"Digital Cinema: perspectives on the creative processes of dramaturgy and directing in the era of numeric film"

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My speech is based on two (from each other) independent research works that I have been conducting since 2011. The first subject concerns the impact of **digital mathematics on the creative cinematic process**. This topic springs from "Film & Anti-matter: Perspectives for a New Metaphysics of Digital Cinema", a paper written during my tenure as Academic Innovator and lecturer at Whistling Woods, the leading institute of film and media in India, in 2017. This work deals with the problem-statement or question posed initially by myself to some of my colleagues in the directing department: **"how long will cinema-teaching be able to avoid mathematics?".** The problem statement / question posed deals with some of the new realities faced by filmmaking, as a result of the increasing amount of digital technology that conforms the backbone of our creative industry (e.g. super advanced CGI and VR). ***

The second subject concerns the fundamentals of **"dramaturgical self-awareness and its shot to shot composition and orchestration"**. This work is based on my own pedagogical experience, observations and peer to peer discussions throughout the years. It deals with the problem statement / question **"what is the real role of personality in the filmmaking process?".** This query copes with the challenge of teaching film writing and directing to young aspiring filmmakers.

It is important to stress that both are works in progress. ***

Digital Mathematics

On my paper "Film & Anti-matter", initially published by CILECT (The International Association of Film & Television Schools) in 2017, I have proposed that <u>mathematics has taken over the part of celluloid in the form of an abstract creative material, its implication being that</u> **the language of cinema has entered an entirely new phase** and that it is therefore paramount for the next generations of filmmakers to have a greater understanding of the processes involved behind digital motion pictures. The aim of this approach is not to transform aspiring filmmakers into scientists, but **to integrate the *<u>metaphysics of science</u>* into their individual and collective thinking.**

<u>Theoretical physics offers today one of the most revealing scientific systems that we have access to. It has opened the doors to the world of the infinite and of the infinitely small, both imperceptible to the human eye.</u> Concepts such as parallel dimensions and multiverse are, at least to some extent, not only expanding our views but challenging our individual and collective perceptions of reality. Thus, we have been given the possibility of rediscovering the world in an era of apparent disbelief.

To master the metaphysics of contemporary science could give us a greater insight into the mind of the digital, which is the fountain of our collective cinematic experience. ***

To paraphrase author-director Ingmar Bergman nobody should have **to explain to a director how the machinery of film actually works:** no sound technician should have to tell him/her about sound, nor should he/she be lectured by the cinematographer about cinematography. **The director "should already know the tools of filmmaking to perfection". According to him, a director should also have something important to say about the nature of our world.** This was Ingmar Bergman's vision of the ideal director of his time and it would perhaps not be advisable to expect the same level of thoroughness from our own students, since the current bulk of technological advances is far too wide and too great for anyone to grasp fully. On the other hand, a basic understanding of the digital cinematic apparatus would not be detrimental but probably beneficial: it could give our pupils substantial knowledge about the context of their lives, not only

regarding the visible forces that we relate to on a daily basis as human beings (both social and existential), but also about the greater invisible scope that -I speculate- plays an equally important part in our lives. ***

One could eventually argue against this principle (that it is important for the coming generations of writer-directors to have a greater understanding of the processes behind digital cinema) by saying that **the purpose of digital technology is not to understand its underlying machinery, but to make wise creative use of its advantages**. **This is true to the extent that films can be made by simply filming**, today more than ever. The question is **if meaningful films can be achieved through this aleatory process of creation run, to a greater and greater extent, by technology itself**, or if film as an artform still requires a conscious metaphysical approach to achieve personal films in our impersonal times. ***

Auteur Andrei Tarkovsky proposes, when pondering about his film 'Solaris', that there is a "moral conflict" in the relationship between conscience and technology, two elements that are represented in this film by the two protagonists of the story, Kelvin and Khari. The director states: "(Stanislav) Lem's novel /…/ **expresses precisely man's inability to concentrate on himself, and points to the conflict between man's spiritual life and the objective acquisition of knowledge.** /…/ In simple terms, **the story of Khari's relationship with Kelvin is the story of the relationship between man and his own conscience. It's about man's concern with his own spirit, when he has no possibility of doing anything about it, when he is constantly drawn into the exploration and development of technology."**

The question if mathematics should have any place in film teaching can be easily misinterpreted, since it involves perhaps the most exact science known to mankind, and quite a complex one. With cinema being an art form that evolves in the minds of its creators, seemingly, through a very different creative intellectual and spiritual process, at first glance it would seem impossible (unnecessary?) to reconcile these two disciplines, much less to merge them into a unique field of study. If I were to reformulate the question and replace mathematics with theoretical physics, ***

the contradiction would apparently remain, although this particular scientific field (physics) is perhaps closer to cinema than initially thought. ***

Physics holds some of the keys to unlock the secrets of time and space, while cinema locks spacetime within the frame of a particular time, through the peculiarity of a particular creative gaze.

The fascination that film exerts over crowds around the world is, I believe, based on the instinctive assumption that we have access to the fourth dimension (aka time) through this medium, that we can observe others in their obliviousness, in the same way as Time itself might be observing us. ***

To paraphrase Andrei Tarkovsky, cinema is the art of sculpting in time. Another possible definition would be to say that **film is the craft of sculpting with light and thus it represents the most 'tangible' example of a metamorphosis of light**. How so? Because we use light to imprint a sequence of events into the minds and hearts of the spectators. **We utilize light to create and atmosphere on the set, which is brought to the lens of the camera as light, stored as information at nearly the speed of light, and revealed once again to the spectator's eye and eventually imprinted into her mind, with the ink of light**. Thus, what the viewers perceive is more than a simple image: it is the very essence of meaningful life in the known universe.

I'd like to take you back to the moral dilemma discussed by Tarkovsky in the interview about his movie 'Solaris', because I believe that in his approach to this question (the contradiction between mankind's spirituality and technology) lies at least a portion of the solution to this dichotomy. ***

Tarkovsky says "the film ends with what is most precious for a person /…/ ordinary human relationships, which are the starting point of man's endless journey /…/ the fact that the ocean brought forth /…/ the very thing that was most important to him -his dream of returning to the Earth- that is, the idea of contact /…/ **For me the finale is Kelvin's return to the cradle, to his**

source, which cannot ever be forgotten. And it is all the more important because he had travelled so far along the road of technological progress, in the process of acquiring knowledge".

Before I move on to the next subject of this lecture, I'd like to read from my work "Film & Anti-matter". ***

Dramaturgical Self-awareness

*** Now I will move on to the second subject of this lecture: "dramaturgical self-awareness and its shot to shot composition and orchestration". This subject deals with the fundamental aspects of authorship in cinema, suggesting an approach as to how to translate **personal experience** into a cinematic work of art.

What keeps cinema alive in an era of digital aesthetic perfection? It is by no means its amazing and awe-inspiring visuals, produced by sublime state of the art technology and the make-up of brilliantly designed software.

While collaborating with Karin Grand Nielsen, former head of fiction and principal at the European Film College, and my co-guest professor at Beijing Film Academy in 2015, I learned that an author's self-awareness was the element that transforms a digital motion picture into a movie that breathes and sweats the happiness and the sufferings of its characters. *** Her **pedagogic point of departure was always the student, or rather the person behind the student.** By gradually making the pupil self-aware about his/her own trajectory of life, happiness and/or sadness simmered slowly to the surface with revealing fictional power. Stories with substance from a real subjective experience begun to take shape in front of the digital camera, transfiguring its mathematical essence into something profoundly simple, profoundly human.

The aspiring writer-director will struggle with this issue in every film school around the world. The professionals do it every day. Film, as all of us know, is not an easy artistic expression to deal with. It takes great courage and hard work to reveal oneself, even when comfortably sitting behind a desk, trying to write a meaningful screenplay or planning a shooting day.

The fast paced, digitalized urban world that we live in resonates from Montevideo to Bombay with enormous power. The planet seems to have one huge digital mind and a lifestyle that is shrinking in terms of cultural differences. Under such conditions it becomes an odyssey to guide a student from digitalization to self-sincerity. An ocean of perceptions run by an endless world of media stands in the way. Luckily, **the answer to the riddle lies -primarily- within the pupils themselves, within their own private life experiences.**

To fathom 'personal filmmaking' is like learning to conjugate "to be" in present, past and future, where close-ups are the primary step towards constructing a sentence. But what does it really mean to be personal in the context of a film? <u>And how does the director apply his/her own private experience to the writing process</u>? *******

"To me making movies is a personal matter, a need to the same extent as hunger and thirst." This is how bluntly Ingmar Bergman describes his passionate motivation for making films in one of his essays. Comparable statements can be quoted from many directors from then and now. The lesser passionate in this context express, at the very least, the need to show a world that they know from the inside out. For instance, when Martin Scorsese talks about his movie "Mean Streets" he says the film shows a world that he knew "personally", whereas **Andrei Tarkovsky defines "Mirror" as an "autobiographical film", based on experiences of people "close" to him.**

There are of course many kinds of personal motivations to make movies. Some directors are capable of making memorable films out of novels which they did not write themselves, about an epoch -whether past or future- that they have never experienced. But let me keep to the subject of aspiring filmmakers within the context of their own private lives. I will therefore try to define the mysterious substance behind it: **the soul of the filmmaker, *****
or to use Jean Cocteau's own words "the blood of the poet". Where does it come from? What does it look like?

Here follows the most common scenario that I -and some of my peers- have faced during most of our experience as teachers of film writing and directing at schools in Europe, Asia and South

America: when pupils are faced with the task of creating their very first foundation films, most (many) will tend to take the easy path and either write something distant from themselves, such as a banal comedy, or over dramatic stories, usually about a world of crime that most of them know nothing, if very little about. Guns, bombs, weapons and murders seem to be a recurrent theme in the beginning of many, or at least some aspiring directors. Students imitate the world that they see on the internet and on TV and that comprehends genres that require not only a high technical skill to perform, but also a great level of research and *insight*. And this is precisely what personal filmmaking is about: **the capacity to penetrate a theme and extract its essence in full.**

There is nothing closer to a filmmaker than his own personal experience. Sadness, happiness, deception, love and hate, well yes, every thinkable emotion is palpable in oneself when one is forced to search inside for the true voice of art. The soul of the poet is the fountain from where the blood transfusion to the film will be consummated. In turn, **this requires not only the courage of the mentor (lecturer), but his full commitment to supporting the student throughout the process.** I would like to compare the level of trust that must be established between mentor and pupil to the absolute reliance that should exist between actor and director, according to the principles of the late Ingmar Bergman. ***

While working as artistic director of a symphonic musical performance with acting and poetry in Sweden, in 2003, I had the honour of collaborating with actor Börje Ahlstedt, known from films like "Fanny and Alexander" and "Saraband". Between rehearsals we had time to talk about the work that he was doing, at the same time, with Ingmar Bergman at the Royal Theatre. **"My commitment to him (Bergman) is as great as his commitment to me", he said. "He relies 100% on my capacity as an actor and I know that he will be equally supportive during the process of rehearsal"**. A very similar adage was passed on to me by my peer Karin Grand, regarding the commitment that she felt towards her pupils at the European Film College, whom could count on her full support to explore their inner essence, in order to create their films.

In the complex web of human relationships, trust is equal to truth. "I trust you, therefore be truthful, to me but first of all to yourself."

*** When Tarkovsky was asked in a 1966 interview by Maria Chugunova "what do you consider to be most important in cinema today" his answer was simply "the truth. When an artist abandons his search for the truth it is going to have a disastrous effect on his work."

The aspiring filmmaker is, in one way or another, searching for her soul, for her verity. Personally, I am a strong advocate of teaching students not only how to make personal movies with a high level of technical skills, but also how to survive in the industry, staying as close to their essence as it is humanly possible, without losing their options as filmmakers.

Now let me move on and look a little deeper into the rings that surround the riddle of personal expression, as I originally intended.

Once the consummation between the pupil and the artist within the pupil is in place, as well as the rituals of mutual commitment have been established between mentor and his trainee, then it is time for the student to be given the tools to start building up the first sentences of her filmmaking experience.

Let us then assume that a short screenplay, based on personal account, is ready to be translated into motion pictures and sound. Since we are over the first step (script), it is time to approach what appears to be a "technical" challenge: how to shoot the movie, in terms of framing, lighting and rhythm (I will leave acting for another lecture).

Based on my own experience, and by this I do not mean that this is the only possible method, I would say that the foundation film should focus primarily on the characters of the movie, and is there anything more revealing about a character than a close-up? ***

From my point of view, **the close-range shot is the most difficult one to master. It forces the director to have absolute focus on the acting and the story (dramaturgy) and has a greater impact on the shot to shot composition and orchestration. It also brings the student very close**

to the essence of acting, giving him important visual feedback on the effect that his direction has on an actor's performance.

By establishing the close-up as the fundamental element in the filmmaking DNA of a directing student, it will be easier to move on to the rhythmic and relatively abstract territory of camera movements.

The long take is a metaphysical world with its own set of laws. It requires -again- a personal approach to the story, but even more so an understanding of spacetime and its underlying nature, which rebounds on the first part of my lecture and the importance of providing students with a fundamental set of knowledge about theoretical physics. But it is not enough to understand the basic scientific tenets about the nature of our physical world. What is essential about the long take has to do with <u>space itself</u>, and that can only be explored through body dynamics and physical movement. This form of training is usually associated to acting students, even though it has proven to be an efficient learning system for aspiring directors as well. ***

While couple dance (e.g. waltz, tango, salsa) will help the student to understand pacing and choreography, martial arts (or fencing) will reinforce her sense of timing and attack within a narrow space. *

I will finish my lecture by talking very shortly about VR, an area of filmmaking that transcends the boundaries of conventional cinema. I consider Virtual Reality to be a form of oneiric cinematic style that needs to be approached theatrically, in terms of shooting. Its basic tenet does not differ from that of film: **VR is as much dependent on establishing an emotional, spiritual and intellectual link to the viewer as cinema is. Hence, it requires a personal commitment to the audience from the part of the writer-director**, for even when a story might or might not be the primary subject of the film, VR is the frame within which many personal stories can to be told and intertwined within the widest possible cinematic gaze.

The choreographic elements of VR (here I am referring to how actors perform in front of the 360 degrees camera) can be equally reinforced by the same or a similar system of body dynamics to the one that I propose for aspiring directors of 'conventional' digital cinema, working within the frame of what we are still calling motion pictures.