



New York Cultural Center

Sculpting a Movie: The Analogy between the Filmmaking Process and Human Experience

Armando Fumagalli—Director of the Masters Program in Screenwriting, Fiction and Movies, Catholic University of Milan, Italy

Richard Pepperman—Professor of the Art of Editing, School of Visual Arts

Salvatore Petrosino—Director of Operations, Film, Video, and Animation Department, School of Visual Arts

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Petrosino: Good evening and welcome to *Sculpting a Movie: the Analogy between the Filmmaking Process and Human Experience*. We are happy to share this evening with Crossroads Cultural Center and want to thank Simonetta Wiener, Angelo Sala and John Touhey for this unique and potentially intriguing discussion. I would also like to thank the Chairman of our department, Reeves Lehmann.

Part of the title for this evening's presentation comes from a book on cinema from the great Russian director Andrey Tarkovsky called *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on Cinema*.

When I first meet my filmmaking students, I tell them that they are about to begin a personal journey of discovery—a journey that not only introduces them to the power of film, but also of the possibility of discovering a part of themselves yet to be unwrapped. You see, the two are intertwined. Not only as the embrace of lovers, but sometimes in the combative nature of two enemies on a battlefield. The search for truth has begun.

If a filmmaker's true desire is to share his or her voice with the world, then they must be open to that world and what influences their voice, what shapes their perspective, what motivates their choices. The great Russian director Andrey Tarkovsky once said, "The artist, his product and his public are an indivisible entity like a single organism linked by the same bloodstream." The artist as creator has a responsibility, an obligation to allow what he or she creates to evolve. The truth of those discoveries is what any good filmmaker aspires to. No matter how much is defined, rehearsed, and planned in its technical and aesthetic approach, the greatest moments, the magical moments, are those that appear out of nowhere to become classic cinema that could never have been anticipated. Why? How does this happen?

The start of any journey, much like the filmmaker who scripts an idea for film, starts with a belief of a truth or the desire to seek it. Tonight we explore the journey of story, from concept to completion.

Please note that after our two guest speakers have completed their lectures, we will have a Q&A immediately afterward.

At this time, I would like to introduce Mr. John Touhey from Crossroads New York Cultural Center.

Touhey: Thank you. Crossroads New York Cultural Center is happy to once again collaborate with the School of visual Arts to organize a cultural event here at this great institution. I would like to begin tonight's event by thanking the SVA, particularly the chairman of the Film Department, Mr. Reeves Lehmann, Prof. Bill Hopkins, who graciously allowed us to take part in his class, and Salvatore Petrosino, Director of Operations, Video and Animation who made this event possible.

Tonight's discussion is dedicated to movie making, and specifically to the crucial creative process that leads from screenwriting to editing. We have with us tonight some outstanding scholars and teachers in this field, who are not only experts in a technical sense but also have a deep grasp on the artistic unity of cinematography, of what makes it a form of art. Every artistic expression is, in one way or another, an attempt at gauging the depths of human experience in order to discover its secret and find a point of unity that reveals its significance. The difference between a random sequence of images and a story emerges when there is the presentment of a meaning, of a larger picture to which all the various details discretely point. Thus, also the beauty of a movie is enhanced when nothing is by chance, but every particular image builds the whole story and reveals the truth beneath the surface. Especially today it is clear, however, that the ability to recognize every detail as a sign of the meaning of the whole story is not "natural" but the fruit of an education. Thus, we are fortunate tonight to have the possibility to learn from three outstanding educators who can teach us how to look at cinema less superficially.

Prof Armando Fumagalli is Director of the Masters program in Screenwriting, Fiction and Movies at the Catholic University of Milan, Italy, where he is also Extraordinary Professor of Semiotics. He has taught screenwriting for many years, including at the Italian National School of Cinema. He is the author of several books on communications, the media, and the relationship between literature, cinema and television. He is also a development consultant for the Lux video TV production company.

Prof. Richard Pepperman is editing professor here at the School of Visual Arts, and has worked in film for more than 42 years. His credits include work as an editor, post -production supervisor and consultant on features, documentaries, industrials, and commercials. His collaborations have received several awards, including the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Science Outstanding Documentary Award, the Andy Award and the Clio Award. Now I will give the floor to Prof. Armando Fumagalli.

Fumagalli: Thank you very much to Reeves Lehmann, Chairman of the Department of Film and Video, and to Simonetta Wiener and the people of Crossroads for their kind invitation to speak to such an attentive and qualified audience. I am honoured to be here, and I am honoured to speak at the same table with men of such experience and professional achievement as Richard Pepperman and Sal Petrosino.

I would like to start by watching a few minutes of a movie: the first scenes of a movie that was not only highly successful, but that was also able to move the hearts of people around the world to understand more about more than one thing. It has helped us to be more sympathetic to mental illness, and also – I think- to be more sympathetic to the mathematicians, people that normally we consider a little bit strange...

Screening of:

A Beautiful Mind, mins.1-8.

In these seven minutes we have just seen how the authors of the movie have made us go deep into the most intimate problems of this wonderful character, John Nash. In a very simple and sweet way, we have learned which are his biggest problems: “I was born with two helpings of brain but only half a helping of heart.” “The truth is that I do not like people much and they don’t much like me.”

This is what in technical terms some script doctors call the *need* of the character, his greatest – sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious- problem. The problem that the character will have to solve during the journey to which the story invites him and invites us.

We have learned also which is his main goal. Some of these script doctors call it the *desire* of the character, that is to say, the object (normally it is an external object, something to attain, something to achieve) of his will, of his efforts during the story. In the case of John Nash, the *need* is to solve his problems of heart, his consideration that with logic, with the mind alone, you can solve any problem in your life; the *desire* is to do something important, to be distinguished, to matter, to become famous, widely known for his professional achievements.

John Nash, through the great acting of such a performer as Russell Crowe, has told us in a few minutes what normally in life we would need months, maybe years of sincere and intimate friendship, to know from another real person. Maybe, at least in some cases, we never reach such an intimate confidence also with real people that we have known for years. I think that this is one of the great values of storytelling, and one of the great values of good cinema.

There are some French critics -Christian Metz, for example- that have developed a theory of cinema that gives great emphasis to the experience of watching the movie as the experience of a *voyeur*. I think that it is not true. The most beautiful experience in cinema is the experience of becoming intimate with characters: we are friends of theirs; we know their heart so deeply and so completely as we do only with our very best friends.

The idea that our relationship with characters in a story is a sort of friendship, that we are invited to share their view of the world, to share their values, is the heritage of Wayne C. Booth, a great American scholar that died two years ago, professor for many years at the University of Chicago, whose works – especially *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) and *The Company We Keep*, (1988)- have been for me always of great inspiration¹.

¹ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edition, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1983; reprint Penguin, Harmondsworth 1987 (1st ed. 1961); Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep. An Ethics of Fiction*, University of California Press, Berkeley -Los Angeles - London 1988.

But if there has to be a friendship, we have to know each other. That is not easy, especially in a story that has only two hours at most, to develop its plots, to present protagonist and antagonist, to introduce a world and some secondary characters, etc. This is one of the reasons why screenwriting is so hard, why to write a movie is such a tough job. Because good movies have events, things that happen, turning points, surprises, but most of all, they have to go deep into the characters: I should say that good movies are *vertical*, have to be vertical.

I have an experience of eight years reading scripts and helping the development of stories in the biggest Italian company for TV fiction, Lux vide (www.luxvide.it), that has produced TV movies, miniseries and series with CBS, TNT, Art and Entertainment, and with eight or nine different European countries. This experience has showed me how necessary, and how important it is to be *vertical*.

When it happens to read a script of an *amateur*, of a non professional writer or of a beginner, one of the first flaws I see is exactly this one: We do not go deep into the character. We do not really know him, we do not understand him, and so to “root for him” is very difficult, or sometimes almost impossible.

This is not easy because it must be done in a natural way, showing characters as if it were a normal day in a normal season, catching them in the most innocent and daily occupation. But the art of the screenwriter is to go to the essential, to give us the *heart* of the character in a few moments, in a few words. In the history of cinema, some scenes have remained a paradigm. The first scene of *The Godfather*, showing the system of values and the system of power of this fascinating -but at the end evil- man; the scene of the French toast in *Kramer vs. Kramer* that shows the inability of Dustin Hoffman’s character to deal with his home and with his son, a situation made worse by his selfishness and his superficial self-confidence... We could go on with examples like these.

Good films go deep. In a few moments, in a few actions, in a few words, we are at the centre of a world, and at the centre of a heart. It can be an interview for a job, like in *Erin Brockovich*, or it can be the fear to engage in a not superficial love affair shown by a simple dinner with a friend in the first scene of *My Best Friend’s Wedding*.

As you maybe know, in Italy from ten years to now, but especially in the last seven years people have been very surprised by the success of some TV miniseries about the life of some saints, like an Italian friar, Padre Pio, or the life of Mother Theresa, or of the Popes, like the two biopics of John XXIII or those about the life of John Paul II. Some of them have reached up to 20 or more (up to 25 in the case of *Pope John XXIII*) points of rating in Italian television. A huge success. I think that one of the reasons for the success of these movies is the fact that they had to be vertical. They succeeded in going deep into the life of the character and in showing what was most intimate for them, their relationship with God.

There is a wide misunderstanding, especially in Europe, about the power of story. We have a large intellectual and academic tradition that has seen stories merely as artefacts, merely as artificial manipulations of incidents and characters. It is the tradition of French structuralism, for which – depending on Jean Paul Sartre’s idea of the absurdity of the world- every story is an attempt to create artificial (and ultimately false) meanings in a world that is completely meaningless. In the American tradition, especially in that tradition that goes back to Aristotle, and that is still alive in at least some of the most important currents of screenwriting theories, story is a way to illuminate life. Good stories are

metaphors of life. For this reason, as Kenneth Burke pointed out many years ago, “Stories are equipment for living.”

Robert McKee, an American script doctor well known also in Italy, who has written ten years ago what I still consider the best book on the basis of screenwriting², gives us some very important insights about the power of story.

It is true that a good story brings us to an unknown world, to a land that we did not know before. But, when we have gone far in this travel, as McKee points out, we find ourselves. Deep within the characters and conflicts of these great stories “we discover our own humanity.” The hunger for stories is maybe in many cases also a hunger for entertainment, but this is not to be considered an escape. We do not want to abandon our life. It is only a different way to find life. In good stories we use our mind in new, fresh, unusual ways, we discover the subtlety of feelings, the nuances of experience. This is why we leave a movie with a sense that we have been far away, but also that we have been deeply into ourselves, and that we are much richer than we were before.

The stories we love define us much more than the clothes we wear, much more than the food we eat. They are part of our biography. They are part of our own story, of the story of our life.

As you know, there has been a great renewal in some currents of moral philosophy because in the last 25 years, beginning with Alasdair MacIntyre, and continuing with Charles Taylor and many other thinkers, also moral philosophers have begun again to understand the fundamental value that stories have in shaping our moral vision, our vision of what is good and bad in life, of what we want to achieve and what we consider not important. The Aristotelian question of “which is the good life” has been answered in many cultures and for many, many centuries by stories. Stories are one of the best ways to make sense out of an existence that could appear too complex, almost (or completely) incomprehensible.

But at this point of the question philosophers are divided: As we said before, some of them think that the world has no meaning, and so stories are completely the fruit of the author’s will, of his absolute power of creating connexions that have no more value than the craft that they show and the system they build.

I think –and many others with me- that in a good story, the act of creation is a new and fresh and unusual way to reach a truth that is beyond the surface - truth that was there and the artist discovers. He is possessed by this truth, also if he is a true creator, because he has given to this truth a new life, a new light, a new perspective.

Let us think not only of great, difficult, elitist art. Let us think also of great achievements in the most popular entertainment products. I am sure that *Finding Nemo* gives a new insight, using its coloured fishes, to the eternal question of the father and son relationship, of the difficulty of a father to accept that his son may grow, and that he needs his freedom; and the difficulty of a son to temperate his eagerness to be completely free and to be master of himself completely and immediately. The men of Pixar have spoken to us in a new and creative way, but they have spoken to us about something that we understand is deeply true.

² Robert McKee, *Story: substance, structure, style, and the principles of screenwriting*, HarperCollins, New York 1997.

On another level, it is the same that was said by Andrej Tarkovskij, when he spoke of the artist as a servant of the truth. He did not agree with the path followed by most contemporary art, the worship of the artist's self and of his own feelings, when they are no longer related to the search for truth.

“Creation is not an affirmation of personality; personality is at the service of an idea superior to it. The artist is always a servant; he tries to thank for the gift that he has received as a grace”³.

Andrej Tarkovskij, one of the greatest filmmakers of all time, used the expression of *sculpting time*; from what I know it has been translated into English –at least as the title of his book- as *Sculpting in Time*, but I think that it would be better *sculpting time*, because Tarkovskij referred to the fact that the filmmaker is sculpting the audience's time, he is preparing an experience for the viewer that is essentially an experience of things developing *in time*, in a time that has its hardness, its *durété*, as they say in French, where the same word means hardness and duration. The filmmaker is thus preparing for the viewer an essentially time-shaped experience. And shots like the 12-minute shot without any cut that is at the end of *Nostalghia* is planned exactly to give the viewer the feeling of how hard it is to accomplish the duty that the protagonist has to serve, in carrying the candle of faith and love to the extreme of the empty pool of St. Catherine.

A movie shapes our experience of time and in this sense it sculpts our time. My academic mentor, Gianfranco Bettetini, one of founders of the European Semiotics of audiovisual used to say that time makes sense. *Tempo del senso*, time of meaning, was the title of one of his most important books, published in 1979, and translated into various languages⁴.

But this sense must be related to our life. As we said before, a good story is a metaphor for life. As again Robert McKee points out, “A storyteller is a life poet, an artist who transforms day-to-day living, inner life and outer life, dream and actuality into a poem whose rhyme scheme is event rather than words –a two-hour metaphor that says: Life is like *this*! Therefore, a story must abstract from life to discover its essence, but not become an abstraction that loses all sense of life-as-lived. A story must be *like* life, but not so verbatim that it has no depth or meaning beyond what's obvious to everyone on the street.”⁵

For this reason a good story is not merely facts. It is a distillation of their essence, of their meanings. We see through experience that we can have very different “stories” all based upon the same facts. Going back once again to the stories of the life of someone, we can have very different biopics of one and same man or woman. And in fact we have. Why it is so? Because the facts are not enough to have a story. A good artist begins with the facts, but then there is his work that goes to the inner meanings, to the essence, to the distillation of truth that he can find below the surface.

The analogy with sculpture can help us again. In sculpture the artist must hit the stone again and again until he discovers the form that was beneath the block of marble. So too the screenwriter. Those of you who have experience with the art of writing stories for cinema can understand very well what I am saying. When the drafts go one after another, and come to five, ten, fifteen, twenty... up to one hundred, as I have read in an interview with the winner of the Academy Award for Best Screenplay of this year, one can understand why we say that writing a good script is at least as hard and difficult and tiring and exciting as sculpting a work of art in marble.

³ Andrej Tarkovskij, *Sculpting in Time*, University of Texas Press, Austin (I translate from the Italian edition of the original *Sapetschatljonnoje Wremja*, 1986.

⁴ Gianfranco Bettetini, *Tempo del senso*, Bompiani, Milano 1979.

⁵ Robert McKee, *Story*, p.25.

But this is only the first act of the movie. Because, as some people say (and I think they are right) a movie is written three times: first the script, second the direction, third the editing.

In his beautiful book on editing, Richard Pepperman quotes Lajos Egri, one of the first writers on playwriting or scriptwriting of the 20th Century: “Art is not the mirror of life, but the essence of life.” He was right.

But I would like to hear Richard Pepperman now, and I thank you for your kind attention.

Petrosino: I would like to introduce a friend I have known for almost thirty years. Richard Pepperman is an editor and author who has worked in cinema for nearly forty years. He is the author of three books on editing and cinema: *The Eye is Quicker*, *Setting Up Your Scenes* and *Film School*. His collaborations have received several awards including the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Science Outstanding Documentary Award, the ANDY Award and the CLIO.

He is one of our esteemed faculty members and mentor to many who have had the pleasure to learn from him. Richard Pepperman...

Pepperman: Thank you. Thank you. I'd like to thank the Crossroads Cultural Center for having me participate and thank you to Reeves Lehmann.

I realized that the very title of this evening's get-together is what proves that we are human beings; that is, we have the capacity to be self-observing, reflective, and because of it, and in our efforts to achieve that we often look for metaphors. And I too was struck by the title “Sculpting a Movie” for various reasons. One, when I did come across Andrey Tarkovsky's book, I assumed that he was talking about editing. It seemed to be a terrific title for a book exclusively about editing, but it is a memoir of his life in film across all the disciplines of film. And so, to begin with, I'd like to stick with this idea of time and how film miraculously handles how we perceive time.

Armando mentioned duration and film deals much more accurately with the inaccuracy of duration than it does with measured time. How long does this evening seem to last? How long was this past summer? It seemed to fly by, but it was as long as the summer before it. And film is really an effort in its structures in time to understand that. Of course there is also the dramatic needs that occur. And so film is not so much a matter of piecing together ongoing measured time, but rather coming up with enormous deletions, and at the same time extending moments across that time.

So, to begin with, and to touch on this at my outset, we're going to see two scenes. One will take us into an interesting sequence. One is Sergey Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, the battle on ice scene, followed 37 years later by a similar approach by Sidney Lumet with *Dog Day Afternoon*.

Screening of *Alexander Nevsky* and *Dog Day Afternoon*

I take no credit for any of that. Edward Dmytryk in his book on film editing offers so great advice to editors about humility. What he expresses is something I do believe and that is that if an editor has done a good job, it is not so much that he or she has saved the film. We often hear that. It isn't true. It is that the editor has done what she was supposed to do. If there is a problem to be resolved, a structure to be altered, some other choices to be made that seem suitable in the script, suitable in the dailies, then suddenly make themselves known, your finding a solution is what you are being paid to do. You didn't

re-cast, re-shoot, rewrite, re-direct, you were given material and your task was to that material. Your obligation was to that material.

What we have seen in these two films, is an effort to produce anticipation and tension by extending the time it takes in a very similar approach. In *Alexander Nevsky*, Eisenstein has taken an amazing amount of time. In fact, we were watching the Teutonic knights come across the ice for an amazingly long period of time. We recognize, here they come!—and yet minutes into the scene, two of the Russian officers say, “The Germans!” And Prince Nevsky acknowledges that something is on the horizon when it is, of course, well passed. Eisenstein worked with contrasts; that is, in this case, the Russian peasant army that Nevsky has put together is severely motionless, and the knights are galloping across the ice.

And then we saw in *Dog Day Afternoon* this approach to duration. There is great tension. Will the robbers and the hostages get safely into the bus? And the crowd, the police, the FBI are still, and the hostages and robbers make their way to the bus. In fact, when you go home you can get the DVD, or you might even own it, what you’ll find if you look is that the people get into the bus more than two times. All that mattered was that the door slams are somewhat accurate to the number of doors in the bus.

When people are working in a collaboration in film, they are, of course, trying to tell a story and tell a story well. I think what makes us human beings is that we are story tellers. We look for metaphor; we look to try to understand who we are, why we are. Ernest Becker, who was a multi-disciplined thinker, often wrote about the anxiety produced by the fact that human beings know that they are mortal. I’ve taken that into account personally by changing the way I view my birthdays each year. I don’t think of myself as so many years old, but rather think much more broadly in duration. I think that I have only been around the sun 65 times. Not a hell of a lot of times given the age of the solar system. Much better. I’m approaching my 66th year around the sun. But Becker talked about the anxiety, and out of that anxiety of mortality comes a search for meaning. And out of that search, of course, comes stories.

Another multi-disciplined thinker who is the Charles Darwin Professor of Anthropology at Rutgers, someone named Lionel Tiger, has written over the years about the fact that human beings have survived because we are an optimistic creature. We expect that life can be accomplished through all of the anxieties, the terror, and at times perhaps even meaninglessness. And this, of course, we are all familiar with, this notion because when we hear fairy tales, they always end with people living happily ever after. And so, as adults still telling stories, we try to come up with a different approach. And to show this, I’m going to skip some of the scenes that I had prepared, and get to an extraordinary work by Jan Kadar. It was *The Shop on Main Street*. So if we could skip to that in one moment. Here is a film that deals with the Holocaust. In order for it really to make an impact, Kadar offers a single, elderly Jewish woman who owns a button shop that is not doing very well, but the Jewish community helps this widow by furnishing her income. The village in Czechoslovakia is taken over politically by a factious party. The brother-in-law of our protagonist gives Tono the right to own the button shop. And as the film draws to its conclusion, Mrs. Loutman, who is somewhat senile, and confined in large part to the button shop, doesn’t realize that what is going on outside in the town square is a rounding up of all the Jews in the village, and they are being transported, of course, to concentration camps. And Tono tries to protect her. Then he hears an announcement over the public address system in the square which says that anyone who hides a Jew will be punished. He also sees his brother-in-law heading to the shop and in panic he tries to hide Mrs. Loutman and accidentally causes her death. So we’re into some very awful moments. And we’ve chosen the scene following that terrible accident because one of the most remarkable

qualities of storytellers is this effort as Lionel Tiger presents it, and even Ernest Becker, that there needs to be some hopefulness within the total structure for us to understand who we are and be able to go on. And so one might think there's no possible way that Tono and Mrs. Loutman both, concluding the story, can possibly offer us any hope at all. In fact, we probably think it's impossible. So, this is following Mrs. Loutman's accidental death. Tono has tried to tell her that everything is all clear now. She can come out of the closet he's tried to hide her in, and he has found her dead. And what the filmmakers do at this moment I think you'll find this quite remarkable; that it can work. What the filmmakers do at this moment is let us see the conscience of Tono. He will look right at us. He will try hiding from us. Okay, let's look at this.

Screening of *The Shop on Main Street*

Quite amazing. When I was preparing some selections and some thoughts about what it is that makes us human, and how storytelling contributes to our humanity, I came across a poem by Anne Pierson Wiese. I won't recite the whole poem. It's written in the first person, and I thought it best sums up in a very few words exactly what storytelling is all about, and what being a human being is all about, and why we want to understand ourselves, and how we get to understand ourselves through others. The poet is on a subway train early in the morning and sees a man who is no doubt homeless, waking up from a night sleeping on the subway, carefully folding his blanket, and then grooming himself somewhat, and putting on a little bit nicer jacket than he has slept in. And the poem is called "Tell Me," and the last stanza says:

Whoever you are-tell me what unforgiving series
of moments has added up to this one: a man
making himself presentable to the world in front
of the world, as if life has revealed to him the secret
that all our secrets from one another are imaginary.

Thank you.