

Director's Notes



"We are each our own Devil, and we make our world a living Hell"

Alex Ross

“Above all, what audiences need is a feeling of complete confidence and trust that the movie they are seeing will take them on a journey and get them safely to their destination. Without this trust, audiences cannot suspend their disbelief or ignore the artifice of the medium; they cannot succumb to the experience of watching and partaking in the movie.” - Alfred Hitchcock



THEMES

We are each our own devil, and we make our world a living Hell.

Superstition leads to destruction.

Escape from reality leads to a day of reckoning.

Illusions turn into painful knowledge.

The slippery ambiguity with which myths takes hold.

Something kills love anyway – something always does.

People in landscapes of estrangement.

Ultimately it's the human spirit that lets us down. And that's the most frightening thing of all. The terror is not brought on by some "crazed maniac". It's brought on by pain. By the realities of life.

HORROR

The real star in a horror film is the source of the horror itself.

In horror we are overwhelmed by the face to face confrontations with our deepest, most irrational insecurities - courage is suppressed until the very end.

A horror film suggests that just under that apparently safe surface of the world lies a festering, irrational chaos.



A suffocating horror - so bland on the surface, so naturalistic in its staging, and yet as ghastly as a catacomb.

Good horror relies on isolation, both literally (location), and figuratively - in the mind of the characters.

THE STORY

“The important thing is not to over explain it or to completely resolve it, but to let you leave the theater still thinking about it and have you figure it out for yourself.” - Tobe Hooper

The more “plot” there is, the more we lose our primal fear of the unknown. It should be simple. It doesn’t need twists and turns. Things should happen very quickly. Within days, within hours.

Scenes should be long and slow - respecting “real time” as much as possible.



Rosemary's Baby: (subjective filmmaking; no dramatic irony)

Mood creates dread. We go against the obvious, especially with the ending. We keep a calm, firm hold on the material; hypnotizing the audience into following us until the very end.

There will be a choice behind the execution to keep events ambiguous even after the resolution. The film should be haunting because the mass suicide is never fully explained.

What, exactly, is going on? You have no idea in the first scene, and you may not be totally sure even by the last. But it should be fascinating for the way it introduces an idea and then builds on it slowly, sustaining suspense.

Okay, that's the plot – what else is going on? We avoid easy answers and engage the viewer on various levels.

THE CHARACTERS

A director's detachment from the characters enables him to portray them as complex individuals. We are less interested in making our protagonists likable, more so in making them interesting.

Our protagonists find themselves in a strange land, suddenly ill-equipped to understand or handle its challenges - an unfamiliar territory - and they find themselves lost.

Because of the drugs, jet-lag, and overall disappointment with life – they will be in a constant half awakened state. Sleepwalking their way through most of the film until it's too late.



Wake in Fright: (the skulls beneath the smiling faces)

Julian's choices backfire. He thinks he has the answers, but they're the wrong answers. When it's all over, the movie isn't done with him yet - he hasn't finished learning his lesson.



Julian: a feeling of dissatisfaction within himself.



Five Easy Pieces: (No core identity, no meaningful sense of self, no moral center of gravity.)

Julian - a man and his camera. Here you go my friend, here's your camera, but you've lost your family. Maybe now you'll have something to say.

His overall dissatisfaction with life will make him sluggish; unable to care.

All of these people are refusing to grow up; refusing to take responsibility for their own lives. They no longer feel anything. The drugs don't work.

Anna – a wounded bird. Incapable of fighting. Manipulated by all.



Funny Games: (fighting a losing battle; her outcome already established)



Christian - "The cold child" - unfeeling. Detached from reality.



Taxi Driver: (passing the point of no return)



Blade Runner: (surrendering to the inevitable/acceptance)

FILM REFERENCES

“Mess with your audience visually. We’re used to TV, to scenes giving us immediate information, so the viewer thinks, “I’ve seen it. I understand it. Next.” And you never really get to the point of having a particular sensitivity to the situation. If you want to move someone, then you have to play with their visual habits, with what they’re used to seeing.” - Michael Haneke

“Rosemary’s Baby” (subjective storytelling)

“The Shining” (Crushing isolation, lighting)

“Woman in the Dunes” (texture, pauses, character’s thinking process)

“Time of the Wolf” (cinematography, night ext. scenes)

“Funny Games” (camera lenses, angles, POV’s, staging)

“Picnic at Hanging Rock” (horror in daylight)

“Cries and Whispers” (opening titles, opening sequence)

“The Silence” (sounds)

“E.T.” (lens flares, dark foreground - bright background)

“The Witch” (rhythm/pacing)

“The Loneliest Planet” (location shooting/ tracking characters)

“Martha Marcy May Marlene” (available light/dusk shots)

“The Headless Woman” (static camera as characters exit the frame)

“Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf” (staging, back lighting)

“Five Easy Pieces” (final shot, Julian’s character)

“Inside” (face approaching from the darkness)

CINEMATOGRAPHY

Clear. Clean. Crisp. Severe. Direct. Precise. Rock solid framing.



A clinical, sharp, desaturated palette. Filled with dark, earthy imagery. Disorienting blackness in the desolate countryside. At the same time we find horror in daylight. A grey, foggy atmosphere.

A patient camera. Resisting movement and scaling down character action – create a sense of stillness. Very stoic and simple shots.

In the age of the Steady-cam, tracking characters strolling through a location forever is almost criminally easy. There is a cost to such flash. Speed hurtles past nuance; exhilaration in sheer motion misses minute gestures.



The choice of camera position is often deliberately “inadequate”, as far as direct, transparent communication of the plot. The camera becomes the subtlest of narrative instruments. Though it can identify with a character’s POV when it suits its purposes, it usually preserves its own identity and distance.



Cache -The camera seems to be conducting its own inquiry, one not quite at the service of the characters. It remains aloof, alert to independent inquiry – even the possibilities of a completely different story.

THE LONG TAKE

“If a scene is only one shot, then there is at least a less sense of time being manipulated. The reduction of montage to a minimum shifts the responsibility back to the viewer in that contemplation is required. I use your fantasy.” - Michael Haneke

Audience participation. Activates the imagination. You're aware of multiple dimensions all at once. There's a higher level of ambiguity, and a direct connection to reality.

The viewer will have to scan the image, seek out salient points of interest, and integrate information into an overall judgment about a scene. Incorporate long takes, which crystallize dramatic time, with montage sequences which represent a more conceptual duration.



“Barry Lyndon” - A subtle descriptive style (W/camera). A departure from a narrative mode that assumes that everything is accessible to viewers at all times. Instead, a mediating space is inserted between the action and the spectators. An unexpected camera angle which is not gratuitous.

DEEP FOCUS

Sharp focus across several planes of action. It embraces the possibility of staging in depth – placing significant objects or figures at different distances – regardless of whether all those elements in the scene are in focus.

Deep focus produces a more profound realism because it respects the integrity of physical space and time. The deep focus shot can supply both a CU and a LS in the same framing – a synthesis of what editing gives us in separate shots.

Deep focus forces the spectator to participate in the meaning of the film by distinguishing the implicit relations and creates a psychological realism.



La Dolce Vita: Action away from camera in the background.

WIDE LENSES

Wide angle: no need for long shots and close ups – which help break down realism. The camera, like the human eye, sees an entire panorama at once, with everything clear and lifelike. Wide lenses that put the characters in context within the world around them. Long lenses tend to isolate the figure.



Mid-range and wide angle lenses. Things are seen only as they would be seen by your own eyes. We generally use the 50mm lens which more closely resembles human vision. The three basic lenses - the 50mm, the 32mm, and the 75mm. We also use a zoom but with caution.



Boogie Nights: Off centered framing. Little or no space in eye-line

Even in close ups we use fairly wide lenses. 40s and 50s and maybe a 75mm. Wide angle lenses give you a social context.

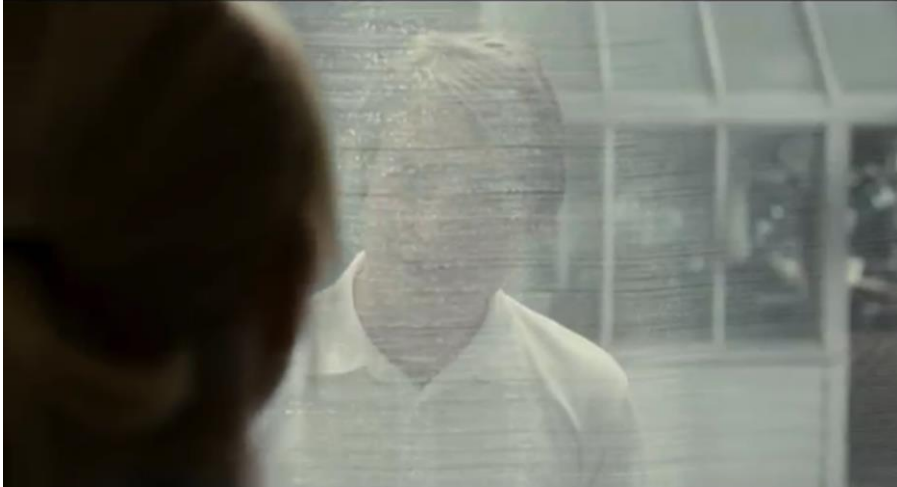
The craftsmanship needs to be precise; the result should be enigmatic.

THE LIGHTING

“In a particular scene where you expect everybody to be in a dark spooky house, let’s play it up a key, turn on all the lights and let’s find the horror in the light. “The Exorcist” for the most part, is lit in a conventional way – the way you expect things to look in real life. The horror comes out of the story in this conventional setting. You see a normal living room but here comes the Devil.” – William Friedkin



Picnic at Hanging Rock: (nature is unconcerned with the drama of humans)



Funny Games: (terror in daylight)



The Shining: Slight lens flare from above/70s Spielberg film).



Cache: (Silhouettes – Dark foregrounds/bright backgrounds)

Practicals/Bounce boards/lanterns/ Par cans for night exteriors.

Fresnel lights for extremely precise, sharp light.

The light source must be justified; logical rather than aesthetic.

Chiaroscuro. One single light source.



Time of the Wolf: (Night scenes occur in utter blackness)

LOCATIONS

Why are we in a foreign place? Lack of communication. Things going on that you do not understand. Beyond customs and traditions. A foreign land could also symbolize an awakening of some kind - a seeing the world/your life with new found eyesight.

Each location is in a way pristine and inviolate, independent of the characters/story – and this presence desires to be featured, made prominent.

The landscape in which the story takes place is as much a character as the subjects themselves.



Picnic at Hanging Rock



Don't Look Now: (the terrifying unknowability of a foreign place)

A foreign location: it makes us face fears we wouldn't normally face. The concept of home is important to everyone. I want to go home. Where is home. What is home?

The characters have to be physically isolated from the rest of society – once you separate yourself anything is possible. Behaviors can unfold that wouldn't in their ordinary life. Certain structures are taken away.

A good setting works for your characters and the story, taking a life of its own as it plays an integral role in the action. The setting should be the **ONLY** place your story can play out in. It should enhance and add texture – and it should aggravate the character’s problems.

Integrate landscapes in a meaningful way – subvert their very essence; cast them as hollow, impassive and indifferent symbols that observe the ant-like humans in their life or death struggles.

EDITING

Physical space has been destroyed. Space has been extended, bent, chopped into fragments, held together by cutting so rapid that one sees little of what is going on. They produce temporary sensation rather than emotion and engagement. A vague memory of having been briefly excited rather than the enduring contentment of scenes playing out again and again in your head.

New movies burn up one’s senses, they leave nothing behind but a jangled nervous system, a blank memory, and a vacuum where emotion should be.

Spatial integrity is just about gone from big movies. One action shot on top of another, often with only a general relation in space or body movement between the two.



The Godfather: That scene works because you know where Pacino is in relation to the two men at every second.

We let the scenes carry on for an uncomfortable amount of time to get at something beyond the surface of things, beyond the mere story-line.



Lawrence of Arabia: Cut on key moments, when a psychological shift occurs

The substance of cinema is an endless long take; it is the reproduction of the present. Coverage: derived from TV – the increasingly common practice of using multiple cameras. The danger with coverage is that with so much material available, the original vision may be drowned or never fully realized or defined.

No coverage is a lost art because it means making choices, real choices, and sticking to them.

Impact cut: Emphasizes contrast/violence or confuses with unusual transition in time and space.

Image harmony: A sequence of images that express similar ideas or a unifying concept. Creating links in the images that occur at different locations or point in time.

MUSIC

“The problem with a musical score, with an opening theme, is that it sets up stylistic expectations that might, or might not be followed through. Music not only guides the spectator, on a more subconscious level it gives the viewer a hint of the filmmakers’ tastes. With no music suddenly one is left to feel things for themselves. To make their own choices.” - Walter Murch

Old world instruments. Witches dancing.

Usually music is used to hide a film’s problems.

Most music is like steroids: it gives you an edge, it gives you speed, but it's unhealthy for the organism in the long run.

“Echoes of Time and the River” – George Crumb

“Anaklasis for string orchestra” – Penderecki

“Polymorphia” for 48 strings” – Penderecki

“Hawk’s prairie” – Eyvind Kang

“Hoga Visan” – Hans-Ola Ericsson

Hayshi Hikaru

Toru Takemitsu

Instead of a musical score we concentrate on DIEGETIC MUSIC - the music and songs played by the characters themselves within the scenes.

SONGS

“Eisbar” – Grauzone 1981

“Major Tom” – German version Peter Schilling

German Industrial

Cheesy 80s

Techno

Establish a sound. A note. A sound that leaves a strong impression.

We don’t compromise the image. We don’t weaken its power. We have absolute confidence in its ability to communicate feelings. Narration through images, words, sounds, gestures, facial expressions, body language.

SOUND DESIGN

Sound is critical. You can approach the heart more directly through the ear than the eye. Our ears are more resistant than our eyes, which are flooded with images. With sound, you can directly reach a viewer’s unconscious mind. What happens off screen is as important as on screen.



Floor boards that sound hollow. A chair creaking when you shift on it.
"There Will be Blood"

Mix for overlapping dialogue – everyone talking at once – the audience feels uneasy.

FINAL CREDITS ROLL OVER THE SHOT IN SILENCE. NO MUSIC.
ONLY LOCATION SOUNDS.

It's an extremely effective technique – it leaves you wanting more. It takes all of the ambiguity of the film and pushes it past the film – into the unknown. "Five easy Pieces".

NO SUBTITLES

It's bold to have characters speaking another language with no translation. As a result you're paying much more attention to how things are said, and the body language being used - and you're perceiving things in a very different way. You're listening to the sound of the language - not the meaning. You don't know what they're saying, so the only way to understand what the scene is about is to watch HOW they say it, through tone and body language and facial expressions. The sound exercises the mind in much more complex ways than appear on the surface of the scene, which is otherwise just a dialogue scene between people.

And with the language barrier there is an additional level of discomfort. Our leading man disappears further and further down a bleak road.



Cache: (The notes: *“SPAREN SIE SICH!! DIESEN ORT VERLASSEN!!”*)



“You are the only one that remains to prove that we ever existed.”