MAKING 10 MONTHS:
AN APPLICATION OF THE AUTEUR THEORY OF FILMMAKING

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ABSTRACT

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by James Flynn

The auteur theory of filmmaking gave film legitimacy as an art-form, but also gained controversy because it seemed to downplay the significant contributions of any of the workers of a film beyond the director. The theory has changed since its inception. It is now used to describe up-and-coming filmmakers or filmmakers who perform several tasks on their film, and is also used as a marketing tool. I proposed that the theory could also be used as an approach to filmmaking. I tested this notion by creating a short narrative film, 10 Months, in which I applied aspects of auteurism, such as performing several tasks, creating a personal work, and attempting to exhibit control over all aspects of the production while maintaining all decision-making related to the film.
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Introduction:

In this project, I discuss and detail the evolution and issues surrounding the auteur theory of cinema (auteur being French for “author”), including its implications about the authorship of art in general. Additionally, I take the auteur theory in a new, more practical direction, arguing that it is multifaceted and has evolved greatly since its inception, and that the independent, low-budget director should adopt certain notions of the theory as an approach to filmmaking to solve certain problems inherent in making their films.

I have written this project because of my continued interest in the role of the director, as well as my gravitation toward directors with strong personal, thematic and technical visions. The theory is also of interest because it is one of the few theories of any art that is explicit in trying to define what makes an artist solely responsible for a piece or body of pieces (even if the work is a collaboration).

This project will focus on two main points: 1) the argument, made by the proponents of the auteur theory, that the director is the sole author of a film, 2) the evolution of the auteur theory, which has taken the original ideas of the theory and applied or corrupted them in both good and bad ways. For the former point, I will discuss the early originators and proponents of the theory, who include Alexandre Astruc, Francois Truffaut and Andrew Sarris. I also include arguments by those who opposed the theory most vocally, including Pauline Kael and William Goldman.

I will also discuss the notion of authorship in other media and/or art, and how it relates to the debate over the auteur theory. I then show how this extension of authorship has contributed to the theory coming to mean other things (such as a director with
stylistic or thematic consistency, an up-and-coming director, a director performs multiple
tasks throughout the filmmaking cycle, and more).

I will then apply the theory in a new way, as an approach to filmmaking that
allows low-budget directors to maintain a sense of control and ownership over their work,
for both practical and artistic purposes. My application includes the production of a short
film entitled *10 Months*, wherein I put into practice certain notions of the auteur theory
and my application of it.

Throughout this project, I will use both examples from academic texts regarding
film theory and criticism, as well as actual quotes and ideas from interviews with
professional filmmakers themselves. For the discussion of my own application of the
auteur theory, I use my own experience and my on-going filmmaker’s journal to shed
light on the process.
Historical Perspective:

The roots of the auteur theory are in existentialism and, by extension, phenomenology. Phenomenology, described by German philosopher Edmund Husserl, attempted to describe phenomena accurately and independently of assumptions derived from science or scientific research (Sokolowski).

Existentialism, known mostly through the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, is “a significant philosophical reflection on the nature of being and the absurdity of the human condition” (Gazetas, 194). Although formulated prior to the 20th century, existentialism gained prominence in Europe after World War II, when many felt alienated and frustrated with the state of the world as a result of the economic, emotional, and cultural toll of the war.

The auteur theory was arguably first formulated in 1948 by Alexandre Astruc, a French documentary filmmaker and writer and devotee of Sartre (he later, in fact, directed a documentary about Sartre entitled Sartre by himself). In his seminal piece, “The Birth of the New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo” (The Camera Pen), Astruc drafted the notion that the camera was similar to the pen (Levy, 77).

Astruc suggested that film should be read as a text, and that any quality film has all of its elements -- its mise-en-scene (“setting in scene”) -- filtered through the director. Thus the director should be considered the film’s main creative force, or author, since he isn’t merely “illustrating or presenting a scene, but [performing] a true act of writing” (Astruc, 17). Elements of this idea were picked up and propagated in Cahiers du Cinéma (“Books of the Cinema”), a premier French film journal founded in 1951 by André Bazin and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze. Throughout the journal, Bazin continued and expanded
upon Astruc’s work, insisting that the filmmaker is as legitimate an artist as a novelist, and should be treated as such (Bazin).

In 1954, Cahiers critic François Truffaut formally drafted what we now consider to be “the auteur theory” in his article “Une certaine tendance du cinema françaix” (“A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema”) (Insdorf, 18-23). In the article, Truffaut furthered Astruc’s theory to applying it to specific directors and raged against France’s “Tradition of Quality,” in which most films emphasized the literal rather than the visual, and consequently were heavily dependent on plot (Neupert, 161-206).

Controversy arose in Truffaut’s discussion of the theory in relation to certain directors working in the Hollywood studio system, such as Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford and Howard Hawks. Most other critics and serious film enthusiasts argued that the Hollywood studio system was only inclined to release juvenile genre material, such as westerns or thrillers, and no personal vision could be applied to films of that nature (Insdorf).

Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, many critics of the theory were unhappy with a theory that seemed to value the director above all other technicians and artists working on a film. Since film has historically been considered one of the most collaborative of arts, involving the talents and skills of often hundreds of people working on the film’s text, costumes, acting, design and other areas, many critics balked at the idea that one person could take credit for the work done by so many.

Truffaut and many of the early critics from Cahiers du Cinema moved on from film criticism to filmmaking. Some of these filmmakers were Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, and Alain Resnais, all of whom applied the elements of auteur theory to their
own works by releasing genre films with personal stories as the focus, such as Godard’s *A bout de soufflé (Breathless)*, about a troubled young criminal’s relationship with an American girl. Godard and his *Cahiers* peers subsequently became celebrated and acclaimed filmmakers in their own right as part of the *nouvelle vague* (“French New Wave”), a revitalization of French cinema in the 1950s and 1960s that mostly focused on realism in film, using hand-held cameras, filming on location, and improvisation in performances.

These filmic techniques were, whether consciously or not, extensions of the ideas of both existentialism and phenomenology. The philosophies are at play in the early works of the nouvelle vague, where the viewer is given a voyeuristic, less objective and more personal view of the bleak nature of the modern world -- a world where the characters make decisions and pay the consequences for them. In the case of *A bout de soufflé*, the main character, Michel, is a criminal and is shot dead at the end of the film because of the actions he took in exercising his free will -- in this case, he kills a cop (Godard).

In 1962, American film critic Andrew Sarris published “Notes on the Auteur Theory,” bringing Truffaut’s work across the Atlantic and categorizing directors in order of importance, particularly in relation to influence and visual style. In this article, Sarris was the first person to affix the tag “theory” to what the French had previously referred to as a tendency or policy. Sarris also elaborated on the original conception of the theory, arguing that a true auteur exhibits "technical competence," a "distinguishable personality," and "interior meaning" (Sarris, 269-278), points that were to be taken to their limit in describing directors as auteurs.
Sarris’ essay was immediately controversial, and most infamously responded to by renowned critic Pauline Kael. In her 1963 essay “Circles and Squares” (Kael, 516-529), Kael attacked Sarris’ text, her main problem being the notion of categorizing and structuring directors, which even Sarris himself says takes courage and a certain amount of “cultural audacity” (Sarris).

But Kael also took aim at Sarris’ insistence on directors having good technique, the theory’s dismissive feelings toward anyone other than the director, and the assertion that a man working in the studio system is more cinematic because he uses visuals rather than literary or textual content to impose personality in the film, since Kael (and basically, the history of art) argued that content and form should complement one another.

The result of Sarris and Kael’s contributions were that the auteur theory was thrust further into the limelight. Since many of the French critics who helped formulate the idea of auteurism were now legitimate filmmakers and no longer just critics, the two Americans became linked on opposite ends of an on-going theoretical debate (van der Ent).

**The Evolution of the Auteur Theory:**

The auteur theory has undeniably changed since its inception some fifty years ago, so that it is now part of our language in referring to film and filmmaking. The idea is so ingrained, in fact, that the MLA citation rules for film require only that one cite the film’s director and actors (Trimmer, 13). The auteur theory’s emphasis on the role of the
director has been used in myriad ways, but their reasons for focusing on this, one of many jobs in the process of making a film, have become obscured and changed over time.

The first, most important, and, ironically, most detrimental change to the initial conception was Andrew Sarris’ interpretation of Truffaut’s original article (Cheshire), which changed Truffaut’s wording from “tendency” or “policy” to “theory”. In becoming a “theory,” the idea of the auteur held much more weight than it should have: it was initially intended as a tool to reexamine how and why we value certain films over others (for example, a Carl Theodor Dreyer drama over a John Ford western), as well as a method of understanding the trajectory and influence of a director’s entire body of work on subsequent filmmakers.

However, according to Jean-Luc Godard, “then the whole idea became perverted; it was transformed into a cult of the author instead of a cult of the author’s work” (Tirard, 214). In other words, the notion of auteurism became a tool to champion certain directors, without taking each individual film as separate from the influence of the other work the director has done.

For example, if one is to look at the Cahiers top ten lists, you find the same directors over and over again, such as Jean-Luc Godard and Clint Eastwood. Godard, in fact, was listed three times in 1967 (Johnson), so it seems that the proponents of the auteur theory champion the works of directors whom they like, regardless of the quality of the specific piece at hand.

One of the negative ways that the auteur theory has evolved is that it is now used to describe up-and-coming filmmakers, or it is used as a marketing tool to get audiences to see the latest film by a specific director. For example, many art-house films are
referred to as “A film by x”, which assumes you know their work, consider it of quality and are interested in seeing more. This is similar to how marketing departments sell movie stars, and is far from the original idea of the auteur theory; now, instead of being a critical tool used for dissection of an artist’s output, the auteur tag can and has been twisted to sell film as a product, not as a piece of art.

One of the positive evolutions of the theory is that it is commonly used to describe a filmmaker who takes on more than one role in the film’s production. This usually takes the form of a director who also writes the material. Director Pedro Almodovar said, “I think that there is a genuine difference between directors who write and those who don’t” (Tirard). Almodovar, it should be noted, does indeed write his own films, as well as direct, but also agrees with the Cahiers crowd that older studio directors “truly managed to be the authors of their films and of their work, in the broadest possible sense” (Ibid.).

In addition to those who only write and direct, the label of “auteur” is also now routinely applied to filmmakers who do more than that. For example, Woody Allen, who writes, directs and acts in his films; the Coen Brothers, who write, direct, and edit their features; or even Robert Rodriguez, who writes, directs, produces, edits, composes, and more (IMDB).

As we can see, auteurism applies to those who perform more than one task on their films, since it can arguably leave more of their personal vision on the final product. Striving towards filmmaking with a more “personal touch” (Insdorf), of course, is one of the reasons the auteur theory exists.
One of the ways that the auteur theory has not changed, however, is that it still refers to filmmakers who exhibit idiosyncratic stylistic or thematic content. This is taken directly from Sartre’s notion of authenticity, “where writers and filmmakers authenticate their work in style” (Andrew), and explains why certain studio directors could be considered the authors of their films: even though they didn’t write the work themselves, they used the grammar of film to personalize the film’s subject and came up with a product that reflected their inner vision.

Alfred Hitchcock, a favorite of the Cahiers crowd, made a quite comfortable living directing studio thrillers, which he created with extraordinary care and craftsmanship. For example, Hitchcock’s most critically acclaimed film, Vertigo, concerned a man who lost a love, found another woman, and remade her in the image of his lost love (Hitchcock). In the film, Hitchcock brilliantly deconstructed his own technique of using his films to manipulate women. While not in the script of the film (written by Coppel and Taylor, with significant contributions by Hitchcock based on a novel by Boileau and Narcejac), he used the subtext of film grammar to make the film a personal one.

For instance, Hitchcock cast the film with Kim Novak in one of the lead roles. His reason for doing this, one might expect, is that she was indicative of the kinds of women that populated all of Hitchcock’s films: icy, blonde, and in need of the help and support of a strong man.

Additionally, Hitchcock uses technique to make his points. Vertigo was the first film to use the reverse zoom, wherein the camera lens zoomed out while camera body
moved forward on a dolly track. By using this technique, Hitchcock was able to simulate a character’s inner emotional state in a technical way and purely filmic way.

Because of its emphasis solely on the director, the auteur theory is now being applied to other jobs, such as producer, actor or even editor (Adamick). Even in this argument, however, one seems to always necessitate a single entity on which to focus the attention of the film, rather than treating film as a necessary collaboration between myriad people completing specific tasks for a greater goal.

**Advocates of the Auteur Theory:**

The question of who is the sole author (if indeed there is one) of a work that involves collaboration is not unique to cinema. For example, the connection between film and architecture is worth pointing out. Put very basically, the designer of a building develops a design concept, gathers a crew of technicians together to make the project a reality, and when all is said and done, the main architect is the one person who the overall work is attributed to, and who takes all positive or negative responsibility (Levy).

**In Architecture:**

An architectural parallel to the French New Wave directors can be found in “the Masters of the Modern Movement,” which included Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier (Hoag). These men, disappointed by the architecture of their times, sought to create fresh designs. Le Corbusier’s seminal work, *Towards a New Architecture*, reads similarly to Traffaut’s original piece about the auteur theory, in that it
espouses the virtue of learning from the past masters of the form, then taking it in a new direction; in this case, using materials, space concepts, and forms (Corbusier).

In both cases, the reader gets the overriding sense of a young man or group of men who felt trapped by the restrictions of the past work done in their field. Their response was to subvert the traditions that proceeded them to create change and excitement in a form. In this case of Le Corbusier and the other masters, this took the form of unusual features and materials. In the case of the Truffaut and the other filmmakers of the New Wave, it took the form of forcing realism through techniques such as hand-held cameras.

Both, however, used stylistic means to create change. Is this another aspect of what makes a creator the author of his or her work? Is it necessary either to use stylistic aspects of a form in different ways? Certainly we see this in film, as Max Ophuls’ tracking shots indicate his status as an auteur, or David Lynch’s overriding use of sound count him as the author of the work? Clearly, there is more than one element at play in tagging an artist an auteur, but unexpected use of style in a form seems to be another example of what makes someone the author of their work.

Comics:

Another interesting and pertinent parallel is to comic books. Currently, comic books are undergoing a transformation from strictly children’s entertainment, to a contemporary and expressive art-form. Critics and even comic artists themselves are now able to see an evolution within the form, and through that, gain a greater insight into what makes the form of comics work as it does (Eisner). This is very similar to what
happened with film years ago, because one of the important and over-looked aspects of the auteur theory is that it helped give films a greater gravity than they previously had – films, even those made in the Hollywood system or those mired in genre trappings, could be more than a diversion or a disposable piece of mere entertainment (Chown).

Some of the instigators of the maturation of the comic form include: Alan Moore (*Watchmen*) Neil Gaiman (*Sandman*) and Harvey Pekar (*American Splendor*), who all functioned as predominately writers on their particular works. Just as the director gets most of the credit for the result of a film, the writer of a comic book almost always takes responsibility for the final product, regardless of contributions of the entire collaborative team, which can include colorists, letterers, publishers, artists and more.

The notion that a writer would take credit for a medium which is defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (McCloud, 9) is a peculiar one, since it would seem that the artist creating the visual aspect of the piece would be the primary talent in such an heavily visual medium.

Is the argument in favor of the writer being the author of a comic book because he or she came up with the original idea? In this case, the writer for a film would usually be the one responsible for the work, but the auteur theory says this isn’t so (Bazin). There is no doubt, however, that despite the crew of a comic book getting credit for their work, the writer is often the one who almost exclusively takes credit or blame for the work.

So, it is difficult to take Kael at face value when she stated: “Traditionally, in any art, the personalities of all those involved in a production have been a factor in judgement” (Kael). For advocates of the auteur theory, this isn’t really the case. Even
though the auteur theory states it more explicitly, the idea of a sole author for a piece of collaborative art is not one that is independent of cinema.

**Critics of the Auteur Theory:**

As stated earlier, the biggest American detractor to the auteur theory was Pauline Kael. Kael’s response to Sarris’ article on the auteur theory, “Circles and Squares,” is what jump-started the debate of auteurism in America, and she (along with her many disciples) defended her position until her death in 2001 (Davis). One of Kael’s biggest qualms was Sarris’ categorizing of directors, since it seemed that by doing so, one made it seem as though a good director couldn’t make a bad film and vice versa.

**Goldman:**

Another leading American critic of the auteur theory has been Academy-Award winner William Goldman. Besides being a screenwriter, Goldman authored two books about his experiences working for the Hollywood system. In the first, *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, he dedicates an entire chapter to the author theory; more specifically, Goldman dedicates an entire chapter to downplaying the legitimacy of the theory, stressing the collaborative nature of film. He says about auteurism: “it sure as shit isn’t true in Hollywood” (Goldman).

Goldman’s argument was that, in Hollywood, there is an elaborate system set up to make films, and each of the technicians involved in a film is crucial to that particular film coming out well. He also posits that proponents of the auteur theory found certain artists whom they championed, even in their worst work. He argued that they did this to
make a mark on the film work, and to move from film critics to filmmakers, using a
theory of their own design to help in that transition.

Of course, Goldman had a vested interest in seeing that the auteur theory didn’t
catch hold: his livelihood as a screenwriter. And furthermore, if one believes Sarris’ own
remarks (in his revisiting of the auteur theory), the “theory” is inappropriately named – it
should be considered more of a policy or a tool, much as the French originally intended,
and should primarily be used to view the whole of an artist’s output, since that was the
original intention of the French who conceptualized it (Sarris).

Goldman’s criticism also isn’t well-researched: Truffaut routinely criticized
several films from Alfred Hitchcock’s canon in his book of interviews with the
filmmaker entitled *Hitchcock* (Truffaut). He still holds the man and his art in high
esteem, but is able to recognize their faults as well.

**Dogme:**

One film movement that seems to be a reaction to the idea of authorship in film is
Dogme 95. Dogme 95 was started in 1995 by four Danish filmmakers, Lars Von Trier,
Thomas Vinterberg, Soren Krag Jabobsen and Kristian Levring. According to the official
website, Von Trier had the initial idea and asked if he “wanted to start a new wave”
(Dogme).

Dogme films include many stylistic elements that the French New Wave
filmmakers stressed, such as hand-held cameras, natural lighting, and improvisational
acting. However, the Dogme Manifesto states clearly that “the auteur concept was
bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby ... false!” (Dogme). The main
differences between the two movements are that the Dogme folks have their rules clearly defined in a “Vow of Chastity,” and that the Dogme director is not allowed to take possessive credit of the work (such as inserting a title card saying “A film by…”), and often the director is not listed in the credits at all.

Interestingly, the Dogme movement appears to be a similar reaction to the New Wave as the New Wave’s reaction was to the French “Tradition of Quality”; that is, a group of young filmmakers trying to subvert conventions of their form to breathe new life into the work they are doing, while at the same time making a name for themselves and getting their work shown to a larger audience.

**Different Views in Other Arts:**

Just as the auteur theory has parallels in other art forms, there are many forms that seem to be contradictory to the idea of a theory that stresses authorship. In particular, theatre is rather similar to film, in that it uses many of the same elements (a narrative text and acting, for example). However, the focus of the work is different: in the theatre, the writer and actors are often the most dominant aspects of the production. Film director Steven Soderbergh stated:

> Directing a play, it seems to me, has all the fun stuff of directing a film (working with actors, coming up with bits of business), with none of the shit (worries about weather, location logistics, losing the light, etc., etc.). And there’s no fucking with the text, which is another time-saver. I’m digging it. (Soderbergh, 167).

Soderbergh focused on the acting and the playwriting, the two most important aspects of a theatrical production. This is in opposition to the concept of authorship, since the relationship between and actor and the playwright’s text is a necessary collaboration.
Almost everyone knows who William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov and Henrick Ibsen are, but the layman often wouldn’t know the director of a particular play. Similarly, actors in the theatre are given an extraordinary amount of freedom to perform their craft, and since the whole of a production depends on their professionalism for the play to not fall apart, they are relied upon heavily (Shapiro, 31-98).

Application:

There has been much controversy and corruption of the original idea of the auteur theory. Some of it has been beneficial, such as auteur being applied mainly to writer-directors, since those filmmakers are more likely to create projects with personal visions. Some of it has been detrimental, such as using the theory as a marketing tool to attempt to “sell” a film as a director’s film, which can allow filmmakers to “coast” on their name recognition. Since the theory has gone under so many variations and changes since its inception some half a century ago, I thought I would add one more twist to it: using the notion of the auteur as an approach to filmmaking, rather than as a critical tool in examining a director’s work.

There were several reasons to do this. The first is that I wanted to make a short film for the creative portion of my project, but I wanted to do it in a way that mimicked a professional production. As such, I had to present myself seriously to the cast and crew, otherwise they would approach the film as little more than a frivolous student film, or, worse yet, a glorified home-movie.

The idea of considering yourself as auteur first as a way of taking yourself and the project seriously from the beginning stems from one of the great benefits of the auteur
theory: it gave film legitimacy as an art form that it previously lacked. Similarly, I wanted to give myself and my film project a legitimacy that I lacked, since I had never directed a film before.

Since one of the evolutions of the auteur theory was that it often refers to directors who also performed other tasks on the film, I wanted to do that as well. On my film, 10 Months, I performed the following tasks: writer, director, actor, and editor. These are the jobs that I credited myself for, but I also assisted in other jobs on and off the set that I did not credited myself for. Among the other jobs I performed are: cinematographer, assistant director, producer, and music supervisor. The theory supports the idea that a filmmaker who performs more than one (or even many) of the important tasks on a film will have a better chance of creating a work that is personal, and hence, arguably more artistic (regardless of quality).

There is also a practical reason for performing many tasks on the film. Since the film’s budget was miniscule, I didn’t want to ask too many people to get involved. I couldn’t pay anyone, and I didn’t want to infringe on too many people’s time, energy or resources, since film work takes up a startling amount of all of those things. If I wasn’t paying anyone, I wanted to keep the cast and crew as small as necessary, to alleviate stress on set and keep everyone active and involved in their respective roles.

Another element that defines an auteur is a strong or repetitive thematic or stylistic trait, or a combination or series of these traits. films exhibit the traits of "technical competence," a "distinguishable personality," and "interior meaning" (Sarris).

For example, Paul Thomas Anderson is considered by many to be an auteur because his films discuss themes of family, surrogate families and suburban alienation. He drives these points home by using techniques such as a constantly moving camera,
irises and whip pans, which often indicate the inner emotions of excitement or distress that his characters go through.

David Lynch is another good example. His films often are superficially structured as *film noirs*, but he uses this genre to dissect the secrets and horrors below the surface of the American small town. His masterful use of sound and strobe lights contribute to this uneasy depiction of life in the rural areas of our country. Both directors above exhibit repetitive thematic traits, and, “over a group of films, [they]…exhibit certain recurring characteristics of style, which serve as [their] signature” (Mast and Cohen, 512).

I will try to do something similar with *10 Months*, by examining the immaturity of the main characters and the breakdown of a relationship between two young adults. I will do this by using a non-chronological structure to give an impressionistic feel, improvisational acting to allow greater empathy between the characters and the audience, and a series of popular songs to aid in my themes. The main drawback of approaching my project this way, however, is that this is my only piece of work: there is no other film to compare this one, and thus no way of examining any reoccurring elements.
Filmmaker’s Journal

Introduction:

To detail the entire process of making a film, I decided to maintain a journal. I thought it would give a better idea of how the filmmaking process works, on a realistic, day-by-day basis, as well as how someone who is attempting authorship on a work makes decisions on every aspect of the film. In hindsight, I think the journal also illuminates many of the frustrations filmmakers face in doing their jobs, which can be anything from weather problems to actors forgetting their lines.

The journal begins at the start of the first draft of the script. The script started earlier, however – I began it my freshman year of college, in spring of 2000. Originally titled Lucky Penny, it was a more poorly-written and pretentious piece with only a few similarities to what you see in 10 Months.

The journal continues through the rest of pre-production, including finding a cast and crew, securing locations, continuing work on the script. Then I discuss shooting, which is difficult to condense because of the long hours and amount of detail involved. Hopefully I’ve done it some justice here.

Finally, I discuss some of the enormity and insecurity of the post-production process and putting the movie together. This section is slighter than the others because a lot of the work is hugely detail-oriented, mostly boring, and hard to quantify. For the most part, though, it’s all there.
16 September 2003, 20:40

It has been a long day. Monday is my day off from classes, so I took the time to run errands and catch up on school work. The biggest concern, in my mind, was to transfer the *10 Months* script from my old PC to my shiny new Mac. The problem is that I was using Sophocles for the PC, which is not compatible with Final Draft. So I wasted a lot of time trying to find a way around that, which resulted in me just burning a CD of the script in text format.

I had other work to do, so I didn’t get started on reformatting and cleaning up *10 Months* until about 1:30AM. I worked hard for 2 hours, taking out the myriad director’s notes, alternate visions of scenes, music selections, etc. from the script, as well as adding treatment for scenes that have yet to be written so the structure was in place. I was finally finished at about 3:30AM, and when I went to save the program quit. I lost all of my work, which made me want to scream, but I didn’t do it because it was late and I live in a duplex.

I tried for a while to revert to an old copy or get the changes back somehow. No such luck…I guess that’s what I get for using pirated software.

Sleep was not very forthcoming, since I had script ideas swimming in my head (note to self: don’t write right before bed), not to mention residual anger from losing two hours of work. This would be a big deal anyway, but it was even more so because I promised Sean a copy of the script for our meeting today.

When we met I told him what happened, and we talked about the timeline I wrote for production (which looked good and doable). We also hashed out more ideas for the
written portion of my project, but the meeting dissolved quickly when a wasp flew in the window and Sean decided to kill it at any cost.

I went immediately to the Shriver Center bookstore, bought a legit copy of Final Draft, and have spent the rest of the night messing around the house and getting the rough draft of the script done. Tomorrow I will turn it in to Sean and Howard Blanning, who is advising my independent study in scriptwriting through the Theatre dept. I think the script is in good, albeit rough, form, but we will see what those two gents have to say.

22 September 2003, 12:51

Turned in my script (or “screetment”, as Howard called it) last Wednesday to Howard and Sean. I haven’t heard anything back from either of them; it makes sense that Howard hasn’t talked to me about it, since he went to China, but I am assuming Sean and I will discuss the text tomorrow. I am anxious to hear what he says, because I know what I see and think in my head about how it will look and feel, but I don’t know how well that has come across. That’s the big dilemma, isn’t it?

I have been working on the script some this week, regardless. There are some minor cosmetic things that needed to be address, as well as additions to scenes and things like that.

Talked to Brandon Lea about the new Miami Association of Filmmakers and Independent Actors (MAFIA) organization that he is starting with some fellow mass com major friends. He wants me involved as Vice President, liaison to Western, and technical advisor, as well as one of the first people to pump out some product for this thing. Hey, whatever I can do to help, but I want to use some of their funds for a Panasonic DVX100
so that I can shoot my film in 24fps. If I can’t shoot on film (and I can’t), I want to shoot on that camera.

I hung out with S. tonight, who is back in town from living in Mackinac Island, Michigan over the summer. Of course, she is one of the inspirations for the film, so it is interesting to see how I relate to her (and vice versa) versus what I am going to throw up onto the screen. The main thing is this: S. and I had a pretty dysfunctional relationship, but now we get along well, so everything is fine. In movie-land, that would equate to a happy ending, but that is not the way I wrote it. As I look over other writing I have done, I don’t see endings that are positive anywhere — am I incapable of writing something happy or hopeful?

27 September 2003, 14:16

Trying to get the crew set. I called Jackie Smith today, who I haven’t talked to since early summer. I want her to be the producer / production manager, so we are going to talk about that over drinks sometime this week.

Working on my annotated bibliography right now, trying to go in spurts so I don’t have to do the whole thing at once. That is one thing I am horrendous at: working steadily. I usually just want to do everything at once and get it done, but the problem is that it makes things so much easier to procrastinate with that attitude, since you have too much to tackle and it seems insurmountable.

Anyway, I am trying to do some of the bib, but the whole written aspect of this project is not very inspiring to me. I realize you need a theoretical basis for what I am doing, but I don’t know how you quantify inspiration. I mean, I know I love Shoot the
Piano Player, and I know that Truffaut has influenced me. But I also love Smokey and the Bandit, so should I maybe be writing about the genius of Burt Reynolds improv skills? I don’t know -- I’d love to present that paper though.

The point with all this is that the written portion is not something I care about that all that much: what I really want to do is go out and shoot this movie already. I will have to wait for February to do that, though, which makes me anxious.

Talked to Sean about the 10 Months script during our weekly meeting. He said he liked it, although he had some questions: Why is it all in Sean’s perspective? How much is going to be filled in, and how much is going to be left to improv? Why is there so much music, and why is it so specific?

I explained the idea that it was his memory of the stuff that happened, which cleared it right up for him, and he liked it even better then. So it looks like I wasn’t as explicit about that aspect of the film as I could have been, and as a result I have added the quote from The Glass Menagerie to the very beginning of the film, as well as added some pointers in the rest of the work (most notably in the diner scene).

I’ve also been reading some screenwriting stuff, notably William Goldman’s books and Soderbergh’s book about himself / Richard Lester. Lester has some good things to say, particularly in regards to having wished he had written his own movies. This is funny, because throughout almost the entire book, Soderbergh complains in interspersed journal entries about how much he “loathes writing”. Then his idol says he admires him for writing his own works (which he only does about half the time or so)!
02 October 2003, 0:07

I had a meeting with Jackie Smith tonight. I shouldn’t say meeting, because we just met at the Balcony and had drinks. But I haven’t seen her since the summer, and I realized that I need someone as a producer / production manager, and the only person I ever even thought of for the position was her. So I ran it down for her – I told her what the script was about, I told her the time-frame, I told her what her role would be and why I thought she was good for it. She was flattered (or so she said) and accepted. Which is good, because the crew is basically locked down now, and that is one thing that I don’t really have to worry about anymore.

I also talked to the MAFIA presidents, Brandon, Sam, and AJ. They submitted an equipment list to the advisors of the group, and they went way over-budget with it. The problem with that is that there will be no Panasonic DVX100 camera. I can’t say I agree with their decision, but I don’t have much say in it either. I might have to start looking if there is any place near here that rents it, because after seeing footage from that camera, I can’t imagine shooting on anything else.

Tomorrow the annotated bibliography is due. Sean and I talked about it during our meeting Tuesday, and he said it is in good shape, but needs to be fleshed out some. It’s a great thing that I’m going to be just starting to flesh it out right after I’m done writing this thing. That means it probably won’t get done until about 3 in the morning – I am a moron.

Sean and I also talked about the structure of the project. It looks like I will have a preface explaining everything, followed by the piece on the auteur theory, followed by my journal, followed by the script, followed by my wrapping up of the whole experience.
And, of course, I will have a movie to show everyone, which is exciting and scary and happy and nerve-wracking and weird and responsible and everything together all at once.

09 October 2003, 14:37

So many things going on, I don’t even know where to start. Let’s just go through it, shall we?

- The crew is starting to come together more fully. I talked to Jackie last week, and to Brad Martin yesterday about doing sound (and sound design). I want to get everyone set up and ready for what is in store for them, because this will not be the easiest thing they’ve ever done, especially since no one (including me) really knows what we’re doing. Also, regarding the crew: I need more people than I thought I would initially. However, this isn’t a problem, because so many people have offered their help. Now, I realize that is a knee-jerk reaction from a lot of folks, but if even 20% of the people who said they’d help do, then I’ll still have way too many people running around nutty on my set. So I’m going to have to start whittling it down…

- Bought a copy of *All the Real Girls*, when remains a favorite and will definitely be screened for cast and crew. One of the cool things about it was listening to the commentary, and realizing all the myriad things that went into the production, particularly in regards to the director working with the actors and giving them so much freedom, especially in regards to improvisation. This is something I must emulate.
• Had a meeting with Howard Blanning today about my script. We talked for over an hour about it, with him telling me he thought it was commercial (not in a pejorative sense, but in the sense that it wasn’t an art film) and that, in fact, it was a “chick flick”. When I told this to JM, he asked if I thought Howard was drunk during our meeting. Dunno. But it raises a larger issue, and one that I discussed with Jaso, which is that the intention you have for a piece of art often doesn’t get across exactly as you intended. I for one have often been surprised by people’s reactions to things that I have written or done. This screenplay is clearly no exception, so it will be weird to see how others view the final product (and, by extension, how I view the final product, since it is bound to be different from what I am currently imagining).

14 October 2003, 23:36
Went to bed last night thinking about how I want to shoot the diner scene, and all the things that go into that. For one, I need to find a location, and I think I want that to be Mocha Joe’s. Also, I am trying to figure out how to shoot a conversation and have the cutting together of it make sense. Then, I am thinking of shooting them separate in every shot, but then having a dolly out beat at the end to show that the last scene is their collective memory. So many things to think about, so many decisions to make, and no right answers.

One thing I’ve been pondering is how inspiration works for me. I work a lot on thinking about films and doing scriptwriting (which is really a form of pre-visualization in the directing) by instinct, and figure out the legitimacy later. For example, I knew I
wanted to do a memory movie, but didn’t know if anyone had done it the way I did. Then I read *The Glass Menagerie*. I thought I was doing something new with a young love story. Then I saw *All the Real Girls*.

So it turns out that I figure this stuff out on my own, then I “copy” it later from other sources. This is something that I’ve come to term “reverse inspiration”, and it must have something to do with the collective unconscious. Or not. I don’t know.

We had project presentations today in senior sem. I went first, even though I didn’t really know what I was doing. I got a lot of good feedback from other folks, which made me think I’m on the right track with my approach and the pitfalls I’m finding myself in (as weird as that might sound).

Had my meeting with Sean at Alex today, since we were both busy. He ate asparagus and we talked about what I need to do next, which is finish the script and continue working on the lit. review. I’ll get right on it.

16 October 2003, 18:33

Had the first meeting and mixer for the MAFIA last night. It was held at 26 1/2. People came, signed up, and Brandon, Sam and A.J. talked for a little bit about what the concept for the society was and how it was going to operate. They wanted me to come up front and talk too, but I didn’t know what to say.

We watched some of their films as well, which aren’t really my taste. The good part is that they are uniformly well crafted and there are good parts and points to all of them. So I complimented the guys on their work, hung out for a while, then went to the bars with Noah to drink too much and watch the Cubs get beaten.
The more I think about it, the more I’m approaching this film like a mix tape -- you have to start off energetically, then change tempos, and switch gears, and everything needs to flow correctly with what came before it. And rhythm is very important. I know that sounds very vague, but at least I know what I mean when I say it, even if no one else does.

Got an email from Jordan from Arizona or New Mexico (even he didn’t know where he was) where he detailed his criticisms of the script. Namely, he didn’t think the characters were fleshed out well enough. The problem I have with that is that: 1) I disagree, 2) Several scenes are still in treatment form, 3) The actors are the ones who bring a lot of the characterization to the finished product. So I’d like to tell him to fuck off, but that wouldn’t be nice.

22 October 2003, 22:28

I talked to Brandon last night, who offered to use some of the MAFIA money to assist my film and make it the first official production of the film society. That’s very flattering. It will be a nice arrangement that benefits everyone, since it will allow me get some money so I don’t have to spend all of my own, it shows the faith that the presidents have in my filmmaking abilities, it will allow the society to have what I hope will be a pretty damn good film on their hands for their first outing, and it will give members of the group a chance to come on set and see how a production of this scale works.

So now it is time to finish the script already and move on to other things.
26 October 2003 – 14:07

...And so I have. In a burst of work, I finished another draft of the script last night. I think this will basically be the final draft. I’m sure I’ll tinker with it here and there in the next couple of months, and might adjust certain things when I cast the actors and when the rehearsals start so that I will have a shooting script. But for the most part, it is done.

I finished around midnight last night, then printed it out while dancing. I’ll give Sean and Howard copies this week, and I already gave one to the presidents of the film society (along with a funding request form). I also gave Jaso a copy so he could see what I’m up to. He liked it, especially since he said there was a through-line of “collisions” in the text that were interesting and appropriate. True.

The other day was rough. I went to see a performance of Godspell by the Rising Phoenix Theatre Company in Middletown, and it turns out that J. and her live-in boyfriend were in the audience. That made me uneasy throughout the entire thing, and even more so when I saw them after the show and had to talk to them a little bit. Not cool.

As I told Jaso, there are some people you just never get over. It reminds me of a part in Lenny Bruce’s autobiography where he talks of seeing his ex-wife in the audience at one of his shows and stopping dead in his tracks. You think you are over someone, even if you’ve gotten closure, but your body (which is infinitely smarter than your brain will ever be) tells you that you are wrong, wrong, wrong.

The whole situation with J. is certainly part of the reason I wrote 10 Months. I think writing it has helped me examine some of the ways in which I am consistently a bad boyfriend; I think it was my attempt to exorcise the demons of the important
relationships of my life. I’m not sure it has worked entirely, and I think that may be due to the fact that, in the course of writing it and filling in the details from the outline I had, it has become less and less autobiographical and more a piece of fiction. That’s for the best, I suppose, but I wonder if other writers struggle with trying to write something personal and ending up with something different. It’s probably just too hard, or too damned painful to do the reality justice.

So I dove into a depression for about a day, mostly because of the encounter with J. (there were and are other factors, too, but I don’t want to get into them). But in coming out of it, I got a burst of energy that helped me finish the script. I’m pretty pleased with myself as a result, so I need to keep working and keep my head above water.

29 October 2003 – 19:40

This has been such a busy week, and I still have yet to finish my lit. review tonight (which I assure you will be of the highest quality – and length). There has been serious and significant work in each of my classes, writing and reading and performing several plays, writing critiques, finishing my script, doing group work, blah blah blah. It’s really quite no fun and I feel like complaining.

Same day – 3:16

I finally finished this lit review, so I’m rocking out to Pantera (but not too loudly, because Jasom is still working on his). Now I am ready to do something else – it will probably involve sleep in one form or another.
OK, what are the things I need to talk about? Well, I turned in and then had my literature review returned to me, and I feel kinda bad about it. I know that I didn’t put as much time or energy (or discipline) into it as I should have, and the results showed: there were tons of typos and mechanical problems and missing areas and all kinds of crappy badness.

Sean and I talked a lot about my lit. review and the holes in it -- basically, it isn’t nearly as interdisciplinary as it could and should be, and at this stage in the game, that is a serious problem. So we sat in the sun and discussed ways and means to get it to the shape it needs to be in, and now I’ll have to jump back in and get to work on my 30 pages.

What else? I have been corresponding a lot via email with AJ, one of the MAFIA presidents. I read his new script and gave him notes, and he did the same for *10 Months*. He said it was “awesome”, which is hyperbole, of course, but still makes me feel good. He liked a lot of things, but wasn’t sure what it was all about. Also, he was concerned that it was too depressing. Sorry.

Had a meeting with Jackie tonight. I gave her the script and we just caught up for a while. I caught her up with my plans for the next couple months with the preproduction and shooting and her role as the producer in all of that, and she’s down.

The second draft of the script is done! I sent it out to some people, including the MAFIA guys, as well as Gareth and Seth and some other friends. I also spent 2 hours of
my Friday afternoon talking with Howard about it (finally). I told him that I usually have a lot of insecurities about my writing, but that I felt really confident in the script and my ideas for *10 Months*: I think the writing is entertaining, well-structured and smart, with a lot of good stuff for the actors to chew on and have fun with. By extension, I think the shoot will probably go well and I hope the end result is something everyone can be proud of.

Anyway, I told Howard this stuff, and he agreed. He told me I should be happy about my writing and this screenplay in particular. We also talked about practical stuff, such as locations and casting; he doesn’t think I should hold auditions, but that I should instead offer parts to people with his advising. He must have some ulterior motive for this, but I can’t figure out what that would be. The real problem is finding the right people. I am very conflicted about just handing parts to kids when I don’t know their work. I would at least like to read with people, but we’ll see what happens.

19 November 2003 – 22:22

Today I talked to Brandon some more about what’s going on with the MAFIA. He said that he is personally putting my movie through first, and as such, I will be somewhat of a guinea pig for the budgeting, production, and many other aspects of how this society will actually work. This is a little disconcerting; it seems like no one really knows what they are doing and we are all working through this together, but hopefully everything will come together and we’ll get some movies made.

Yesterday Sean and I had our meeting at Alex while eating. We talked about my theory paper and I realized just how much I have to get done in the next few weeks – get
a serious rough draft of my 30 pages, get casting locked down, meet with the Mocha Joe
dude (to talk about shooting the diner scene), and have a read-through with all cast and
crew. Oh, and also all the other work I have to do for finals for other classes.

Same day – 0:34
Just got off the phone with Brandon, who told me my application for money from the
film society was rejected. He went to bat for me, I’m sure, but both AJ and Sam seem to
want to save all the money for equipment. The reality of it is that if you are making a
movie for almost nothing and you can’t pay anyone anything, the least you can do is give
them something to eat for their effort – yeah, most of my budget was for food. Go figure.

So Brandon was much more upset about the whole thing than I was, but I still
have my own money and some from Western as well. I’ll be fine without the MAFIA’S
money, as long as I can still use the equipment.

20 November 2003 – 7:08
I received an email a moment ago from Sharon, informing me that my funding via the
Jacqui Wallace has been approved. So that will help some of the practical costs of this
thing, considering the MAFIA’S position on it.

Saw another episode of The Lampshade, a play series in the basement of Presser.
I went because it’s funny, but also because, Ben, the guy who writes and stars in it, is the
dude I want to play Sean. So I gave him a copy of the new timeline I wrote last night and
a copy of the script and I told him to let me know if he wants to do it.
After *The Lampshade*, I went to Mary Lyon to eat vegan thanksgiving food with some hippies, and when I got home I had too many messages on the answering machine. The first one, however, was from Brandon, informing me that ASG gave MAFIA thirteen grand to do with what they will. I called him back immediately and pleaded for him to buy the Panasonic camera – it is $3500 but worth every penny.

24 November 2003 – 12:15

This weekend I saw *Birds* at Gates-Abegglen with T. It was weird -- I wasn’t expecting that. But it was good because I got to see Ben Gillman in something other than *The Lampshade*, even though in this case he was in a bird costume and hardly had any dialogue.

He hasn’t gotten back to me about doing the movie, which makes me nervous and insecure, imagining him backstage, showing other actors the script and all of them having a good chuckle at my expense while still wearing their bird costumes.

You see, even though I think the script is good, I am still an insecure person by nature, and you can see that coming to the surface.

03 December 2003 – 0:41

I’m going a little nuts here. On top of all the schoolwork I have to do for finals, I’m also currently in the process of finishing up casting the film. I have been playing phone tag with Ben Gillman ever since break ended: he called me to say he wanted to do it, but then we couldn’t seem to find each other. He finally got in touch with me at 1 o’clock last
night, and we chatted for a bit about changing the schedule (which was fine, considering I built in flexibility for that very reason). Now have a leading man.

The next step is to have some readings with actresses to find someone who works with him. I’m trying to get Lauren Skirbunt and Emily Savage to read with him this weekend, and I told Ben if he had anyone in mind that he should talk to them too. Either way, the entire cast needs to be read before finals starts, meaning by the end of next week. My lord.

07 December 2003 – 23:03
I’m working on casting still. I have Ben locked down, and I have Noah locked down, and I have a reading with Ben and Lauren Skirbunt for Tuesday evening. She is the only one that I know who will be reading at this point, because Emily Savage decided to back out based on her commitment to her own s.p. I can understand that.

So it’s Skirbunt for now, but I did send a message to the MAFIA listserv inviting actresses to come to read. We’ll see if that happens.

13 December 2003 – 6:37PM
Tuesday I had auditions for the part of Rebecca in 10 Months. The read-thrus went fine, even though only 3 people showed up. I had an instinct to go with Lauren Skirbunt anyway, so I decided to just do it. She was in the dressing room of Rising Phoenix getting ready to go on stage when I called and told her, and she started screaming and yelping with excitement. She told me she wants to do a good job for me, which is exactly the kind of attitude I need at this point.
Thursday was the last episode of *The Lampshade*, and it ended on a surprisingly melancholy note. I think Ben is a really good performer and I’m curious to see what he’s going to bring to the table for the film.

Today we had a read-through with the cast and crew. It wasn’t a completely full thing, because certain people were missing, but it was good for a few people to see how the script works and it was good for me to hear it read out loud, so that I know what doesn’t sound right and can change it before shooting starts.

I had described the script to Matt Clark when we drove down to Florida, but he said he was surprised by how funny it was. That’s good, because I basically don’t think I write funny well, so I’m glad certain things came off that way.

Anyway, people met each other and heard the script and have a better sense of what we’re all doing, and that’s good. I also gave homework to the cast - Ben is to grow a beard, and Lauren is to go to church at least once. Also, they are all supposed to do character bios. And that’s where we’re at with the film right now.

19 December 2003 – 3:54

I’ve done not much lately. So for the rest of break I need to do a shooting draft of the script (basically making sure that the dialogue doesn’t suck, and changing a few minor things), work quite a good deal on my s.p. theory paper, and continue doing pre-production work on the film.

The latter part includes: working with Jordan on the cinematography (i.e., test shots, lighting schemes, rigs), making a new timeline / shooting schedule, relegating tasks in specifics, and doing a lot of little detail work.
I hate all this detail work. For one, it is tedious and I’m lazy. For another, it brings so many variables into the equation, which makes it easier for the final product to be much different than you would have anticipated. I wish I could take the ideas and images I have in my head and transmit them directly onto film without all this hassle of actually shooting -- the film in my head is already a winner.

06 January 04 – 4:05

Maybe I had this burst of energy to write and get some things done because I just finished watching Living in Oblivion and realized how true it all was. The main point of the film is that there are so many variables on set and in working on a movie that the director becomes someone who juggles 1000 balls at once and just tries to minimize mess-ups and complications.

In my case (and the case of 10 Months), there are certainly things that are already giving me a headache. For one, I still haven’t locked down a place for the diner scene. Nor have I gotten actors for Sean’s parents. Nor do I know if we’ll get the Panasonic in time. Nor have I made storyboards or finished a shooting draft of the script.

And as I type this I realize pretty much all of those things are a result of my laziness. So I’ve sat around enough over this Christmas break -- it’s time to get back to work.

09 Jan 2004 – 13:23

I’ve been editing a video of my friends and I being drunk and screwing around for the last several days straight and I’m going nuts. I hate editing. This footage is difficult in
particular, since it is so heavily based on montage, and thus is tedious and time-consuming and a pain in my ass all over the place.

As all editing is. It reminds me of a few years ago when I did an independent study in editing to figure out how it works. I made a video for Big Man Bias, the band I was in at the time with Mike and Duncan, and I spent about 3 days in the SISSCAL digital lab working with Premiere (!), cutting all the silly footage together.

And for 10 Months I’ll be moving up to Final Cut Pro 4 (not to mention After Effects, Magic Bullet and all kinds of other stuff) for the post work, and I don’t mind telling you I’m intimidated by it.

I don’t currently have a headache, but I feel like I could have one. Things keep going weird during this pre-production period: I’ve had to push back the shooting start date because I don’t have the camera yet, not to mention I didn’t do any work over break and, perhaps most importantly, I think I’m overestimating time needed to do scenes. What does all this mean?

Well, now we start shooting on 07 February.

11 January 2004 – 14:51

Sean sent me an email over break about All the Real Girls. Basically, he didn’t really like it so much, and I could understand why someone would feel that way. To me, though, it hit some emotional notes that I responded to, and so I loved it.

I’ve mentioned All the Real Girls as an inspiration before, but here are some others:

1) Code Inconnu, Michael Haneke. This is a French film from a few years ago, starring Juliette Binoche, that I saw in a film class and connected with quite a bit.
The thing that I took away from this particularly was the way “real life” was depicted in the extraordinarily strong long-takes as opposed to the artifice of montages and continuity editing. I will use this as a way to show the difference between the memories Sean has of the relationship to the one scene that takes place in the present day -- month 20. There’s more to talk about with this movie, but that’s enough for right now.

2) Clumsy, Jeffrey Brown. A crudely-drawn graphic novel that I read after the first draft of the script was finished (thanks Sean Duncan). I like that he captures the small moments of a relationship, and that he shows the way distance can have such a devastating effect of how people interact. Brown also casts himself in a very unflattering light, which is brave.

3) The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee Williams. Now, I had read this in high-school, but it wasn’t until I read it and saw it (or vice-versa) again over the summer that its applicability to what I was doing became clear. Most notable is the use of memory as a device, as well as the various characterizations contained within the text. So strong is my love for this play and its influence that I start the film off with a quote from it.

4) The Afghan Whigs. I love the Whigs’ music. I remember Lucky Penny, the old script that I pillaged to make 10 Months, being scored to music all by the band. While I only have one of their songs in the new movie, the influence is definitely still there, as well it should be.

5) Movies. There are many other movies that I feel could be considered sisters to 10 Months, either because I stole things outright from them, or because I find them to
be similar in content, theme or technique. These include: *Lolita* (Kubrick’s, of course); *Sex, Lies and Videotape; Last Tango in Paris; Jules et Jim; In the Mood for Love; Breathless; The Graduate.*

That’s not a bad list, is it?

19 January 2004 – 23:45

Last night I finished a new draft of the script. It is mostly the same, except that I changed some of the dialogue and made things cleaner and clearer. I think it will be better for the actors, especially since I took out all the things that made me want to cringe -- and there were more there than I had thought.

I’ve been storyboarding lately too. The storyboards are totally hilarious, because I can’t draw at all! Seriously, the characters inside the frames look like stick figures (let’s be honest – they are stick figures), and the angles don’t match to what I think of in my head. Regardless of that, though, it forces me to think of the shots and what I want to do and how I want to accomplish it, so it’s still important.

Brats and I are starting up on the behind-the-scenes documentary on the film. We are in the early stages of it – we haven’t shot anything yet, but this week we will do it. I swear.

Am I making any sense at all? I think I’m getting sick and I feel weird.
20 January 2004 – 18:02

Today involved a meeting with AJ, wherein we discussed post-production techniques and programs in more detail. Again, I’m intimidated by Final Cut, as well as all the other programs (After Effects, Magic Bullet) and variables you have to consider. Ironically, having too many options makes you feel trapped.

Had a meeting with Skirbunt, too. We talked about the script and technical stuff, such as how she should wear her hair and what the makeup situation is going to be like. She also told me that she was planning on putting a lot of herself into the role, which is fine, but I warned her that the character she is playing is not a loud, outgoing person like she is. I think I said it wrong, and I hope I didn’t offend her or make her mad. I like her as a person, which is why I want to work with her, but my words probably came out wrong. Damn.

Talking with Lauren reminded me of how little I know about directing actors. For example, I talked to Noah the other day and he has a problem with a line in the script. Do I take it out? Do I let him improv around it? Do I tell him to shut his silly mouth?

If I’m honest with myself, directing actors scares me. I have done it before and I have even acted myself, but I still don’t think I am able to give the actors all they need to do their best work, and that bothers me quite a bit.

21 January 2004 – 23:57

Started working on the documentary with Brats. For the first session she just interviewed me about the script and various other pieces of the pre-production process.
It surprised me that she had such good questions and had her work together as well as she did. That should be a lesson to the control freak in me that if I give people the chance and a little bit of breathing room, they will do their job well.

What else? Still storyboarding, although I might move that back a bit, because I have other things to worry about, such as shot lists, job lists (specific tasks for the crew to handle since none of them have really been on a film set or know what goes on on one), working more on the documentary, getting a rehearsal space, setting up how I want the rehearsals to work, etc.

There is so much that goes into making a movie that it becomes mind-boggling.

23 January 2004 – 17:07

Locked down Mocha Joe’s as for the diner location. Thank god.

24 January 2004 – 21:50

Sick!

Yep, after a mild week, I finally got sick. I felt weird last night when I was out drinking with Seth and Noah, so I came home early (before midnight!). Blew my nose a lot, then took some cold medicine from a silver package that Seth’s dad gave me.

It didn’t help. I woke up stuffed up this morning, so I spent the whole day in the house, leaving only to pick up some food and return some videos (The French Connection and Brother, my first Beat Takeshi film).
Hopefully this day off from everything will make me feel better tomorrow. I know being sick is probably a sign that I’m wearing myself too thin, but I have too much to do right now to back down.


Feeling better. I think my body just wanted me to rest, so I did. I don’t feel 100%, but I still have things to do, so that’s what I’ll do.

I spent part of yesterday researching how to shoot with the Panasonic, since it is currently on the way. I think I found some good information/tricks on how to make this thing behave as though it were film, which is to light for film, shoot in 24 fps (obviously), get a polarizer and other filters, etc. I also found out a way to letterbox the footage in post so that the aspect ratio is the same as Cinemascope!

I also am in the process of making a detailed shot list so that I know what the exact shot-by-shot will be. This, of course, goes hand in hand with the storyboarding, which I am also doing, but slowly.

I also watched All the Real Girls again. It’s so good, but I must not watch it anymore until after the film is completed -- otherwise I will steal from it too much and make the exact same movie, only worse.

Had a MAFIA pre-meeting with the presidents at Mac N’ Joe’s, planning for tomorrow’s meeting. The whole thing was weird for three reasons: 1) It had been snowing all day, and since it was evening, the streetlights were all diffused and lovely and beautiful from all the pure white snow, 2) I was really giddy because I literally hadn’t been out of the house in two days and I was excited to see real humans beings again, 3) I.
was at the meeting (she’d helping with some of the paperwork for funding) and even though it isn’t weird between us, it still is.

    Again, she is one of the inspirations for *10 Months*, and we get along now (even though I don’t want to see her anymore), so why couldn’t I have written the script that way? Maybe I did and don’t even realize it.

26 January 2004 – 23:27

We had the MAFIA meeting today at 26 1/2. The meeting started late. A lot less people showed up at this one, but those who did seemed much more interested in the work and the details of how you get a film done, so in that respect it was successful.

    I told people that I had all the cast and crew, but they could show up to watch and ask questions, and several folks signed up to do just that, including a girl who seemed particularly interested in scriptwriting. I’d love to help her out, since I consider myself a writer before a director (that’s pretty pretentious for someone who hasn’t even shot yet, isn’t it?)

    School school school this week. I’m busy, with lots of things coming up really soon, including more work on my s.p. theory paper. Oh, also I’m shooting a movie in less than 2 weeks – have I mentioned that?

27 January 2004 – 0:32

I just got done meeting with Jordan about the cinematography of the film. I can’t tell you how happy I am that he is shooting it, because he has the right balance you want in any crew member: a practical ability to get things done in an effective and efficient manner,
while also contributing to the overall aesthetic of the piece at hand. It also doesn’t hurt that he’s a good guy.

So I’m happy with Jordan. We talked about different ways to achieve looks that I want and especially different camera moves. I showed him something that I had found a while ago on the University of Virginia film site, which is a $14 steadycam system. As with any steadycam, so much of how the shots looks depends on who is doing the camera operating, but I think if Jordan gets a bit of practice in, we’ll be able to film some smooth, flowing, beautiful stuff.

And I love that! I love long-takes, I love tracking shots, I love moving the camera, I love steadycam, I love all of that great filmic stuff. I want so much to do the same types of camera moves that I’ve seen and loved in other films where you see the camera glide through the space.

I will.

01 February 2004 – 23:20

Lots have happened since I last wrote. The main this is that this weekend I had meetings and work with the cast and crew.

Saturday I woke up and went to Presser, where I met with Ben, Lauren and Noah. We did a read-thru of the shooting script in the library, then took a break and went into the main stage, because it was the only room in the building with heat (or at least it seemed that way).

We did all of Noah’s scenes first, because he had worked the night before until 4 in the morning, so I wanted to get him out of there and let him take a nap.
The way we did things was as follows: I decided what scene we were going to do, then I set up the furniture and small props similar to what they will be at the locations. I let them go through the scenes a few times without an direction at all, letting them feel through the blocking and emotions on their own. Then, I would suggest a few things or have them play things a different way until it seemed to work and felt good for everyone.

After Noah left, it was just Ben and Lauren and me (and Brats filming, too), and we went through all their scenes together. By the end of the rehearsal, they were nailing everything, and it was pretty incredible to see. Ben made a joke about the 26th take being his best, and I feel there is an element of truth to that -- once they got warmed up, it was inspiring to watch the quality of their work.

I was pretty nervous about how I would do in the directing, but the truth of the matter is that I loved it! It was incredibly intoxicating to have good actors perform dialogue and actions that you’ve written, and they did such a great job that I completely fell in love with them.

My experiences with rehearsing the actors reminds me of a quote I read from a Jean-Pierre Juenet interview. He said that he was nervous about directing actors, having come mostly from making commercials. He didn’t know if he could work with the actors well, “but as soon as I started doing it, I enjoyed it. I could feel my veins physically filling with warmth. And once you enjoy doing this, you can only do it well. Therefore, you have to love doing it.”

And I think that’s true. I can’t imagine not liking my actors as people, or not liking the script, or not having quality actors, or doing things in the way I just described,
basically. I think I’m on the right track with this film in a lot of ways, and that level of self-confidence is rare for me in any aspect of my life, so I’m enjoying it immensely.

After rehearsals, I went to Lauren’s house to raid her wardrobe and figure out her look. She is understandably concerned about looking her best, and I don’t blame her -- vanity is something no actor can escape, considering they are in front of the camera the entire time.

This morning was the meeting with crew. It went okay, although it was much more practical and therefore less exciting, because we basically detailed all the specific tasks that everyone would be doing and all the little logistical things that must be done to make a movie.

That’s right -- I’m making a movie! This is quickly changing from an abstract idea into a concrete reality, and it is exciting.

03 February 04 – 17:38

Well, things are a little weirder now. For one, I got a call from AJ earlier today saying that there was confusion in the Panasonic order, and that we will be getting the camera around the 16th instead of, well, sooner.

But there are two plusses to that: we are getting the updated version of the camera (DVX-100A instead of P, which has several new features), and we will also be getting the anamorphic lens. I probably won’t be using the lens, because I don’t have a field monitor to view the results and see if things are properly focused, but we still may mess around with it and see how nice things look with it on.
Turns out, though, that AJ was able to convince the guy working the camera shop to send us their floor model for use until we get our camera, so I will, in fact, be able to shoot with a DVX-100 and not have to postpone the shoot more than I had previously planned.

One thing that sucks is that I had four pages of notes on the shooting of the film that I somehow lost on Sunday. I think I must have left them at Presser after the crew meeting, but I went back there to look and either I am wrong and left them somewhere else, or they were thrown away. Either way, I’m not thrilled about the situation; I had tons of little pieces of business on there and now it’s gone. The good part is that I remember a lot of it, but I’m sure I’m forgetting a good bit of it too.

So in lieu of having that, I’ve made a very detailed shot list that I will follow to the letter to get this thing done, as well as the storyboards. It never ends.
05 February 2004 - 19:49PM

Argh. Well, according to AJ, the camera was supposed to be here today. However, I haven’t heard from him. I also haven’t heard from Jordan, who was to come over tonight and make the steadicam. Argh.

06 February 2004 – 18:23PM

I woke up today and hung around for a bit. I told myself I was going to work out, but I didn’t. Instead, I ate some food, then went to the com. department offices to pick up some equipment with Brats. I dropped her off, then came home to find a message from AJ saying: “Stop sweating bullets – I’m on the way to get the camera right now.”

So I went up to the bar to hang out with Brandon, and after about an hour, AJ shows up with the new DVX100. We took it out in the bar, which was probably a stupid thing to do (for myriad reasons), then AJ and I came back to my house to play around with it some more.

Sam came over too, and we played around with various settings on the camera to get a good look out of the thing. We shot a small amount of test footage with lights, too, including a mock of the *Lost in Translation* commercial shoot: “For relaxing times, make it Suntory time.”

The camera, needless to say, looks brilliant. AJ and I kept yelling and screaming and laughing because we couldn’t contain our happiness over having such an awesome piece of machinery. This whole thing makes me insanely excited, and AJ and Sam were also freaking out too -- our plans are finally coming together.
If there’s one thing that’s rad about the MAFIA, it’s that we are all very supportive of each other, and there’s a sense of everyone being in it together. That’s a nice feeling, and one that doesn’t happen very often.

08 February 2004 – 2:15

I woke up this morning to a call from Jordan. We asked some questions about the steadicam system and if he needed to bring anything for it. I said no, just come to my house and we’ll all do it together. He called a few more times while I ate breakfast.

Everyone got here at about noon. By everyone I mean Jordan, Andrea, Brad and Brats. We needed to go to the com. department to get equipment, so Brad, Brats and I picked up a tripod dolly and audio equipment as Jordan and Andrea ate.

We all met back up again at Wal-Mart, where Andrea and I picked out make-up to use for the shoot. We are going rather spartan, with base, concealer and small amounts of mascara and eyeliner.

Brad was clearly in a bad mood, so when we got back to my house, we did audio tests first. We couldn’t figure out why, but for some reason, the external microphones were not plugging in correctly to the camera, and we were worried we wouldn’t be able to use booms.

Brad went to Steve the Greek’s house to borrow other cords to test, and even went back to his house to test the mics on his sound system, and everything worked fine. We spent over an hour on this problem, when it turns out that there was one little switch that we didn’t switch. Then we did. Then things worked.
But there is still a concern about the audio, because although we have a boom and a nice mic in the Sennheiser ME66, the audio seems omnidirectional and thus picks up way too much surrounding noise. So we might have to muffle. Either way, we need to figure something out, because good audio is a must to have a movie that people take seriously, which is the whole goal.

Next we did make-up tests. This involved Jordan taping a close-up of my face as Andrea applied make-up to test different looks. Again, we decided to go light on make-up, for the most part. The reason for this is that there are very few close-ups in the film, and we want to keep the actors looking pretty natural.

After that, Jordan and I did camera tests. We had been playing around with it throughout the other tests, trying to get good footage from the steadicams, the tripod dolly, and with lighting. After everyone left, though, we delved into some other junk. One of the main things we did was we tried to get a shallow depth of field. For film, this is not a big deal, but it’s a problem with digital cameras, where the depth of field is almost always infinite.

We also tried to figure out whether or not we should shoot 16:9 letterboxed in camera, or whether we should shoot full screen, mask it off and crop it to 2:35:1 in post. I’d love the latter, but because we don’t have a wide angle lens and we are shooting a lot in doors, I think cropping it that much in post will make everything look too claustrophobic and will leave little room for the actors to move in the frame.

We even went to Western to see how things would look on location, and you just couldn’t frame well. Again, I wish we had a wider lens, but we don’t, so it looks like our aspect ratio will be 1.85 instead of 2.35.
Jordan and I also tussled about the exposure and iris settings. I’ve read that it is better to underexpose slightly when shooting digital, because it gives a more filmic look, but Jordan doesn’t want to do it. He seemed to want to question all of my rationale, but I’ve done a lot of research on this camera and I have a pretty good idea of what I’m talking about. Needless to say, he was getting on my nerves by this point, and I felt like I was going to tear my hair out.

08 February 2004 – 21:57

Today was the first day of shooting. I woke up at about 10:30 in the morning (early for me) and packed up all the equipment I had in the house: a tripod dolly, all the sound equipment, and the camera.

I drove to Western and threw everything in the living room of Peabody. People ambled in around noon, but there was a lot of sitting around, eating, things like that. One thing that we have to pay attention to is making sure that we start on time, because there is much too much sitting around before set-up.

The first shot was outside on the Peabody porch swing. We set some stand-ins there before we had Lauren and Andrea be in the shot. Also, one of members of the MAFIA came by to watch the shooting, and we threw him in the shot, for no particular reason at all. He looks out of place, but I think it’s funny.

I had planned to make a little speech to the whole cast in the crew, but as I was doing it I just decided to abbreviate it. So I think it came out something like, “This is the first shot of this movie. Let’s make an awesome movie.” Yes, I can be eloquent when I want to be.
After my “speech”, we shot three takes of the scene, at different exposure settings. It looked too blue and the sky was blown out, but we had to move on, hoping I could correct it in post. Having a monitor on set would help, of course, but this is straight low-budget guerilla moviemaking!

The next shot was in the first-floor hallway of Peabody, right outside the living room. It took a while to set up, because we have no overhead lights and we were trying to get a good look. I also had an idea to have someone pass by the frame, which was surprisingly tricky to plan and execute.

The whole thing was a weird zoo. For one, lights were being held everywhere, which was maddening to walk around. Also, Bill Newell was in the building and watching here and there. At one point, as we were setting up the shot, I walked over to him and said, “This is the life I have made for myself.” He replied, “Enjoy it,” which is the best advice someone can give, I think.

So we ended up getting the shot, although we did nine takes. The reason there were so many, I think, was because we tried different things with Brats walking through the shot, as well as minor coverage of me walking into the shot vs. me being in the shot from the beginning. I still don’t know which I will use.

The plus side, though, is that we tested audio in that scene, and it sounds really good. Audio is a big concern in shooting movies (especially no-budget things like this one), but I think it will turn out nicely if we keep on like we did.

We moved to Peabody kitchen for the last scene of the day. Jordan and I had some disputes over framing, particularly in getting a curtain out of the shot. He asked me later if I thought he was undermining my authority, and I don’t think so. It was weird
though, because he’s used to directing models and is in that mode on our shoot, so he’s a bit more vocal about things that I’d like right now, which I told him. But things will be different next week, because I won’t be in the shots and I can sit behind the camera with him. That will help.

We got the framing right, as well as the lights. I had Matt Clark go get ice cream for everyone, and we threw everyone who was sitting around into the frame. There were two reasons for this: one, I wanted to show a sense of movement in this montage, and I wasn’t able to do that with camera movements, so I wanted there to be several people in each shot. Also, after reading comments made by Emir Kusturica and seeing *La regle du jeu*, I realized how much I love when a frame is alive. So I’m going to pack people in as much as I can, or at least whenever it makes sense.

So we took who knows how many takes of that scene, and then we wrapped for the day. Everyone seemed to want to scurry off fast, so I let them. I said thanks first, though.

Sean D., Matt C., Jordan and I packed some stuff up, then watch dailies on a TV in a classroom in Peabody. We recognized immediately that: 1) The camera looks phenomenal, especially with good lighting, 2) The sound sounded great, 3) The last shot was underexposed and too dark, 4) We did a pretty good job, especially for the first day.

I came home and napped. Woke up and watched dailies again, this time on my computer. The shots looked similar, so I captured them and toyed with them in Final Cut. The adjustments that you can make in Final Cut are unreal! I used color correction a lot and contrast and brightness: suddenly, the too dark shot was just right, and I was, needless to say, very happy.
Bertolucci talks about how Jean Renoir gave him this piece of advice before he died: “You must always leave the door of the set open because you never know what might come in.” I found that to be true almost immediately. We shot a very small amount of footage today, but I have already stated improvising and doing things based on how I feel that day. One example of that is that the first shot we did was bluish. The second turned out to be a bit yellowish, because of the paint on the wall. The third shot had a lot of green in it. So I think I will tweak the colors when I edit, and when we shoot the last scene of this montage, I will focus on the color red, so that all the main primary colors are seen. It’s a little thing, I know, but it could end up looking cool.

Another example of that is that when we framed the scene where everyone is eating ice cream, my position when I sat down completely blocked Andrea. Jordan pointed this out to me, and I acted like I planned it that way. But it put a whole new spin on the montage: my character is taking place of hers in importance of Rebecca’s life.

We dubbed that move the “total eclipse of the roommate”, in reference to the Air Supply song. Sean Duncan called the move “pretentious”, but in an affectionate way. I guess I would agree, but it’s a small thing, and one that I don’t think many people will notice (at least not consciously).

So those were some good things that happened. Some problems arose, though, as well. The main thing, I think, is to pay attention to lighting. If you light well, this camera loves you. If you do not, good fucking luck. So need to get more lights and especially see if we can light from overhead somehow. We’ll see.

Another thing that we found out is the cameras viewfinder and eyepiece both cut off some of the sides. So you think you are framing correctly, but then you get shit on
the sides in the final product that you thought you framed out of. That can be fixed easily, but it is good to know now so that we can frame tighter than we think.

But those things are minor. For the most part, I think things went pretty well today. People will have a better idea for next time of what they are to do and how the work is done, and that will give me more time to work with the actors. Also, we all know each other now, so it won’t be awkward anymore.

One last thing: in the evening, I got calls from all three MAFIA presidents asking me how shooting went. That was a nice gesture, and made me feel like I was doing something good.

I’m exhausted but excited. I can’t wait until next week.

10 February 04 – 17:16

Even on days where I’m not shooting, the film is constantly in my head, and I can’t seem to think too hard about much else. I really need to clear my head and be able to function in society, rather than continue with this feedback-loop of thoughts about my own minor creation.

Yesterday was weird. I went with AJ, Brandon and this kid Kevin who was on set Sunday to see a panel of alumni speak at Shriver Center. One of them, Navid McIlhargey, was an executive for Revolution Studios, so we talked with him a bit about the MAFIA and filmmaking in general. He was friendly about advice, which was nice, but I guess I expected him to be more helpful or supportive or something.

The whole thing left me feeling very insecure about 10 Months, because he made a comment about how so many short films are about a suicidal, mopey main character. Is
that what I’m creating? Am I making a cliché short that anyone could make? I stressed out about it all day yesterday, and it made me feel like dirt.

The good part is that I had my scriptwriting class this morning, and we talked about structure. In doing so, I realized that I did, in fact, write the movie pretty well. I also reread an email from Dan Prazer that starts like this:

***
Date: Thu, 11 Dec 2003 02:01:18 -0500
From: daniel l. prazer <prazerdl@hotmail.com>
To: flynn@entropy.muc.muohio.edu
Subject: RE: hey

just signed on for the express purpose of e-mailing you.

so i just read your script. are you trying to make people like me who haven't written in a while look bad? because, james, it's really fucking good, and you know i wouldn't say that if i didn't mean it. the dialogue is just spot-fucking-on, and as i see what's happening to sean, i just got all knotted up in my gut. bravo, son. you've done very well.

***

It goes on about some other stuff, but I gotta keep that in mind so that I don’t become doubtful and discouraged.

So, yeah, when I think about it, I think I’ve written well. Even with the non-chronological order of action, I set the piece pretty clearly in a three-act form, while melding character motivation and action with theme and plot. After realizing that, I felt a lot better about the whole situation, and now I’m ready to go out and do it again.
11 February 2004 – 17:58

I’m mad, because I’ve been trying to track down Steve, a grad student, to play Jim for this film. He just sent me an email about not being able to do it, so I’m back at square one.

I guess the next thing to do is talk to Howard tomorrow about doing it. He says he’s not good on camera, but he’ll have to do. Then I have to worry about who will play Sarah, and it never ends…

14 February 2004 – 19:46

Oh my. We shot for a long time today, and all I can say is that my legs hurt.

I woke up at 8, which is much too early for me. I drank RedBull and ate a bagel, then packed equipment up and went to Mocha Joe’s. In one of the biggest surprises in a while, Jordan was the first crew member to show up.

We got into Mocha Joe’s café a little later than 9:30 (the stated start time), and waited around for people to show up. Matt Clark was quite late, and Jackie actually never showed up at all.

The crew set some things up while I worked with the actors. People mostly sat around eating and what-not, which was kind of annoying.

We got ready to shoot, but then realized that the boom mic was faulty. It wouldn’t work at all, so we played around with it for about an hour. I drove to the com. building to see if I could get a replacement, but they were closed on account of the holiday.
I went back to Mocha Joe’s, and after playing around more, we realized it was the cord on the boom pole. We switched it out, and got back to work.

Shot Ben’s angle first, which went fine. He did something great too -- he spit some ice out of his mouth during the conversation. I looked around at everyone with the biggest smile on my face because I love when little things like that happen, and you can’t really script them because they’re too weird or little to even think about.

So we got Ben’s angle, then we shot him going to the bathroom, which involved me pushing Jordan in a chair. While setting up angle for Lauren, we got rushed because the owner said they needed to start putting people in that room. What resulted was that we were only able to get one take of Lauren’s angle, then some bad-looking shots of them together at the end (the color was all off of those, too, because we turned the overhead florescent light back on). Because of that rush, I’m worried about the eyeline match and Lauren’s performance being less that it could be, but it’s a moot point now -- that’s the demands of making the day, and it is harder than I imagined.

We packed up and all ate at Fiesta Charra. Then we came to my house to change clothes and do the car scenes. We used Andrea’s Jeep, first driving out to Hueston Woods to film the opening conversation on the way to Ben’s parents house. Then someone said something about a carwash, and I decided quickly to film the other car scene (Month 5, I think) with Sean and Rebecca in the carwash. Matt Clark washed the car as they did their dialogue, and I think it came out well.

We all came back to my house and drank beer and watched dailies on my computer. Ben and Lauren were both shy about seeing themselves on screen, which is
understandable. I need to reassure them more that they look fine and are doing a good job, because they do and they are.

The footage continues to look and sound exceptional. I mucked around with some of it in Final Cut after everyone left, and if you light well and shoot well, you have so much flexibility in post to adjust things. I’m excited to get to the editing stage and make it all look perfect.

Took a nap, and was woken up by several phone calls. One was from Kelly, saying she could come for the next shoot. Fine. Then Jackie called, telling me that she had been in the hospital because of a car accident. I told her to relax and take care of herself, and that we would see her whenever she was ready.

17 February 2004 – 22:02
I woke up early and ate/drank a RedBull and bagel breakfast and got to Peabody around 10:30. Sean was already in his office, so I hung out with him for a bit, trying to wake up. Pretty much everyone was late and sluggish when they got there, and Brad was especially bad -- he looked like being there on set was the last place he wanted to be.

I don’t know if it was because we already had a long day the day before, or if everyone was hung over, or if they are getting tired of shooting, or what, but I could tell almost immediately that hardly anyone was into it. So I made a little speech before we started shooting, wherein I told them all what happened to Jackie, as well as encouraged them to get to the set on time and be on task a bit more.

After that, we set up the scene where Sean and Rebecca have their first kiss, and I cleared the set so that the actors wouldn’t be as self-conscious and would have additional
pressure that would make them act more nervous. It worked -- they did a good job of playing up being anxious with each other. We did five takes, each with different improvised dialogue (I didn’t write anything for that scene), and then we moved on.

We all ate at Jimmy John’s, staying silent for the most part. The mood was grim, and I couldn’t really understand why. So we ate and I called Nebz to make sure he was home, then we moved on over to his house and shot all the scenes set at Sean’s house.

When we arrived, everyone took a look around and realized why I had chosen their house to shoot at: the place is gross. There were beer and booze bottles covering every inch of all the tables and spilling off onto the floor. Literally dozens of pizza boxes were stacked up on the kitchen counters and on top of the fridge. Flies were coming out of everywhere, and the place just smelled. As such, it was perfect to show what a scumbag Sean is/has become.

We set up a few shorter shots, mostly to be included in the montage in Month 12. Then we set up for the scene during Month 12 where Nate lets it spill that Rebecca is with someone else.

I had Ben and Noah play it by the script for the first few takes, because they are always rusty the first couple of runs-through. But as they got more comfortable, I told them to improvise and go off on tangents, as long as they remained essentially true to the points of the scene.

So they played around a lot, and the footage that resulted was hysterical. I found myself laughing so hard I would have to fit my fist in my mouth to not blow their takes. Choice gags included: Nate calling Sean out on putting q-tips in beer bottles, talking about taking Polaroids of girls, and their discussion of what they are going to do at the
club. I’m sure I’m missing some stuff, because it all had us laughing in fits, which we needed at that point.

We set up a few more shots for that scene, then moved on to when Sean and Nate are playing chess and smoking weed. I did it exactly the same way: I had them go through the scene a few times with scant direction. Then I gave suggestions, mostly in having them play the scene smaller. This always seems to be a problem, particularly with Ben, because of his extensive stage experience. I then had them improv through the scene to see if there’s anything we can use, and again, it was hilarious. Noah’s additions to the weed-smoking business was great, such as taking a pair of tweezers out of his pocket. His last night in one of the takes was classic: “Hey, quit tag-teaming it, bro!”

I guess it’s a little self-indulgent to do the scenes that way (since most of it will never end up in the movie), but I get immense joy out of seeing the actors perform off-the-cuff in the world I’ve created. I think they have fun with it, too, and that’s something I can’t ever forget about making a movie: it should be fun, no matter how serious I am about the process.

We got a few more small shots, then packed up and went to my house for beer and dailies. They all looked quite good, but it was hard to be objective because I was so tired and intimidated by the shooting process that day. I haven’t addressed it correctly or to the extent that I think it was a problem, but I need to reiterate that the crew wasn’t into doing the movie that day, and there were particular problems with Brad and Jordan.

Brad because he was being moody that day, and even went so far as to say “I don’t care” when I asked him if he wanted to wear the headphones to make sure the sound was OK. That’s not something I need.
Jordan because he is much too much of a perfectionist and isn’t shy about voicing his opinion loudly, about everything. For example, he has made suggestions about dialogue and acting and sound, which really don’t have anything to do with his role. He was upsetting me quite a bit that day, so I had a talk with him earlier this week about my concerns. I realize that he just wants to do well, and that a lot of the problems come from both his experiences directing models as a photographer and his weird personality, but I told him that he needs to be more tactful and not try to direct my actors. I think he understands; I hope he understands, because we have a lot more to shoot and it needs to go more smoothly or my sanity will be shot.

Besides that, I think there were several reasons for the problems in general. My speech didn’t help, because, for starters, I didn’t deliver it well. I also think it came off like I was reprimanding the crew; they’re adults, and they don’t need me scolding them. I think many people were hung-over, which never puts you in a good mood. Plus, it was a long day on top of the previous long day, and it is easy to get bored and tired.

On viewing the dailies, I realize that even though I don’t want to make a cutty movie (and even rationalized it to myself why and how I wouldn’t do that), I still have been shooting far fewer set-ups and coverage than I probably should. But these are the things that one learns in making their first film, and I will remember for the next time.

All in all, there is a lot of insecurity about what’s going on right now. I feel like this movie is getting out of my control, and that’s not what I need. But the reality is that the footage I have looks good, and I have a pretty good handle on what’s next (besides the huge hole of not having the parents cast!), and I have serious determination to finish and get on with my life. That’s what it comes down to.
Well, a lot has happened since I last wrote. I put off writing because I was so dismayed by how the shooting went that I had to hibernate for a while.

Anyway, the other night I hung out with AJ, and we talked film, film, film, and New York. We watched some footage he shot the previous day, and looked at comparisons from before and after color correction in Final Cut (it’s astounding, in case you didn’t know). I taught him everything I know about aspect ratios. We discussed shooting and editing action set-pieces, and shared New York celebrity stories – his introduction to and meeting of Francis Ford Coppola (or “Frank” as he calls himself) beats my boozy night in the Village hanging out with half of the old R&B group Solo.

AJ said something weird to me, which was, “So, do you wanna be a director or a cinematographer?” He asked, I think, because I pay so much attention to the technical aspects of cinematography. For example, I was the one who suggested the DVX100, and I know too much about aspect ratios, Cinemascope, film stocks, etc. And it was weird to me, because although I pay attention to the image a lot (because, after all, movies are a visual medium), I came to this whole thing from the writing, really. And if you look at someone like Almodovar or Bertolucci (who is slowly becoming a favorite), I think it is possible to have a film look gorgeous without getting in the way of the text and especially the performances.

After AJ left, Jordan popped by. We talked some more about him limiting his opinions on the set, which sounds like a bad way to put it. But I think it makes sense for Jordan’s personality, and I told him it was fine if he had opinions, but to tell them to me
directly and quietly instead of yelling them all over the location. Although he means no harm and is trying to be helpful, it is disrespectful and doesn’t get the work done.

We also watched a little crappy edit I did of some of the footage. We really dove into the cuts and the match-on-action and talked about things we would do differently (already!). Jordan mentioned about how we’ve really only shot on tripods so far, and how “in a real movie, the camera is always moving.” That’s not quite accurate, but I understand what he means.

The truth of it is that the scenes we’ve shot need to be static for one reason or another. And that needs to be a contrast to the early scenes in the movie, where the camera will be moving constantly to show the excited nature of the characters. The camera doesn’t move later in the movie because Sean feels trapped and stagnant.

This is a good example of something I have been thinking about lately, which is the idea that I love so much about film: the techniques create emotion. For example, I will shoot Month 10 only in handheld, to create a constant tension and a difference from the rest of the film. I think it will work, and I love that about movies -- you can do a certain move and the audience subconsciously understands what it means. It’s a shorthand, and it makes things so much smoother.

So I told Jordan that we will be moving the camera more, and that made him happy. It makes me happy too, because to me camera movements are some of the most pleasurable aspects of cinema if done right, and I think we will do some good things. It will just take planning.
So that was all fine, but what isn’t fine is that I still don’t have an actor for Jim!

I’ve decided that it is too hard to find two older actors, so I’m going to rewrite the opening scene with just a dad character.

Howard is jerking me around on this, telling me, in no uncertain terms, that he doesn’t want to do it. He gave me no real reason, though, which makes me confused and gives me much more searching to do.

24 February 2004 – 1:38

Well, I guess things are a little better. For one, I spent this weekend forgetting about the movie as much as I could, because I knew I wouldn’t and couldn’t really shoot.

Sunday Jordan and I played around with the anamorphic lens, which came to AJ and which he gave to me. Jordan wants to shoot the rest of the movie with it, but I’m not down for several reasons: the looks won’t match, we don’t have a field monitor, we will have to be much more careful with the camera that we normally would as not to scratch the sensitive lens. On top of that, the lens doesn’t seem well-constructed, and I just don’t trust it. I’ll probably do tests with it for the next thing I shoot (which will probably be this summer sometime), but it’s not going to happen on this show.

Jordan and I went out and shot second-unit stuff, which was rather uneventful. We got the establishing shot of Mocha Joe’s, as well as a bunch of inserts of various objects in Nebz’ house. As promised, we moved the camera a lot, and it looked fantastic.

Jordan had to go do a photo shoot, so we decided to meet up again on Thursday to shoot the exterior car footage with Noah Everett (including the very first shot of the movie). I went out to Hueston Woods and kept shooting until the battery ran out. The
light was gorgeous, so I got some fun lens flair effects, as well as other establishing shots (i.e., for the picnic scene) and other miscellaneous junk.

Later on Sunday, I got an email from Sean Duncan that went like this:

***
Date: Sun, 22 Feb 2004 11:40:07 -0500
From: Sean Duncan <duncansc@muohio.edu>
To: Four-Door Ford <flynn@entropy.muc.muohio.edu>
Subject: comments

okay,

i think the film is going along pretty well so far. i like how you're corralling everyone and how enthusiastic everyone seems about this. while being pretty loose, it's running much more professionally than i'd hoped, and i'm generally very, very pleased.

that said, i still have a few comments/criticisms that i'd like to suggest:

* the setup of shots needs to be a lot quicker, plain and simple. we're wasting a lot of time by, say, not having the roses already there before we start shooting, and having to waste 20 minutes waiting for him to come back.

* similarly, you and jordan should be figuring out how you want the shot before we get there. you can re-scout the locations with him, taking the camera along and maybe some lights beforehand, and get a better sense of what you want to do before we begin. i'm a little confused (as are many of the others, i think) as to exactly where jordan's role ends -- he's doing more than just determining lighting, and is often times quasi-directing. if this is what you're going for, that's fine, but it seems as though most of the visual style of the film is being dictated by him and i think that's a bit confusing to some of us.

* i think the actors (ok, maybe just ben) are looking for more guidance on what to do. ben looked pretty stiff in the scenes with noah (most people would), and he ratchets up his performance too much too soon, i fear. i don't think he's fully realized that theater is different from film, and you might want to work with him more on that.

* i'm concerned about coverage -- each of the scenes we did last weekend were several takes, but ended with "the take." i'd like to see
you maybe move a little beyond that, and perhaps think about mixing up parts of takes. in neborak's house, we could have take some extra shots of the exterior, the beer bottles, whatever to help with the editing, but we didn't. i'm fearful that you're going to end up with either a very static looking movie (lots of medium shots of "talking heads" a la kevin smith) or one in which you'll have to ditch parts of great takes because part of it was off.

* i'm worried about the schedule. i think you and jordan will need to do some shooting in the week, to get everything in time (especially now that we're not shooting this morning). i'm sure you're aware of this, but i want to reiterate that time's getting way short.

ok, that's all for now. again, these are constructive criticisms -- right now i think the project is an A project as it stands, but i'd like it to be an A+. let's meet this week, and get me more of the written project to read then.

--sean

***

I don’t really have much to say about that, except A) I know, and B) now I understand how a quarterback feels on Monday morning.

By the way, I think I have an actor for Jim – the owner of Mocha Joe’s! More on this as it comes up…

24 February 2004 – 17:57

OK, so it looks like the owner of Mocha Joe’s, Bill Hoess, is a go for playing Jim.

Here’s how it happened:

I talked to Howard very briefly last Friday about how Steve hadn’t gotten back to me, about how Howard Kleiman hadn’t been able to do it, and how I was running out of options. His quote was, “Well, give me a schedule as soon as you can, but I reserve the right to pick someone else to do it for me.” What a nice thing to hear.
So he called me Sunday and left a message about how the owner of Mocha Joe’s was interested. So I went to see him, and after we hashed out the schedule, he said yes.

Last night I rewrote the opening dessert scene so that it would retain the ideas, but only be for the father and not a mother character. I also expanded on the awkward silence bits, as well as included a bit of business from the location -- the deer head.

I think the scene plays funnier, and hopefully the audience will stick pick up the point of the scene: the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. And in this case, that ends up in you being alone.
27 February 2004 – 21:18PM

Last night was Open Mic at 26 1/2. People kept asking me about the movie, and I continued avoid answering it. The reason for doing that is that sometimes someone will have heard something else and get it all wrong, and then I feel compelled to explain.

For example, somehow my old acting teacher heard about the movie, and told someone else it was about a girl trying to convert her boyfriend to Christianity. On top of that, Andrea’s friend Katy told me last night that she heard (presumably from Andrea) that it was about my relationship with J.

And that made me angry, because it really isn’t. The problem with writing something personal is that there are elements of your life in there, but they become so detached that they cease to resemble your life. I’ll say it again: I tried to write something that would mirror the key relationships in my life (most notably J. and S.). I tried to do that. I set out to do it. But as the writing continued, the characters and situations took on a life of their own, and thank God for that, because otherwise, the movie would be a lot more boring.

But the reality of it, at least for me, is that the movie has very small elements of it from my life, but most of it is made up. And I’ve always had a problem with writing things that seem real, and people imagining that the main character was me or the event was real. It’s frustrating, and 10 Months is no exception.

02 March 2004 – 23:11

Saturday we had an 11AM call at my good pal Kristen DeLap’s room in Mary Lyon Hall. I showed up early, talked to her a bit and then kicked her out of her own room.
The cast and crew showed up gradually: Ben first, as always, followed by various others. We all got in the room somehow, even though it was a tight fit, and right as we were about to start shooting, someone yelled “Ticket lady!” and we all ran out to our cars.

Normally this sort of thing wouldn’t have been a problem, but there were no more spaces left outside Mary Lyon, so we all parked on the grass. Needless to say, that’s a no-no, and a few of the people got tickets, which I promptly grabbed from them and will pay sometime this week.

We got back into the room and, after shooting a small part of Month 3, started shooting Month 9. The shooting went much more smoothly than before, because I ran through everything with Jordan the day before, and we were on task a lot better than before. We shot the scene from three different angles, and every take Ben had a hilarious little twist on the dance he does.

We got the two overhead bed shots, then moved on to Month 10. This is/was a big scene, because it is the climax of the movie and has to be played just right. So I cleared the set and shot the scene myself, day for night. We went through it a few times, then started shooting.

I don’t even remember the takes very well, because we did many takes – a dozen or so I’m sure. But we had to because it was so important, and Lauren wasn’t happy with how she was playing it most of the time. I’m not going to move on if an actor isn’t happy, and I also wanted to make sure that we had enough footage to work with. It will be rough to edit, though.

Regardless, I think the scene came out well. For one, Ben played the beginning of the scene a lot funnier than I expected -- he put in some bits of business, like saying
“What are you doing?”, and starting to take off his clothes when she asks him to take a shower. But I think the scene does a good job of doing what I love best about movies -- changing emotions very quickly. Ben goes from being drunk & flirty to crying & sad to mad enough to hit his girlfriend. And I think it makes sense and works, and a lot of that has to do with the way he played it.

We finished that scene up and went to my mom and step-dad’s house to shoot Month 6. We set up and shot Lauren’s monologue first, then Ben’s close-up. Bill showed up then, and we went through the scene several times with him. He hadn’t acted in a while, and I think he knew the lines, he was just very intimidated and nervous about having to do it in front of other actors and a crew.

I think he played the scene well. He nailed the awkward silences (because he was actually nervous), and his improv story about the camping trip was unexpected and awesome.

We got several different angles of the scene, then ended as the sun was coming down. Packed up, went back to my house and shot a few scenes in my bathroom of Ben acting drunk. He got in my nasty tub, too, which shows you his dedication.

We watched dailies afterwards. I was exhausted but still excited, because the day went quite well -- we shot a lot, got quality performances, and had some great improv from Bill. Plus it was pretty outside.

Woke up on Leap Year Day at 8. We started off slow in the Peabody living room, waiting for everyone to arrive and wake up when they did. Because there was a lot of sitting around, I went out around Peabody and the area to find the best places to shoot the picnic scene. I couldn’t decide, so I had Jordan come with me and we walked all around
Peabody and McKee Beach. We decided to shoot the photo scene near a tree by Kumler, then the picnic scene on McKee Beach.

The main problem we were having was that we wanted it to look like spring or summer, even though we are shooting in February! As such, we had to make sure we got as little of the surrounding trees and bushes as possible in the shot, because bare limbs are a dead giveaway of winter.

The first thing we shot was Ben taking pictures of Lauren. He improv’d some funny stuff, including “You’re a tiger!” and some of the other little things. We did several takes, because we had some technical problems (stepping on cords, panning too fast, etc.), but we got some good stuff.

After that, we moved on to the picnic scene. In the script I wrote “Rebecca tells Sean a story from her childhood”, so, Lauren being a professional, told a story from her childhood. It involved her and her little sister acting like cats for a summer, and having neighborhood kids pass cat tests to play with them. The story was incredible, and in one of the run-throughs, she ended by saying that they used to climb trees a lot. Then she asked Ben if he wanted to climb a tree! I was in heaven.

I told her to keep that, and Ben to keep his line about *Cats* being a “freaky musical”, so hopefully we’ll be able to use that for those things for the final cut.

While we were shooting that scene, several things happened: the weather got warm and beautiful, Noah showed up looking hilarious with his moustache (which we have great footage of), and my brother Joe showed up for his cameo. So we finished the shot, then broke for lunch.
I ran around, charging batteries, wrangling extras for the football scene, and not eating lunch. So we all got back to Alumnae Field at 1, and I had my brother get me some food while Jordan and I set up the next shot.

We shot the scene between Noah and Ben in the football field very simply -- shot/reverse shot, with a few close-ups. Their improv, of course, was cracking everyone up. Those guys play so well off each other.

The scene was a little difficult to shoot, though, because we had to stop often to wait for the wind. No wind-screen is a bad thing when you’re shooting outside, and I don’t recommend it; I will actually have to cut around dialogue when the wind kicks in, and I hate having to truncate performances for something like that.

We shot the rest of the scene, with Noah including a bit of Spanish, and me making more of my extended cameo.

Throughout a lot of this, because there were so many people sitting around, and because it was a nice day, and because we were almost finished shooting, Jordan shot a lot of extraneous footage, and so much of it is hilarious. He dubbed it “Cut, genius!” because after he would shoot, that’s the last thing you heard before the camera was turned off. I’m definitely going to have to make a bloopers/outhakes reel with that stuff on it, because there is so much funny shit that I want to share.

Since Jordan was in the football scene, I shot it. I did it run-and-gun style, with no tripod and lots of push-ins and little fun stuff like that. The shooting of the scene went fast because I knew exactly what I wanted, Joe helped keep the cast in line, and there was no fucking around and arguing with Jordan over the shots.
We got all the football shots, then moved on to the hit between Sean and Rebecca. I hope it came out well, because I didn’t have a good idea of how I wanted to shoot it, and I just did it however it felt right at the time. Did a push-in for the hand-shake, which I think I will reverse to a dolly-out in editing -- dolly and crane-outs for last shots just seem right to me.

We moved everyone to Peabody front steps and shot the last scene of the film: the pull-up on the motorcycle. I shot very few takes of this, for two reasons: shooting with someone on a motorcycle takes a long time, and the footage looked good anyway.

Noah Everett rode up with Lauren on his back, then we got her walk up the steps without the steadicam. I decided to shoot the last shot of the movie, which was Noah speeding away on his motorcycle. I yelled “Cut, that’s a wrap!” and then we took cast and crew photos.

We watched dailies at my house, which almost everyone attended. We laughed at the improv, then went to Mac and Joe’s for food and drinks and watching the Oscars.

14 March 2004 – 17:34

I’m in despair. I started editing in earnest yesterday, and realized quickly that the movie looks like utter trash. It’s my fault of course, and there’s not much that can be done at this point (at least not by me).

There are two major problems, which are indicative of an even larger issue. These are a serious lack of continuity and match-on-action, which makes the scenes look broken up and amateurish, and severe color problems, where the color changes
throughout the scenes and bounces you out of the story. What all this means is that I’m screwed, and I don’t know how to edit around this stuff.

I will finish a cut of the movie myself, but after that, I think, I should see if I can get someone else to edit the thing and hopefully they can work with these problems. Because if they can’t, I wanna bury this movie and hang my head in shame. As it stands, I already am.

16 March 2004 – 20:40

Took a break for a day, and I feel much better about it all. However, there are still serious problems with the cut, so I think what I want to do is finish the cut up, mess with it in After Effects/Magic Bullet, and hopefully work something out.

After that, I want to see if someone else in the MAFIA (preferably AJ or someone who has done editing or a short before) can do a pass on it. I’d like to see what someone else can do with it, because I have quickly realized that I am not an editor (something I should have realized before), and that editing is too powerful and final a process to take lightly.

23 March 2004 – 1:15

I’m back from spring break, which went well. I spent until Tuesday working on editing the movie, then flew down to Florida to hang out with my brothers.

Now I need to get to work. The first order of business is to finish the editing. I’ve been working on it a bit, but again: I’d really like to bring someone else in to do it. The reason being is that it is just too much of a final process to muck it up and do it
It has to be done well, and I am not the man for that job. So I’m going to send feelers to AJ and maybe someone/some others and see if anyone can help me out with the editing.

I also need to cut the movie down. I’m thinking about cutting out certain scenes that take too long, such as Lauren’s monologue about how they met (since you end up seeing it, so you don’t need it described), the photo-taking scene (just go right into the picnic), maybe some little parts that I’ve done here or there that are extraneous. I don’t like doing those things, but sometimes it is only after you’ve shot that you realize something isn’t working.

30 March 2004 – 2:01
I’ve been in a bad funk lately, because the movie isn’t coming together the way I want. That’s the way it is with filmmaking with me – the highest highs and the lowest lows.

Regardless, I’ve cut a bunch already. I have the first four scenes done, up until Month 9. Then I have some of Month 12 and all of Month 0, the last scene.

It is going slower than I had hoped, and I still hate doing. Editing is pulling teeth for me, mainly because I think I do a bad job of it. Hopefully I can pull something off, though, because it needs to get done, and it needs to be done well.

05 April 2004 – 19:58
This past Thursday some filmmakers came into town. One of them, Tom McAlister, was a 1999 graduate of Miami who has since moved out to LA. He made a movie with his
friend Greg Fitzsimmons called *White Like Me*, which they have been entering into festivals and with which they are doing a college tour.

They screened the short in Culler 46, after which there was an hour and a half question and answer period. The film was solid, addressing politics and race relations in America in a fresh and honest way, and they were amiable in answering the questions.

The MAFIA took Tom and Greg out for dinner and drinks at Kona following the screening. Also in tow were some professors, such as Pete Martin and Rich Erlich, a gaggle of girls, and some other hangers-on.

One of the latter of those was Dave Kajganich, who rooms with Tom. He was in town to visit and give support to them, I suppose. We spent most of the dinner talking and catching up, which was nice. He insulted me something fierce once, but I guess time heals all wounds because we got along fine and ended on a hug.

He’s doing well for himself, too. He sold his spec script *Town Creek* to Warners, and now has a deal with them where he’s writing the remakes of both *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The Changeling*. He’s excited about the whole thing, especially since his pitch for the scripts was quite political: he called the movies “a big fuck-you to George W. Bush.” Hopefully some of that will show up on the screen.

After dinner we all went out to the bar and a late-night at Brandon’s house. Everyone got too drunk for their own good, but it was tons of fun and a needed break for the filmmakers, I think.

Tom wrote an email a few days later:
Dear maniacs,

(please forward this along to Sam -- never got his e-mail address in the fray --)

A quick note to let you know that we're all alive and home safe, and to thank you for the epic time we all had on Thursday night. All week we wore out "amazing" to describe the things we were experiencing. Little did we know the amp could go up to eleven in O-town. There must be another, more expansive, more explanation-point-soaked adjective to describe what went down, but I can't find it. I keep puzzling over it and coming up with nothing. I suppose some things are bigger than words.

You guys are so on the level and great it hurts. As Greg said on the plane yesterday -- and keep in mind Greg said about five words on the plane, because we were both pretty banged up in the friendly skies, what with all the beers and no sleep, so you gotta know he meant it -- he said, "What's scary is those guys don't even realize how cool they are."

Well, we realize. Great to meet you all.

tom

That's incredibly generous, of course, but quite nice nonetheless.

So we've been trading emails back and forth, and they are offering to put us up and help us find jobs if/when we come out to LA. Now, I've said that I'd never do that, but sometimes you gotta go where the work is. That's a bit far in the future, but let it be said that this is the first time I've ever seriously considered living anywhere in California.
Last night I hung out with AJ for a while. He showed me the new movie he shot, *Volition*. He used the new Panasonic (not the rental model I had) with the anamorphic lens, and it looks amazing! The framing and the precision of the image were really crisp and clean, and the movie seemed fun too.

He did something weird: he had a script on the day, but threw it away and had the actors improv everything. I told him that’s what a lot of Dogme or wannabe Dogme dudes do, because everything you get is a gift. I could see him nod his head in agreement.

So it will be fun to see how his short turns out. We talked about mine and looked at some of it. I asked that he edit it, and he’s willing to do some, but he doesn’t have the time to do it all. So I’m going to finish my cut this weekend and we’ll go from there.

I still hate editing -- I’m just doing it because I have to.

10 April 2004 – 0:47

Oh boy. Well, I’ve been working my tail off the last several days. It has been beautiful out, so I usually spend the day running errands or playing outside, and getting to work when the lights go out.

It’s still hard, though. I’m so tired of this project at this point that working on it is like pulling teeth. But I got an eighth wind last night while editing. I had an idea to make a montage out of Month 2 footage, intercutting everything, including the motorcycle bits, the photography scene, even some outtakes. I did it fast, but I think it plays well (especially since I put it on top of an Afghan Whigs song).
Turned some of the final chapter into Sean, which he critiqued and turned back into me today. Now I have to keep implementing changes and add some more stuff, but then I’m going to call it quits on the written portion of the project.

Then I spend the rest of the weekend in editing. Fabulous.

11 April 2004 – 4:20

I have confined myself in the house, performing long hours of writing and revising, and I finally finished the written portion of the project. I also finished a cut of the movie for consumption. It needs tweaking here and there, but now right now.

I have finished a lot of work, but let me stress one thing: there is no joy in this. The written portion I am content with, but for the movie I now have to do artwork, the DVD, the bonus footage, send it out to friend and festivals and on and on and on.

Making a movie never ends.
Reflection:

Introduction:

The auteur theory is a controversial idea for a reason: there isn’t another form of art that explicitly states that one person is solely responsible for the entirety of the whole collaboration. One worker taking credit for the results of a collaboration isn’t new to the art world, but the explicitness and extrapolation of the auteur theory into becoming a theory is what has caused so much consternation.

And maybe there’s a reason for that. I approached this film as a test to see how much of my personal vision and how much the auteur theory I could apply to a film. It didn’t seem hard, considering the budget (and the stakes) were so low. But I found that there are variables involved in making a film that can’t be foreseen that can make an attempt to be an auteur a difficult endeavor.

Cast:

Throughout making 10 Months, I realized just how much a director relies on the cast and crew of the film to make a piece that works. The actors in my film, in particular, brought an enormous amount to their roles, fleshing their parts out and adding bits that I could never have imagined. I gave them a large amount of flexibility in terms of improvising dialogue and actions for their characters, and the final film reflects that.

For example, one of the early scenes in the film I left intentionally blank. In the script I wrote in “The CAMERA pans slowly to Rebecca as she tells Sean a story from her childhood.” On that day of shooting, Lauren Skirbunt, (Rebecca), improvised a story from when she was young about how she and her sister used to act like cats. I found the
story to be touching and funny, but I didn’t write it. It was all Lauren’s, and it works well within the context of the larger story.

Another example of this would be any scene with Noah Applebaum’s character, Nate. Because I had worked with Noah before and knew his acting skills, I did many takes of his scenes, letting him improvise and play around with dialogue and actions. The result is that he took a character that was a bit flat on the page and made him more comical, as well as more immature and a contrast to Ben Gillman’s character Sean.

Part of this inclusion of actor’s own dialogue resulted because, as the director, I specifically set the script and filming up to allow for their improvisation. In fact, I encouraged the improvisation. There were two reasons for this: I enjoy watching the actors work within a world that I’ve created, and I wanted them to feel like they were part of the process, not just someone who was to show up, say lines, and take direction.

Because I respect the actor’s job so much, I wanted to set up a situation on set where they felt free to explore the world I wrote and to come up with bits on their own. That way, they were more invested in the final product, and everyone would be surprised by at least a little of the results of the shoot. I think it worked, and I’m lucky to have had actors willing to improvise.

My authorship in this part would be the way I allowed the actors a large amount of freedom to work. Since I do appreciate their job, I wanted to facilitate that on set. So I gave them rehearsal time (sometimes a luxury on a film shoot). I gave them long takes to act out entire scenes without cutting. I gave them freedom to improvise extensively. I made the decision to allow for the actors to do good work in these ways, and, because I edited 10 Months as well, I chose what went into the final cut.
**Crew:**

While I did perform many of the main tasks on the film (and I consider writing, directing and editing the most important tasks of any film), the contributions of the crew were vital and shaped the film in important ways. One of the most important aspects of having a good cast and crew, and one that I believe gets overlooked, is that having good people doing their jobs responsibly and efficiently allows directors to worry about less and focus on managing what I consider to be their most important task while on set: the actor’s performances.

This is where I think I made a mistake in taking too far the idea of the auteur performing many tasks: I had to worry about logistical details, such as locations, weather, moving crew and equipment, catering, and more. I largely took those tasks out of the hands of my producer/production manager, for several reasons. The first is that she was in a car accident during one of the shooting weekends, meaning I had to take over her duties. Another was that her personality conflicted with that of many other crew members, and they didn’t seem to want to listen to her. This resulted in me worrying more about practical concerns, such as getting the cast and crew fed, than the work that my actors were giving me, and I think that was unfortunate.

There were two consequences, and both of them were bad. The first is that my producer felt that her role was expendable, and that she was superfluous on set. The second is that the actors, while performing well and doing a good job, were often left to their own devices, unsure of the important guidance a director should give. They ended up faring well on their own, but I could have been more reassuring and available for them while we were on the set.
I think that is one of the main problems with my application of the auteur theory, and with the theory itself. Since it downplays the significant and necessary contributions of all the workers on a film, it can lead directors into thinking they can perform many of those tasks by themselves. The result is that they may be trying to do too many things at once, and while the films might indeed reflect something personal (as auteur’s films should), they are also often less well constructed, designed and executed than films that consist of many good people doing good work.

For example, one of the tasks that I did relinquish control over (and one that many low-budget directors do not) was the cinematography of the film. I relied heavily on my cinematographer, Jordan Tate, who established the look of the film. Jordan’s background in photography helped to bring in proper lighting systems and techniques, and well as compose frames that pleased the eye. Without his expertise, the film would have undoubtedly looked far worse, since he was focused on only one thing, had done something similar to it before, and could concentrate on his task at hand without many other concerns.

Theory vs. Practice:

I’m aware of the large tension between the theory and practice in an endeavor such as this one. My research about the ideas contained within the auteur theory, and my desire to take the theory in a new direction by applying it to the practical task of filmmaking (as opposed to the reflective job of film criticism), allowed me to get a better sense of the large scope of the inception and changes the theory has gone through since it was first developed by the French some fifty years ago. Those changes include: the
effect the French New Wave directors had on filmmaking, the canonization of the
director (especially by Andrew Sarris), and the appropriation of the auteur theory as a
marketing tool.

But my research didn’t prepare me for what really goes on on a film set – as
Ethan Coen puts it, “the uniform pressure of having to make the day” (finishing all the
necessary shots within the span of your day) (Lowenstein, 19), dealing with the
personalities of the cast and crew, getting appropriate performances at any cost, and
more. In other words, having read about the auteur theory does not give one the
necessary practical knowledge on how to make films. It can inform the process of pre-
production, and can give directors a better sense of how they want to approach a project,
but a lot of that theory is upended when one steps onto the set or location and has to start
shooting.

While one might go into a project like this, as I did, assuming you will maintain
total control over all aspects of the filming and have a grasp of all the details, the concrete
reality of film production makes for surprises. For example, I wasn’t able to do many
tracking-shot camera moves that I would have like to have done, because of the lack of
money or proper equipment, or because of the small spaces we shot in. Another example
would be the way light works when shooting outside, or the weather on a day. Some
things you can’t predict.

Final Thoughts:

I’m not sure how much I can claim to be the author of 10 Months. I think
everyone who worked on the film would agree that I performed the most tasks and did
the majority of the work. The piece certainly also reflects my sensibilities as well, such as my love of long takes, my taste in popular music, or my pessimistic view of romantic relationships.

All of those things are there in the final product, but there is a lot more of the personalities and work of the cast and crew in the film than I imagined upon inception and during pre-production. For instance, Lauren Skirbunt’s story about acting like a cat when she was young, or the way Jordan Tate lit certain scenes. Both of these examples, among myriad others, contributed to the totality of the film in a way I would never have anticipated. And since many of the contributions of the cast and crew remain in the film and make it a stronger work, my view of the theory has changed.

I don’t believe in the auteur theory in the same way I did before I started this project. The theory works better as a tool to re-examine the director’s job, not as a steadfast rule about how filmmaking works. In other words, I agree more with the aforementioned original concept that the French had, as a way to review directors’ work, than the changed way that we know the “theory” today.

As such, I don’t think I’m an auteur of this film. For one, I’m sympathetic to the initial French notion of using the idea of the auteur as a tool to examine director’s long bodies of work, and consequently finding patterns, themes, motifs and (hopefully) escalating technique within that body of work. Because this is my first film, you can’t apply those sorts of rules to 10 Months, because there is no other work of mine to compare it to.

If we were to examine the film in the context of the evolution of the auteur theory, wherein one considers someone an auteur, my work and the film fares better. For one, I
performed specific and important tasks, the most crucial being the director. Another way
the evolution of the theory could be applied to me is that, if the film was to be marketed,
it could be marketed as my film – “A film by James Flynn”. Publicists and the media
would be able to use me to sell my film, forgoing giving credit to all those who
contributed, spending long, cold hours contributing to my vision.

My own application of the theory didn’t work as well as I’d hoped, though. I
imagined being able to assume several responsibilities through all aspects of the
filmmaking process, using all I knew about the theory and the French New Wave
filmmakers who formulated and followed it, and it was extraordinarily difficult based on
the amount of responsibility I had to assume, as well as the budget (or lack thereof).

However, I did retain a certain amount of control over the film from start to
finish, because at almost every level, I had a hand in the decision-making process of both
the cast and crew. I delegated tasks to a crew member, and would veto their work if it
wasn’t good. For example, Andrea Small would apply make-up at the beginning of the
day, and would check with me about it after she finished. If she did something that didn’t
work, we would scrap it and start over.

More importantly, I also edited the film. In many views, editing is one of the
most important aspects of filmmaking, because it is the point when everything comes
together on the film. My editing of the movie was, aside from directing it, the most
crucial task in the way the film finally took shape and became what it is.

What I learned in the filmmaking process, and what I think is the result, is that 10
Months, as well as almost all films, is more of a collage or quilt of several people’s work,
rather than one that I could take complete credit for. But that is most likely how the best
films are made -- many people, good at their specific tasks, all contributing to the larger work. And one could argue that the auteur theory is not necessarily at odds with other collaborative arts, it just takes on a bigger role than others since it explicitly states that one person contributes more work or the overall vision.
Works Cited:


