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#### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

*The principal purpose of **p.o.v.** is to provide a framework for collaborative publication for those of us who study and teach film at the Department of Information and Media Science at Aarhus University. We will also invite contributions from colleagues at 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 of **p.o.v.** a variety of approaches to the film or question at hand – approaches which complete rather than compete with one another.*

# p . o . v .

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**Marianne Olsen Ulrichsen**

*Come*

**(Norway, 1995)**



# COME

**Marianne Olsen Ulrichsen**

(Norway, 1995), 4 minutes 30 seconds, 35 mm, color

## **Principal production credits and cast**

Director and screenplay	Marianne Olsen Ulrichsen
Cinematographer	Paul Rene Roestad
Sound	Roy Fenstad
Editing	Håkon Øverås / Pål Gengenbach
Music	Patric Shaw Iversen.
Assistant director	Geir Alvin Jensen
Production manager	Dagfinn Rassmussen
Continuity	Erik Smith Meyer
Producer	Fiksjonsfilm
Financing	Nordnorsk Filmsenter
Old woman	Ruth Gurholt
Young woman	Gry Olsen Ulrichsen
Young man	Thor Iversen
Old man	John Kristian Hansen.

## **Festivals and Prizes**

18th Norwegian Short Film Festival, 1995  
5th International Outdoor Film Festival, Sydney, 1996  
Special Jury Mention - Best Debut Film, Aspen Filmfest, USA, 1996  
Tampere International Short Film Festival, Finland, 1996  
Silver Images Film Festival, Chicago, 1996  
Best Short Film, Cinema delle Donne, Torino, Italy, 1996  
Wellington/New Zealand Film Festival Tour, 1996  
Melbourne International Film Festival, 1996  
Sao Paulo International Short Film Festival, 1996  
Short Film Festival of Drama, 1996  
Cork International Film Festival, Ireland, 1996  
Rencontres internationales de cinéma à Paris, 1996  
Best European Star - Ruth Gurholt, Donne in Corto, Rome, 1996  
German Federal Short Film Festival, 1997  
Nordic Glory, Jyväskylä, Finland, 1997  
Portland International Film Festival, USA, 1997



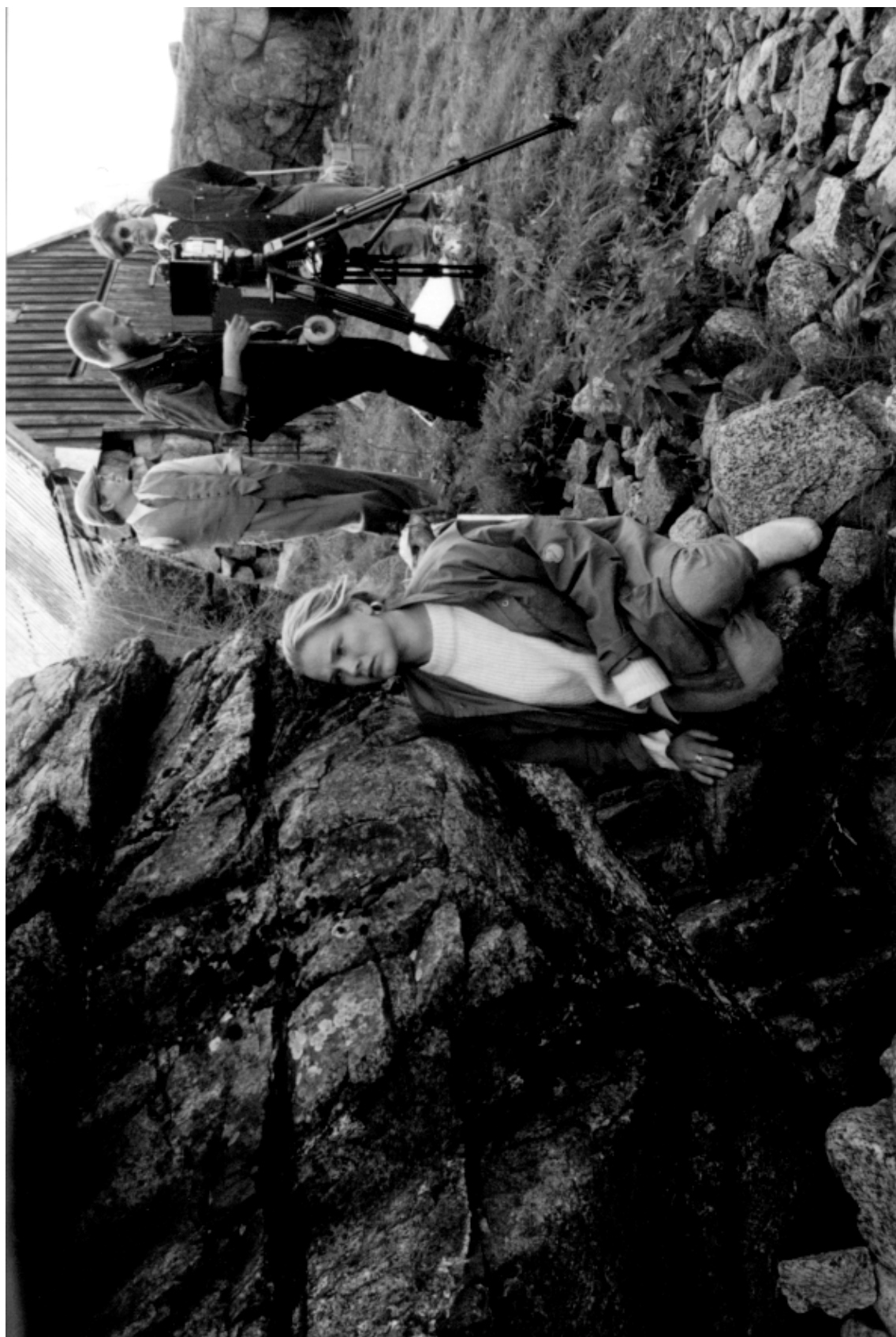


## **Marianne Olsen Ulrichsen**

The writer / director of *Come* was educated at The Nordland Video Workshop in Kabelvåg. Since 1992, she has been working freelance in feature films, short films, commercials and commissioned films. *Come* is her directorial debut. In 1999, she will continue her studies at the National Film and Television School in England. She writes about herself:

*Born on an island in the north of Norway, I ran away to Berlin as soon as I finished school, then broke my leg and got sent home. On returning to my village, I was offered a place in a media course for unemployed, confused kids. I accepted the place (though not very eagerly), and quickly found that I was hooked by filmmaking – not trapped, just happily awake. During the first years after finishing the course, I did whatever jobs I could get on various film productions – catering, runner, camera assistant on a feature film in Riga, first assistant director on shorts and commercials, actor, casting – and in the meantime, working hard to establish enough confidence to direct and tell my own stories...*

*To me the most challenging part of filmmaking is to work with actors. In *Come*, I looked for moments – vivid, truthful moments, but still short moments. Now I want to let go of that kind of control and work more with the actor in a search for the truth of the character. What I want is for the actor to feel responsible for the character and then let the character tell the story.*

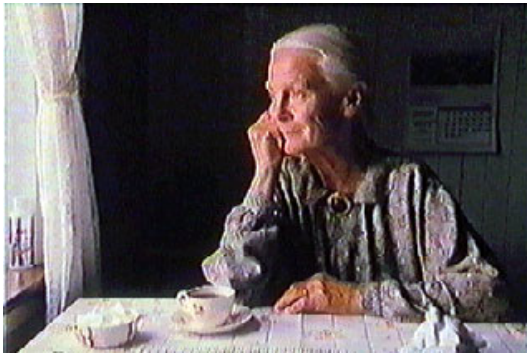


## An outline of Marianne Olsen Ulrichsen's *Come*

Richard Raskin

### 1. The present (shots 1-7)

An elderly woman is alternately seated at her table and standing, in a meditative mood. In her mind's eye, she briefly glimpses the face of a young man, then reaches for a pocket watch lying on her table.



Shot 3



Shot 4

### 2. Flashback (shots 8-46)



Shot 21



Shot 22

Now as a young woman, she is at an outdoor celebration, watching people dancing near a fire, and a couple kissing. Two men, holding a woman by her shoulders and legs, teasingly threaten to drop her into the fire. Our main character now catches sight of three young men standing together, sharing a bottle of brandy. She is holding the pocket watch and makes eye contact with the young man glimpsed earlier. As she smiles at him, he sees the pocket watch she is holding by its chain, dangling from her hand. One of his friends smiles at him, amused by what is now happening. Our young man

now feels for his own watch in his vest pocket, and not finding it there, looks back up at her with an almost accusatory expression in his eyes. She smiles invitingly, then turns and walks away. He follows her, leaving his friends behind. When he is standing next to her, she tucks the watch into his vest pocket, which she then smooths down with her hand. He looks down at her hand as she does this. She then takes his hand, says "Come," and leads him to a nearby cabin where they are alone. As he looks down at her, she looks up into his eyes and touches his hair and face, after which they kiss. What then follows is a montage of touching. She closes her eyes in pleasure, as his hand gently moves over her breast and down her dress, his fingers finally curling upward.



Shot 40



Shot 40 (cont.)

### 3. Return to the present (shots 47-52)

The elderly woman visibly and audibly enjoys the memory we have just glimpsed, then winds the pocket watch and places it in the vest pocket of her husband, now seated next to her. They look into each other's eyes. She squeezes his hand and leans over to whisper "Come" into his ear. He smiles.



Shot 49



Shot 50

## **An interview with Marianne Olsen Ulrichsen on *Come***

Richard Raskin

*NB. Unable to locate a copy of the original screenplay before the interview took place, Marianne Olsen Ulrichsen kindly sent me the following notes about the initial conception of the film:*

- The story started with a wide shot of a little house, standing alone at the base of a huge mountain. Tracking in, passing farming tools, hearing sounds of people working, laughing and talking. Cut to the door which opens and a plate with milk for the cat is being put down on the stairs. Cut to inside the house – to an empty kitchen, the legs of a woman walking, making coffee, more walking, etc.
- I also had the idea of cutting between similar shots of the old woman's legs and the young girl's legs, walking.
- The three young boys had a short conversation after she had shown the watch. (It didn't work, not within the shot itself, and of course not later.)
- The editing process was long. After using my time in the editing studio and using up all my money, I was not pleased with the result. I was depressed but at the same time very certain that the story had a potential that was not yet revealed. I started begging and some nice people lent me an Avid machine which I used evenings and nights, and I also got a new editor who came in and gave me feedback. Together we (well, mostly he) got rid of the wide shots, all my silent non-action moments and my "darlings" had to go as well.
- Looking back I can see that many of my written ideas were too literary, not cinematic, and that they just stopped the story from moving forward. But I will always have doubts about cutting away most of the non-action shots.
- Before shooting, the story was meant to be around 10 minutes. It ended up at 4 minutes 30 seconds.





*Is Come a film you made completely on your own, or was it made at film school?*

No, I did it afterward. Actually, I had the idea for the script during my last year at film school, but it wasn't accepted as a good enough basis for the final work. So I dropped the idea, I didn't fight to do it at that point. I left it, but I couldn't forget it. Maybe a year or two later, I started rewriting it. I wrote and wrote, and then showed it to a friend who was working in the film business, and he said: "I think you should try and apply for money." I hesitated. I had lost some confidence when the head teacher told me: "No, this is not good enough." So then I took some time to think over whether or not I believed in it and should go ahead with it. I couldn't just forget it and put it away, so I sent it off and I got money to do it.

*In your letter, you told me about the original beginning of the story.*

This was my first script. I was afraid that the content of the story was too thin so I elaborated on and extended the original plot. This resulted in a loss of focus of the ideas central to the original story. In the extended script, the woman ended up having three flashbacks.

The first is the one that's in the film. In the second one, she tries to leave the man, and in the third one, she sees her husband involved in an accident while at work and she fears he has been killed. So the story had become much longer and more complex. I realized that having the three flashbacks weakened the story.

I think it comes down to: what is it I really want to tell. I tried to solve too many problems in one little film and that just doesn't work.

*You also wrote that you eliminated the establishing shots – the wide shots of the house and so on – so that the story could get moving more quickly. Then you added: "But I'll always have doubts about cutting away most of*

*the non-action shots." Why is that? What do you see as their function in the film?*

Some yearilm, but what I'm most interested in is not to give ready-made answers. However, I like the complexities of human relationships and the difficulties we have in dealing with our emotions. For example: when you read a book, the most exciting thing is when the message can be found not so much in the actual written words and actions but between the lines and left to the reader to explore as the story evolves.

I intended to achieve a similar experience for the audience by using non-action shots. And in *Come*, maybe what happened was that the characters became too much of an instrument to fulfill the story. And that observation of human complexity is not present on the screen.

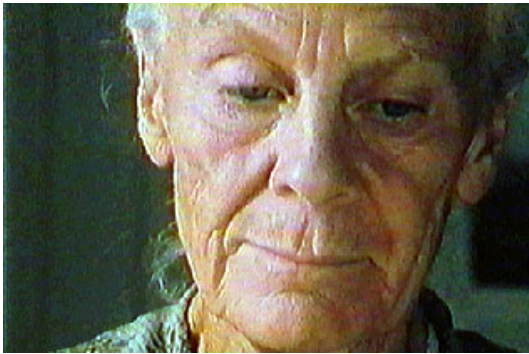
*I think you're too critical of your own film, because the interactions in Come are so subtle. I wouldn't change one frame.*

Thank you... But I think when you have an original idea, and during the production process, you have to kill some of your darlings, there will always be a doubt if it doesn't turn out completely the way you wanted: is it because the idea didn't work, or could I have done something different and gotten out of it a result that was closer to my original intention?

*Just before the main flashback starts, we see the old woman looking down (at the watch). In the first moments of the flashback, the young girl is also looking down, and then looks up. The transition between the two is made very smooth by this matching of the direction of their gaze. Was that deliberate or did it just turn out that way?*

No, it was deliberate. The deliberate thing about it was that I wanted the characters' focus to be the same. She has changed. All people change as they grow older. But some things never change. Therefore some of the personal attributes of the two characters had to be portrayed as similar.





Shot 7



Shot 8



Shot 8 (cont.)

I also had a lot of other matching shots like that, but they didn't work. For example, before you see the woman's face, you see her legs walking slowly. And both her stockings are curled down. And when you see the first shot of the girl, one of *her* stockings is curled down too. I had more details like that which worked well in a literary sense but not in the film.

*The watch plays a very important role in the story – it binds the present to the past, the woman to the man (both in their younger and their older versions). When I show your film to my students, one of the things I point out is your use of an object which is invested with great meaning. Would you agree that in general, it's a good idea to let an object tell part of the story in a short film?*

I think it's very difficult because for many people, for example, a watch is an over-used symbol. So the balance is very difficult and I was a bit afraid of it, afraid that it would carry too many connotations, you know: "time passes," etc. The danger of using

overexposed symbols is that they become a cliché. But when it works, I really like it.

My grandmother had certain objects, and I could see her face and her whole behavior change when she touched them. It's *touching* the object, not just *looking* at it that counts – i.e., the connection between the person and the object.

*Was your grandmother the inspiration for the story?*

Yes.

*Was it in any way biographical?*

No. She's dead now. She used to tell me stories about her love life and she was very *active* when she was young. That was not normal at the time. She said no to a lot of her father's demands. He wanted her to get married. He gave her brothers support for their education but not her. She taught me that if you want something, you have to go and get it. But you have to be smart. She said: why should I be hunted, I want to be the hunter.

*That's one of the things that I like best about your film: your main character knows what she wants and she gets it. She's not a passive character.*

And that's also very important to me, because in a lot of stories, the female characters are often reacting to men's actions, or their problems are because of men, not because of what they choose to do or what they want to get or don't get. I wanted to show a girl who believed in love and was romantic but still *strong*.

*Early in the flashback, the young girl looks out at the other young people playing. And in one of those shots, there's a girl being carried, teased by a bunch of boys, who make believe they're going to drop her into the fire. In a way, that's the exact opposite of the role that your main character plays. There's one girl – the main character – who makes her own story, and*

*there's another one who is trapped inside a man's story. Is that something that you consciously thought about?*

Well, that whole thing with the girl in the coffin, in the box, it was kind of improvised... I was looking for action that showed that my main character was different.



**Shot 13**

You know, if you're a girl who takes too much space, you can be burnt at the stake. I wanted to say: this is what can happen to girls who go their own way.

But the main character goes ahead anyway.

*It's your younger sister who plays the main role, isn't it?*

Yes.

*I think she does such a wonderful job. There are moments when she is looking at the boy, and she does something with her mouth – savoring what was to come. It's wonderful. Is that something that she thought of, or did you tell her to do that?*

No, I didn't tell her. I had never worked with actors before. And I knew that to me, it was important to have the security of knowing the person playing the main character. I knew that when we worked together, I would be able to tell before it happened whether her acting was becoming stiff, because I knew her intimately. We didn't talk much about what she was actually going to do. We found the framework and then it was up to her to develop the character from her own understanding.

*In a way, you trick the viewer into thinking that the old woman is alone, that she has lost her husband. Then you show us that the husband is still there. I assume that this was a deliberate strategy on your part. Did you know, when you first wrote the story, that he would be there at the end?*

Yes. I knew the beginning and the end. That didn't change.

*So it's sort of to give the viewer an unexpected reward, that there's this happy surprise at the end?*

Yes. I also tried to have some more intimate scenes with the old couple. But I realized that saying less leaves more to the imagination.

*In that connection, let me ask a stupid question: when the old woman says "Come" at the end, is she calling her husband to bed?*

Yes, she is.

*Your choice of music was also perfect. Do I remember correctly that there are two kinds of music? There's the music when the people are dancing, and then there's another music when they're alone in the cabin? Can you tell me anything about your choice of the music?*

Actually, the guy we see playing the accordion is an old fisherman at home where I come from. I remember him from the time I was young. He was an excentric guy. He never felt he fitted in with the well-to-do, cultural people, but he used to play on occasions when people gathered together. When he started playing, his whole attitude changed. He was just wonderful. His special integrity and authenticity were expressed through his music.

The other music I heard at a festival in Oslo, and the composer was playing down at the harbor. I walked past and I stopped and thought: this music is so visual, and evokes the elements (air, water, etc.). And I knew it would be the right music for my film.



*Is there anything else you would like to say about Come?*

At this stage, so many years later and wiser, I am somewhat ashamed of the naiveté of the film. The message that love can survive everything, that a long lasting love relationship is achievable, was what I wished to put across and wanted to believe in myself. I realize today that this is a reality for very few, but most of us look for this "lasting love." I fear it has become something of a cliché. I spent a lot of time thinking about what many people would call *clichés*, and the challenge is to explore them and to tell them in a new way to make them real again.

*Is there any advice you would give student filmmakers who are working on their own short films?*

I've learned that it's very important to have people around you – not necessarily people who are very well educated about film – but people you have a good dialogue with and people that you trust... Don't be afraid to express your personal experiences and views of the world through your scripts and stories.

27 May 1998

## *The most beautiful, the most difficult and the most important...*

An analysis of *Come* in the perspective of the short film format

Gitte Hansen

### **What is specific to the short format?**

In 1948 the English magazine *Documentary Film News* arranged a competition for the best definition of the concept *documentary*. At that time the English documentary film movement had existed for around 18 years<sup>1</sup>, and they had not yet found or agreed upon a definitive definition. The first prize went to the following contribution:

Documentary films are the films that are made by the people who make documentary films.<sup>2</sup>

The winning contribution had (in addition to irony) the advantage of covering all ideas and trends originating from their movement. And indeed it is tempting to use the same recipe for a purely external definition of the *short film*, since there seem to be as many short film definitions as there are short films. Bevin Yeatman argues that short film production is part of a continuing process of complex

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<sup>1</sup> The Scot, John Grierson, is the dominant figure within the classic English documentary movement. In 1930, he was authorized to start his own film group within Empire Marketing Board, a British government institution. Grierson's group made films for the government, but also developed their own thoughts and theories on documentary films, which they called "a creative treatment of actuality". The movement inspired filmmakers from all over the world and has a central place in the history and tradition of documentary films today.

<sup>2</sup> *DF-Bulletin*, no. 19, 1949.

cultural relationships, and states that the short film itself is never at rest. He concludes:

Short film is something that we define because of the context we place it in, and there are a myriad of contexts to choose.<sup>3</sup>

In a strictly academic sense, it is not possible to define the short film as being one genre<sup>4</sup>, but rather as a certain film practice, for which different traditions exist throughout its history. In this sense it is arguable that in a number of ways, the short film is a kind of institution as far as financing, production and distribution are concerned.<sup>5</sup>

When the short film is defined in terms of its duration, it is often characterized as being shorter than the feature film, for which time-slots in cinemas are at least 70 minutes. But criteria of duration vary. When, for example, international short film festivals – which constitute one of the more important windows for short films –

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<sup>3</sup> Bevin Yeatman, "What makes a Short Film Good?" in *P.O.V.* no. 5 (March 1998), p. 157.

<sup>4</sup> I define *genre* as an institutional system of categorization that builds on socially, culturally and historically determined codes, conventions or contracts in between the sender and the receiver.

<sup>5</sup> Institutionalized areas for short films are primarily: 1. *Sources for financing* (e.g. funding bodies and film institutes with special guidelines for short films, and commissioning editors for short films etc.). 2. *Production* (production companies, producers and directors working mainly with short films, established means of scriptwriting and production). 3. *Distribution* (film institutes and other public institutions such as libraries buying and distributing short films to schools and private use, international distribution companies for short films, international markets and festivals for short films, cinemas and tv-stations with time-slots and strands for short films, buyers from tv-stations for short films etc). Concerning distribution, The International Short Film Conference has published: *How to Sell Your Short Films*, by Jan Rofekamp.



include criteria of duration in their guidelines<sup>6</sup>, they often set the limit at 40 minutes.

However, aside from the mechanical criterion of duration, particular aesthetic concepts are often discussed when professionals from e.g. the film community and academic forums attempt to define and evaluate the art of the short film. Furthermore, short films are sometimes divided into categories and genres. In the present article, I will focus on one specific short fiction film, without placing it in any category. For this reason, I will not touch on the subject of categorization any further.<sup>7</sup>

Having worked with providing information on and distributing short films for a number of years, I find the (more or less short) duration of films interesting, not in terms of mechanical categorization, e.g. in relation to distribution, but as part of the art and means of expression of the film, and as an important factor in the spectator's perception of a particular film. Interpretating short films (and for that matter, feature films as well) is a process of oscillation between the form and the content.<sup>8</sup> The form, including the duration of the film, does not exist apart from the content but rather corresponds to it precisely and in a number of ways. The

---

<sup>6</sup> E.g. International Short Film Festival of Tampere, max. 30 minutes; International Short Film Festival of Oberhausen, max. 35 minutes; International Short Film Festival of Vila do Conde, max. 40 minutes; and International Short Film Festival of Clermont-Ferrand, max. 40 minutes.

<sup>7</sup> Marek Hendrykowski lists different short film genres in his publication *The Art of the Short Film*, including both fiction and documentaries, p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> David Bordwell concludes the same on narration: "In the fiction film, narration is the process whereby the film's syuzhet and the style interact in the course of cueing and channeling the spectator's construction of the *fabula*." *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Routledge, 1988), p. 53.

timing and the duration of the film are part of its means of expression. From this perspective, Jacques Kermabon describes the acknowledged Dutch short film maker, Johan van der Keuken, in the following way:

Il a réalisé une cinquantaine de films, sans considérer le court métrage comme un apprentissage mais comme la durée adéquate au projet, qu'il voulait conduire.<sup>9</sup>

While recognizing the form of a particular film, we gradually approach its meanings which could not be expressed otherwise than in a certain form. The form becomes the content itself. With this as the basis for his discussion, Marek Hendrykowski takes a step away from a purely external definition, and characterizes the peculiarity of the short film as follows:

The short subject operates with its own aesthetics, the essence of which is the most advanced conciseness and economy of the employed means of expression.<sup>10</sup>

It is in the perspective of Hendrykowski's characterization that I will now focus on the short film *Come*.

### ***The most beautiful, the most difficult and the most important...***

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Kermabon, *Johan van der Keuken. Le monde à portée de main* in BREF, *Le magazine du court métrage*, 39 hiver 1998, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Marek Hendrykowski, *The Art of the Short Film* (Poznan: Ars Nova, 1998), p. 109.

- this anaphora is the synopsis<sup>11</sup> for Marianne Olsen Ulrichsen's 4:30 minute fiction film *Come* (*Kom*, Norway, 1995), and signals a huge theme. Ulrichsen's film, with its judiciously selected effects and precise composition and timing, is basically a story about a life- long (and still strong) love between a man and a woman. The film is an example of how a short fiction in its concise and momentary form lets its spectator experience depth as underlying meaning, while engaging the spectator in the vast, underlying theme of love.

But how does the filmmaker succeed in this? How has she composed this precise work which covers so much ground within a duration of less than five minutes?

Richard Raskin has formulated five parameters<sup>12</sup>: *simplicity/ depth*, *causality/choice*, *character/object*, *consistency/surprise*, *image/ sound*, which I have chosen to use in the following analysis in order to illuminate the construction of the story and thereby the aesthetic qualities of this short fiction film. I find Raskin's parameters useful as tools for this purpose, because they are related especially to short fiction and enable us to take into account the particular conciseness of expression and the amount of time that belongs to the short film format.

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<sup>11</sup> The synopsis is used in several festival- and market catalogues, e.g. Nordisk Panorama 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Raskin, "Five Parameters for Story Design in the Short Fiction Film," in *P.O.V.* no. 5 (March 1998), pp. 163-207.

### **Moments and years**

The action in the film *Come* operates on several temporal levels. First of all two moments: a present action and a flashback action. The present action takes place in the living room of an old couple and almost corresponds to the duration of the film. An old woman (in close-ups) by a window remembers (flashback) herself as young girl when she makes her love leave his friends and follow her, by showing him his pocket watch in her hand. Remote from the others, she says *come* to him, making him go with her to a cabin. The flashback takes place on a summer night in the countryside and covers a moment of her young love from the time when she sees him, makes him follow her and they kiss in a cabin. However, in the film the flash-back lasts only a few minutes and corresponds to the old woman's remembering. Back in the present time, the old woman now winds the same watch while sitting by the window. Then we see her in the sofa with her lover now grown old; she puts the watch in his pocket, their hands caress each other, and she whispers the same word in his ear, *come*.

The construction of the two levels of time is very clear and simple, and allows the spectator time and space to participate in the construction of the story, and in this context a third time of action becomes relevant: namely the time *between* the present time and the flashback. This period of more than half a century is never shown in the film, but is left to the spectator to construct, by showing two moments of her life. The construction gives her character an inner space and the film a temporal depth. Using Raskin's terminology there is a balance between *simplicity* and *depth*.

### **The *real* love**

Raskin states that causality is necessary for the inner logic and coherence of a story. In the film *Come*, the spectator has to believe immediately that the two characters are in love in order to follow the rest of the story; the spectator has to believe that their love and affection originates within the characters themselves, that their love is *real*. It is in the power of the characters to act on this situation, as is underlined by other means of expression. The filmmaker focuses (e.g. by using long close-ups) on the characters' facial expressions, on the intensity in their eyes when they look at each other, and on their hands which caress each other. The timing and expressions give the spectator time and reason to create and understand them as being in love. Furthermore, she has only a few seconds to win his interest, to make him leave his friends and go with her. She shows him that she has his watch. During the following moments in the story, anything can happen and the outcome depends on his *choice*. Will he let her down or leave his friends and follow her? His following her is a redemption and a confirmation of their love. The characters become alive, the story becomes alive and the balance of *causality* and *choice* following Raskin's parameters is perfect.

### **His watch in her hand**

The same watch appears in the flashback and in the present time, namely his watch in her hand, which she gives to him. The watch is first seen on the table in the present time. We see her hand touch it just before she seems to think of the past. The watch is charged with meaning, it makes her remember and think of a special moment. In its appearance in the flashback it is now a symbol of

their relationship. There is a reason that she has his watch! – or rather, there is a good reason to assume that they have been together before. In the flashback she shows him his watch as a sign of what they did when she got it. In its second appearance in the present time she winds the watch with a smile. The watch is now enriched with a storytelling function, since there is a reason she still has his watch. Now the watch not only symbolizes their relationship, but also their lifetime together. The old woman winding the watch shows how there is still time and life in their relationship. As the driving force in the story, she once again gives the watch back to him, now with them sitting in the sofa. There is a dynamic interplay between her as the main *character* and the watch as *object*.

### **Repetitions**

As a young girl, she acts as the driving force in their meeting. She goes to him, she attracts his attention, shows him the watch and speaks the invitation, *come*. When half a century later she still has his watch, winds it and gives it to him, her figure remains consistent. She enjoys remembering their young love, and confirms their still being together by her act of giving him the watch once again. At the same time her action seems like a closing gesture to her temporary flash-back (and to the film as such), and their old hands with wedding rings now caress each other, symbolizing their life-long marriage. However, when she subsequently takes her time to lean towards him and whispers *come* in his ear, she takes the spectator by *surprise*. Her act is a surprise but still loyal to her character. Her saying *come* is a repetition in relation to the young

couple going into the cabin to kiss. The spectator does not expect her to say *come* as an old woman. But in fact she confirms that not only is she the same, but also that their relationship remains unchanged. There is a perfect balance between *consistency* and *surprise*.

### **Pattern of details**

The filmmaker's composition of pictures and sounds is simple and economical. All means of expression have a specific and to some degree a symbolic role to play. There is a careful balance between sounds and pictures in order to concentrate and optimize each means of expression. As part of a pattern, means of expression are repeated in a certain rhythm. But when the design of the pattern becomes clear to us, an overall theme about life-long love makes sense in the film. The effect of the pattern is also related to the very short duration of the film, because it gives a clarity to the design, which is very important.

There are very few camera movements, only simply composed pictures, often close-ups with very few or slow movements within the frame, and each shot is held for a long time.

Verbal communication is kept to a minimum because other means of expression are used, e.g. close ups of their faces, of them kissing, of his hand on her breast, of her winding the watch, of her giving him the watch, sounds of breathing and music, etc. Only one word is spoken (twice) during the 4:30 minutes, namely *come*, which also is the title of the film. A quietness dominates the film, especially in the

present time. This gives the spectator a reason to concentrate on pictures, on her face, which gives an emotional depth.

On the other hand the economical use of sound and the creation of silence at the same time gives her word *come* a very strong effect that makes her a driving force, and also sets his action in motion in the flashback. The imperative *come* initiates action, but as she repeats the word in the present time, the film ends. Here the word creates an open ending and illustrates that their relationship (with all its facets) goes on. The off screen music heard immediately after she says *come* (when the credits are shown) has a symbolic role. It is namely the same music we heard when they kissed in the cabin as young lovers, and therefore now hints to a sexual relationship between the old couple. Visual and auditive means of expression, *image* and *sound*, are working together in balance like single details in a pattern.

### **Summing up**

In order to illuminate the design of the story and the aesthetic qualities of the short film *Come*, I focused first on what characterizes the short format. Not in a social, external or institutional perspective, but rather in relation to the aesthetic concept of the film.

I have assumed that the short film operates with its own aesthetics, the essence of which is conciseness and economy of employed means of expression, and I have considered the unit of time not only as a categorization of films, but as a tool when making or watching them, instinctively or deliberately.



By asking the question as to how *Come* engages its spectator in its underlying and abstract theme of love, I have shown how it allows the spectator time and space to participate in the construction of and reflect upon the story. I have used Raskin's five parameters in order to illuminate the story design and aesthetic qualities. In *Come* I have found that simplicity allows depth by economized means of expression, because the spectator within the short period of narration understands them as concentrated and loaded, e.g. two moments of time and action cover a life-long period of love between two persons.

In the film there is causality (because of coherence and inner logic in the story) but there are also choices taken by individual characters. And there is an interplay between the main character and an object, the watch, charged with meaning. The watch, combined with the woman's actions, creates in turn new actions and meanings.

The spectator has reasons not only to believe in the characters because of their consistency, but is also motivated to have an interest in them and the story by being taken by surprise.

The story design is an important virtue of the short film. In *Come* means of expression have both a specific and to some degree a symbolic role to play, as well as being part of the overall expression. By being simple and clear the film allows the spectator time and space to participate in the construction of and to reflect upon the story, which engages him or her in the vast theme of *the most beautiful, the most difficult and the most important...*

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## Wordless eloquence in *Come*

Richard Raskin

In many films now being made, there is very little cinema: they are mostly what I call "photographs of people talking". When we tell a story in cinema we should resort to dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise.

Alfred Hitchcock

With the exception of two moments when the title word is spoken by the main character, first as a girl and later as an old woman, *Come* is a film which tells its story entirely without the use of dialogue.

Not many short fiction films can tell their stories in this way. Some, in fact, are *about* the verbal interaction of characters and *must* therefore be dialogue-based. This is true, for example, of Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes* (U.S.A., 1986), Ariel Gordon's *Goodbye Mom* (Mexico, 1997) and Nina Mimica's *The War Is Over* (Italy, 1997), each of which is a remarkable achievement in its own unique way. In *Come* we find a different kind of story to be told, and consequently non-verbal storytelling becomes both possible and necessary. The result is a gem of a rare quality.

When the main character – whether as a young woman in the flashback or as an old woman in the present – is alone or at some distance from others, as she is for perhaps half of this four-minute film's duration, dialogue is of course out of the question. During

most of that alone time in the flashback, she positions herself to pursue the man she has chosen, and what she ultimately does both to capture his attention and to lure him to her, is simply to let a pocket watch dangle on its chain from her hand (shot 24).

In this way, an object is used as bait, and the filmmaker deftly lets us know without any words being spoken: 1) that the watch belongs to the young man, who hurriedly checks his own vest pocket, then looks up at the girl with an almost accusatory expression in his eyes (shots 27-28); 2) that he will have to leave his two friends and follow her if he wants to get it back (shot 29); and 3) that what we are witnessing here is in itself a deft move on the young woman's part, as the smile on the friend's face testifies (shot 26).

**Shot 24****Shot 25****Shot 26****Shot 27**



Shot 28



Shot 29

Having separated the man she has chosen from his friends, and finally standing right beside him, she smiles (shot 31) and tucks the watch in his vest pocket, which she then smooths down with her hand in a gesture that amounts to momentarily caressing his chest (shot 32). His looking down at her hand at this moment (shot 33) shows that he understands the full meaning of her gesture, and he willingly follows her when she takes him by the hand and tells him “Come” (shot 34).



Shot 29 (cont.)



Shot 30





Shot 31



Shot 31 (cont.)



Shot 32



Shot 32 (cont.)



Shot 33



Shot 34

Only one word has until this point been spoken, and yet a great deal has been told by means of eye-contact and smiles, the beginnings of touching, and at the center of it all, the use of a meaningful object as a focus of attention.

Having now led her young man into a cabin where they can no longer be seen by anyone else (shot 35), the young woman continues to take the initiative, first by looking up into his eyes (shot 38) and by touching his hair and face while her own mouth visibly savors her conquest and the first kiss that will quickly ensue (shots 39-40). We are then treated to an exquisite montage of touching and of the satisfaction it gives her (shots 41-46).



**Shot 34 (cont.)**



**Shot 35**



**Shot 36**



**Shot 37**



**Shot 38**



**Shot 39**





Shot 40



Shot 40 (cont.)



Shot 41



Shot 42



Shot 43



Shot 44



Shot 44 (cont.)



Shot 45





Shot 46



Shot 46 (cont.)

Returned now to the present, and to the old woman who is remembering these events, we see her pick up the watch she had reached for (shot 6) before the flashback began, and tuck it into her lover's pocket, repeating in this way – perhaps as a kind of in-joke they share in re-enacting the early history of their relationship – the gesture that had first united them (shots 48-49). She then makes eye-contact and smiles, then once again takes his hand in hers (shot 51) and completes the original ritual by saying to him “Come”.



Shot 47



Shot 48



Shot 49



Shot 50



Shot 51



Shot 52

Much of the wordless eloquence in this film is based on such silent gestures as the making of eye-contact, smiling, and touching. And equally important in this context is making an object – the pocket watch – a focus of the characters' and of our own attention. As such, it serves a number of storytelling functions: 1) as bait, used to lure the young man away from his friends; 2) as a link between the present and the past, connecting the old couple to the couple they were when they both were young, particularly in the act of tucking the watch in the vest pocket (shots 32 and 49); and 3) as a symbol both for the passing of time and for the heart of its owner.

In *Come*, we see a love relationship which withstands the test of time, surviving as it does from the moment the two young lovers first become a couple in the bloom of their youth, to the present in

which their appetite for one another persists into old age. To whatever degree the watch is an embodiment of time, it gives an extra resonance to the film's portrayal of the love relationship as time-transcending. And at the end of the film, when we see to our delight that the couple is still alive and well and that their tenderness and attraction to one another are undiminished, the watch can be seen as a symbolic expression of the fact that time has been on their side, like an old friend – an ally rather than an adversary.

The watch is also defined for us as belonging to the man, as being a part of him. Given both the location of its "home" vest pocket, and its role in the relationship, the watch can be seen as symbolizing the heart of the man, his "ticker", also in that the woman in the story has won his heart and cherished it during all the intervening years.

In all these ways, letting an object take on and carry out storytelling functions is an important aspect of the wordless eloquence of *Come*.

Finally, in making almost all of the storytelling non-verbal, Marianne Ulrichsen is able to give to the one word spoken in the film, "Come," the full weight of its meaning, both in luring the man to the woman, and in inviting him on what would turn out to be a life-long journey.



Shot 11



Shot 13

Again it is the woman who speaks the one word in the film, who sets the couple's agenda. Unlike the woman we see carried by two men who teasingly threaten to drop her into the fire (shot 13), and who in that sense is part of a story controlled by men, the main character in *Come* is a woman who shapes and manages her own story, who knows exactly what she wants and how to get it, and whose single word and silent gestures make things happen.

## ***Come* and the pictorial tradition: the meaning of the hands**

**Søren Kolstrup**

Nor do not saw the air too much with  
your hands, thus; but use all gently..  
*Hamlet, III, 2*



Figure 1: Detail from an anonymous  
16<sup>th</sup> Century French painting

### **Introduction: The Ericsson campaign and *Come***

At the end of the year 1998, Ericsson made a sales campaign for mobile telephones. The newspaper ads showed the photo of an elderly couple sitting across from one another at a table in a restaurant (or is it a kitchen?). He puts his hands on the table; she puts her hands on his. Directly on the photo, there are two texts: "Kærlighedens ord dør aldrig" ("Words of love never die.") and "Make yourself heard" (in English). Under the photo there are 14 lines of text, in which the company expounds its ideas about communication, love and age!





Figure 2: Detail from the Ericsson campaign

*Come* uses similar pictures. *Come* has a moral, which could also be expressed by the sentence in the ad.

At first sight the similarities between the two are embarrassing!

### **The language of the hands, a short cut to the meaning?**

The face and the hands are the two most important general paradigms by which (figurative) pictures generate meaning. The paradigm of the different facial expressions probably provides a weaker code than the different forms of the hand, because the language of the hand is based on a set of distinctive features which can be quite clearly followed throughout the history of (European) art.

The hand is an index. The hand shows the traces of time and of work. The texture of a hand can tell the experience of a lifetime, even better than the face can do, whereas the face tells us a story of decay.

The hand can tell us the story of an action. It is a vector, a means of action, and it gives us access to symbolic processes, to the thoughts of the protagonists. As there is no space for developing this point, I can only recommend that the reader consult Kress and Leuwen p. 43ff. and p. 108ff.

The language of the hands in the pictures is a very complex system, a conglomerate of several domains. A cognitive researcher like Paul

Messaris would say that we understand the language of the hand in pictures because we draw inferences from our experience of gesture language and other movements of the hand in our everyday life. See Messaris p.14ff. and p.71ff.

The pictorial language incorporates at least three domains from "the outside world": firstly the hand of our everyday work, the hand at work and the hand at rest, secondly the gesture language of the hands in everyday life and in more ritual settings (from conversation to prayers) and finally the conventions of the theatre, of ballet, etc. The boundaries between the three domains are by no means clear-cut and some conventions may change quite rapidly such as those in the gestures of the rock singers!

The pictorial language has more or less integrated and formalized all these (changing) conventions, at least to some extent. Thus we can establish a scale from "little convention" (realistic or natural photos or paintings of the hand-at-work) to the totally conventionalized emblematic expressions (the praying hand), which Fausing and Larsen call iconographic codes (Fausing and Larsen p.67ff.), and, in between, we have all the more or less conventionalized expressions, as in *Come*.

Look at the Figures 3 and 4. Women and men do not put their hand under their cheek in the same way when they resting or thinking! At least they did not in the paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Women separate the index finger (and possibly also the middle finger) from the rest of the fingers, whereas men keep the fingers together, possibly bending them. It is (or was it?) far from elegant for a woman to keep the stretched fingers together under her cheek, or even worse, bent them, as men do.



Figure 3: Detail from a portrait by Ingres.



Figure 4: Detail from a photo from about 1890,

These two examples may help us see the factors or the distinctive features in the way the hand generates meaning:

- the degree of aperture of the hand and the degree of tension;
- the position of the fingers in relation to each other; (Which fingers are close to which?)
- whether the hand appears "alone" or working together with the other; (Do the hands touch each other and in which way?)
- the way, in which the hands are positioned in relation to the body. (Are they close to the body or distant?)

Obviously there are many combinations and some exclusions: some positions exclude each other like grammatical features in verbal language. All this may seem strange, even ridiculous, but it works, and like verbal language it mainly works at the subconscious level. We can find illustrations of this throughout the history of European



art from its very beginning (10<sup>th</sup> Century): the early medieval ritual gestures preceding facial expressions, the expressiveness of baroque body language, the sentimental bourgeois paintings of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century (Greuze), the realistic painters, among whom especially Repin was a master in painting hands.

What makes this art and not mere communication is probably the fact that here, as well as anywhere else, the tiny changes or biasing of our expectations revive the expression. Folded hands are a convention for prayer, for meditation (depending on the context). The folded hands as convention demand a symmetric construction.



Figure 5: Detail from a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer.



Figure 6: Detail from a modern photo.

Look at Figures 5 and 6. The asymmetric construction opens up for other, deviant interpretations, here probably sorrow and despair. In Figure 7, Mary Magdalene does not keep her fingers folded and she holds up her hands. This particular combination is a sign of revolt, of protest.



Figure 7: Detail from the Isenheim Altar by Grünewald.

The hand can create an incredible variety of meanings that are based on the indexical features of the hand, on the distinctive features of its representation and on the combinations of these features. When it comes to the intensity of the meaning, however, facial expressiveness is probably the stronger paradigm.

### ***Come*, simplicity and intensity of a minimalist art**

Within 4 or 5 minutes the film is to represent the essence of a whole life's experience, contained in the overall and classical structure of a Now-Then-Now. This can only be realized if the creator uses a concentrated method of expression, a kind of metonymy, a synecdoche, where a part, an element, stands for the totality.

Language has disappeared from *Come* with the exception of the two imperatives, both collecting and accumulating all the "information" presented by the picture story.

The film must necessarily tell the story by means of pictures; no words could lead to the concentrated sense of the imperative

"Come." The pictures should not be ambiguous. They should be clear, but not unequivocal. This necessity for minimalist simplicity implies that the camera cannot draw attention to itself as a storyteller by using impressive movements. Of course there are some isolated camera movements: a zoom-in shot, a pan and a tilt, but in fact, most of the shots are rather static, or show a very simple action, which is often completed within the shot.

The film concentrates on the faces (their expression, the gaze of the eyes and, linked to this, the p.o.v. camera and the subjective camera). The meaning, and to some degree, the actions are created between the shots, in the montage.

The hand is the decisive factor. The movements of the hand form the actions, or better still, form the synecdoches for the complexity of the story and the hand (possibly better than the facial expressions) shows a long life's experience through its different textures.

### **The evolution of the film**

**Shot 3:** The old woman looks vaguely at something, outside the window or is it inside herself? Her closed hand is under her cheek. The stretched finger of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century would not tell a serious story; it would be a ridiculous attempt at (false) feminine elegance. We are far from the conventional representation of a sexualized hand!

**Shot 6:** The old hand with its traces of work and rheumatism, the shot accumulates the signs of time

**Shot 10:** The hands of desire, but seen at a distance: the hands have no texture and thus present a secondary story, the mirror for what is told in the following shots .

**Shot 11:** We should now be able to identify the hand as the hand from shots 3 and 6. It is a young hand. It does not have the texture of age, but it has the texture of work. It is rather dirty! It is a hand

which has already become acquainted with work. It has no false elegance.

**Shots 14 – 46:** The seduction is told by the use of the gaze (the persons' thoughts, intentions, feelings), whereas the actions are mostly told by the hands shown in close-ups (synecdoches).

In shots 16, 17 and 24, her hands are active, holding the watch and showing it. His hands are helpless, seeking the watch in shot 27, and in shot 30 he closes his hand in a powerless way. Her hands become more active. They put the watch back in his pocket (shot 32) and she takes his hand (shot 34). In 39 and 40 her hands begin the final seduction: in 41 and 43 their hands clutch each other and thus the contract is made. They are engaged. His hands can take over in shots 44 - 46.

**Last shots:** We return to Now: shot 48 corresponds to 16, shot 49 to 32, shot 51 to 41 and 43. Of course her second "come" is the important thing, but the imperative would make no sense at all, if the hands had not built up the meaning, if the correspondences had not established the time, and finally confirmed the old contract.

### **Conclusion**

The balance is delicate. We should receive just enough information necessary for reconstructing the story of a life (look at shot 51), but just sufficient information to avoid redundancy in the sense of superfluous information. That would lead to sentimentality, and sentimentality is the great challenge for the fabula of *Come*.

The Ericsson campaign may be considered as a counter illustration. She grasps both his hands. The visual information is ambiguous: does she ask for help, or does she want to dominate him, or what is the situation? The text does not help us. The advertisement says, "Words of love never die", but the sense of these words is killed by "Make yourself heard" and from the 14 lines below the photo, the message is all about a product. The photo becomes sentimental and untrustworthy, which is a shame, because it's a nice photo.

*Come* escapes the Scylla of sentimentality (overloading with information and feeling) and the Charybdis of a simplicity, which does not tell anything or is too unambiguous. This is achieved by the use of synecdochic pictures, and maybe by a tiny dose of empathetic irony. The blend of age-old picture schemes with an impossible fabula (everlasting love) is a masterpiece of refreshing novelty.



Shot 3



Shot 6



Shot 11



Shot 16



Shot 27



Shot 30



Shot 32A



Shot 32B



Shot 34



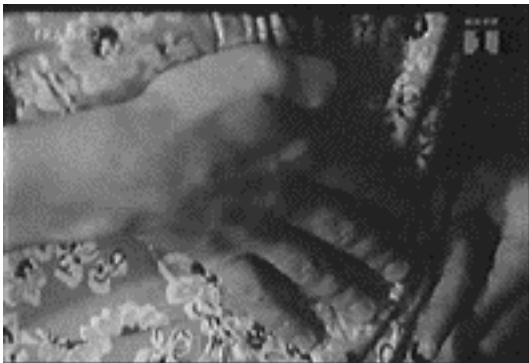
Shot 39



Shot 41



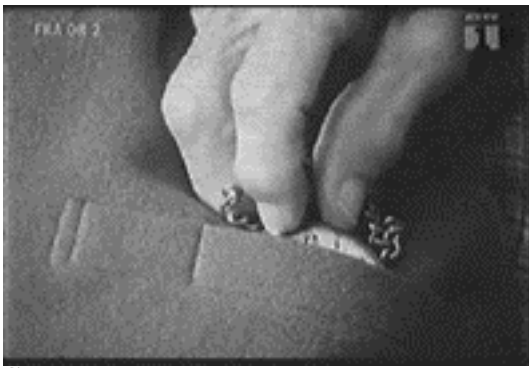
Shot 43



Shot 44



Shot 48



**Shot 49**



**Shot 51**

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## **Collapsing time<sup>1</sup>**

Edvin Kau

### **Difference or identity in time?**

In a movie you can cut back and forth between past, present, and future. Because the film material is independent of the chronology of everyday time, it is possible, e.g. in flashbacks/flashforwards, to place earlier or later events in the narrative string. In most instances this is done in ordinary narrative films to make clear or suggest some logical relation between events at different points of the developing narrative. This means that the flashback structure depends on and in itself affirms the *difference* between present, past, and future events.

Why is it that I feel something else going on, when I experience Ulrichsen's *Kom* ? My guess is, that it has to do, not with the story itself (its elements and their order), but, put simply, the way it is told. What I'll try to explain is the feeling that *Kom* makes correspondances between different times; that, in fact, this film makes time collapse. To make this plausible, I shall begin by outlining its narrative structure.

### **From the window to a kiss or two?**

On a general level, the narrative has three parts: I) we see an old woman (fig. 1) who is thinking of herself and her husband, and the way they met and fell in love; or, how she, as a young girl, seduced

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this article have been presented in a paper entitled *Mediated Time* at the conference "Technologies of the Moving Images" at Stockholm University, 6-9 December 1998. This paper has been reworked and enlarged into an article and may be published in a book with proceedings from the conference (by John Libbey).

him one bright evening at an outdoor party near the sea. Her memories are awakened by her husband's old watch. II) This part shows the party and the two young people's attraction to each other. She used the watch to get his attention. III) Back with the old woman: she takes the watch, and going to her husband in another room, she tries the old watch trick again...



Fig. 1

You could go into more details with a resumé of the story. For instance, that the sound of seagulls indicates that she is looking out on the coast (fig. 1), and that this also (besides the watch) reminds her of the love of their youth; and one could give a more elaborate description of how they have had, and still have the same experience of infatuation, mutual attraction, the joy of being with each other etc.

### Watching Time Collapse

But, it is not this narrative string of elements itself, this story about love, eroticism, and a mutual bond through ages which is at the centre of this film, the effectiveness and the real beauty of it. (Although, admittedly, there is one thing in the order of elements which is of absolute importance, namely that one of the two lines of

dialogue with the word "come" must be placed within the closing seconds of the film). The crux of it and its aesthetically precise structure as well as its emotionally engaging magic lies in its pattern and timing of montage. That is, the distribution of time and space elements within its own structure of time-space.

From this perspective, the most interesting characteristics are: 1) the relations *between* the three parts of the film. What kind of correlations are there between part I (old) and part II (young), part III (old) and part II, and between part I and part III? And 2) what are the hints in part I as to our understanding of part II and III? And of the film as a whole?

Before we try to answer the last questions by going into more details on part I, let's have a look at how Ulrichsen creates the correlations through montage. Relatively simple, as it were, but very elegantly done, too. The key examples can serve to give the idea. The editing directly combines the old woman with her husband as a young man; they meet across a cut (fig. 2-3).



Fig. 2-3

She takes an old watch from the table (fig. 4-5), and a cut brings us to her as a young girl at the party (fig. 6-7). As she takes the watch

(fig. 5), the soundtrack already introduces the music from the party, a connection before the fact, so to speak). She is watching young people a little older than herself flirting and kissing. But she is also holding the watch which she must have purloined from him, and following him with a lovestruck gaze. (fig. 8-9).



Fig. 4-9.

As she approaches him, he sees the watch, and is surprised that it has disappeared from the pocket of his waistcoat (fig 10-12). He

follows her, as she walks towards a shack where they can be by themselves. As they stop for a moment, she puts the watch into his pocket (fig. 13) and says: "Come" ("Kom") (fig. 14); they kiss each other, and we see their hands (fig.15-16). Before they make love, a cut brings us to the old woman, and it is clear what memories make her smile (fig. 17). Her old hands take the watch, put it where the young ones put it, she takes her husband's hand, and as she leans towards him, she says: "Come" (fig. 18-21).



Fig. 10-13



Fig. 14-21

This little film is a demonstration of cinematic time as a possible suspension of the conventional concept of time. The editing and the possibilities in the moving images, of making direct connections across what we ordinarily consider even huge gaps in time, show that different times and ages are embedded in each other. Even if it seems so at first glance, *Kom* is not an ordinary flashback structure. Of course, the couple is doing things, both as young and as old people, but on the other hand - in the interpretation and the stylistic choices of the film - they are doing precisely the *same* things, *all the time*. Events, things, minds, and persons are in different places and times at the same moment. This is accomplished just by showing, repeating, combining elements within the moving image. Time disappears and distance is overcome.

Past (1), present(2), and future(3) are not just presented in this chronological way:

$$\underline{1} + \underline{2} + \underline{3}.$$

Rather, it is a matter of overlapping, like this:

$$\begin{array}{c} \underline{1} \\ \underline{2} \\ \underline{2} \\ \underline{3} \end{array}, \text{ or: } \begin{array}{c} \underline{1} \\ \underline{2} \\ \underline{3} \end{array}, \text{ or } \underline{1} \text{ even:}$$

that is, with the possibility of complete simultaneity, perhaps more than that: different "pieces" of time as if enclosed in Chinese boxes.

Cinema can literally show people or things to be in different times and places at the same moment. Unfolding in time and space in the real world the moving image can suspend space and time. Spatiality

and duration are prerequisites, but only as points of departure. The moving image is able to "steal", and redefine or reproduce in another shape, what we might call screen time and screen space, which, when projected as moving *pictures*, can make time stand still (lose intervals; we are here, at this spot!) and space stop (lose distance; we are in this now, at this moment!).

This kind of "meeting place" for screen time and real time defines some conditions: we have to be *there*, in real time, to experience reel time. We do not "disappear" into cinematic time or fiction time (as much speculation on different types of so-called identification suggests). We are literally *in front of* the moving image. The moving image is producing meaning in and of time-space. And as spectators we experience this meaning as structures in time and space. The meaning of the moving image is very much a sensual thing. We have to be there physically (and I think we are consciously; more so, than often suggested) to hear and see what is going on in the pictures.

So, by using and repeating the watch, the hands, the faces, and the gestures - and by bringing them, and the lovers' minds, together in a very precise montage - Marianne Ulrichsen succeeds in suspending time. In a way the two people are the incarnation of collapsing time. But the time structure of the film is even more intricate than already analysed. Before "meeting" her husband as a young man across a cut (fig. 2-3), as I mentioned above, something has happened in relation to the first shots of her, sitting by the table and





Fig. 22-28. Frames representing every shot of part I, in the right order. The old woman is looking out the window - and at the watch, something we only learn when she picks it up in fig. 27. Before this is shown, fig. 25 shows her on her way from table to husband, and we see him as she is reminded of him, fig. 26. These two shots take us forward as well as backwards in time, even before we have left part I to see the next two parts of the film.

gazing out the window. (See fig. 22-28 above, and the description of them). She has actually left the table (fig. 25) and gone to the room where her husband is (this is at least a plausible way of seeing these shots, and the difference between them).

When she sees her (old) husband, we capture her memory - the young fellow (fig. 26). And after the shot of him, we are even further back than the shot immediately before that of him, namely with her sitting by the table, looking at the watch and reaching for it (fig. 27-28). The shot of the young boy belongs to part II, but is interpolated with the material of part I. Thus we have two intricate collapses of time, even before part II with the party: he is shown "too early", and the woman has already got up from the table to go to her husband (which otherwise is shown in part III). But when we return to her, we go to her first moments with the watch, before she rises from the table (fig. 27-28).

Furthermore, when part III returns from the party of the past to the old folks, we start with a shot of the old woman (fig. 29-30, same shot. See also fig. 29-35 below and the description of them), a cut to when she actually picks up the watch, *and* a direct cut to her hands putting the watch in his pocket. She leans towards him and repeats their little word: "Come".



Fig. 29-35. Frames representing every shot of part III, in the right order. The old woman's response to the memory of their first erotic experience is immediately connected to the watch, and the montage very swiftly completes the chain: watch, watch in pocket, eye contact, smiles, hands, "come"...

So, part III skips her walk from the table to him altogether. Just as part I went a little "too far" (the shot of the young boy in fig. 26) and returned to the table/window- shots, part III goes a little "too far" backwards, maybe in order to connect the very first shots of the beginning with the ending. So much the better. This example of the mechanics and aesthetics of film art couldn't care less about the logic of everyday concepts of time. It shows the time mechanisms which I have outlined at work.

The "timeless" use of cinematic time in *Kom* is directly related to memory. This playing with time and space is very much part of the enjoyable experience of viewing this film. Sitting in the time and space of the real world, we see time collapsing. This is where a certain way of using an art form's media specific characteristics becomes poetry.

## Identity, inference and recollection in *Come*

Paisley Livingston

Samuel Coleridge once noted that very short works of art ease the cognitive burden on poet and reader alike. Limiting the number of lines in a poem, he contends, allows the work 'to acquire, as it were, a Totality' which allows the reader's mind to 'rest satisfied'. Anyone who has strained to grasp the overall pattern of some massive novel, film, or musical work can readily appreciate Coleridge's point. And yet insofar as a film or poem is a temporal work of art, the parts of which are manifested only consecutively, its Totality – be it an ever so small one – is never directly presented to us all at once, and its acquisition, as well as the satisfaction such an acquisition can provide, requires a feat of memory. A film, like a life, may have a brilliant, simple order and a deep and powerful unity, but the presentation and realization of such a totality is something that takes place in time, something that requires an experience of temporal unfolding – something that requires the work of a mind capable of thinking through and recollecting the temporal relations between the parts of the whole. So that while Marianne Olsen Ulrichsen's *Come* (1995) is a perfectly unified gem, a satisfying totality that presents itself to us in just four and a half minutes, we must nonetheless live through its unfolding to discover the coherence of its parts. One of this film's central themes is precisely this kind of process, namely, the constitution of personal identity and togetherness, in and through time and memory. What

follows is just one story that may be told about an elusive process that no doubt takes very different forms for different viewers.

About twelve seconds into *Come*, the shots of the pensive face of the old woman (played by Ruth Gurholt) with which the film began are followed by a shot of a young woman (portrayed by Gry Olsen Ulrichsen). We have first seen the old woman sitting serenely, then we see a young woman standing outside in a rocky coastal scene. We see the young woman approach a group of young men wearing clothes, the fashion of which indicates that these events have occurred at some time in the past (clothes similar, in fact, to those worn by the man depicted in the old photograph that hangs on the wall behind the old woman). The spectator may infer, somewhat automatically, that this abrupt change of scene (from interior to exterior, and from some present moment to a time in the past) is meant to show us the contents of the old woman's reflections. We have seen her gaze thoughtfully at the pocket watch she is holding, musing perhaps, over time, her times and experiences. The cut is, then, fairly obviously a flashback.

Yet another question is raised here, and though many spectators may again answer it for themselves quickly and somewhat automatically, the implicit reasoning this time is less obvious. Who is this young woman about whom the old woman is thinking in her moment of recollection? Is it herself, or some other figure from her past? One may think that it is perfectly natural to assume that the old woman must be reflecting on herself, and thus that the young woman we see must be herself in a youthful manifestation, yet a

little more reflection in fact reveals that the conclusion is not so straightforward and compelling. After all, at this point in the film we do not know what is going to happen. We may conjecture that as the story unfolds, the young woman initially shown to us in the flashback will encounter another young woman, and it could be the latter who will turn out to be the figure doing the recollecting. We may remember as well that flashbacks do not always function in the same way, for even if they begin with some one person's recollections, they can be presented as more or less 'objective' retellings of story events, as opposed to events recounted from someone's first person perspective. Thus it need not be the case that what we see and hear is something that the person doing the recollecting experienced directly or in the first person. Sometimes a flashback is organized around someone's narrative, and includes story events that this person did not experience and only later surmised. And of course there are radically deceptive flashbacks as well. So if we are right to imagine that what we see is what the woman remembers about herself, then this is a conclusion that must be supported by additional evidence, and that evidence is simply not available to the viewer early on in a first experience of the film.

Consider as well some additional grounds for uncertainty at this early point in a first experience of the film. Even without waiting to see the credits, we may reckon that two different actresses have played the old and young woman, and that if they are supposed to portray the youthful and aged appearances of the same person, they do so only by means of a well-known cinematic convention, and not by virtue of some kind of immediately perceptible physical



identity that would compel us to identify the two as manifestations or stages of the same person. If we are somewhat experienced film viewers, we know that this convention is a tricky one. Sometimes it is stretched quite far, especially when the practical problems of casting cannot really be solved. How can one find an adolescent who can convincingly portray a younger manifestation of a character who, when grown up, will be acted by Robert Redford? One cannot, and the failure to do so stretches the casting convention to the breaking point in *A River Runs Through It*. Experiences of movies like this teach spectators that to go along with the story, one must sometimes simply accept that one's make believe about the story need not be guided directly by what the images literally depict. In the case of *Come*, there is no obvious problem with the casting: the old woman we see depicted could have looked like this young woman when she was young. Yet experienced spectators know that this does not suffice to settle the matter. They know that film makers sometimes play with this convention, and can use it to play tricks on us. Part of the genius of *Le retour de Martin Guerre* is its exploitation of our uncertainty in this regard: we see very well that Gérard Depardieu does not look like the young man who left the village, but suspense is maintained, partly because we know that by convention personal identity in fiction can be maintained across radical differences in casting. And uncertainty can be further motivated by our knowledge that one performer can embody two or more characters, as when one actress plays twins or look-alikes, so that even the most perfect physical resemblance does not automatically carry over to identity of character or person. And personal identity across long stretches

of time is hardly, in life or in fiction, a simple matter of continuity of physical appearances!

My point in evoking these vagaries of the casting convention here is not that viewers should conclude that the old woman and the young girl in *Come* are not the same person in the story. Far from it. Rather, I am suggesting that if we reflect over our possible inferences during the film's first minute, we may realize just how complex these matters are. Uncertainty concerning the use of the casting convention alone gives us grounds for not committing ourselves with any great conviction to those immediate inferences about identity that may in fact occur.

Instead, the evidence falls into place a few minutes later once the images return to the initial time and setting in which the process of recollection began. The lovers' initial caresses, the youthful exchange of the pocket watch, are intercut with similar gestures performed years later. The first couple – the young girl and the old woman – have a counterpart, it seems, in the young man and old man who, so to speak, join them at the end of the film. The woman's early utterance of 'Come' is echoed, years later, yet its repetition carries a warmth, familiarity, and shared awareness that makes of it a very different utterance. And yet we know that in some strange sense – a sense, finally, that none of us truly understands or can explain – this is a repetition of the same utterance, by the same person, who is speaking to the same man she singled out on the beach years earlier, and who sits by her side in the present, in a joyful and almost magical triumph of unity and

identity across time and difference. And so in the very unity that this film encourages us to recreate, through memory and inference, across the brief time of its own unfolding, *Come* exemplifies and recounts the unity of a person's life, a unity created in part through a similar sharing of memory and experience.

**Brad McGann**

*Possum*

(New Zealand, 1997)



## **POSSUM**

**Brad McGann**

**(New Zealand, 1997), 14 minutes, 35 mm**

### **Production credits and cast**

Writer/Director	Brad McGann
Producer	Trevor Haysom
Director of photography	Leon Narbey
Editor	Chris Plummer
Music	Tom Bailey
Production designer	Tracy Grant
Costume design	Kirsty Cameron
Sound design	Chris Burt
Little Man	Martin Taylor
Dad	Stephen Papps
Kid	Eve-Marie Brandish
Missy	Alexia Verdonkschot

### **Festivals and prizes**

Melbourne International Film Festival, Australia  
Telluride Film Festival, USA  
New York International Short Film Festival  
Sao Paulo Short Film Festival, Brazil  
Mill Valley Film Festival, USA  
International Jury Prize for 'Best Short Film,' Gijon Film Festival, Spain  
Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival, France (competition), 1998  
Toronto Film Festival, Canada  
Auckland Film Festival, New Zealand  
Wellington Film Festival, New Zealand  
Five for Five, New Zealand  
Odense Film Festival, Denmark, 1998  
Oberhausen Film Festival, Germany  
Montecatini Terme, Italy  
Bristol Short Film Festival, U.K.  
Antalya International Film Festival, Turkey  
Award for 'Best Craft in Short Form Drama' (cinematography), New Zealand  
Film and Television Awards  
Second prize, Hamburg International Short Film Festival, 1998

### **Filmography**

1989 **Home Away from Here** (writer, director, editor), 30 min.  
1995 **Come As You Are** (co-writer, director), 27 min.  
1996 **It Never Rains** (writer, director)  
1997 **Possum** (writer, director), 14 min.



On Brad McGann (adapted from the press kit for *Possum*)



*Possum* is Brad McGann's fourth film. Originally from Auckland, New Zealand, he moved to Melbourne, Australia in 1989 to attend film school at Swinburne (now VCA) after completing a Bachelor of Commerce degree at the University of Otago. His first film, *A Home Away from Here*, was a 30 minute black and white surrealist drama about a power struggle and the subsequent isolation within the family environment. It was here that he developed an interest in psychological drama, with focus on issues of isolation, identity and the foibles of communication between people in close proximity.

The Australian Film Commission and ABC Television funded his next film, *Come As You Are*, a stylized half hour documentary about alter ego. Again exploring issues of identity and isolation, the documentary journeys into the lives of three people who, for various reasons, have created a second self. It has been screened on national television in Australia and has recently been invited to: the British International Short Film Festival, the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam, the INPUT Broadcasting Conference in France, and the Oberhausen Short Film Festival.

Brad McGann was invited by the ABC TV Drama Department to make a twelve minute film for the series entitled *Short Wave*, show-casing the work of six young directors. It was here he made *It Never Rains*, a realist drama which parallels the urban isolation of two characters from different walks of life. It has screened on national television in Australia and has recently been shown at the Five For Five programme in New Zealand and the St. Kilda Short Film Festival in Melbourne.

*Possum* represents a stylistic shift for Brad McGann. It is a dark fable in which the narrative hovers between real events and the imagination of a young boy. This film is perhaps the most personal and risk-taking of all his work to date. It is a film about the subconscious and the primal relationship between people and their environment. *Possum* reflects his continuing interest in making films about the outsider and the emotional quest for a sense of place and belonging.

**THE ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY**

Final Draft, November 1996

© Brad McGann

**POSSUM**

SCENE 1.EXT                      HIGH COUNTRY FOREST                      DAY                      SCENE 1

We see two pairs of well-worn boots walk through the forest undergrowth. A young boy (LITTLE MAN) walks beside his FATHER, through a thicket of trees on the edge of a high country expanse. The both carry sacks. They stop to clear a large hare from a trap. The father bends and releases the trap with expertise.

LITTLE MAN

(voice over)

Dad says the shock of the trap kills em. Their heart stop  
beating when they know they've been caught.

A glacial wind whips up. The hare is placed in the father's sack. The father signals for Little Man to follow.

Little Man's attention is caught by a scuttling noise above him, a pine cone is knocked from a high branch.

LITTLE MAN

(voice over)

Sometime a possum get caught too.

**TITLE: POSSUM**

SCENE 2

We see a small shack amongst trees. (Estab. shot)

SCENE 2A. INT.                      KITCHEN                      DUSK                      SCENE 2

A small butcher's axe chops meat on a wooden board. We see an unusual yet attractive girl in her early teens (MISSY) chopping up a small skinned creature.

SCENE 3. INT.                      DINNER TABLE                      EARLY EVENING                      SCENE 3

A small pair of hands carefully lay out a knife and fork on an old wooden table. A plate is placed between them.

LITTLE MAN

(voice of)

Once in a while I set a place for Mum... so she won't go  
hungry.

In a sparsely decorated interior akin to a run-down cottage, a family sit at a table. A magpie sits on a perch at one side of the room, looking on.

Casserole is placed in front of each family member. The father sits at one end. On one side sits MISSY; opposite her sits LITTLE MAN. At the other end a plate is set for an invisible guest.

The father stares at the plate, as though recalling something.

Missy runs a finger around the edge of her glass creating a ghostly noise. Little Man looks at the plate of food before the empty chair, then to Missy who meets his eyes.

Missy sips her water and widens her eyes. Little Man smiles. The father gives Little Man a stern look.

DAD  
Eat.

Little Man takes a mouthful and casts his eyes to the kitchen. Beneath a table amongst the shadows squats a young girl, KID, a feral looking thing almost half animal. She eats with her hands.

LITTLE MAN  
(voice of)  
Kid's lucky. She didn't have to eat at the table.  
Kid like to be left alone.

---

SCENE 4. INT.                      KITCHEN                      EARLY EVENING                      SCENE 4

---

Missy scrapes the full plate of food into the stock pot.

In the kitchen LITTLE MAN and MISSY are doing the dishes. An open window reveals a receding high-country landscape at dusk.

MISSY  
Can you get her plate.

Little Man bends down to retrieve what looks like a dog bowl from beneath the kitchen table. Kid is nowhere to be seen. Little Man passes the plate to Missy who gives it a quick token scrub.

MISSY  
She'll need a bath.

Missy slaps the plate on the rack.

---

SCENE 5. INT.                      KITCHEN                      NIGHT                      SCENE 5

---

KID screams as LITTLE MAN struggles to get her dress off and take her near a copper bath.

LITTLE MAN  
(voice of)  
Kid don't like water. She scream an' scratch her nails.  
No-one else go close...

LITTLE MAN places KID into a steaming bath. Kid struggles and kicks trying to break free, making the job virtually impossible. Little Man clucks his tongue trying to calm her.

He passes her the soap. Kid bites it. A small wooden boat floats on the water. Little Man pours water from a jug onto Kid's matted hair. Dirt flows in the water.

LITTLE MAN  
(voice of... con'd)  
...*scaredy cats, scaredy cats*, that what I say to Kid. Kid  
bites. When she bites, she bite hard.

Kid kicks her legs, splashing water over the edge of the bath.

Kid grabs Little Man's hand, causing him to drop the jug. She looks at the gap between his fingers, holding it close to her eye.

\*\*\*For a moment we travel at blinding speed through shrub and bushes. Kid blinks, pushes his hand away. (Sound of spash.)  
Little Man vigorously dries Kid's hair with a towel. He tries to comb her hair. In an old mirror he studies her reflection, puzzled by her other-worldliness. The state of the mirror accentuates her strange demeanour.

LITTLE MAN  
(voice of)  
Kid got power of the howling wind.

SCENE 6. INT.                      BENEATH KITCHEN TABLE                      NIGHT                      SCENE 6

The pages of a large book turn as though blown by a light wind.

KID crawls under the kitchen table, taking refuge in the shadows. The magpie watches her, almost suspiciously.

Beneath the kitchen table KID emerges from the shadows and turns the pages of a large worn book on animal life. The etchings of animals are almost photograph-like.

LITTLE MAN  
(vo)  
Kid know 'bout animals.

As she slowly turns the pages Kid becomes fixated with the pictures, jerks her head slightly. Her hair is still wet and matted from the bath. She perfectly mimics the sound of each animal or bird. The sounds are haunting.

INSERT: Little Man is carefully laying out crayons in a straight row, evenly spaced. He looks up in the direction from where the sounds are coming.

LITTLE MAN  
(vo)  
She teach me the sounds of animals I've never seen.  
A pair of feet walk past the table. MISSY bends and peers into the shadows, watches kid with her book. A CAT sidles up along side her. She takes the cat and holds it out before

her. The cat hisses at the presence under the table. The cat hisses again vehemently, and Kid backs away into the shadows. Missy stands and walks away. Kid's face emerges from the shadows, she imitates the hiss of the cat.

LITTLE MAN

(vo)

Missy says Kid got a devil in her. She tell me to be careful.  
...She says Kid stole mum's breath when she was born.

SCENE 7. INT.                      LIVING AREA                      NIGHT                      SCENE 7

DAD sits at the table fixing a trap. He turns to the kitchen table where the sound of a domestic cat growling can be heard. He stamps his foot. The noise ceases.

LITTLE MAN lies in front of the fire. He draws with crayons.

LITTLE MAN

(voice of)

I like night-time before bed. In the fire, I see faces of the  
spooks that live outside. They come down from the mountain to  
keep warm in the fire.

The fire crackles and glows in the grill. His drawing is slightly devilish, revealing a natural talent. Little Man draws in the eyes then looks in the fire. Glowing embers breathe, drift strangely up into darkness. A small ember explodes, momentarily startling the cat. Otherwise everything seems peaceful.

MISSY enters in a night-gown and brushes her hair in front of the fire.  
Missy glances at the picture.

MISSY

Here, let me fix the eyes.

Missy takes a crayon and scribbles over the eyes giggling. Little Man slaps her hand. A play fight ensues and she holds Little Man down, pretends to dribble on him. They both giggle, Little Man tries to avoid the spit.

Dad tests the trap. It goes off. He looks at his children, as he stands.

DAD

Into bed.

SCENE 8. INT.                      HALLWAY                      NIGHT                      SCENE 8

Using a lantern, LITTLE MAN opens a hatch door in the floor boards. It squeaks on its rusty hinges. KID scuttles past him and through the hatch. Little Man looks into the darkness where Kid has disappeared. The distant sound of wind comes up from under the house. He lifts the lid to the hatch and closes it.

We are left in darkness for a split second.

SCENE 9. INT. LITTLE MAN & MISSY'S BEDROOM NIGHT SCENE 9

LITTLE MAN puts the picture on the wall behind the bed. He tries with a finger nail to remove some of Missy's crayon.

LITTLE MAN  
(whisper)  
Goodnight mum.

He blows out the candle, lies in bed. Rain runs against the windowpane casting a reflection on his face. He looks at the gap between his fingers, makes a shadow on the wall. The low sound of footsteps can be heard. The door partially opens and the FATHER looks in on his children. A shaft of light shines through onto the Little Man.

MISSY suddenly wakes, turns over and sees her father watching her. There is an exchange of looks. The door is pulled gently shut.

LITTLE MAN  
(voice of)  
At night stray dogs come up under our house to lick the  
leaking pipes.

Little man relights the candle, places it on the floor. He settles back down in bed. His face warms in the light.

LITTLE MAN  
(vo cont'd - whisper)  
I lie awake listening thinking of names to name the  
one... which could be mine.

SCENE 9A. UNDER HOUSE NIGHT SCENE 9A.

Sinking below the floorboards, we see a rusty leaking pipe. A dark shape moves in the background (a DOG), whining softly to itself. We reveal Kid. She looks toward the light shining through the floorboards.  
FADE TO BLACK.

SCENE 10. EXT BACK-YARD OF SHACK MORNING SCENE 10.

LITTLE MAN is helping the FATHER roll skins into bundles. He runs his hand through fur. The FATHER picks up the pile Little Man is playing with and places it on top of the rest.

FATHER  
Has she had breakfast?

SCENE 11. INT. KITCHEN/BENEATH KITCHEN TABLE MORN SCENE 11.

We see a porridge bowl being turned over.  
LITTLE MAN bends down to clean up spilt porridge under Kid's table.

Missy pushes open the kitchen window, idly braids her hair. She notices the mess Kid's making.

MISSY  
(tuts)

I've told you not to give her porridge.

LITTLE MAN  
She can't help it.

Little Man wipes up porridge from Kid's book and opens it to the page of a tiger in an exquisite jungle surround. He runs his finger across the image almost caressing it. He runs his finger along the word accompanying the picture.

LITTLE MAN  
T-e-ga... Tega

He looks into the shadows. We hear the low rumbling growl of a tiger. We see Kid's face in the shadows. The noise suddenly transforms into a screech of a chimpanzee, and the book is snatched from his hands.

LITTLE MAN  
Sometimes Kid didn't wanna teach me stuff.

The FATHER enters and scruffs his son's head, he is wearing a change of clothes. He puts on his hat, nods goodbye to his children.

FATHER  
Be good.

Little Man goes to the door and watches the father walk off into the distance. He is carrying a bag.

SCENE 12. INT. PARENTS BEDROOM LATE AFTERNOON SCENE 12.

MISSY and LITTLE MAN stand in the doorway to their parents bedroom.

Missy enters, Little Man follows. He looks about the room tentatively as Missy moves over to a dusty dresser. She picks up a half burnt cigarette, lights it and places it back in the ashtray. Missy locates a hidden key under a candle holder, unlocks a drawer and takes out an old jewelry box.

Little Man approaches and watches his sister open the box. Inside are bits and pieces belonging to the mother including an old photo of her. She takes out a small scent-cushion, gives it to Little Man who takes a sniff. Missy passes the photo to Little Man, notices the way he is looking at it. Missy picks up a string of pearls and makes a crown out of it, places it on Little Man's head. She giggles at what she's created.

An old gramophone plays.



Little Man and Missy bounce on the bed with great verve, as they drink their father's whisky. With a high bounce Missy lands flat on her back. Little Man jumps about on top sipping from the small bottle. He gags and coughs.

Missy laughs as she pulls him down onto the bed, taking the bottle off him. She bends forward and kisses him on the cheek, the string of pearls hang over Little Man. She taps his nose.

MISSY  
(smiling)  
Can't handle ya liquor, eh.

They look at each other.

MISSY  
You're *my* little man.

LITTLE MAN  
(voice of)  
When Dad goes off to sell skins, Missy likes playin' games.

SCENE 13. INT. KITCHEN LATE AFTERNOON SCENE 13.

MISSY fishes under the table with the pearls. She gives small tugs.

MISSY  
Here kitty, kid, kid.

The CAT tries to steal the pearls and Missy pushes it to one side. On a second attempt a hand tries to snatch the pearls. Missy pulls them away. She does this again but this time Kid manages to whip them away.

MISSY  
Give em back.

Missy hears a growl, reaches deep into the shadows, locates a foot and pulls. KID begins growling and hissing like a wild cat as Missy grabs her legs and drags her from under the table into the kitchen area.

MISSY  
Give them to me.

In a desperate bid to break free, Kid breaks the string of pearls. They scatter everywhere. KID turns, snaps at Missy, biting her leg.

MISSY  
It bloody bit me.

Missy charges after Kid.

SCENE 14. INT. LIVING AREA SCENE 14.

CONTINUATION OF ABOVE

LITTLE MAN watches as KID and MISSY charge about the place. Kid giggles, jumping about like a chimp. An ornament is knocked from a small table. Missy grabs a blanket and corners Kid.

Missy tigs the blanket like a bull-master. Kid runs her sharp finger-nails along the wall, goes to move. Missy lunges forward, captures her with the blanket.

MISSY  
You are not my sister.

Missy tries to suffocate Kid. The magpie shifts nervously on its perch. Little Man suddenly reacts and tries to drag his older sister off Kid.

LITTLE MAN  
Leave'er alone!!

The three of them struggle against each other.  
Kid breaks free, scuttles away. Missy glances at the blood trickling down her leg.

MISSY  
She bit me!

SCENE 15. INT. FATHER'S BEDROOM NIGHT SCENE 15.

LITTLE MAN pushes the door slightly ajar and watches his FATHER tend the wound with care. He dabs the wound with iodine. MISSY sees Little Man watching through the small gap.

SCENE 15A. INT. INT. LIVING AREA SCENE 15A.

The FATHER tosses the book of animals on a fire in the fire place.

LITTLE MAN  
(voice over)  
Missy told Dad what happened... that night the devil came into the house.

SCENE 16. INT UNDER HOUSE NIGHT SCENE 16.

A hand takes hold of a lantern.  
The FATHER disappears through the hatch under the house. He holds a sack in one hand and a lantern in the other. He passes spider webs, the leaking pipe. He turns to a noise.

Two marsupial eyes and pointed ears can be made out in the shadows. We hear a low growl. Dad puts the lantern down and bends forward with the sack.

SCENE 17. INT UNDER HOUSE NIGHT SCENE 17.

DAD empties the sack onto a small bed. KID lands on the bed, curls up. A light above her swings back and forth. Kid tries to get under the bed, which Dad prevents. He places her back on the bed. LITTLE MAN and MISSY watch from their beds.

DAD

From now on you'll sleep in a bed.

He unbuckles his belt and pulls it through the rungs of his pants. Dad fastens Kid to the bedpost, by her hands. Kid squeals, bangs her head against the post. Dad turns out the light.

SCENE 17A. INT BEDROOM MORNING SCENE 17A.

LITTLE MAN approaches KID. Shadows dance on the wall. Kid rocks violently, unaware of him, or avoiding eye contact. Little Man brings his head down to Kid's level, trying to make eye contact. Kid keeps rocking her head. Little Man unbuckles the belt.

Kid stops rocking and looks Little Man in the eyes and for a brief moment it's as though an invisible language passes between them.

Kid looks beyond Little Man, and points at something with a smile. He turns to follow her stare. In the tree outside the window, a POSSUM scratches it's way up a tree, lit by a clear moon.

Kid makes the noise of a possum.

She stands in the cot and twirls in small circles, obviously enjoying her freedom. Her dress spirals around her legs.

SCENE 17B. INT BEDROOM MORNING SCENE 17B.

LITTLE MAN wakes with a start.

Little Man stands by Kid's empty bed. Kid had disappeared. The father's belt lies at the foot of the bed. Little Man looks out the window at the landscape. In the distance, low cloud cuts off the mountain. The scene is misty, mysterious.

SCENE 18. EXT. BACK-DOOR EVENING SCENE 18.

LITTLE MAN clucks his tongue three times, signalling Kid. We hear a distant dog howl. He looks at his FATHER who looks into the night with concern. Little Man places Kid's ratty toy on the doorstep.

LITTLE MAN

(voice of)

Kid didn't come back that day. She went off to be with her friend's for a while.

SCENE 19. EXT HIGH-LAND FOREST DAY SCENE 19.

LITTLE MAN walks along the edge of trees with his FATHER. They both carry sacks. Little Man stops in his tracks. KID lies motionless ahead of him. The father moves forward bends down, his lips part as he takes a breath. We see a child's leg caught in a trap. Dry mud covers the ankle. We see KID's eyes, lifeless and fixed. The father stares at his daughter and we see the realisation in his eyes. He turns to look at Little Man.

SCENE 20. INT. EDGE OF FOREST DAY SCENE 20.

The FATHER spades dirt onto a wooden box.

Through the above motion we see LITTLE MAN and MISSY watching. The father gives the mound a tap.

Missy and the father walk off, leaving Little Man alone.

Little Man bends and looks at the grave before him. He reaches over and pulls the stick out of the soil which marks the grave. As he does this he hears a noise in the forest. With a start he looks above him. We hear a scuttling noise.

Little Man runs with all his might through the trees. In POV we move through tussock and bush. He runs out across expanse of tussock.

DISSOLVE: to two vista shots (passing of time).

LITTLE MAN

(voice of)

Dad said Kid had gone to be with mum. He said it was for the best. That night we had roast for dinner.

SCENE 20B.

MISSY flicks her glass with her finger nail. The sound seems to resonate in the silent room. She looks at little Man. As if trying to console him, she goes to make the noise (from Scene 3) - runs her finger along the top.

Little Man lightly shakes his head.

The family eat in silence.

SCENE 21. INT BEDROOM EARLY EVENING SCENE 21.

LITTLE MAN stares through the window into the dusky landscape. We follow his stare.

SCENE 21A. INT BEDROOM NIGHT SCENE 21A.

DISSOLVE TO:

Little Man kicks off his boots. On his bed he dusts off the cover of a book.

Little Man looks through the burnt book of animals (which he salvaged from the fire). Most of the pages have been damaged. He turns a page to a lithogram of a tiger, another page to an eagle, then turns another page to a possum.

Little Man lies back on his bed and looks at his hand. He puts his arms behind his head and stares at the ceiling. We see his pictures on the wall behind him.

LITTLE MAN

(voice of)

Sometimes I wonder where she is, where she goes...

In his mind's eye, we see the point of view of a creature running at blinding speed through the bushes, dead wood, paddocks of tussock, up a tree outside a run-down cottage. The accompanying score builds.

LITTLE MAN

(voice of)

At night I leave my window open for her... just in case.

Through the window we see the POSSUM in the tree, taking it's place on a branch. It peers through the window at Little Man, the two marsupial eyes glow with reflection.

The music echoes into the distance.

END



## **An interview with Brad McGann on *Possum***

Richard Raskin

*When and how did you first get the idea for making this film?*

It was very spontaneous. I had just finished making two shorts in Australia which had funding from the ABC and AFC and which were basically aimed at a television audience and were screened on TV. And after making them, I decided to return to my home country, which is New Zealand. I decided to go back for about six months, just to spend some time with the family.

And I thought that while I was back there, I might as well see if I could get a film of some sort made. I was thinking of just doing something on Super 8. I rang a producer, and he said that there was a submission date for screenplay proposals in about a week. So I wrote the script very quickly, in about four days.

So I went away and just played some music. I thought: OK, I'm going to write a film, I'll give myself four days to do this task, and I'll put some music on. There was a time when I was working with autistic kids, and for some reason – I think the combination of the music and the fact that I was working with free-flowing thoughts, that I was allowing anything to come to me – this one particular child whom I had spent some time with just popped up. She used to hide under tables when I was working with her, and that image of a child under a table was really the germ of the idea.

*There is such an authentic quality to the film that I thought you must have had contact with an autistic child.*

I remembered working with this child and there was something very animalistic about her. I'm using that term in the proverbial sense. One of the things that really amazed me was that some of the other residents that I was working with were actually quite scared of her. As a care attendant, you have to spend time with them, and you have to bathe these people and clothe them and assist them with eating. I actually became quite fascinated by her



ability to imitate animal noises. When she was in the bath, she would bite me and she would fight and scratch and scream. And I put this tape on, which had ambient whale noises and birds tweeting. And lo and behold she just started imitating these noises. It wasn't just an imitation, it was more a replication of the noises. And I realized that when I played these tapes, she became very focused and it was almost a moment of genius that came out of her.

That's what fascinated me and I decided to base the story in a time when people didn't know anything about autism and give it a slight fable quality, because I guess up until the 1930s – perhaps even later – people had a very limited understanding of autism, and used to surmise that possibly these children were possessed by spirits or were feral children that retreated to the wilderness at night. That was based on a bit of research. So I decided to take a more abstract concept of autism, explore it as opposed to the more clinical, institutional image.

*One of the things that fascinated me in your film is that there are points on Little Man's voice over where he whispers. I've never heard that before on a voice over. Do you remember why you thought of doing that?*

I was interested in getting close to the central character, which is Little Man. I decided that within the framework of the family, my first impulse was to go with Kid's story. But it's very hard to tell a story from the point of view of an autistic child or somebody who's communicating very much in a different language. So I thought the most sympathetic character would probably be the most interesting: a person who is caught between the world of the father and the world of the child. That gave me a point of reference from which I could explore all the characters, using very broad brushstrokes. The detail in the film is very much with Little Man while the other characters were painted with very broad brushstrokes, so that they jump out at you almost. I thought well if I've only got fifteen minutes, then Little Man's internal world was the place that interested me most when I was writing the film.

The whispering quality really just came – I didn't anticipate that it was going to be a whisper when I wrote the script – but when I got to the editing suite I realized that it really was an internal space that was being reflected in the outside world. And I decided that the contrast between a vast landscape and a quiet whisper set up a really nice opposition. But I think it was really to pull the audience in, now that I actually think about it. What I was trying to do was to bring a focus to the film which was the internal voice of a child who was seeking to understand the world around him.

*Is it correct to describe Possum as monochrome?*

It's sepia. It's actually not monochrome because to create sepia, I think they use three hues. But the final effect to the eye is very much a monochrome effect.

*What about your decision to do the film in sepia?*

Well, when you do a submission for any funding body, one thing that they prompt you to think about is how you are going to approach the style of the film. It's actually a very hard thing for a lot of filmmakers to do, because production designers and directors of photography and various people come in later. And to write the film and project it in your mind and know exactly how it's going to look is, I think, very much a myth. But what I did decide early on was that I wanted a very simple device that allowed me to give the film a timeless quality. So I gave myself at that stage three options, which were: 1) to shoot in black and white, which I felt just wouldn't quite do it; 2) to shoot in color and then do a 40% color removal – which was my preference, but that was very costly (the lab said that this would blow the budget); and 3) which is what we did: we shot it on black and white, and then did tests processing it on color stock, which is a very inexpensive way of achieving a monochrome result.

It was really a matter of talking with the director of photography and the designer and making that decision on a collective level. It made the designer's job very easy and it made my job very easy,

because the removal of color can sometimes highlight the emotional scape and sometimes it's just one less thing to concern yourself about. And over and above that, it was really trying to achieve a timeless quality. I didn't want it to be fixed and say the 1890s, which was the period that I gave the designer. I wanted more ambiguity about the setting. And that was our collective choice.

*I remember being very struck by the look of the film, right from the first shots. Did you do something special with the exposure or in your choice of film stock?*

Some of the shots were overexposed. I was looking at the print and thinking that the grading has gone a bit wild. But somebody came up to me afterwards and said: You know, I really like that rustic, overexposed feel that the film had. That just happened. The lab actually warned me, because not many people shoot on black and white and process on color stock. One of the consequences of choosing that approach is that you can't control the grading to the same degree. I was actually surprised to see that it was overexposed and at first, I panicked and thought: My God, what's happened here, something's gone wrong. And then afterwards, I actually quite liked it.

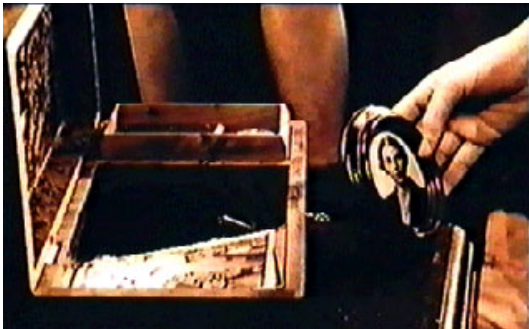
That's exciting sometimes. It's good to have that element of surprise that sometimes works for the film, and people think it's intentional though in actual fact, it's a mistake that occurred. I wasn't expecting so much grain, but I think I like it [*laughter*].

*I suppose that the basic polarity in the film is the father, who's identified with the trapping of animals – there's even a moment where he bangs his fist down on a trap, so you've got that identification – and then you very successfully identify Kid with the world of the animals...*

You're asking about what approach to the wilderness that each character has? That was something I became aware of after I made the film. I realised that one of the keystones in creating these characters was very much about their approach to the wilderness and nature, and perhaps the wild side of human nature. Given that I see that we are part animal. We're human but there's also a very untamed animal side to us which I think that through conditioning

and society and just the way things are structured in life that we learn to tame and we learn to fit in with each other. I use "the animal" in an allegorical sense. It wasn't necessarily referring to possums, or rabbits... It was more "the animal" as the wild, unspoken part.

The father is very much a trapper by profession, but at the same time, he's trapped. And I kind of like that contradiction. He's sort of a pioneering New Zealander in some respect, and they were very much about taming the wilderness and gaining control over the land and keeping the family together. And Kid was very much at the opposite end of this spectrum. She was the untamed spirit. She related more to the animal world than the human world. Missy was somewhat repulsed – both intrigued and also a little disgusted by Kid, and is somebody who likes going through jewelry boxes, who likes refined things. There's a shot of her playing with the pearls. So I guess she's somewhere on the other side of the triangle.



**Shot 84** Missy going through her mother's jewelry box.



**Shot 72** Little Man pets a possum skin, then puts his fingers through the eye-holes and continues petting it.

And then Little Man is right in the middle of the family structure. He can see why his father needs to trap but at the same time he's very much intrigued by Kid – this child who represents something completely different. Possibly the shot where I tried to achieve that was where he was sitting on a tree and he was patting the skin and he puts his fingers through the two eye-holes and sort of makes these two little eyes. And the next shot we cut to is the father tanning the skins. It's strange because I suppose that over and above that, there is a theme of death which comes through that

and the idea of the skin being a dead possum, and yet the boy is still seeing life in that skin. That was something that I noticed in watching the film, I didn't actually intend that. It was kind of foreshadowing the end at some level where his sister is gone but at the same time he has kept open the possibility of her being alive and being out there and free to run and become who she wants to be. And ultimately the possum that visits on the tree. So there was that very mild link between those two shots.

*One of the things that I especially like in your film is the interplay of sound and image. You do an enormous amount of work on the sound track.*

Not personally. What I did was I gave it to a sound designer, Chris Burt. He's one of the better sound designers in New Zealand who's done a lot of work on short films. I'd seen short films which he'd sound designed, like *Kitchen Sink*.

I gave him a brief in which I summed up in about fifty words what I expected from the sound. He put his own slant on it, and I actually didn't hear the final thing until we were mixing. He said: "Look, you can leave it with me." I went through the script and said to him: "These are some of the details that I would like in there if you can do that. But the overall feeling I'll leave to you." And then I came and we did a pre-mix.

One thing of interest in the sound was his interpretation of Kid, because I didn't actually anticipate in the beginning that he was going to use real animal noises. When I first saw it I must admit that I was a little bit reticent. I remember thinking: Maybe that's going a little bit too far. I always envisaged that it was going to be her actual noises. And then I was going to mix in a little bit of wild noise. But he actually used pure animal noises, which was sort of interesting. It gave it a completely different interpretation and took it to a different place.

I remember talking to the producer about it and saying to him: Are we going too far? And he said: No, I actually quite like it. So I decided to be bold and go with it. It's always good in shorts to be bold. If there's any place in which you can actually be bold, it's in a short film. It's better to try it and risk failing than being too safe and too precious.

*There are two specific sounds I wanted to ask about. One is Missy's running her finger around the rim of the glass. Where does that come from?*



Shot 12

The back story, the story you don't see, is a story about the death of the mother. How she died is irrelevant. It's just the fact that she's gone. Missy's character for me was very much a mischievous adolescent. Somebody who was discovering her sexuality and who to some extent was ruling the family. She had stepped into the mother's shoes. And when the father is mourning, when he sets a plate out for the mother, Missy's running her finger around the glass is a kind of mischievous playing with the idea that there's a ghost.

*So when Little Man shakes his head no, it's because he doesn't want her to be making fun of the father's symbolic gesture?*

Yeah. It isn't a deliberate act against the mother. There's a cruel aspect to children, and they sometimes do things they don't necessarily even approve of themselves.





*I also wanted to ask about the sounds Kid makes when she is bathed.*

Well, I know she screams. And then suddenly she grabs Little Man's hand. And this is one thing that this autistic kid used to do. She'd grab my hand and look through the gaps. Autistic children are always fascinated by gaps...



Shot 32



Shot 34

I think at that point, what I wanted to do was to bring in a new layer of the film, which was really taking it out of the ordinary and placing it more in the extraordinary. I love myth and I love the idea of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary... This was really very much the first turning point of the film: going into Kid's world, which being a short film happens very quickly. You're very quickly led into a different space. I think what I said to the sound designer is that this is where it begins to turn. And how he achieved that was very much up to him. I think he brings in a bit of wind and a bit of music and these more elemental noises begin to come into the film.

*Another thing I like is that the pacing of the film is such that the viewer has a chance to sit back and register things. The viewer isn't always rushing to keep up. There are...*

Reflective moments.

*Yes. And one of them is when the bite on Missy's leg is being treated and she and Little Man exchange glances.*

I call those "reflective moments" – moments where you can register some of the subtext, which comes through in the silences. That's something that a lot of filmmakers try to achieve. When I decided



to make the film, I knew I wanted something that had a lot of space in it. I was thinking not so much of figurative space, but of cinematic space and space in terms of text. I wanted moments where not much was happening, but yet something very small was happening, and it was probably that very small thing that would ultimately affect the overall flavor of the film.

So even though it's a reflective moment, there is a certain amount of details that are being passed out to the viewers. And what they're doing is that they are registering it very much at a gut level as opposed to an intellectual level. I think that's very important in a film: to appeal to an audience at a place where they don't understand it intellectually, and you can achieve that best in those moments where you are saying something to them and they aren't quite sure what they are being told. *I know what I'm saying but they don't necessarily know the ins and outs because you're not telling them everything.*

And I think with that moment you mentioned, I'm really putting out the possibility that even though Missy is the antagonist in the situation, she'll get her own way. She very much is the one who rules the roost and has the sympathies and the affection of their father. So even though she is the one to blame, she is the one who will win out. And that's sort of true to life in a lot of places. Often the people who provoke trouble are the ones who manage to get out of it at the last moment and let other people becomes victims of that.

So it was setting up this unspoken language between the two characters, saying: Yes, I can do this. And yes, Kid is now in serious trouble. Even though I'm to blame, I'm the one with the power in this situation.

And there's also a possibility of creating a sort of ambiguity about her character, as to whether she is really a daughter or... I don't like to use the word incest, but she is in the father's bedroom, and he is washing her leg. So there are certain overtones that suggest

that. Maybe it's not a sexual thing, but there is a tenderness between the two of them. And very much the way that Little Man has a tenderness with Kid, I think Missy has that with the father. But it's very much in the background, and we only see it through a gap in the door. And I kind of like that, because then the viewers are able to draw their own conclusions.



Shot 111



Shot 112



Shot 112 (cont.)



Shot 113

Which comes to the thing that as a director or storyteller, you should only give maybe 70% or 80% of your story. I think that you should leave at least 20% of your story untold. I like that personally. I like to be able to fill in some gaps and not be told everything.

So in those reflective moments, there are very small things happening – but they're open to interpretation. I guess that's the essential thing.

*That moment where Kid is tied up... I mean, here the father again is doing his thing of trapping. Her wrists are tied and even the end of the bed looks*

*like part of a cage with her hands sticking out through the bars. And Little Man frees her. This is clearly an important choice that he makes...*

Yes, I know what you're getting at.

First off, the scene preceding the one you're talking about is for me, the second turning point. It's where the father throws the book on the fire. Some people might say that the death of Kid is the second turning point, but for me, the father throwing the book on the fire is very much the second turning point, because everyone is making decisions at that point. In that scene, we see "animal" written on the book. And the voice over of Little Man is, in a whisper: "Missy told Dad what happened. That night the Devil came into the house." And it was the idea of that parallel between the Devil and the animal in Kid that interested me.

Quite often we see the Christian image of the wilderness: as a place in which evil lurks and the animal within people must be crushed... It's quite a brutal thing that the father actually does. And I needed some image to allow the audience to go into that phase in which there is potential violence and there is cruelty occurring there. But I wanted the audience to at least understand why the father was doing that. And I think in tying up Kid and Little Man letting her go, what we are actually left with in the final scene at the dinner table is: who is to blame here? Is anyone to blame? Is it just something that happened through fate? Is this the way the world exists – where the people inevitably become victims? Little Man let her go. The father tied her to the cot. And yet Missy was the one who told the father in the first place. Even though it's a very simple matrix...

I guess I see the world that way. I do see the world as being potentially cruel. Nature is able to provide gifts for us, but at the same time it's very cruel. There's a contradiction. And I think that exists within people. Quite often they do things that they're not really happy with. And why they do that is actually a mystery to themselves. Why racism exists. Kid could be a street kid, or disabled, or an elderly person. She could be anything. I guess this is

going very much into the subtext of the film but I think there is something that we don't control, that life can be very cruel to people who don't pose any threat, who aren't doing anything wrong and have a right to be here. But we tend to fear things that we don't understand. And yet, I don't know if that is essentially an unconscious or a conscious thing. I like to think that people are able to sympathize with people less fortunate than themselves or people that they don't necessarily understand. To me, the world would be a fantastic place if we did understand... I don't like to use the word misfits, or minorities.



Shot 172

And I think that last scene at the table for me was a really important scene and why I chose to go up high. Because there was a certain amount of loneliness and I guess it wasn't really guilt, it was almost like: My God, what's happened? This child has died. Who is to blame? Are any of us to blame or is this just the way that life works, is this fate? And I think there are circumstances where you can't really blame anyone. And I don't like to see Missy, the father or Little Man as responsible. I see it as being the overall circumstance, as almost an inevitability. This is very bleak, but I actually see that in life around me. I sometimes go past beggars lying in the street, and I think: these are people who possibly need a lot of help, but at the same time people are scared of them and they won't do anything. And to some extent, we can perpetuate things...

Kid to me represents the outsider, essentially. She is the proverbial outsider, and the family I guess, if we're talking very intellectually,

is almost like society. And the relationship between the outsider and society is very central to my work. All the films that I've made seem to focus on the outsider and isolation. And also elements of sympathy between characters who have nothing in common. I'm very interested in exploring that. Yet again, I came up with a different construct to express that.

*My last question is one that you've already answered, at least in part, when you said that you like to tell only about 75% or 80% of your story. Do you have any advice to give to student filmmakers?*

Well, I have a quote that I always put in my diary for some reason, and it's by Robert Bresson. [Brad McGann removes a piece of paper from his diary and reads the quote.] "Make visible what without you might never be seen." I can't impose that idea on anyone else, because some people like to make films that are populist in nature and there's nothing wrong with that. Those films have an audience. But my personal belief, my own philosophy is very much to tell stories which without me might otherwise not be seen. That's just where I come from. And I would always recommend that people try that before resorting to doing...

It really comes back to what you want to say and how you want to say it. Like there are only seven stories, right? There's this old belief that there are only so many stories and it's not really about what story you're telling, it's how you are saying it. And I think the subtext of any story is very much your own subtext. The story doesn't really belong to you; it's the characters' story. But the subtext of the story is very much the filmmaker's story. So I would say: Know your subtext. Know what you are trying to express. And if you're unsure of it, it's really good just to think in terms of your own emotional space. Don't intellectualize it. Just register it at an emotional level. Because there's so much academia surrounding film. And I think it's very important to keep that spark of life within it, where you go with gut instinct. If lecturers, and friends, and script editors, and producers, and camera operators and all these people can have their own interpretation of your work, I think if

you can understand the subtext, that personal space that exists within you as a filmmaker, then you're in a very good state to realize the project. And the actual story and the dialogue and the way it's shot, all that can be altered. But if you know what your story's about, and the internal space of your film, which is never seen it's only sensed, then it'll be great.

Clermont-Ferrand, 25 January 1998

## The uncertainties of mood: Reflections on Brad McGann's *Possum*

Mette Hjort

In an article entitled "Five Parameters for Story Design in the Short Fiction Film," Richard Raskin (1998) argues that "depth" enhanced by "simplicity" is a factor that enables film stories to function optimally. Raskin provides three definitions of depth:

One way in which we experience depth in a short film is in the form of inner space within characters. ... A second way in which depth can be understood is in terms of the depth of emotion the film inspires in us. ... Yet a third way depth can be understood is in terms of underlying meaning, or openness to interpretation (199, 201, 203).

I am primarily interested here in the second definition of depth, which I take to concern the way in which narrative structure and visual style are designed to provoke certain emotions in viewers. Although emotions have emerged recently as key features of cinematic narration and response, little attention has been paid to the idea of emotional depth that Raskin foregrounds. What is more, the task of specifying exactly what emotional depth amounts to proves to be anything but simple. Is emotional depth a matter of the experience of certain kinds of emotions rather than others? Do the relevant emotions have to be experienced at a certain level of intensity to qualify as a form of depth? Or is emotional depth a question of provoking emotions that are rarely experienced and that somehow belong to the kairotic, rather than the more mundane moments of existence? Perhaps emotional depth arises

when cinematic texts help to chart new emotional terrain, thereby guarding against what Susan Feagin (1997, 60) calls “emotional myopia.” Emotional depth in that case would be intimately connected with the expansion of our affective repertoire, one of the functions, ideally, of artworks in Feagin’s view.

That emotion is a constitutive feature of cinematic narration and response is a point that has been developed variously by influential film scholars. In *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, Murray Smith (1995) convincingly shows that the representation, recognition, and experience of emotion are central to the forms of engagement and make-believe that cinematic fictions encourage. Noël Carroll (1997, 191) makes a related point when he claims that “emotions are the cement that keeps audiences connected to the artworks, especially to the narrative fictions, that they consume.” Carroll’s (1997, 191) claim has a polemical thrust, for he goes on to insist that the emotions in question are “generally garden-variety ones--fear, anger, horror, reverence, suspense, pity, admiration, indignation, awe, repugnance, grief, compassion, infatuation, comic amusement, and the like,” that is, the very emotions that are trivialized in psychoanalytic accounts, where pride of place instead is given to “certain generic, ill-defined forces like desire and pleasure.” In his ground-breaking work on emotion and film, Carroll has provided fine-grained accounts of the nature and function of these garden-variety emotions within cinematic fictions. In *The Philosophy of Horror; or Paradoxes of the Heart*, for example, Carroll (1990) explores the relation between emotion and genre, arguing that it is a feature of horror fictions to be structured



by the very categories that are constitutive of the two emotions, disgust and fear, that together comprise horror. In his more recent study, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, Carroll (1996) examines carefully the complex relations between point-of-view editing and emotion. He argues, more specifically, that cinematic narration frequently makes use of the point/object shot “to supply the viewer with the cause or object of the character’s emotion in order to specify that emotion in a fine-grained way” (131). Carroll’s account assumes that agents have certain innate abilities to discern the general categories of emotion that facial displays express. By identifying the object or cause of the emotions expressed by a given cinematic character, the point/object shot in many cases enables viewers to attribute specific emotions, rather than a general cluster of emotions, to the fictional characters in question. The concept of emotion, it would seem, helps to explain a wide range of cinematic phenomena: why agents are inclined to care about fictional characters, generic differentiation, and the logic of specific visual constructions.

Now, what is striking is the fact that influential theorists interested in the constitutive role played by emotion in film have paid no attention to the concept of mood. This lacuna is somewhat surprising, if only because the cognitive psychologists on whom film theorists draw repeatedly insist that the differences between mood and emotion are significant enough to require discussion. The idea that moods are recurrent features of everyday psychologies, but play no role in cinematic fictions seems counter-intuitive. Far more compelling as a starting assumption is the idea that a detailed

exploration of the differences between mood and emotion in the context of film will help to shed further light on the psychology of cinematic spectatorship. In what follows, I would like to begin to explore the significance of mood for film in a brief discussion of a recent short film entitled *Possum* (1997), directed by the New Zealander, Brad McGann.

According to both Raskin and the authors of the press kit promoting *Possum*, Brad McGann is intensely attuned to questions of emotion. Raskin, for example, takes *Possum* to be a prime example of a film capable of generating a deep emotional response in the viewer. And the press kit claims that *Possum* "is a film about the subconscious and the primal relationship between people and their environment." *Possum* is further said to reflect the filmmaker's "continuing interest in making films about the outsider and the *emotional quest* [my emphasis] for a sense of place and belonging." I would like here to suggest a shift in emphasis, for I want to argue that *Possum* is a film designed, not only to generate specific emotions, but, more importantly, to provoke a certain *mood*. In my view, it is this consistent emphasizing of mood that accounts for some of the film's most striking visual and narrative features. What is more, it is the complex interplay between mood and emotion, with a privileging of mood throughout, that ultimately contributes to the sense of affective depth that we associate with this film. In *Possum* crucial information is repeatedly withheld, making it impossible for viewers to identify the specific objects and causes of characters' emotional responses. The result is a deeply distressing mood, and this mood is provoked in a largely cumula-

tive manner that deliberately blocks all forms of cathartic resolution. The sense of depth in this case is quite literally the result of an ever-expanding affective abyss linked to diffuse moods, rather than specific, identifiable emotions. *Possum*, I would suggest, affords precisely the kind of affective experience that corresponds to the idea of depth identified above. For example, the affective experience encouraged by *Possum* is importantly marked by increasing and largely unrelenting intensity.

Before analyzing the role of emotion and mood in McGann's short film, it is necessary briefly to identify the key differences between emotions and moods, as they have been described by cognitive psychologists. The most important difference concerns the question of intentionality and its relation to moods and emotions. According to cognitive conceptions of emotion, the vast majority of emotions have objects and are therefore intentional states or attitudes. William Lyons (1980), for example, claims that emotions typically have both formal and particular objects, the formal objects being general evaluative categories, and the particular objects the specific situations that prompt the mobilization of these categories. Moods, on the other hand, "are often objectless, free-floating" (Jenkins & Oatley, 1996: 125). That is, it is frequently difficult to identify the precise cause, and hence object, of a mood. In this sense, the temporality of moods is quite different from that of emotions, for whereas emotions in many cases can be accurately traced to a particular cause at a precise moment in time, the exact causal and temporal origin of moods tends to be obscure. Another important temporal difference between moods and emotions has been noted

by Oatley and Jenkins, who rightly point out that moods tend to last longer than punctual emotions. Indeed, moods can last “for hours, days, or weeks, sometimes as a low intensity background” (125). Moods, it appears, tend to be “produced in a cumulative fashion over time” (Davidson, 1994: 53), whereas emotions are prompted by punctual evaluations of specific situations. In most cases, punctually experienced emotions subside as soon as agents cease to direct their attention toward the relevant formal and particular objects. Moods, on the other hand, can assume a somewhat autonomous existence and can be more difficult to influence and manipulate than emotions. The very possibility of controlling or manipulating emotions hinges on an agent’s ability correctly to identify the evaluative categories and particular situations that together cause the emotions. Inasmuch as moods lack the intentional dimensions of emotions, they are much more difficult to control. Finally, according to some theorists, such as Ekman and Davidson (1994), emotions and moods serve quite different functions. Davidson claims that whereas the “primary function of emotion is to modulate or bias action,” the “primary function of moods ... is to modulate or bias cognition” (52). Emotions, that is, provide a punctual motivation for action, while moods color our general view of the world. Davidson thus defines the general relation between emotion and mood as follows: “Moods provide the affective background, the emotional color, to all that we do. Emotions can be viewed as phasic perturbations that are superimposed on this background activity” (52).

The narrative strategy in *Possum* is to encourage viewers to focus on notions of threat, while withholding the kind of information that

would make possible a precise identification of the source of imminent danger. In a couple of key sequences *Possum* provokes certain negative emotions, such as pity or fear, by confronting viewers with particular situations that are presented as somehow tragic or dangerous. But these emotions, which have precise, identifiable objects, are used primarily to channel the viewer's thoughts in a certain direction and to instil certain expectations. Most of the sequences in *Possum* promote ambiguity and subtextual complexity, and are designed to block intentional emotions and to contribute instead to a brooding sense of generalized anxiety, that is, a mood.

The evocation of intentional emotions occurs primarily in three scenes: the opening scene in which Little Man (Martin Taylor) comes upon a trapped and dead animal together with Dad (Stephen Papps); the crisis scene in which Missy (Alexia Verdonk-schot) teases, and is bitten by Kid (Eve-Marie Brandish); and the disclosure scene in which Kid is discovered dead, caught in a trap like the wild animals with which she identified. There are a number of important differences between these emotion-provoking scenes and the mood-enhancing scenes. The characters' emotional displays in the former scenes are less ambiguous than in the latter, where facial expressions tend to be puzzling or non-communicative and to resist an interpretive activity involving fine-grained emotional attributions. In the emotion-generating scenes, the emotions expressed by characters are linked to the kinds of objects that typically and conventionally cause the emotions in question. The situation is quite different in the mood-enhancing scenes, for here it is frequently a

matter of aligning an emotional expressivity with situations that, in the absence of further explanation, seem unlikely to cause the emotions expressed by the characters. And what is withheld is precisely the information, or the explanation, that would forge a fit between the expressed emotion and its cause.

Not surprisingly, the opening sequence plays a framing role and thus emphasizes intentional emotions, rather than objectless moods. The viewer witnesses a series of shots of tall trees and a man and young boy walking in a forest. These shots are accompanied by bird song combined with non-naturalistic sound from an unidentifiable source. A subsequent shot reveals a dead rabbit, and as the viewer contemplates the image, the following thought is articulated by a voice that is readily attributable to the young boy: "Dad says the shock of the trap killed him. Their hearts stop beating when they know they've been caught." The shot of the dead animal is followed by a reaction shot of the boy looking mournful. His grief at the situation is underscored by his downcast eyes and deep sigh. The acting and editing here clearly identify the dead animal as the cause of the young boy's sadness. What is more, the fit between the expressed emotion and its identified cause is conventional and unproblematic: the sight of a furry dead animal is the kind of thing that upsets young children. As the father says "come on" and urges the boy to follow him, the child contemplates the trees and internally whispers the following words: "sometime a possum get caught too." That the phrase somehow points to subsequent events



Shot 3



Shot 4

in the narrative is a hypothesis that the viewer may be quick to formulate. The child's expressed emotions, combined with the ominous whisper, serve to construe the punctually represented situation and the larger context within which it figures as one involving death and related emotions. By the end of the opening sequence, the viewer's thoughts have been turned toward death and violence as a result of a fine cinematic use of the language of emotion. Any sadness that the viewer might feel during the opening moments of the film will be prompted by a particular evaluation of the dead animal and the boy's response to it. At the same time, the viewer has reason to expect that the kind of negative emotion experienced at this point will be reanimated by subsequent events. What the precise object of these subsequent emotional episodes will be is, of course, unclear. And the narrative strategy of *Possum* is precisely to leave the viewer guessing as to the nature of the victim and the source of the threat, for in the ensuing scenes, with the exception of the crisis scene, and the scene in which Kid is found dead, the emphasis is placed fully on ambiguity. As the early negative emotions subside they are replaced by dark, distressing moods that are fueled importantly by

an anticipation of violence and a distressing inability to localize its vehicle or agent.

In *Possum*, Brad McGann employs at least three strategies to provoke and continuously foster a dark mood of generalized, objectless anxiety. The strategy of norm flouting is used early on in the film and involves the staging of emotional displays that seem somehow to conflict with, or to be poorly aligned with, the situation that prompts them. I am thinking, for example, of the scene in which Dad, Little Man, and Missy are seated at the table eating dinner. Missy runs her finger around the edge of her glass while looking intensely at Little Man, who observes her with a look of calm concentration. The emphasis is on virtually immobilized figures and subtle expressions. When Missy suddenly sticks out her tongue, Little Man unexpectedly erupts into loud hysterical laughter, which in turn prompts the previously surly, non-communicative father to pound the table with his fist. In the absence of



Shot 12



Shot 15





Shot 16



Shot 17

further information, the sudden outburst of loud, hysterical laughter seems like an inappropriate response to Missy's behavior, just as the father's angry fist fits poorly with the situation, at least as it has been presented to the viewer. What we have here is the foregrounding of a problematic relation between unambiguous expressions of hilarity and anger, on the one hand, and their particular causes or objects, on the other. The viewer's perception of a clash between the emotional displays and their apparent causes has the effect of highlighting the viewer's lack of information about the relevant family and its internal dynamics.

The second strategy involves, not the flouting of normative relations between emotions and their causes, but the staging of essentially *ambiguous* emotional displays. In this case it is a matter of the viewer being unable to identify the relevant emotional displays with any kind of precision. An example of a fundamentally ambiguous emotional display is Little Man's smile in response to the sequence of events that includes Kid being teased by Missy and the father slamming a hammer onto a metal *Possum* trap. On a first viewing, it is impossible to tell whether the smile expresses a sense

of sympathy for Kid, a gleeful delight in having stayed out of the conflict, or a mocking attitude towards the father's outburst.

Dark, objectless moods are further fostered by a third strategy, which involves systematically withholding emotional displays in situations that appear to be highly charged emotionally. This strategy hinges on a highly restrained, *non-communicative* acting style, which is expertly executed by, in particular, Martin Taylor (Little Man) and Stephen Papps (Dad). An example is the scene in which Little Man and Dad exchange looks as the child prepares to sleep.



Shot 69



Shot 70

The viewer's growing sense of foreboding is in no way alleviated at this point, for while the exchange of looks and absence of explicit verbal communication create an atmosphere of emotional intensity, the facial expressions deliberately withhold information about the characters' inner states. As a result the viewer is unable even to begin to chart the emotional landscape in the scene in question.

The three mood-inducing strategies employed in *Possum* have the overall effect of placing the viewer in a situation of profound uncertainty. The viewer is systematically made to understand that he or

she lacks crucial information about the nature of the characters' interactions and the forces that determine their lives. The negative emotions prompted in the viewer during the early moments of the film set the stage for a generalized anxiety that is fueled by various forms of uncertainty. The film is unrelenting in this regard, for it deliberately deprives the viewer of the kind of cathartic moments traditionally associated with tragic narrative. At no point is the viewer able to determine the cause of the crises and tragic events that plague the family. Instead, the viewer is left to choose between a number of possible causes, including supernatural forces and sexual transgression. That is, the narrative strategy adopted makes it impossible for the viewer retroactively to identify the underlying cause of the anxiety experienced in the course of the film. The viewer is thus denied the possibility of transforming a dark, objectless mood into a clearly defined emotional state with a precise starting point and conclusion. And this privileging of mood over emotion clearly identifies Brad McGann as a quintessentially modern practitioner of tragic fiction.

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## ***Possum*, film noir, and the past/future of New Zealand**

**Jerry White**

Like so much of the Commonwealth, New Zealand is undergoing a great deal of transformation as the world moves into an era where tradition is ever-present but not always meaningful. Its cinema of recent years, small wonder, is also in a state of flux, and is marked by an attempt to find new ways to deal with ongoing cultural problems and traumas. Brad McGann's *Possum* is an especially interesting example of this kind of wrestling, on both formal, thematic and ideological level. The film is explicitly engaged with the myth of the frontier so central to colonialist settler societies such as New Zealand's, although the way that McGann mixes classical themes of romanticism with a harsh, alienated vision shows just how awkward this mythology has become. This ambiguity is reinforced visually, as *Possum's* look is defined by a split between a few landscape shots and a preponderance of claustrophobic, noir-like interiors. Further, McGann draws upon an essentially linear narrative form, although there are many ruptures of this kind of clarity, again reflecting an engagement with convention but also impatience with its limitations. *Possum* is a deeply conflicted film, and illustrates concisely the push and pull between tradition and

newness that defines so much of the Commonwealth in a post-colonial age.<sup>1</sup>

*Possum* is centered around a family living in the New Zealand bush. The father in question traps possums and sells the pelts; his wife seems to have died some years ago. He has three children: a teenage girl named Missy, a young girl named Kid, and a young boy known as Little Man, through whose eyes we see the film. Kid seems seriously mentally disturbed, spends most of her time under the table, and has cultivated an animal-like ferocity. When their father is away selling pelts, Missy gets into a terrible fight with Kid (Kid breaks her mother's strand of pearls and then bites Missy). When he returns he is furious ("the devil entered the house," says Little Man in voice over), and ties Kid to the bed ("you'll sleep in a bed now," he says, trying to bring her wild days to an end). Little Man lets her out, she runs away, and is found the next day, dead in one of her father's traps. This conclusion is an astonishingly brutal image, although it gives the film a kind of formal unity, since one of McGann's opening shots was of a possum in just such a trap. Like his father's ritual of setting a place at the table for his dead wife, Little Man says in voice over that after she died, he always left a window open for Kid, just in case.

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<sup>1</sup> I am well aware of the ambiguities of this term, and certainly believe that there is a serious disparity between the meaning of post-colonialism in a country like New Zealand (or, for that matter, Canada) and countries like India or Ireland. I do not mean to confuse the two conditions, and believe that Canada and New Zealand are living not so much in a "post-colonial" state as an increasingly "post-Commonwealth" state. But that is another article. It is fair to say, however, that throughout the world, the experience of colonialism as it existed in the era of Empire is over, which is why I sometimes draw on the term "post-colonial" to describe this condition. We need a better term.

The way that this narrative engages with the myth of the frontier is a highly complex matter, much more ambiguous than a harsh dismissal of the experience that this short narrative summary might suggest. The film has some shots of the forest which surrounds the family home, and while the life that these images stand for is eventually seen as incredibly unforgiving, McGann is also able to convey a very genuine fondness for the landscape. This duality is set up quite explicitly in the opening images of the film, which follows just such a landscape shot with an image of a possum killed in a leg-trap. Some of the film's other juxtapositions are trickier, however, and McGann makes it fairly clear that he has not resolved any of the various moral crises presented by the frontier experience. The motif of animality, for instance, here embodied by the grunting, perhaps insane Kid, has a certain *Heart Of Darkness*, descent into the primitive sense about it. This is complicated, however, by the awakening that is spurned in Little Man through his interactions with his little sister. "Kid teaches me animals," he says in voice over as the two sit together and look through an old, British-looking nature book. What the frontier experience has produced in this child looks like a movement into madness, but Little Man doesn't see it that way. For him, it promises a kind of redemption of the violence and death that has so far defined his life. What's important, though, is that his life is seen as completely redeemable. It's not that McGann understands life in the New Zealand bush as hopelessly alienating, nor does he see it as dreamily romantic. In the figure of the wild child Kid, McGann is

able to compress a kind of promise and betrayal that hints at a deep confusion about the experience of forging a life in unfamiliar terrain.

An understanding of *Possum* as an anti-pastoral is certainly supported by its noir-ish visual style. The family's small house is shot throughout the film in a dark, somewhat oppressive fashion, with jagged lighting and tight compositions. The interiors give a sense that the characters are trapped in a dark, suffocating space, unable to fully grasp or control their surroundings. Images inside the house account for the majority of the film, and this seems a self-conscious bit of irony on McGann's part: even in the most wide open, seemingly uncontrolled spaces, what dominates is a rigid, crowded interiority. The film's overall mood, despite (or perhaps because of) its pastoral setting, is extremely grim. Visually, it provides very few opportunities (aside from the occasional landscape shot) to revel romantically in the New Zealand bush. It is important to remember, however, that the noir style of heavy shadows and claustrophobic interiors that is so clearly present here typically signifies an anxiety about urban space. In *Possum* these visual conventions are reversed, investing a completely rural space (sometimes seen as a utopic escape in noir) with just such anxiety. In a very concise and useful article on noir and rural space, Gary Morris writes that it is ever-important for noir protagonists "[t]o escape from the city, its effects, to feed their spirit by finding again the pastoral ideal that hovers atavistically in their minds."<sup>2</sup> Seen through this lens, *Possum* might seem an especially dark film given

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Morris, "Noir Country." *Bright Lights Film Journal* #12 (Spring 1994), p.17.



its suppression (by virtue of the narrative centrality but comparative absence in the film's overall visual setup) of the ever-present but unstated escape valve of conventional noir, the countryside.

Perhaps the best way to describe *Possum* is as a distinctly New Zealandian film noir (if "New Zealandian" is not too absurd a linguistic kluge for the time being). Morris writes that "[t]he combination of spiritual longings and dehumanized, poverty-inducing urban environments creates paranoia and self-destruction - i.e., the fallen world of noir."<sup>3</sup> A crucial difference between the North American and Oceanic worlds, however, is that in New Zealand, it is not the urban world that is "poverty inducing," but the rural one. Comprehensive urbanization is a much more recent process in New Zealand than in the United States, and remote areas remain invested with associations of very real underdevelopment and poverty that is nowhere near as potent as in the United States. With this in mind, the film's erasure of rural serenity seems entirely consistent with a noir world view. Indeed, the film arguably has an ever-present but unstated escape valve of urban space, where there is much more intense social convention (you can't tie kids to their bed, and, moreover, you don't generally need to because they have no reason to act like an animal: urbanity is, after all, a signifier of civilization). A characterizing feature of noir is that characters are trapped and hopelessly long to be somewhere else. McGann obviously understands this and adjusts the specifics of the narrative form to suit the cultural situation that's important

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<sup>3</sup> Morris, p.16.

to him. This mixture of convention and revision is, of course, very similar to the way that he represents the experience of the frontier.

This mixture is also evident in the film's narrative form. While *Possum* has an easily identifiable beginning, middle and end, it also features sequences that depart from this kind of linearity, although they do end up augmenting rather than standing apart from that narrative. One of the film's recurring images is of a very fast, grainy, ground level POV shot of running through bushes and weeds - this seems to represent Kid's frenzied longing, and, as a little kid who sees the world through the eyes of an animal, close to the ground, view of the world. This shot is included at the beginning of the film, when Kid struggles as Little Man gives her a bath, and at the end, when he looks at the book they used to read together and says on the voice over that he sometimes wonders where she is. Like the twin rituals of mourning (Dad/setting an extra place, Little Man/leaving a window open) this repeated image gives the film a sense of unity that, while disrupting the narrative flow, re-enforces the overall meaning of that narrative (in this case, that Kid had a rich but unstable interior life). There are plenty of other shots that serve no immediate narrative purpose: a very high angle shot of the dinner table, now missing two people, comes at the end of the film; a shot of Kid underneath what appears to be floorboards, with water dripping on her, in another image that gives no new narrative information but provides a purely visual summary of what had been communicated so far. Despite being a tightly constructed short film (it conveys a fairly complex story in a mere 14 minutes) there is a great deal in *Possum* that flies in the face

of Hollywood-style narrative efficiency. Like his usage of frontier ideology and film noir visual style, McGann's use of sequential storytelling is conflicted but pragmatic, taking what serves his overall purpose but never afraid to depart from received wisdom.

While there's not space to explore this in full, it is worth mentioning that the Canadian film *Silent Tears* by Shirley Cheechoo (which checks in at about 20 minutes and was made in 1996) covers much of the same thematic and formal ground as McGann. This film portrays the life of a couple – she's Russian, he's Cree (native Canadian) – who, with their two young kids, work on a trap line somewhere in the Canadian north. Like *Possum*, the date that the action takes place is not given and is almost impossible to ascertain, and this sense of timelessness gives both films a sense that they are dealing with broad, ongoing cultural arguments. Also like *Possum*, Cheechoo's film has a discernible beginning, middle and end (it's about what happens when the wife must cut out a tumor from her husband's neck) but this narrative is rendered in a lyrical, occasionally non-narrative sort of way. This comparison is especially important given New Zealand and Canada's common identities both as members of the Commonwealth and as countries whose frontiers have not yet been fully closed. In such places, tradition (both in terms of cinematic aesthetics as well as lifestyle choices that the narratives themselves deal with) is often part of the national life but the frequently unacknowledged specifics of the place necessitate subtle transformations of these traditions.

Sam Neill seemed to be on to just this kind of flexibility in *A Cinema of Unease* (1995), his documentary about New Zealand film.<sup>4</sup> Neill spends a lot of time talking about how hard it was for New Zealanders to understand their experience clearly enough in order to make films about it (much the same thing is constantly said about Canada). While the insecurity and awkwardness with which Neill is pre-occupied is nowhere to be found in the confident and adventurous *Possum*, what is visible in McGann's film is a lack of satisfaction with what post-modernists might call meta-récits (or what normal people might call the instruction manuals of life and art). McGann is clearly invoking conventions of film noir, although he makes some radical changes to them. He's also invoking the anxiety of the frontier myth, although he refuses to buy into either the self-loathing or the romanticism that discourse around that myth often embodies. Instead, his film is a tightly constructed but innovative work, partaking both in intense character study and broader cultural critique. New Zealand's cinema, once mired in unease, is emerging into the more fertile ground of ambiguity. *Possum* provides a fine example of the possibilities of such ambiguity.

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<sup>4</sup> This was directed by Neill, and was part of the British Film Institute's series of films on national cinemas, commissioned to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the movies. Other films in the series include Martin Scorsese's *A Journey Through American Movies*, Nelson Pierre dos Santos' *Cinema of Tears* (on Brazil) and Nagisha Oshima's *100 Years of Japanese Cinema*.

## Why must she die?

Karen Nordentoft

Toward the end of Brad McGann's 15 minute short film *Possum*, which focuses on the lonesome life of a family based in the woods, the younger daughter dies. Although it is by accident that Kid dies, when her leg is caught in a trap set for hares, the film left me with a feeling that her death was strangely inevitable and yet very disturbing. The question as to why she had to die kept distressing me. Rather than attempting to answer to that question, I shall in the following try to uncover some of the causes of this distress within the film – in other words, the devices used to make her death seem so inevitable but also enigmatic.

The storytelling in this film is in some ways experimental and in some ways classical.

The dramatic trajectory of the story is classical in the sense that it is based on a simple structure involving a beginning, a middle and an end. Within this structure we are given the story of the family which makes its living from trapping; the very first scene shows the father setting up traps, the succeeding scenes present the various members of the family, their characters, their actions and interactions, and the final scenes deal with Kid's death. Thus, from a strictly dramatic point of view, we are prepared for the death of the little girl by the opening of the film, which imbues our

experience of the film with a strong sense of causality or necessity. If you place a gun in the beginning of a film, you have to use it later on. In this context the trap is obviously like the gun.

Among the film's experimental devices are two main stylistic characteristics: the monochrome cinematography and the minimal use of dialogue, which gives way to the boy's voice-over, sometimes whispered sometimes not. The cinematography gives to the depicted milieu a poor and sad, maybe even a tragic look, but also a sense of intimacy that – coupled with the whisper – becomes secretive and points to a lurking and unspeakable danger. The whisper in itself suggests that there is something 'more' at stake in the film. It invites us to look for secrets, hidden meanings, for things that are not what they seem to be, for metaphors and symbols.

Considering which lines are spoken in a whisper, the first one comes across as particularly significant as it speaks of the danger caused by the traps for the title animal. On a further semantic level suggested by the whisper, the line contains more than just the specialized knowledge of a trapper. Possum is short for the opossum, a marsupial which is not completely developed at the moment of birth, and which continues its development in the mother's pouch. This born fetus, a premature baby, is obviously an emblem for Kid who was motherless at birth and mentally retarded. She is so to speak retarded, because she was either literally premature or couldn't have a mother's protection as a newborn child. Taking this parallel into account, the whispered

statement is a prediction of the dramatic turning point, the death of “the opossum Kid”. Already within its first two minutes, the film – structurally and semantically - tells us what to expect and in this manner it creates a strong sense of fatalism.

The semantic implications of the metaphorical and emblematic use of the opossum to characterize Kid, are however developed with much greater complexity. Kid has the extraordinary gift of imitating the sounds of all kinds of animals and in particular the species the opossum belongs to. Even the cat believes her screams and howls to be real, but the opossum peeping in through the window at night doesn’t mind. Kid eats under the table and doesn’t like to be washed; the editing suggests a parallel with wild dogs, and she bites. The bottom line is that only her appearance can fit a conventional definition of what is human.

In other words, Kid’s actions are governed purely by instincts and urges. She is a human being representing a part of what is human, an anthropomorphication of pure instinct and urge. The boy’s belief that she is still around after her burial can thus be understood as a hint about Kid’s function in the film more as a symbolic representation than as an actual person or character. This reduction of the character to a representation of a specific part of the human, seems to apply to the other characters as well, a reduction which indeed is already implied in the replacement of names with roles: “The Man”, “Little Man”, Kid and Missy.

The father, "The Man", is the authority. He is against playfulness, he is the one who ties Kid up and he practically only speaks in imperatives. The only time he asks a question ("Did she eat?") it is to give a nod ordering the boy to feed Kid. These opposite qualities in the characters of the Man and Kid point towards an interpretation of them as representatives of the two opposite forces in the Freudian model of a complex personality, the super ego and the id. In such an interpretive framework, Missy – her nickname alluding to the possibility of her being a mistress – takes the position of another person challenging the Man by teasing the instincts.

In this context, Little Man, the boy, should obviously represent the ego in this composite person. And insofar as he is clearly the go-between between the other parties, since he is the only one who interacts with all of the other characters, he fits in perfectly. This Freudian perspective on the character descriptions in the film, implies that what is at stake is an allegory of a fight among the various forces within a person standing before a sexual challenge which ends with the defeat of the instincts.

However inviting this interpretation of the characters may be, the actual drama in the final part of the film seems to negate it. The father ties Kid to her bed, the boy sets her free and she flees only to get caught in the trap. Both actions, the tying up and the untying, lead to the flight of Kid and consequently to her death. But neither the father nor the boy can be seen as intending her death and it doesn't make much sense to extract from the ending a moral such as: "whether you try to tame your instincts or you let



go of them, you will kill them". Unless of course, we take the boy's final voice-over literally as a sign that Kid is still around.

The drama at stake in the scenes leading to Kid's flight seem much more to be a battle between the father and the son. The boy who had until then obeyed his father's orders, disobeys him by loosening the rope. The significance of this disobedience is expressed partly by the tragic consequences, partly by the voice-over having just claimed the entrance of the devil to the house. The boy clearly disagrees with his father and by disobeying him, he liberates himself, taking a step in the process of maturity. Again however, it is hard to understand the necessity of Kid's death in this context.

A glance at the temporal structure of the film might illuminate this seeming rejection of coherent allegorical interpretations. The temporal flow indicated by the classical composition is disrupted and maybe even distorted within the film. Until a certain point towards the end, there is no indication that the scenes follow one another in time. On the contrary, the voice-over states that the scenes take place "sometimes", thus indicating that the action in the scenes are really a sampling of events. Towards the end, however, the voice-over sets the specific time of a scene to be "that night". It is only from this statement of time to the end of the film that the story can be seen as a pattern of actions following one another in time. Strictly speaking, the earlier scenes are really one long interruption or delay of the action. On the other hand, however, the demonstrative pronoun "that" assumes a connection in time

with what has just been shown and told, but the internal structure linking the former scenes does not reveal how far back this connection reaches. The temporal structure is consequently an insoluble puzzle, a labyrinth of the random and the casual.

This leads us to wonder whether we should take the boy's final voice-over for granted, to question the power of the pictures showing us the body of the little girl, and to ask whether she really does die. A question which is all the more relevant to ask since one of the characteristics of the opossum is the trick it plays in the presence of danger, a trick from which even the standard phrase "to play possum" originates. Maybe Kid only "plays possum", that is: pretends to be dead. Maybe she only slumbers until she – like the instincts – will awaken again – an interpretation which is all the more possible since one of the final scenes (the three people at the dining table) is a repetition of one of the first scenes, indicating the possible start of yet another series of actions like those we have witnessed. On the other hand, to play possum can also just mean to pretend an illness: maybe Kid hasn't really been mentally retarded at all.

The only conclusion is that it is impossible to conclude anything. The film invites one to follow semantically certain tracks, only then to set out a trap on these tracks. It suggests metaphorical layers and develops them, but the allegory they indicate slips out of the hands of the eager interpretator and becomes a dead end. I shall however neither conclude that the film resists interpretation, nor that it dissolves as meaningful communication into pure form. In being

inconclusive, the film expresses a solidarity with its main character, the boy. It describes a “state of things” and unfolds a fatal yet incomprehensible tragedy. The boy tries to understand the life he has been given in the remote forest deprived of his mother and, as the film progresses, also of his little sister. He looks for interpretive patterns in an effort to make his circumstances comprehensible, just as we look for them in the film.



**Ariel Gordon**  
***Goodbye Mom***  
**(Mexico, 1997)**



## ***Goodbye Mom***

**Ariel Gordon**

(Mexico, 1997), 8 minutes, 35 mm, color

### **Production credits and cast**

Director and screenplay	Ariel Gordon
Production Company	IMCINE - Dirección de Cortometraje
Associate Producers	Estudios Churubusco Azteca
Production	Javier Bourges
Executive Production	Patricia Rikken
Production Manager	Ricardo del Río
Photography	Santiago Navarrete
Editor	Carlos Salces
Music	Gerardo Tamez
Sound Designer	Nerio Barberis
Customer	Daniel Giménez Cacho
Older woman	Dolores Berinstain
Cashier	Patricia Aguirre
Manager	Paco Montoya

### **Festivals and prizes**

XII Muestra de Cine Mexicano, Guadalajara, 1997  
Cannes Film Festival, 1997  
Inéditos. Cortometrajes. Ciudad de México, 1997  
Film Festival, Freiburg, Switzerland 1997  
Special Mention, World Film Festival, Montreal, 1997  
Jury's Prize, Valladolid Film Festival, 1997  
Hamburg International Film Festival, 1997  
Biarritz Film Festival, 1997  
21st Film Festival of Flanders, 1997  
Festival of New Latin-American Cinema, Havana, 1997  
Göteborg Film Festival, 1998  
20th International Short Film Festival at Clermont-Ferrand, 1998  
Festival of New Audio-Visual Media, Quebec, 1998  
International Film Festival of Cartagena, Colombia, 1998  
28th International Short Film Festival, Tampere, Finland, 1998  
Festival of New Cinema, Brussels, 1998  
Chicago Latin Film Festival, 1998  
Latin Film Festival, Tübingen, 1998  
22nd International Film Festival of Cleveland, 1998  
Festival of Young Cinema, Barcelona, 1998

Ariel Gordon was born in 1977 in Mexico City, where he attended elementary school, continuing his high school education in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There, he worked in several plays and in a TV production workshop at Point Park

College. In 1995, he was admitted to the University Center of Film Studies (CUEC) of the National Autonomous University of Mexico where he studied filmmaking. He has worked on several short and feature film productions. At the CUEC, he did his first short, entitled *Escape*, which tells the story of a man confronting his own death. In 1996, he won the first prize for fiction at the Third National Contest of Short Screenwriting, sponsored by the National Council for the Arts in Mexico, for the screenplay of *Goodbye Mom*.





## **An outline of Ariel Gordon's *Goodbye Mom***

Richard Raskin

### **1. Prelude (shots 1-7)**

A young man, about 25, enters a busy supermarket in the evening and picks out three small items. He then picks out a magazine and gets on line at one of the check-out counters, standing behind a middle-aged woman.



**Shot 4**



**Shot 7**

### **2. The encounter (shots 8-56)**

The woman turns around to look at the young man and seems astonished. The following dialogue ensues as he tries to continue reading his magazine and finally gives up:



**Shot 8**



**Shot 9**

WOMAN. You look like my son... You're really just like him.

MAN. Well, I don't know what to say.

WOMAN. Your features are the same.

MAN. Really?

WOMAN. You have the same eyes... May I touch you?

MAN. No, no... I'm sorry.

WOMAN. He would say that too... He's shy and quiet like you. You won't believe me, but you have the same tone of voice.

MAN. And so what?

WOMAN. He died in a car accident. The other driver was drunk. If he were alive, he would be your age. He would have graduated. And he would probably have a family. And I would be a grandmother. *(She begins to weep.)*

MAN. Please don't cry.



Shot 36



Shot 37

WOMAN. You know, you are his double. God sent you to me. Blessed be the Lord for letting me see my son again. *(She hugs him and he accepts the embrace.)*

MAN. Don't upset yourself, Ma'am. Life goes on. You have to go on.

WOMAN. Can I ask you a favor.

MAN. All right.

WOMAN. I never had the chance to say goodbye to him. His death was so sudden. At least could you call me Mom... and say goodbye when I leave?... I know you think I'm crazy. But I need to get this off my chest.

MAN. But I couldn't.

WOMAN. Please?

MAN (*reluctantly giving in*). All right.

**3. "Goodbye Mom" (shots 57-63)**

The woman's many purchases are checked out by a cashier as the man stands reading his magazine. The last bag of merchandise is loaded into the woman's shopping cart, after which she walks sadly away, then turns toward the man.

WOMAN (*waving*). Goodbye, Son.

MAN (*embarrassed*). Goodbye, Mom.

WOMAN. Goodbye, dear.

MAN. Goodbye, Mom.



Shot 58



Shot 62

She turns and exits from the supermarket.

**4. The man's turn at the register (shots 64-80)**

As the cashier checks out the man's few items, a buzzer goes off.

CASHIER. I don't know what's wrong. It doesn't recognize this article. The manager will be here in a minute.

The manager arrives and types in the price of the item.

MANAGER. There.

CASHIER. Thank you.

MANAGER. You're welcome.

She finishes checking out the man's few items.

CASHIER. That will be 3, 488 pesos.

MAN. What? It can't be.



CASHIER. Yes, it's right.



Shot 74



Shot 75

MAN. But miss, I only have three things!

CASHIER. What about the things your mother took?

As the shock of recognition hits him, he remembers the brooding face of the woman who had conned him, as she turned and left the supermarket.



Shot 78



Shot 79



Shot 79/80 dissolve



Shot 80

## An interview with Ariel Gordon on *Goodbye Mom*

Richard Raskin

*You're only 20 years old now. That means you were even younger when you made Goodbye Mom.*

When I wrote the script, I was just 18 years old. It was actually the first script that I ever wrote... I heard the whole story [which actually happened to someone I knew] while having lunch one day and I liked the story. I wrote the first draft of the script in about two hours. And after that, I spent about two months reworking it, thinking about each moment and trying to make the situation work. After I finished writing the script, I tried to get the film produced but I couldn't raise the money. It was at that time that I got accepted into film school, so I left the script in a drawer.

I wanted to make the film at film school, but I couldn't do it in the first year because the first short has to be between three and five minutes long but with no dialogue. And for the second short, in the second year, you can do a film with dialogue but it has to be ten minutes long, and mine is a five minute short. After I finished the first year of school and my first short, I realized that I wasn't going to be able to make *Goodbye Mom* in school. So I entered the script in a short screenwriting contest in Mexico to see if I would get lucky and something might happen. And by some miracle it won!

Thanks to that, I got the opportunity to direct the short even though the prize didn't necessarily give you the chance to direct. The Mexican Film Institute had the right to do the short and they wanted a big director to do it. But I convinced them to let me do it. I showed them the first short I did. I actually don't like it. I think it's horrible. But they liked it. And based on that, and on the advice of the actor I had in my first short, who is a very well known actor in Mexico, they gave me the chance.

*May I ask what the production costs were?*

About \$40,000 to 50,000. It cost that much because it's done professionally and everyone had a salary. That makes it a whole lot better because you're not asking anyone for favors. You're not begging anyone to work for free. Now this was a dream situation where I had everything that I wanted. That's not the main thing but it makes work easier.

*Now you told me when we were speaking earlier that the real work in filmmaking doesn't take place during the shooting but at the desk. Can you tell me what you mean by that?*

I think you have to plan everything like clockwork, like an architect. I like to think through each scene, where I'm going to put the camera. In *Goodbye Mom* it wasn't that hard. But sometimes I can spend about three or four days or even a week thinking about a single shot – hearing music, drawing possibilities, trying to find the best way to resolve the dramatic moment that you're looking for. For example, in *Goodbye Mom*, the camera is always very static. But there is a moment when there is a small dolly-in when she hugs him and he tries to push her away. In that moment, after the camera has been static so long, that small movement is like a comma or a period. Great directors, like Bergman, do that much better than I can. They have a way of *pointing* things out.

But I guess you have to think not only where the camera goes, but how to direct an actor. I think directing actors is the most difficult thing in the world because you're playing with human emotions. You never know how people are going to react and everyone is different. There is no key formula for every actor.

So you need to try to understand, first of all, the line of thought that runs through the script and to work on that with the actors. I don't care whether they learn their lines by heart. For me, that's not important. What I care about is the emotions that come through and that makes them say the lines. If you don't have that emotion, you can say the line perfectly but it will be false. Often in Mexico,

you don't see a doctor in a movie, you see an actor dressed like a doctor. I think what you have to try to do is to get those emotions. To make the actors *live* the characters, *become* the characters.

To do that, you plan everything. Like for this short, while directing I decided that the actress playing the old woman should play the part as though everything the character said were true; not as though her character was going to betray or rob anyone. She was to play the role as though she actually *met* her son. It took me a long time to convince her. These are things you have to think through carefully.

Also the art direction, what colors you are going to use and why... In *Goodbye Mom*, we tried to use cold colors in the setting, and the only warm colors were on our two characters. It's not very noticeable. But what I wanted to create was the only humanity point between these two in the supermarket, in such an impersonal place. These things you have to think about at your desk. You can't get to the set and be a genius and start improvising. I think you have to work really hard clarifying for yourself what kind of lens you want in any moment... and also to let yourself be touched. When I was working on the shooting script, I started to cry, even though I knew the ending. I think it's important to let yourself be moved all the time and to work with your feelings. Because in the end, that's what it comes down to in filmmaking – feelings. So you can say many intellectual things but if it doesn't cause the emotion, it won't work...

*Can you tell me about the casting of your two major roles? Did you choose the actors yourself?*

Yes, I chose the actors. I like them both very much. Daniel Giménez Cacho I think is such a wonderful actor. I think he did an extremely good job. And my "old lady", Dolores Berinstain, I liked the way she looked. I went by her looks. I feel in love with her eyes, they were so expressive. She had the face I wanted: sweet but hard, old but homey. I don't know, there were so many things in her that I liked a lot. She is also a big name.

I rehearsed with the actors before filming. I don't like to *start* directing on the set. I like to get on the set and tell what's next, take care of some little touch. I don't like to do everything there. I like to work more closely with people. And with Daniel it was really easy. During the shooting, I almost didn't have to say anything to him. He had everything really clear. He did everything I said in the rehearsal. So it was really easy. For my actress, it was the opposite. The second day that I shot all the dialogues, she completely forgot her character as we had worked it out. And that was really scary because she started to talk like herself, not as the character I was looking for. So when that happens at two o'clock in the morning, with an angry crew of fifty people and fifty extras, it was hard for me. I had done my previous short with a crew of eight people and two actors. And for this one, I had trucks and fifty people, three assistant directors, and the first night I had 110 extras! It was too big for me. And my actress started to fight with me, saying that I didn't tell her anything. So if they fight, you fight! I told her that I did, but that if I didn't then I was telling her now. I had to break the whole thing up and start shooting line by line... And every time she changed her acting tone, I had to cut and lie to her, saying: "You were very good but let's take it over and try a different tone." I guess for me, my personal achievement with this short was that she seemed to act in the same tone throughout the film, even though she was fluctuating a lot from one tone to another. So I had to push her to the limit...

I guess it's really nice to work each scene to get what you want. You have to know at the desk that what you need in this scene dramatically is this moment. So when you're on the set, you *have* to look for that moment. Because if you don't look for the moment, it flies away!

*Does that mean that your original intention was to use fewer shots of her and that you needed to break her dialogue down into more shots than you had planned?*

Yes. Even though when I do my shooting, I like to always make a storyboard, showing what's going to be in a close-up, what's going



to be in a medium close-up, what's going to be in a master. What I wanted to do was to film everything in close-up, everything in a medium close, everything in a medium, to have different possibilities to choose from later, but I just couldn't do that with her. With Daniel it was really easy, I just set up the camera and he said everything twice and it was great. But with her, we had to go line by line, because she forgot. It was amazing, because we began shooting on a Monday and on the previous Friday or Saturday, at the last rehearsal, she was so marvelous. I was so sure that everything was all right. I knew that she had problems with her memory but it didn't worry me so much.

*You mentioned earlier that your film got a mixed reception in Mexico.*

I guess I got into jealous territory. Since I won the script contest, people started to hate me because even big, established directors sent scripts to the contest. So many people started saying, "It's stupid *he* won. Maybe he's somebody's cousin." I asked my school if they were interested in making it a co-production, but they refused. They said because I won, the academic process – with script revisions made under the supervision of the teachers – didn't matter, and so on. They made a big fuss about it. The academic advisor at the school, who is now the school's director, told me: "If they offer to let you direct, don't accept it. You're not ready. Look for a great director and you will become his assistant." I wasn't going to do that! (*Laughter.*) But when I got the chance to direct, when the Mexican Film Institute told me they would back me up and give me the money, my school told me that it was an extra-curricular activity, it wasn't a school activity. So if I was going to direct, and I missed classes and had more than my permitted 20% of absences from classes, that I was out. So from the start, it was actually a very difficult situation because I was really scared. I thought that if I didn't do a good short and got kicked out of school, I would end up with nothing. But sometimes you have to take a chance. So I thought: at my school, we shoot in 16mm, we don't have money for anything, I want to try the big thing and see what happens. So I took it and at my school, they failed me in two subjects, because at the time I only had two courses. And you have

to flunk in three to get kicked out. Then I thought to myself that I didn't care about the bureaucracy, that what I cared about was my fellow students, my own generation. And just after I had completed *Goodbye Mom*, I was supposed to turn in a script for the second year short and I just didn't have it. But I had explained a thousand times that in that period, I had to work intensely on *Goodbye Mom* which had to be completed quickly for political reasons. So the academic advisor of the school flunked me in front of everyone. And all my peers just started to laugh at my expense... Because people got angry that I had the chance, that a nineteen-year old with no experience gets a chance with a big budget filming in 35mm. How in earth did I get that while they didn't? So they got really mad about that. And I asked for a one-year leave of absence from the school. Then my short was selected to be in the critics week in Cannes and I guess that was just too much for the school.

*So you didn't get the leave of absence?*

Yes they gave it to me. I'm supposed to come back in March. But they actually *hate* the fact that I went to Cannes. I guess they hate Cannes also for choosing me. (*Laughter.*) They say that it's a stupid dialogue. That it's filmed in a dumb way, in a simple crisscross [reverse angle shots]. That I'm not a genius. But what did they want be do? It's a dialogue! Did they want me to have the camera moving around the people? And they say it's a stupid joke. And they say it's like a hidden camera TV program. Now I like criticism. If anyone asked me: "Who is the harshest critic of the short?" I would say: "I am." I'm the one that can trash it in three seconds and very correctly, because I know all the details and I know all the things I did not achieve well. I have a very clear picture of those things. But you know, when you get criticism that is not founded, that's just pure hatred... Another thing a lot of people tell me in Mexico is that art is about human existence and my short is just a plain joke.

I just wanted to pull the rug out from under people, I just wanted to get an emotion across. I didn't want to do anything else.

Because I think that to create a living fiction is very hard. Every detail has to be thought out so carefully, everything has to be correct so no one will notice. It's really a little bit backwards. You do things so that people won't realize that they are done...

So I guess that's why people in Mexico don't like my short. They say it's not art. Actually my producers didn't like the ending of my short. On the set I had some time and some material left. I had a crane, so I did a crane shot – getting a long shot of my actor. But I said: "Heck, I don't want that. I want to finish on the actor's reaction." I guess my producers were telling me that it was going so great, and at the end, instead of saying something about mankind, I just made it a joke. In a way, I think that was my intention: to say "Life is not as serious as people think. Life is sometimes just a joke." So I guess I had to fight a lot with jealousy and many problems.

And for me, it's very clear that I want to get back to school because they will make my life miserable and they will try to show me that I'm stupid... I'm at a difficult moment of my life now because for me, school ended without my choosing that. But also people in the industry in Mexico say: "He was lucky, but he needs to learn more. It was just by luck that he did it." So right now, I'm not really a student and I'm not really in the industry. I'm something in between. Who knows what?

I'm trying to fight and to become a director because I guess that's the hardest thing. It's easy to get a diploma saying that you finished school. To become a director, to consolidate what you've learned, is really hard.

I think to succeed in life, you can't take the highway, the panoramic highway. If you do that, you won't end up at the top. You can get very close but not quite make it. If you want to really make it, you

have to go cross-country. There's no *road* to success. If you want to get there, just take a back pack and walk...

*When we spoke together at an earlier point, you mentioned "situations up to the limit". What did you mean by that?*

That's something that happens in *Goodbye Mom*, and I think it should happen in every story. I think that for a story to be interesting, you have to take an ordinary situation and push it to the limit, change it, make it strange. So people are anxious to see what will happen. Because if not, reality – normal reality – gets boring.

In *Goodbye Mom*, for example, when the customer enters and walks around in the supermarket, that shows that we are in an ordinary reality, that he is doing something entirely normal. And also to get people involved with that character. The people are going to be projected into that character. So we make the public feel that *he* is the main character, we show that we are in a normal reality. That's the start. But you know, usually the start of a story is a conflict, so that's like a prologue to the story. After we know that this is something normal, the conflict comes and you turn that normal situation into something strange when the woman turns around and after looking for a moment, says: "You look like my son." OK, there you've got a whole different situation. That's not common, in such an impersonal place. So that was the idea.

I guess my producers always questioned me, asking why we didn't start on the check-out line, because it cost a lot and took much more time to show the man walking through the supermarket. But I think it's important to show the public: this is the reality, and now we're going to break it... To make something kind of interesting, you always need to take a situation to the limit. I think that's what makes a story great.

*Are there other things, other ingredients as well, that help to make a good story?*

I guess I'm a very traditional kind of guy. I believe that Aristotle was right. I would say: you need a conflict which evolves and then a resolution. If you don't start with a conflict – if you don't say: *this* is a problem, *this* is what it's about – you don't have a story. You see so many movies and also shorts that you watch and after five or ten minutes you're still trying to figure out *what it's about*. *Where are we going?*

I believe that people like to go to the cinema in order to dream. Cinema makes it possible for people to live a human experience that would be inaccessible to them in reality. But people want to live the whole thing, completely. They don't want to be left hanging in the middle. They want to live the whole experience. That's why you need to give the whole experience, and to do that, you need a strong conflict, to show how it evolves and how it is concluded. People say: "No, that's the most traditional thing." For me, I think it's the natural thing. That doesn't mean you have to keep the unity of time, that you can't have flash forwards, flashbacks. You can have all of that. I think people confuse structure with time. You can play with time in as many ways as you like and that doesn't mean anything about structure. For example, *Usual Suspects* is a film that plays a lot with time but that has a Hollywood structure which is based on Aristotle.

A good story can be about anything. The most important thing is *how* you tell the story and what you're trying to say. You have to be clear about what you have to say. And it's best not to try to say too many things at the same time. I think the movies that try to talk about humankind in many ways are doomed to fail. Just tell me one thing and keep the other things in the background as a backdrop...

I read Eric Bentley's book, *Life of Drama*. When he talks about Shakespeare, he says something beautiful. He says that the success of Shakespeare's stories wasn't only in the situations and in the speed of the action, but he also knew *how to put on the brakes*. When I read that, it was like a revelation to me. And I think that today, with the MTV generation, where everything is like one second then

cut, another second then cut, everything has to be fast action, action, action, I guess now people are running loose without brakes...

Nowadays – I guess I'm talking like a forty-year old instead of a twenty-year old – people sometimes do shots or scenes that look cool, the nice-looking thing, but they don't do the dramatic thing. You have to go for the dramatic things. You're telling a story. It doesn't have to look cool...

One mistake I made in *Goodbye Mom* was making the shot of all the woman's groceries last too long. About 20% or 30% of the people seeing that shot guess what she is up to because they see everything. I should have made it a little bit shorter. We edited the film on Avid, and on the small screen, I didn't think that shot would give away the ending. But when I see it in a movie theater, I can see that it lasts too long. I learned an important lesson with that shot.

One thing I like about the short is that the tone changes throughout the film. It starts in a comical way, with people laughing at the crazy woman. But suddenly it becomes very sad. And then it becomes happy again. The tone doesn't stay the same; it changes. At film school they told me not to do that. But sometimes you have to break the rules. In real life situations, the tone changes, the mood changes too.

Clermont-Ferrand  
28 January 1998

## Directing the logical course of action in real life

Hans Otto Nicolayssen

*Adiós Mamá* is in many ways a traditional short film (with the customary surprise ending) that focuses on a small segment of a seemingly simple everyday incident. But what exactly is it about this movie that draws my attention?

Each year it is my duty (and privilege!) to read through and evaluate hundreds of scripts, drafts and general ideas for short films. And I must confess, had I been given a manuscript like *Adiós Mamá* it probably would have ended up in the “refusal” pile due to its lack of originality. But it's precisely the simple nature of this film that is its greatest quality. Even though I haven't read the script, it seems like the director has fully realized the potential of this little story. The film is directed with unpretentious ease and daring simplicity, because this is really not an easy film to direct; it contains no apparent visual challenges, the whole thing is more or less a simple dialogue scene with two people. In a way, this could be one of the exceptions to the “rule” that a good short film doesn't contain dialogue. In this case the director deserves credit for giving the dialogue added “weight” and making it special.

This is what makes this a *film* in contrast to *filmed reality*. This little scene in a supermarket – that appears to be an authentic situation –

is staged as something more unreal and portrayed in a filmic fashion in order to *replace* the very reality one wishes to express. Film isn't only what we see, but also what we experience while we're watching it. Keeping this in mind, it's evident that the director of *Adiós Mamá* is gifted. If we take a closer look at the film we can see that a number of good choices have been made. Picking out actors is done early on when making a film. Here, the director has made some wise decisions. Both of the actors have a look of melancholy, almost sad eyes, something that further enables them to act out this little tragedy we're served. Their faces evoke a sense of empathy that we're supposed to have for both the characters and the situation in itself. This is further accentuated by the choices of the turning points in both dialogue and acting.

The “mother” discovers her “son”, he senses her gaze of recognition and starts to feel uncomfortable. Then she says: “You look like my son”.

The first spoken line in a film is always critical. This is a point where it's crucial for the director to get the viewer involved in the characters and the given situation – it even sets the tone for the rest of the movie. As a result of this, I think nuances in acting, facial expression and chosen turning points are essential in making the audience believe in what's being said.

In other words, there's something to be said for the old “rule”: “Action before dialogue”. In *Adiós Mamá* the director and editor have truly taken this to heart; the cuts from “mother” to “son” are



done with perfect timing. The chosen framing of the different shots makes them work well with each other since they're composed with the "negative room" in mind – the illusion of the third dimension. We "see" the line of people waiting, the cashier, the groceries, the *place* is well documented and thus gives us the feeling of being "present" in the room.

The flow of time is also conveyed with an intelligent use of music and sound, perhaps one of the hidden qualities of the film. It starts off with low-pitched strings. Later on, the turning points are accentuated by a few notes from the cello. But what's even more noteworthy is the way the sounds from the cash register and the supermarket in general are woven in and out of the soundtrack to further enhance the twists and turns of the dialogue. This creates a recurring sense of "frozen time", which in turn opens up the spoken text so that the audience can get even closer to the characters.

The scene with these two main characters is acted out while the cashier is registering the "mother's" groceries. Here, the director gives proof of his craftsmanship by "concealing" the fact that the cashier doesn't add up her bill and ask her to pay.

He actually chooses to ignore what we would logically expect to happen in real life. With seamless and natural directing he makes us accept the fact that the "mother" freely walks away without paying. He manages to prevent the audience from going: "Hey, isn't she supposed to pay?". The entire surprise at the end would

have been totally ruined had he not succeeded with this. Even though it may sound banal, I believe this problem of what I would call the “the logical course of action in real life”, and the filmic ways of handling it, is a true test of craftsmanship in a director.

If these kinds of situations are portrayed the right way, the audience will never notice anything or be bothered by any lack of logic, but if it's done the wrong way it can be fatal.

So how does the director treat this problem in *Adiós Mamá*?

First of all, from the very beginning he never reveals just how many groceries the man is buying and how many the “mother” has picked out and that are being registered by the cashier. The shots are composed in such a way that we only get the feeling that she's actually hoarded quite a lot of stuff (which indeed she has!). Secondly, and this is perhaps one the most ingenious techniques a director can employ, he diverts our attention by staging a little situation where the cashier has trouble registering one of his groceries! The result is that we forget all about the “mother” *and* the whole question of whether or not she has payed. This keeps us occupied with another “problem” and actually gives the payoff added effect.

In a surprisingly short amount of time, from the introductory shots to the situation itself, I find myself carried away by this mother who has lost her son, and how this “son” is acted upon. We all

recognize this tense feeling when some complete stranger comes too close. First you reject the person, then you become aggressive.

But when the man hears that the old woman's son died in a car accident, he reacts with understanding and empathy – he's even willing to help her get through her grief by saying goodbye to her with the words: *Adiós Mamá*, only to discover that he's been hustled and that we humans can be both cunning and cruel.

This aspect of the film reminds me of the fact that we humans share many social experiences in our everyday lives and that we can experience minor or huge tragedies whether we live in Mexico or Norway. Afterwards we're left wondering, with many unanswered questions, before we go home to make dinner.

It wasn't more than that. But that's not bad in five minutes!  
That's the way short film is – neither more, nor less.



## On the interplay of consistency and surprise in the short fiction film

Richard Raskin

In an earlier article,<sup>13</sup> I suggested that in the best short fiction films, any major character will have definition, a central core of attributes that remain constant, and yet will behave in a way that is totally unpredictable. Pål Sletaune's *Eating Out* (Norway, 1993, 6 min.) was among the examples used to illustrate this interplay of consistency and surprise, which I take to be a hallmark of living characters and good story design.



Shot 15



Shot 16

For example, when Roy orders Cook at gunpoint to make a burger for Julie during the holdup, Cook answers: "I can't do two things at the same time. Do you want the money first and then the burger, or the burger first and then the money?" This totally unpredictable response delights us and takes us by surprise,

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<sup>13</sup> "Five parameters for story design in the short fiction film," **p.o.v.** no. 5 (March 1998), especially pages 176-184. See also "*Eating Out* and the aesthetics of surprise" in **p.o.v.** no. 3 (March 1997), pp. 26-30.

though it is perfectly consistent with Cook's earlier reply when he was first ordered to hand over the money while scraping the grill: "Can't you see I'm busy? You'll have to wait until I'm finished."

In examples of this kind, the interplay of consistency and surprise involves an unchanging character definition and a series of norm-defying behaviors which take us by surprise even though they remain "in character". These small surprises occurring throughout the film bring essentially unchanging characters to life and give us a sense that we can never foresee what will happen next. One way in which this interplay is managed involves momentarily overriding our expectations as to how oddly a given character reacts, by placing that character in a situation evoking a logical expectation (such as complying unconditionally with a gunman's request for food). When the character then behaves in harmony with the unusual expectations we should have held on to, we experience both consistency and surprise in an interplay based on the idiosyncratic nature of the character.

In *Goodbye Mom* (Mexico, 1997, 8 min.), however, we find a very different kind of interplay of consistency and surprise. Here, the woman character is initially defined for us as a grieving mother, and her desperate request that the young man say "Goodbye Mom" to her is understood as genuinely motivated by a need to take leave of her dead son. At the close of the film, after the man has complied with her wish and said "Goodbye Mom" to her twice before she leaves the supermarket with her wagon full of groceries, the truth comes out: having him say "Goodbye Mom" within earshot of the

cashier, was a manoeuvre designed to trap him into paying her bill. Here she is suddenly and unexpectedly redefined for us as a trickster, and when that happens, we can see in retrospect that everything she has said and done is perfectly consistent with this *new* definition as well as the original one. Here, it is a sudden shift in the very definition of the character that takes us by surprise.



Shot 17



Shot 18

A similar shift is found in Nina Mimica's *The War Is Over* (Italy, 1997, 5 min.), in which a soldier phones his family from the front lines to say that he is well and will soon be home, and to ask whether he may bring a friend home with him for a while. When his father says yes, that there was no need even to ask, the son explains that his friend has lost a leg in the war. (We are led to think that a soldier standing next to him, and apparently on crutches, is the man he is referring to.) The father now explains with some embarrassment that so patent a reminder of the war would be too burdensome psychologically for the mother, who suffers from severe asthma attacks, and that it would be better to wait a while before bringing that friend home. The son tells his father that he understands. When he hangs up, and the man who had been standing next to

him takes his place at the telephone, we can see that the new caller is perfectly mobile. We are then shown the son moving away from the phone, and see that *he* is the one on crutches and missing a leg.



In both *Goodbye Mom* and *The War Is Over*, an initial character definition is unexpectedly replaced by another, and the behaviors seen to be consistent with the original one are now radically reinterpreted in the light of the new definition, with which they are just as consistent, though in a way not formerly suspected. This second kind of interplay, involving one decisive surprise at the end of the film, dynamically reconfigures our understanding of the entire story as a character suddenly changes shape before our eyes, and gives us a sense that we had been taken in by appearances strategically designed to conceal some underlying reality.

This deception-based interplay of consistency and surprise involves first fooling and then disabusing the viewer and its success depends on three factors: 1) the degree to which the new definition of the character adequately covers both a motivation for concealment and the behaviors we had initially misinterpreted; 2) our not guessing in advance what was actually going on; and 3) our



not feeling cheated by the little trick that has been played on us by the filmmaker, when the truth is revealed.

What we have then are two very different kinds of interplay of consistency and surprise, one based on characters' idiosyncracies, the other on a strategic deception, and which may be summarized as follows:

<p>idiosyncratic-based interplay of consistency and surprise</p> <p><i>Eating Out</i></p>	<p>deception-based interplay of consistency and surprise</p> <p><i>Goodbye Mom</i> <i>The War Is Over</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unpredictable, norm-defying character behavior constitutes a series of small surprises throughout the film</li> <li>• the surprising behaviors are consistent with an unchanging and idiosyncratic character definition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a sudden change in the very definition of a character constitutes one big surprise at the end of the film, revealing a strategically designed deception that had been put over on another character and on the viewer</li> <li>• both the initial and final character definitions are consistent with the character's behavior</li> </ul>

The next issue of **p.o.v.** (number 8, December 1999) will be devoted to Wim Wenders's modern classic, *WINGS OF DESIRE* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*).



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