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No room for the fun stuff: the question of the screenplay in American indie cinema

ABSTRACT

One of the most interesting trends in recent independent cinema has been for film-makers to avoid using traditional screenplays in making their films. Not only have emerging film-makers associated with the so-called 'mumblecore' movement, such as Joe Swanberg, Aaron Katz and Ronald Bronstein, veered away from depending on conventionally written screenplays, but other critically acclaimed films, including The Pool *(Smith, 2008) and* Ballast *(Hammer, 2008), have as well. Indeed, some of the most notable American indie film-makers – Gus Van Sant, David Lynch and Jim Jarmusch – have employed alternative strategies to the screenplay in such recent films as* Elephant *(2003),* Inland Empire *(2006), and* The Limits of Control *(2009). What is behind these developments and why has the conventional screenplay been under attack? What are the aesthetic benefits of choosing not to rely on a traditional script? Is this a completely new phenomenon or has the industrial screenplay always been an obstacle? I explore these issues by looking at three major strategies that indie film-makers have used in place of the*

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traditional screenplay: improvisation, psychodrama and visual storytelling. Finally, I argue that for current independent film-makers in the United States of America these methods provide an appropriate model for a practice that is attempting to create a truly viable alternative to Hollywood cinema.

One of the most interesting trends in recent independent cinema has been for film-makers to avoid using traditional screenplays in making their films. Not only have emerging film-makers associated with the so-called 'mumblecore' movement,[1] such as Joe Swanberg, Aaron Katz and Ronald Bronstein, veered away from depending on conventionally written screenplays, but other critically acclaimed films, including *The Pool* (2008) and *Ballast* (2008), have as well. Indeed, some of the most notable American indie film-makers – Gus Van Sant, David Lynch and Jim Jarmusch – have employed alternative strategies to the screenplay in such recent films as *Elephant* (2003), *Inland Empire* (2006) and *The Limits of Control* (2009).[2] What is behind these developments and why has the conventional screenplay been under attack? What are the aesthetic benefits of choosing not to rely on a traditional script? Is this a completely new phenomenon or has the industrial screenplay always been an obstacle? I intend to explore these issues by looking at three major strategies that American indie film-makers have used in place of the traditional screenplay: improvisation, psychodrama and visual storytelling. These three strategies may appear in isolation or in various combinations in the work of independent film-makers – both past and present. For some film-makers like Andy Warhol the categories themselves are fluid and cannot be separated from each other either in theory or practice. Finally, I argue that for current independent film-makers in the United States of America these methods provide an appropriate model for a practice that is attempting to create a truly viable alternative to Hollywood cinema.

In his chapter on writing in *Film Production Theory*, Jean-Pierre Geuens shows that following the introduction of sound, the industrial model of the dialogue-driven script became the standard convention (Geuens 2000: 81–109). There proved to be a number of obvious benefits to this industrial model as a kind of blueprint for a film production. It provides a basis for the strict division of labour required by the Hollywood industry. Given the huge financial risks that a feature film entails, the conventional screenplay allows studio executives, producers and financial backers to have a clear sense of the film they are making. It enables actors to know precisely what lines they will rehearse and deliver, production managers to know what locations have to be found and what type of equipment will need to be rented, the wardrobe department to secure the required costumes, and the continuity person to be aware of what exactly will occur in each scene.

As Geuens points out, there are also a number of drawbacks to this approach. By emphasizing dialogue over action, written dialogue has become privileged over visual storytelling and improvisation. This model has been reinforced by various manual writers who now treat

1. Mumblecore is a term coined by Andrew Bujalski's sound mixer, Eric Masunaga, during the 2005 SXSW Film Festival to refer to a series of naturalistic films made on micro-budgets by a group of younger film-makers inspired by John Cassavetes. The word alluded to the garbled sound quality of some of the films. Bujalski's *Funny Ha Ha* (2005) is generally recognized to be the first mumblecore film. See Van Couvering (2007).
2. My focus on American independent cinema stems from a need to limit the parameters of the discussion. American indie cinema is not simply a matter of budget. In order to obtain financing or to compete successfully in the US marketplace, indie films must walk a fine line between novelty and convention, yet still manage to differentiate themselves from Hollywood. The financing of international art cinema represents a very different situation. See Murphy (2007). For a treatment of alternative screenwriting issues related to international art cinema, see Millard (2006).

this as the norm. Richard Walter, for instance, ridicules the 'weary cliché that film is a visual medium' by insisting that 'still, there is no getting around the fact that a good movie script is mainly talk'. He goes on to add, 'but the fact remains: open a modern screenplay and you're looking mainly at dialogue' (Walter 1988: 83). For Walter, description in a screenplay has become 'all that black stuff', which he refers to as 'random smatterings of ink grouped into bulky rectangular blocks separating the dialogue' (Walter 1988: 83–84). Walter contends that producers and agents only read the dialogue and skip over the description or action when reading a screenplay. In turn, the written dialogue on a page has also had a huge impact on the performance of actors because it does not allow them to deviate from the script or to utilize improvisatory skills, a technique which I will touch on later.

In their efforts to develop an alternative cinema in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, American independent film-makers were keenly aware of these problems. The screenplay, in fact, has been a source of contention since the very beginning of modern American independent cinema, as evidenced by the influential writings of Maya Deren and Jonas Mekas, the controversy surrounding the two different versions of John Cassavetes's *Shadows* (1958, 1959), and Andy Warhol's subversion of the very idea of the script in films he made during the 1960s.

Maya Deren insisted in her lectures 'that the trouble with most films is that they are "written", whereas cinematic thinking is another process altogether' (Deren 1965: 33). In an article, entitled 'Planning by Eye: Notes on "Individual" and "Industrial" Film', she offers a visual alternative to the conventional written script; 'every effectiveness that my films have, I owe to the fact that they were planned by eye: that I drew out what I wanted to see on the screen as the final product, and that I discarded any idea which I could not see or draw' (Deren 1965: 34). Deren uses the concept 'feeling lonely' as an example, arguing that 'aloneness' is a 'visual condition';

> Instead of showing bad and unconvincing grimaces, one might show, for example, a long-shot of a figure, isolated in an empty area. And this aloneness might even be strengthened if some action, such as people passing or children playing, were happening at one edge of the frame, with no active relationship between the isolated individual and the other activity. One might even suggest this activity by shadows which come near the isolated individual. The possibilities are many, but note that they are all visual in nature, and that they are all more accessible to the amateur film-maker than those which would rely on speech (a monologue), titles, or acting.
>
> (Deren 1965: 34)

Deren uses the word 'amateur' here to suggest a film-maker who creates out of love as opposed to commerce.

Jonas Mekas, the editor of *Film Culture* magazine and film critic for the alternative weekly the *Village Voice*, was also highly critical of the traditional script. He placed the blame squarely on the screenwriters, even going so far as to suggest that they should be shot for keeping cinema so conventional (Mekas 1959). Mekas had been an ardent champion of the improvised and unscripted version of John Cassavetes's first feature *Shadows*, even giving it *Film Culture*'s First Independent Film Award. Mekas felt betrayed after Cassavetes decided to go back and re-shoot a second version of the film using a script. All the qualities that Mekas had so admired in the first version – improvisation, spontaneity and inspiration – he found lacking in the new version, which he felt was no different from a Hollywood film.

Mekas would subsequently develop the notion of what he termed 'plotless cinema'. For Mekas, *La Règle du jeu/Rules of the Game* (1939) represents 'the masterpiece of the personal, "plotless" cinema'. He writes:

> Renoir's people look like people, act like people, and are confused like people, vague and unclear. They are moved not by the plot, not by theatrical dramatic climaxes, but by something that one could even call the stream of life itself, by their own irrationality, their sporadic, unpredictable behavior.
>
> (Mekas 1961)

Mekas's writings influenced a number of independent film-makers, perhaps none more so than Ron Rice.

Ron Rice made one of the early independent examples of plotless cinema, *The Flower Thief* (1960), a film that played for an extended commercial run and received a positive review in the *New York Times*. Strongly influenced by the spontaneity of beat poetry and Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank's *Pull My Daisy* (1959) – a film for which Jack Kerouac improvised the narration – Rice and the poet and underground actor Taylor Mead combined to make a feature film without the benefit of a written script. Rice was more interested in 'doing' than in 'pre-planning'. He dedicated *The Flower Thief* to the 'Wild Man' – the person in early Hollywood cinema who dreamed up something when all else failed.

Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles* (1961) is another early plotless narrative that brilliantly employs visual storytelling. Recently restored and finally given a belated theatrical release after languishing in obscurity for nearly fifty years, *The Exiles* involves a collaboration between the film-maker and performers and presents a slice-of-life portrait of a group of displaced American Indians living in urban Los Angeles over the course of a twelve-hour period. Although the credits indicate that the film was written, produced and directed by Mackenzie, 'there was never any script' according to John Morrill, one of the three cinematographers listed on the film (Lim 2008).

In the 1960s, Andy Warhol often deliberately subverted the scripts or treatments of his collaborators, Ronald Tavel and Paul Morrissey.

Warhol preferred the moments when the scripts would break down and the performers would fall out of roles and become themselves. In order to do this he often employed a kind of 'psychodrama'. In *Visionary Film*, P. Adams Sitney uses the term 'trance film' or 'psychodrama' to describe films that represent intense interior states of mind enacted in symbolic form, such as Deren and Hammid's 1943 classic *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Sitney 1974).

Psychodrama also refers to a form of psychotherapy developed by Jacob L. Moreno, who emigrated from Vienna to the United States in 1925 and created the first Theater of Psychodrama in Beacon, New York in 1936. During World War II, Moreno started the New York Theater of Psychodrama, which he later renamed the Moreno Institute in 1951. Moreno's psychodrama became very influential during the 1960s when his therapy sessions attracted the attention of actors and directors associated with professional theatre and were even broadcast on television.

Although Moreno's definition of psychodrama was broad and shifted over time, psychodrama involves the patient's spontaneous improvisation of a particular critical life situation within a clinical theatrical setting. According to Peter Felix Kellermann:

> A number of scenes are enacted, depicting, for example, memories of specific happenings in the past, unfinished situations, inner dramas, fantasies, dreams, preparations for future risk-taking situations, or unrehearsed expressions of mental states in the here and now. These scenes either approximate real-life situations or are externalizations of inner mental processes.
>
> (Kellermann 1992: 20)

The esteemed theatre critic Eric Bentley offers a description of a typical 'open stage' session in the 1960s:

> A patient, here called a protagonist, presents himself for a psychodramatic performance. A director-psychiatrist talks with him briefly, to find out what he sees as his problem, and what scenes from his life might be enacted. A scene being chosen, the roles of others taking part in it are played either by trained assistants or by anyone else present who might volunteer. What and how they are to play is briefly explained to them by the protagonist and director.
>
> (Bentley 1987: 322–23)

Bentley makes clear that success in a psychodrama very much depends on the degree of spontaneity and self-illumination achieved by the patient in the process of active role-playing. The protagonist often experiences an intense emotional experience that leads to a deep personal insight and often builds to some type of a dramatic climax. According to Bentley, at this point, 'The director now ends the play-acting and asks the audience to share common experience with the protagonist' (Bentley 1987: 323).

I employ the word 'psychodrama' in a different sense from either Sitney or Moreno. For lack of a better term, I am using 'psychodrama' here to refer to those peak moments of dramatic interaction, where the artifice of the performance or situation suddenly breaks down, and the performer as well as the audience experiences a heightened sense of reality. The films of John Cassavetes often contain such moments. In *Shadows* (1959) the lovemaking scene between Lelia and Tony can serve as an example.

The scene, which was actually scripted, involves what Ray Carney has referred to as a number of radical 'tonal' shifts (Carney 2001: 48). Although the audience expects that Lelia and Tony's tryst will develop into a romantic plotline, Lelia has an unanticipated negative response to the lovemaking. We learn, for instance, that this was her first sexual encounter and, to our surprise, she tells him, 'I didn't know it could be so awful.' Rather than feeling a sense of elation, Lelia has become unmoored, causing her to vacillate in her reactions to Tony. When he assures her that it is going to be much easier next time, Lelia replies, 'There isn't going to be a next time.' After Tony raises the issue of her disappointment with him, Lelia talks about feeling frightened and wanting to cry, but then responds, 'If you love a man, you shouldn't be so frightened.' Lelia asks, 'What happens now? ... I mean, do I stay with you?' She questions whether they are now going to live together – in other words, whether their lovemaking implies a commitment to each other. Tony responds somewhat insincerely, 'You want to?' But sensing his true feelings, Lelia answers, 'No, I want to go home.'

What has been occurring in this scene is a kind of emotional flip-flop that reflects Lelia's inner turmoil following her impulsive decision to have sex with Tony, a person she hardly knows and someone who has already indicated that he is 'not a nice person'. As the camera focuses on her, Lelia discusses her initial expectations, but realizes that they are merely 'two strangers'. She concludes, 'It's over. I know that much about life.' After Tony attempts to placate Lelia and tells her that he loves her, Lelia appears to have a psychic breakdown. Lelia tells him, 'Please don't touch me. Please don't touch me. I want to go home. I want to get dressed now. Please leave me alone.' As Tony tries to comfort her, she once again insists, 'I want to go home.'

The scene has shifted from being scripted to something that seems unstaged rather than acted. Carney also suggests that the scene reflects the dynamic of Lelia and Tony's relationship in real life. He writes:

> Cassavetes once again drew on his actors' real feelings and personalities to lend authority to their line deliveries: Tony and Lelia had actually had a difficult romantic relationship that had not worked out well. There was still a residue of mixed feelings about their relationship when the scene was shot that undoubtedly added to its authenticity.
>
> (Carney 1995: 238)

There are other instances of psychodramatic situations in American independent films of the 1960s, including Jonas Mekas's documentary-like production of The Living Theater's *The Brig* (1964), the films of Norman Mailer and *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968). In the latter film, William Greaves plays the role of an inept director shooting a feature film in an attempt to provoke open rebellion among his cast and crew members. The connection to psychodrama and Moreno is direct in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* because Greaves employed a Moreno-trained psychodramatist, Marcia Karp, to work with the actors on set (MacDonald 1998: 53).

No film-maker used the technique of psychodrama more consistently than Andy Warhol, especially once he turned to making films with synchronous sound. Warhol was interested in continuously recording events because he felt the most interesting things would happen the moment the camera was turned off. Warhol intuitively understood that the camera and the passage of time had the inherent potential to transform the profilmic event. Once he began to work with the playwright Ronald Tavel and to make narrative films, the employment of psychodrama became a standard technique for creating combustible dramatic situations.

Warhol conceived of narrative as a series of situations in which his non-actor performers would engage in improvised role-playing in contrast to a carefully constructed plot. Many of Warhol's films contain scenes that develop into psychodrama. The most famous example is Ondine's freak-out in *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) where he slaps Ronna Page in the face and throws an extended tantrum. Other examples include the off-screen taunting of Edie Sedgwick by her former boyfriend, Chuck Wein, in *Beauty # 2* (1965) and the decision to cast Valerie Solanas in *I, a Man* (1967) in a scene where Tom Baker attempts to coerce Solanas, an avid man-hater and future assassin, to let him into her apartment. The same scene is actually restaged in Mary Harron's biopic, *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996), but the scene lacks the dramatic tension of the original despite the fact that Solanas is played by Lili Taylor, a highly gifted actress.

There are entire Warhol films, such as *Henry Geldzahler* (1964), that appear to be staged as direct psychodramatic encounters. Two early scripted films by Ronald Tavel also take this form by placing the performers in screen tests that bear a striking resemblance to actual psychotherapy sessions, namely *Screen Test # 1* (1965) and *Screen Test # 2* (1965). Tavel describes the genesis of *Screen Test # 1*, the uptight portrait of Philip Fagan, who, at the time, was actually Warhol's asexual live-in lover. According to Tavel, Warhol gave him explicit instructions for writing the script for the film:

> And go home and devise an inquisition, basically. Sit and ask him questions which will make him perform in some way before the

> camera [...] And the questions should be in such a way that they will elicit, you know, things from his face because that's what I'm more interested in rather than in what he says in response.
>
> (Smith 1986: 481)

In other words, Warhol specifically asks Tavel to manipulate Fagan in order to extract certain emotional responses that will create a more authentic drama, thus blurring the distinction between Fagan's actual life and the filmed screen test.

Tavel's own approach was to think of the scripts he wrote for Warhol more as scenarios. He explains:

> They provide a field in which whatever happens will develop its own meaning rather than have the author's imposed meaning. The quality of my work can be judged by how well it provided for things to happen; I didn't impose my personal vision. This way of working was part of what Andy was doing.
>
> (Krasowska 2002: 43)

Tavel points out an underlying principle of working in this type of way:

> But if you want to capture spontaneity, improvisation, the accident, and so forth, you must set up an environment in which the spontaneous, the accidental, the improvisational, the unexpected, will take place. That takes planning. If you just turn the camera on people without saying anything else, they just tighten up.
>
> (James 1995: 49)

After filming Tavel's scenarios, which he often subverted in various ways, Warhol more or less abandoned the concept of using written scripts. He developed the notion of the 'superstar' as a way of shifting the burden from the written page to the performer. Warhol told an interviewer:

> But, mainly, the stars improvise their own dialogue. Somehow, we attract people who can turn themselves on in front of the camera. In this sense, they're *really* superstars. It's much harder, you know, to *be* your own script than to memorize someone else's. Anyhow, scripts bore me. It's much more exciting not to know what's going to happen...
>
> (Kent 1970: 167, original emphasis)

There are numerous examples of subsequent independent film-makers who have reacted against the industrial screenplay, especially when working on smaller budgets outside the system. Jim Jarmusch wrote a treatment rather than a screenplay for *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984). Richard Linklater also used a short treatment of scenes, and then created the script *post-facto* for *Slacker* (1991). Matthew Barney simply

Figure 1: The Pool *(2008). Courtesy: Bluemark Productions.*

had locations and images and some visual storyboards when he began filming *Cremaster 2* (1999). The Waldo Salt Award for Screenwriting at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival went to co-screenwriters Nicholas Jasenovec and Charlyne Yi for their narrative film about romantic love, entitled *Paper Heart* (2009), starring Yi and directed by Jasenovec. In accepting the screenwriting award, Jasenovec remarked, 'This is a weird prize to give this film because there were about five written pages' (Hernandez and Knegt 2009).

The genesis for Chris Smith's *The Pool* (2007) (Figure 1) was a seven-page short story by Randy Russell originally set in Iowa. Smith distilled the central idea – one person's obsession with another's swimming pool – and transposed it to India. The film-maker led a small crew to the ex-Portuguese city of Panaji, or Panjim as it is translated in the film. Over the course of five months and 65 shooting days he shot *The Pool*, which won a Special Jury Prize at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival.

As Ronald Tavel insisted, all films, out of necessity, need to involve some sort of planning – *The Pool* did have some form of a script – but the process of making the film was much more open-ended. Smith, like David Lynch with *Inland Empire* (2006) and Jim Jarmusch with *The Limits of Control* (2009), began filming without actually having a final screenplay. Instead, he had a rough treatment that consisted of approximately 22 pages. While many scenes were scripted later, they evolved and changed during the process of making the film. Once the actors were cast – Jhangir Badshah was recruited as one of the two leads while working at a restaurant the crew frequented – Smith incorporated the

actors' own life experiences as part of their characterizations. Smith, who acted as his own 35mm cinematographer, would shoot a scene and his editor Barry Poltermann would assemble a rough cut on the fly. They would view it and then proceed from there. In a sense, Smith found the 'story' in the course of shooting it, which could be described as a documentary approach applied to narrative film-making.

Chris Smith constructs *The Pool* as a series of vivid snapshots of the characters and the place they inhabit. Some scenes are short vignettes, containing only a few lines of dialogue. Smith is as much concerned with the visual details – the rhythms of 18-year-old Venkatesh's daily life – as with character. Or maybe it is that the endless repetition of daily chores as a hotel worker defines his existence. We see Venkatesh making up beds, buying bread at the bakery, washing dishes in the kitchen, scrubbing marbled floors and toilets, dealing with the laundry and opening and closing the heavy metal gate of the hotel each day.

Venkatesh Chavan and Jhangir Badshah give outstanding performances for being non-professional actors. Both play their parts with a combination of concentration and distraction, which adds to the naturalism. Their bodily gestures convey their characters as much as the words they say. When Nana, the wealthy businessman who owns the swimming pool, again brings up the proposal of Venkatesh accompanying him to Mumbai, Chavan taps his arm with his finger as a kind of nervous tic. And there is something about 11-year-old Jhangir Badshah's upright gait and the energetic way he swings his arms as he walks next to Venkatesh that suggests his fierce determination and survivor instincts.

Lance Hammer's first feature *Ballast* (2008), set in the Mississippi Delta, generated a great deal of critical attention when it screened at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, and Hammer wound up winning the Best Director Award. After immersing himself in the setting for the film and doing extensive interviews with local residents, Hammer abandoned his initial screenplay because he felt it was 'too overt' or 'untruthful'. He eventually wrote a new version, which was based on a series of photographs and very extensive notes, over the course of two years. Hammer then cast African Americans who lived there to play the parts rather than professional actors. He explains:

> In a Bressonian fashion, I was interested in the physical characteristics of people, and physical comportment, the way a body moves in space, the way emotions animate the physical vessel you carry around on earth. You can tell the temperament of a person almost right away.
>
> (Koehler 2008: 12)

Hammer did three months of scene-by-scene rehearsals on location. He would videotape the rehearsals, and what transpired in them would be transcribed into a 'running draft'. The non-professional performers were never given the screenplay in order to memorize lines,

although they sometimes were shown a scripted scene in order to grasp the basic idea of it. Hammer, who also cites Mike Leigh as a major influence, contends:

> Because they [the actors] already had a general understanding of what was going on outside the scene at hand, but a foggy understanding of the scene itself, it would force them to respond as themselves. That was fun: it yielded many wonderful, realistic moments.
>
> (Koehler 2008: 11)

Gus Van Sant de-emphasized the primacy of the screenplay in the last four films he made prior to his scripted biopic *Milk* (2008), i.e. *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), *Last Days* (2005) and *Paranoid Park* (2007). Van Sant, who wound up using an outline for *Elephant*, suggests one limitation of using a traditional screenplay. In interpreting a written screenplay, he insists that 'there's not a lot of room for extra stuff – the *fun* stuff – that's outside the screenplay. So when I got rid of the screenplay, I found that there was only the fun stuff' (Somogyi 2003: 28, original emphasis). This 'fun stuff' includes being able to improvise scenes with the actors and to approach the film in more strictly visual and formal terms. This includes several extended tracking shots, such as the dazzling one lasting over six minutes that follows Brittany, Jordan and Nicole as they stroll down the hallway into the cafeteria and walk along the food line. The camera veers off into the kitchen, then picks the three up as they find a free table and see John outside with a dog, eat lunch, head back out, and then disappear into the women's bathroom. In another, the camera follows Nathan in his red hooded sweatshirt as he moves through the school corridors – the lifeguard symbol on his back suggesting the moving target in a video game. A final striking example is the scene where Eric turns up as the camera tracks around Alex's basement room and he plays Beethoven on the piano (Murphy 2007: 162–79).

Van Sant used somewhat similar approaches in *Gerry* (2002), the film that preceded *Elephant* (2003), as well as the one that followed, *Last Days* (2005). Even in his recent adaptation of Blake Nelson's teen novel into the film version of *Paranoid Park*, Van Sant explains:

> I wrote it quickly, in two days. I outlined the parts I wanted, wrote it out script style, transposing in some ways, not even rewriting. I would take the descriptions and make those scene headings, and then I would take the dialogue and make it dialogue. It was almost like Xeroxing the story. Then I shifted it around and got rid of some of the parts.
>
> (Nelson 2008: 15)

The result was a 30-page screenplay that Van Sant transformed into a 78-minute film by altering the temporal chronology of events and

adding long visual sequences of skateboarding, a time-lapse of the bridge at the film's opening, and extended takes of the young protagonist, Alex, walking down high school corridors. In the film's most spectacular visual sequence, Van Sant changes camera speed and exposure as Alex showers – we see his lowered face as water spills over his hair – in an attempt to wash away the accidental crime he's committed while hitching a ride on a train.

Jim Jarmusch had only a 25-page story, a number of well-known actors and a variety of Spanish locations in mind when he began shooting *The Limits of Control* (2009). His original short story did not contain any dialogue, which was written the night before scenes were shot. In an interview in *Artforum*, Jarmusch indicates: 'the twenty-five pages didn't really have any dialogue, but they were a map of the story. It was very, very minimally written on purpose. I even tried to make the language very minimal, not very descriptive at all' (Taubin 2009: 201). The film follows a professional hit man (Isaach De Bankolé, Figure 2) through a series of episodic incidents with enigmatic characters. In his various encounters, the protagonist, identified in the credits as Lone Man, orders two espressos in separate cups, the other characters all comment on the fact that he does not speak Spanish, they exchange different coloured match boxes that contain diamonds and a folded piece of paper with coded numbers, and clues to his next meeting are provided. One of the characters, an attractive young woman, turns up naked, but Lone Man refuses to have sex with her while he is on assignment. Another slips him an old black guitar. A flamenco dancer at a club passionately sings dialogue from the first scene at the airport. Yet the exact nature of Lone Man's mission remains a mystery

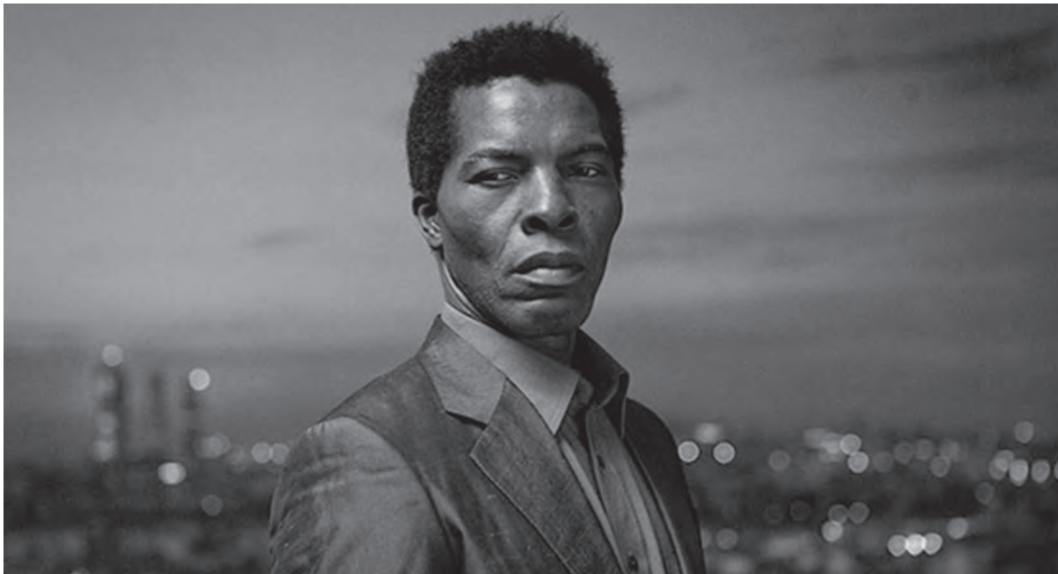

Figure 2: The Limits of Control *(2009). Courtesy: Focus Features.*

throughout the film until he eventually confronts his target in a heavily guarded bunker at the end.

Jarmusch told an interviewer: 'I always wanted to make an action film with no action, or a film with suspense but no drama' (Lim 2009: 13). In *The Limits of Control*, Jarmusch appears to be less interested in creating a conventional dramatic plot than in using repetition and variation to structure a film that is built around a number of cinematic, literary and philosophical references, while at the same time playing with expectations of genre. He shifts the focus to more formal concerns – atmosphere, colour and the resonances of particular places – as Lone Man moves from an airport lounge, to Madrid and then travels by train to Seville and beyond. Jarmusch wanted the film to embody an existential, moment-by-moment apprehension of the world, which is how he positions both Lone Man and the viewer. This is also reflected in the more intuitive way he constructed the film during production. Jarmusch indicates that shots were deliberately not pre-planned, but were devised on location in collaboration with his cinematographer, Christopher Doyle. In discussing the freedom and spontaneity of this method of working, Jarmusch comments:

> It's more of a dream-logic thing. There is a lot about the unconscious for me even in the way we made the film, which was being open to things happening and not always being sure exactly what the next move was or where the next camera placement would be.
> (Taubin 2009: 203)

David Lynch went back to guerrilla film-making (and no final screenplay) in his digital film *Inland Empire* (2006), his film-within-a-film nightmare of an actress, Nikki Grace, who finds herself getting confused between her personal life and the role she's playing in a fictional film called *On High in Blue Tomorrows* (Figure 3). The genesis for the project resulted from the surprise visit of actress Laura Dern, who became Lynch's new neighbour. She expressed a desire to work together again, prompting Lynch to shoot a 14-page monologue that he wrote specifically for her. Lynch began filming other scenes without a clear idea of how they ultimately related to each other, so that the performers only had a sense of individual scenes. Nothing, however, was improvised. In this instance, Lynch admits that digital technology had a profound effect on his more intuitive method of working, including being able to have a smaller crew, to shoot longer takes and to operate the camera, which allows for a greater intimacy. He explains: 'Now you're right in there, and you're feeling it and seeing it and you can do things, subtle, little things, that come out of what you're witnessing' (Rowin 2006).

It is not surprising that digital technology would have an impact on recent independent features, primarily because it reduces the cost of filming. This would seem to allow film-makers the luxury of greater experimentation, as evidenced by David Lynch's piecemeal method of

Figure 3: Inland Empire *(2006). Courtesy: Asymmetrical Productions.*

3. I do not mean to suggest that Hollywood never uses the technique of improvisation. Hollywood films in general, however, are not generated solely through improvisatory practice. When employed, it usually involves isolated moments within a highly-controlled structure.

shooting *Inland Empire*. Digital technology is also having an effect on performance. Sean Baker's *The Prince of Broadway* (2008) (one of his two films that were nominated for the 2009 Independent Spirit John Cassavetes Award) tells the story of a West African immigrant street peddler in New York City who unexpectedly has a baby thrust upon him by a disgruntled Latina ex-lover. The micro-budget film, shot in a documentary style by Baker, utilizes non-professional actors. A final credit indicates that the 'characters' dialogue was realized through improvisation and a collaborative process with all actors'.[3]

A number of Cassavetes-inspired younger film-makers dubbed 'mumblecore' use either improvisation or structured improvisation in films that feature mostly their friends and focus mainly on the relationships of twentysomethings. These film-makers include Andrew Bujalski, Joe Swanberg, the Duplass brothers, Ronald Bronstein and Aaron Katz. The plot of Aaron Katz's *Quiet City* (2007) is remarkably simple. Jamie (Erin Fisher) arrives in Brooklyn to meet a friend, Samantha, who, due to problems with her cell phone, ends up leaving her stranded. Jamie runs into Charlie (Cris Lankenau) in the subway station, asks for directions to a diner, and the two end up spending the next 24 hours together. Although originally scripted, there is not really much of a plot in the conventional sense. Instead we experience a series of episodic narrative incidents. The two of them break into Samantha's apartment, have a foot race in the park, visit a friend to retrieve Charlie's hat, and later go to an art opening and after-party. Katz allowed his two lead actors the freedom to improvise or interpret each scene in their own words, even giving them co-screenwriting credit on the film.

Figure 4: Frownland *(2008). Courtesy: Frownland, Inc.*

Ronald Bronstein's debut feature *Frownland* (2008) is easily the most idiosyncratic of the recent spate of mumblecore films. Bronstein's film is a character study of a dysfunctional, mentally challenged young man named Keith Sontag (played by first-time actor Dore Mann, Figure 4) who just happens to resemble David Berkowitz, the notorious Son of Sam. Keith is more or less harmless, but with his overly baggy clothes, grimacing facial tics and obsessive-compulsive gestures, he seems to be a walking time bomb. Bronstein originally wrote a script for the film – an experience he calls 'a pinheaded endeavor' – but because *Frownland*, like Katz's *Quiet City* (2007), is more character-based rather than plotted, things changed once he cast the actors. Bronstein comments:

> In general, I'm pretty disenchanted with the standard industry approach to screenwriting. I mean, I do find it helpful in terms of mapping out a structure and overarching themes and stuff, but the act of sitting alone in your room and trying to nail on the page the sort of ineffable dimensionality of human inflection just seems so completely backwards to me. 'Cause as soon as you try and pass that set text through an actor's mouth, ugh, it's like knocking a square peg through a round hole. All the immediacy and emotionality gets lost. Like a dubbed voice. Maybe this approach can work if you're making something grounded in heavy plotting, where the characters and the dialogue exist chiefly to move the narrative from A to B. But I want to work in the reverse. I want the progression of the story to form organically out of the characters themselves.
>
> (Lowery 2007)

Shot on 16mm film rather than on digital video, *Frownland* has the overall feel and texture of an underground comic – dark and extremely hellish. Once Bronstein cast the actors, he worked with them over a six-month period to develop their characters through a process that approximates psychodrama (Kipp 2008).

Dore Mann's performance as Keith is absolutely crucial to the success of *Frownland*. There is one scene in the film where Keith becomes extremely agitated at his so-called friend, Sandy, causing Mann's dialogue to become an explosion of incoherent sentence fragments and utterances. While watching the scene, one cannot help but wonder how something like that could possibly have been written. It was not exactly, but Bronstein describes how he was able to achieve the effect:

> Yeah, he's a complete maniac in it. The rehearsals for that particular scene involved making him prepare enough dialogue for like 10 scenes, then loading him up with a disgusting amount of caffeine, spinning him around, making him sprint down the block until he was dizzy and hyperventilating, and then sort of letting him go so that he was totally incapable of relaying this prepared information linearly or coherently. What came out was this berserk jumble of disparate sentiments that rendered him absolutely senseless.
>
> (Lowery 2007)

Bronstein's technique worked because there is something very genuine and unnerving about his portrait of an inveterate loser.

For larger-budget productions, most independent film-makers do not command enough respect within the industry that they can obtain financing without a screenplay. Even after the success of *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), Jim Jarmusch was told by representatives of distribution companies and potential financial backers that the 59-page treatment he had written for his next project, *Down By Law* (1986), was not really a feature-length film (Shapiro 1986). Despite the fact that *Poison* (1991) won the top prize at the Sundance Film Festival, producer Christine Vachon still struggled for a number of years to obtain financing for Todd Haynes's next effort, *Safe* (1995), even though it had a very detailed script and an upcoming star, Julianne Moore, already attached to the project. One independent film-maker who appears to have such flexibility is Gus Van Sant, who tried to get out of making *Elephant* (2003) for Home Box Office (HBO) because he did not have a viable screenplay. Much to Van Sant's chagrin, HBO nevertheless decided to go forward with the project. Jim Jarmusch, whose reputation – much like Gus Van Sant's – has been established over a long and successful career, was able to obtain financing for *The Limits of Control* (2009) from Focus Features with only a 25-page story and a cast of actors. But this turns out to be the exception rather than the rule, even for major indie auteurs.

One of the downsides of the dialogue-driven script, as the prevailing industrial norm, concerns the fact that the conventional screenplay has become an autonomous entity unto itself – something that is used primarily as a standard marketing device to attract producers, financiers and even major actors to a project. Or as Geuens argues, 'the fundamental concern of writers is for the script to catch the interest of agents, readers, and producers during the pitch session' (Geuens 2000: 88). The Catalan director José Luis Guerín, whose structural narrative feature *En la ciudad de Sylvia/In the City of Sylvia* (2007) contains almost no dialogue, calls the system 'perverted'. He told an interviewer:

> Now, in a sense, the screenplay is the thing that controls the capital that a film can attract. It is what the producer uses to find money for his films; it's his primary tool. So you need to ask yourself when you sit down to write a screenplay: do I want to write something that is going to serve as a proper working tool during filming or do I want to write something that will seduce investors, producers and various committees. Because of this traumatic divide that exists even before the actual film is born, a lot of films are chained like slaves to the words on paper.
>
> (van Hoeij 2007)

Guerín goes on to suggest: 'For me, the screenplay is not the destination, but the point of departure. It is like a pretext I use to get the material, human and financial means to start shooting, when I can start inventing the film' (van Hoeij 2007). He sees the actual making of the film as a process of discovery rather than one of translation. As I have tried to suggest, this is also how many American independent film-makers approach their projects when they resort to strategies such as improvisation, psychodrama and visual storytelling.

I am not trying to suggest that many of the alternative strategies I have been describing here would be appropriate for some heavily plotted films, e.g. *The Dark Knight* (2008). Such films no doubt benefit from being tightly scripted. When Gus Van Sant made *Milk* (2008) for Focus Features on a budget of $20 million, he returned to a traditional screenplay by Dustin Lance Black and star actors such as Sean Penn, James Franco, Josh Brolin, Emile Hirsch and Diego Luna. Had Van Sant adopted some of the same tactics he used in his previous four films – no script, improvisation and extensive visual storytelling – he might have wound up with the same type of rebellion among his crew members that William Greaves deliberately incited in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968). Nor, given the size of the budget, might Focus Features have been willing to take the financial risk in the first place. More process-oriented approaches such as were used by Chris Smith in *The Pool* (2008) and Lance Hammer in *Ballast* (2008), or more intuitive ones such as those taken by David Lynch in *Inland Empire* (2006) and Jim Jarmusch in *The Limits of*

Control (2009), are more time-consuming as well as less efficient, which is why they are not necessarily appropriate for big studio films. In addition, the overall architectural structure has to be found in the course of making the film, or in the editing room, because it actually is not fully known in advance, which is one of the obvious benefits of a fully realized screenplay.

Improvisation seems to work better with lower-budget films involving non-professional actors. This appears to be the case with many of the examples cited, such as *The Pool* (2008), *Elephant* (2003), *The Prince of Broadway* (2008), *Quiet City* (2007) and *Frownland* (2008). Many of these films tend to be character-based rather than plot-driven. In striving to differentiate their works from mainstream films, independent film-makers often employ realism or naturalism as a foil to the staged contrivance of Hollywood. Dramatic arcs are often flattened causing the films to be more episodic in nature. Yet there are a number of advantages to employing such strategies. Improvisation often can lead to deeper complexity of characterization. As the film-makers have commented, they are interested in creating something that feels more authentic or genuine. They are more attracted to stories that depict ordinary rather than heroic characters, involving smaller epiphanies rather than heavy drama. Like Cassavetes, they are attempting to collapse the gap between actor and role, thus making us less aware of the artifice of the performance. In a sense, many independent film-makers these days are working at the intersection between documentary and narrative, probably because digital culture has blurred the distinction between mediated experience and our own lives even further.

While it obviously depends on issues of budget and financing, in an age of digital technology when films can be made more quickly and cheaply, the 'proper working tool during filming' could, of course, be a screenplay, but the alternative possibilities are no doubt endless. These could include other creative forms such as sketches, notes, outlines, treatments, storyboards, diagrams, photographs, or even a short story. Kelly Reichardt's career has been reignited through her recent collaboration with writer Jon Raymond on her last two films, *Old Joy* (2006) and *Wendy and Lucy* (2008). Raymond's short stories have provided her with strong characterization. In a recent interview in *Filmmaker*, Reichardt suggests what amounts to a reversal of the normal process of adaptation. In discussing her new project, she told screenwriter Larry Gross: 'Yes, we have a script and Jon is now working on a short story of the script. I'll make a shooting script from the story. I like working from a short story. There's more detail and the form just allows for the characters to have more of an interior' (Gross 2008: 126).

Maya Deren understood early on that industrial procedures have become standardized 'to insure a certain type of product' (Deren 1965: 35). She cautions film-makers:

> For it also follows that if one attempts to emulate commercial production procedures, one will come out with a commercial

> product as surely as it will always be a Ford and not suddenly an Austin which emerges on the belt of the Ford factory.
>
> (Deren 1965: 35)

In industrial practice and the world of screenwriting manuals, the screenplay has become fixed and rule-bound, when in actuality the whole notion of what constitutes a screenplay should be fluid and adaptable to the aesthetic needs of a particular project. Largely because they have always expressed ambivalence towards industrial conventions, independent film-makers owe no allegiance to the written page. Their unique position outside the mainstream industry gives them the freedom to explore all of the available creative tools at their disposal. The sheer fun of a more open-ended approach is that indie film-makers actually have the ability to produce the equivalent of a shiny new Austin when everyone else is expecting just another Ford to roll off the cinematic assembly line.

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