

MAMET TCIA

1

## STORYTELLING

The main questions a director must answer are: "where do I put the camera?" and "what do I tell the actors?"; and a subsequent question, "what's the scene about?" There are two ways to approach this. Most American directors approach it by saying, "let's follow the actors around," as if the film were a record of what the protagonist did.

Now, if the film is a record of what the protagonist does, it had better be interesting. That is to say, this approach puts the director in a position of shooting the film in a novel way, an interesting way, and he or she is constantly wondering, "what's the most interesting place to put the camera to film this love scene? what's the most interesting way I can shoot it plainly? what's the most interesting way that I can allow the actor to

behave in the scene in which, for example, *she proposes to him?*"

That's the way most American films are made, as a supposed record of what real people really did. There's another way to make a movie, which is the way that Eisenstein suggested a movie should be made. This method has nothing to do with following the protagonist around but rather is a *succession of images juxtaposed so that the contrast between these images moves the story forward in the mind of the audience*. This is a fairly succinct rendition of Eisenstein's theory of montage; it is also the first thing I know about film directing, virtually the *only* thing I know about film directing.

You always want to tell the story in cuts. Which is to say, through a juxtaposition of images that are basically uninflected. Mr. Eisenstein tells us that the best image is an uninflected image. A shot of a teacup. A shot of a spoon. A shot of a fork. A shot of a door. Let the cut tell the story. Because otherwise you have not got dramatic action, you have narration. If you slip into narration, you are saying, "you'll never guess why what I just told you is important to the story." It's unimportant that the audience should guess why it's important to the story. It's important simply to *tell* the story. Let the audience be surprised.

The movie, finally, is much closer than the play to simple storytelling. If you listen to the way people tell stories, you will hear that they tell them cinematically. They jump from one thing to the next, and the story is moved along by the juxtaposition of images—which is to say, by the *cut*.

People say, "I'm standing on the corner. It's a foggy day. A bunch of people are running around crazy. Might have been

the full moon: All of a sudden, a car comes up and the guy next to me says . . ."

If you think about it, that's a shot list: (1) a guy standing on the corner; (2) shot of fog; (3) a full moon shining above; (4) a man says, "I think people get wacky this time of year"; (5) a car approaching.

This is good filmmaking, to juxtapose images. Now you're following the story. What, you wonder, is going to happen next?

The smallest unit is the shot; the largest unit is the film; and the unit with which the director most wants to concern himself is the scene.

First the shot: it's the juxtaposition of the shots that moves the film forward. The shots make up the scene. The scene is a formal essay. It is a small film. It is, one might say, a documentary.

Documentaries take basically unrelated footage and juxtapose it in order to give the viewer the idea the filmmaker wants to convey. They take footage of birds snapping a twig. They take footage of a fawn raising his head. The two shots have nothing to do with each other. They were shot days or years, and miles, apart. And the filmmaker juxtaposes the images to give the viewer the idea of *great alertness*. The shots have nothing to do with each other. They are not a record of what the protagonist did. They are not a record of how the deer reacted to the bird. They're basically uninflected images. But they give the viewer the idea of *alertness to danger* when they are juxtaposed. That's good filmmaking.

Now, directors should want to do the same thing. We should

all want to be documentary filmmakers. And we will have this advantage: we can go out and stage and film exactly those uninflected images we require for our story. And then juxtapose them. In the editing room, one is constantly thinking: "I wish I had a shot of . . ." Well, you've got all the time in the world before the film is shot: you can determine what shot you are going to require later, and go out and shoot it.

Almost no one in this country knows how to write a movie script. Almost all movie scripts contain material that cannot be filmed.

"Nick, a young fellow in his thirties with a flair for the unusual." You can't film it. How do you film it? "Jodie, a brash hipster, who's been sitting on the bench for thirty hours." How do you do that? It can't be done. Other than through narration (visual or verbal). Visual: Jodie looks at watch. Dissolve. It is now thirty hours later. Verbal: "Well, as hip as I am, it has surely been a trial to've been sitting on this bench for the last thirty hours." If you find that a point cannot be made without narration, it is virtually certain that the point is unimportant to the story (which is to say, to the audience): the audience requires not *information* but *drama*. Who, then, requires this *information*? This dreadful plodding narration that compromises almost all American filmscripts.

Most movie scripts were written for an audience of studio executives. Studio executives do not know how to read movie scripts. Not one of them. Not one of them knows how to read a movie script. A movie script should be a juxtaposition of uninflected shots that tell the story. To read this script and to "see" the movie will surely require either some cinematic ed-

ucation or some naïveté—neither of which is going to be found in the studio executive.

The work of the director is the work of constructing the shot list from the script. The work on the set is nothing. All you have to do on the set is stay awake, follow your plans, help the actors be simple, and keep your sense of humor. The film is directed in the making of the shot list. The work on the set is simply to record what has been chosen to be recorded. It is the *plan* that makes the movie.

I don't have any experience with film schools. I suspect that they're useless, because I've had experience with drama schools, and have found them to be useless.

Most drama schools teach things that will be learned by anyone in the normal course of events, and refrain from insulting the gentleman or gentlewoman student of liberal arts by offering instructions in a demonstrable skill. I suppose that film schools do the same. What should film schools teach? An understanding of the technique of juxtaposition of uninflected images to create in the mind of the viewer the progression of the story.

The Steadicam (a hand-held camera), like many another technological miracle, has done injury; it has injured American movies, because it makes it so easy to follow the protagonist around, one no longer has to think, "what is the shot?" or "where should I put the camera?" One thinks, instead, "I can shoot the whole thing in the morning." But if you love that morning's work at dailies (screenings of the footage you're shooting on a daily basis), you'll hate it when you're in the editing room. Because what you're seeing in dailies is not for your amusement; it should not be "little plays." It should be uninflected, short

shots that can eventually cut, one to the other, to tell the story.

Here's why the images have to be uninflected. Two guys are walking down the street. One of them says to the other guy . . . Now you, reader, are listening: you are listening because you want to know *what happens next*. The shot list, and the work on the set, should be no more inflected than the cuts in the little story above. Two guys walking down the street . . . one guy starts to talk to the other . . .

*The purpose of technique is to free the unconscious.* If you follow the rules ploddingly, they will allow your unconscious to be free. That's true creativity. If not, you will be fettered by your conscious mind. Because the conscious mind always wants to be liked and wants to be interesting. The conscious mind is going to suggest the obvious, the cliché, because these things offer the security of having succeeded in the past. Only the mind that has been taken off itself and put on a task is allowed true creativity.

The mechanical working of the film is just like the mechanism of a dream; because that's what the film is really going to end up being, isn't it?

The images in a dream are vastly varied and magnificently interesting. And most of them are uninflected. It is their juxtaposition that gives the dream its strength. The terror and beauty of the dream come from the connection of previously unrelated mundanities of life. As discontinuous and as meaningless as that juxtaposition might seem on first glimpse, an enlightened analysis reveals the highest and the most simple order of organization and, so, the deepest meaning. Isn't that true?

The same should be true of a movie. The great movie can be as free of being a record of the progress of the protagonist as is a dream. I would suggest that those who are interested might want to do some reading in psychoanalysis, which is a great storehouse of information about movies. Both studies are basically the same. The dream and the film are the juxtaposition of images in order to answer a question.

I recommend, for example, *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Sigmund Freud; *The Uses of Enchantment* by Bruno Bettelheim; *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* by Carl Jung.

All film is, finally, a "dream sequence." How incredibly impressionistic even the worst, most plodding, most American movie is. *Platoon* really is not any more or less realistic than *Dumbo*. Both just happen to tell the story well, each in its own way. In other words, it's all make-believe. The question is, how good make-believe is it going to be?