early 1970s

A Course in Film-Making

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I

THE COMPANY, jaded and exhausted, happily or unhappily sexed-out after five days and nights of moviemaking and balling in midnight beds and pools, had been converted to a bunch of enforced existentialists by the making of the film. There is no other philosophical word which will apply to the condition of being an actor who has never acted before, finding himself in a strange place with a thoroughgoing swap of strangers and familiars for bedfellows, no script, and a story which suggests that the leading man is a fit and appropriate target for assassination. Since many of the actors were not without their freaks, their kinks, or old clarion calls to violence, and since the word of the Collective Rumor was that more than one of the men was packing a piece, a real piece with bullets, these five days and nights had been the advanced course in existentialism. Nobody knew what was going to happen, but for one hundred and twenty hours the conviction had been growing that if the warning system of one's senses had been worth anything in the past, something was most certainly going to happen before the film was out. Indeed on several separate occasions, it seemed nearly to happen. A dwarf almost drowned in a pool, a fight had taken place, then a bad fight, and on the night before at a climactic party two hours of the most intense potential for violence had been filmed yet nothing commensurate had happened. The company was now in that state of hangover, breath foul with swallowed curses and congestions of the instincts, which comes to

prizefight fans when a big night, long awaited, ends as a lackluster and lumbering waltz. Not that the party had been a failure while it was being filmed. The tension of the party was memorable in the experience of many. But, finally, nothing happened.

So, at this point next day in the filming of *Maidstone*, on the lazy afternoon which followed the night of the party, the director had come to the erroneous conclusion his movie was done—even though the film was still continuing in the collective mind of some working photographers before whom the director was yet to get hit on the head by a hammer wielded by his best actor, and would respond by biting the best actor on the ear, a fight to give him a whole new conception of his movie. What a pity to remind ourselves of these violent facts, for they encourage interest in a narrative which will not be presented in a hurry and then only a little, and that after an inquiry into the director's real interest which is (less bloody and more philosophical) the possible real nature of film—not an easy discussion since the director has already found a most special way of making movies. When he begins to discourse on the subject, he feels as if he is not so much a director as an Argument. He can literally think of himself as The Argument, some medieval win—a player who is there for harangue. Certainly in that precise hour of the afternoon when he took off his actor's cape and moved from Norman T. Kingsley back to Norman Mailer again, and gave an orientation on the grass of Gardiner's Island, it could hardly be said that he failed to talk about his movie to the company. No, he made every effort, even went so far as to explain that his way of making films was analogous to a military operation, to a commando raid on the nature of reality—they would discover where reality was located by the attack itself, just as a company of Rangers might learn that the enemy was located not in the first town they invaded but another. Of course, even as he spoke, he felt the resumption of tension. There was still something wrong in the air. The picture, he could swear, but for some fill-in, was finished, yet the presence it created had not left.

He could, however, hardly complain if the film itself was still a *presence*. A condition of dread had been generated over the last five days which had put subtle terror and tension into the faces of people who had never acted before, lines of such delicate intent and fine signification as to draw the envy of professionals. That had been precisely the presence he wished to elicit. It was the fundament of his method, the heart of his confidence, to put untried actors into situations without a script and film them with simple or available lighting, work in the limitations of these means and unforeseen ends and exits to get the best available sound (which was not always near to superb), and yet, all limitations granted, he could by this method give a sense of the bewildering surface of his cinematic reality which was finer by far than the work of all but the very best film artists.

It was in other words, a Leviathan of a thesis, and he, with characteristic modesty, ignorant until a few years ago of nearly all to do with film-making, and still technically more ignorant than the good majority of mediocre directors, was still convinced he had wandered by easy progressions into a most complex and devilish way of working up a film. And now had the confidence he was a film-maker. And the unique experience to convince himself that he was a pioneer, for he believed he had come upon a way to smash the machine which crushed every surface of cinematic reality, that organization of plot, dialogue, sets, professionals, schedules, and thundering union impedimenta which beat every effort to take a good story or a book and flesh it into movie film. No, something was wrong with that, something was dreadfully wrong with a process which wasted time, talent, and millions of dollars at a crack to produce cinematic works of the most predictable encapsulation. One could sit through such works and on rare occasion even enjoy a world of good taste and nice insight without ever a moment of sensuous discomfort, which was exactly equal to saying without a moment of aesthetic revelation.

Still it is something to skip at a leap over thirty years of movie-making apprenticeship he has not served, to

propose that, all ignorance and limitations granted, he has found a novel technique, and is on the consequence ready to issue a claim that his way of putting a film together, cut by cut, is important, and conceivably closer to the nature of film than the work of other, more talented directors.

Style?

2

Of course, he makes no second claim that technically, gymnastically, pyrotechnically, or by any complex measure of craft does he begin to know the secrets of the more virtuoso of the directors and the cuters, no, he would only say that the material he has filmed lends itself happily, even innocently, to whole new ways of making cuts. That is because it has captured the life it was supposed to photograph. He is unfolding no blueprint. So there tends to be less monotony to his composition, less of a necessity to have overillumined and too simplified frames, less of a push to give a single emphasis to each scene. His lines of dramatic force are not always converging toward the same point—nobody in his frame has yet learned to look for the reaction of the hero after the villain insults him, no, his film is not diminished by supporting actors who are forever obliged to indicate what the point of the scene is supposed to be (and are thereby reminiscent of dutiful relatives at a family dinner). So, his movie is not reminiscent of other films where the scene, no matter how superb, has a hollow —not so pervasive perhaps as the cheerful hollow in the voices of visitors who have come to be cheerful to a patient in a hospital, but there, even in the best of films always there. In the worst of films it is like the cordiality at the reception desk in a mortician's manor. So it could even be said that professional movie acting consists of the ability to reduce the hollow to an all but invisible hole, and one can measure such actors by their ability to transcend the hollow. Marlon Brando could go "Wow" in *Waterfront* and Dustin Hoffman would limp to the kitchen sink in *Midnight*

cutters

Cowboy and the lack of life in the conventional movie frame was replaced by magical life. One would speak with justice of great actors. Perhaps a thousand actors and two thousand films can be cited where the movie frame comes alive and there is no dip at the foot of consciousness because something is false at the root.

Nonetheless any such appearance of talent was close to magic. The conventional way of making most films usually guaranteed its absence. For there was an element which interfered with motion pictures as much as the blurring of print would hinder the reading of a book, and this flaw derived from the peculiar misapprehension with which the silent film gave way to sound, the supposition that sound-and-film was but an extension of the theater, even as the theater was but an extension of literature. It was assumed that movies were there to tell a story. The story might derive from the stage, or from the pages of a book, or even from an idea for a story, but the film was asked to issue from a detailed plan which would have lines of dialogue. The making of the movie would be a fulfillment of that script, that literary plan; so, each scene would be shaped like a construction unit to build the architecture of the story. It was one of those profoundly false assumptions which seem at the time absolute common sense, yet it was no more natural than to have insisted that a movie was a river and one should always experience, while watching a film, emotions analogous to an afternoon spent on the banks of a stream. That might have been seen instantly as confining, a most confining notion; but to consider the carryover of the story from literature to the film as ~~confining~~—no, that was not very evident.

For few people wished to contemplate the size of the job in transporting a novelist's vision of life over to a film; indeed, who in the movie business was going to admit that once literary characters had been converted over to actors, they could not possibly produce the same relation to other actors that the characters once had to each other? Interpretations had to collide. If each actor had his own idea of the dialogue he committed to memory, be certain the director had a better idea. And the producer! Lifetimes

of professional craft go into halving such conceptual differences. The director gives up a little of his interpretation, then a little more, then almost all of it. The actor is directed away from his favorite misconceptions (and conceptions). Both parties suffer the rigor mortis of the technical conditions—which are not so close to a brightly lit operating theater as to a brightly lit morgue. Then the scriptwriter has dependably delivered the scenario with his own private —and sometimes willful—idea buried in it (and if the work is an adaptation, odd lines of the novelist are still turning over). The coherence of the original novel has been cremated and strewn. Now the film is being made with conflicting notions of those scattered ashes. Of course the director is forced back willy-nilly to his script. It is all he can finally depend upon. Given the fundamental, nay, even organic confusion on a movie set over what everybody is really doing, the company has to pool all differences and be faithful to the script even when the script has lost any relation to the original conception, and has probably begun to constrict the real life which is beginning to emerge on the set. No wonder great novels invariably make the most disappointing movies, and modest novels (like *The Asphalt Jungle*) sometimes make very good movies. It is because the original conception in modest novels is less special and so more capable of being worked upon by any number of other writers, directors, and actors.

Still, the discussion has been too narrow. The film after all, is fed not only by literature but by the theater, and the theater is a conspicuous example of how attractively a blueprint can be unfolded. In fact, the theater is reduced to very little whenever the collaboration between actors and script is not excellent. Yet the theater has had to put up with many a similar difficulty. Can it be said that something works in the theater which only pretends to work in the film? If the first error perpetrated upon movies has been to see them as an adjunct of literature, perhaps the second is the rush to make film an auxiliary of the theatrical arts, until even movies considered classics are hardly more than pieces of filmed theater.

Of course a film lover could counter by saying that he

was not necessarily thinking only of such monuments as *Gone with the Wind* when he used the term classic. In fact, he would inquire about *A Night at the Opera* or *The Maltese Falcon*.

The difficulties had obviously begun. The Argument would be never so simple again. The Marx Brothers, for example, stampeded over every line of a script and tore off in enough directions to leave concepts fluttering like ticker tape on the mysterious nature of the movie art. Certainly, any attempt to declare *The Maltese Falcon* a piece of filmed theater would have to confess that *The Maltese Falcon* was more, a mysterious ineffable possession of "more" that was precisely what one looked for in a film, ~~and that~~ was a hint to indicate some answer to the secrets of film might begin to be found in the curious and never quite explained phenomenon of the movie star. For Humphrey Bogart was certainly an element of natural film, yes, even *the* element which made *The Maltese Falcon* more than an excellent piece of filmed theater. Thinking of the evocative aesthetic mists of that movie, how could the question not present itself: why did every piece of good dramatic theater have to be the enemy of the film? It was unhappily evident to The Argument that any quick and invigorating theses on the character of movie stars and the hidden nature of the movie might have to wait for a little exposition on the special qualities of theater.

3

A COMPLEX matter. You might, for instance, have to take into account why people who think it comfortable to be nicely drunk at the beginning of a play would find it no pleasure to go to a movie in the same condition. Pot was more congenial for a film. If the difference for most hard-working actors between movies and theater seemed hardly more than a trip across a crack, the split to any philosopher of the film was an abyss, just that same existential abyss which lies between booze and the beginnings of the psychedelic.

Existentially, theater and film were in different dominions (and literature was probably nearer to each of them than they were to each other). The theater was a ceremony with live priests who had learned by rote to pool their aesthetic instincts for a larger purpose. So theater partook of a near-obscene ceremony: it imitated life in a living place, and it had real people as the imitators. Such imitation was either sacrilege to the roots of life, or a reinforcement of them. Certainly, sentiments called religious appeared ready to arise whenever a group of people attended a ceremony in a large and dimly lit place. But in fact anyone who has ever experienced a moment of unmistakable balance between the audience, the cast, the theater and the ~~presence~~ of the play, an awe usually remarked by a silence palpable as the theatrical velvet of an unvoiced echo, knows the foundation of the theater is in the church and in the power of kings, or at least knows, if theater goes back to blood sacrifices performed in a cave—which is about where the most advanced theater seems ready to go—that the more recent foundations were ecclesiastical and royal. Theater, at all of its massive best, can be seen as equal to a ceremony, performed by noblemen who have power to chastise an audience, savage them, dignify them, warm them, marry their humors, even create a magical forest where each human on his seat is a tree and every sense is vibrating to the rustle of other leaves. One's roots return then to some lost majesty of pomp and power. Of course, theater is seldom so good. None of us have had a night like that recently. Still, theater has its minutes: a scene whose original concept was lost in the mixing of too many talents is recovered by the power of the actor to open relations with his audience. While he is engaged in an emotional transaction which is false by its nature (because he knows by heart the lines of apparently spontaneous passion he will say next), still he has to be true to the honest difficulty of not knowing whether the audience will believe him or not. His position onstage is existential—he cannot know in advance if his effort will succeed or not. In turn, the audience must respect him. For he is at the least brave enough to dare their displeasure. And if he is bad enough . . . well, how can he forget old nightmares where audi-

ences kill actors? So the actor on stage is at once a fraud (because he pretends to emotion he cannot by any Method feel absolutely—*or he would be mad*) and yet is a true man engaged in a tricky venture, dangerous in its potentialities for humiliation. That is the strength of the theater. A vision of life somewhat different each night comes into existence between the actors and the audience, and what has been lost in the playwright's vision is sometimes transcended by the mood of a high theatrical hearth.

We are speaking of course only of the best and freshest plays. Even in a good play something dies about the time an actor recognizes that he can be mediocre in his performance and survive. The reputation of the play has become so useful that the audience has become a touch mediocre as well; at this point in the season the actor inevitably becomes as interesting as a whore in a house after her favorite client has gone for the night.

Nonetheless, it is still reminiscent of orgy to have relations with two worlds of sentience at once, and when fresh, theater is orgy. Onstage, the actor is in communion with the audience, and up to his neck in relations with other actors (if they are all still working together). A world of technique supports them. There are ways and means to live and act with half-thought-out lines of dialogue and errors of placement by the director, ways to deal with sentiments which have no ring and situations one knows by heart and still must enter with a pretense of theatrical surprise. An actor's culture exists, after all, for the working up of the false into the all-but-true; actors know the audience will carry the all-but-true over into the real and emotionally stirring if given a chance. So actors develop a full organ of emotional manifests. Large vibrant voices, significant moves. It all works because the actor is literally alive on a stage and therefore can never be false altogether. His presence is the real truth: he is at once the royal center of all eyes, and a Christian up before lions. So his theatrical emotion (which bears the same relation to real emotion which veneer of walnut bears to walnut) is moved by the risk of his position into a technique which offers truth. A

skillful actor with false gestures and false emotions elicits our admiration because he tries to establish a vault under which we can seize on the truth since, after all, he has told the lie so well. Why, then, must that be an emotional transaction light-years of the psyche away from the same transaction carried over to film?

4

It is because the risk of film is of other varieties. No audience is present unless the actor plays his scene for the cameramen and the union grips. And that is a specific audience with the prejudices and tastes of policemen. Indeed they usually dress like cops off-duty and are built like cops (with the same heavy meat in the shoulders, some bellies oiled on beer), which is not surprising for they are also in surveillance upon a criminal activity: people are forging emotions under bright lights.

But it is no longer false emotion brought by technique to a point where it can be breathed upon and given life by audiences who do not know the next line. No, now the crew is a set of skills and intelligence. They are as sophisticated to the lines of the scene as the actors themselves. Like cops they see through every fake move and hardly care. The camera must move on cue and the sound boom, the lights be shifted and the walls slid apart—the action is easily as complex as a professional football team running through the intricacies of a new play or preparing a defense against it.

In fact, the actor does not usually play for the technicians. It is the director whose intelligence he will feel first, a charged critical intelligence knowing more of the scene than himself, a center of authority altogether different from a theatrical audience's authority (which is ready to relax with every good sound the actor makes). The movie director, however, does not relax then. The good sound of the actor can turn the plot inside out. No, here, the actor must work into a focus of will. The real face he speaks to, whether a step or ten steps to the side of the director, is a circle of

glass as empty of love as an empty glass. That lens is his final audience. It takes precedence over the director and even over the actors he plays with. In the moment of his profoundest passion, as he reaches forward to kiss the heroine with every tenderness, his lips to be famous for their quiver, he is of course slowly and proficiently bringing his mouth up to the erogenous zone of the lens.

Onstage, an actor, after twenty years of apprenticeship, can learn to reach the depths of an audience at the moment he is employing the maximum of his technique. A film actor with equivalent technique will have developed superb skills for revealing his reaction to the circle of glass. He can fail every other way, disobey the director or appear incapable of reacting to his direction, leave the other actors isolated from him and with nothing to react to, he can even get his lines wrong, but if he has film technique he will look sensational in the rushes, he will bring life to the scene even if he was death on the set. It is not surprising. There is something sinister about film. *Film is a phenomenon whose resemblance to death has been ignored for too long.* An emotion produced from the churn of the flesh is delivered to a machine, and that machine and its connections manage to produce a flow of images which will arouse some related sentiment in those who watch. The living emotion has passed through a burial ground—and has been resurrected. The living emotion survives as a psychological reality; it continues to exist as a set of images in one's memory which are not too different, [illegible] years go by, to the images we keep of a relative who is dead. Think of a favorite uncle who is gone. Does the apparatus of the mind which flashes his picture before us act in another fashion if we ask for a flash of Humphrey Bogart next? Perhaps it does not. Film seems part of the mechanism of memory, or at the least, a most peculiar annex to memory. For in film we remember events as if they had taken place and we were there. But we were not. The psyche has taken into itself a whole country of fantasy and made it psychologically real, made it a part of memory. We are obviously dealing with a phenomenon whose roots are less defined than the power and glory of king and

church. Yes, movies are more mysterious than theater; even a clue to the undefinable attraction of the movie star is that he remains a point of light in that measureless dark of memory where other scenes have given up their light. He has obviously become a center of meaning to millions, possessed of more meaning than the actor next to him who may be actually more attractive, more interesting—definition of the phenomenon frays as we try to touch it. But has the heart of the discussion been sounded? Does it suggest that movie stars partake of the mysterious psychic properties of film more than other actors? that something in them lends itself to the need of memory for images of the past one can refer to when the mind has need to comprehend something new before it? We have to be careful. It is perhaps not so simple as that. The movie star may also suggest obsession, that negative condition of memory, that painful place to which we return over and over because a fundamental question is still unresolved: something happened to us years ago which was important, yet we hardly know if an angel kissed us then or a witch, whether we were brave or timid. We return to the ambiguity with pain. The obsession hurts because we cannot resolve it and so are losing confidence in our ability to estimate the present.

Obsession is a wasteful fix. Memory, when it can be free of obsession, is a storehouse to offer up essences of the past capable of digesting most of the problems of the present, memory is even the libido of the ego sweetening harsh demands of the will when memory is, yes, good. But the movie star seems to serve some double function: the star feeds memory *and* obsession—one need only think back to one's feelings about Marilyn Monroe! The movie star is welcoming but mysterious, unavailable yet intimate, the movie star is the embodiment of a love which could leave us abject, yet we believe we are the only soul the movie star can love. Quintessence of the elusive nature of film, the movie star is like a guide to bring us through the adventures of a half-conscious dream. It is even possible the movie star gives focus to themes of the imagination so large, romantic, and daring that they might not encounter reality: how can an adolescent have any real

idea whether he will ever have sex with a beautiful woman or fight for his life? Nonetheless, events so grand might need years of psychic preparation. It was therefore also possible that the dream life of the film existed not only to provide escape but to prepare the psyche for apocalyptic moments which would likely never come.

Some differences of film from theater may then have been noted. Theater works on our ideas of social life and our understanding of manners. At its most generous, theater creates a communion of bodies and a savory of the emotions—it becomes a feast and a fuck. But film speaks to the lost islands of the mind. Film lives somewhere in that underground river of the psyche which travels from the domain of sex through the deeps of memory and the dream, on out into the possible montages of death—we need only think of any man who was rescued from drowning after he thought he was on the last trip down. Does he ever relate the experience without speaking of the sensation that his life became a film running backward? *It is as if film has an existence within the brain which may be comparable to memory and the dream,* be indeed as real as memory and the dream, be even to some degree as functional. It was as if the levels of that existential river which runs into ultimate psychic states would no longer read as perhaps once it did: sex—memory—dream—death; but now flows through a technological age and so has to be described by way of sex—memory—*film*—dream—death. Theater has to be in the world of manners, but film is in the physiology of the psyche. For that reason, perhaps, film comes nearest to a religion as the movie houses are empty, it speaks across all the lonely traverses of the mind, it is at its most beautiful in precisely those places it is least concrete, least theatrical, most other-worldly, most ghostly, most lingering unto death—then the true experience of the film as some Atlantis of the psyche will manifest itself, and directors like Antonioni and Bergman will show us that the film inhabits a secret place where the past tense of memory and the future intimations of the dream are interchangeable, are partners in the film: there is an unmistakable quality to any film which is not made as filmed

theater but rather appears as some existence we call film. That existence runs through Chaplin and *Sunset Boulevard* and *Persona*—it runs through home movies. It was Warhol's talent to perceive that in every home movie there is a sense of Time trying to express itself as a new kind of creation, a palpability which breathes in the *being* of the film. The best of works and some of the worst of film works have this quality. One can even find it for flashes in cranky old battered films of the purest mediocrity late at night on TV, B-films without an instant of talent, yet the years have added magic to what was once moronic—Time is winking her eye as we look at the film. Time suddenly appears to us as a wit.

Of course, there are movies which have delivered huge pleasures to millions and never were film at all, just celluloid theater convertible to cash. Some were good, some very good, some awful, but the majority of motion pictures, particularly the majority of expensive ones, have always labored against the umbilical antipathy of film for theater. They were, no matter how good as filmed theater, never equal to theater at its best—rather, scaled-down repasts for the eye and ear. They had a kind of phlegmatic tempo and all-too-well-lit color which rarely hindered them from reaching lists for the Ten Best Pictures of the year. They were pictures like *Oklahoma, South Pacific, The Sound of Music, Mary Poppins,* and *The Best Years of Our Lives.* They were even such critical favorites as *Marty, Born Yesterday, Brief Encounter,* and *The Seven Year Itch,* or *Anne of the Thousand Days,* add *Lust for Life, All About Eve, Around the World in Eighty Days, West Side Story.* All that celluloid was super-technique for audiences who had not necessarily ever seen a play but were constantly nourished in the great cafeteria of the American Aesthetic where the media meals were served up as binder for the shattered nervous system of the masses. To the owners of that cafeteria there was something obscene in the idea that one should not be able to translate a book into a play, film, or TV series—something arrogant, for it would say the difference between the movies just named and films like *Zabriskie Point, M.A.S.H., Naked Summer, Belle de Jour,*

Limelight, Diabolique, 8½, The Bicycle Thief, The Four Hundred Blows, High Noon, Easy Rider, and *Weekend* were as the difference between crud and sustenance for that ghostly part of the psyche the film was supposed to enrich.

5

VERY WELL. He had his point at least. There was film and filmed-theater; there were relatively pure movies, and there were moneymaking motion pictures which had almost nothing to do with movies or memory or dream, but were filmed circus for the suckers who proceeded to enjoy them enormously (when they did—for some cost canyons of cash and brought back trickles), suckers who loved them for their binding glue, and the status of seeing them, and the easy massage such pictures gave to emotions real theater might have satisfied more. These motion pictures, made for no motive more in focus than the desire for money, were derived from plays, or were written and directed as filmed plays, they composed three-quarters to nine-tenths of the motion pictures which were made, and they might yet be the terminal death of Hollywood for they were color television on enormous screens and so failed more often than they succeeded; the media were mixed so the messages were mixed—audiences tended to regard them with apathy.

Of course the films he loved were just as often watched in empty theaters, but if he would call upon the difference it was that they were not regarded in apathy but in subtle fear or mixed pleasure or with gloom or dread or the kind of fascination which hinted uncomfortably at future obsession. There was a quality he could almost lay his hands on in movies he admired and so would raise to the superior eminence of Film: they were experiences which were later as pure in recollection as splendid or tragic days in one's life, they were not unlike the memory of some modest love which did not survive but was tender in retrospect for now it lived with the dignity of old love. Such films

changed as one remembered them since they had become part of one's psychological life. Like love, they partook a little of some miracle, they had emerged from the abominable limitations of the script, yes, they had emerged out of some mysterious but wholly agreeable lack of focus toward that script in the intent of the director and/or the actor, they were subtly attached to a creative mist, they had the ambiguity of film. For if filmed-theater could sometimes be effective, sometimes be even as perfect and deserving of admiration as *Midnight Cowboy* or *On the Waterfront,* such pictures still had their aesthetic fired by the simpler communication of the theater where relations between actors usually produced a dramatic outcome as capable of definition as the last line of a family fight. "Go to an analyst" turned out to be the message, or "Lover, we'll get along," or "God bless us, we're unhappy, but we'll stick for the kids." If it is theater so rich as *The Little Foxes,* it will say, "I am prepared to kill you, and I will." Since the need of a stage actor is to draw an audience together, his instinct is to simplify the play and concentrate it, give it a single crisp flavor. So theater speaks. Powerfully or with banality, comically, or in the botch of hysteria, it speaks, secretly it almost always speaks vulgarly, for almost always it says, "We're here to tell you something about life. We've got a piece of the meat for you." Of course if it is bad theater, conceived in advance as a television series or any other form of Cafeteria, then it is only there to tell you something about public opinion and how that works at the lowest common denominator. But good or bad, theater functions at its simple best when every resonance of the evening can collect about a single point—that place where the actors seduced the audience to meet the play.

Film, however, is shown to audiences who do not often react together. Some laugh, while others are silent, some are bored. Few share the same time. They have come in on the movie at different places. For film always speaks of death. Theater rouses desires between the living audience and the living actors; film stirs suicide pacts where each individual in the audience goes over the horizon alone with the star; film speaks of the ambiguity of death—is it

nothingness we go to, or eternal life? Is it to peace we travel or the migrations of the soul? So the ambiguity of the movie star is essential, and it helps to understand that subtle emptiness which is usually present in the colors of their acting, that pause in the certainty of what they would say, that note of distraction and sorrows on the other side of the hill, that hint they are thinking of a late date they will meet after this guy is gone. Movie stars are caught in the complexity of the plot but they do not belong to it altogether, as stage actors do. It does not matter of whom we speak: whether it is Garbo or Harlow or Marilyn Monroe, Carole Lombard or Myrna Loy, even Dottie Lamour or Gable, the star is still one misty wink of the eye away from total absorption. Even Cagney, phallic as a column of rock, had the hint of bells ringing in his head from blows some big brother gave him in years gone by, and Gable's growling voice always seemed to hint at one big hunk of *other* business he would have to take care of in a little while. The charisma of the movie star spoke of associations with tangential thoughts, with dissipations of the story-point into ripples which went out wider and wider, out to the shores of some land only the waves of the movies could wash.

Now, much of that was gone. There were still stars, even in color film there were bonafide stars. There was Catherine Deneuve and Robert Redford and huge box-office familiars predictable as the neighbor next door and twice as vivid —Bob Hope and Lucille Ball for two. If film spoke of death, motion-pictures-for-money spoke of everything which was boring, unkillable, and bouncy, and could be stopped with a switch quick as TV, and was by couples necking in drive-in theaters. The film had also become brands of sex marked R, X, and Hard-Core, the film was epic documentaries like *Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter,* the film was *Pound* and *Trash* and *Performance,* which some called great and some would not, the film was in transition, the film was in a place no one could name, and he was there with *Maidstone,* caught in the position of talking about a film made near to three years before. Three years was a decade in the recent history of the film. Half of the shock

in his sexual scenes was nearly as comfortable by now as the lingerie ads in a fashion magazine, and his emphasis on film without script was evident in small uses everywhere, it had begun for that matter as long ago as Cassavetes' *Shadows,* a film of the fifties he did not particularly remember, but then for that matter, film without script had begun with the two-reeler and the sequence of action worked out on the director's white starched cuff. It was finally not to the point. He had had a conception of film which was more or less his own, and he did not feel the desire to argue about it, or install himself modestly in a scholar's catalogue of predecessors and contemporaries, it seemed to him naturally and without great heat that *Maidstone* was a film made more by the method by which it had been made than any film he knew, and if there were others of which it could be said that they were even more, he would cheer them for the pleasure of seeing what was done. But his film was his own, and he knew it, and he supposed he could write about it well enough to point out from time to time what was special and mysterious in the work, and therefore full of relation to that argument about cinema which has brought us this far, cinema —that river enema of the sins. Wasn't there whole appropriation of meaning in every corner of the mogul business?

II

He had, of course, embarked on the making of *Maidstone* with his own money, had in fact sold a piece of his shares of *The Village Voice,* a prosperous and sentimental holding. Not wishing to undergo the neurotic bends of trying to raise funds for a film he would begin shooting in a few weeks without a line of script or the desire to put anything on paper (he looked with horror on such a novel!) he had small choice. Who would give him funds on past performance? In his first picture the sound was near to

muffled; the second, while ready to be shown in the fall at the New York Film Festival, was nonetheless not yet evidence at a box office, and in fact had been sold to a distributor for fifteen thousand dollars, a small sale even for a movie which had cost no more than sixty.

It was of course possible he could have raised the money. The market was full of profit that year. Risk capital ready for tax loss could have been found. He did not try. There was some marrow of satisfaction in paying for it himself. So he sold a portion of *The Voice* and did not look back. The film was calling to him with every stimulus and every fear. He had, after all, conceived the heart of his movie in the days right after the assassination of Robert Kennedy, a time when it seemed the country was getting ready to blow its separate conventions apart (and indeed he was the man least surprised when the Democratic convention in Chicago had responsible politicians talking of the Reichstag fire). Besides, he was a guilty American, guilty with the others—he felt implicated in the death of Bobby, although he could never name how (short of fornicating with a witch on the afternoon of the deed) he must therefore be so responsible; nonetheless he was, he felt, along with ten million others—perhaps a backlash from years of living with Kennedy jibes and making some of them himself, perhaps from some unconscious delinquency which amounted to more.

In any case, a film he had contemplated for a year, a modest little film to take place in a bar with pimps waiting for their whores and then dealing with them, now turned inside out. He would use that original idea for the core of a larger story, as the sketch of a film to be made by a famous film director within a larger film. This film director would be one of fifty men whom America in her bewilderment and profound demoralization might be contemplating as a possible President, a film director famous for near-pornographic films would be, yes, in range of the Presidency—what a time for the country! Now the last of his elements of plot came into place: there would be an elite group of secret police debating the director's assassination. What an impulse to put this into a script. But writing such

a script and managing to direct it would take three years, and call for working with executives in a studio. Others would devour his story and make it something else. He preferred to make it himself, preferred to lose the story himself.

He knew from his experience with *Beyond the Law* (a film of the greatest simplicity next to this!) that when actors were without lines and the end of a scene was undetermined, one did not control the picture. Even if he would be in the middle of the film, would play in it as he had in the two others, would indeed play the leading role of the director (indeed find another actor on earth to even believe in such a role!), that did not mean the film would proceed as he had planned. At best, making movies by his method was like being the hostess at a party with a prearranged theme—at a party, let us say, where everybody was supposed to come dressed in black or white with the understanding that those in black should pretend to be somber in mood and those in white be gay. The guests would of course rebel, first by tricks, then by open stands. A beauty would arrive in red. The party would get away from the hostess constantly—as constantly would she work to restore it to the conception with which she began, yes, she would strive until the point where the party was a success and she could put up with her rules being broken. There would be art in the relinquishing of her strength. If the party turned out to be superb it would be the product not only of her theme, nor of the attack of her guests upon it, but her compensatory efforts to bring the party back to its theme. The history of what happened at her party was bound to prove more interesting than her original plan. Indeed, something parallel to that had occurred with *Beyond the Law*. He had started with an idea of putting together police, a police station, and the interrogation of suspects. But his actors had been as rich in ideas. In trying to keep them within his conception, the picture had taken on a ferocious life.

Yet with *Maidstone* he decided to gamble by a bolder step. Given his plot, he would be obliged to separate his functions as director and actor. It would help his perform-

ance if the actor passed through situations he could not dominate because he had also as director had the privilege of laying his eyes on every scene. It was important, for example, that the secret police who would look to assassinate him be able to have their plots filmed without his knowledge. On that account he had assigned directorial powers to several of the actors. They could pick photographers to do their scenes, scenes he would not see until filming was done. So too had he assigned autonomy to Rip Torn who would play Raoul Rey O'Houlihan, his fictional half-brother, an obvious potential assassin in the film—whether Rey would actually strike was tacitly understood to be open to the pressures within the making of the movie. Since Rey would also have the Cashbox, a Praetorian Guard loyal either to Rey or to Kingsley, that must prove still another undetermined element in the film. Of necessity, therefore, would Rey have photographers he could call on. So the company as a whole had five cameras for use—four Arriflex and one Eclair—five teams composed of a cameraman and sound man who were sometimes interchangeable, each team independent, each able to work under available light conditions which might vary from splendid to absurdly difficult, five teams to be spread out on certain days as much as five miles apart, for he had managed to capture the use of four fine houses for the week of shooting the film, an exercise in diplomacy he had not been capable of on any other weekend in his life, he had the estates, and kept them by a further exercise of diplomacy through the weeks before the picture and into the shooting. There were crises every day and he was on the edge of losing more than one set of grounds on more than one day, but the torrent of preparations was on, his energy was carried with the rush—in a few weeks they began with a cast of fifty or sixty (new actors coming and leaving all the time), a capital of seventy thousand dollars, an availability of forty or fifty hours of sound and film, an average of eight to ten hours for each cameraman in a week of shooting which would begin on a light day of work for Wednesday, would pass through the heaviest of schedules on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and

finish with light work on Monday and Tuesday, an impossible speed for anyone fixed to the script of a movie as ambitious as this, but he had cards to play. They were his cameramen.

2

THEY HAD ALMOST all taken part in the making of *Monterey Pop,* which had some of the best cinematography he had ever seen. They had many other credits. That was hardly the point. It was more to the issue that the stodgy unhappy catatonia of the old documentary, where people bearing real names sat in chairs and explained in self-conscious voices what they were up to, had been liberated by the invention of a *wireless* synchronizer between camera and tape recorder. A cameraman free of the caution that he must always move in ways the sound man could follow (since they had once been connected by a leash to one another) was now able to get around as he wished; he could stand on a ladder or slide on his belly, he could walk while filming and turn (years of technique had gone into acquiring a flat-footed walk which might approximate the old camera move on a dolly) but since he was not on tracks or connected to anyone else, so the path could be free in its curve. The eye of the lens could inquire into the scene. The cameraman could even shoot up from the floor between the bodies of men in a dispute or listen to a social conversation from a worm's-eye view beneath a glass coffee table—what play of light on the astrays and the highballs! Such shots went back of course to *Citizen Kane*—the issue was that documentary could now be open to subjects which were formerly closed. Since a camera on a man's shoulder was not as intimidating as the old huge camera on a tripod, the subject felt less like a prisoner booked into the stocks of documentary record-taking. Indeed a man who actually reacted to his voice and movements was photographing him. Animation could begin to appear in the face and voice of the subject. So the subjects become more interesting. The documentary

moved from the photographing of executives, engineers, and inventors to the faces of slum children playing in the street, or to the study of married couples on an evening at home (and in bed.) A world of subjects too fragile in mood for the entrance of heavy equipment, high-power lights, and crews of technicians became available, and people who had formerly been as interesting in front of the camera as slabs of stone began to show a gleam in their facade. But *cinema vérité* still had technical limits which awaited the development of high-speed film with very little grain and better portable sound equipment.

Cinema vérité suffered even further from the basic flaw that people were playing themselves in real situations, and were therefore the opposite of actors. Instead of offering a well-put-together lie which had all the feel of dramatic truth, they gave off a species of fact which came out flat and wooden and like a lie. It was as if there was a law that a person could not be himself in front of a camera unless he pretended to be someone other than himself. By that logic, *cinema vérité* would work if it photographed a performer in the midst of his performance, since a musician in the reverberating cave of his work was hardly himself, he had moved out of daily dimensions, he was a creature in a kingdom of sound. So films like *Monterey Pop* were able to explore the existence of a performer on stage as no fixed camera had been able to do. The crew was small enough to be lost in the lights and the audience. Their lens could move in, retreat, turn away and react, even swing to the beat. Film came back of Janis Joplin and Otis Redding, of Jimi Hendrix and Ravi Shankar which went beyond any film seen before of musicians giving a performance. It was precisely because the cameramen had worked free of the stipulations of a director. They knew more of what a camera could do than any director who had not spent years as a cameraman himself, they had lived in their conscious mind and in all the aesthetic ponderings of the unconscious with the problems of composition in a fast-changing scene, their eye for the potentialities of camera expression was their own.

—So far as a man could take a thirty- or forty-pound camera on his shoulder and still see with the freedom of an unimpeded eye they were ready, they could interpret: critical to the matter—they could *react*. It meant musicians could play without a thought of being photographed, and so were never inhibited by the restrictions directors and cameramen working on massive tripods were obliged to impose on a performer's movement.

It had been his own idea, however, that *cinema vérité* might also be used to photograph feature-length movies which told imaginary stories. He had come to the thought by way of his first film. Even if that had ended as a disaster (because the just-tolerable sound he heard on magnetic tape went underwater with an optical track), there had been a period in editing when he saw something he had never seen in other film. The actors (he was one of them) were more real, seemed more—it had to be said —more vivid than in other films. He supposed it was because people in fictional situations had never been photographed with such sensitivity before. The camera moved with the delicacy and uncertainty, the wariness before possible shock, that the human eye would feel in a strange situation. The camera had the animal awareness of a fifteen-year-old entering a room rather than a Mafia overlord promenading down a corridor. It made him realize that the movement of camera in conventional film (in filmed theater) had none of the real movement of the eye, just the horizontal movement of vehicles, the vertical movement of elevators, and the turning movement of a door on a hinge. The eye of such cameras moved in relation to the human eye as a steam shovel moves in relation to the human body. The professional camera, however, was smooth, as indubitably smooth as the closing of a coffin lid. If it passed through space with the rigidity of a steam shovel, it did not clank. That, unhappily, was left for the *cinema vérité* camera. The price of greater sensitivity to the unpremeditated action of actors was a set of vibrations, shudders, clunks, plus a host of missed anticipations when the camera zoomed in on the expectation of an interesting response, and the actor, whom the photographer had

picked, was dull. Yet even that was cinematically curious once one recovered from the shock that not every instant on screen was shaped into significance. For now the cinematic point became the fact that the photographer could never know precisely what was coming—he was *obliged* to anticipate and he could be wrong: a story began to be told of the uncertain investigation of the eye onto each scene before us. It expanded one's notion of cinematic possibilities, and it intensified one's awareness of the moment. When significant movement was captured, it was now doubly significant because one could not take it for granted. Watching film became an act of interpretation and restoration for what was missed—much as one might look to fill the empty unpainted spaces in old canvases of Larry Rivers—it was also kin to that sense of excitement which is felt at a party when insights are arriving more quickly than one's ability to put them away neatly.

By whatever point of view, he had then a corps of cameramen, and they were equipped to photograph scenes which might veer off in any one of a dozen directions—they were ready to be surprised. It stimulated that coordination between hand, eye, and camera balance which was the dynamic of their art, surprises gave style to the rhythm and angle by which they would move in or zoom away. Once, after an impromptu free-for-all had developed in the filming of *Beyond the Law* with actors' bodies finally locked on the floor like a heap of twist-roll dough shaped for the oven, the cameraman had said, "You know I'd like to cover the camera with a case of foam rubber." And added wistfully, "Then I could just get in the middle of the fight next time." Such ideas carried to their conclusion might slip non-stop miniaturized cameras with built-in lights up the cervix to a baby's fist so the trip through the canal could be photographed, but that was years away from its unhappy debate.—For the present he had cameramen who were nimble enough to work in close to a scene and get away (most of the time) without bumping the action or photographing the sound man. Or each other, if two cameras were working different angles.

Later, comparing two men's work on the same scene, he would come to observe that each man had a mode as characteristic as a literary style. The work of one was invariably well-composed, austere, tasteful; another would be alert to the play of forces between two actors—he would have talent for capturing that body language which would most accentuate what the actors unconsciously were doing. Another had little interest in the turn of a scene, but was fascinated with visual minutiae—occasionally his minutiae were more interesting than the scene. Some were best at photographing men, others at studying women or the mood of a landscape. Some were work-horses, some were delicate. Some were delicate and still worked like horses. He came to applaud his cameramen during the week of shooting the film, for there were days when they worked for sixteen hours, bodies quivering from fatigue, yet rallying to steadiness when they worked—the love affair was to go through a turn or two when he sat in a screening room for two weeks and studied the forty-five hours they had brought back, saw the unexpected mistakes, the loss of focus on sudden shifts of action, the edge of the microphone in the frame when the unforeseen move of an actor had flushed the sound man. And wistful disappointments that scenes on which he had counted mightily had lost their emphasis because the cameraman had not seen what he, the director, had seen, had not been in the same state of psychic awareness. And there were miles of footage, filmed in his absence, where the actors had gone wandering and the cameramen had let them, idiocies piled on idiocies, wooden muddy characterless footage, the depression of the cameraman visible in his lack of desire to give visual shape to a tiresome duet. Loss was everywhere in the forty-five hours.

But there were bonuses and benefits where he had never looked. Scenes he had thought uninspired as he played them were given life by the art of the photographer, and scenes he knew were good were made even better by choices of angle he would not have had the insight to pick himself. If he lost what he desired in one scene, he found himself compensated in another. As the months of editing went on, he would feel at times like a

sculptor discovering his statue. The chisel could not go where it wished, but there was a statue to be disclosed if one would follow the veins of the stone. So *Maidstone* began to emerge, not the idea for a picture with which he had begun, but another which had come out of it, a metamorphosis for which he was prepared, since in parallel to the flaws and bonuses of his *cinema vérité* photography the *Maidstone* emerging was as much better than the conception with which he had started, as it was inferior. If it was a movie of another sort than he had first conceived, it seemed to him finally that there were not too many movies like it, for *Maidstone* was a film which had been made out of the materials of its making, a movie which had had almost no existence in plans or on drawing boards or detailed budgets before it was begun, a movie delivered out of film material which had come to life in the heat chamber of seven days of intense improvised and scriptless film-making, so a movie which had a curious first existence in itself not easy to describe and then a later existence which did not come from the stone but the shape of the film-maker's hand. If he had arrived at six or seven hours of footage he considered suitable or agreeable or useful or tasty or splendid or fine or essential, if the smelting had reduced forty-five hours of film to a seventh of itself, there was still, he knew, a length to which the material must shrink by way of brooding, rubbing, and polishing, by elucidation then de-infatuation with pieces of film or conceits of story he had loved too much at first to relinquish. It would be a work of months, and then finally of a year (and a second year to follow) of mistakes and losses, blunders and mislaid gems of film strip, but when done, it would be his conception, he would by then have *written* a movie using strips of film rather than words, a movie different from the film anyone else would have made out of the same six or seven hours of usable film, would have written it as uniquely, and differently as any one writer would have been from another writer if both were working on the same topic and had the same dictionary. It was his film. He had framed some of the language, and others had framed the rest of it for

him, but by the time he began his editing, it was all part of the same dictionary; he had created *Maidstone* out of the given; so it was entirely different from films which had devoted their effort to creating the given from a script, then nailing it up according to plan.

In the act of this most particular film-writing, his pencil became the size of an editing machine,° he discovered where he thought the nature of the film might lie, and so tried to end with a film which would be in itself the nature of film, a metaphysical dumpling of a remark which is close to indigestible. Does it make it easier to suggest that even as an angel may be the nature of goodness and beauty, so to look at an angel is to obtain a picture of humans from heaven? By analogy he wanted a film which would live in the mind like a movie star, that is he wanted the film itself to be the movie star, some evocative ambiguous presence which was always suggesting the ghostly but most real ~~existence~~ of the *special* existence of cinema.

3

But he anticipates. He has come to the peroration before he has reached the middle. It is a natural mistake for a film-maker. A novelist learns early in his career that beginning, middle, and end are a part of literary time, and cause direct notice when shifted, but in film no time exists but the order of progression. A film is made by one piece of film being stuck onto the next and that is the only scheme of time which prevails. ~~On the full current~~ of a film we can see an actor who looks twenty years old. In the next cut he looks sixty—we do not jump immediately to the conclusion that it is forty years later, no, we may have to recognize it is his idea of himself forty years later, or his recollection of a previous life when he was

° With the advent of electronic editing from video tapes the notion of *writing* one's movie out of the film at one's disposal—since it promises to be quicker and easier—becomes next to inevitable.

sixty. Indeed it may be a shot of his grandfather—we wait for the next cut. If it explains nothing, merely goes off to further adventures of the twenty-year-old, the isolated cut has its peculiar existence—it is a warning or a symbol or an omen, something!—it sticks with its incomprehensible flash even as we have flashes in life of people we know well who are seen for an instant doing something we cannot comprehend—the town patriot sticks his tongue out at the flag: next moment he is, as always, smiling on his cigar. Did we see the tongue go out or did one crazy cell in our own head imagine it? That is a fair preparation for film. One can put anything next to anything in film—there is a correlative in some psychic state of memory, in the dream, the *déjà vu*, or the death mask, in some blink of the eye or jump of the nerve. So one can work whole stretches of film free of any thought of the story. A piece of film can be put next to another piece of film regardless of plot—it will work or it will not work. Of course, this is exactly the place where the mystique of film begins and one starts to talk of its nature. Every beginner of a film-cutter becomes willy-nilly an amateur philosopher about the time he recognizes that you cannot attach one piece of film to another simply because it makes sense for your story. If the cut is poor, the screen will jump. A virtuoso can make it jump to one side, then to the other—that, too, is a psychic state the film can offer, but it is like the dying spasms of a broken tooth—can the average film afford such pain?

No, there was a syntax to film movement. The slow sweep of a man walking to the left and out of the frame could be followed by the sweep of another man walking to the right. If the tempos were similar, the movement was restful. If the second man walked faster than the first the logical expectation was for a faster and more intense scene on the third cut. Some action would obviously be getting ready. What it was would hardly matter. A fight could follow between two men or two dogs, an airplane could dive, a train go by, or a woman could scream, then turn immobile and the freezing of her movement would go into the strictures of the scream. You could do

anything in film if you could do it. Of course, some cuts were vastly better than others but led you to more exquisite troubles since several beautiful cuts in a row awakened expectations which oncoming material would have to satisfy. If there was nothing that good to follow, it was like stopping in the middle of the act.

On the other hand, mediocre cuts could follow one another, each cut more or less endurable, until suddenly a cut would go dead. The cut had seemed reasonable for the plot but it left a feeling in the lungs analogous to breathing the exhaust of a bus. Cuts were like words. You could put many an ordinary word next to another word but you could not put them all. If your last name was Klotz, you might call your son Chris, but you would not call your girl Emerald, not unless your ear and the ear of fashion were in a special little race that year. Godard made jump cuts in *Breathless* which no one had been able to endure before, did it out of all his experience as a cutter, and from his artistic insight that the verboten had moved to the edge of the virtuoso. Yet, you may be certain the twenty precise cuts before the jump cut fed subtly into it, if indeed the jump cut had not become the particular metaphysics of that film.

Still, some cuts work, some do not. Some cuts work in extraordinary fashion. One cannot understand why two pieces of film otherwise unrelated seem agreeable next to one another, even appear on screen with that same unfolding of mood the sun suggests as it works at last through a cloud. Poetry is working. A few words which had little to do with one another are now enriching each other. Peerless grapefruit peel! In color film the effect is twice to be noticed. For the syntax of good movement can be reduced by the color, or, since color film is easily as malleable to editing as black and white, an otherwise indifferent movement will be given resonance by the shift of color. It does not matter what is used. A good cutter with enough film can cut a run of images which will give pleasure to an audience. If there is no story present, no other exposition or logic than the aesthetic of color, composition, and movement, then there is a length to such a film, and

it is not usually more than a quarter of an hour. Give a hint of story, however, and the interest of the audience might ride for twice as long. The good cutter is like a very good skier. He does not study the trail ahead, he sets out down the mountain, makes his turns as they come, does his checks, his drops into the fall-line, his traverses into the hill, then tips around and down again. It is beauty to watch. If we add the knowledge that he is in a *race*, the beauty is hardly diminished and our tension is certainly increased. It is not unlike what happens when a hint of story is added to film montage.

Now, however, create a complexity for which film is uniquely suited. Offer a situation where the film seems to tell the audience the skier is in a race, then a minute later seems to indicate he is not in a race. All the while we are following his descent—now the race seems to be on again. To the attention and irritation of not knowing which situation is real, and to the beauty of the photography, have been added ambiguities of context. A fine slippery shiver of meaning comes over us because the situation has altered a little faster than our comprehension of it. Film can offer such sensations as no other art.

If, then, he was ready to start with a conventional, even supercharged movie plot (which he knew would be quickly warped, intensified, dissipated, and altered) and if he was equally ready to throw a Colosseum fodder of actors almost totally untrained into such maximum circus, it was because he had learned that improvised scenes with *cinema vérité* photographers gave many more opportunities to the cutter than the choices open to a film editor who was working on a movie whose rushes came off a script. For, whether trained or untrained, actors in any improvised scene had hardly any more idea of what the final relation of their scene would be to the eventual movie than a man in a love affair may know if his woman will be with him for the rest of his life. So there was an indispensably intense air of the provisional and the real to the actors' work. They were not present to send off signals, as actors with a script must unconsciously do, that the end of the scene was

near. Therefore, any improvised scenes which worked in whole or in part, which is to say had vitality or flashes of vitality, always gave some interesting ensemble of movement that could be used as the springboard for a quick or curious cut to the tempo of other actors in other improvised scenes which were also working well. Indeed, one could cut away from a continuing scene at any point—for the script was still to be put together. That was a choice which film with a script would rarely offer. With script, each scene was staged and thereby necessarily acted with its little unconscious beginning, little middle, and little end. Options for interesting cuts were on the consequence blocked. A scene which ended with a book being laid with measured finality on a table tended all too often to require an ensuing movement equally full of the slow and the stately. That was legitimate if the flow of the movie called up such a tone, but it was deadening if the next scene in the script wished to get off to a quick start. That next cut could no more ignore the last pause than a conversation could glide over the remark that a friend had passed away.

Improvisation obviously gave more freedom to the cutter, so much in fact that the logic by which one began to connect pieces of film to each other seemed at times to arise out of the very logic of film—even if the logic of film was a concept as deeply buried as the logic of language and so might have to wait for its first tentative elucidation by a semantics of film. What appeared as the immediate difference was that with improvisation and free cutting the story was not obliged to be present as the walls and foundation of a movie, but rather became a house afloat on some curious stream, a melody perhaps on which many an improvisation was winging—it was as if story now had the same relation to film which images bear to language. The influence of story was now partial, not whole. For even as language consists of both the concrete and the abstract, of particular images and also of concepts which have no image, so any logic of film could contain elements of natural story and elements of movement which were opposed to story or simply indifferent to story. The

resonance of film, the *experience* of film—words were of diminishing use here—seemed to derive from some necessary tension between the two, even as language seems to require that we pass from image to concept and back.

But if *Maidstone* (as a prime example of the logic of film) is already once removed from words, it is twice dangerous to keep speaking of it without offering a little more of the particular experience which produced it. If the obvious suggestion arises that the experience resides in the nature of improvisation, one may be forgiven the excessive symmetry of next suggesting that the concealed properties of film and improvisation are parallel (which is why they may belong together). We look at film, any film, and chaos is to a degree ordered. (We can, for example, photograph a wastebasket and it has become more an object of order than it was before.) We know we are looking at a life which is not quite life although it will certainly shift the way we live. So improvisation also orders chaos—gives its focus to random emotions—also becomes a life which is not quite life, and yet, even more than film, improvisation suggests it is indeed ready to become life. Ready to become life? Are we speaking of the moment when a fantasy, which is to say, a psychological reality in the mind transcends itself and becomes a fact? We are probably back to the last afternoon in the filming of *Maidstone*.

4

Given his theories on improvisation, there was a problem to filming *Maidstone* and it was fundamental. While he took it for granted that any man or woman who could talk under stress was usually ready to burst forth with an improvised characterization (almost as if the ability to act, like the ability to make love, had been waiting for its opportunity), still one could never forget that art is art and self-expression is all too often therapy. The need therefore was to have a scheme which would keep the improvisation from flowing over into a purge. Some con-

straint had to be found for each scene; ideally, an overlying constraint had to be found for the entire film. In *Beyond the Law,* the problem seemed to solve itself. Being a policeman or a suspect arrested for the night was apparently one of the formal, even primeval scenes of the unconscious. None of his actors had trouble believing they were either policemen or under arrest, indeed his actors were richer in the conception of their role than the author would have been if he had written it for them. Nor had his presence as a director even been necessary in every scene. He had filmed most of *Beyond the Law* on an unrented floor in a seedy office building. It was perfect for giving the sensation that one was upstairs at a police station. Since he had set up interrogations between his detectives and suspects in separate rooms, three camera teams worked apart from one another in the different interrogation chambers. As in a police station, detectives came in and out, questioned a man, took off. Other detectives came in. After a period of filming, the floor of the office building might as well have become a police station. There was a babble of sound throughout, prisoners were arguing, weeping, protesting, going silent, detectives were bellowing or intoning charges, sounds of a beating in one room were agitating an unstable prisoner in another. Half the movie had ben filmed in two nights, filmed on a sea of sound and cinematic sensations.

Now, however, he was ready to make a film of no simple premise and much complexity. Ideally, many of his scenes would be subtle. Any demonstration of the value of making a movie by this method would depend consequently on how elusive, light, and sinister, were the effects obtained. The proof that his method had resources could only be demonstrated by capturing delicate qualities which none but the most carefully prepared films had hitherto provided. Since he also wished his picture to be nothing less than comic, farcical, sexy, on the edge of horror, and with more than ~~one~~ hint of the ghostly, the concoction would not be automatic to obtain.

Still, he believed he could get it if he could only provide an atmosphere, some pervasive atmosphere, in which his

untried actors would arrive at a working mood. For *Beyond the Law*, his police station had provided that atmosphere, provided it as forcefully as a movie being made in a coal mine. But *Maidstone* would be filmed half in open air, the other half would take place in living rooms and sitting rooms which were models of the exotic or the established. Any prevailing atmosphere could not be simply created by an ideal set—rather it would have to come from the presence of the film-making itself descended as some sort of spirit-resident upon Easthampton, a somewhat frightening film to be certain for its central figure was a man living in danger of assassination. Since improvisation was never dependable, far from it! the theme was uneasy *to all*. Murder is another of the primeval scenes of the unconscious. The impulse, however, is guarded by bulldogs in fifty restraining collars—murder was not likely to occur this week on the cheap. Nonetheless, it was only a month and a little more since Bobby Kennedy was dead. That was a thought which lay heavy. Another was the instability of fifty or sixty actors, some white, some black, all congregating and soon fornicating in two small hotels. Nor were the scenes to be played likely to reduce any tension.

He was not so paranoid as to see the venture daring more than a most risk-diminished form of Russian Roulette. Surely, not more than one chance in a hundred, say at the most unlucky, one chance in ten of a real assassination attempt, but whatever the percentage, the practical working movie point was that one percent of real risk introduced a paranoid atmosphere of risk which might be put at twenty percent. And that was a percentage to work with, a percentage to keep the cast in a state of diabolical inclinations, some sensuousness, and much dread. How could legitimate fear not arise that some innocent bystander, some bit actor, might not catch a maladroit effort at assassination intended for another? So a presence for the film had been created. The fear of assassination hung over the cinematic shooting like the faintest luminous evanescent arch of the ineluctable beyond, yes, some pale shade was there, some representative of the ghost-world of

film there along with everything else, along with chaos, cries of love in the grass, and the physical grind of the work, the rush of scenes, the military madness of schedule. Actor and quartermaster, general, production engineer, and the only substitute for a script girl, he had himself more roles than ever before in his life, and staggered through *Maidstone* with the brain of an exhausted infantryman, his mind obliged to work as it had never before, work constantly and without respect for its age, vices, and sedentary habits. Since he also had not slept more than four hours a night for the last two weeks of preparation, keyed to a pitch where if struck could have given off a note, he was speaking slowly for the first time in his life, his brain too used-up to talk fast—the picture was later to prosper as a result since people for once could hear him! —he had nonetheless to wonder at the oddest moments (for there was an unmistakable rainbow of fear and elation in the breath of his chest and it did not leave until the film was done), had to wonder why he was taking such a peculiar chance, which if small was still unnecessary, and knew it had some murky soil of congested roots in the irrational equation that Bobby Kennedy had taken a large chance for a large goal, and he must—in some equilibration of all the underground pressure systems of guilt—now find a way to take a smaller chance for his own private goal, suspected he would never have made this movie or even conceived of it if he had not sat in a room with Bobby Kennedy a month before his death and failed to realize danger: that the man was in mortal danger. So he had a motive not far from obsession: one could return to it over many a year.

Of course his other motive was professional, even elegant in its professionalism, for the fact that he not only made a movie about a possible assassination but gave it structure as a game, even offered the fierce privilege of autonomy to actors who were scheming up plots for his possible cinematic assassination, must also mean that the presence was now being fortified. So he played his part, acting for at least half of his working day rather than directing, his own role certainly helped by that delicate

baleful edge of presence which might lead to artwork, a debacle, or outright disaster. For he had no idea what was being hatched about him, knew only that a variety of large and little plots gave every indication of generating some focus, some steam, some point of a gun, and went through days with staggering schedules, his best reason for speed the instability of the situation. His actors were in for a long weekend. Any longer and the presence would explode or worse, appear absurd, dissipate. Each day in fact he was losing actors, some from frustration, some from fear, some of them good, some promising. Potentialities of story which hung on their presence would have to take a turn. He was not worried at that, not worried by any item of plot or arrival or departure. They would, as he told the company, take B if they could not take A.

So he lived on the fine fever of making the film, hardly aware of any hullaballoo but his own; he was become some lost instrument of his own will, pleased at bottom to be out of touch with two whole sides of his film—the assassination activities of the secret police, and the conceivably murderous of the Praetorian Guard—stayed like some animal in a zone of hunters knowing the great fatigue of a high alert, his senses and adrenalin of warnings whenever Raoul Rey O'Houlihan-Rip Torn was near, for he knew as if Torn were his true brother that the web of intriguings had Torn at the center, that if psychic biddings and curses were flying like bats through the ranks of the company, then Torn was the hole in the roof where they all came in. What pressure! What logic and what torture! What impulse! For Torn was more than an actor, he had in addition to debate his attempt to be the assassin. The vanity of a proud actor, not nearly recognized sufficiently for his talent, for the remarkable force of unholy smolderings he could always present, now had to become a vanity pushing him to take the center, to move from that secondary position of acolyte to the leading part, and preempt the part, be the killer who invaded the hill. Yet he was also first centurion of the guard to protect Kingsley from the point of the threat, and took his mission seriously, yes, with all the seriousness of a profound actor

steeped in his improvisation. Ready to die in order to save Kingsley, he was also ready to kill him—anything but to have the quiet insistent pressure of the picture pass into nowhere, all threats stilled, his own role stilled.

So the night before the afternoon on the grass, the night of the assassination ball became O'Houlihan's high agony. Raoul Rey-Rip Torn had become the center of the film, the focus of every loyalty to the director, yet the wild card in every plot, since it had become an unspoken convention that the attempt of assassination would be on the night of the ball (as if actors in a sustained improvisation ganged naturally to the idea of a focus of plot), so in the hours of the night as the party went by, plots arose and were shattered or missed, or evaded, the director never feeling more real in the role. Uncertain of the size of the attempt, or whether the attempt was even yet to come, not knowing if he played in a game which was a real drama, or worked for a drama just so absurd as a game, he did not accept the more obvious gambits of plot which were offered him. If obvious, they seemed ridiculous, as though one gave assent to pressing a button which would release a boxing glove in one's face. No, he took up posts, or promenaded for two hours—impromptu bodyguard always about him—hung in the situation for two hours, and the time done and the party over, spoke now not to Rey but to Rip as if the movie were finished, as indeed he thought it was, for nothing but a few elements of the dream called "The Death of the Director" would be filmed on Gardiner's Island with the company next day, a day in fact for picnic and celebration that the film was over. His own danger had been as one part in one hundred or less, but he was glad it was done, and so said to his fictional brother, "I don't know if we got anything tonight, but it's still all right," thinking to himself of the dozen different ways he could cut the film (his security residing in a documentary on the making of an unsuccessful film since there was always footage of his own voluminous directions to the cast) and so saying, went to bed and finally to sleep, and the next day found to his horror that on Gardiner's Island

after the lecture of orientation was over that the presence of the dread was returned, but now shorn of elation, shorn of a rainbow. There was something heavy, then awful in the air, he knew he was in more physical danger than at any time before, and as Torn came walking toward him across the green, hammer dangling from his hand, he remembered taking off his black leather vest and holding it like a short folded cape in lieu of a better weapon, and after the fight, too furious to speak to Torn for many a month, outraged that Torn had broken the unspoken convention of their film—that violence cease with the end of the filming of the ball—was yet obliged to discover in the months of studying his forty-five hours of reels that his own blunder had been enormous in giving so much autonomy to Torn and the other assistant directors. The work they had done was by sections good, but not finally good enough. The buried half of the film he had been waiting to see would remain for the most part buried. He had been left with the most embarrassing work of all, an ego trip, for he had been the hardest-working actor in the film, and so the film was his, it was all too unhappily his, and all too much of him, since that was the part which unfortunately worked the best. Torn had therefore been right to make his attack. The hole in the film had called for that. Without it, there was not enough. And with it—he glimpsed as he worked each day with his editors that a film was emerging which he would yet be pleased to call his own for it was a mysterious film and became more mysterious as he thought on it. It was reminiscent first of the image he had held of the ski race which was on, then declared off, then put on again—the film shifted from context to context in modes as obsessive and haunting and *attached* to memory as those recollections of indefinable moments between sleep and a dream where context shifts, only to shift back again—we are in the dream . . . no, it is the edge of day. So Proust had floated his reader on a hundred-page procession of state from sleep to wakefulness into sleep.

In *Maidstone* the context moved into some other place. It was a film about the surface of reality and the less visible

surface of psychological reality. For if everyday reality was a surface, or a crust, or a skin, psychological reality was a balloon which lived as a surface so long as the air of belief was within it. And since he had come to write his *Maidstone* after all the film was in, he chose the mysterious shifting character of its surface as the subject, and looked to show just how many of its realities were psychological realities which could suddenly be exploded and then where had they gone? What was left of such reality? It was a project he could never have commenced with words, nor even with the fiction of a story, but *Maidstone* had been filmed not only as an imaginary event but as a real event, and so was both a fiction and a documentary at once and then become impossible to locate so precisely, for what came nearest to the hard hide of the real? Was it Norman Mailer, the self-satisfied director, instructing his cast for the last time, or was it the suddenly real head of Norman T. Kingsley that Torn as suddenly attacked. (Yet his hammer had been held carefully on the flat to reduce the damage.) For if the attack was real, the actor upon whom it was wreaked should not be, and would not be unless the attack became fiercer still, fierce enough to kill him indeed. Then Kingsley would have become undeniably more real than Mailer.

It was a species of realization—that the hide of the real remains real only so long as the psychologically real fails to cut into its existence by an act which makes psychology real—the tongue would twist in its turnings on such a philosophical attempt faster than the film. For it was possible *Maidstone* inhabited that place where the film was supposed to live—that half-way station between the psychological and the real which helped to explain the real. As time went on, he saw that the cutting he did by newly acquired instinct was with purpose, and had a logic to reveal the topography of that half-way station. For *Maidstone* kept promising developments of plot which never quite took place, even as we travel through our lives forever anticipating the formation of plots around us which do not quite form. We are always looking for real stories to ensue which never exactly enact themselves as we

expect, yet we still work at such times as actors in the real story of our life, pursuing roles which can become our life at any instant the psychological can become the real —as occasionally it will. For out of fifty stories in which we are at any instant enmeshed, (fifty sets of expectations that next week we fall in love or tonight we go out and get drunk and have a terrible fight) not three times out of fifty, not two, nor one does the expected event occur. And then it does, it happens, it takes place out of the stored force of all the denouements which did not take place. So Torn attacked out of all the plots of other actors, Torn became the presence of the film, the psychological reality that became a literal reality out of the pressure of all the ones which did not. So that film about a director who would run for President became instead a photographed event of simulated plots and threats kept under high pressure by the curious curse of playing with photography of the female in the act of love, of playing with the curse of love which is gone, of playing with the curses of matrimony, yes, that film of an event which was a thousand events (of which nine hundred and ninety had small issue, or none, or were never photographed) became at last a film of the ineffable shimmer of reality, even became, as its director had wished, the star itself. Then it was that the presence of the film crystallized into the *geist* of *Maidstone,* Rip Torn. A superb actor was at a pitch of intensity and so revealed the premise on which a film had been built, even offered the essence of a method which could yet become the future of the film. For is it not a common premise to many a lover of movies that the hidden wealth in every strong-box of the cinematographic are those sequences of footage where the event has been innocent of script and yet resonant with life? Of course! We are talking of nothing other than movie stars in frames where the mood has been pure. Mood is our only acquaintance with the sensuous properties of time. And film is the only art which can search, cut by cut, into the mystery of moods which follow and accommodate one another; film is the only art which can study sudden shifts of mood which sever the ongoing river of time a fine film has set in flow. So we search for

the pure in film as we search for the first real tear of love. We are a Faustian age determined to meet the Lord or the Devil before we are done, and the ineluctable ore of the authentic is our only key to the lock.