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http://imv.aau.dk/publikationer/pov/POV.html

The contents of this journal are registered in the Film Literature Index.

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 in other departments and at other universities. Our emphasis is on collaborative projects, enabling us to combine our efforts, each bringing his or her own point of view to bear on a given film or genre or theoretical problem. Consequently, the reader will find in each issue 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.

Number 9, March 2000

CONTENTS

Two Recent Short Fiction Films

1. Asif Kapadia, THE SHEEP THIEF (UK, 1997) 5
Data on the film and director 7
The original screenplay 9
Richard Raskin: *An interview with Asif Kapadia* 29
Tue Sand Larsen and Claus Toft-Nielsen: *The Sheep Thief* 47
Jakob Ion Wille: *Point of view in The Sheep Thief* 57

2. Claude Saint Antoine, NEW YORK ENCOUNTER (France, 1998) 65
Data on the film and director 67
Richard Raskin: A shot-by-shot reconstruction of *New York Encounter* 69
Richard Raskin: *An interview with Claude Saint Antoine* 75
Mette Hjort: *What's so funny? Reflections on jokes and short films* 81
Edvin Vestergaard Kau: *The irony of convention and variation* 95
Søren Kolstrup: *New York Encounter or the breaking of the rules* 101
Richard Raskin: *On dialogue-based storytelling in the short fiction film* 109

On the Run, directed by Bruno de Almeida 115
(US/Portuguese/French co-production 1998; theatrical release 2000)

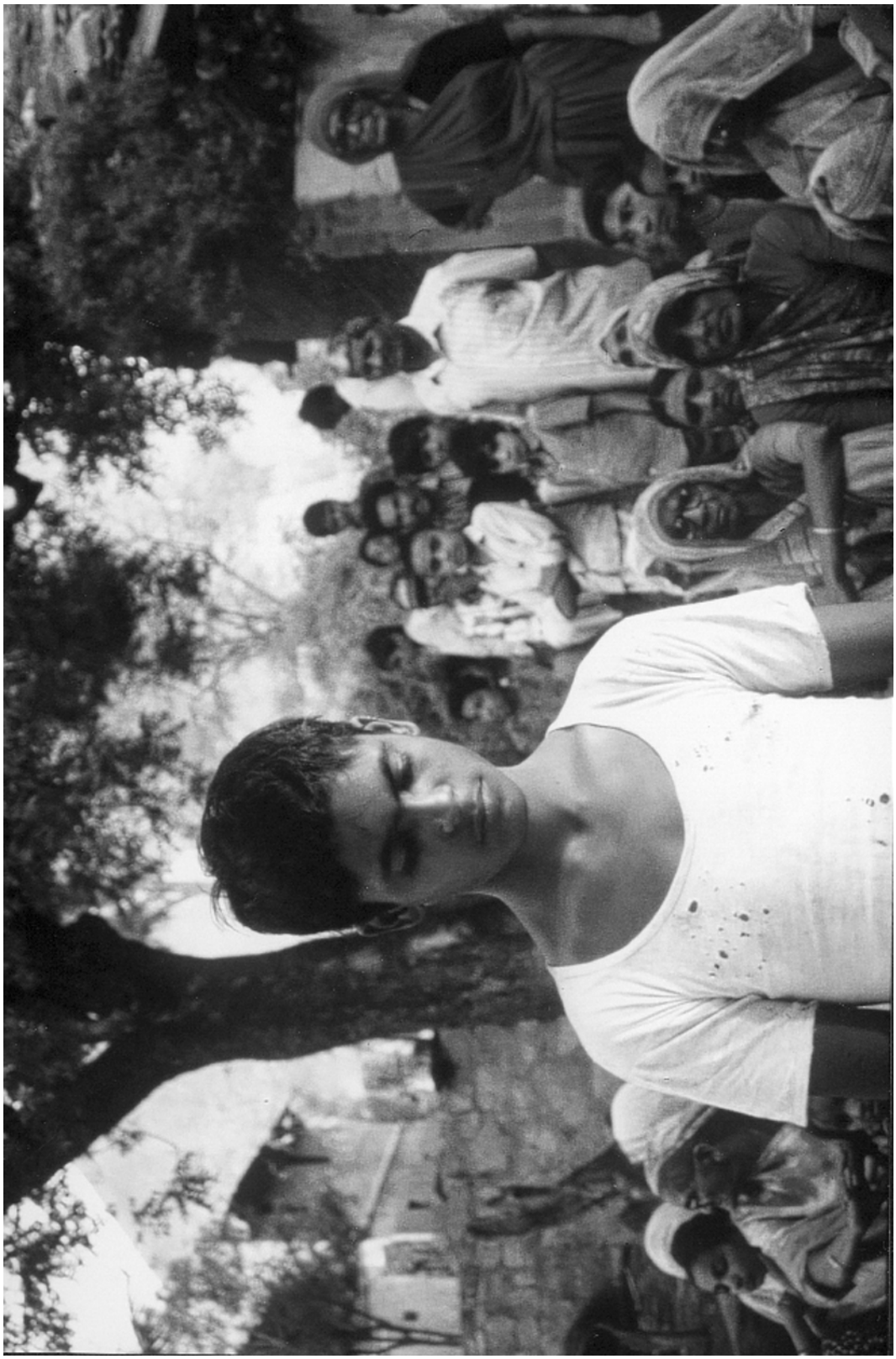
Film data 117
Richard Raskin: *On the Run – An interview with Bruno de Almeida* 119

On the next issue of **p.o.v.** 127
The contributors 129

Asif Kapadia

The Sheep Thief

(UK, 1997)



Asif Kapadia
THE SHEEP THIEF
(UK, 1997), 23 minutes, 16 mm, color

Principal production credits

Written and directed by	Asif Kapadia
Director of Photography	Roman Osin
Production Designer	Victoria Harwood
Sound Design	Andy Shelley
Producer	Victoria Connell
Editor	Hugo Lawrence
Music	Dario Marionelli

Cast
Abdul Rehman
Soaib Bhai Karimbhai
Jigar Bhai Bikhabhai
Kokila Behen Mahendra

Festivals and Prizes include:
Grand Prix, 12th Short Film Festival, Brest, 1997
Best Film Award, VIII International Film Festival Message to Man, St. Petersburg, 1998
Best Short Fiction Award, 47th Melbourne International Film Festival, 1998
Prix de la Mise en Scène, Poitiers Film Festival, 1997
Most Promising Director, 7th International Student Film Festival, Tel Aviv, 1998
International Prix d'Aaton, 51st International Film Festival of Locarno, 1998
International Short Film Festival, Clermont-Ferrand, 1998
Cannes Film Festival, official selection, 1998
Best Short Film, 14th Iranian International Festival of Film, 1999
Silver Jury Prize, New York Expo of Short Film & Video, 1999

Asif Kapadia
In 1994, Asif Kapadia graduated with honors from the University of Westminster where he specialized in screenwriting. It was here that he wrote and directed *Indian Tales*, which won the Gold Plaque at the Chicago International Film Festival, was screened at festivals in New York, Toronto, and the UK, and broadcast by British and Canadian television. *The Sheep Thief* was his graduation film at the Royal College of Art and was shot in Rajasthan, India. Asif Kapadia has made commercials and trailers, and has directed/produced short dramas, documentaries and insert films for both the BBC and Carlton Television. He is presently developing feature film projects, including *The Coward,* a magical folk tale set in India.

The Sheep Thief
The Original Screenplay

1. EXT. DESERT. DAY.

The sun blazes in the clear blue sky.
A deserted landscape bisected by a straight road.
On the ground what appears a bundle of rags; face down in an awkward position lies TASHAN [16, skinny].
Far off, through a cloud of smoke a MOPED rapidly approaches.
The bike heads straight for TASHAN's torso.
The rider SABIR [30's, well dressed] sees TASHAN late, he swerves at the last moment and just misses TASHAN.
SABIR somehow manages to keep control of his moped.
He gets off the bike and approaches TASHAN.
He crouches down and lightly touches TASHAN's cheek with the outside of his hand.
He lifts TASHAN's head. A look of disgust comes over SABIR's face.
He drops TASHAN's head, it falls to the ground with a dull thud.
SABIR heads back to his bike.
The MOPED rides off, leaving a cloud of smoke behind.
The smoke clears revealing TASHAN's dry, bruised and bloody face.
On TASHAN's forehead a 'mark', [an abstract symbol] can be seen 'branded' on.

Working Title: **The Sheep Thief**

2. EXT. STREET. DUSK. [flashback]

A dark street with tall houses closing in on one another.
Inside one of the houses a family noisily settles down to eat.
Beside the house a large cattle shed, the flicker of a moving oil lamp comes from within.
Crouched behind a goods lorry, TASHAN looks across at the cattle shed, whilst wrapping a length of rope around his palm. TASHAN holds a stick in his hand.
A creaking door is heard, TASHAN lifts his eyes.
A large, pot bellied man BILAL with a heavy moustache, exits the shed carrying a bucket. BILAL disappears inside the house.
TASHAN heads for the shed.

3. INT. CATTLE SHED. DUSK. [flashback]

A large, dark shed with a low roof. Oil lamps hang from the walls and ceiling and in the corner of a room a small fire smoulders.

TASHAN's eyes hunt for something to focus on. A cow moos, TASHAN turns and makes his way over to it, banging his head hard on a low cross beam.

He bends over and holds his head, recovering.

He unravels the rope and attempts to capture an animal.

A 'mark', [an abstract symbol] is seen branded on the animals' sides.

The animals grow uncomfortable and begin to squeal noisily.

TASHAN corners a SHEEP and ties a knot around its neck.

4. EXT. STREET. DUSK. [flashback]

TASHAN's bare feet pound the road.

Sweat drips from his face.

TASHAN walks swiftly away from BILAL's shed, pulling a sheep behind him.

The other animals can be heard loudly squealing in the distance.

A door opens.

TASHAN checks behind him. BILAL comes out of his house, followed by his sons RAJESH [mid 20's] and SHAM [low 20's, chubby].

They see the SHED door ajar and notice TASHAN running off with a sheep.

5. EXT. NARROW ALLEYWAY. DUSK. [flashback]

TASHAN turns a corner and runs along a deserted alleyway.

SHAM chases after TASHAN.

The sheep slows, TASHAN hits it on the behind with his stick.

TASHAN hears SHAM closing behind him.

The shoes of SHAM catch up with TASHAN's bare feet. SHAM reaches out, grabs the rope and pulls it back.TASHAN turns and lashes out with his stick, catching SHAM full in the face. SHAM falls to the ground, screaming in pain.

TASHAN looks down at SHAM. He lets the stick fall from his grasp, and runs off.

The stick lands on the floor, revealing a bloody, rusty nail protruding from the end.

6. EXT. NARROW ALLEYWAY. DUSK. [flashback]

A long dark, deserted alleyway.

TASHAN and the sheep hide under a dark veranda.

Footsteps approach.
BILAL runs into the alleyway.
TASHAN holds his breath. From under the veranda he watches BILAL's legs approach.
TASHAN calms the sheep and watches wide eyed as BILAL's legs pass inches away from him and walk off along the alleyway.
TASHAN sighs and drops his head to the ground.
He catches his breath. Then something catches his eye.
A shiny golden coin glitters in the mud in the middle of the alleyway.
Without a thought TASHAN leans across and reaches out at full stretch for the coin.
BILAL turns from the alleyway into the street, he has one final look over his shoulder and freezes. He sees TASHAN's skinny arm reaching out from under a veranda.

7. INT. CATTLE SHED. NIGHT. [flashback]

Clump after clump of hair falls in a pile onto the dirty, straw and dung covered floor.
A fire burns, throwing flickering shadows of numerous figures onto the walls.
Using rusty clippers, BILAL, toothpick in mouth, hacks off TASHAN's hair.
The penned in cattle and sheep look on.
TASHAN's bloody and beaten head is gripped steady by a pair of strong hands.
BILAL removes a red hot branding iron from the fire, he carries the steaming rod across the shed.
He holds it in front of TASHAN's face.
The orange glow of molten iron is reflected in TASHAN's terrified eyes.
The intense heat forces TASHAN to struggle and turn away.
He looks up through the corner of his eyes at BILAL, who stares coldly back.
BILAL snaps the toothpick in his mouth in half with his teeth and spits it out.

8. EXT. DESERT. DAY. [present]

The branding 'mark' can be seen on TASHAN's forehead as he lies on the ground in an awkward position.
In the distance a dog passes across the horizon, looking for food.
The sun continues to blaze down.
The shadow from a passing cloud shades TASHAN from the sun.
A single drop of water falls on TASHAN's mark. Followed by a second, heavier drop.
Slowly, light rain begins to fall.
A tiny pool of water forms on TASHAN's cheek, it dribbles down his face seeping past his chapped lips into the corner of his mouth.

TASHAN's eyes slowly flicker with life.
His eyes open.
TASHAN gingerly reaches up to touch the mark with his fingers. He flinches.

9. EXT. ROAD. DAY.

A bright, hand painted goods lorry, beeping incessantly flies past at high speed.
It misses TASHAN, walking unsteadily along the centre of the road by inches.
He holds his head, looking lost and confused.
The lorry vanishes into the distance. Silence but for TASHAN's footsteps.

10a. EXT. ROCKY STREAM. DAY.

TASHAN walks along the bank of a stream. He hears a cry to the side.
A frail old man BISWAS with a cloth bag over his shoulder stands stranded on a rock in the middle of the fast flowing stream. BISWAS chides himself angrily.
TASHAN stares across at BISWAS. He raises his hand to cover his mark and makes his way through the stream towards the old man.
BISWAS turns to TASHAN, revealing his milky, diseased eyes.
TASHAN drops his hand, he and BISWAS look across at one another.
BISWAS holds out his hand.
Using forefinger and thumb, TASHAN takes hold of BISWAS' wrist.
BISWAS nods his head and smiles, revealing the single, rotten tooth in his mouth.

10b. EXT. ROCKY STREAM. DAY.

TASHAN wades through the water up to his knees.
He carries BISWAS on his back.
BISWAS holds his legs up to stop his feet getting wet.
As TASHAN takes a step he hears a metallic jingle sound.
He takes another step, again he hears the sound, his eyes dart around.
TASHAN steps from a rock onto the bank.
He carefully lets the old man down from his back.
BISWAS nods his head and sets off on his way.
TASHAN takes hold of the old man's wrist.
BISWAS smiles and turns to walk away.
TASHAN doesn't move, instead he tightens his grip on the old man's wrist.
The smile falls from BISWAS' face.

TASHAN squeezes tighter.
BISWAS tries to free his arm, he cries out in pain.
TASHAN looks on impassively.
With his free hand BISWAS tries to release TASHAN's grip.
He hits out and tries to push away TASHAN's face, accidentally touching the branding on TASHAN's forehead.
BISWAS freezes, he 'reads' the branding with his fingertips.
BISWAS opens his hand and lets a handful of coins fall into TASHAN's outstretched palm.
TASHAN closes his hand into a tight fist, he shakes it, listens to the jingle of coins then walks off, leaving BISWAS behind him.

11. EXT. HOUSE. DAY.

A secluded house, inside a young woman DEEPA sings as she bakes roti.
Her mother, MANOSHAR sleeps outside on the veranda.
A hand reaches across and carefully lifts MANOSHAR's red scarf from her head.
The final corner gets caught under the old woman's shoulder.
TASHAN gives it a swift tug, pulling it free, he runs off.

12 a. EXT. ROAD NEAR ORCHARD. DAY.

Returning to the road, TASHAN ties the red scarf around his head, covering the mark.
TASHAN hears a cry and cuts across a track. He peers through some bushes.
The wheel comes off a hand cart scattering baskets filled with mangoes to the floor.
A young woman SAFIA [mid 20's] and her son ZED [aged 9] run around collecting their mangoes, placing them back into baskets.
A mango rolls across the road towards TASHAN.
He follows it with his eyes.
ZED notices the mango and runs across to get it.
SAFIA picks their tiffin [stainless steel lunchbox] up off the floor.
ZED reaches across for the mango, he sees TASHAN staring from the side of the road and freezes.
SAFIA notices, she comes over.
SAFIA and TASHAN look across at one another. She picks out a ripe mango and offers it to TASHAN. He stares at the juicy fruit.

12 b. EXT. ROAD NEAR ORCHARD. DAY.

Juice drips down the side of TASHAN's mouth as he messily sucks on a mango.
He struggles with all his strength to lift the cart off the ground as SAFIA and ZED reattach the wheel.
TASHAN gently drops the cart to the ground. It wobbles and the wheel falls off again.
SAFIA offers him another mango.

13. EXT. DIRT ROAD. DAY.

SAFIA and ZED walk along the road carrying the baskets on their head.
TASHAN follows, dragging the damaged cart with a wonky wheel.

14. EXT. VILLAGE ENTRANCE. DAY.

TASHAN, SAFIA and ZED approach the village entrance; a narrow gap between two immense, intimidating boulders.
TASHAN stares up at the rocks. His eyes dart around.

15. EXT. LAKSHMI'S HOUSE. DAY.

SAFIA, TASHAN and ZED pass a well kept, two storey house.
Out on the veranda, on a swing sits a well attired old woman, LAKSHMI.
A young servant SANJIT brings her a cup of tea.
LAKSHMI notices SAFIA and smiles.
SAFIA nudges ZED, who runs over and hands a mango to LAKSHMI.
The old woman takes it with a nod.
TASHAN notices LAKSHMI's ornate jewellery.
SAFIA and ZED continue along the lane.
LAKSHMI and TASHAN share a look, TASHAN breaks it and follows SAFIA.
LAKSHMI watches them go.

16. EXT. SAFIA'S HOUSE. DAY.

YA YA [aged 7] runs out from SAFIA's home; a compact brick house with a bamboo veranda. He greets his mother and takes a basket from his brother ZED.
The family enter the house.
TASHAN peeks in through the door. He leaves the cart outside their home and walks off.
SAFIA comes out of the house and grabs TASHAN's shoulder.

He pulls himself free.
SAFIA motions for him to sit.

17. EXT. SAFIA'S HOUSE. DAY. [later]

SAFIA spoons some rice from a pot onto a metal plate.
TASHAN sits legs crossed under the veranda.
On the other end of the veranda sits ZED staring. TASHAN looks across at ZED.
ZED smiles.
TASHAN continues to stare. The smile falls from ZED's face, he drops his head.
YA YA tentatively approaches TASHAN with a plate of food.
He places the plate in front of TASHAN and quickly steps away.
TASHAN snatches the plate and, using his hands, noisily devours the food.
SAFIA and the KIDS eat inside the house, sharing from the same plate.

18. EXT. SAFIA'S HUT. DUSK.

The licked clean metal plate is lifted off the floor by SAFIA.
She looks around.
TASHAN is no where to be seen.
She heads inside the house, closing the door behind her.

19. EXT. ROAD. DAWN.

A long straight road on a misty morning.
SAFIA walks along carrying her tiffin.
ZED pulls their cart, stacked high with wicker baskets.
It bounces along because of its one wonky wheel.
As they walk something catches ZED's eye, he pulls at his mother's clothes.
SAFIA turns to look.
They both slow to a stop.
They stare down at the base of a tree where TASHAN, looking dirtier than ever lies curled up asleep, a stick close by his side.
SAFIA shakes her head and continues walking.
ZED doesn't move. He turns from his mother to TASHAN.
He walks over to TASHAN and kneels down.
He gently shakes TASHAN awake.

TASHAN wakes with a start and immediately grabs his stick, scaring ZED who jumps away.
TASHAN looks up at ZED.
ZED smiles nervously, he takes hold of TASHAN's arm.
TASHAN doesn't move.
ZED pulls with all his might.

20. EXT. ROAD NEAR ORCHARD. DAY.

SAFIA walks ahead at speed.
ZED struggles to keep up with the cart. He pulls TASHAN along by the arm.

21. EXT. ORCHARD. DAY.

A mango falls from a tree to the earth, followed by another.
The floor around the tree is covered with mangoes.
TASHAN collects the fruit from the floor and places them into a basket.
He hides one inside his shirt. TASHAN places a full basket onto the cart and takes an empty one. To the side, SAFIA tends to the aniseed growing on her small plot of land.

22. EXT. ORCHARD. DAY.

The stainless steel tiffin is unclipped, the handles are folded down to the side. SAFIA lifts off two trays.

SAFIA

D'you need somewhere to sleep?

TASHAN shrugs. She hands a dish to TASHAN.

SAFIA

You could work for me here.

TASHAN nods.
They eat under the shade of their tree as the midday sun blazes overhead.

23 a. EXT. SAFIA'S HOUSE. AFTERNOON.

YA YA draws on a piece of slate with some chalk, watched by ZED.
TASHAN sharpens a stick on the floor. He turns to look at YA YA and ZED.
He slides across the veranda, taking a seat beside YA YA.
TASHAN takes a piece of green chalk from YA YA's chalk box and holds his hand out for the slate. YA YA hesitates, then hands it over.
The curious eyes of YA YA & ZED watch as TASHAN rubs out their drawing and he patiently begins to draw dots, in the shape of triangles.
YA YA and ZED share a look.

23 b. INT/EXT. SAFIA'S HOUSE. AFTERNOON.

Inside the house, SAFIA mends some clothes. She watches the kids falling under TASHAN's spell.

23 c. EXT. SAFIA'S HOUSE. AFTERNOON.

The dots cover the slate. TASHAN joins two dots with a line and passes the slate across to YA YA, who thinks deeply, then joins two dots up with a line.
ZED takes the slate...

24. EXT. SAFIA'S HOUSE. LATE AFTERNOON. [later]

The sun begins to set behind a boulder, the shadows have lengthened.
The slate is covered with blue, red but mainly green triangles.
TASHAN joins up two dots to make yet another triangle.
He draws his mark in the middle of the triangle.
YA YA groans.

TASHAN

Do you want to know a secret?.... I can do magic.

YA YA and ZED look up at TASHAN.

TASHAN

I can make the trees cry.

ZED

No you can't.

YA YA

...How?

25. EXT. BOULDERS. DUSK.

The silhouetted TASHAN is followed by ZED and YA YA over a boulder.

26. EXT. TREES. DUSK.

Dense woodland, TASHAN and the kids stand beside an old tree.
YA YA and ZED cover their eyes.
TASHAN checks to see no one is peeking.
With his sharpened stick he peels away a little bark and then using the point he cuts deep, vertical grooves into the soft skin of the tree.
TASHAN clears his throat.
YA YA and ZED uncover their eyes and look at the tree.
Nothing.
TASHAN points with the stick at YA YA, ZED then himself [one, two, three]
He then carefully taps the tree three times with the stick, whilst mumbling 'magic words' under his breath.
ZED looks skeptically up at TASHAN.
TASHAN looks confused, then nods his head.
ZED turns back to the tree.
Three 'tears' of sap slowly 'weep' down the tree's bark.
ZED and YA YA's eyes open wide in amazement.
TASHAN hides a smile.

27. EXT. LAKSHMI's HOUSE. NIGHT.

SAFIA sits before LAKSHMI, who is sitting on her swing drinking tea.

LAKSHMI

Where are his family?

SAFIA

He has none, he's alone.

LAKSHMI finishes her cup of tea. She sighs.

LAKSHMI

If he causes no problems in the village, he can stay.

SAFIA smiles, she touches LAKSHMI's feet and leaves.

28 a. EXT. SAFIA'S HOUSE. NIGHT.

The village is asleep and silent. Attached to SAFIA's house is a small shed.

28 b. INT. SHED. NIGHT.

A single oil lamp burns, throwing flickering shadows onto the walls.
TASHAN's nervous eyes stare directly ahead as he lies on the floor.
He looks to the side. In the corner of the shack, beside the handcart rests SAFIA's solitary goat. TASHAN stares hard at the animal without blinking.
The goat sleeps peacefully.
TASHAN tightens his head scarf, turns off the oil lamp and settles down to sleep.

29. EXT. MARKET. DAY.

A noisy, colourful market, hundreds of people buying and selling.
The stalls selling chilies, rice, aubergines, ginger, colourful clothes, pots and pans appear to go on forever.
On the floor sits SAFIA, she calls out to passing customers.
An older woman, RAANI running a stall alongside also sells mangoes but with more fortune. A crowd hover around RAANI's stall.
RAANI and SAFIA share a look.
RAANI flicks her eyes across to TASHAN.
TASHAN neatly lays the mangoes out assisted by YA YA & ZED, who both wear scarves around their heads. The three of them work closely as a team, TASHAN giving out the orders.
YA YA watches RAANI, he looks across at TASHAN.

YA YA

You can do magic. Make them buy our mangoes.

TASHAN feels uneasy.
Their work finished TASHAN looks around.

The other stall holders stare in his direction.
He tightens his scarf. People continue to stare.
Feeling paranoid, TASHAN stands, YA YA and ZED also rise.
He shakes his head and sets off alone, pushing his way through the crowd.
SAFIA notices him walking away.

30. EXT. VILLAGE. DAY.

TASHAN makes his way through the village.
He passes a group of BOYS troubling the CHAI WALLA.
Leaving the noisy, crowded market behind him, TASHAN relaxes slightly.

31. EXT. DRY RIVERBED. DAY.

TASHAN passes through some trees into a clearing.
He stops, ahead of him, on the bank of a dry river he finds an old TEMPLE.

32. INT. TEMPLE. DAY.

TASHAN walks towards the beautiful shrine, decorated with intricate ornaments, and golden trinkets. The temple is peaceful and deserted.
TASHAN stares in wonder at the shrine and the beautiful trinkets on display.
Something to the side catches TASHAN's eye.
TASHAN steps into the shrine, he reaches across and carefully picks up a GOLDEN ORNAMENT and studies the object closely, turning it over in his hand.
The ORNAMENT's shiny reflection is seen in TASHAN's eyes.

33. EXT. DRY RIVERBED. DAY.

TASHAN's flip flops pound the earth.
Sweat drips off his face.
He makes his way along the dry river away from the village.

34. EXT. BOULDER ROAD. LATE AFTERNOON.

TASHAN runs along a straight road lined with angular boulders.

35. EXT. ROCKY LANDSCAPE ROAD. EARLY EVENING.

TASHAN comes round a blind bend at full tilt.

Three young men RAFIK, KAREEM and RAM run in the opposite direction.
TASHAN just manages to dodge them as they fly past.
He turns to continue running and walks straight into another youth AFTAB.
The two of them clash heads painfully.
The GOLDEN ORNAMENT falls to the floor.
AFTAB and TASHAN hold their heads. AFTAB removes his hand to see if he is bleeding, revealing the 'mark' branded on his forehead. TASHAN freezes.
AFTAB lifts his eyes to TASHAN, giving him a venomous look.
TASHAN steps away.
AFTAB walks over and pushes his face into TASHAN's.
TASHAN stares back.
A whistle is heard. AFTAB and TASHAN turn.
RAFIK, KAREEM and RAM wait further up the road.
AFTAB checks behind him, he gives TASHAN a final murderous look then runs off.
The gang cut through some boulders and out of sight.
TASHAN rubs his head, feeling a bit dizzy.
He bends down and picks up the GOLDEN ORNAMENT.
He stands to find a large, middle aged man NISH running towards him.
TASHAN freezes. NISH notices the ORNAMENT, his eyes widen.
TASHAN offers NISH the ORNAMENT.
NISH throws his arms around TASHAN and hugs him tightly.

36. INT. TEMPLE. DUSK.

The GOLDEN ORNAMENT is carefully cleaned and polished before being returned to its spot.

NISH [V/O]
There were four 'marked' boys....I know them, they're...

37. EXT. LAKSHMI'S HOUSE. NIGHT.

The old woman, LAKSHMI listens, she eats pistachio nuts whilst rocking lightly on her swing. The swing squeaks lightly as it moves to and fro.

NISH
....from bad families...They make trouble in many villages round here.

TASHAN sits on the floor in front of LAKSHMI as NISH gives LAKSHMI the details.
YA YA and ZED sit on a step listening intently.
A small crowd of villagers hover nearby.

NISH

People are afraid of them, but this young man fought them alone!

LAKSHMI smiles at TASHAN. Embarrassed, he turns away.

NISH

If it wasn't for him all the Temple's Gold would've been stolen.

The watching crowd begin to murmur.

38 a. INT. SAFIA'S HOUSE. NIGHT.

A cloth is dipped into a bowl of water, squeezed of excess water, then lifted to clean dirt from TASHAN's face. He stares blankly ahead.
SAFIA places the cloth on the side of the bowl and reaches up to remove his filthy head scarf.
TASHAN pushes her hand away.
She tries again. TASHAN stubbornly holds the scarf in position.
SAFIA looks across at TASHAN.
He slowly pushes off his scarf, revealing the 'mark'.
The smile falls from SAFIA's face. She stares at the 'mark'.

SAFIA

What did you do?

TASHAN looks away.
SAFIA picks up the bowl and walks away to the kitchen.
TASHAN sits head lowered.

38 b. INT. SAFIA'S KITCHEN. NIGHT.

SAFIA empties the bowl of dirty water. She thinks for a moment.

38 c. INT. SAFIA'S HOUSE. NIGHT.

TASHAN angrily scrunches up the scarf in his hands.
SAFIA's hand comes in and lightly touches the 'mark' with the cloth.
He lifts his head, they look across at one another.

SAFIA

Listen to me. What you've done before I don't want to know. But promise it won't happen whilst you're in this house.

TASHAN nods. SAFIA takes the scarf from TASHAN's hands, noting how dirty it is she puts it aside. She takes her own purple scarf and ties it carefully round TASHAN's head.

39. EXT. MARKET. DAY.

Numerous hands hold out money.
SAFIA tries to keep up with the demand for her mangoes.
RAANI stares across from her deserted stall.
ZED sits mouth open as the local men and women jostle to shake TASHAN's hand.
YA YA looks up at TASHAN.

YA YA

What other magic can you do?

TASHAN leans across, he raises his eyes.
YA YA and ZED look up.

TASHAN

I can make the sky cry.

YA YA and ZED look at TASHAN skeptically.
TASHAN smiles and shakes another outstretched hand.
He looks up and freezes, the hand belongs to the pot bellied farmer with the heavy moustache BILAL who, toothpick in mouth raises his eyes to the headscarf around TASHAN's head.
TASHAN tries to release his hand, but BILAL keeps a tight grip.
RAANI looks across from the next stall.
TASHAN struggles to pull his hand away.

BILAL looks across at SAFIA and the kids.
TASHAN finally forces his hand free, and tightens the scarf around his head.
He fills a bag with mangoes. He looks to see SAFIA isn't watching, then hands the bag over to BILAL. BILAL smiles.
TASHAN pleadingly offers the bag again.
RAANI continues to watch with interest from the next stall.
BILAL snaps the toothpick in his mouth in half and spits it out.
TASHAN recoils.
BILAL takes the bag. He stands and walks away. TASHAN watches him go into the crowd.
RAANI watches BILAL go. She returns her gaze to TASHAN.

40. EXT. ROAD. EARLY EVENING.

A happy SAFIA, YA YA and ZED head home along the dirt road.
TASHAN follows pulling their wonky cart, stacked with empty baskets.

41. EXT. VILLAGE SWEET STALL. DAY.

YA YA greedily looks at various goodies available at the village sweet stall.
The old man YOGESH neatens the selection on view.
YA YA points at a jar of boiled sweets behind YOGESH.
The old man turns to get the jar.
TASHAN notices out of the corner of his eye ZED, reach across for a shiny gold wrapped chocolate.
YOGESH returns with the bag of sweets.
TASHAN hands over the money.
ZED swiftly walks away.
TASHAN stops him, he reaches into ZED's pocket, he finds three shiny gold sweets.
TASHAN returns them to YOGESH.
TASHAN, YA YA and an embarrassed ZED head off along the lane.

42. EXT / INT. SAFIA'S HOUSE. EARLY EVENING.

SAFIA places a plate of food onto a mat on the floor.
TASHAN and the kids enter and take their seats.
SAFIA nods her head and they tuck in.

They eat like a family, sharing from a single plate and drinking water from a shared metal cup.

SANJIT [off screen]
Sister Safia.

SAFIA turns to see LAKSHMI's servant outside the house.

SANJIT
The Panchayat wants to see you.

SAFIA turns to look at TASHAN.

SANJIT
The village elders want to see you.

TASHAN stares back.
YA YA and ZED continue to eat, oblivious.

43. EXT. LAKSHMI'S HOUSE. EARLY EVENING.
SAFIA and TASHAN sit on the floor before LAKSHMI, who sits on her swing.
The Panchayat [village elders] sit behind LAKSHMI, men on one side, women on the other.
A small crowd of villagers including NISH and RAANI watch from the side.
TASHAN stands before them, without his scarf, his 'mark' exposed.

LAKSHMI
His reputation is bad for the village.

SAFIA
But where will he go?

LAKSHMI
There's nothing to discuss. The Boy will be gone by morning.

SAFIA tries to plead her case but TASHAN stops her.
He respectfully touches LAKSHMI's feet.

He and SAFIA share a look. TASHAN touches SAFIA's feet, then walks away.
SAFIA notices the crowd of villagers watching, she notices RAANI staring.
SAFIA turns away and follows TASHAN home.

44. EXT. HILL. DUSK.

A hill overlooking a wide, expansive landscape.
TASHAN, YA YA and ZED sit on the hill.
YA YA and ZED stare at the 'mark' on TASHAN's head. They share a confused look.
TASHAN rips his scarf in two and gives one half to ZED and the other half to YA YA.
The two of them wrap the material around their heads.
TASHAN slumps flat on his back and looks up at the sky.
He stares directly upwards, never blinking.
YA YA and ZED watch TASHAN.
He appears upset.
The kids share a look.
TASHAN continues to stare up at the sky.
The sun goes behind a cloud, dropping the three of them into shadow.
ZED looks up.
Rain clouds gather overhead.
YA YA nudges his brother.
ZED looks down again at TASHAN.
TASHAN looks tearful.
Just then a drop of water falls on ZED's cheek, he wipes it away.
A drop of water lands on YA YA's nose.
Another on TASHAN's 'mark'.
Suddenly, heavy rain begins to fall.
YA YA and ZED look up at the heavy thunder clouds in the sky, back at TASHAN, then share a look. Their eyes open wide in amazement.
A crack of thunder shatters the silence.
The boys are drenched in a torrential downpour.
ZED takes YA YA by the hand and leads him home, leaving TASHAN on the hill alone.

45. EXT. VILLAGE ENTRANCE. DAWN.

The sun rises behind the two intimidating boulders at the entrance to the village.

46. INT. SCHOOL ROOM. MORNING.

A class in progress. The children sit cross legged on the floor, their slates in front of them.

YA YA wearing his red scarf writes on his slate intently.

He repeatedly draws TASHAN's mark with his chalk.

47. EXT. ORCHARD. DAY.

ZED, wearing his red scarf climbs from one branch to another.

He passes mangoes down to his mother.

ZED

Where's he gone?

SAFIA fills a basket.

SAFIA

...To help another family.

She places the basket onto the cart and takes a breather. ZED thinks for a moment.

ZED

He can use his magic to help them too.

SAFIA smiles.

48. EXT. JUNGLE ROAD. DAY.

TASHAN carries in his hand SAFIA's stainless steel tiffin. He walks, without a headscarf along a hilly road through lush, green landscape. The only sound comes from his footsteps on the road. The branches from the trees curve over and shade TASHAN from the sun. Leaving the shade of the trees TASHAN steps into the harsh sunlight and heads off into the distance.

fin.

An interview with Asif Kapadia on *The Sheep Thief*

Richard Raskin

Unlike most other short films, The Sheep Thief *uses many locations, many actors and I imagine was not filmed under particularly favorable conditions. It is also quite long for a short film, with its running time of 23 minutes. All in all, it was a very ambitious project, compared to almost any other contemporary short film I can think of. Can you tell me about your decision to take on the special challenges involved in making* The Sheep Thief*?*

This is a pretty big question. There are many answers as to why we (myself and the core crew) decided to take on the challenges involved in shooting *The Sheep Thief* in India.

The short answer is that I knew it would be the last short film I would make as a student and I wanted to push the boat out. I wanted to make a longer short film with a story, one which was more than a joke with a twist. I needed to see if I could handle a longer screen time as in the end I wanted to make features and the longest film I had made thus far was 12 minutes in length.

I had studied filmmaking at different film schools for six years in total and I wished to graduate with something that made me stand out a little as a filmmaker. At the time I was feeling a little uninspired by rainy London and its grey concrete.

There is a problem with the way the terms or semesters of educational establishments work out. You write in the summer when the weather is good. You pre-produce in the autumn and end up

shooting in the winter when it's grey, rainy, cold and the daylight is at its shortest. Then you're locked away in the cutting room when it's spring!

Anyway I was mulling over a few ideas which I had submitted to the Royal College of Art as possible graduation film ideas. One was set in London. It was a contemporary tale set in the world I grew up in. I was co-writing the project with a friend. (This project was called *On The Corner*. It is a feature project I now have in development here in London.)

The second project called *Lunch* was a strong idea but too short and simple for a diploma film. The final idea was a story I remembered from when I was around seven. A teacher told us a tale of a thief who becomes a saint in religious studies. I never forgot the tale and this became the basis for *The Sheep Thief*.

I wrote a short synopsis of the story and we tried to figure out how the story could be done. When we thought of setting it in rural Wales or Ireland, for example, it didn't feel right.

The next stage of the story behind *The Sheep Thief* involved going to see a film called *Cyclo* by a young French-Vietnamese director called Tran Ang Hung (whose first film was *Scent of Green Papaya*). The director grew up and studied in France but he shot *Cyclo* in Vietnam. I was blown away by the visual style and power of the film. Also I felt I saw in the film an outsider's viewpoint on Vietnam,

but I could tell that the director must have known the culture to make the film. For me it was like a light going on.

I would shoot *The Sheep Thief* in India. I spoke the language and had family there. Winter time in Europe is the best and coolest time to be in India. They have a huge film industry and plenty of equipment. Our money would also go a lot further.

It all slotted together. My production designer, who was English, had travelled India for eight months and had pictures of all the different regions. We knew the film would work in the desert of Rajasthan. I myself had only been to India once for two weeks a few years before. I hardly knew the place.

So our naive plan was formed. The people at our college were terrified by the prospect but our enthusiasm and the fact that they liked the story meant that they encouraged us to develop the idea. The team had worked together before and our two previous films had both won prizes and filmstock from Kodak.

I lied and said that my family were very well known and respected there and that I would only shoot in their town, etc. The college thought about it and said if we could raise the finances they would in theory be behind us.

We then found out that no Westerners had shot a short student film in India before – on celluloid film. People had shot docu-

mentaries on video or huge TV or film productions. But we found no one who had done a film like ours. So we were on our own.

The number of locations and characters all came from the story which was written in London. Essentially the tale was the same as the initial synopsis I had written. A friend put me in contact with an Indian writer/musician/lecturer called Venkat, who was doing a Ph.D. at the London School of Economics. He became my script doctor. He knew and grew up in rural India and would tell me which elements were not realistic. We would talk and he helped improve the script enormously.

In the end the film's budget was £25,000. The college gave each graduation film £7,500 so the team of myself, the designer Victoria Harwood and the producer Victoria Connell had to raise the rest of the money.

The money was raised on the basis of the script and from people whom I had worked for previously. In the end the money came in dribs and drabs from a producer in New York (Polaris Arts), a German co-production company (Strawberry Vale), and the BBC. I begged people I had worked for or with in television. Two editors I had worked with wrote me personal checks of £1000.

Somehow we go the money.

There are a number of differences between your screenplay and the film. For example, in the screenplay, certain events are presented in flashback, while in the film, you chose a more linear chronology. What was the reason for this change?

The differences between the script and the screenplay essentially came from the difficulties of shooting in India. So many of the subtleties got lost in the process. The flashback element was changed in the editing suite. We tried it the way it was in the script, but it was confusing.

In the end the film opens with a single aerial shot: our lead character Tashan lying dead in the desert. We then go back to him stealing the sheep and after he is branded we return to the desert. It's subtle, most people don't remember it. The only sequence which was dropped and not shot was the one where Tashan carried the old blind man across the stream and then robbed him. We just ran out of time and couldn't find an elderly person who was small enough for our actor to carry. It was I felt the one scene we could lose from the opening sequence which wasn't vital to the tale and dropping it enabled us to keep on schedule.

There are also events in the screenplay which you omitted from the film – for example, a) the encounter with Biswas; b) Tashan's encounter with Aftab whose forehead has also been branded; c) Zed's theft of the sweets and Tashan's returning them to Yogesh; d) Tashan's reluctant removal of the red scarf when Safia wants to clean the dirt from his face. Do you recall your reasons for omitting each of these things?

As I am the writer and the director, I always leave myself the option of changing elements of the tale during casting, rehearsal and of course shooting. I know I'm going to do it. The script must offer the structure and the characters but when I try something with the actors, if it doesn't work I change it. If they don't feel natural doing something, then together we come up with something better. And often in the case of this film, we just ran out of time.

Elements which were eventually dropped from the finished film:

a] *the encounter with Bilal*. At the end of the day the scene read better on the page than it would have when played before the camera. In reality, as far as I can remember, it seemed too much for them to be face to face. It was more subtle to see Bilal through the crowd. For the two of them to lock eyes told us everything we needed to know and quicker.

b] *Tashan's encounter with Aftab who was also branded*. The honest truth: I can't remember why we didn't do it! As I re-read the script I think the idea sounds great. In reality, I remember that finding the gang to play Aftab was very difficult. I can only guess that in the prep I must have decided that the branding was a very rare occurance and that Tashan should be the only one in the film to have to deal with the stigma. Maybe I was wrong.

c] *Zed's theft of the sweets* was shot. I was unable to make the scene work. The gentleman cast as the sweet shop owner looked into the camera in every take and was a tad wooden.

One problem with the script was that it had too many endings. In the end we cut it as it was weak and we wanted to get on with the tale and get to the climax. I also remember feeling it may have been a little too sentimental.

d] *Tashan's removal of the red scarf* is one of the biggest regrets of the film. We built a special set for the interior of Safia's home. We shot

the scene but it was one of the worst days and nights of my life as a director. I could not communicate directly with the woman playing Safia. Everything I said was through an interpreter. The woman felt very uncomfortable going anywhere near the young boy Abdul who played Tashan. Shooting the scene was hell. We went miles behind schedule and wasted a hell of a lot of film.

The truth was that asking a woman to play a part in a Western film in rural India is impossible. Of all the women we asked, no one wanted to be in the film. If the woman said yes, her husband or mother-in-law said no. We were desperate. Only one woman said yes and so she was cast. She had an amazing face but could not act or take direction. She was very awkward in front of the crew and with the boy.

So we shot the scene and I knew it stank.

We went on shooting the next day. It was one of the market scenes. Again nothing worked. Then my assistant director pointed out a woman extra in the crowd. She was so full of life and had an amazing presence. Her name was Kokila Behen.

I stopped shooting and spoke to the crew. I wanted to recast the part of Safia with Kokila Behen. We were half way through the schedule and our filmstock. The crew went crazy. Most of them wanted to go home by now.

I explained that we only had to shoot close-ups of Kokila Behen, not re-shoot every scene. In the end, after a lot of talking, we recast the part of Safia and that is who you see in the present film.

Every wide shot in the beginning and middle of the film is the first woman and the close-ups are of Kokila Behen. She was a revelation and the entire atmosphere of the film changed. I got my confidence back and the crew finally felt we were shooting something good.

So by now our set for the scene where Tashan removes his scarf before Safia, had been taken apart. It had been built inside a home and the family had moved back in. We tried to reshoot the scene on the last day but it didn't look right.

The remains of the first scene and the set are in the film towards the end. It is squeezed in between Tashan seeing Bilal in the market and Tashan's 'last supper' with Safia and the boys.

I cut out all the shots of the first Safia and we are left with Tashan playing guiltily with the red scarf as a fly walks on his branding. This is still one of my favourite scenes in the film.

One very nice touch in the film which I believe was not in the screenplay, is the magic trick with the hair and imaginary needle. Though its importance in the film is obvious, I wonder if you would tell in your own words about your choice to add it to your story.

The magic trick in the film with the hair and the paper was indeed not in the script. On the page Tashan bonded with the two kids by introducing them to a game of triangles played on Zed and Ya Ya's

chalkboard. I wasn't really happy with the idea as it was on the page but I knew I needed something there for the three kids to do together.

Once we were in India and casting, I improvised with the kids using various games – often asking the kids themselves what games they played with their friends.

In the end the idea of the 'magic' hair and paper came into play and worked. This happens to be the one and only 'trick' I myself know. It was something I was shown when I was a child and never forgot. I can't remember who taught it to me or why but it seems everything comes in handy at some point!

Abdul Rehman, who played Tashan, mastered the trick within seconds. He tried it out on little Jiggly (Ya Ya) during a rehearsal and I knew we had the perfect idea. I asked Abdul not to do the trick again until the camera was rolling.

Little Jiggly was transfixed and had no idea what was going on. His reaction in the film is entirely genuine, as is his attempt to pull his own hair out and mimic it at the end of the film in the classroom. We shot the rehearsals and got lucky in capturing the young child's natural response.

In the end the trick works much better than the idea on the page, to establish Tashan as someone the two young boys see as 'magical' even if most of the time he uses 'sleight of hand'.

One of the aspects of your film that I find most striking is the attention you give to physical detail, such as raindrops landing on grains of sand, a bit of bloody tissue on the nail protruding from a stick, and drops of sap running down a tree trunk. I don't think I've ever seen another short film which focuses on physical detail to quite the same degree. Can you tell me about your choice to make these physical details central to your storytelling?

The idea of physical detail probably comes from my aim to try and tell the story *visually* as much as possible. Rather than a character saying something, my wish is to show – and for the audience to register and feel – the meaning.

Also I'm a big fan of Sergio Leone westerns and other directors who shoot huge cinemascope wide shots then cut to extreme close-ups – a tiny detail of a fly walking on a character's face or whatever.

Every detail you mention in your question was in the script. I try to put the images down on the page, to incorporate them into the tale. These details need to move the story forward, to have some emotional meaning and not just be pretty shots.

In many of the best short films, there is an object charged with meaning for one or more characters. In The Sheep Thief, *you allow the red scarf to take on important parts of the storytelling – both when it is used to hide Tashan's mark, and when he tears it in two near the end of the film, giving the halves to Ya Ya and Zed. Do you agree that it is good to let some object take on an important storytelling role in a short film?*

Here again as in my previous answer: the idea is to use objects as *visual* elements which carry the story forward.

The most basic example of this comes from the mark on Tashan's forehead. In the story I had been told when I was a child, the thief

who steals a sheep is actually branded with the letters S and T, standing for sheep thief. This was too literal and of course the letters would mean little in India. So we decided on an abstract shape from the branding iron as the mark.

The red scarf then covered the mark – red being a very emotive colour. We tried as much as possible to minimise the use of the colour red within the frame throughout the film, to make the red of the scarf stand out as much as possible.

The ripping of the red scarf was in and out of the film. At one point Tashan left with the red scarf still on but it seemed right that he would tear up the scarf which hides his secret and move on. Somehow when the scarf is worn by the children it changes from a negative to a positive object. Without anyone saying a word in the scene near the end of the film, we hopefully get across the different emotions of the characters. The kids are proud to wear Tashan's scarf, while he has to move on with his mark there for all to see.

Objects offer to both a short or a long film the opportunity to tell the tale symbolically. If used well they can really add to the story. However, focusing on an object *too* much can add meaning where it isn't needed or intended, so you have to be careful. A simple close up used as a cut-away will leave the audience thinking: "I'll remember that object. The director has shown it because it'll come back later." And then it doesn't and you leave the viewer wondering what it all meant.

In your view, does the short film tell its story in essentially the same way as a feature, or does the short film have its own, specific kind of storytelling, not found in the feature?

That's a difficult question for me to answer as I have yet to make a feature film. My experience comes from writing three full length screenplays over the past two years. Since graduating from film school, I have found that there is a huge leap from writing a short and writing a 90 page script. It takes a long time. I have found to my cost that all the hard work goes into the planning, working out the story before you actually set out on writing the script. You can waste so much time trying to figure out the tale as you go along with the longer form.

With a short, I feel so much is dependant on the specific length of the film. I have made shorts of various lengths: 60 seconds, 3 minutes, 8 minutes, 12 minutes, 23 minutes. I feel that depending on the length of the short, there are certain types of story or narrative structures that work better than others.

With anything up to about three minutes in length, I feel the story can be very simple. The film can literally have one 'story' and be like a joke. As long as it finishes well – normally with a bit of humour or a twist – the audience goes away satisfied.

With a longer short film – about 10 minutes in length and more – I feel you need to have a lot more going on. You need to have almost three 'stories' woven into each other. Following one simple situation may feel a little boring. You need to have rounded characters, if

that is the type of story being told. I feel a film around 10 minutes long doesn't really leave much time to stray too far from the main story, everything should lead back into the tale.

When dealing with a film twenty or thirty minutes long, you really need to have a strong idea, rounded characters, a journey. Something needs to happen and things should change. I found when making *The Sheep Thief* that for the first time I had enough time to be able to veer off the central storyline to build character. I could take my time and play with the pacing as I was (hopefully) going to have the audience's attention for a while.

These all sound like sweeping generalizations, but they were the rules I played by. I always considered the length of the film when coming up with the idea and writing the script. Certain ideas don't work when squeezed into 10 minutes. You simply need more time to do the tale justice. In the same way, certain clever or funny or joke-like ideas cannot be spread out over a longer length and work best when short and sweet.

I reckon the main thing to bear in mind, whatever the length of the film, is that it should never be too long. Keep the film tight and leave the audience wanting more.

Do you agree that the short film deserves far greater public exposure than it presently receives?

The short answer is yes. I feel that good, strong short films should be seen by more people to show what can be done with the form. I

can only really answer the question from my experience though here in the UK the number of places where you can see short films is very limited.

There are a few short film festivals – new ones are popping up all over the place – and that will help. Unfortunately here in the UK I feel we just don't have the culture of watching short films. I will never forget going to Clermont-Ferrand and seeing people queuing around the block in the snow, paying money to watch short films well after midnight. I just don't think it would happen here in the UK. Many of the European festivals I have been to also have young juries, school kids are brought along to watch the films, special screenings take place for younger children, and older students at college conducted interviews at Brest and at a few other festivals. Again I haven't seen this happening yet at British festivals. So most of the people who go to screenings are the filmmakers and their friends, and most people outside of this very specialised world never see the films as they are intended – on the big screen.

I know a few cinemas here in London are trying to screen short films up to 10 minutes in length before the main feature but these are primarily the art house cinemas.

Shorts in the main are screened on TV late at night by Channel Four or by BBC 2. The number of places are very limited as often there is a commissioning process and only a few get produced and then shown. Also nearly all of these films need to be 10 minutes in length to fit neatly into the schedules.

Once a year, Channel four has a series of purchased shorts screened. They can be of any length and there is an interesting range of films shown. Unfortunately the programme starts at 11 p.m. and runs until about 3 a.m. – not exactly prime time.

I think somehow someone needs to take a chance. Good shorts need to be seen at the cinema again before the main programme by an unsuspecting audience.

There are more and more film and media courses – more and more shorts being made and somehow we need to get them seen by real people. Who knows? Viewers may even feel inspired to have a go themselves.

What advice would you give to young filmmakers, making their own first short films?

The main thing is to enjoy yourself. To try and surround yourself with people who will be positive, who will push you to try things out.

I took the film school route into filmmaking. It worked for me. I got my hands on equipment, film stock and a crew. Sometimes I was even given a small budget to work with. I would never have been able to put a production together on my own.

But it can be done. The main thing is to believe in yourself as at the end of the day there is no set way, no one knows anything. Make your own rules. You don't have to know anything at first. Just go

off with a video or DVD camera and shoot something, anything. Then look at the footage, try to cut it together and see why certain shots work better than others. The main thing is to learn from your own mistakes and from the mistakes made by the people around you.

I tried my hand at everything on my first few shorts. I wrote, produced, directed, operated the camera and edited. I felt I had to do this to learn about every process. The films were terrible but I knew what each stage encompassed. I then tried to find people to collaborate with who were better than me at camera, producing, etc., so I could concentrate on the story and the directing.

Learning to write is pretty central in my opinion to making your first few films. As you have no track record no one will give you a script. Write your own. The more you write the better you will get. If you can't work out a story, just put down the order in which certain events will take place. Don't get stuck on the dialogue. The structure is vital, the dialogue will keep changing, and you could work it out on set.

All the hard work is done in the prep. Have your script or storyline or the structure all in place before you shoot. It never improves as you shoot it.

Try and set yourself a task with each film. Set the film entirely in one room with only two characters. Shoot an entire film in one

shot. Concentrate on dialogue. Or shoot with no dialogue. Keep pushing and experimenting.

I feel at the beginning and possibly at the end that it can be really positive to have no money, or minimal equipment. Then you have to use your head to find clever ways to make your ideas work.

Work out your shot list, have a plan of each location and where you intend to put the camera. I am not a big fan of tight storyboarding, but simple stick drawings, which enable you to undertand and explain how a sequence will be cut, will really help when things get confusing and you get short of time during the shoot.

Editing is also an important thing to learn about. Not necessarily by cutting one's own footage. But I learned a lot by studying the rushes to see why certain shots felt weak because I was too close to the actor, why certain shots didn't cut together properly because I had not put the camera in the right place.

On my first films, the cutting room was where I learned the most. The production was so badly put together, that we just rushed from one disaster to the next. It was in the cutting room that for the first time I had any peace and quiet and could try to make sense of what we had shot.

I feel it's very important to watch plenty of films, at the cinema and on video, all sorts – commercial and art house – just to see how

they are put together, what makes one unique and another derivative.

Read books by and about filmmakers that interest you. Everyone goes through the same traumas. See how they achieved things. Read plenty of scripts, both long and short. Study the structure of films, the devices used by the writer to pull you into the story and the characters.

Learn to trust your instincts. Everyone will tell you to shoot it one way when you know you want to do it another way. But also know when to listen to your crew. You have to trust one another.

There's so much I could say, but at the end of the day, just go out and shoot. Just do it. You can only really learn by doing it and making your own mistakes. You can't really learn filmmaking by reading a book.

Try to make each film better than your last, then at least you're moving in the right direction.

September 1999
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via e-mail

The Sheep Thief

Tue Sand Larsen and Claus Toft-Nielsen

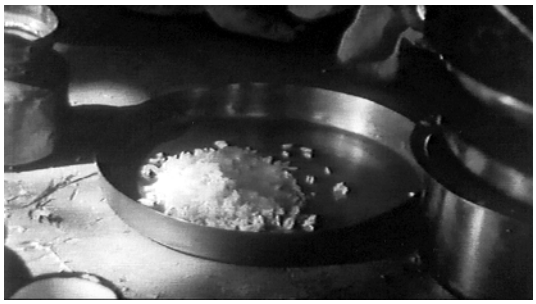
Temporality

The protagonist in *The Sheep Thief* is caught in the act of stealing a sheep, is branded on the forehead and expelled from society. The film is centred around his subsequent struggle to achieve social acceptance and recognition, and it largely obeys the laws and design of classical narration as it portrays the young Indian boy's efforts and eventually his final fall. With a plot that easily summarised it is evident that *The Sheep Thief* doesn't invest its 23 minutes in a complex narrative structure. Hence the question arises as to how time is spent in this production.

Aesthetic devices: To conjure up the mythic in time

An answer to the question posed is most likely to be found in the film's style. *The Sheep Thief* is marked by a lingering mood, a considerable slowness in its posing of tableaus and a constant aesthetic retardation in its narrative development. Far from "just" supporting the protagonist's line of action, the pictures seem to have a life of their own: they are visually meticulously composed and strikingly rich in colours. The pictures leave their spectator with a sensual impression, which is further heightened by the metonymic pars-pro-toto style of the film. Instead of long shots, the spectator is continuously presented with close-ups focusing on everyday artefacts. Composition, colours and light ensure that a rice-bowl,

for instance, is lifted out of its everyday-use context and transformed into a *motif* – an aesthetic category.



However, the artefacts in *The Sheep Thief* are not completely detached from a realistic universe. The spectator does not witness a process of de-realisation by aesthetic means. What he does witness, however, is how the film's stylistic emphasis throws objects into the foreground, thereby giving them additional meaning. They open a door to a mythic plane which coexists alongside the realistic one. Therefore the universe of *The Sheep Thief* is not a uniform, prosaic one. It is, on the contrary, a world charged with meaning and connectedness. Following this line of argument, to be rightfully understood, the artefacts in the film should be interpreted as mediating symbols: present in realistic space, referring to a mythic reality.

The symbols chosen by the film are rather conventional ones and since they are so powerfully and explicitly exposed, they can seem almost naive in character. The tree, for instance, represents a mediating figure. It connects upper and lower, earth and sky, reality and myth and is altogether a category of the in-between. It is through the tree that the outcast protagonist is first given an opportunity to re-enter the social world as he is allowed into the

working community of the family gathering fruit for the market. Through the tree, upper and lower social co-ordinates are levelled and the symbolic value is to a large extent emphasised by the film's choices of stylistic means: via POV-shots going upwards from below the tree combined with POV-shoots going downwards from the crown of the tree, the spectator is given access to both upper and lower planes. The camera angles thus help define the tree as a unifying symbol and the exact same effect is accomplished by several long shots in the film, where trees are placed in the *mise-en-scene* so that earth and skyline meet at their trunks.

A less well-defined but still well-known symbol is the water. At the beginning of the film, the protagonist lies in the middle of a desert, unable to move and suffering from thirst, exhaustion and pain from the branding. Suddenly water pours down from the sky. He rises and begins his Odyssey. Rain pushes the action forward from 'point zero' and invests the story with epic drive. It brings about narrative fertility and the connection between rain, movement and even life is further accentuated by the aesthetics of this particular scene in which the long-shot is superseded by an ultra close-up. Thus, as desert sand and water meet, the spectator is given an impression of heavy movement and an experience of the entire frame almost coming to life. Furthermore, the cutting is accelerated in the sequences following the rainfall, which is particularly noticeable since it makes these sequences stand out from the lingering pace of the rest of the film. Besides representing life and movement, water, just like the trees, represents merging and transgression. Just as it couples earth and sky, it connects the protagonist to the

boys in the family that adopts him. Therefore it is no surprise that the film presents the meeting between water and tree in a visually potent scene, where bark is cut open by the protagonist and golden resin pours down the trunk[1].

Transforming stigma into ornament
A temporary acceptance by society

Following his theft in the beginning of the film, the sheep thief is branded and given a permanent, visual stigma, which becomes a part of the boy. It invades his character, and turns into an almost self-fulfilling prophecy: from the moment of branding and throughout the narrative, theft remains his destiny and any attempt to avoid this seems futile. For instance, our nameless protagonist steals a scarf to cover his brand and hide it from the rest of the world. In Erving Goffman's terms, the brand is transformed from a *discredited stigma* where "the stigmatized assumes that the difference [between himself and society] is known by the members of society or is evident to them" and it becomes a *discreditable stigma* characterised by a difference that "is neither known by members of society nor perceivable by them".[2] Having made his abnormality invisible, the sheep thief is first incorporated into the working community, then let into the fundamental social unit of the family, and eventually accepted into communal life on the authority of a village elder. Gradually our main character works his way into the

[1] Apart from the fact that resin can be considered a combination of water and tree, it is worth noting that the protagonist, by adding a scar to the tree, establishes an identity between the tree and his own character. A shared identity, which is reinforced by the film, that lets both represent the levelling of planes.

[2] George Ritzer, *Sociological Theory*, 3rd ed., International Editions, 1992, p. 361.

social world. But the pervading force of the brand will not be denied and in spite of the social acceptance he is given, the stigma remains an internalised fact within the boy. In every one of the three phases of re-socialisation, disturbing elements threaten to disrupt the harmony: The sheep thief may be let into the working community but is still subjected to a state of paranoia, experiencing what he considers to be surveillance from alien, distrustful and threatening eyes. He is let into the family, but still the film stylistically points out that the inner space of community is continuously complemented by an outer space of ostracism: when we are visually presented to the family cabin, the deep focus establishes a depth of field as a reminder that an outside/outcast position is constantly juxtaposed to the inner family space as a potential danger. A threat coming closer.

Finally, after having been approved by the village counsel the sheep thief is caught up by his past in the shape of the man who had branded him – an incarnation of destiny. Eventually the protagonist's fate is fulfilled. He must obey 'the law of gravity'.

By several means, the process of falling is established as the centre of attention in the film. In the scene mentioned earlier, in which the

family picks fruits for the market, specific emphasis is put on the mangoes' movement from treetop to ground, which is accentuated by audio-visual means. It is clearly established how the fall of the mangoes can be considered a *mise-en-abyme* commenting on the boy's social *déroute*. But as the mangoes' fall proves to be fruitful, so does the sheep thief's. The development of the protagonist is mirrored by the scar on his forehead, which is transformed from an ugly, inflamed wound attracting flies, into a beautiful rounded sign.

As the wound undergoes transformation through the narrative, so does the protagonist. Not in a traditional manner, however. He never fully belongs within the social world but realises, on the contrary, that he can never escape from his stigma. He learns to see himself on the outskirts of society, as a marginal figure and also experiences just how this position can be turned into gain – and rain.

Stealing and conjuring – hiding and exposing

"I can make the sky cry" the protagonist tells the younger boy in the family at the market and plays a simple trick on him: he lures him to focus on the sky, then squirts water in his face, thereby giving the illusion that he can perform "magic". The sheep thief is installed not only as an icon of theft, but also as an icon of magic in

the eyes of the two young boys. That is why, when the family has difficulties selling their mangoes at the market, one of the boys asks the protagonist to do magic that will make people buy their fruits. In the following sequence, and almost as an answer to the request, the protagonist heads towards the temple, presumably to pray to higher forces for a miracle. But once again he is overwhelmed by his fate, which is communicated to the spectator by the film's POV-strategy, where the frame is drawn from the religious icon of the temple to a golden jug. In the next scene, the sheep thief is running away with the jug, his latest object of desire, but he is watched and attacked during his escape. He nevertheless succeeds in holding on to the jug. One of the villagers, who witnesses the scene from a distance, misinterprets the situation and by an almost divine intervention, the protagonist is celebrated as the savior of the jug. In the mythic universe of *The Sheep Thief* misdeed is turned into virtue, and thanks to the reputation that subsequently arises around the protagonist and the family which has taken him under their wing, almost everyone in the village makes a pilgrimage to the family booth at the market. The sheep thief has, in a roundabout way, fulfilled the young boy's request and the dividing line between theft and magic is erased as the former is metamorphosed into the latter.

At the end of the film, we get a pay-off to ensure that the line "I can make the sky cry" becomes almost prophetic in nature: the sheep thief lies on his back on desert rocks, staring into the cloudless sky. The camera focuses on his face and shows the sky's

reflection in his eyes.[3] We cannot fail to see the tear running down his cheek. In an absolutely non-realistic scenario there is a sudden cloudburst. Heavy rain starts pouring down from the blue sky and teardrops and raindrops melt together on the face of the protagonist.

In the fictitious universe of *The Sheep Thief*, the protagonist is literally making the sky cry. He is the boy whose words come true. Situated in the space between the realistic and the mythic plane, he binds the two together. Like the water meeting on his face, he is a figure of transgression and mediation, reconciling binary opposites: always on the edge of society, the sheep thief connects the social world with the individuality of the outcast, belonging with loneliness, and wrong (stealing) with right (doing magic).

Furthermore, like water, he is a link to fertility and life, which is pointed out in his relation to the family, whose material and spiritual needs he meets. This is very well reflected in the film's final line, spoken by the mother answering her son's question as to where the sheep thief has gone: "To help another family", she replies promptly and resolutely.

Before leaving the family, however, the protagonist tears his scarf in two and hands the pieces over to the two kids. With pride they tie them around their foreheads, wearing them as a symbol of gratitude and admiration. *The Sheep Thief* is thus, in short, a story about a thief turning into a magician and a scarf thereby changing

[3] The reflection of the sky colours the sheep thief's eyes in such a way that the two correspond. In this way, the film seems to suggest an underlying harmony between the two.

value: from being a piece of cloth used to conceal, it is turned into an emblem of honour.

The Sheep Thief – spanning two cultures

The Sheep Thief can be understood as a borderline phenomenon. The film has its roots in a predominantly European context and tradition, but at the same time it draws us into a specifically Indian world. It is carefully grown in soil where two cultures meet and this is clearly reflected in its representation. First of all, even though *The Sheep Thief* was directed by a man of Indian ancestry, it was produced at The Royal College of Art, situated in urban London and the European influence manifests itself throughout the film. *The Sheep Thief* is very explicit in its intertextual references, for instance to one of the European masterworks, De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1947). Not only does the title of Kapadia's film bear traces of the canonised Italian neo-realist production, but also on a thematic level, theft is in both cases foregrounded by the narrative as a strategy of survival for the main character. Along with that, *The Sheep Thief* pays tribute to its predecessor in its selection of motifs by carefully scattering a significant number of bicycles in the chase scene at the beginning of the film.

The bicycle is however replaced by a sheep both as a main motif and in the title, as a reminder that Kapadia's film is located in India, primarily dealing with Indian society. *The Sheep Thief* evidently draws inspiration from Indian culture and film culture. A fact which is reflected, for instance, by the simplicity of the thoroughly composed pictures, the pronounced and sensuous colour scheme,

the mythic condensed universe and the deliberately naive use of symbols.

These specifically Indian modes of expression might be considered a brand printed on the forehead of the film. But no attempt is made to hide or cover this brand. On the contrary, it is exposed in a prodigious aesthetic gesture – quite like a diadem.

Point of view in Asif Kapadia's *The Sheep Thief*

Jakob Ion Wille

Opening *The Sheep Thief*

The opening of this short by Asif Kapadia is overwhelming. Under the burning sun, from an Olympian high angle shot, we see a young boy lying on the glowing sand on the one side of two wheel-tracks. After the title-sequence we cut back in time. Now, at ground level, we see the boy hiding in the dark city night. In front of a house, a sheep is tied up. The boy cautiously crawls out of his hiding-place, unties the sheep and grabs it. The theft is soon discovered and the boy, closely pursued by two men, runs through the narrow alleys of the city carrying the animal in his arms. When one of the pursuers reaches out to grab the sheep thief, the latter suddenly stops and hits him with a primitive weapon. The pursuer is hit in the eye and falls to the ground. The sheep thief finds a hiding place under a house, but when he is about to pick up a coin somebody lost in the street, he is discovered by the second pursuer. The punishment for theft is cruel. The boy gets a stigma burnt onto his forehead. His wild hair is cut and he is left to his fate on the sand outside the city.

Later, we shall take a closer look at the ways in which Kapadia establishes the point of view of the main character. The establishment of POV is a critical moment in any movie, but as I will try to show, the solution to the problem in *The Sheep Thief* is particularly refined. I shall also briefly situate the film with respect to genre. But first, back to the plot:

A man stops to help the unconscious boy, but when he discovers the stigma branded on the thief's forehead, he abandons him again. Luckily it starts to rain. The sheep thief wakes up and comes to his feet.

Having walked for a while, he comes to a little village, steals a red scarf from a sleeping woman and ties it around his head to cover the stigma.

The nameless thief helps two boys harvesting a mango tree and succeeds in becoming friends with them. He also shows some magic tricks to the boys, and step by step, they end up trusting him. The boys' mother invites him to stay, provided that he help them with their daily harvesting work, which he does.

But when the family tries to sell the fruit at the village market, no one is interested in buying their produce. The younger of the two brothers asks the thief if he can help them by using his magic.

Possibly inspired by the younger brother, the thief steals a golden lamp from a local temple. Some young men from the village follow him and beat him up. An elderly man observes the attack and as he approaches the scene the attackers hurry away. The thief succeeds in turning the situation to his own advantage. He gives the lamp to the elderly man and tells him that he was trying to prevent the others from stealing it. The sheep thief is suddenly hailed as a hero. After that, the selling of the mangoes becomes a prosperous business.

But soon the past catches up with the thief. The man who had

branded him recognises him at the market, and the next day, the boy is expelled from the village. Before he leaves, he divides his red scarf into two strips and gives one to each brother. The three boys lie on the sand outside the city and for a while they look up at the sky. Suddenly it starts raining and the two brothers return home. The thief walks on and continues towards an uncertain future. "To help another family", as the mother puts it when she and her two sons work around the mango tree again in the closing scene. And one of the boys replies: "He can help them with his magic".

Magic plays an important role in *The Sheep Thief*. One of the poetic highlights of the film is the scene at the market, in which the sheep thief tells the younger of the two brothers that he can make it rain. He asks the boy to look up at the sky and then sprays some water from a bottle at him. Another of these moments we find in the scene in which the thief shows to the brothers how to make resin run from a tree trunk.

This magic represents the one glimpse of hope that exists in *The Sheep Thief* and at the same time it equips the protagonist with some of the inner tension that makes him interesting as an object of identification. I will later take a closer look at the creation of this figure of identification and in that connection, will naturally focus on the dramatic set-up in the film. But first I will briefly comment on both stylistics and genre relations.

Stealing sheep and bicycles

Kapadia's film is entitled *The Sheep Thief,* which almost automatically leads one's thoughts to Vittorio De Sica's neorealistic classic, *The*

Bicycle Thief from 1947. Kapadia's film, like De Sica's, is shot on location, the dialogue is minimal and children and other amateur actors are seen in the leading parts. At the same time, *The Sheep Thief* tells a tragic and stark story about the absolutely lowest level of Indian existence, while never losing sight of the beauty and possibilities inherent in this existence. As a story, *The Sheep Thief* has all the classical neorealistic virtues. The film can be seen as an adventure in a poor but beautiful India and as an illustration of the mechanisms that turn a boy into a thief. It is important to keep in mind that the quality of the film lies in its way of interweaving these problems with a simple plot, but what lifts it beyond just being good and sympathetic craftsmanship is its ambiguity. The richness in nuance is especially obvious in the description of the thief's character and his development.

Point of view

Although it is the meeting with the friendly family that catalyses the thief's transition from wild boy to magician, it is obvious that his stigmatization plays a major role in his development. Had he not been discovered and literally torn out of the darkness that surrounds him in the beginning, he would never have met the family with the mango tree and there would probably not have been any progression at all.

The transition out of the first sequence in the film happens simultaneously with the stigmatising of the boy. As he cries out in pain, the frame burns out and turns white. After that, the boy, whose world was secret before, now lies out in the open for

everyone to see. The contrast could not have been any stronger. There are no easy solutions in the film. It is painful for the boy to become visible.

In the film, the boy continues to steal but the spectator easily forgives him. We can understand the impossible situation he is in, but empathy is also dependent on the emotional involvement of the spectator. It is, as mentioned, a critical moment in most movies if this identification is well established. In *The Sheep Thief* the problem is solved both in an exciting and an effective way.

The set-up and establishment of POV occur in the most dramatic sequence in *The Sheep Thief*. The POV of the film is fixed in this sequence that is defined and framed by the two shots of the boy lying unconscious on the sand. The POV of the boy finds its fixed form during the climax of the sequence as the thief hits his opponent's eye and blinds him. Though *The Sheep Thief* is not a film that in any way questions conventional cinematic codes or the position of the spectator, it provides an interesting solution to the problem of establishing the protagonist's POV, in this case through the destruction of another POV. The action reduces the possibilities for identification. The spectator's POV is established with a violence that is absent in the rest of the film. This sharpens our sensibility to the new world that opens to the thief and to us as spectators. At one and the same time, the dramatic moment in the set-up limits the possibilities for identification and opens the spectator's eyes to the thief's special world.

It is through a refined use of classical dramatic elements in the

setting of a short film that Asif Kapadia opens up his main character. The same can be said about the construction of the protagonist in *The Sheep Thief*.

The secret agent

Of course the protagonist is more than just a construction in a film like *The Sheep Thief*. However it is still possible to extract some essential components from the figure. The main character in the film is, first and foremost, a child and a thief. He is therefore, by definition, both innocent and guilty. The character's inner drive is embedded in this simple antagonism.

At the same time, we have a character who tries to hide his true identity. The main character's hidden identity gives the film its tension and suspense. But at the same time it sets in relief an important aspect of the figure. The protagonist always represents the spectator's eye and is therefore our main point of entrance into the fiction. The main character mediates between the real world outside and the fiction. The boy in *The Sheep Thief* is a stranger, and because of his secret he can never be an integrated part of the world of the family with the mango tree. This again qualifies him as the spectator's agent. Throughout most of the film, the thief even carries a visible mark signifying this. The red scarf hides his second identity and thereby constitutes itself as sign of the boy's main conflict and function. This is classical. But the division in the thief's character also shows up on several levels. The thief is burned by the sun and by the stigma in his forehead, but at the same time, he produces rain and resin. He carries the sign of destruction, but he

makes the family business prosper. The thief mediates several conditions and this tension and the development it encourages makes him attractive and open for identification.

Magic

In short *The Sheep Thief* tells the story of a thief who, not unlike Aladdin, survives by using magic. His development is vitalized through the use of the red scarf and by his progress as a magician. In the beginning the thief shows magic tricks to the brothers, but in the end he may be the cause of a cloudburst. It is then told that he is going to help other families with his magic. The magic represents the glimpse of hope that exists in ***The Sheep Thief***. At the same time ***The Sheep Thief*** represents some of the magic that can be found in the poetic realism of cinema – and maybe in life in general.

Claude Saint Antoine

New York Encounter
[Rencontre à New York]

(France, 1998)

Claude Saint Antoine
NEW YORK ENCOUNTER

(France, 1998), 2 minutes 30 seconds, 35 mm, color

Principal production credits and cast

Director and screenplay	Claude Saint Antoine
Production	Dominique Esmenard, Francis Mataguez
Cinematographer	François Reumont
Sound recording	Jean-Luc Fauvel
Sound mix	Stéphane Joly
Editing	Francis Mataguez, Christine Maffre
Produced and distributed by	Joe & Bob Productions
Helen	Sarah Winkler
Steve	Gordon Elliott

Festivals and Prizes include:

Special Jury Prize, Festival Comédi'Alp à l'Alpe d'Huez, January 1999
Public Prize and Special Jury Prize, Festival Cinéma d'Alès, March 1999
Mention du Jury, Festival de Valenciennes, March 1999
Special Jury Prize, Festival d'Humour de Meudon, October 1999
Quality Award, Centre National de la Cinématographie, 1999
Festival du Film Court de Brest, 1998
22nd Sao Paulo International Film Festival, 1998
17ème Festival du Cinéma International à Rouyn-Noranda, Québec, 1998
Brief Encounters 4, Bristol Short Film Festival, 1998
Alternativa' 98: 5th International Festival of Independent Cinema, Barcelona, 1998
European Competition: 26th International Festival of Cinema, Brussels, 1998
6th Bradford Film Festival, 1999
Avignon-New York French-American Film Festival, 1999
First French Short Film Festival, New York 1999
Cinema Jove: 14th Short Film Competition, Valencia 1999
Filmvideo 99: 50th Mostra Internazionale de Cortometraggio di Montecatini, 1999
Alpine Film Festival, Austria, 1999
Cinéma tout écran de Genève, 1999

Claude Saint Antoine

Born in Toulon in 1970, Claude Saint Antoine moved to Paris with her family when she was seven. She studied photography, film music, theater, holds a law degree, worked in real estate and did some acting. She directed her first short film, *Rendez-vous*, in 1997. Both *Rendez-vous* and *New York Encounter* have been shown in movie theaters throughout France, before feature films.

A shot-by-shot reconstruction of Claude Saint Antoine's *New York Encounter*

Richard Raskin

Shots 1-14 New York mosaic.

Shot 15

Shot 16

Shot 17

Shot 18
Steve *(having bumped into Helen)*: Oh!

Shot 19
Steve: Sor… Sorry.

Shot 20
Steve: I'm sorry.

Shot 21
Steve: Hello. I'm Steve. I'm a lawyer.

Shot 22
Steve: I live on Fifth Avenue at Central Park.

Shot 23
Steve: I earn $250,000 a year.

Shot 24
Helen: Nice to meet you. Helen. I'm a fashion designer. And I guess the windows of my apartment…

Shot 25
Helen: **…** face yours from the west side of Central Park at a distance of…

Shot 26
Helen: …approximately a mile. I earn $100,000 a year.

Shot 27
Steve: Can I ask you a personal question?
Helen: Please.
Steve: Are you married? Divorced? Any children?
Helen: Not at all. You?
Steve: No, no. Could we get together some time very soon?

Shot 28
Helen: I... I... I'm sorry but I have not a single hour available within the next two weeks.

Shot 29
Steve: Ohhh. That puts us into May and I've got a trial - a big one - that starts. It should go about 45 days. That takes us into July. What about July?

Shot 30
Helen: I'm sorry. I don't have a single day available the entire summer either.

Shot 31
Helen: Ah, let's see... Listen: what do you think about…

Shot 32
…ah, the15th of September for a quick lunch?

Shot 33
Steve: Perfect. You've got me.

Shot 34
Helen: Okay.
Steve: All right... Since it seems that we're not…

Shot 35
Steve: …going to see each other until September 15th - six months from now - would it be in any way inconvenient …

Shot 36
Steve: …if I kissed you today instead of waiting til then?

Shot 37

Shot 38
Helen: Not at all.

Shot 39

Shot 40
Helen: Ah, listen, I just... I just remember I... I... might have an occasion in July.

Shot 41
Steve: No.

Shot 42
Helen: No?

Shot 43
Steve: No – I mean yes! I mean…

Shot 44
Steve: …I realize I could have a day off…

Shot 45
Steve: … towards the end of the trial in May.

Shot 46
Helen: I am still available for lunch a week from Friday.

Shot 47
Steve: What about Tuesday?

Shot 48
Helen: What are you doing right now?

Shot 49
Steve: What do you mean, right now?

An Interview with Claude Saint Antoine on *New York Encounter*

Richard Raskin

When we spoke on the phone, you mentioned that there was a story behind the making of New York Encounter.

Well actually I think there is a story behind the shooting of *every* film… I decided to shoot a short film here [in New York] because I was invited by a festival to present my first short film, *Rendez-vous*. It was the first time I was coming here. And I had decided years ago that I wouldn't go to New York unless it was in connection with my work. I didn't want to come as a tourist. It had to be for my work and for something artistic, and at that moment I didn't even know that I would ever be making films. So it was really a dream come true – being invited to a film festival.

Which festival was it?

It was the French-American Film Festival, Avignon-New York. It's a really wonderful *workshop* festival. It begins in Avignon and then they have a session here in New York. And I met some American filmmakers at the Avignon festival and decided to keep in touch with them. There was a director, Michael Bergman, who won an award at that festival for a feature film, *Milk and Money*. We kept in touch and I said "I'm coming to New York" and we decided to do a project together, to shoot a short film. So I arrived for a reading before the festival began, a few days in advance, to meet some

actors, and I decided I would write it in New York, because I had no idea what the city was like. So that's what I did.

I saw some actors at this reading – it was a reading for Michael Bergman's screenplay – I just got off the plane and went directly to the reading. It was surrealistic…

But you didn't have your story yet at that moment?

No, I didn't have the story at that point. I was supposed to spend ten days in New York for the festival. So I arrived three days in advance to see these actors at this private reading. It was like doing a casting without saying that it was a casting. It was the opposite of what I had done with *Rendez-vous*. This time I wanted to have specific actors in mind before I wrote the film. So I saw all those actors and then had to find an idea. For a few days, I couldn't think of anything.

And the second point – it was like a bet – was to make a film that was only 100 seconds long. A very, very short film. To find an idea in New York, with no money *(laughter)*, very short, two three maybe four actors, but something that would be good for the actors too.

And then I wrote the story. I wrote the dialogues in English. And then my bag was robbed, with the dialogues and everything inside. And it's very difficult when you write something like that, especially when it's not in your own language, to remember exactly

what you wrote. Sometimes you re-read what you just wrote and say: ”Oh, did I really write this?”

So when my bag was robbed with the script in it, I was a bit depressed. But eventually I was able to reconstruct the lines I had written. And we started making jokes, saying that maybe the person who stole the bag would make his own film with the same script, and it would be funny to see the difference *(laughter)*. But it never happened – at least not yet. Now I guess it’s too late for him.

So then the script was written. And I had thought about two actors: Sarah Winckler and Gordon Elliott – actors I saw at the reading and who were really great. Michael Bergman helped me to get in touch with the actors, and he organized the shooting. He called Gordon who was just leaving for a few days, to do some work in L.A. We had sent him the script and he said: ”OK, I agree”. But we had to wait until he got back to New York. So I decided to postpone my trip back to France. I stayed an extra week. And I met Sarah who also agreed.

The shooting was supposed to begin on a Thursday and the weather was very bad. It was raining. Storms were predicted for Friday and Gordon didn’t arrive until Wednesday night. So Thursday was the only day we could shoot.

We went to Rockefeller Center, which I had chosen on the previous Monday as the location for the shooting. And they were so nice to us. I didn’t know that you were supposed to get permission in

advance. Everything had been so improvised. I thought you could just shoot in the street as long as you didn't put a tripod on the ground. But it was not really "the street" because it was Rockefeller Center which is private property. Normally you have to ask for permission one month in advance. We left the location on the Monday and one day later, they called back and said it was okay. Maybe they were so nice to us because they said: "it's a very short film, and it's French and it's funny".

Thursday came, we did the shooting and we all really enjoyed it. It took so little time, not even an entire day. For the title sequence, I wanted shots of very crowded places in New York. But it was quite difficult to find the right locations because it wasn't as sunny as usual for the end of April or beginning of May, and there weren't that many people outside. So we had to try to find places with a lot of people and went into the subway.

Then we arrived at the set at Rockefeller Center at about 11 a.m. We had a cup of coffee and talked with the actors about the film and about life. After that warm-up we did some rehearsing. And the shoot itself went very quickly. When people have confidence and the rhythm is right, things can go so smoothly. The only problem was the weather changing from rain to sun right in the middle of the shooting.

I had seen Sarah earlier to choose her dress and her scarf. But Gordon just arrived. And it was amazing. I really admire their work. By about 4 o'clock, we were done.

Did you film the entire dialogue continuously, several times, or did you did you do it one line at a time?

No, we didn't have that much film. And it was not very long. Actually, there were two main parts: before the kiss and after the kiss, because the emotions are different in each of those sections. The actors were so good that we didn't need to make a lot of takes. At the most two for any one shot, and only one for some of the shots.

Your first short, Rendez-vous*, is also about time.*

Ah, you've noticed that.

Yes. Is this a kind of pattern? Is time something that preoccupies you in your own life?

Yes. It's funny because when you make a second short film, you realize what it has in common with the first, and you begin to become aware of what you are interested in. Yes, time is important to me… And when I arrived here in New York, people were talking about time – all the time! So that's how I imagined those two characters.

Now for me, New York Encounter *is about two people who don't live in the present. Is that the way you see the story?*

Yes, I think that's a good way to see the story. Some people see *New York Encounter* as a love story. I think it's more a time story. It's very painful not to live in the present. And I think when you are passionate, you live in the present.

What about the opening lines in which Steve and Helen tell each other how much money they make. Is this just a funny idea that came to you or do you see New Yorkers as people who think this way?

They were funny lines that came to me, just like that, but they were also connected to what I have actually heard here [in New York]. When New Yorkers saw the film, they really laughed and loved it. I had thought that Americans might be offended by the film, but not at all. They came to me and said: "How did you get us so quickly? That's really what New Yorkers are like. Did you live here?" But I had only been here for a week when I wrote the script.

Is there any advice you might give to students who are about to make their own short films for the first time?

I don't think I can really give advice to anybody. But at the same time, I understand that when you are a student, anything someone can tell you can be very helpful – even if it's wrong!

For me, it's not about making films. It's about life. I think life is more important than films… What I really want is to move people by making them laugh, maybe cry just a little. For me, that's what films do: move people. And if you want to do that, you have to really *enjoy* the work. You have to work with people you feel connected to and have a wonderful human time with them. That's what's important to me.

14 December 1999
New York

What's so funny?
Reflections on jokes and short films

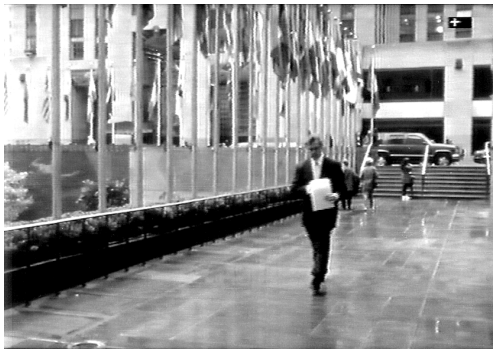
Mette Hjort

The short film is in many ways the neglected stepchild of cinema studies. And yet, much like the figure in the fairy tales, this type of film-making does, in fact, warrant critical attention. Indeed, a careful scrutiny of selected short films can contribute usefully to ongoing research programs having to do with the cognition and aesthetic appreciation of cinematic images. The annual Short Film Symposium held at Aarhus University and organized by Richard Raskin has helped in recent years to bring this kind of film into focus. At the same time articles in *p.o.v.* by, among others, Johannes Riis (1998), Bevin Yeatman (1998), and Richard Raskin (1998) have identified a number of key questions having to do with how the constraints characteristic of short-film production provide the conditions for creative practices that are guided, ideally, by certain narrative parameters.

I would like here to continue this promising line of work by looking briefly, not at a *type* of film-making – the short – but at a *genre* within that general type – the comic short film. Many short-film directors interested in prompting laughter gravitate toward forms of narration that bring to mind the organizing principles of verbal jokes. On closer reflection this is anything but surprising, for in jokes, much as in shorts, the act of telling typically unfolds within a highly restricted temporal framework. As a result the successful

joke teller tends to pursue the goal of laughter with a single-minded intent that is quite different, for example, from the multiple intentions that might guide the comic novelist. The latter, after all, has *time* to foster a far more differentiated set of cognitive and affective responses. Indeed, a more generous temporal framework for narration seems to dictate a variety of communicative intentions, otherwise the result would in all likelihood be overwhelmingly monotonous. Jokes, then, be they narratives or riddles, are highly streamlined, efficient instances of verbal communication. And this narrative economy, I want to argue, appeals naturally to directors interested in contributing to the genre of the comic short film.

The film I would like to explore in this context is *New York Encounter* (1998), directed by the French film-maker, Claude Saint Antoine (b. 1970). This two-and-a-half minute short begins with a series of brief establishing shots of New York street and subway life, edited in such a way as to suggest a generalized sense of frenzy. Two medium-long shots subsequently introduce us to the film's protagonists. The woman, Helen (Sarah Winkler), furiously studies her agenda while walking rapidly toward a flight of stairs. The man, Steve (Gordon Elliott), frenetically tears open an envelope while inadvertently pursuing a collision course with Helen. The two



collide, and Steve's response, after a quick apology, is to introduce himself as an eminently desirable partner: "Sorry. Hello. My name is Steve. I am a lawyer. I live on 5th Avenue at Central Park. I earn 250,000 dollars a year." Helen is in no way taken aback by the nature of the introduction and responds as follows: "Nice to meet you. Helen. I'm a fashion designer. And I guess the windows of my apartment face yours from the West side of Central Park at a distance of approximately one mile. I earn 100,000 dollars a year." Steve goes on to pose a direct question about Helen's marital status. Having determined that she is neither married nor divorced and has no children, Steve requests to see her again soon. Helen proves willing, but the packed schedules of these two professionals quickly become a serious obstacle:

> Helen: I'm sorry. But I've not a single hour available within the next two weeks.
> Steve: That puts us into May. And I've got a trial, a big one, that starts and should go about 45 days. That takes us into July. What about July?
> Helen: I'm sorry. I don't have a single day available the entire summer either. Let's see. Listen. What do you think about the 15th of September for a quick lunch?
> Steve: Perfect. You got me.

After a brief pause for reflection, Steve utters another pointed question, thereby initiating further hectic attempts to coordinate schedules and desires:

> Steve: Since it seems that we're not going to see each other until September 15th, six months from now, would it be in any way inconvenient if I kissed you today instead of waiting until then?
> Helen: Not at all.
> Helen: Listen. I just remember. I might have an occasion in July.
> Steve: No.
> Helen: No?
> Steve: No. I mean yes. I mean I realize I could have a day off toward the end of trial.

Helen: I am still available for lunch a week from Friday.
Steve: What about Tuesday?
Helen: What are doing right now?
Steve: What do you mean 'right now'?

The film's final image is of Steve's puzzled face as he ponders the implications of Helen's suggestion that the present moment might be free of work-related obligations. The dialogue, acting style, and camera angles combine to make Helen and Steve the object of gentle mockery and encourage the viewer to laugh at the workaholic attitudes that define the self-understandings of these two New Yorkers. Helen and Steve are presented throughout as members of an alien tribe and their laughable foibles become apparent through the mobilization of background beliefs capable of generating broadly cross-cultural comparisons.

New York Encounter, I contend, is, and is meant to be, funny. The question, then, is what makes this short film humorous. In order to respond to this question I propose to make use of Noël Carroll's (1991) insightful account of jokes. Carroll's starting assumption in "On Jokes" is that jokes have "underlying structural principles" (285) that set them apart from other forms of verbally mediated humor. His analysis focuses on verbal riddles and narratives that conclude with punch lines, although he does mention briefly the sight gags that might appear at first blush to be the visual correlates of jokes. Carroll's references to Buster Keaton are, however, meant only to contest the idea that jokes and sight gags share defining features. As a result, the interesting concept of visual and audio-visual jokes is left entirely unexplored. That joking behavior may include audio-visual expression is, I believe, amply illustrated, not

only by Saint Antoine's *New York Encounter* but by many other shorts, such as Ariel Gordon's *Goodbye Mom* (Mexico, 1997), which figured centrally in an earlier issue of this journal (March 1999). The task, then, is to understand, among other things, what verbal and audio-visual jokes have in common and how they diverge as a result, perhaps, of media-related properties. In the present context my aim is merely to point, very generally, in the direction of some possible responses to these kinds of questions.

What, then, according to Carroll are the salient features of jokes? His claim is that,

> *x* is a joke if and only if (1) *x* is integrally structured, verbal discourse, generally of the form of a riddle or a narrative (often a fantastical narrative), (2) concluding with a punch line, whose *abruptly* puzzling nature, (3) elicits, usually quite quickly, a determinate interpretation (or determinate range of interpretations) from listeners, (4) which interpretation solves the puzzle and fits the prominent features of the riddle or narrative, but (5) involves the attribution of at least one gross error, but possibly more, to the characters and/or implied tellers of the riddle or narrative, and/or involves the assumption of at least one such error by the implied or actual listener, (6) which error is supposed to be recognized by the listener as an error (293).

On the whole, the emphasis here on determinate meanings and uptake within a broadly conversational model seems quite promising. Unlike many other forms of communicative expression in the spheres of art or play, the very concept of a joke is predicated on the idea of the listener grasping a precise solution to a given conundrum. Jokes imply the possibility of "getting it," that is, understanding how a particular utterance solves some puzzle. As Carroll points out, it is possible to "get" a joke without finding it particularly funny. "Getting it," then, presupposes comprehension,

but not necessarily appreciation. Ideally, however, jokes elicit both comprehension and appreciation.

Although Carroll's general approach seems correct, some of the points specified above generate an overly restrictive definition of jokes. The first claim is that jokes necessarily are a matter only of "integrally structured, verbal discourse." And the very point of discussing *New York Encounter* in the present context is, of course, to suggest that we would do well to think of jokes as finding audio-visual as well as verbal expression. The second clause specifies not only that jokes conclude with punch lines, but that these punch lines themselves are puzzles to be solved by identifying fairly quickly some determinate answer. Yet, is it really the case that *all* punch lines are puzzling in the specified sense? It seems, rather, that jokes divide into at least two categories, one of which includes jokes that satisfy the second clause in Carroll's definition, the other jokes ending with punch lines that, rather than generating new puzzles, merely provide immediately graspable solutions to the conundra initially posed by the riddles or narratives in question. An example of a joke belonging to the first category would be the following:

> Question: What do you get when you cross a penis with a potato?
> Answer: A dicktater.

'Dicktater,' which when pronounced is indistinguishable from 'dictator,' is a puzzling punch line inasmuch as it makes sense only once the listener remembers that 'dick' is slang for penis and 'tater' for potato. The punch line serves a quite different function,

however, in the following example, which is said to have been one of Ronald Reagan's favorite jokes.

> A man's car breaks down in the vicinity of a farm where he seeks help. Upon arrival he notices a pig with a wooden leg in the yard and queries the farmer about this unusual animal. The farmer responds: "Oh, that's an amazing pig. There was a fire in the barn one evening and the pig found its way into the house and up the stairs, so that it could wake us up. I swear that pig saved our lives. It's an amazing pig." The visitor, still puzzled, asks: "But what about the wooden leg?" To which the farmer responds: "Hell, you cain't eat a pig like that all at once."

In this case the puzzle has to do, not with the punch line, but with the existence of a pig with a wooden leg. The punch line merely gives the listener access to a set of unusual, but immediately comprehensible, attitudes and beliefs that make sense of the animal's condition.

What the above examples suggest is that Carroll is wrong to claim that the two components identified by rival accounts of jokes can be fused in a single model:

> A joke, on my view, is a two-stage structure, involving a puzzle and its solution. One advantage of the two-stage model is that it can dissolve the apparent debate between what are called surprise theorists (Hobbes, Hartley, Gerard, Kant) – who maintain that laughter is a function of suddenness or unexpectedness--and configurational theorists (Quintilian, Hegel, Maier) – who see humor as a function of things "falling into place." On the two-stage account, each camp has identified an essential ingredient of the joke: sudden puzzlement, on the one hand, versus a reconfiguring interpretation, on the other. The mistake each camp makes is to regard its ingredient as *the* (one and only) essential feature. The two-stage model incorporates both of their insights into a more encompassing theory (288).

That there may be a problem with Carroll's two-stage model, which presupposes punch lines that themselves are puzzling, is suggested by the phrasing of point (3). The puzzling nature of the punch line,

we are told, "elicits, *usually quite quickly* [emphasis added], a determinate interpretation (or determinate range of interpretations) from listeners" (293). In the case of the penis-and-potato joke, the response generates surprise and, if not bewilderment, then at least an amused acknowledgment of the fact that the punch line is designed to be puzzling. In the case of the wooden-legged pig joke, on the other hand, the determinate interpretation provided by the punch line is a matter of understanding how insight into the farmer's attitudes and world view "reconfigures"– to use the terminology associated with Quintilian, Hegel, and Maier – the significance of the situation initially described. It seems, then, that the elements of surprise and reconfiguration are best thought of, not as defining features of rival accounts, nor as central elements in an all-encompassing model, but as traits that define the distinctiveness of two categories of jokes. It is my suspicion, although I cannot argue the point here, that audio-visually mediated jokes typically involve punch lines that reconfigure rather than puzzle.

At this point it is time to determine whether, or to what extent, *New York Encounter* draws on the basic structural principles of jokes. It is helpful in this respect to begin by examining some of our most basic classificatory intuitions about the narrative in question. The story told in *New York Encounter*, I want to contend, resembles jokes targeting ethnic, regional or professional groups and appeals to our expectations about how such narratives or riddles work. *New York Encounter* makes sense as a narrative designed to provoke laughter precisely because of the viewer's familiarity, for example,

with jokes about lawyers, doctors, Belgians, and other target groups. Indeed, the viewer quickly understands that *New York Encounter* gently mocks the mores of a particular social group that is defined by profession and location, namely, upwardly mobile, New York workaholics.

The story told in *New York Encounter* does not, of course, unfold in the manner of classic jokes targeting ethnic or social groups, for we are not dealing here with an instance of face-to-face communication involving the possibility of a direct question and response, as is the case in riddles. Nor are we dealing with a medium that can readily accommodate the kinds of narrators that are presupposed by verbal narrative jokes and figure centrally in short stories or novels. Questions having to do with whether cinematic narration presupposes narrators in much the way that narration in the novel and related genres does have been the object of intense debate in recent times (Wilson 1986, 1997; Levinson 1996) and cannot be seriously explored here. Suffice it to say that the absence of a straightforward riddle or narrative structure involving a clear-cut punch line does not in and of itself disqualify *New York Encounter* from inclusion in the category of jokes. Instead, I would want to suggest, the relevant absence points to some of those features of cinematic narration that have a direct bearing on the specific nature of audio-visual jokes. At the same time, it is important to note that the viewer senses throughout that a gifted comedian would have no trouble paraphrasing the story told in *New York Encounter* in ways that make use of the classic riddle form ("How do you know when a New York workaholic is experiencing love at first sight?"

Or, "What's the difference between a hooker and a New York workaholic?" and so on).

New York Encounter does not conclude with a punch line, but instead encourages certain determinate inferences and interpretations by means of a series of punch-line-like utterances: Steve's "Since it seems that we're not going to see each other until September 15th, six months from now, would it be in any way inconvenient if I kissed you today instead of waiting until then?"; Helen's "What are you doing right now?"; and Steve's "What do you mean 'right now'?" Helen and Steve are, of course, amusing from the outset on account of their urgency and self-seriousness, but these three utterances play a special role within the unfolding story. In *New York Encounter*, then, distributed humor is punctuated at key moments by questions that resemble punch lines inasmuch as they prompt interpretive reconfiguration. Up until the moment when Steve asks for a kiss, the exchange has ostensibly been governed by a desire simply to meet again and by obstacles engendered by the packed schedules that both produce and are a sign of professional success. Steve's question is a turning point, for whereas earlier remarks outlined a distant temporal horizon, the final part of the exchange emphasizes a radical shrinking of time. Having previously contemplated the prospect of some luncheon at an absurdly distant time in the future, the viewer is made privy in a subsequent moment to talk that ultimately identifies the punctual *now* as the most desirable time for a *future* encounter. The three questions shed a sudden, reconfiguring light on the workaholic's inner space. What is being pursued, it turns out, is not simply an

exploratory meeting, but the positive conclusion to such a meeting. So eager is Steve for this positive conclusion that he is willing to skip all the traditional exploratory moments. And Helen, it turns out, not only shares Steve's desires but his unusual way of thinking. Beneath the workaholic's smooth and monied exterior, we discover personal desperation. And this desperation, the viewer is encouraged smugly to reason, is self-inflicted by the workaholic's questionable values and priorities.

The punch-line-like utterances have the effect of allowing the viewer to identify the gross errors that govern the workaholic's thinking. This is crucial, for in Carroll's mind, jokes involve either the attribution of at least one "gross error" (293) to the narrative's characters and/or the "assumption" (293) of such an error by the listener (and by extension, viewer). Helen and Steve, the viewer notes, err in multiple ways: their values are confused; they systematically conflate distinct spheres of human interaction, engage in self-deception, and commit basic errors in logic. The workaholic's blind and personally debilitating commitment to work leads, it would appear, to an inability to recognize that the kind of means-end rationality that is appropriate within contexts of work and exchange cannot provide adequate guidance within other spheres. Here we have a vivid illustration of what Jürgen Habermas has called the "colonization" of life-worlds by systems involving abstract steering mechanisms. The workaholic, it is clear, has lost sight of the fact that, at least within modern, western contexts committed to notions of romantic love, the choice of a life partner is not meant to be determined primarily by profession, address, and

income. The workaholic's willingness to allow the norms of work to become all-encompassing has the effect of undermining all significant differences between romantic courtship behavior and any crass pick-up subjected to the laws of exchange. The workaholic emerges as a creature of self-deception whose self-understandings privilege money and success at the expense of a series of more basic desires that fail to receive appropriate attention. The extent to which the workaholic's thinking is impaired is deliciously underscored by the temporal confusions that equate 'soon' with the 'distant future' and finally with the 'punctual now.'

New York Encounter, it seems, explicitly *thematizes* what Carroll considers to be one of the central traits of jokes and their uptake: the conflict between "optimality" and "rationality" (292). Carroll's point is that the listener is encouraged to resolve the punch line's puzzle by producing an interpretation that is optimal in its ability to make sense of the joke's various elements but in some way opposes rationality. Interestingly, in *New York Encounter* this tension between optimizing behavior and rationality is explicitly explored at the level of the narrative's theme. After all, the upwardly mobile workaholic is the very incarnation of the self-centered optimizer. And yet, as the couple's laughable antics make clear, optimizing under the wrong circumstances leads only to the most absurd of results.

New York Encounter, I have been arguing, suggests that joking behavior may find audio-visual as well as purely verbal expression. In my mind Carroll's definition of verbal jokes provides a useful starting point for reflections on the nature of the audio-visual jokes

that figure centrally in many comic short films. At the same time, his account requires modification, for there are key differences, it turns out, between verbal and audio-visual jokes; and some of these differences are best explained in terms of the specific possibilities and limitations, or standard utilizations, of the media in question. The aim here has not been to provide the required revisions, but to gesture toward some of the interesting issues that might repay extensive, in-depth analysis at some future point.

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New York Encounter
The irony of convention and variation

Edvin Vestergaard Kau

You must remember this
A kiss is still a kiss
A sigh is just a sigh
The fundamental things apply…

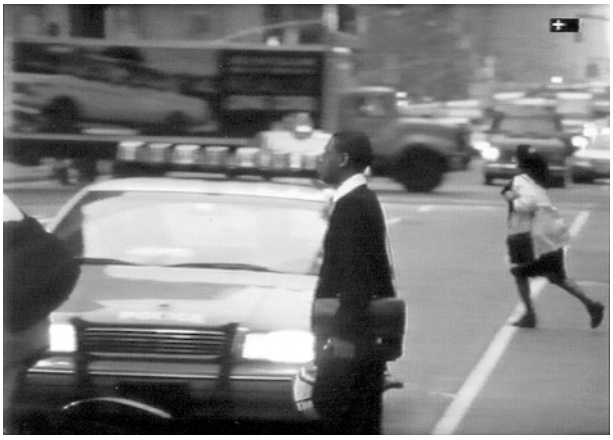
The kiss.

At first sight, *New York Encounter* may look like nothing but a script idea, a brief joke, which may not even merit being transposed from screenplay to screen.

But then you may start thinking differently. What we have is the well-known boy-meets-girl story, but with a twist, and the way *Encounter's* twisting variations are concentrated, timed, and articulated against obvious conventions, is a vital part of its charm.

First, we have the simple structure of, if not Redford & Streisand or Gere & Roberts, then other characters representing Man and Woman, meeting each other in the busiest setting of all busy

settings: New York. In sum: busy people, heavy traffic, Man and Woman. Helen and Steve bump into each other, agree to have lunch together, but can't find time for the date in their busy schedules. But after their first kiss, on the spot – instead of waiting six months for it – they decide otherwise and agree to have lunch not later, but *now*. The end – and they (may) live happily ever after.



"New York" - the convention.

So, apart from the story structure, the first convention we are presented with is New York, the very busy metropolis, populated with very busy and restless people. This is the reputation and picture of the Big Apple we are presented with time and again, for instance in films and television series, and we know the hectic, nerve-wracking pulse of it from shows like *NYPD*. Parts of the picture are even showcased and discussed, though with ironic distance, in Woody Allen movies.

What we may see as characteristic in *Encounter* is a deliberate twisting and exaggeration of these conventions in the setting, mise-

en-scène, and characters, enhancing the *NYPD*-like pulse of city life plus the Allenesque persons within this urban panorama.

"Very busy" - the convention.

After Helen and Steve have bumped into each other, they must inevitably make the appointment to have lunch together. Only, the twist to this convention is, on the one hand, that they settle on a date six months in the future, and on the other, that as a result of the kiss (another conventional element, although not always brought about in this way!), they completely turn the appointment upside down: a consequence of the prospect of a break of six months in a relationship that has barely started, or which may be only a hardly realized hope, Steve's suggestion is that they kiss each other now.

The next convention in a movie romance is that we witness the happy lunch scene, now that both kiss and appointment have become a reality. But in the first place, the appointment is made in this rather unusual way, and secondly, we are *not* allowed to see this love feast.

Helen suggests that they have lunch now, and acceptance as well as happy disbelief are in Steve's question at the end: "What do you mean, right now?" Cut. The End. So, immediately after the beginning of a hopefully beautiful relationship, a *cut* blocks out the rest of the story! Not only the distribution and ironic use of narrative structure, but also the editing at this point is part of a playful, teasing practice right up to the very end. Up until this surprising and entertaining break and interplay between plot and cut, the editing and camera work are very traditional. On the one hand, this visual style monitors the characters' reactions (including their gradual loss of professional and blasé armor). On the other, it is important to stick to the traditional way of cutting back and forth between the two during the dialogue, and to do this with shots from inconspicuous angles and perspectives. As a result, we have the surprise of how their schedule for a date is turned upside down, and this payoff is achieved by playing off the editing against the dialogue in the split-second of the ending.

I have tried to point out what I see as an important element in *Encounter*: the balance between conventions and contrasting variations. This little joke, the entertaining idea of showing emotions (if not as love at first sight, then love at first bump plus two or three cuts), would not have worked out, I think, if (1) its narrative and lines of dialogue had been played out within (2) a traditional editing of shots *and at the same time* the use of conventions like those mentioned above. The variation of the boy-meets-girl story and the last cut, on the other hand, make room for the playful irony in the tension between convention and variation.

Furthermore, this narrative and stylistic strategy offers the audience two paths to follow: what we hear and what we see. Just watch those eyes, while Helen and Steve are babbling away during their first few lines (or for that matter, most of the dialogue)!

New York Encounter is, in this way, a demonstration of cinema's capacity to take a written idea and give it tactile and aesthetic substance and impact. This is done through cinematic style and narrative pattern, in this case with a result which is arguably both emotionally satisfying and charged with a quiet humor. At the same time this helps to keep a certain ironic distance with respect to the potentially banal conventions of media depictions of the hectic life, busy professionals, and superficial human relations of world metropolises, especially New York, or what the rest of the world is endlessly told about this city.

What do you mean, right now?

Encounter's irony and Helen and Steve's decision to have lunch immediately may be seen as a contribution to breaking down the New Yorkers' self-image of being very important people with no

time to really meet - and maybe even the provincial conception of New York as *the* most important place on Earth.

New York Encounter or the breaking of the rules

Søren Kolstrup

This ultra short fiction film relies basically on language. The plot is based on language; language makes the action progress after an initial visual event. Only at one particular moment does the visual action take over.

A pedantic introduction: a reminder of the rules of conversation

Language in this film works by breaking some of the fundamental rules of conversation.

A normal conversation is built up of very small units, either adjacency pairs such as question-answer, action-reaction, etc. or of more complicated triple moves such as request-reply-feed-back. The opening of a conversation has specific rules. There are even rules for closing a conversation, or better still, a linguistic interaction. Moreover there are rules for the linguistic exchanges in specific (social) situations and rules bound to the different roles we have in specific conversations, etc. We expect every one to talk according to these rules and are shocked if people do not. Finally there are different social norms regulating the content of the exchanges: what are we allowed to tell to which conversation partner in which situation? These (social-semantic) rules are as different from culture to culture as the rules for the construction of the linguistic sequences. (For more details see the "General note".)

The conversational movement

The dialogue in this film can be divided into five movements:

1. Steve: Oh ..Sor… - Helen: ..$100,000 a year
2. Steve: Can I . . – Steve: No, no
3. Steve: Could we. . – Helen: Okay
4. Steve: All right (??). . Helen: Not at all
5. Helen: Ah listen . . – Steve: right now??

Each of these small movements or exchanges is characterised by a specific use of, or playing with the rules of conversation and the rules of appropriate behaviour. (That is, which type of discourse is appropriate in a given situation.)

Establishing of the story and the social background in exchange 1

The two persons meet each other in a clash, a jump cut that is not according to the Hollywood rules for establishing scenes. We have been warned! This opening movement breaks the rules of conversation in a rather brutal way. Each of the lines of dialogue consists of five elements which, in a normal conversation, would be linked as five exchanges (reciprocal pairs or triple moves). Here we have a reconstruction of a normal exchange, which, had it really taken place, would have been extremely boring.

1: Oh, sor.. sorry. I am sorry → expression of forgiving…….

2: I am Steve → Nice to meet you. Helen

3: Non verbal expression → I am a lawyer (+ expression)→ I am a fashion designer

4: Non verbal expression → I live on Fifth Avenue at Central Park (? Expression) → I guess the windows of my apartment face yours from the west side of Central Park at a distance of approximately a mile.

5: I earn $250,000 a year → I earn $100,000 a year

Clearly the actual text has avoided all the introductory stuff: the opening with the triple moves, not for the sake of the economy but to create a new sense, some kind of connotation.

What happens when the five exchanges in the normalised version are reduced to one, when the rules for verbal exchanges are broken?

The words have an effect of straightness, of efficiency and already at this syntactic-pragmatic level they give us a sense of ironical distance. We have been warned once more; the two rejoinders are a contract. This first movement is a (gentle) parody of the way we open up for new relations – at least if we are well off, middle class Americans.

The first movement establishes equally well some other values (other than straightness and efficiency): the American attachment to material values, to prestigious living and to trendy jobs – the ones we all know from television.

Finally, the opening establishes or introduces the gender values or characteristics. Steve takes the initiative, he earns more than she, he is taller than she is. This last point is clearly indicated by the camera angle. He is seen in a low angle shot (the way she sees him). She is seen with a bird's eye view (the way he sees her). We are presented with three paradigms: the paradigm of initiative (from initiative to passiveness), the paradigm of richness (more or less rich, that is, degrees of richness), and the paradigm of size. This way of stressing the paradigms behind the syntagmatic development is an old procedure. In Hans Christian Andersen's

story "The Tinderbox" we have the same use of paradigmatic exposition:

Copper money	eyes like teacups	normal big dog
Silver money	eyes like mill's stones	very big dog
gold money	eyes like "Runde tårn"	enormous dog

The usefulness of the paradigmatic exposition is of course that it presents a description in a simple and clear pattern. In minimum time we know how the elements are related. The matching elements of the opening point out the paradigmatic structure of the world.
All this with ironic distance.

Exchange 2: **establishing the personal background**

This small exchange is much more "normal", but Steve continues anyhow to ask three questions in one block. This is still against the normal rules for conversation. Moreover it is equally aimed against the rules of discourse used in court, where the poor accused must answer each of these identification questions before the examination can continue. Helen gives a global answer "no", but adds "at all" which is not logical because it implies extent or degree of – and in normal procedures you are either married or not (from a legal point of view), either you have children or you haven't (that is, you have been recognised as a father or mother). This little "at all" reduces the professional discourse of Steve and she begins to take initiatives.

Exchange 3: establishing the contract

Now the structure of dialogue becomes absolutely normal, as it has to! Steve plays the role of the man who takes the initiative, who has a goal. Yet they both postpone the date to save their social image: the busy modern people who can only foresee a quick lunch five months from now. However, in order to play this postponing strategically, you must use a normal dialogue pattern for the request or type of reply. This is exactly what happens in the film. Only such a dialogue pattern can construct the narrative basic line, which leads to the temporary halt in "okay".

Exchange 4: lawyer's arguments and action-reaction

They have got a date, but the narrative cannot stop here. There is a narrative movement but it would have to come to a stop without solution or with a half solution. The narrative has to continue.

Steve proposes that a date implies kissing. This he does using a strongly professional discourse, the language usage of the lawyers. He begins with a formal, argumentative or explanatory conjunction "since" and continues by using a hypothetical construction "it seems". He uses a formal polite style and a hypothetical mode "would it be… inconvenient". The expression "in any way" denotes the lawyer's prudence taking into account all possible inconveniences or misfortunes that his question might arouse.

Now, finally language leaves room for non-linguistic action: the kissing. The film might stop here: it begins with a physical action, builds the rest of the narrative on linguistic elements to end with a physical action and a psychological state (where she is visibly pleased after the kiss). Truth lies in the picture, while language can

be true or it can cheat us! Yet her expression (truth) makes the five (not six!) months' waiting psychologically unacceptable!

Exchange 5: the hour of truth

The lawyer's discourse collapses. The protagonists repeat words, they stumble, they are uncertain. The social image crumbles. The dialogue resembles more and more a simple every day conversation. Steve has lost initiative, asks simple questions, and he no longer knows what his position is. The lawyer has vanished. By contrast, she is in possession of the initiative for making the date come closer and closer. They rushed forward when Steve proposed the date; they rush back after the kiss.

Then, if you begin to count and examine the details (a very pedantic procedure), you will see that now the trial will be finishing "towards the end of May" instead of at a date "that takes us into July".

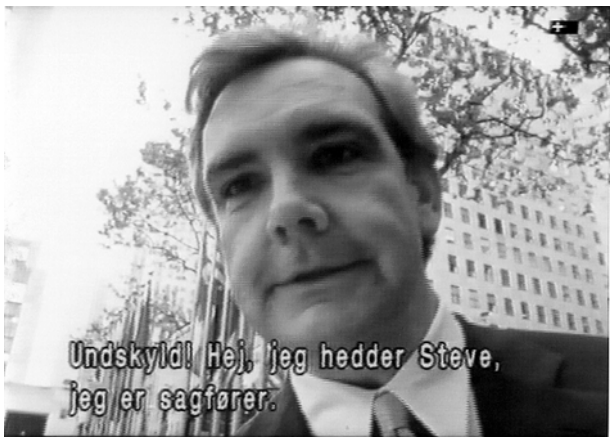
Conclusion

This ultra short film is constructed according to fundamental narrative rules. It does so on the background of a paradigmatic skeleton (social and gender values). However, the effects of the film, its humor and irony are based on the breaking of the social rules for conversation and other linguistic exchanges. It is absolutely necessary that the viewing audience at least knows the fundamentals of these rules.

General note

You can find the rules for conversations and other linguistic face to face exchanges in an astonishing number of texts. I recommend the following:

Margaret Berry (1987): "Is teacher an unanalysed concept?" in Halliday and Fawcett (ed): *New developments in systemic linguistics*. London New York, Frances Pinter.
Robert Vion (1992): *La communication verbale.* Paris, Hachette.



On dialogue-based storytelling in the short fiction film

Richard Raskin

It is possible to distinguish between two different modes of storytelling in the short fiction film: non-verbal and dialogue-based. Roman Polanski's masterpiece, *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (Poland, 1958, 15 min.), is a perfect example of the non-verbal variety, and Polanski himself categorically argued that dialogue is out of place in a short film, stating for example:

> I think that in a short it's unpleasant to use dialogue. It's like a *piece* of a feature film... When you use people in a short, if they talk you expect it's going to last for two hours. It's not natural, not proper to the form.[1]

Some of the best short fiction films of the late 20th Century follow Polanski's lead in telling their stories without dialogue, such as Liz Hughes's *Cat's Cradle* (Australia, 1991, 12 min.), Marianne Olsen Ulrichsen's *Come* (Norway, 1995, 4 min. 30 sec.) and Marcell Iványi's *Wind* (Hungary, 1996, 6 min.), to name only three which were presented in earlier issues of **p.o.v.**[2]

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[1] From an interview appearing in Joseph Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971), pp. 144-145.

[2] Articles and other material on *Cat's Cradle* can be found in **p.o.v.** no. 1 (March 1996), on *Come* in **p.o.v.** no. 7 (March 1999), and on *Wind* in **p.o.v.** no. 5 (March 1998). In the present context, my article, "Wordless eloquence in *Come*", might be of some interest to the reader (**p.o.v.** no. 7, pp. 35-44).

There are, however, equally important short fiction films which tell their stories largely on the basis of dialogue, such as Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes* (USA, 1986, 5 min.), Nina Mimica's *The War Is Over* (Italy, 1997, 7 min.), Ariel Gordon's *Goodbye Mom* (Mexico, 1997, 8 min.),[3] and even more recently, Claude Saint Antoine's *New York Encounter* (France, 1998, 2 min. 30 sec.).

Works of this quality make it impossible to maintain Polanski's unconditional view that the short film should be free of dialogue. At the same time, however, student filmmakers should be warned against using too much dialogue in their films, for a number of reasons, including the following practical considerations: dialogue *can* be difficult 1) for beginners to write; 2) for the amateur actors who are likely to appear in student productions, to deliver convincingly and intelligibly; and 3) for non-professional production crews to record properly during shooting. (It is all too often the case in dialogue-based student productions that the one spoken line that carries the story more than all the others put together, will be the one line that the actor mumbles or that is inaudibly recorded because of an incorrectly positioned microphone.)

But even if these practical considerations posed no problem, student filmmakers should still be aware of the dangers of using dialogue excessively, because – as I will now suggest – dialogue is appropriate in the short fiction film *when and only when* certain basic conditions are met.

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[3] See **p.o.v.** no. 7 (March 1999) for articles and an interview on *Goodbye Mom*. Chapters in my forthcoming book, *The Art of Storytelling in the Short Fiction Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2001), will be devoted to *Coffee and Cigarettes* and *The War Is Over*.

Stated in a nutshell and in the form of advice to student filmmakers, those conditions are as follows:

- Keep your story's focus on the here-and-now, on the interaction unfolding before our eyes, even if the dialogue touches on past or future events.
- Keep your characters engaged in negotiating meaningful choices and opportunities, not just exchanging information.
- Make every spoken line not only character-specific but also character-defining and character-differentiating.
- Let the very timbre of the voices we hear and the characters' manner of speaking, be essential to the flavor of the story.
- Make the non-verbal components of the storytelling as salient as possible.
- Never use dialogue to put into words the underlying meaning of your film.
- Never use dialogue to convey something that could be enacted non-verbally before the camera.

No one film will fully embody all of these principles. However, the best dialogue-based shorts are likely to illustrate a number of them.

Looking at *New York Encounter* in this perspective – and moving quickly in order not to belabor the obvious – we can see that:

- The film focuses on the here-and-now of Steve and Helen's off the wall interaction, on what happens between them, including their self-presentation, mutual attraction, shifting roles with respect to who takes the initiative and who responds, the wish for and effect of the kiss, etc.

- Although these characters immediately exchange information about profession, residence, income and civil status, they do so in the context of negotiating a date and also a kiss.

- Steve and Helen have so much in common that their lines are not as character-differentiating as might otherwise be the case, though the final exchange clearly shows that Steve cannot even grasp the concept of living in the present while Helen can, in the aftermath of a kiss.

- Gordon Elliott's (Steve's) Australian accent is an extra ingredient enriching the dialogue, just as in *Coffee and Cigarettes*, Roberto Benigni's Italian accent adds flavor to the interaction.

- The difference in the actors' heights is used to vary the camera angles and make the film more interesting in purely visual terms, as do certain particularly memorable shots, such as the one in which Helen rises vertically into frame after the collision, with an almost goofy look of availability and interest on her face.

- Neither character ever concludes "We really don't know how to live in the present" – a line that would have let all the air out of the balloon and sent the film plummeting to the ground with a final thud.

- None of the spoken words – none of the initiatives taken by Steve before the kiss or by Helen after the kiss, and none of the replies given by either character concerning his or her availability – could have been replaced by a non-verbal enactment before the camera.

In addition to meeting those criteria, the dialogue in this film is also clearly a *parody* of a conversation, in which norms to which the viewer presumably subscribes are systematically broken by the characters, whose unavailability for a date because of previous professional or social obligations is also parodistically pushed to absurd limits. As a result, the dialogue repeatedly takes the viewer by surprise and provides the enjoyment of being in on a joke.

*
* *

Under the conditions specified above, dialogue can work beautifully in a short fiction film. And although it may well be the case that the seven constraints proposed here can apply to the feature film as well as to the short, I would argue that the density of the storytelling found in the short requires an even more judicious use of dialogue than does the feature.

ON THE RUN

(US/Portuguese/French co-production, 1998)
directed by Bruno de Almeida


-Men du har siddet i fængsel?


enue Express

Bruno de Almeida, ON THE RUN

US/Portuguese/French co-production 1998; theatrical release 2000
35m, color. Dolby Digital. Running time: 94 minutes.
http://www.arcofilms.com

Principal credits

Directed by	Bruno de Almeida
Screenplay by	Joseph Minion
Based on a story by	Bruno de Almeida & Jonathan Berman
Music composed by	Frank London
Director of photography	Igor Sunara
Production designer	Andy Bernard
Editor	Beatrice Sisul
Costume designer	Cat Thomas
Casting directors	Georgia Walken & Sheila Jaffe
Credit sequence	Alex Weil, Charlex NY
Co-producers	Isabelle Parion & Raymond Parizer
Produced by	Tino Navarro & Bruno de Almeida

Cast

Michael Imperioli	Albert DeSantis
John Ventimiglia	Louie Salazar
Drena De Niro	Rita
Nick Sandow	Jack
Joaquim de Almeida	Ignacio
Victor Argo	Shaving man
Tom Gilroy	Tom
Arthur Nascarella	Irwin
Sharon Angela	Tina
Joseph R. Gannascoli	Frank, The Burly Guy
Paul Lazar	Cabbie
John Frey	George
Bronson Dudley	Dr. Shapiro
Tony Zacarro	Cop in apartment
Anna Kohler	Anna
AgnÍs Jaoui	Kirstin
Suzanne Shepherd	Lady in travel agency

Bruno de Almeida: Filmography

On the Run, 1998 (feature film)
The Debt, 1993 (short film)
Amália, Strange Way of Life (documentary)
The King in Exile (dance film)
The Art of Amália (documentary)
Sagres Beer (commercial)
Expo 98' Tribute to Amália (music video)
Las Vagas, GNR (music video)
Amália, Live in New York City (concert video)
I'm still here (music video)
Anti Glamour (documentary)

On the Run: An interview with Bruno de Almeida

Richard Raskin

I understand that it was on the basis of your short film, The Debt, *which won the Best Short Film award at Cannes in 1993, that you were approached by a producer who enabled you to make* On the Run?

I was actually approached by several producers in Cannes. I won't tell you the whole story about how *On the Run* got made because that would take about two hours. But basically this is what happened.

In 1994, it was Lisbon's turn to be the cultural capital of Europe, and as part of the Lisbon '94 celebrations, they chose to do a film about Lisbon called *Twenty-Four Hours in Lisbon*, or something like that. And they invited three filmmakers under thirty – at the time I was twenty-seven – to do three shorts of 45 minutes each, about Lisbon: "The Morning", "The Afternoon", and "The Night". And just after Cannes, I was invited to do "The Night" in Lisbon. Which was a little weird, because I don't live there. I wasn't even born there, but my parents are from Lisbon. Anyway, they invited me and I got a grant from the Portuguese Film Institute to do the short; they would also help with the feature film. So there's a connection there.

Anyway, when I was invited to do "The Night", I proposed a buddy movie. An American businessman would go to Lisbon. He arrives at the airport, takes a cab to go to the hotel, and has a seminar to do the next morning. The cab driver is a crazy lunatic,

and he'll never get to the hotel. It's pretty much the same relationship as in *On the Run*, with one introverted and one extroverted character in a story about life and death. The story was approved, but I wanted to do it as a feature, not as a short, because I needed time to explore their relationship. The ending was the same as it would be later in *On the Run:* they would have a car accident. In this case, the American would die in the taxi… Anyway, they didn't have money to do the feature and I wound up not doing the short, mainly because of differences with regard to financing.

So I had this idea that I wanted to explore. I didn't have a script, but I had a story. Then I met a producer called Tino Navarro and he said: "Anything you want to do is fine. I'll make a deal with you and you'll do the film". We signed an agreement that I would make a film with him as producer. Then in early 1994, when I came to New York, I met with my friend Jonathan Berman, who would become my co-writer. He told me a true story that had happened to him, about his best friend who phoned him after an escape from jail. That whole bit is a true story. This best friend had robbed a few banks, I think he was involved with drugs, I really don't know too much about it, but he was mainly a manic depressive. So Jonathan Berman told me the story about his friend who called him from Port Authority, and Jonathan was really worried because he knew his friend was crazy and had a gun, so he called the police. In the true story, the police went to get him but didn't find him. The guy robbed another bank and went back to jail. There's more to it, but as I said, it would take two hours to tell the whole story.

During this conversation with Jonathan, I said: "Well this is terrific, because I have this other story about two characters and I was looking for a framework for exploring their relationship in a buddy movie". So I said: "Great, that could be the first act of the film, and let's make it so that he feels guilty, so he goes to Port Authority to pick him up, and then we have two guys on the run". That was the basic premise. And in the ending, I knew that one of them would have to die but I didn't know which one at the time.

And when I was creating the world of this movie, I saw a film that really influenced me a lot called *Il sorpasso*, by Dino Risi. A great film from 1962 I think, with Jean-Louis Trintignant playing the straight guy and Vittorio Gassman playing the crazy one. That film really influenced this one a lot, and the ending is also very close to mine. So I used that as a sort of reference.

I had a story, the two characters, I had had several meetings with my co-writer, Jonathan Berman, developing ideas that were based on what had happened to him. I had the producer. And to write the script, I found Joe Minion. And that's pretty much the story behind *On the Run*.

The casting of On the Run *is superb. Did you know the actors while you were developing the story?*

Not when I started working with Joe Minion on the script, which took us two years – a year and a half for the first draft. We didn't have any actors. He said: "Who do you see as the main character, Albert di Santis?" And I said: "Michael Imperioli", whom I didn't

know personally. Some friends of mine knew him, but I had never met him. I had seen him in a lot of theater work in New York in the early 90's. And I had seen some of his films, like *Goodfellows*. I felt he had a very *interior* quality, which is very rare. And he had the shyness that I needed for the straight guy. So we wrote it with him in mind, and I sent him a draft around 1995 or early 1996. At the time, he was busy writing *Summer of Sam*, a Spike Lee movie that's coming out next week. His manager called and said he's not available. So in 1996, when I started casting, I decided to begin by casting the other character and then do a match, which is very important in a buddy movie.

I saw about 150 actors and was about to give up. I told my casting director that we just won't make the film, because it's really a character movie. Then on the last day of casting, John Ventimiglia walked in and before he even read any of the lines, I immediately knew that he was right for the part. He read, and my casting director didn't want me to offer him the role right away, he wanted me to sleep on it. The next day I woke up and I loved the tape. So I called him. We had lunch and I told him that he had the role. He asked: "Who's playing the other guy?" meaning like: "I'll do it but I have to know who's the other guy because it's almost like a love story." So I said: "I've written it for Michael Imperioli, but he's busy." And he said: "Oh, Michael is my best friend." So of course he called him and the next day we had dinner and the deal was done…

We had about one year after the casting of the two leads to finish working on the script. We did improvised sessions that were taped

and transcribed. Then we'd go back and rewrite what we had done. This went on every week for a year. So they really got to know their characters very well and a lot of personal things started coming in, from me and from them. We became like a trio, with very strong bonds.

Most of the other actors were suggested by either John or Michael. I also did a lot of auditions, mostly with people I knew. I wanted it to be very New York, to have that quality. And there are wonderful actors here. The link was that all the actors chosen had a very special New York quality about them – in the way they were a little off-center or had certain "twists" that we would look for.

The actors playing the main characters made a very important contribution even in dialogue. I would show the writer the stuff that came up in improvisations, and he loved it. We also improvised on the set, which I like doing. It's my favorite part of filmmaking – the collaboration with the actors. The other stuff is hard; that's easy (*laughter*).

I've never heard dialogue with that particular quality in any other movie.

Well Joe Minion is superb. And talk about coincidences. In 1994, I was looking for a writer who had a unique style that balances a kind of absurdity with realism. You don't find that often in the States. And when I went through my video collections, I found films written by Joe Minion that had that quality and I thought he would be great but I had no idea where he was. Then the phone rang, and it was my friend Lisa, who taught at the North Carolina

School of the Arts. She asked if I had a writer yet. I told her that I was interested in this guy, Joe Minion, and that I was going to try to find him somehow. And she said: "Oh, he's right here!" and she put him on the phone. He was then teaching at the same school. A total coincidence! I talked to him on the phone, he was on the train to New York the next day. He gave up his job at the school and we worked on the film together for over a year.

Joe is very good. I personally think he is one of the best writers. He writes very specific dialogue. He has that quality, that absurdity that I like. It's very hard to write that sort of thing – situations that could be believable but are on the verge of not being believable. The first draft was even more absurd, very crazy. And to get the balance I was looking for, the actors brought in a style of New York street realism. And what you see in the film is the fusion of the two styles – the absurdity and realism, combined with a lot of John Cassavetes's influence. We would take a scene that was written with very specific beats, with a twist on every beat. Then we would say: let's open up the scene. For instance, the scene at the bar with that girl, Tina. Originally, there were tighter, faster beats in that scene. And we opened it up with improvisations while shooting, and stuff came up that was totally unpredictable.

So I would say a combination of styles was what I was aiming for, and I don't know whether I succeeded or not. It's not for me to say. We tried. And it was risky. There were points when we didn't know where we were going. We'd sometimes get lost… We would explore. I would get a phone call from John at 5 in the morning: "Why would Louie do this?" "Why does he escape from jail?" And

I would say: "That's for you to find out." It became a sort of anthropological study of the two characters, and it was a very collaborative effort.

I would like to ask about a specific scene. At the point when Louie is hiding in the kitchen, and the policeman reveals that Albert had turned him in, Louis looks into the camera. Is that really a camera look?

Yeah, that's a Godard thing. That's like: "you're watching a movie"… If you've noticed, there's a shift in the point of view at that moment. Until then, you're pretty much with Albert. At the point when Louie looks into the camera, you're with him. So the audience turns to the other side. And then you stay with Louie pretty much for while, until he destroys the apartment, and then maybe you go back to Albert. It was a transference of point of view. I don't know if it worked, but that was the idea.

If I may ask a very general question: what do you see as the main ingredients of a good story in a film?

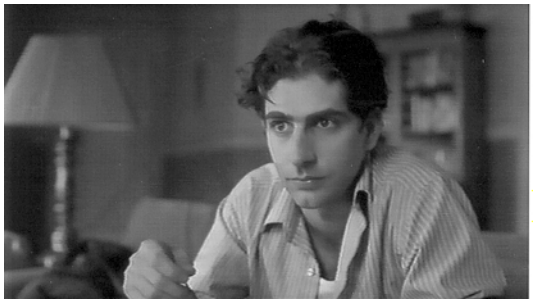
I tend to go more for character, actually. I love stories. But there's a difference between what I like and what I want to do. I like so many different kinds of films. If we're talking about films that I would like to do as a director, I like films that are character-based and that have a kind of philosophical or even spiritual evolution of the characters at the end. I love going to the movies and seeing a really good story, but the story not my *primary* interest in my own work.

What kinds of characters do you like to work with?

Troubled ones (*laughter*). That's a good question. In the case of *On the Run*, I like not only the characters but also the relationship

between them. I'm generally attracted to characters that are outsiders in some way. I have five scripts in development right now, at various stages, and they all involve the same style of characters, with the same actors playing the roles. At least I'm going to try to do all five films with the same actors. So you'll be seeing a lot more of these guys.

New York
24 June 1999



The next issue of **p.o.v.** (Number 10, December 2000) will focus primarily on the "dogma" phenomenon, seen in retrospect.

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