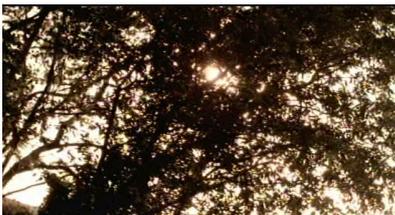


Shot 192-193

What he remembered was simply heat, yellow grass, a baseball field.



Shot 194



Shot 195

The whirl of insects as he trails...



Shot 196

...the other boys of the neighborhood to a pick-up game.



Shot 197



Shot 198



Shot 199

A couple of the others argue...



Shot 200

...the relative genius of Mantle and Mays.



Shot 201

They had been worrying the subject all summer. And it has become tedious to Anders.



Shot 202

An oppression, like the heat.



Shot 203  
Finally...



Shot 204  
...the last two boys arrived – this one kid who lived near the dump, and his cousin from Mississippi. Anders has never met the cousin before...



Shot 205  
...and will never see him again.



Shot 206



Shot 207  
When they have chosen sides...



Shot 208  
...someone asks the cousin what position he wants to play.



Shot 209  
And he says...  
COUSIN (off): "Shortstop."



Shot 210  
COUSIN: " – short's the best position they is."



Shot 211  
Narrator's voice-over: "Short's



Shot 212  
the best position they is."



Shot 213  
Anders wants to hear the cousin repeat what he has just said...



Shot 214  
... but knows better than to ask. The others will think he's being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar.



Shot 215



Shot 216



Shot 217  
But that isn't it. Not at all.



Shot 218



Shot 219  
It's that Anders is strangely aroused – elated by those two final words, their pure unexpectedness and their music.



Shot 220



Shot 221



Shot 222  
So, the bullet is already in the brain.



Shot 223  
It won't be outrun forever, or charmed to a halt.



Shot 224



Shot 225



Shot 226



Shots 227-232 Montage sequence  
In the end, it will do its work and leave the troubled skull behind, dragging its comet tail of memory and hope and talent and love



...into that anonymous hall of commerce.



Shot 233  
But for now Anders can still make time.



Shot 234  
Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass,



Shot 235



Shot 236

...time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball,



Shot 237



Shot 238

... time for the boy in left field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt...



Shot 239



Shot 240



Shot 241

...and softly chant,...



Shot 242

*They is,...*



Shot 243

*they is,...*



Shot 244

...*they is.*

## **An interview with David Von Ancken on *Bullet in the Brain***

Richard Raskin

*How did you become involved with making *Bullet in the Brain*?*

Actually I read the Tobias Wolff story in *The New Yorker*. A friend of mine had pointed it out to me. I think it's about a four-page short story. Very dense prose. What fascinated me about it relative to a potential for film was that the short story was all about what someone did not remember... which I thought was inherently not visual. I thought basing a film on the story would be an interesting problem. I had started to write one-act plays in New York. This was probably about 1999. I had made a couple of avant-garde jazz short films that had no dialogue. And I didn't know anything about optioning. I just phoned *The New Yorker* and found out who Tobias Wolff's agent was. I went to them, and they had no idea who I was and probably thought I was a fuck-up [*laughter*]. And then I got in touch with Toby Wolff and sent him my first short, called *Box Suite* [1997] and then I forgot about it for about six months. Then suddenly I got a call from Wolff's agent who said he saw the first short and was very impressed with it and was willing to option the short film rights for *Bullet in the Brain*. So that's really the genesis of it.

It took me about eight months to write the script.

*One of the things that interests me most concerns the classroom scenes in the first half of the film which are so striking, and aren't in the original short story.*

You hit right on the topic that concerned me most in collaborating with Wolff. That I had to put my writing up against his on a hard cut. His writing is so very well thought out and the more you read *Bullet in the Brain* or any of his short stories, the more you realize just how well thought out every sentence is. And after becoming friends with Wolff, I found out that it took him many months to write *Bullet in the Brain* even though it's such a short story. And he actually responded very positively to my version of his story. He'd had a number of his stories or scripts made into movies and he'd hated them all. So he'd reserved the right to keep his name off of it if he didn't like it. And because he really enjoyed it... we became friends.

*I think those initial scenes really enriched the story.*

Well you know, ultimately it was trying to get a visual medium in a story that is apparently not visual but happening in someone's mind. And without simply illustrating things that are in the story, like driving his dad's car into a tree, or going to an anti-war rally. I hate pictures that simply illustrate a voice-over. That's why the voice-over comes so late in the game in that short. I think it's over half way through the film before we introduce George Plimpton's voice.

Wolff has Anders as a book critic which fits a story where a man has lived his life in his head but is not really an occupation that is very visual. I changed Anders to a teacher b/c it gives the character a visual platform – the classroom - through which we can get a little bit into his psyche.

*Anders's wrist-watch plays a recurrent role in the story. Can you recall how and why you thought of adding it in the film?*

The wristwatch of it all. Since the concept of time plays such a central role in the story and the short film, making the concept of time physical becomes a challenge and an opportunity. The compression and for a moment control of something as immutable as time by something as elegant and fragile as the brain is, I believe, one of the most interesting elements of the story. We are in the end no more than our collective memories and we die when they die but remain somehow alive in the memories of others. The watch then becomes the reminder that as Wolff says you cannot outrun time. Even as a child Anders was fascinated by the passing seconds and it hints at the man he will become.

*A linear time-line is broken repeatedly in the film, for example when Anders's arrival at the bank and departure from the classroom are interwoven. Was this planned from the start or an opportunity you thought of during the editing of the film?*

The breaking of a linear time line was both planned and found in the editing process. Since the story and film are essentially about the passage of time, the creation of memory and how we fleetingly bear witness to events in time, a sequence of events or memories of those events does in fact become a life remembered. Since memories – at least my memories are always fragmented and overlapping, I thought narrative right angles in the film would work. And of course, Wolff opens the door to such non-linear story telling by using a third person narrator. I remember using the intercutting between the classroom and the bank to shorten the film because above all else I have always felt that short films need to be short. The shorter the better.

*Did you have Tom Noonan in mind right from the start or did that come later?*

I had seen a film called *What Happened Was* [1994] which was fascinating. And I did not know him at the time. I wrote the script with no one in particular in mind, but then as I got around towards the end of it, I started thinking of him. Because he has an ability to articulate things in a way that is very unique. I trimmed it to him. And once I had him on board, we worked on the initial monologue.

The initial monologue that we filmed was four times longer than you see in the movie. And I believe short films should be short. I think the original version was twenty-two minutes long. It was kinda sad because it was a really good monologue that I wrote and ultimately we had to cut it apart. But it plays better for being short I think.

July 14, 2008/January 15, 2009

## ***Bullet in the Brain* : from text to film**

Jacques Lefebvre

*Bullet in the Brain* is a digital short film by David von Ancken which was awarded many prizes in various film festivals and selected as the most « hypnotic » film in the Hypnotic Million Dollar Film Festival in 2001. It is one of the very first films ever to reach notoriety through the Web and it helped launch David von Ancken's career. Von Ancken was offered a \$1 million dollar deal with Universal Pictures and Hypnotic at a special presentation during the Sundance Film Festival in 2001. The film follows a single character, Anders, a professor of literature, who is gunned down during a bank robbery.

The film is adapted from *Bullet in the Brain*, a short story by Tobias Wolff whose rights von Ancken had acquired in 1998. Tobias Wolff is one of the great masters of the short story on the contemporary American literary scene along with such great short story writers as Raymond Carver or even Ernest Hemingway with whom he shares a very specific tone. There is a razor-sharp relentlessness in Wolff's handling of the narrative, which makes the reading of his stories a captivating experience. While remaining faithful to Edgar Allan Poe's theory of the unity of effect, Wolff often takes the reader off-balance by resorting to different narrative voices. The simplicity of his style gives added weight to each carefully chosen word and the characters are brought to life thanks to the sheer honesty of his writing. It was therefore an interesting if not a daunting challenge for von Ancken.

The short film format is in keeping with the brevity of the short story as such and the choices made by von Ancken are highly reminiscent of his work on a number of television series. The text

begins in *medias res*, a device that allows the writer to plunge the reader in the midst of things:

Anders couldn't get to the bank until before it closed, so of course the line was endless and he got stuck behind two women whose loud, stupid conversation put him in a murderous temper. He was never in the best of tempers anyway, Anders – a book critic known for the weary, elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed.

Wolff deliberately chooses not to describe the main protagonist and piles up negative connotations regarding the situation and Anders's personality. He is also presented as a book critic, a profession that may be seen as highly uninventive. The location is also made clear from the outset.

Von Ancken chooses a completely different angle. The sound of a siren may be heard, followed by a series of very brief shots taken with what seems to be a hand-held camera. The point of view is subjective and, through a series of flashes, one catches several glimpses of a silhouette, a tall man walking briskly. The man is wearing a casual shirt and braces. He does not look very neat. Now and again, one sees the blurred image of his face. The absence of credits heightens this opening sequence. This is the sort of sequence one would expect to see in a television series. The second sequence shows the protagonist winding his watch and checking that it works properly. It is 2:55 p.m. He is lecturing a group of students. This sequence allows the audience to become better acquainted with Anders. One sees his "savagery" in action. The sequence is rather long, dominated by Anders's speech, filled with his bitter irony and his frustration at his students not being able to choose the right word. He hammers down his spite, shows them the portrait of a woman painted by Picasso, tries to imprint in their minds the importance of truth in the choice of one's words. The

speech is compelling, almost mesmerizing, all the more so as the students remain silent. The weight of their silence can actually be felt on screen. The speech is interspersed with glimpses of Anders as he makes his way to the bank and then insists on being allowed in although it is almost closing time. The viewer understands that sequence one and two are intertwined and that the lecturing is actually a flashback. But the flashback is not an external narrative device. The constant reminder of Anders's walk towards the bank combines two time sequences and somehow enables the viewer to apprehend the film from Anders's point of view. The watch is not only a time marker that indicates the time span before closing time; it is also an old-fashioned watch that requires winding. It suits the looks of the academic but it also refers to a more distant past.

The third sequence takes the viewer into the bank and actually corresponds to the beginning of the short story. The script borrows from the text quite closely and the tension of the dialogue is brought up to the surface. Tom Noonan's magnificent performance also contributes to the heightening of the tension. The discrepancy between Anders's attitude as a professor and his behavior inside the bank is disturbing and yet it illustrates the core meaning of the story: Anders's quest for the true meaning of life will bring about his own death in a tragic fit of laughter. "Capiche" means to understand and it is the last word Anders utters. The staccato rhythm of the editing, the pseudo point of view shots, the blurred images combined with the distorted angles chosen, are a reminder of the action scenes one is familiar with in most television series. The brutality of the images echoes the coarseness of the dialogue. The tension is also heightened by the treatment of sound. Behind the words uttered there is a kind of muffled silence that brings out each word, a weight one actually senses in the text and which is the mark of Tobias Wolff's style. The

end of the sequence brings the viewer halfway through the film, and corresponds to the end of the first half of the short story.

Anders burst out laughing. He covered his mouth with both hands and said, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' then snorted helplessly through his fingers and said, '*Capiche* – oh, God, *capiche*,' and at that the man with the pistol raised the pistol and shot Anders right in the head.

The robber's gun is pointed towards the audience, a shot that was introduced by E. S. Porter in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and also used on various occasions by Alfred Hitchcock, notably in *Spellbound* (1945). The shooting indicates the end of the sequence and introduces sequence number four thanks to a voice-over. One is first led to believe this is actually spoken by a journalist covering the event but this voice-over very rapidly becomes an omniscient narrative voice that follows the bullet's course as it enters Anders's brain. The text and the film coincide.

The last sequence accounts for the title of both the film and the story. The alliteration focuses the reader and the viewer on speed. The sequence is clearly delineated as in the text. The voice-over first refers to what he did not remember and then recalls what he did remember while the bullet was entering his brain at full speed. These are intense moments rendered first through an accumulation of chaotic flashes: Distorted close-ups of Anders's face, driving through a tunnel at full speed, Anders walking in the city, Anders lying dead, various reflections of Anders as he makes his way towards the bank, his first love, his wife, his daughter, the city at night in shades of blue. The piling up of such flashes contrasts with the smoothness of the tone of the voice-over. In the second part, one switches to a specific episode. Anders, as a child, remembers a grammatical mistake made by one of his cousins during a baseball game. Anders wears the same watch he

is seen winding years later as a teacher. The watch is not mentioned at all in the text, but in the film version it becomes essential in order to illustrate the passing and the halting of time. Anders chooses not to correct his cousin's mistake, he looks relaxed on screen, and he smiles to himself. The whole atmosphere is almost idyllic and yet one is actually inside Anders's brain as he is about to die. The script follows the text closely; the film ends with Anders watching the city at night from the top of a building, time is running out but there is still time to remember...

The bullet is already in the brain; it won't be outrun forever, or charmed to a halt. In the end it will do its work and leave the troubled skull behind, dragging its comet's tail of memory and hope and talent and love into the marble hall of commerce. That can't be helped. But for now Anders can still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball, time for the boy in the right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant, *They is, they is, they is.*

## **The Torment of Consciousness: David Von Ancken's *Bullet in the Brain***

Mark LeFanu

The 14-minute short *Bullet in the Brain* came out eight years ago and since then has established a certain reputation, especially at film schools, where it has been absorbed into the academic curriculum – possibly due to the boldness of its structure, but also (perhaps unconsciously) because of the pedagogic spirit it exudes: the first third of the film takes place in a classroom, where the topic being lectured on is storytelling.

So “literature”, in a way, is the subject of the film, and the pretext for what is, at first glance, by far the most striking thing about it: I mean its unapologetic wordiness. In the space of the film’s short running time, three distinct usages of the spoken word are dramatized contrastingly, corresponding to the three main “acts” of the movie: the first, a classroom monologue, spoken (perhaps, more accurately, orated) by the film’s protagonist, a once-charismatic but now disillusioned teacher of creative writing; the second, a dialogue, or series of dialogues, taking place in a bank that same afternoon, at which our protagonist fatally stumbles into a hold-up; the last, a classic voice-over, narrated by a third party (whose timbre of voice and even class accent is strikingly different from that of the protagonist) detailing the protagonist’s final mortal thoughts as a bullet from one of the bank-robber’s guns enters and then exits his brain.

The received wisdom is that short films should be as sparse as possible in dialogue, the message – if any – being put over by visual means. *Bullet in the Brain*, on the contrary presents us with a torrent of words, and the interesting question, aesthetically speaking, is how (indeed *whether*) it gets away with it. Opening with the diatribe spoken

by the teacher against the cliché-ridden output of his students, and proceeding into a second act where in some way language is also at issue (our protagonist pays with his life by mocking the second-hand movie lingo of the gangsters), the film, you could say, “saves up” its true verbal fireworks for the third and final sequence, a virtuoso cataloguing of some of the memories that did, and did not, flash through the protagonist’s mind’s eye during his last moments on earth. One memory above all is privileged – an afternoon’s baseball match from the narrator’s childhood, from which he remembers, in particular, the peculiar vocal nuance of the reply he was given when he asked one of his youthful team-mates which position the boy would like to play in on the field. “Short stop”, says the child (a tubby creature); “*short’s the best position they is.*”



We are meant to take in, I believe, that the writing of this interior monologue is a sort of answer or riposte to the adjudged apathy of the students in the opening class-room sequence (an apathy, of course, that the audience must take on trust, since we aren’t actually exposed to any examples of the “shoddy output” that set off the protagonist’s original verbal tirade). It is as if, in this finely-wrought elegiac meditation, the protagonist would show us, from beyond the grave, what “real writing” is made of. Its virtuosity is demonstrative. Another way of looking at the matter would be to say that the demonstration is for our benefit also, not just the students’: the film-maker wants to show

us that it's possible to *have* real writing - writing with a wow factor – inside the medium of the short film, where we may not be usually disposed to look for it.

Is it convincing? An only slightly more expansive version of the monologue in question is printed as part of the original short story on pp. 10-11 of this issue of *P.O.V.*, so the reader may judge for himself. What one doesn't get in reading it cold is the gentleness and (so to speak) the sumptuous weariness of Bill Plimpton's patrician voice, such an interesting contrast to the harsh pedagogic irony of the actor playing the protagonist (although this speech is written in the third person, at some level of course the two voices are supposed to incarnate the same person). Nor does one get from simply reading the text the force and opulence of the visual imagery that comes on stream at this culminating point in the movie: suddenly the aesthetic becomes salient. Of course it is clever, too, conceptually: the images that *aren't* remembered (mainly erotic in content) are given as much prominence as the images that *are*. *He* (the protagonist) may not remember them, but *we* are privy to them nonetheless (so, in a way, he *does* remember). The whole speech has a kind of spaciousness, a modulation, that partakes too of the film's conceptual intelligence, since part of the fun – part of the gamble – is to find out how much thought and remembrance *can* be crammed into a split second without contravening unwritten laws of vraisemblance.



"He did not remember when everything began to remind him of something else."

The film came out, as has been noted, eight years ago: the persons involved have all moved on (some, alas, in the literal sense: witty Bill Plimpton has died in the interim). Whose film is it, exactly? Concerning such a writerly exercise, the question of authorship is interesting. The script is credited to the director, David Von Ancken, based on a short story by a certain Tobias Wolff. The writer of these lines is not acquainted with this author – nor able to state for certain whether the *idea* of dramatizing the last moment before violent death by gunshot is original or not. Hemingway is cited in the film, and certainly the artfully-contrived mixture of brutality and tenderness seems “Hemingwayesque”. One wouldn’t be surprised to find the descriptive task (that of itemizing random last memories) being set as an exercise in creative writing – in fact, the kind of exercise that might well have been put in front of his students by our disillusioned protagonist (who sports, by the way, the Hemingwayesque name of Anders). The actor playing this character, Tom Noonan, is also, it is intriguing to hear, a writer himself – a published playwright – so there may even have been some input into the script from this quarter too. It’s not crucial to know, and maybe indeed better *not* to know. The film stands by itself: a model of energy. It has a confidence, a vigour, and a structural boldness, that are surely impressive by any criteria.



A Hemingwayesque ambiance. Tom Noonan as Anders in *Bullet in the Brain*.

## In the beginning was the word

Brian Dunnigan

“ Men like poets, rush ‘into the midst’, *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in media rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations.”

*Frank Kermode, The Sense of An Ending*

A tall grey-haired man pushes through a crowd. He is in a hurry, glancing at his watch and breathing hard. The sounds of breathing and of time ticking away on the soundtrack prepare us for the revelation that the man now hurrying to the bank is also rushing, unknowingly, to his death.

We see him a few minutes earlier, winding his wristwatch before a class of writing students. We will see the watch twice more, as he holds it up to the guard at the bank and finally on the hand of his younger self. The watch is both a structuring device and a symbol; for this story like all stories and life itself takes place in time and is shadowed by the end. Where what is lost in time may be regained or recovered: redeemed. And this is a story of redemption. Of an embittered, middle-aged writer whose passion for writing and words has cut him off from life, and of his rediscovering the spirit that gave him life and gave his life meaning.

The opening scene takes place in a classroom and is almost a third of the film’s running time. It is also a major addition to the original short story and provides a necessarily more detailed exposition of character and theme. Here we are introduced to the intense, unforgiving character of the writer as teacher, pacing a room full of unresponsive students, berating them for the lack of passion and truth

in their writing. This may be a righteous, cleansing anger, which the students need to hear, a clarion call to try harder, go deeper. But you also sense that it is an expression of personal disappointment and frustration: the destructive feedback of a writer who is tired of his students, and of teaching what cannot be taught. For this is a man who regards writing and words with an almost religious passion: he has the ferocity of an old testament prophet, a preacher excoriating his parishioners for their sins and warning them of the hellfire to come. Writing, like the religious life is an urgent calling and true inspiration a divine gift. You have to believe you are chosen. You have to hear the call. At one point he drops to his knees before a student and asks him if he believes that you can be moved by something as timid as a word. Can words save us from the rational? He is clearly a believer in both words and the need to break with the rational, but the lack of response from the students suggests that he is alone in this belief: a prophet speaking in the wilderness. And his words will be prophetic.

All plots have an element of prophecy in them. Something seen or said that seems of passing importance but which anticipates the final revelation. For this writer and teacher, it is his belief in the power of words that leads directly to his death and salvation. It is words that will move him to laugh irrationally and words that in his dying moments will redeem him and lead the audience to an understanding of this beginning.

For this man is someone driven a little crazy by words and, you imagine, by the long hours of isolation, of reading and thinking and writing. The romantic outsider, the rugged individualist of American letters and literary tradition, whose foundation is the Puritan revelation, high standards and self-reliant passion of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and on through Hemingway and Carver to Tobias Wolff, the writer of the short story which inspires the film. (Larzer Ziff

1985, p 26). This is a writer whose very reality is literary and who despises the too rationalised modern world of consumption and commerce and where ironically his “comet’s tail of memory and hope and talent and love” will flare up and die. From the classroom we have arrived at the temple of Mammon where he laughs three times at the words spoken by one of the bank robbers. Oblivious to danger or in spite of that realisation, like a child in church he cannot help himself laugh at the clichés and their literary antecedents. In the short story the decisive loss of control is triggered by his view of the pretentious and vulgar ceiling paintings. In the film it is his memory of what he asked the student, “ Do you believe in the power of a *word*?”

As he falls to the floor of the bank, time slows. We step back from the more immediate drama of his external life to a third person account of his internal imaginary. The narrative voice that guides us is cool and disinterested, lifted directly from the literary text and counterpoints the flow of filmic imagery. We cannot know for sure (how reliable is the narrator?) but we are told of all that he does *not* remember and in that account glimpse a life lived and now almost lost. Moving between shots of him writing and rewriting we are *told* that what he does not remember are his first lover, his wife before they fell out of love, his daughter as a child, a woman jumping from a building, but because they are not only *named* in the narration but also *shown* through the imagery, they are paradoxically like Adam’s naming of the animals, brought to life, *remembered*. Being shown and told at the same time, intensifies our experience and move us as they also amplify the background story of a man increasingly isolated and tired of life. However there is nothing redemptive in these memories: they offer *chronos*, mere passing of time in contrast to *kairos*, time fulfilled (Frank Kermode 1968, p 47). So the story cannot end here.

Thus flaring between these forgotten memories is another time and

place where time itself stands still. The narrator's voice mellows, music plays under, shots of waving grass and high-blown clouds, the sounds of insects. This is an image of Eden: eternity. Through the long grass on a long summer's day we enter the redemptive and sacred space of childhood, the ground of a specifically male and American dream of innocence: the baseball field. Here the writer as a child is checking his watch, the same watch as we saw in the beginning. And as in the beginning he is bored, when two words spoken by a boy whom he will never see again, suddenly move him and transform his day. A moment of epiphany that his nature responds to, and which shape his life, a life that is now being taken away by the bullet in his brain. These words resonate and provide an image of affirmation. A break in the rational, that allows the light of some inexplicable joy to penetrate and illuminate, at once locating the ground of his being, the source of his inspiration and the recovery of what had been forgotten before all is forgotten – forever.

This is the ending that fiction can provide, an ending consonant with the middle and with its origins. It humanizes time by placing our lives and actions in a meaningful context, and gives us home *in media res*; a place where we belong and where our life has meaning. While the redemptive arc of the Hebrew prophets shadows all our stories, the spirit of revelation in a secular world has migrated from an ethereal heaven to the childhood beloved of the Romantics. From *Citizen Kane* to *Hunger* the answer to the enigma of our life, these films and the narrative form itself seem to suggest, lies in our *beginnings*; a moment in time that anchors our faith, propels us into life and provides an image that shapes our lives. It's what art and literature can suggest by providing us with hopeful narratives. At the same time the sudden shift from the drama to the disinterested and god-like narration, reminds us that life is rarely that neat; that our individual

destinies and personal tragedies are played out against an indifferent cosmos. Humans are both unique and insignificant. Our lives in time a fiction shadowed by our death, which may arrive at any moment. What we are likely to be thinking or whether that moment will be redemptive, no man can say. In the end the narrator tells us that the writer was thinking of no one but himself. And we in turn are moved by his life and fate to think of our own.

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## “They is” – Control and Chaos

Julie Budtz Sørensen

Life is fundamentally chaotic and human beings are in a constant battle to organize it and make it controllable.

As a child grows up it is gradually taught to master the chaos with which it was initially in harmony. It begins to categorize things and occurrences and put them into systems, and the questions which the child used to pose slowly cease to be asked: Life becomes predictable.

To a certain extent this is good, not to mention unavoidable; man is not fit to live in total chaos and therefore needs systems and predictability. But this organizing of chaos has a negative consequence since it tries to exclude the possibility of something unexpected occurring and ignores the fact that life does not always make sense.

Life's absurdity is noticed mostly by children and is reflected in their honest statements about it. As is well known kids say the darndest things, and we laugh at them and think that they are cute (understood as naïve.) Thereby, and quite conveniently, we reinforce our image of a completely logical world.

When everything becomes predictable, life itself and the way we lead it become mechanical and this is what has happened to the protagonist Anders in the short fiction film *Bullet in the Brain*.

As a literature teacher with a deep contempt for his mediocre students, Anders considers himself an intellectual. One may argue, though, that if an intellectual is understood as one who is constantly searching for a deeper meaning in life, Anders is not in fact one. He has stopped searching and has lost his naïve interest in the world. His existence is based on predictability and control, nothing surprises him and nothing amazes him.

Even the poems of the great writers he used to admire have become profane to him since he has memorized them so as to be able to 'shiver at will.' This paradox – to shiver at will – seems symptomatic of his life, where

the things which might move him only tire him. His wife, his mistress, his work.

Anders' lack of interest in his surroundings not to mention his arrogance and ironical attitude make it difficult for us to like him. When he gets shot in the head during a bank robbery for making a sarcastic remark at the robber we feel indifference, perhaps even a hint of malicious pleasure. Why should we care about him?

'Life happens without applause', Anders notes when lecturing his students. The same could be said of his death which happens in silence.

However, our somewhat blank perception of Anders is altered by the flashbacks from his past.

In the beginning of the film Anders takes out an image painted by Picasso and speaks the following words:

See, you can't sell us cubism or a blue period or any of that shit without the base. Without the ability to tell how it really is first. Without the ability to show us beauty on its face.

In the same way we, the audience, cannot judge what Anders has become before knowing what he was. It is impossible for us to fully grasp his actions and his exhaustion with life, but in watching the flashbacks which make up the final part of the film (and describe what has happened after the bullet has entered his brain) our perception becomes nuanced as we peek into his life. By seeing the base, we begin to understand his blue period, so to speak.

What is depicted in the flashbacks is a particular life – *Anders'* life – but at the same life in general is portrayed with all its changes: passion, misery, joy, sorrow, ups and downs. The unpredictability of life for all of us.

The events from the past are not connected to each other by any unifying thread other than the voice of the articulate narrator who could have been chosen by Anders himself.

Anders does not remember his mistress, his wife, his mother's last words or a woman committing suicide the day after the birth of his daughter.

What he *does* remember is a small detail from his childhood; an event that does not at first seem to have much significance but nevertheless takes on an essential role in the film. Anders remembers playing baseball in a field one childhood summer. Here, he was confronted with a sentence which, in all its simplicity, changed him and lingered in his mind. One boy, visiting from Mississippi, was asked which position he wanted to play, and uttered: "Shortstop. Short's the best position they is." Anders was mesmerized:

Anders is strangely roused – elated by those two final words, their pure unexpectedness and their music.

The boy's incorrect grammar touched something fundamental inside of Anders and he wanted to make the moment last forever.

The words indicate the chaos in the man-made cosmos which is founded on reason and predictability. They shine due to their unexpectedness and that is why they touch Anders so deeply. It is an experience of something *more* than trivial life.

Earlier when mocking a student in the classroom Anders asks:

Do you believe in the chance that you could be changed by something as timid as a word? The chance to move and be moved? The chance at salvation from the rational? Do you believe?

'They is' is exactly this: the beauty of the irrational. It is a shift in elements and meanings which has a liberating effect on Anders.

When Anders is shot he is lifted into a new consciousness. Here "under the mediation of brain time" he finally escapes the rational. He is no longer subordinated to time and space but by virtue of this mediation a single moment becomes elastic and is stretched out. In this moment the monotonous and repetitive order is replaced by a reality where the logic of "they is" can be repeated for all eternity. They is, they is, they is.

## Narrative Voice in *Bullet in the Brain*

Matt Binetti

*Bullet in the Brain* (David Von Ancken, 2001) is an exceptional example of the art of short-form filmmaking. Von Ancken's film is not only a good film, it's a good *short* film in that it uses the inherent qualities of the form in a very appropriate way. With Von Ancken's short I'd like to draw attention to one narrative technique in particular: the use of voice-over narration. The way Von Ancken's film uses an off-screen, omnipotent narrative voice not only works in this piece, it does so in such a way that helps define the practice of short-form filmmaking. In other words, Von Ancken used narration in a way that is suited for short-form filmmaking practice and what would have been less so for long-form, or "feature length," moviemaking practice. At the same time, asking questions about the effects of screen duration on motion picture form can help us explain why the particular use of narration in *Bullet*, a stylistic choice, works to define the piece as a pure example of live-action, short-form storytelling.

To help analyze the narrative voice in *Bullet* it's revealing to ask what formal and stylistic demands an audience would place upon Von Ancken's shoulders if he were to have made a feature length movie about the same story instead? At first glance, the obvious answer that jumps to mind is that the movie would need to be longer. Technically, this is an observation on the movie's **screen duration** – the time based measurement of all the diegetic and non-diegetic elements in sum. Another technical term for this measurement is also the **Total Running Time** of a piece. If *Bullet* were longer, say, over an hour long, would the director's use of narrative voice change? And if indeed it were to change, what then can we say about the effects of

screen duration upon motion picture style?

I would argue that as screen duration decreases, the heavy use of a narrator's voice in place of plot action is aesthetically acceptable, and, at best, is enjoyable and entertaining. *Bullet* defies the popular conventions of classical screenwriting in the same sense writer/filmmaker Charlie Kaufman does in his screenplay for the film *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002). In *Adaptation* the main character is also the off-screen narrator. In the last moments of the movie the narrator's voice vocally disregards the oftentimes criticized practice of gratuitously disclosing key story/plot information when he directly relates to the audience the psychological thought processes going on inside the fictional main character's mind. He even, ironically enough, admits how the aesthetic rule he's rebelliously ignoring is being broken. Most literature and teachings on visual storytelling declare the best method for communicating story information to the viewer is by way of showing the audience important plot points through on-screen events and actions. "Show me, don't tell me" as goes the old visual medium adage. But I've just assumed that classical, more than likely Hollywood, screenwriting technique also instructs short-form screenwriting.

Von Ancken's movie should prove to us this is not the case. Just past the midway point of the plot there is a climactic release wherein the bank robber, played by Dean Cain, discharges his revolver's ammo into the brain of our tragic, midlife crisis hero, Prof. Anders, played by Tom Noonan. Forthwith, the audience hears the narrator's voice begin speaking for the first time. It continues, diving into an epilogue that recounts Prof. Anders's life, or, more particularly, the key events of his life that start flashing before his eyes.

Now then, *Bullet* is not long, its screen duration is just under fourteen minutes; and a little after seven and a half minutes into the movie the narrator begins the verbose exposé that continues for the

remaining five minutes of the movie. Yet at the end of the piece we feel satisfied and touched, as though we've just seen a complete biographical motion picture as in-depth and revealing as *Gandhi*. Ultimately, we allow the director to get away with this all knowing narrator whose knowledge about the doomed professor seems utterly unrestricted. The audio-visual montage the audience experiences during the five minute voiceover can be described as the visual form of poetry – "visual poetry" to define the term. Perhaps "narrated montage" fits as an appropriate observation of the stylistic technique as well.

David Bordwell can shed light on why this stylistic choice – a five minute narrated montage – helps *Bullet* work as a short-form motion picture. In his book *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1987), Bordwell discusses screen duration, editing and the cognitive experience of watching time-based art:

Cognitive psychologists have suggested that the mind's induction operations can be limited by the speed at which the environment demands decisions. Our anticipatory schemata are ready to pick up certain kinds of data, and the rate at which the information is presented can affect how we develop hypotheses... Meir Sternberg shows that such features depend on the "qualitative indicator," the sense that the syuzhet span devoted to a fabula event lies in proportion to the event's contextual importance...the viewer must readjust his or her expectation, reset the scale or significance to be applied to the syuzhet, and perhaps play with a more open set of alternative schemata. Rhythm in narrative cinema comes down to this: by forcing the spectator to make inferences at a certain *rate*, the narration governs *what* and *how* we infer. (76)

If this cognitive theory is true, can I not apply this concept to the example I raise with *Bullet*? Based on this idea, I would argue that the audience expectation, and the mental faculties involved in the process of meaning making, adjust and allow short-form to work as its plot (syuzhet) collapses story (fabula) time down into a restricted screen duration. This is one characteristic, of many, that sets narration based

short-form apart from long-form motion pictures. In the case of *Bullet in the Brain*, the viewer doesn't mind the fact that Prof. Ander's knowledge and life experience (a fifty plus decade fabula) can be summed up in five minutes (syuzhet) by the anonymous narrator's monologue. The experience of a fourteen minute story, i.e. "the speed at which the environment demands decisions," allow it to exist in this way, i.e. let's the audience "play with a more open set of alternative schemata" -- a much different stylistic expectation than if *Bullet* were feature length (Bordwell, 76).

All live-action motion picture forms have their preoccupied mode: persuasion as we'd see in a commercial, journalism as in a documentary, complex subplots as in a feature film, the coolness of a rock band as in a music video, or taking a seven minute sponsor break as in a network series. The experience of restricted screen duration affords us the simple sweetness of a song and dance (Ari Sandel's *West Bank Story*, 2005), the frame reordering of a non-narrative project (Martin Arnold's *Cinemnesia*, 1989-98), or a poem dedicated to the last thoughts of a murdered man as a bullet traverses his skull. And that's not to place short-form above the others. They each have their stylistic boundaries and when directors understand the differences inherent to the respective forms, audiences are treated to aesthetically pure media experiences such as Von Ancken's *Bullet in the Brain*.

### Works Cited

Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. New York: Routledge, 1987.



## *Alumbramiento / Lightborne*

(Spain, 2007), 15 min.

Eduardo Chaperó-Jackson



Cristina Plazas as Sara in *Alumbramiento*.  
Photo provided by Prosopopey Productions.

### **Principal crew**

Director and writer: Eduardo Chaperó-Jackson

Director of photography: Juan Carlos Gómez

Film editors: Iván Aledo, Quique Dominguez

Production designer: Esther Garcia

Camera operator: Juanjo Sánchez

Sound: David Rodriguez

Original music: Pascal Gaigne

Executive producers:

Eduardo Chaperó-Jackson, Elsa Díaz Pirinoli, Pepe Jordana, Sergio Ródenas

Producer: Pepe Jordana, Prosopopey Productions

### **Principal cast**

Maria: Marivi Bilbao

Sara: Cristina Plazas

Rafa: Manolo Solo

**Awards include:**

UIP Prize for Best European Short Film, Prix UIP Venezia 2007

Best Short Fiction Film at AFIA Film Festival, 2008

Press Award for Best Short Film, Valladolid;

Best Short Film, Festival de Cine de Catagena

Best Short Film, Festival de Manlleu

Best Short Film, Silver Dragon, Cracow Film Festival, 2008

Best Short Film, Ibero-American Short Film Competition, 2008

Best Short, Silver Biznaga, Málaga Spanish Film Festival, 2008

Best Director, Festival de Aguilar de Campoo

Best Director, Valladolid

Best Director, Festival de Rivas

Best Cinematography, Juan Carlos Gómez, Medina del Campo

Best Sound, Larissa Internacional Film Festival

Best Actress, Cristina Plazas. Festival Internacional de Móstoles.

Best Actress, Cristina Plazas. Festival Primavera Cinematográfica de Lorca

Best Actress, Marivi Bilbao. Festival de Rioja Alavesa

Best Actor, Manolo Sólo. Festival de Madina del Campo

**Eduardo Chaperó-Jackson**

Born in Madrid in 1971, of a Spanish father and an American mother, Eduardo Chaperó-Jackson has lived for long periods of time in both countries. Studied Fine Arts, Literature and Filmmaking in New York City. In 1996 returned to Spain as a freelance and started exhibiting his artwork. From 1997 to 2004 worked at one of Spain's leading production companies, Sogecine, where he became associate producer and head of screenplay development. In 2007 he left the company to return to directing. Meanwhile, he has studied acting for more than four years and is now getting a degree in gestalt psychology.

**Filmography (as writer and director)**

*Contracuerpo*, 2005

*Alumbramiento / Lightborne*, 2007

*The End*, 2008



Manolo S6lo as Rafa. Photo provided by Prosopopey Productions.



Cristina Plazas as Sara. Photo provided by Prosopopey Productions.



Cristina Plazas as Sara. Photo provided by Prosopopey Productions.

## An interview with Eduardo-Chapero Jackson on *Alumbramiento*

Richard Raskin

*The title Alumbramiento is intriguing. And the English translation, Lightborne, captures what I understand to be both meanings of the Spanish word – referring (if I am not mistaken) both to childbirth and to emerging from the darkness. Can you tell me why you chose that title for your film? And perhaps also comment on your choice to work in purely visual terms with the interplay of light and darkness in a way reminiscent of chiaroscuro in painting?*

Coming up with *Alumbramiento* as the title was a very satisfying find. Indeed, it's a word used for the act of giving birth, which in Spanish is also called "*dar a luz*", meaning "to give light". *Alumbramiento* could be translated as "the light give". I wrote the story perceiving the process of dying as an act of giving birth, birth to death. That's how I experienced it when my grandparents started to pass away. Instead of preparing for the arrival of a new life, for me it was like the unfolding of the closure of an old life. I wanted to create a link from one pole to the other, like the omega of the alpha. Also, the film narrates how one person sums up the courage and humanity to guide another, who is dying in fear, to a peaceful acceptance of death, allowing her to make that transition in love and gratitude. What the protagonist does is to aid a person at that pivotal moment, carrying her from darkness to light.

All through the film I wanted to explore the relationship between darkness and light as a way to perceive that kind of experience, to transmit the sensations I wanted. In all the spaces of all the locations, darkness reigns; just little points of artificial light give some warmth to the void and emptiness. It's the way people feel in the midst of the vastness and coldness of death. I was most interested in the place where they find one another, where dark and light meet and melt, that chiaroscuro that reminds us of certain paintings is where the mysterious relationship between both aspects, life and death, is hidden. It's somehow scary and sensual at the same time, there is mysticism and wisdom there, in a phenomenological form. Viewers

are drawn by it.

*I regard the scene in the car as a very important one for at least two reasons. 1) Rafa's disengaging his hand from Sara's establishes something that will change later on, when he takes her hand in the final bedside scene; and 2) the exchange of lines - "Is it too much medication" "Yes, but what else can we do" - establishes at this early point what will become a fundamental difference between two approaches to the moment of death, Rafa's and Sara's. Would you agree?*

It's true, I wanted to portray two very different ways of approaching the huge fear of dealing with the death of a loved one. Normally people tend to infantilize the dying, negating many issues, trying to ease the pain at a physical level, but not dealing with the pain at an emotional level, because that would entail having to confront it oneself. Although we've made significant progress using medicine to avoid pain, we are still at a loss when trying to ease the suffering of the dying person. There are profound psychological processes that go on when a person faces his or her own death. Painkillers are great, but not enough. I really wanted to go into that other terrain with the character of Sara. She becomes a shaman (or "shawoman", rather), the one who guides with great wisdom the very difficult journey. Rafa, at the end of the film, acknowledges her great act, he is very thankful to her for realising what was at stake, and he does seek her touch. But at the beginning of the film, though, he could not deal with her touch, because it put him in danger of connecting with his own fear and emotions. During that part of the film he has his defenses up, his armour that protects him from the pain, but only actually worsening the very source of that pain. Sara sees all this and takes the decision of changing the whole structure of the personal dynamics of the moment.

*Can you tell about the way you chose to end the film – the closural strategies involved in pulling the camera back from the bedside scene and past characters standing in rather statuesque positions?*

I wanted to create a hypnotically static rhythm throughout the film. No camera movements, everything still, just as the characters' frozen attitudes facing the unmovable and unavoidable stillness of death. I wanted to recreate that sense of lack of flow, because it depicts a situation of painful flow-less-ness, like being in an existential cell that

you cannot escape. Once Sara completely changes the situation, she opens the gates of emotions, resolves the situation, which finally finds its release, its organic and natural flow, like the camera at the end. The camera, the spectator's point of view, the spectator who has been forced to that stillness as well, is pleasurably released, exiting the space as the very soul of the dying person would. During that movement of release from life to death, the characters are found at the place they chose to be in relation to that moment. At the end, the one who denied death the most, is the one who finds herself most alone, most lost in the dark.



Photo provided by Prosopopey Productions.

*Can you tell more about the way this film was inspired by your own experiences of dear ones dying?*

Yes, for me experiencing the deaths of my grandparents became a major epiphany. It opened my eyes to many things about life. But it also suggested to me that dying could be different, less awkward, less difficult and painful than what I witnessed. More light could be shed onto that important process leading to the final moment. Most people die in the dark, confused, lost, unhappy, alone, unresolved, unconscious, denying, un-accepting. The expression "to die in peace" has truly a major and transcendental significance. To die in peace entails many essential things in relation to how one has approached life. It was clear to me that those who depart and those who are left

behind, including myself, could benefit greatly by perhaps another way of dealing with life's closure. *Alumbramiento* was for me a way of exploring that at a very personal level. The film itself does not depict an actual event, it's a synthesis combining several experiences I had. Then I tried to imagine a situation and plot that would allow me to reach that other zone, Sara's zone, an alter ego for me. Obviously, it's written in the way I thought could work best at a narrative and cinematographic level.



Cristina Plazas as Sara. Photo provided by Prosopopey Productions.

*One of the many rare qualities of this film is that it can actually change the viewer's way of thinking about what counts most at the moment of death. Is this something you might like to comment upon?*

*Alumbramiento* has been, and still is, an amazing and profound experience for us. Somehow it seems that we were able to convey that very potent experience we aimed at. As a director I am very aware that it's rare, it's something that I cannot completely control, it was a major risk, it depended completely on the truth. It happened that all the right things fell into place at the right moment. So the magic and the alchemy happened. We were just a vehicle for it. Its especially moving for us that the film is currently used by psychiatrists and psychologists working in hospitals with terminally ill patients. There is a growing attention in medical circles on the importance of emotionally helping patients and families.

*Can you describe your own approach to directing actors?*

I consider the work with actors absolutely essential and immensely stimulating. I considered it so important that I didn't direct until I had studied acting for a couple of years myself. Altogether I have done four years of acting courses. It also helps a great when writing and creating roles. I have also studied for a masters degree in Gestalt psychology in order to continue the pursuit of understanding human nature.

While working I am very open to the suggestions of the actors. I experiment openly with improvisation, I understand that many of the real qualities of what is written emerge in that way. I rehearse characters and relationships in a very investigative manner, but I don't necessarily rehearse certain situations. It varies, sometimes I decide by mere gut instinct, other times in order to create a certain creative tension. For instance, in *Alumbramiento*, although I thoroughly prepared and rehearsed the roles and certain back-story material separately, I told the actors that I didn't want to rehearse the last big scene, the dying scene. I told them that we didn't know how death was, that we could not prepare for it, that we just had to prepare ourselves to jump into that void and see how it is. Also in order to use their fear of the scene as the fear of death itself. The actors seemed to thrive on that premise. It was risky, but I also thrive on a certain amount of excitement. Of course, needless to say that I planned out the sequence in great detail for a very long time. It's mostly about planting the right seeds, nourishing them in the right way, with lots of care and attention, so that at the end the magic grows from them. But that does not depend entirely on you, it depends on life, and even filmmaking cannot completely control it.

*Could you comment on the major casting decisions you made for this film?*

As already mentioned, the great challenge of this film was to convey absolute truth. It portrays such an intimate, intense and emotionally transcendent moment that anything not believable would ruin the experience. No plot, no *mise-en-scène*, no "acting" could hide a lack of

truthfulness. It took me a whole year to assemble the cast that felt right to me. For each role I took a great deal of time and care, trying to control my eagerness to shoot. All of the roles were very special, but the most challenging role to fill was that of Maria, the old woman who passes away. It's not easy to find an accomplished actress over seventy who would be willing to do a mere short film that entails such demanding acting. There are very few active actresses of that age, most are considered great dames of the business and mostly do theater and feature films. When I thought of Mariví Bilbao many people told me I was mistaken because she is so well known for her comic roles in TV series. They thought nobody would take her seriously in such a dramatic situation, shown for such a short time (with a short film you have even less time to counteract any familiar associations for a known thespian). But I always fight against clichéd type-casting. Actors have so much more to give. When I sent the script to Mariví, her agent called me: "Eduardo, Mariví's sister just died and I can't give her a script like this now...". I, of course, sadly understood. But a few hours later Mariví called: "Eduardo, I insisted that my agent give me the script... I want to do it, in honor of my sister, she would have wanted me to do it. Thank you, it has helped me to read it. It's necessary to do it." So she was personally committed from a very deep and intimate starting point. I believe hers is an outstanding performance. So is Cristina Plaza's and Manolo Solo's. It's very important to work with people who are really generous and committed.



Mariví Bilbao as Maria. Photo provided by Prosopopey Productions.

*Is there anything else you might want to say about Alumbramiento?*

For me was very important to find the right location. Maria's house, although you don't see much of it, is like another character in the film. It has a mood, an atmosphere, a history. The old crystal doors were very important for me, creating that effect of light and darkness. Working in the right place helps to inspire you and the whole team. Sometimes a studio or set won't do that. Places have energy and presence, so do objects. The bed where Maria lies is very old, it's used, it has a strange size and sound. Those things become an important part of the experience.

*Is there any advice you might give students about to make their own first short films?*

It helped me a great deal trying to be very honest with myself, using my feelings as a guide. Sometimes it takes a long time to get anywhere in cinema. It's ok, filmmakers are storytellers who need to know about life, and therefore to have lived. There is so much pressure to succeed that we forget the journey, we skip the process, we forget ourselves. Never forget to see filmmaking as a way of growing and enjoying, of sharing the magic of creativity with a team of other dreamers who work along side you.

10 December 2008/5 January 2009

## **An interview with Pepe Jordana, producer of *Alumbramiento***

Henrik Underbjerg

*One of the key questions regarding the producing of short films: Where's the audience? When producing short films in Denmark you know that if you're lucky enough to get a broadcaster on board they will probably hide your film away in a slot where they know nobody will be watching. In their analysis a short film doesn't have the potential needed to penetrate all the media-noise and reach its audience. Commissioning editors have tried so many times in past years to make it happen but now they have given up, folded their arms repeating the word 'No' over and over again. They have the same feeling you may share with me that if I could get the audience into the cinema or get it to turn on the TV at the right time they will have a very good experience and be both entertained and perhaps even touched. But I don't have the means to make this happen. For the most part the lack of audience equals the lack of funding. And this does not necessarily mean that only the exceptionally good shorts get made. Seen from the outside, the perception is perhaps that it is a coincidence whenever a film gets out; sometimes a stroke of luck but first and foremost a coincidence. When looking a bit closer, it's more or less a matter of (the coincidental) finding the right combination of creatives and story but also the timing and the possible noise you can get to play a role in this game. Is there a Spanish audience for *Alumbramiento*? And do you see any signs of a possible emergence of a European audience through new platforms of distribution? What importance do you think timing, noise, strategy have?*

Is there an audience? Where is it? Is television the only way to reach the audience? What does it take to penetrate the noise and make yourself a space in front of the audience? I don't believe in the established distribution system, not anymore. Nor in local audiences. I believe in a global audience and also in our actual capacity to make the product instantly international. *Alumbramiento* was born at the Venice Festival and has earned more awards outside Spain than within our country. It's true that in Spain it has been issued on DVD (with the Rumanian film, *4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days*, also a European Film Academy winner) and it has also been broadcast on several TV-stations, but that's not the real audience. The audience could be much bigger, and that's the one we have to try to reach, in any way possible. The audience doesn't know how much they are missing. If anyone dares to make a package with three or four good shorts and spend the same amount of money on promotion as they usually spend on a

feature launch promotion, there could be some surprises regarding audience. The huge amount of shorts available permits one to choose and pack with precision for any given type of targeted audience. Everybody loves shorts. Commercials (more than film) have tightened the language, the speed and the codes for several generations. But on top of that, a short film takes less effort from the viewer (in time) and can be as powerful, intense and artistic as a feature film. And with reduced production costs. Some day somebody will notice all this and will go for a big business opportunity.

The internet and cell phones are very good tools but are also dangerous in some way. I don't think we can talk about audiences in the same sense that film and TV have been designating them. The multiplicity of the sources takes us to the atomization of the audience. There won't be big audiences anymore. There might be hits, weird cases that will make it for a big mass of little audiences.

In a few years we'll get the technological capacity for a good image and sound experience, with real quality, which is my obsession, with no compression, big sized images and perfect streaming. But there is this part I don't like: I believe in the viewer, in his willingness to see a film, alone or with others, but with full dedication to that observation, to the experience. I don't think that *Alumbramiento* should be viewed at a bus stop or on the tiny screen of a cell phone. I don't like interruptions for ads on the TV so I'm not friendly toward any apparatus with a pause button. A film must not be interrupted.

I prefer to think about new forms of exhibition rather than distribution, because we shouldn't let technology rule the world. I like to think about those old musical juke-boxes, imagine a future where all films are available on the net in great quality, you own a little café where in some corner, a group of people are watching a film together and the café has its own private Top-10 with the most viewed shorts of the month.

We could have uploaded *Alumbramiento* on the web but we didn't feel like doing it. Not only because of the plastic, the light and the photography, that we feel gets distorted and badly treated in multi-media quality, but also for the film itself: Watching an old woman die, surrounded by stupid banners for travel offers and so on, is something we must try to avoid. We need to find better ways of distribution.

Strategy and noise are necessary, but may fail. At the end it's always the audience who has the last word, who decides. Indeed I think there must be a launch, in some way. But I don't believe in established formats. Films must adapt and go out there and look for its audience, its circuits, its exhibition platforms, which can be very different depending on each film and its targeted audience. Short films have been looking to feature films for too long, and they should look more to commercials. Those are closer formats regarding language, tools, and impact capacity. Advertising has abandoned television and press, jumping to the streets, searching for their victims because they know the audience is not there anymore, passively, in front of the media, suffering the bombardment. Each product must look for its consumer and each film and filmmaker must find his public, and get his film to them, not waiting for the public to come.

All this is said because I think that a film doesn't really exist until somebody watches it. The movie can make sense, it can have a value, it may even be something important, but it really doesn't exist if nobody is watching.

*The audience decides... And Alumbramiento was born in Venice where it first met its audience. But this is only possible if the film finds its way to the audience. At the same time the established distribution systems now appear to be on their way to becoming irrelevant or at least on their way to becoming supplemented by various platforms that can exhibit short films rather than atomize the audience by approaching it through all possible means. Some would say that it's not only the audience that becomes atomized nowadays but also the formats. A fast-moving parallel media-flow could be the news where the notion increasingly becomes that we as the audience don't have to do anything to find the news because the news will find us – if it's relevant for us. In this light a trust in the audience's ability to give life to one's film could be said to cover for a very hard selection process. A selection that demands a lot of both the filmmakers and the story they have undertaken to produce. As we are probably not the only ones to know, a vast number of titles disappear every year – and perhaps ten times that figure never even gets close to principal photography. How did you and the director, Eduardo Chaperó-Jackson, know that*

*Alumbramiento could penetrate the noise and find its way to the audience (and its funding)? Does the success of your film (in finding its audience) have anything to do with a dedication to shorts as a genre in their own right (as opposed to doing shorts as a stepping stone to features)? And following the news-line: Do you think that Alumbramiento would have found me if Richard hadn't asked me for a contribution to POV?*

I love short films, watching them and making them. For Eduardo and for me they are not a step toward other things. The format gives us the freedom to choose projects and the freedom to work, to face the project as we like. If you don't have that freedom, the creative process becomes just a job, even if you have a great budget or the final cut.

The funding. We worked on a strange basis: We financed the project with our own funds and resources. Working in other areas (advertising, TV, postproduction services) enabled us to face the project with enough freedom. It was a small project with only a three-day shoot in a closed set and a little driving around. We didn't care about getting the money back until it was finished. Apparently we've gone from guerrilla filmmaking to kamikaze fundraising.

Too many movies, maybe it's too much. There was a time when somebody could think of himself as capable of knowing ALL about main literature, and maybe the same about knowing ALL ABOUT (important) FILMS. Not anymore. The audiovisual is just another language which new generations know and use even better than their natural oral-verbal language. The frontiers between film, video creation, advertisement, propaganda and crap are very diffuse. So it's very difficult to categorize or to compare; there's simply too much material to analyze. For me analyzing is boring. I just want to know where to look. I don't want to waste my time on something I'm not interested in.

How do I decide if I want to get involved in a project? I'm very impulsive, very instinctive. I don't think I choose a project but the project chooses me. Besides, I'm not very interested in the result. I am more interested in the creative process, in the people participating (the director and the cast and crew), I need to be sure that there is space for experimentation, learning and joy. I could add the general interest, discarding extreme author self-interest. I look for projects worried

about the audience's interest, not about audiences worried about the interest of the project.

*Alumbramiento* started from a concept: improvising. There was a detailed script but with suggested dialogs. There was a key point, of course, established at "Maria, you are going to die", but it was at the rehearsals that all the rest would appear. Eduardo and the cast prepared the characters, their backgrounds, their feelings, but they didn't rehearse moment of the tragic ending because, from the very beginning, Eduardo felt that "nobody can rehearse death". So we went all together to that final moment, shooting chronologically, knowing that Maria would die but not knowing how it would be. The idea of the song, when the son starts singing, stems from the rehearsal that only the director and the actor knew (and myself). Everything was intended to search for spontaneity, naturalness and truth. So we decided to shoot with three cameras, one for each actor, in a very complicated set-up and all the lightning equipment spread around the bed.

Finally Henrik, I cannot know if you would have seen *Alumbramiento*. I guess that now that you've seen it, it's because it had to be that way. I think any form of art has to run the road by itself, in a natural way, of course surrounded and accompanied by the rest of us, who have to make our best effort and our best job: director, producer and all the rest until it comes to Richard. And then it's your turn. And so on.

*The freedom you have been able to offer to Alumbramiento almost makes me want to move to Spain! I'm very curious about the way you describe the film's 'life' from your initial impulsive and instinctive decision until it comes to life in the eyes and minds of the audience. You stress that you look for projects that are concerned with the possible audience – and while shooting you care less for the result, i.e. the finished film, and more about the making of the film, the process.*

Not exactly – maybe I didn't explain myself clearly enough. If I decide to go for a project, it's because I believe there is something real to offer to the audience. Also, I must feel there is enough space for learning and experimentation, to challenge our own boundaries as filmmakers and storytellers. While shooting, it's not that I don't care about the result, its more that I have this faith in the process, something to do

with maximum honesty and effort in every aspect of the shoot and postproduction, with special focus on scriptwriting, development and preproduction. And then the film gets done and some people seem to like it, some others may not, but we don't really care because we are proud of it and we like it. The rest is just a matter of finding more people who would like the film.

*In the film there's a point where the sister asks Sara to step forward into the light where Maria can see her. Even though this step can be seen as an omen, the step into the light is an action in its own right and a step 'into character' almost inevitably leading Sara to say "Maria, you're going to die". Would it be fair to say that if you sense a core of meaning or attraction in the idea or the script, which makes you decide to try and work further on the film, this core will transcend the film and will almost inevitably bring the film to its audience, thus making it 'come alive'?*



Cristina Plazas as Sara. Photo provided by Prosopopey Productions.

I don't really know... As I said before, I believe indeed that at some point, there must be a very honest process in the making of the film in order to enable it to transcend..., especially with such a script, trying to recreate a moment of deep humanity with very powerful feelings going on within the scene. I remember that Eduardo and I talked a lot about the lighting: a very theatrical atmosphere, almost like a painting, full of darkness but with small areas of light, where characters could go back and forth, from consciousness to dreamland, from the present to their memories, from life to death, from your own life to the life of another, from fiction to reality.

*Furthermore through the financing, the production, the exhibition we can use all kinds of strategies and make all kinds of noises, but the key element in play is the core of the story – and that core works with or without our help. That core made you choose the project and now that I have seen the film, I carry that core, passing it on...?*

I guess so. The core doesn't work by itself. It needs the complicity of many others, like me and you. The closets are full of great scripts and even great films that will never see the light because one day someone decided not to look or not to act. Even with tons of promotion (noise), nobody can tell if a movie is going to make it to every single home on the planet. But sometimes a movie makes it, with more noise than promotion, and that is the very moment when we must remember that films are a collective kind of art, because they take a lot of people to get them made and also a much bigger number of people to get them distributed all over. Word of mouth being the biggest promotional channel, especially in these times of atomized audience in front of thousands of blogs. Please, pass it on. ;-)

5 January 2009



Manolo Sólo as Rafa. Photo provided by Prosopopey Productions.

## Visualizing the unspeakable: point-zero filmmaking in *Alumbramiento*

Andreas Kakiou Halskov

*What art can still do is testify, not of the sublime, but of this aporia of art (the insufficiency to present the sublime) and the pain it causes. She does not speak about the unspeakable, she rather speaks about the impossibility to speak about it.*

Jean-François Lyotard (cited in Oosterling 1999, p. 91).

According to the French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, modernism presents a way of dealing with taboos, of cultivating the heterogeneous or, as it were, “presenting the unrepresentable”. Unable to speak (directly) about “the unspeakable”, modern filmmakers, for example, deal with unspeakable subjects in cinematic terms, using different techniques – lighting, acting, sound and framing – to illustrate the *silencing* and *suppression* of such taboos.

Dealing with physical illness and death, the short film *Alumbramiento* (2007) by Eduardo Chaperó-Jackson is all but outspoken, reducing verbal and visual information to an absolute minimum. If death is uncomfortable to deal with – and ultimately unspeakable – *Alumbramiento* subtly deals with the “unspeakability” of this very subject.

A Spanish word for “giving light” or “giving birth”, *Alumbramiento* is, ironically, about facing death – and, in terms of lighting, the film is vividly low-key. The plot has undergone a process of *dedramatization*, the cinematography a process of *delumination*, and the dialogue a process of *deverbalization*: there are but few lines of dialogue in the film, a scant amount of action, and a sparse amount of lighting.

As distinct from the typical Hollywood film of today – whose style has fittingly been called an “intensification” of the classical film – *Alumbramiento* is dark, looming and meditative, distending time, while reducing action and dialogue (cf. Bordwell 2002).

The style in *Alumbramiento* has, deservedly, earned its director and crew a number of awards – including the prize for Best Sound at the Cine Mediterráneo de Larissa in Greece, and the prizes for Best Cinematography and Best European Short Film at the UIP awards in Venice – and the film epitomizes one of the most dependable rules of cinema: “Less is more”.

### **Toward a cinematic *point-zero***

In trying to analyze the cinematic strategies in *Alumbramiento*, I use the term *point-zero filmmaking*, understood as a process of stylistic reduction: the plot is stripped of gratuitous action, the lighting is low-key, and the dialogue is close to non-existent (diminishing the amount of verbal information, in return for an ominous quietude on the soundtrack).

#### **1. THE PROCESS OF DEDRAMATIZATION**

The first of these parameters, often known as a process of *dedramatization*, is best described in the words of Matthew Flanagan, as “a minimal narrative structure [...] predominantly achieved by a process of direct reduction, a sustained emptying out of deeply entrenched dramatic elements...” (Flanagan 2008).

Closer to “the spacious rhythms of the modern novel” than to classical cinema – let alone contemporary Hollywood films or the French *cinema du look* – films by Bergman and Antonioni distend time and treat their subjects in a “suppressive or oblique fashion” (Bordwell 2005, p. 152).

In a similar way, Chaperro-Jackson *dedramatizes* the main event in *Alumbramiento* (the death of an old woman). As a short film, with a playing time of approximately 15 minutes, *Alumbramiento* may never be experienced in the same way as *Tystnaden* (1963) or *Il deserto rosso* (1964), but the stylistic choices in *Alumbramiento* are not that different from those in the aforementioned films.

The general pace of *Alumbramiento* is slow and lingering. The dramatic elements within the story are subdued or even suppressed, and, unlike the *heightened expressiveness* of the classical film, feelings and expressions are often withheld or played down.

The film opens in darkness, punctuated by a recurring source of light that metaphorically resembles a heartbeat, as measured by an echo-cardiogram. The blinking light, it turns out, is from a cell phone, awakening one of our main characters (Rafa played by Manolo Solo). Rafa picks up the phone ("Yes, me..."), and his wife, Sara played by Christina Plazas, responds by asking him a question: "How is she?"

No response is given, and thus – in classical terms – a suspenseful *set-up* is produced. Questions naturally arise as to who this woman is, how she is doing, and how she is related to our main characters. Nevertheless, the plot develops in an all but "dramatic" way (however intense the non-verbal acting), and after a scene in the car – in which our main characters exchange but few lines of dialogue or even gestures – we learn that the aforementioned woman, María played by Mariví Bilbao, is on the verge of dying. There is no acceleration of the drama, no compression of time or intensification of the editing, and the different *pay-offs* are presented in a slow and subdued manner.

Likewise, when Sara ultimately decides to tell María that she is going to die, no drama or conflict is created around her decision. María's passing is presented in a slow and quiet fashion, the camera lingering on the peaceful expression of the dying mother.

*Alumbramiento* is not about conflict; it is about facing death, the passage of time and about “coming to an end”, themes that are beautifully envisioned through lengthy shots, slow camera movements and a “sustained emptying out of [...] dramatic elements”.

A short montage, halfway through the film, perfectly underlines and accentuates the above-mentioned theme: a stuffed butterfly hanging on the wall followed by a clock that is suspended in time and an old photograph in black and white. In all of these instances, life has come to an end, but is suspended and captured in time.

## 2. THE PROCESS OF DEVERBALIZATION

Another stylistic strategy that is evident throughout the film – neatly touching upon death as an unspeakable subject – is a general process of *deverbalization*.

The technical and aesthetic norms of the classical film, many theoreticians argue, “were implicitly calculated to privilege the voice and the intelligibility of dialogue” (Chion 1999, pp. 5-6). Indeed, using a term coined by Michel Chion, the classical film may be defined as *verbocentric*: since the early talkies, films have been arranged so as to make the dialogue a primary agent, through which expository information is given to the audience (Chion 1994, p. 6).

On the contrary, some directors have chosen, aesthetically, to *deprivilege* the human voice, either by rejecting the classical notion of intelligibility (as seen in films by Federico Fellini) or reducing the amount of dialogue altogether (as seen in the German experimental film *Tuvalu* [1999]).

Not unlike *Tuvalu* or *Tystnaden*, *Alumbramiento* has undergone a process of *deverbalization*, reducing the amount of dialogue, and realizing this dialogue in a curiously inexpressive fashion (akin to Robert Bresson): the different characters often “speak as if speaking to

themselves”, at the edge of a whisper, in few connected syllables (cf. Bresson 1986, p.74). The dialogue in the opening scene, between Rafa, Sara and the person on the other end of the telephone line, is a typical example of this process of *deverbalization*: the characters speak in abridged sentences and fragments, and respond to information that the audience never receives. Especially Rafa, whose facial expressions are also strangely Bressonian, talk in medical terms and one-syllable-sentences that provide us with little expository information; and long stretches of the plot are dominated by an eerie silence, punctuated only by María’s sickly cough (reminiscent of films by Ingmar Bergman and Lasse Hallström).



Fig.1,1. *Alumbramiento* (2007)



Fig.1,2. *Tystnaden* (1963)

### 3. THE PROCESS OF DELUMINATION

Indeed, the soundtrack in *Alumbramiento* is eerily minimalistic, consisting of little dialogue, long stretches of *ambient silence* and a short, non-diegetic piano piece (created by Pascal Gaigne).

But also with regards to lighting and staging, the film may be defined as minimalistic, using few locations and a beautifully dark decor that is lit so scantily as to minimize the amount of visual information. This process of *delumination*, as created by cinematographer Juan Carlos Gómez, not only produces a somber and dark atmosphere (akin to *Lost Highway* [1997]), but also directs and “intensifies the spectator’s gaze, awareness and response” (Flanagan 2008).

It is difficult to make out, let alone to recognize, the different objects and locations that appear in the film. Consequently, our attention is directed toward the facial expressions of the different characters (these non-verbal expressions, in turn, being our only true sources of information).



Fig. 2. *Alumbramiento*

The cinematic strategy in *Alumbramiento* may, indeed, be defined as *point-zero filmmaking*, understood as an aesthetic reduction of dramatic, visual and verbal information, through which Chapero-Jackson illustrates the unspeakable nature of death and physical illness.

The *heightened expressiveness* of the classical film is discarded in *Alumbramiento*, in return for a slow, minimalistic style. Unlike the typical Hollywood film of today – abounding with gratuitous action, rapid editing and gross visual effects – the style in *Alumbramiento* may be defined as subtle or even sublime. Unable to speak (directly) about “the unspeakable”, *Alumbramiento* instead deals with “the impossibility to speak about the unspeakable”. Thematizing death and physical illness, *Alumbramiento* abounds neither in action nor in words. But its depiction of death – and how we respond to the termination of life – is all the more poignant and cinematic.

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## **In the shadow of light** **– a reflection on *Alumbramiento***

Sébastien Doubinsky

A dying mother, a good son who is also a doctor, a quiet sister, a loving though somewhat estranged wife and a nurse, these are all the characters of the beautiful short film by Spanish-born director Eduardo Chaperó-Jackson, *Alumbramiento*. Five characters only, locked into a room – the mother’s room – and trying to cope with her death-throes.

The son wants to stop her suffering by giving her more and more medicine, in a rational attempt to ease her passing away, but is confronted with the limits of his trade – to save a life at all costs.

Finally, the wife, the “stranger” in the family, will be the liberator, as she comforts the mother and lets her pass quietly to the other side.

The film could easily be considered as a modern parable defending the right for a dignified death (and it has been presented as such), but with its intricate construction, we can see that it reaches much deeper than that.

By the use of a contrasted light – a chiaroscuro da Vinci, Caravaggio or Georges de La Tour would have been proud of – Chaperó-Jackson sets the story in a deep frame, where the shadow is much deeper than light. What’s more, the scenes are filmed within a tight frame, in near claustrophobic proximity, a technique very reminiscent of Bergman’s *Visningar och rop* (*Cries and Whispers*) or *Vargtimmen* (*Hour of the Wolf*).

The effect is already paradoxical, as we are made to believe this is a realistic setting, while at the same time feeling that not all is

presented within the faces or close-ups. We see the characters, but we only see what they are presenting in the light. And the presence of the wife, almost always standing in the shadow, is here to remind us that shadows are equally important – as shadows, like light, have a strong ambivalent symbolic power.

Light in *Alumbramiento*, rather roughly translated in my opinion by *Lightborne*, is indeed linked with truth – as truth is brought into the light like an infant into life (*Alumbramiento* actually means birth, as “bringing into light” or “being brought into light”). But what truth? To what purpose?

The characters of the story are confronted by what is commonly called a “moment of truth”, the death of a dear one – or of the “dearest one”, as it is, after all, the mother herself passing away. Death reveals all the hidden traits and the characters of *Alumbramiento* do not escape its all-powerful effect. The loving son is trying his best to ease his mother’s pain, unwillingly prolonging her agony and suffering. What else can he do, though? He is the loving son, after all. The doctor. The one in charge. The one in the light, by the side of his mother’s bed.

But he is also the one in the darkness of his car, sitting next to his wife who is trying to reach out to him, with no success. He is the one who is not answering his sister and is preoccupied only with the milligrams of Morphine he is about to inject into his mother’s arm. The light here becomes the very symbol of impotence and illusion, the exact contrary of its traditional symbolic value. As we are told in *Genesis*, 1.1 to 1.4: “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light/And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.” Unfortunately for the son, the light is not dividing any darkness here, quite the contrary, in fact.

His wife, on the other hand, remains in the shadow – or rather, steps out of the shadow. We feel there is tension in the couple,

although we will not know why and we can build our own scenarios. A long-time crisis? A rift caused by the mother's agony? The wife is an onlooker at first, albeit a disapproving one. Standing back, she acknowledges her husband's efforts, but finds them ineffective, if not downright cruel (involuntarily cruel, that is, but resulting in great suffering). When she decides to act, she moves out of the shadow and sits on the other side of the bed, to nurse her husband's mother. The first thing she does, after being "unveiled", is to tell the truth: "You are going to die" she tells the mother, in a rather abrupt way.

One could consider here that, as in *Genesis*, light is parting the darkness, as the mother seems to accept the words with gratefulness. But the wife changes roles, becoming the symbolic mother of the mother, lulling her slowly to her final moments. A face replaces another face, a person becomes the ghost of another and illusion replaces reality. Light is veiled again, but Shadow is not evil – quite the contrary. It is peace, at last. Real peace.

Death is thus, as in the tradition, a passage from one reality to another. Here, the title becomes problematic again, stopping our conventional understanding like a glass wall. *Alumbramiento*, the passage towards light, the coming to light. But is Death really enlightening?

The film actually ends in darkness, with a slow backwards traveling, allowing us to see the onlooking nurse and the sister, standing in the shadow, her back against the wall like a mysterious figure.

This semi-obscure is perplexing to the viewer. Where is the promised "light"? After all, all the characters have been "freed": The mother has finally been liberated from her agony, the son from his painful duty, the sister from her mother's suffering, the nurse from her job – but the doctor's wife? What has this death revealed to her, apart from her husband's suffering and vain attempts to relieve his mother? Of course, the couple is reunited at the end – their hands joining over

the deceased's chest. Still, the fact remains that she, and she alone, has helped the mother. The light of truth here again is reminiscent of Bergman's, both appeasing and deeply unsettling.

And the husband, precisely, the good son, what has he learned? That Death is the limit of medicine? That his wife understands Death more than he does – his own mother's death, of all things? That he isn't such a good son after all?

And what about the sister, left in the shadow at the end, like a mysterious Renaissance allegory? Why is she outside the room, when the nurse – a stranger – is looking on?

All these questions remain unanswered and the viewer is left only with the central story to focus on, although Chaperon-Jackson has made it clear, through his narrative technique (close-ups, *chiaroscuro*, almost non-existent dialogues, etc.) that there is definitely more to the picture than meets the eye.

More than a "a meditation on an extraordinary aspect of human dignity, the right to an undisturbed and peaceful death" as the Cracow Film Festival presents *Alumbramiento*, one wonders if it isn't an extraordinary reflection on the possibilities of narration offered by the limits of fiction itself, just as darkness and light are defined by each other. Death is not only a moment of truth, it is mostly a moment of revelation, in which the un-expressed collides with the expressed and where truth, in order to become light, has to become shadow itself. Life and Death are mirror images of each other, as silence is to words – but they are not impenetrable, quite the contrary: they can only exist entwined, although locked in constant conflict. And their fight, precisely, blurs their identity, as motion sets an object in ambivalence.

An anguishing oxymoron, finally, where the welcomed peace might not be the final peace, as in Baudelaire's poem, *Le crépuscule du soir*: "Night, which put shadows in their minds, brings light to my

own. And, even though it is not rare to see the same cause produce two contrary effects, I am still somewhat intrigued and alarmed by this. “

*Alumbramiento* is therefore not a film about death, but much more about the darkness contained in the light around death. Coming to light is darkness, remaining darkness, illuminated only superficially. The peaceful death of the mother hence becomes a symbol not of the right to die, but of the right to exist, outside of the conventional patterns of our thoughts. Yes, the wife helps the mother die, finally. She helps *her* escape. But her only. The living are still here, with their mixture of shadow and light. With their stories, told and untold – mostly untold.

The center of gravity is therefore not where it should be – not in the light illuminating the dying mother’s bed, but off-camera, in the dark corners of the apartment with the sister, where silence reigns, waiting to mingle with words as, everyone knows, silence, not light, is truth.

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## ***Alumbramiento*: the story unpredictable.**

Daniel Alegi

*Alumbramiento*: a family faces the last night of its eldest member, showing their different ways of dealing with a life's ending. In a surprising manner, overcoming fear and taboo, one of them will guide the passing" (from website, *Arrivano i corti* film festival, Italy)

This is an accurate linear-narrative account of the plot elements of this unique award-winning short from Spain by Eduardo Chapero-Jackson. I will suggest another: *Alumbramiento* is a powerful cinematic experience, simple yet narratively unpredictable. The surprise ending resolves not only the specific short narrative, but sheds light - as the title suggests - into the realm of big unanswered questions.

It all starts in a dark bedroom. Pitch black with thick shadows, so impenetrable one is unsure when exactly *Lightborne* (as the title is translated in English) begins and the title sequence ends. Did a phone ring? Sounds mingle, invisible hands awake and fumble for a switch. Light. In the middle of the night. A man and a woman. Another light is on. Then off again. An exhausted pattern of taking turns, one that can fill both dream and waking life with exposed nerves, low tolerance, fatigue.

Time to heed the call. Time to put on glasses, to try and see. Where does life go?

Now we're in a car, slicing through a yawning sequence of on/off lamp-posts, flashing like low-energy question marks, without apparent purpose nor answers, so much more powerful is the night. It's a journey with no peace of mind. The man drives, focused, spent. His eyes gripping the road through the steering wheel, his mind taking

logical stabs at the scarcity of solutions, given the dire medical report he just heard. His woman sits by him, navigating by feelings rather than professional instinct. She offers a hand but he refuses, they don't come together. Pain and fear create a kind of distance that – uncured – can be fatal. The director frames each separately, two broken halves deep in silent visuals of the hallucinatory real. The dawn is much further away. How can life be fixed?

We understand from scant dialogue delivered with surgical precision – in script and performance – that this scenario is recurrent. 120 seconds into the film and we are immersed in an amniotic texture of lucid confusion, a quiet helpless re-investigation of the apparent dead-ends of life, relationships, memory. Before we can even begin to try and escape to safe and controlled rationalizations (what city are we in? have I seen a film by Chapero-Jackson before?) or connect plot strands (where are they going? who is sick?), a darkened apartment and bedroom engulfs and suppresses our resistance. We are witnesses in a magnetized, polarized cinematic space of dark and bare practical lighting of the devastating narrative undercurrent: life is much more subtle, weaker, than death. We are here to spend ten minutes in the bedroom next door and – through a magical unpredictable development in narrative – we will stay there much longer.

The characters enter, the forces of life assemble around each other's weakening pulses, matching optimism against pessimism. "She will make it. She always makes it" says his sister. Silence replies. Rafa shifts shape from son-who-is-a-doctor to doctor-who-is-also-son by directing a nurse in the technical requirements of tonight's pain-aversion attempts. He tries to appear in control, hiding his feelings. His woman observes, until now a cutaway, a pair of eyes of vast and quiet intensity. The old woman on the deathbed appears childish and

angelic, but wrapped in breathing tube and coughing all she seems to have left inside, with resistance. Time and place is now, the narrative secrets of the first few minutes are explained. There was no need to clarify who was going where and why. This is the doctor's mother and she will soon die despite the morphine and more morphine.

Predictably, death will not be mentioned around a deathbed. This is a story about death and the living. Its ending escapes classical categories of dramatic endings (happy, sad, good, bad, etc.). In *Alumbramiento* the passing on of the old mother is not the end of the story. It is not the tipping point where we cry. The childhood song about the piggies is, sung by the doctor and his sister. Seconds before, the doctor's wife's life-embracing beat of no-return "*Tu te vas a morir*" had opened the dance with death, unafraid. The doctor's wife now replaces human logic (the distancing and silencing of pain, the fear and avoidance of death) with a peaceful caress and a simple imperative: "Breathe, you did well in life. Just breathe." She removes all power from the predictable. These two beats open the narrative doors and award *Alumbramiento* unpredictable emotional heights: the visible moment-to-moment defeat of fear and death by way of love, forgiveness, rejoicing, celebrating life as it was. As it is.

Here is a look at this extraordinary film from a film-practice angle.

### Story

*Alumbramiento* has a simple plot yet a complex structure. There are several relationships defined by the story, not provided before the story. Information, when needed, is integral to the development, as in real life. We see what we need to see – and what we manage to understand – at the exact moment the story requires it, all *in medias res*, includes all the characters' lives, which we encounter "in the middle of

the night". This simplifies audience "narrative baggage" to a focus on the now, nothing more. During the nighttime ellipsis at the mother's house, we see a montage: images of a butterfly, a photograph of a woman holding hands with a boy. None of these images added narrative burdens by imposing overly-complicated symbolisms to decode. The family imagery remained elusive, poetic, organic to the moment. It is sound that brings the past to life, the clear sound of a shared song sung in tears, wash away the heavy cough of departure and welcoming the final silence.

### **Personal**

It feels like this film and its catharsis may refer to the director's own experience. Making peace with one's memory, one's demons may be afforded us in fiction more than in real life. The power of short films to engage in topics of deep significance to all of us (i.e. phases of natural life) seems better exploited as a combination of personal experience and dramatization. The personal links are left to the thank you references to real persons in the credits, but the story is not told in first person. An asset.

### **Endings**

"A surprise ending" can be any clever solution pushing standard plot structures aside. *Alumbramiento* has a miniature three-act setup (the call, the wait, the end) and – quite predictably – cannot prevent the old woman from dying. On the contrary, it is a film about facilitating the end of suffering through shared memory of life's accomplishments and efforts. The dead woman's smiling face is an image of eternal happiness and purpose. Rarely have I ever seen on film a sequence so poignant: a woman choosing, accepting to die, honoring the good in the mystery of life.

## **Two of everything**

The director extends the cinematic aesthetic contradiction of light and darkness to all areas of content. The film's apparently static locations and forms function as a delicate visual and aural layer, with particular magic in the use of duality, ambiguity and repetition. The son has been there many times before, the sister suggests the old mother "always pulls through", morphine injections are repeated, childhood memories recur, aesthetic patterns exist.

Repetition is a key to modulation. it establishes what small later variations can highlight. Modal musical scales are a parallel example. The final gestures (the holding hands over the dead body) is itself a repeated gesture healing the first occurrence, when hands would not hold in the pain-car.

Eduardo Chapero-Jackson is in full control of *Alumbramiento*, its cinematic and narrative textures, and its emotional high. *Alumbramiento* can mean in Spanish both "illumination" and "safe delivery", the awaited climax, the arrival of light and peace. Imagine all that, in a film devoid of any visible sunlight.

Gracias, Eduardo.



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