CHAPTER 1

THE JOB OF THE DIRECTOR

You are in love with the movies and want to try your hand at directing. This book, written by someone who has spent many years helping people try their wings, will help you. Affordable technology for learning by experiment is available and conditions for learning have never been better. Now the only way to find out if and where you belong in filmmaking is to roll up your sleeves and do it. This book is written with the firm belief that you learn best by doing, either in a film school with fellow students or out of it working with a few friends.

Becoming a good screen director demands a strong, clear identity in relation to the world around you and a clear grasp of what drama is. Developing these will figure very largely in this book. You will need other skills, too, but let's first examine the job and what the working environment is currently like for filmmakers. Whenever I speak of filmmakers and making film, I include film and video production together because each is just a delivery medium drawing on a common screen language.

THE CINEMA NOW

Cinema, at the start of the 21st century, is indisputably the great art form of our time, the preferred forum for mass entertainment, and a major conduit for ideas and expression. Occupying a status formerly monopolized by the novel, the screen is now where dreams of every shape, hue, and meaning leap into the public mind—crossing language and cultural barriers to excite hearts and minds as art must, and as no medium has ever done before.

The cinema has earned this place because it is a collective, not an individualist's, medium. Cinema production is a place of encounter, collaboration, and compromise among writers, dramatists, actors, image and illusion makers, choreographers, art directors, scene builders, sound designers, make-up artists and costumers, musicians, editors, artists, and technicians of every kind. They willingly yield the greater part of their lives to serve the screen story in its many incarnations. To complete this Noah's Ark, there are distributors,

exhibitors, business people, financiers, and speculators. They make filmmaking possible because they make sure it finds its audience, nationally and internationally.

The medium gets its strength from the interplay at the center of its process. Ingmar Bergman likens film production to the great undertaking in the Middle Ages when large teams of craftsmen gathered to build the European cathedrals. These were specialists who didn't even leave us their names. The cinema, says Bergman, is a collective endeavor with shared creativity out of which something emerges that is greater than the sum of its parts. A similar process generated most of the early theater and dramatic poetry whose inheritance, if you think of the Arthurian legends and the tradition of romantic love, we are still using. So the artist as an embattled individualist is a very recent invention and is not the only or best source for enduring artwork.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

There has never been a better time to study filmmaking. The film industry thoroughly accepts that filmmakers of new talent will emerge from film schools and that these students are more broadly educated, versatile, and capable of radically developing the cinema than any preceding generation. Film school alumni have created such a stellar track record that the question is no longer *whether* the aspiring filmmaker should go to film school but only which one would be suitable.

Film schools, so recently founded in comparison with those for other arts, are usually good at teaching history and techniques. The better institutions try to liberate their students to recognize their own experience and to express their sharpest perceptions of the world around them. These schools are likely to be those that include practicing professionals among their teachers, and place their best students as interns in professional production.

That said, you can also teach yourself and develop a style and a film unit without any film school backing. It's difficult, but so is anything worthwhile. Novices now have access to low-cost video equipment and stand in relation to filmmaking as would-be musicians stood in relation to sound in the 1960s. From such unprecedented access flowed a revolution in popular music that, in its turn, accelerated profound social changes.

FILMMAKING TOOLS

The changing tools of filmmaking make this book's approach ever more practical. Digital camcorders, digital audiotape (DAT) sound recorders and computerized editing have slashed the cost of hands-on experience and massively accelerated the student's learning curve. Films shot and postproduced in the digital domain are presently transferred at great expense to 35 mm film for projection in cinemas, but electronic projectors are appearing that improve on many aspects of 35 mm. There is no weave in the image, colors do not deteriorate, the print does not become scratched, and it cannot break. There are no changeovers

between reels, and focus does not rely on the judgment of a projectionist. Sound is phenomenal, and the entire show can be delivered to the home or cinema via satellite, saving a fortune in shipping. Multiple languages are easier to support, and cheating by exhibitors and piracy of bootleg copies will be more difficult. The present barrier is the high cost of equipping new theaters, but this is a repeat of the cost of re-equipping cinemas for sound in the 1920s. Digital systems will some day soon rival the 65 mm Imax experience, which draws crowds with the sheer exhilaration of the cinematic experience, just as they first came at the start of the twentieth century.

As film production has moved beyond the control of the studio system, so film financing and distribution show strong signs of becoming decentralized and more like book publishing. With more diverse distribution available via videotape, DVD, and movies on demand through the Internet or satellite, more productions will be "narrowcast" to more specialized audiences, just as book production has been for centuries.

INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING

THE GOOD NEWS

The decade of the 1990s saw a steep rise in the number of "indie" or independently financed and produced productions, and their Mecca was the Sundance Film Festival. These movies now outpace studio productions in number and sometimes quality, originality, and prizes, too. Digital production is sometimes replacing film because of its lower costs and greater flexibility. Notable cinema productions shot digitally include: Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* (1998), Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998), Mike Figgis' *Time Code* (2000) and *Hotel* (2001), Spike Lee's *The Original Kings of Comedy* (2000), Rick Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001), Steven Soderbergh's *Full Frontal* (2002), and George Lucas' *Star Wars II* (2002). Lucas used Sony CineAlta high-definition video cameras and pronounced them not only trouble-free but so liberating that he could not imagine returning to shooting on film (Figure 1–1). You can find more news about digital filmmaking at *www.nextwavefilms.com*.

THE BAD NEWS

These encouraging signs are offset by the mournful fact that most independent features are unwatchable and never find a distributor. Better access to the screen has produced a *karaoke* situation in which anyone can stand up and sing—though the audience may not stay to listen. In Tommy Nguyen's *American Cinematographer* article "The Future of Filmmaking" (September 19, 2000), cinematographer after cinematographer affirms a similar belief: Cinema tools will change, but the art of the moving image is already well established and controlling it can only improve. One after another they stress how necessary good stories are and that they are in terribly short supply.

And so you and I squarely face the problem that follows any liberation: How to use the new freedom effectively. How to prepare, how to exercise your

FIGURE 1–1

The Sony CineAlta HD CAM ® HDW-F900 high-definition video camera.

capacities, how to train for the marathon. How not to run over the cliff with the herd. That's what this book is about. Let's look at some sobering facts:

- Most film school recruits are unduly influenced by the occasional *wunderkind* who leaps, fully armed, from school to public prominence, and film schools capitalize on this.
- Nothing is more hazardous to your future than a meteoric start.
- Everyone entering film school wants to direct. Baptismal ordeals show most that they belong in one of the other craft skills.
- The insights and skills required to be a minimally competent director are staggering.
- Becoming good enough to direct films for a living is a long, uncertain, and uphill process.
- Most film school alumni who eventually direct take a decade or two working their way up from editing, camerawork, or writing.
- It takes this long because directing requires a knowledge of life that most 20-somethings do not have until they are 40-something or more.
- Virtually nobody gets financial backing to direct without first having proved themselves in one of the allied crafts.
- Reaching professional competency as a director takes about the same amount of work and dedication as becoming a concert musician. Many are called, few are chosen.

Like any long journey, you've got to really like the trek. Before you commit time and funds to getting an education in filmmaking, read this book very carefully, beginning immediately with Part 8: Career Track. Absorbing what it says will

prepare you to use your whole period of education in preparation for work. Following what everyone else says or does by not planning ahead is not a wise move because it guarantees you won't be distinguishable. Most people follow along, delay making important preparations and choices, and wake up to the realities in the last year of their studies, or later still.

WHO CAN DIRECT

Directors come in all human types—tall, short, fair, dark, introvert, extrovert, loquacious, taciturn, male, female, gay, straight. Today anyone with something to say and access to modest production equipment can direct a movie of some kind—that is no longer the barrier. To be successful means having inventiveness and tenacity, an ability to get the best out of a team, a strong sense of vision, and an abiding love for the process of making films. In a multi-disciplinary medium requiring strong social skills, as well as intellect and character, it is seldom possible to predict who will emerge as truly capable. More men than women presume to have these qualities, but happily this is changing. Film school entry tests are far from definitive, as many a working director will attest. If you are turned down and deeply want to direct, find another way. Do not give up.

The best way to prove your capacity is to just do it. Making cinema, like swimming or dancing, is not something you can learn from theory but something you have to do over and over again—until you get it right.

This book assumes you are without prior knowledge of the component crafts, so you will need to acquire some screencraft basics. It contains many projects to develop your directing skills, but no instructions for operating equipment. For this, many good manuals exist (see the Bibliography). Don't listen to those who say you must learn the tools before you can have anything to say. People, not tools, make films. In the beginning, don't agonize over form, techniques, or polish; if you can find something to say, you will figure out better and better ways to say it.

You will have to reverse the abstract, literary thinking of a lifetime, and instead practice getting strongly visualized stories together. This material—usually, though not invariably, a screenplay—will need to be thoroughly felt, comprehended, and believed in. Then you will need a competent crew, a well-chosen cast, and the skills and strength of character to get the best out of everybody. You will need to understand actors' frames of reference and the various states of consciousness they pass through. For directing means bringing together people of very different skills and mentality. It will be a struggle to keep everyone going while you hold onto your initial vision.

A good director knows how to keep demanding more from the cast and crew while making each person feel special and valuable to the whole. After shooting, you need the skill, persistence, and rigor in the cutting room to work and rework the piece with your editor until the notes have become the concerto. Never *ever* let anyone tell you that you do or don't have talent. Patience and hard work are infinitely more important than talent, which is always ephemeral.

For all this you need the self-knowledge, humility, and toughness that commands respect in any leader. You will have to know your troops, lead by example,

and understand how to fulfill the emotional, psychological, and intellectual needs of the common person—that is, your audience. Happily, the members of that audience are a lot like you.

Expecting to find all these qualities in one human being is a tall order. The beginner confronting all those skills often feels like an inept juggler. Your first efforts (of which you were so proud) soon embarrass you with their flat writing, amateurish acting, and turgid dramatic construction. If you are doing this outside a film community, reliable guidance may be hard or even impossible to find.

This book, thoroughly and exhaustively used, can be your best friend because it has advice, examples, and explanations to cover most predicaments. It cannot, however, provide the perseverance and faith in yourself that characterize those who prosper in the arts and crafts. This you must supply.

PARTICULARLY FOR THE EXCLUDED

Like many desirable professions, filmmaking has long been a white male preserve, but women and minorities are infiltrating and bringing their blessedly different ways of seeing. Is this you? My hope is that your sensibility and real-life experience will dislodge the sick preoccupation with power and violence that presently dominates mass culture. Apologists claim that entertainment does not lead society but reflects it. Were this true, advertising would fail. Of course appetites can be created by endlessly repeating the same ideas and iconic images. But just as pornography temporarily fascinates societies newly emerged from repression, so the present obsession with violence could have something to do with widespread feelings of powerlessness. After the real violence of September 11, 2001, in New York, guns disappeared from American cinema advertising and reappeared in Afghanistan. Coincidence?

In every era it will take new voices and new visions to show us who we really are. Are you ready?

WITH LOW BUDGETS IN MIND

Most who use this book will be working with modest equipment and slender budgets. Take this as a badge of honor, for you can still make excellent films without elaborate settings or expensive props, costumes, equipment, or special effects. The ability to make much out of little is a vital one and shows up throughout cinema history. For this reason, most film examples in this book come from classic or modern low-budget cinema.

SHORT FILMS OR LONGER?

Anyone serving on a festival jury discovers that most films bare their shortcomings in two or three shots. Within as many minutes the whole panoply of strengths and weaknesses is complete. The jury wonders (sometimes aloud) why people don't stop at 5 minutes instead of taking a mind-numbing 50. The message is clear: Short films require their makers to conquer the full range of production, authorship, and stylistic problems poetically and in a small compass. The economy lies in shooting costs and editing time, not in brainwork, for you must

still establish characters, time, place, and dramatic situation and set tight limits on the subject. These are tough skills to learn. They take much thought and practice but pay off handsomely as you approach longer forms. Poets always do well in longer forms, whether they are plays, novels, or films.

Getting your work seen is the precursor to getting your abilities valued, and two good short films have far more chance of a festival showing than one long one. Film schools are not the best place to learn brevity because students and faculty alike are drawn to the medium by features, and film schools mostly use features as examples. Students not attuned to the merits of brevity invariably make what I think of as zeppelins—enormously long films without weight, beauty, or agility. There is a special section, called Short Forms, in Chapter 16 with a list of suggested films. Short films, whether you like it or not, will be your calling card, so you may want to look for recent examples on the Internet.

FILM OR VIDEO?

Passions still run high over what medium to use, so it is worth running over the pros and cons—especially as they affect the way you learn. Shooting a feature film on high-definition (HD) video saves 20–35% of the time and some of the money needed to use camera stock. For features, 35 mm film is still the preferred camera medium, even though postproduction now takes place almost wholly in the digital domain. Film currently records a more detailed image and has a nicer look, but this superiority only shows up in a well-equipped, well-run film theater, and most are neither. Because so much viewing is in the home and on video, the superiority of film is a moot point unless all the other attributes such as writing, acting, and staging are of an equally high order. Directing methods are identical for film and video, so only the scale of operations and path to completion are likely to differ.

Historically, anything shot on film has been widely regarded as of higher *class* than video, so film has been the medium of choice for the festival circuit (where most short films begin and end their careers). But as videomakers learn to shoot and edit to cinema standards of economy, this prejudice is waning. Audience consumption patterns will inevitably influence future production methods. Pornography, for instance, is a huge market that is cheaply produced using small digital cameras. Customers don't expect spectacle because their interests are, um, strictly local. For the large, bright, detailed image that characterizes the cinema, film has been a necessity, but the latest video projection is comparable to, or even exceeds, 35 mm quality. Should movies on demand really arrive—downloadable from satellite, cable, or the Internet—the cinema experience will become ever more widely and cheaply available, and primarily in the home. Home theaters will draw audiences away from the cinema unless the theaters can indeed offer the kind of spectacular experience that Imax now does. Though cinemas may have to specialize in spectacle, more and more films will be needed to feed the rest of the entertainment monster, and they will have to be made on ever lower budgets. Those who do well in the low-budget area will graduate to larger budget productions.

Let's look at the ground level, where you come in. Digital video allows the filmmaker-in-training to shoot ample coverage and edit to broadcast standards

without much regard for expense. The major costs are acquiring the story and paying the cast and crew. This is revolutionary because it democratizes film production. Though 35 mm film is still special and wonderful, the digitizing, editing, and *matchback* process (in which digital numbers become the sole guide to cutting the negative) can be complex and prone to irreversible mistakes. Until recently, most video editing was offline, that is, editing was done initially at a low resolution to cram a lot of screen time on a restricted computer hard disk. You worked to produce an artistically viable fine cut but of degraded technical quality. Once this was achieved, an *Edit Decision List* (EDL) was used to redigitize selected sections of the camera's original tape at high resolution to produce a fine-quality final print.

With computer storage capacities going up and prices coming down, it's now quite possible to store a whole production digitally in the highest quality form and edit a broadcast-quality version in one process. This means that with some experience and a lot of drive, you can use small-format digital video to produce sophisticated work. This you can use to argue persuasively for support in a more expensive format like HD video or film. What matters most is getting as much filmmaking experience as possible.

WHY USING HOLLYWOOD AS A MODEL CAN'T WORK FOR BEGINNERS

To appreciate how you learn best, let's compare the professional feature team's process with that of a lean, independent production. The differences show up in schedules and budgets. Priorities in feature films are mostly set by economic factors, not artistic ones: Scriptwriting is relatively inexpensive and can take time, while actors, equipment, and crew are very costly. Actors are cast for their ability to produce something usable, immediate, and repeatable. Often the director must shoot a safe, all-purpose camera coverage that can be "sorted out in the cutting room" afterward.

Locked into such a production system, the director has little option but to fight narrowly for what he (only rarely she) thinks is achievable. It is hardly surprising that Hollywood-style films, too profitable to change from within, are often as packaged and formulaic as supermarket novels, and reflect this onscreen. A box office success can return millions to its backers in a few weeks, so a producer will sooner back the standard process than the new or the personal.

Consider how professionals acquire and maintain their craft skills. During a feature shoot, about 100 specialists carry forward their particular part of the communal task, each having begun as an apprentice in a lowly position and having worked half a lifetime to earn senior levels of responsibility. Many come from film families and absorb the mindset that goes with the job with their orange juice. Apprenticeship is a vital factor in the continuity of skills, but it's also a conditioning force that deeply discourages self-evaluation and change. None of this is evident to the newcomer, or to the old-timer who grew up in the industry. Both think a film school should naturally emulate the professional system. But it cannot and should not.

Production aspect	90-minute, low-budget professional feature	Typical 30-minute student film
Script development period	6 months- several years, innumerable drafts	2–6 months, probably two drafts only
Preproduction period	4–12 weeks	3–5 weeks
Rehearsal period	Little or none	0–7 days
Shooting period	6–12 weeks	7–15 days
Postproduction period	4–6 months	3–14 months
Format	35 mm	16 mm or DVCAM
Budget	$8 million	$35,000

FIGURE 1–2

Typical professional and student productions compared.

Take a look at the beginner's production schedule in Figure 1–2. The big giveaway is the postproduction period. Enormous time and effort is spent in the cutting room trying to recover from problems embedded in the script (beyond the writer's or director's experience), inadequate acting (poor casting and/or insufficient rehearsal), and inconsistent shooting (hasty, too much coverage early, or too little later). With this example I mean only to warn, not to discourage or disparage. The poor director had to control a slew of unfamiliar variables and could not have helped but underestimate the process.

VITAL DIFFERENCES FOR THE LOW-BUDGET FILMMAKER

Because the low-budget (or no-budget) production seldom has a wide choice of crew or actors, the director must use methods that shape non-professionals into a well-knit, accomplished team. Non-professional actors need extended rehearsals in which to develop empathy with their characters and the confidence and trust in the director that alone give their performances conviction and authority.

Perhaps you have seen these masterpieces in international cinema that use non-professional actors:

Italy
- Luchino Visconti: *La Terra Trema* (1948)
- Vittioria De Sica: *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), *Umberto D* (1952)
- Francesco Rosi: *Salvatore Giuliano* (1961)

France
- Robert Bresson: *Pickpocket* (1959); *Balthazar* (1966), *Mouchette* (1967)

Iran
- Abbas Kiarostami: *Where is the Friend's House?* (1987); *Taste of Cherry* (1997)
- Bahram Beizai: *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1991)
- Mohsen Makhmalbaf: *Gabbeh* (1996)
- Jafar Panahi: *The White Balloon* (1995)
- Bahman Ghobadi: *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000)

Extraordinary performances in these films are from non-professional actors, some of whom are Iranian or Kurdish villagers, nomadic tribespeople, or Italian peasants. Under such circumstances the director cannot afford to be immovable about the script: Cast limitations require that it be responsive to the actor rather than vice versa. Strictly speaking, a script is only a blueprint and by its literary nature impossible to fulfill except through intelligent (which means flexible) translation. You can minimize these shortcomings by choosing a subject and treatment that require no elaborate events or environments. You can schedule more time for rehearsal (if you know how to use it), and so on. But setting the whole low-budget situation alongside big-industry norms, it is overwhelmingly apparent that low-budget filmmakers absolutely must work differently, set different priorities, and use special strategies if they are to convert initial handicaps into advantages.

ALTERNATIVE ROUTES IN THIS BOOK

To aim at professional-level results, you must use trial and error as a developmental process and find strength from experiment. As we shall see, a convincing human presence on the screen is only achieved (by amateur and professional actor alike) when *the director can see the actors' problems and remove the blocks causing them.* Left undisturbed, these obstacles always sabotage the entire film, no matter how glossy the rest of the production process might be.

The development processes outlined in this book create bonds among members of the ensemble and give the director and writer (if they are indeed two people rather than one) a positive immersion in the singularities of each cast member. The director must, in turn, be ready to adapt and transform the script to capitalize on cast members' individual potentials. What the Hollywood filmmaking army does with its marines and machines can be matched if the low-budget filmmaker enters the fray as a guerrilla combatant using cautious, oblique, and experimental tactics. Once this principle of organic, mutual accommodation is accepted, the rest of the process follows logically and naturally.

Actually, there is nothing in this book that is radical or untried. A little reading will show how similar strategies have served major names like Allen, Altman, Bergman, Bresson, Cassavetes, Fassbinder, Fellini, Herzog, Leigh, Loach, Resnais, Soderbergh, and Tanner, as well as the other directors mentioned previously who chose to use non-professional casts.

ABOUT DRAMATIC PRESENTATION AND DIRECTING

The director's main task in relation to actors is often misunderstood. It is not to spur actors into doing the extraordinary but rather to give feedback and remove myriad psychological and other obstacles. These block both the ordinary and the extraordinary from happening. Effective screen acting lies not in a range of arcane techniques but in their absence. When an actor is relaxed, honest to his or her emotions, and free of misconceptions, he or she is no longer acting but *being*, a far more powerful condition. A misguided self-image, for instance, can put actors' attentions in the wrong place and make them behave unnaturally.

The normal psychological defenses that everyone develops are therefore a major barrier to relaxed acting, and even more so are popular ideas about acting itself.

Novice actors in particular—and even trained actors who should know better—often feel they must produce something heightened to merit attention. Instead of just *being,* players discharge their responsibility onscreen by "signifying," which means projecting thought and emotion. This is thought-laden and artificial and precludes any of the true experiencing that makes a stage or screen performance "live." Self-critical and divided even as he or she acts, another part of the actor anxiously watches, criticizes, and plans the next phase of the performance. The camera pitilessly reveals the truth about this divided and unnatural state of affairs. Michael Caine presents some compellingly illustrated arguments on this and other aspects of his craft in *Acting in Film: an Actor's Take on Movie-Making* (BBC TV tape, New York: Applause Theatre Publishers, 1990).

When actors "signify," it is not necessarily because of inexperience or misguided effort. The impulse to stylize dramatic material has a long and respectable history in live theater where performance is often non-naturalistic. Until modern staging and lighting arrived in the 19th century, stage performance made little attempt to be naturalistic. Greek drama was played in masks that concealed the actors' psychological identity and projected archetypal human qualities like nobility, wisdom, or greed. Japanese *Kabuki* theater used elaborate, ritualized costumes and an operatic verbal delivery that, as in Western opera, invites the audience to attach to the groundswell of human passions beneath the surface. Likewise, medieval Christian mystery plays, mime, mummers, and the Italian *commedia del arte* all employed traditional characters, gestures, episodes, and situations. All of this was deliberately non-realistic and not concerned with the actors' psychological identities.

Why should the person of the actor be concealed, yet the interpretation of a stock character be so prized by audiences? Prior to the Renaissance the very idea of individual worth was a vanity amounting to blasphemy against God's purpose. The transience of life and the religious tenets that explained this bleak state of affairs made people see themselves as ephemera in a God-determined whole. A life was just a brief thread in God's great tapestry, with each individual destined to carry out a role allotted by accident of birth but conditioned by such human constants as ambition, compassion, love, and jealousy. Realistic presentation, at least to a small audience, was never impossible, but it's clear that verisimilitude and psychological accuracy were irrelevant to the predicament audiences knew as their own.

With the focus shifting toward the potential of the individual that began during the Renaissance, and particularly after the impact of Darwin in the 19th century, audiences were increasingly interested in investigating the significance of the individual life and willing to see it as a struggle for survival, rather than as a temporary stay during which to earn merit for an afterlife. Writers increasingly reflected ideas about the individual's inner life and about his (rarely her) individually wrought destiny. Acting styles were, however, slower to change and remained declamatory and stylized as late as the early phase of the movies.

In early 20th-century Russia, just after the revolution, came a time of bold rethinking in the arts, allied with advances in psychology. Stanislavsky developed the modern theory of the actor's consciousness that underlies any distinctive performance. The advent of the sound cinema brought audiences eyeball to eyeball with the grisly remains of feigned naturalism, and both actors and dramatists were forced to give new attention to what could pass as a credible human interchange.

Modern audiences now expect screen characters to be as believable as people captured unaware in a documentary. So unless a film strives for a subjectively perceived environment (as in German Expressionist cinema of the 1920s and 1930s or any of the non-realist modern genres such as horror or slapstick comedy), audiences expect to encounter real people behaving realistically in real settings. This, so easy to understand, is exceptionally hard to produce.

Rightly or wrongly, the preponderance of cinema aims at the appearance of verisimilitude, so the student director's priority should be to handle realism. Done well, it looks effortless, and students make the fatal mistake of thinking this must come from using a professional camera. But a camera only magnifies: A good performance is made larger, and a bad one looks larger, too.

Filmmaking compels a circuitous artifice to arrive at the effortless and natural. With shooting fragmented by lighting changes, talent availability, and budget, cinema is not even a good training ground for actors. The best usually come from strong theater backgrounds, where the continuity of performance and the closed loop of communication with an audience have made them trust their own instincts. The film actor, on the other hand, must perform in fits and starts. No audience feedback is possible during filming because only the director, crew, and other actors are present. The actor must, in any case, dismiss the director and crew from consciousness while the camera is rolling.

Acting for the camera should be like living life without knowing you are watched. The camera sees everything, spying at close range upon characters in their most private and intense moments. Actors can afford no lapse in experiencing their characters' inmost thoughts and feelings. Such a lapse, called *losing focus*, is immediately visible. Focused actors can shut out the technical process. During his apprentice days, Aidan Quinn did an improvised scene of considerable power with a woman actor in a directing class of mine. It was taped documentary style (more about this later). During a long and very intense scene, the camera snaked around the actors and came within two or three feet of them. After the student director called "cut," the actors took deep breaths as they returned to the present, and then said, "We should have taped that one." They had been utterly unaware of the camera's presence.

As in documentary, the camera-as-witness and a determined director will compel actors to make a choice between focusing on tasks at hand or becoming disengaged and self-conscious. The actor either stands outside the situation and observes from a position of safety what is being presented (which is disastrous) or he or she jumps in and undergoes a series of actual and sometimes scary emotions that blot out everything extraneous to the character. Movie actors can seldom wear a mask, either actual or psychological. Instead they must go naked and merge with the part—whether that character is good or bad, attractive or ugly, intelligent or stupid. This does not mean that actors' intelligences are

switched off. Far from it: Actors in focus are both inside their characters and still somewhat aware as a craftsperson from the outside.

Here we face a problem that is particularly acute in love scenes: how to behave spontaneously and have real emotions before camera and crew in take after take. This throws formidable demands upon the actor's concentration, ego, and self-assurance, for it is unacceptable to merely signify villainy, impersonate weakness, or mime erotic attraction. The actor has to dig deeply into his or her own emotional range in order to uncover whatever is demanded. Many are afraid, and all have areas of fear. Searching within for an "unpopular" or revealing emotion, the actor may have to confront embarrassing or even hateful aspects of the self. Ralph Fiennes, who so powerfully played the Nazi camp commander Amon Goeth in Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), found his part emotionally excruciating because he despised his character so much. Some of the Polish extras hired to play townspeople are said to have wept after having to yell anti-Semitic abuse at actors playing Jewish prisoners.

A further threat to the actor's ego may be that of accepting and building upon critical feedback from an undemocratic audience of one: the director. A far-ranging, seemingly effortless performance onscreen will thus be the result of an extraordinarily disciplined mind drawing widely upon its owner's emotional experience. For actor and director to achieve such a performance, they must trust and respect each other as they navigate a minefield of fascinating problems together.

ON MASKS AND THE FUNCTION OF DRAMA

There is an important purpose behind stylized theater's masks and stock characterizations. By screening out the banal, psychological identity of the actors, these devices encourage us to fill in the details from our imaginations. This type of theater gives us characters held at a distance so we look not for specific human attractiveness or malevolence but for the immeasurably richer beauty and terror seen by our own imagining minds. Ancient dramatists discovered something the infant cinema has to learn—that dramatic art can only fulfill its potential if it evokes universals. It is insufficient to simulate reportage; it must evoke the audience's co-creation.

In various ways throughout this book I shall seek to demonstrate a curious and little-appreciated fact: *A cinema audience does not really go to see the film but goes to see into itself, to imagine, think, and feel as others may do. Its members go to become* other, *just for a while*. This is like the reader of a novel who reads not to see language or print, but to participate in that structured, waking, and intensely speculative dreaming that we call reading. Film, with its hypnotic appeal to the senses, has often been likened to dreaming.

Here we collide head-on with the cinema's limitation. The prosaic realism of the camera, showing literally and to the last open pore whatever is placed before it, constantly threatens to pull us away from myth and back into the material and banal. Used unintelligently, the camera conveys a glut of the real and lets nothing become metaphorical or metaphysical. This is a severe handicap for an art medium. Think of the phrase, "She was incomparably beautiful." How can

FIGURE 1–3

Carné's *Children of Paradise,* a story of unattainable love based on the Pierrot and Columbine archetypes (courtesy Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive).

you possibly *show* incomparable beauty? Films that successfully break out of the stockade of realism always connect us to myth and archetype. These are the stock of tragi-comic human equations constructed somewhere in the distant past that unfailingly trigger our deeper emotions. The character of Garance in Marcel Carné's *The Children of Paradise* (1945) will be undyingly lovely as long as one print survives and one audience member lives to see her (Figure 1–3). This is not just because the actress, Arletty, is beautiful or because the black-and-white cinematography and the lighting are unearthly, but because her enigmatic character hides so much. She is the legendary character of Columbine reborn, the fickle, unattainable, free spirit whom poor Pierrot can never hold because he's too foolishly sincere and earthbound. In short, she evokes the poignancy of our own unattained loves.

DEVELOPING CINEMA ART

A progressive cinema activates the audience's imagination, opening up interior spaces and questions that can only be filled from the hearts and minds of the viewers. Here we are talking not just about withholding full perception but about

a cinematic language that shows less so it can imply more about the crucial ambiguity of human character and theme. Only thus can a narrative direct the audience toward something of greater worth than the superficial, sensational, or polemical. We are talking about looks, glances, averted profiles, turned backs, enigmatic silences, the suggestive voices of nature, and of primeval landscapes inhabited or abandoned by humans. We are talking of a narrative art that can alert us to what exists at the very edges of our perception, and beyond.

The more the cinema invites the audience to dream, exercise their judgment, and draw on their own instincts, the more it approaches the emotional release of music or matches the intellectual power of literature.

The cinema is several arts rolled into one, and to develop your potential as an artist you need to look for component parts that lie outside cinema. You will have to step back in time to consider how other arts function and how they act upon us, and you will need strong, clear, and critical ideas about your contemporaries and their time. This, the core of artistic identity and the story material it chooses, will be the subject of the next two chapters.

THE *AUTEUR* AND AUTHORIAL CONTROL

This book, intended to take you from beginner to advanced levels of filmmaking, may seem to offer many encouragements to *auteur* filmmaking. This term was coined in the 1950s during the French New Wave and refers to the writer/director wanting to exercise an integrated control across the spectrum of the writing and realization processes. Such control can only be exercised when you have thoroughly internalized how work of depth and resonance is created, how screen works become individual, and how the narrative form itself might be expanded and developed.

In filmmaking of any technical complexity, the *auteur* concept is just that—a concept and not a reality. However, generations reared in the Romantic tradition of the artist as the isolated and controlling individualist have confused directing films with exercising total control. But how can a director control the characters as a novelist does while leading a team of near-equals?

Curiously, the nearest thing to *auteur* exists at the beginner level, when you can do it all yourself, and again—but differently—at the pinnacles of accomplishment in the world film industry. It doesn't hold in the middle ground. A typical evolution begins in film school where the filmmaker starts as a Renaissance figure: writing, shooting, and editing a tiny film. Then, wanting to produce more sophisticated work, he or she has to divide up the tasks among people specializing in one of several crafts. The director comes to specialize in, say, editing. Competently handled, this becomes his or her bridge into the film industry where our filmmaker initially makes a slender living as a freelancer. Eventually becoming a respected specialist, the director becomes known and established and his or her living less precarious. Through years of working and continuous learning, the drive to direct results in an opportunity, but early directing work is necessarily cautious and commercial, for death at the box office means plunging down the ladder again. With two or three modest successes, our director, like someone standing up in a boat, expands cautiously into more personally meaningful work. Even when limited by survival instincts and money interests to doing popular

work, the astute director can flex artistic muscle and learn to control the medium. This is even true to a more limited degree in commercials.

As our greying director gains a mature command of the medium, and as the path of his or her life reveals what he or she has to say through the work, audiences begin to thrill to an exciting authorial identity at work. The filmmaker who in film school had total control over a very small film now has perceived control in an immensely expensive and popularly significant medium. The *auteur* seems to have re-emerged, driving a better car. In fact this same person is humbled from years of teamwork, and would be embarrassed to proclaim him or herself an *auteur*—even though the director will never have more authority. Those heartfelt thanks during Academy Awards given to the team are no meaningless ritual. They acknowledge the true source of creativity in a collaborative art form.

DRAMATURGY ESSENTIALS

BEATS, THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING DRAMA

What drama is and how you make it are for some reason almost universally misunderstood. It's the single most disabling ignorance. The problem seems to arise from unexamined assumptions lodged, virus fashion, somewhere in popular culture. Faced with making drama, most people use it to make escapist entertainment or to supply moral improvement that illustrates right and wrong. Both approaches produce typical characters in typical situations who have typical problems. The result is depiction, explanation, and boring stereotypes but not drama. Ideologically driven work, unless artfully packaged to make it stylish, witty, futuristic, or frightening, is something audiences simply reject from long experience of clumsy salesmanship. They know it from preaching, political, polemic, and advertising propaganda.

In a more innocent time, medieval morality plays used this approach to elevate consciousness by showing the life of a saint dealing with temptation and the struggle between good and evil. Epic morality plays in the cinema, like George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977) or Peter Jackson's 2001 adaptation of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings,* rely on spectacle, a strong plot, and special worlds involving journeys in space, androids, puppets, creature costumes, or computer animation to deflect our attention from the simplistic nature of the underlying messages. By making their stories as epic fables, and by using distancing devices, the plots can be clothed, and we are ready to contemplate notions of courage, loyalty, power, evil, and the other grand abstractions that seem to perennially inhabit human imagination.

But the low-budget filmmaker faces more immediate and universal problems. Not having intergalactic space available, unable to afford even a spade-full of Middle Earth, he or she must instead find drama in the familiar. For this we turn to methods of finding drama all around us, which often means the problems of family and work relationships. This alerts us to the usefulness of the dramatic arc worked out by Greek playwrights 2500 years ago.

First, however, we should talk about the *dramatic unit* and its key component, the *beat*, which, by the way, has nothing to do with rhythm, nor does it,

as some screenplay usages suggest, mean a moment of rest. A beat is a moment of dramatic fulcrum, a changed awareness following mounting pressures that have culminated in a changed balance of forces. That awareness can reside in one of the characters or in the audience when they understand more than the characters.

INTRODUCING THE GOBLIN TEASMADE™

This heartbeat of drama is something few people outside acting understand. When film students grasp what a beat is and how to use it, they have a sense of revelation. I will illustrate the notion of a beat by describing the action of that iconic gadget, still to be found in British bed and breakfast establishments, the Goblin Teasmade™. This automatic tea maker, first brought forth in 1902 by an enterprising gunsmith, is perfect to illustrate a dramatic unit culminating in a beat. Here's how it works:

> Before bed, the brave user fills a metal canister with water, puts dry tea in a china teapot, places them side by side and sets an electric clock for wake-up time. At the appointed hour, the clock silently turns on a heater. Initial rumbles soon turn to hissing as the water comes to a thunderous boil and decants itself by steam pressure into the adjacent teapot. The water, shifting weight from one vessel to the other, tilts a platform that turns off the current. The shaken guest then ventures out from under the covers to enjoy a fresh pot of tea.

Can you see the beat in this machine's performance? It's not when the current switches on, or when the water heats up, for those are the preliminaries. The beat comes at the moment of maximum threat when the shifting weight of water audibly switches the contraption off. At that moment the guests perceive the change that renders the machine harmless and themselves safe to enjoy another day. The full Goblin Teasmade story can be found at *www.teasmade.com/models.htm/*, and yes, people collect these things.

Dramatic scenes center on someone with an *agenda*—something this person wants to get or do. Our guests, being British to the core, want to wake up to a nice hot cup of tea. The scene becomes dramatic because there is some degree of *conflict*. Getting tea means running the gauntlet of steam power, and the guests are intimidated by the explosive nature of the tea's arrival. Dramatic scenes require there to be a *problem*. The problem here is that a modest desire to have tea appears to be life-threatening, and the users suffer feelings of fight or flight that reach their zenith at the machine's moment of maximum activity. Now any *major change of consciousness* in one (or more) of the characters in a scene is a beat. The beat may be subtle, comic, or melodramatically extreme, but it represents a definite forward step up drama's developmental ladder. In the Teasmade scenario, the beat can be placed at the moment of realization that the threat has passed, tea is served, and the war is won.

Now see if you can spot the two beats in this little narrative:

> Two bleary and unshaven men, George and Phil, sprawl in a rusty Dodge full of empty beer cans as they drive across a hot, empty landscape. They notice that

> the car is running on Empty and hope to make it to a gas station they can see in the distance. But the old clunker coughs to a halt before they get there.
>
> Excitable George curses fate and pounds the steering wheel, but phlegmatic Phil steps into the blinding sunlight and walks to the gas station, where he asks for a can of gas.
>
> Don, the sleepy youth on duty, says they don't keep cans. So Phil and George, sweating and cursing, have to push the creaking behemoth to the pumps, where they fill up and then drive away exhausted.

What is the agenda, what is the problem, and where do the major changes of consciousness occur? George and Phil's *agenda* is simply to get wherever they are going. Their *problem* is that they are running out of gas and must find more. One *beat* happens when the car dies short of the gas station. This intensifies their *problem* and changes its nature. No longer can they get the car to the gas, now they must get gas to the car. George howls at the gods but Phil *adapts* to this, and puts a new plan in action—to get a little gas in a can so they can drive the last few hundred yards. The second *beat* comes when Phil realizes from Don's answer that his plan has failed, and he cannot take gas to the car. This raises the question, "Now what will they do?" It is answered when the narrative jumps forward to them implementing their solution, which is to push the car to the gas (the dramatic terminology is italicized so you see how it's used).

What is the *conflict* in this scene? Surely it's two shiftless guys up against the heavy, inert car. We see it played out as a Herculean struggle, and the *resolution* comes when they arrive panting at the pump and are able to fill the car and drive onward to further pursue their *agenda*.

We therefore have several *dramatic units*, each posing questions in the spectator's mind, which is always the key to effective drama:

> **Unit 1** establishes that they are running out of gas. Q: Will they make it? A: No, they won't, and the problem escalates when the car dies. This dramatic unit ends at the first beat when they realize this. Q: How will they solve the problem?
>
> **Unit 2** deals with the answer, how they *adapt* to the *new circumstances*. After some heated discussion involving mutual blaming, Phil steps out into the roasting heat and walks to the gas station. The next beat comes after a brief discussion during which Phil realizes that this plan won't work either. Q: What he will do?
>
> **Unit 3** jumps forward in time to show the answer: pushing the heavy car in stages into the forecourt where they can fill up. Q: Do they even have money to fill the tank?
>
> **Unit 4** is the answer, or *resolution* to the scene as they drive away with the problem solved. Q: What will happen to them next?

Notice the question-and-answer dialogue activated in the audience's minds. This is inherent in good storytelling and can be traced in any skillful telling of a joke. Laying bare the dramatic components of any scene means answering the following questions, which I have applied to our travelers George and Phil:

Main character is	[Phil, because he takes the main action and develops most]
Agenda is . . .	[To complete their journey]
Problem or issue is . . .	[George's lack of foresight means they run out of fuel]
Conflict is between . . .	[Between men and machine, between fallible, imperfect human beings and the unforgiving demands of their journey]
Complicating factors are . . .	[Car dies far from gas station, nobody can bring gas, and no help is available]
Beats are . . .	[See previous discussion in text]
Resolution is . . .	[Expending superhuman energy to refill tank, driving onward]
Dramatic units are . . .	[See previous discussion in text]

You can remember this with a mnemonic device in the letters bold-printed above: MAP CC BiRD.

A dramatic unit can be likened to the tree-felling process. It includes:

- Defining the problem (needing to cut down the tree)
- Overcoming the obstacles that prevent solving the problem (notching the trunk to make it fall the right way; axing or sawing through the trunk)
- Reaching the fulcrum point when the all-important change happens (the tree groans and begins to crash to the ground)
- Finding the resolution (the tree must now be dismantled and carted away—new conditions that inaugurate the next dramatic unit's set of problems)

Further dramatic units might be: struggling to turn the tree into planks; turning the planks into a home for a family; the family now having its particular problems, each of which will be dealt with in a new set of dramatic units.

Each dramatic unit has a *developmental arc* to completion. An example might be the moment in Mike Newell's *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) when Charles realizes that Carrie has given him up and is going to marry her wealthy fiancé after all. The buildup of forces—establishing the situation, pressure building, then an irrevocable change of consciousness that produces new pressures—can only be accomplished if the characters have mismatched volitions and therefore harbor the potential for conflict. *Conflict is the very heart of drama*, and may be:

- External conflict between persons
- External conflict between persons and an environment
- Internal conflict between one part of a person and another

We will later use the material in this chapter to analyze drama and make analytical graphics. If you wish, look ahead to a page of screenplay analyzed and broken down in Chapter 24, Figure 24–1.

If you can apply these principles, no matter what genre, your work will be head and shoulders above most. One way to practice is to find examples of dramatic units in the everyday life around you.

BEATS HAVE NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS

Douglas Heil, in his article "Dramatic and Melodramatic Beat Structures"[1] (*Creative Screenwriting*, Volume 3, Number 4, January, 1997), has quoted Smiley's *Playwriting: The Structure of Action* (Prentice-Hall Inc., New Jersey, 1971) to show that beats can be characterized in three different ways: as plot beats, character attitude beats, and character thought beats. For our purposes, this means that each beat has a different implication for the narrative, and can be summarized thus:

1.	*Plot Beats*	
	a. Story beat	Advances the story, often connected to the disturbance or complication
	b. Preparation beat	Establishes the beginning of a sequence or provides foreshadowing
	c. Expository beat	Provides information about past circumstances
	d. Crisis beat	Presents conflict
	e. Mood beat	Establishes emotional circumstances
	f. Reversal beat	Reverses action (This may well be associated with a plot point)
2.	*Character Attitude Beats*	
	a. Dispositional beat	Reveals a personality bent
	b. Motivational beat	Expresses desires and provides reasons for actions
	c. Deliberative beat	Expresses a reflective or emotional thought
	d. Decisive beat	Indicates a significant decision
3.	*Character Thought Beats*	
	a. Emotive beat	Expresses what a character feels
	b. Reflective beat	Expresses what a character concludes, considers, discovers
	c. Informative beat	Presents information relevant to the (film)
	d. Exaggerational beat	Expresses maximizing or minimizing of a topic
	e. Argumentative beat	Contains conflict

Some of these are fine points and difficult to separate. What, for instance, is the difference between a deliberative beat involving thought and a character thought beat involving reflection? When these distinctions help you clarify the line of action through a scene, use them. When they simply pose boundary problems, don't. As always, we seek clarity of purpose, not taxonomy for its own reason.

In the same article, Heil draws a useful difference between drama and melodrama. He argues that drama is the modern day substitute for tragedy because

[1] My thanks to Doreen Bartoni for drawing my attention to this article.

today's social and psychological forces have replaced antagonists who are supernatural or divine. While drama has complex characters and may concern right fighting right, melodrama "assumes that right and wrong can easily be discerned in any situation." In melodrama, characters are often one-dimensional and pursuing their objectives without reflection or emotion. Drama is more likely to concern everyday conflicts arising from contradictory human desires and situations and to be at a lower pitch than melodrama.

THE THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

The classic *three-act structure* was developed in theater but can be applied to a whole film or the contents of a single sequence. Here are the divisions:

Act I establishes the *setup* (characters, relationships, and situation and dominant problem faced by the central character or characters).

Act II escalates the *complications* in relationships as the central character struggles with the obstacles that prevent him or her solving the main *problem*.

Act III intensifies the situation to a point of *confrontation*, and *resolves* it, often in a climactic way that is emotionally satisfying.

When you begin applying these divisions to films you see and to events you witness or experience, you will see how fundamental they are to all aspects of life.