

The uses of perplexity: A conversation with Robert B. Ray on the art of film, music and pedagogy

Trevor Mowchun: While reading your recently published book, *The Structure of Complex Images* (2020), I found myself doing quite a bit of writing. I filled the margins with various responses and sent you a slew of questions, or provocations, that together reflect my thought process while reading what is, I think, a most energised take on how movies can push us into uncharted aesthetic and philosophical territory, calling for novel ways of thinking and in some cases experimental forms of writing. I see many places to begin, but is there a particular question I posed that strikes you as most pressing, urgent, irresistible to your way of thinking about film that we might discuss further?

Robert B. Ray: Maybe the first one, the way to perplexity via film because that's the key to this book. And the key to what I've been thinking about. I think it also encompasses several of the questions that are at the heart of this book. The question about perplexity is also related to the question of method, and my rather unorthodox method in this book of writing about writing itself, working with student material, and the avoidance of what Roland Barthes called motionless phrases. But I can come back to that. Let's start with perplexity and how movies in particular are so good at generating it, sometimes against our will as spectators, if we remain open to their powers of both revelation and concealment.



Mowchun: I can think of no better way to begin discussing just about anything. The perplexity stirred by cinema is not the perplexity of a math problem. There is no solution to the mystification that is the power of movies. Sometimes, in certain moods, I just want to accept it instead of probe it – to accept the mystery. But I can't sit still about it for very long.

Ray: I can start by saying that Isaiah Berlin, the intellectual historian, distinguishes between two types of questions which can be expressed as follows. If I asked you what is the average shot length of *Anatomy of a Murder* (Otto Preminger, 1959), you may not know the answer, but of course you do know how to find that out. Now what if I asked something else: in *The Caine Mutiny* (Edward Dmytryk, 1954), José Ferrer (as defense lawyer Barney Greenwald) looks at a note his client (played by Van Johnson) has passed to him, and then dismissively crumples it up with his left hand. (His right hand is bandaged from some sort of crack-up that's never explained or made significant.) So why does that small quick action,

completely irrelevant narratively, interest me the way a good question does? More to the point: Why does a film's appeal in general turn on such details? That's the kind of question which, for Berlin, does not seem to contain a pointer for an answer that will satisfy us. This is the kind of question he calls 'philosophical,' and those who ask such questions are, he remarks, 'faced with a perplexity' (Berlin 2013). There are no definitive answers. Dictionaries, encyclopedias, experts, orthodoxies, and so on, are ineffectual guides. So, if you object to such questions, you might say that they don't lead anywhere or that they're childish. In fact, they do resemble the annoying questions of a small child who keeps asking 'why?' about everything. And it's not a coincidence that the philosopher Gareth Matthews, from whom I borrowed the idea of perplexity as a research tool, wrote two books of philosophical dialogues with 8–11-year-old children. He asked questions like, Can a dog think about tomorrow? And if not, how do we think about tomorrow? Matthews admired a definition of philosophy as 'institutionalised naiveté' (1982). The kinds of

questions that interest me about the movies can often seem naive or childish in their concreteness. And you ask – and I think it’s a good question – how do you prompt this attitude of naïveté and genuine perplexity? That’s the very question I was trying to answer in this book, which offers several methods for doing so. As such it amounts to an extension of what I was attempting in *The Avant Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (1995), which used the avant garde arts, especially surrealism, and theoreticians, especially Benjamin and Barthes, as generative sources for experimental methods. *The Structure of Complex Images* continues this project by using different sources – Thoreau, Wittgenstein, Cavell, Empson. I’ll say a couple of things about two of these thinkers. I’ve been interested in Wittgenstein since I was in graduate school, but I’ve only begun teaching him in the last five or six years. He seems to exemplify this interest in naïve-seeming perplexities that resonate with me. How do you teach a child the meaning of a word like ‘game’? How can you describe what happens when you suddenly notice that someone’s face resembles that of someone you know? For Wittgenstein, the best method for dealing with such matters was *description*. As he famously said, ‘We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place’ ([1953] 2001). Cavell, of course, was profoundly influenced by Wittgenstein (you know this better than I maybe). And his first film book, *The World Viewed* ([1971] 1979), begins with asking us to recognise how little we actually know about things we think we thoroughly understand, such as photographs. He says it may be felt that he makes too great a mystery of these objects, for example, but adds that his feeling is rather that we have forgotten how mysterious these things really are.

Mowchun: This point reminds me of Wittgenstein’s idea that the true task of philosophy, insofar as there could ever be only one, is the assembling of reminders for a particular purpose. Knowledge depends on remembering what we already know, recognising what is already in plain sight. Perhaps the desire to describe is not unlike the desire to remember, to redeem what we have forgotten or taken for granted to the point of blindness. Is this what you mean?

Ray: For the moment let’s say that in general I’m less interested in theory than in method and that the methods that appeal

to me often begin with descriptions. If you’re not attuned to this approach, a book like *Walden* ([1854] 2004), can bore you to death with its meticulous accounts of the seasons and their variations in weather, and even Wittgenstein and Cavell may seem to be spinning their wheels. But I always want my students to recall Gertrude Stein’s dictum: ‘description is explanation.’ And Wallace Stevens’ intensification: ‘description is revelation.’ I think André Bazin would have agreed with both of those claims as they pertain to the ontology of film.

Mowchun: It seems to me all sorts of fruitful paths or tangents can be forged from these descriptive moments in movies, moments like the one you mentioned from *The Caine Mutiny* that seem to almost untether themselves from the narrative and encapsulate something essential about a specific character or context. And perhaps this is a big question in terms of writing our responses to movies that move us in ways we don’t always clearly understand or expect. *The Caine Mutiny* is a film whose narrative structure you follow step by step, (its workings may be complex but it is not in itself a cause for perplexity) and yet this particular moment from the film (the crumpling up of the note) holds a meaning which jumps out at you and eludes you. It summons you to attention in a way that the film’s story and dramatic tensions do not. Now if you’re going to write about these types of moments which perplex you and fill you with a kind of wonder, you might be reluctant to search for an explanation that takes you away from the truth of the moment in all its brevity and subtlety. At this point you are interested in a particular moment and not the film as a whole, though a full account of the moment will likely lead you beyond it and back into the film’s diegetic world. This and similar moments are also embedded in the fabric of your own experience, and having made an appeal to your experience, there is the accompanying realisation that a moment – any moment that dawns on your consciousness, as Wittgenstein might say – may carry little if any weight in the experience of others. It could be just as easily lost. Moments are ‘missable’, a term which Stanley Cavell and Andrew Klevan discuss at length during their own exploratory conversation piece, ‘What Becomes of Thinking on Film?’ (2005). Then I wonder if catching such moments, or being caught by them, perhaps caught off-guard, is already on the way to describing what they consist of and how they come to life like

a phenomenon in nature, to echo Bazin. They are not questions awaiting an answer but *forces* commanding some sort of response. The method of description begins with seeing, not thinking, or seeing-as-thinking. You have to be able to see what’s in front of you, facing you, without there necessarily being any ‘truth’ behind it. And because its importance lacks an obvious explanation, you may have to describe it as you see it in order to know what an explanation would be in service of (I think Cavell might suggest something similar). Now when someone hears the word ‘description’ in this context they may think, well, there’s really not much to it then, you’re just repeating mimetically what is already there standing before you (even if you’re the only one for whom it stands out with such forcefulness) – but I think by description you mean something more.

Ray: I do. I mean an intensification or vividness of attention, which is what Thoreau was doing daily in Walden. He meticulously records the temperature at given times of the year, or the exact dates on which the pond froze or melted, and it’s always different. He was there for two years and four months. So it’s different in different years. And why is he interested in that? He does not say why outright – but he is, and he’s interested in other very small details, registering the various sounds, for example, that occur of the seasons as they come and go. At first, when I was teaching *Walden*, I would have the students read it twice in a semester. The first time they would read it they often complained of being bored, but the second time, interestingly, they were not bored at all. Their rhythms of attention had adjusted to what Thoreau was doing, and they were starting to look at things differently and notice things differently. That’s a skill to be able to evoke that degree of attentiveness in young readers, and film has the capacity to evoke it, too, but the difference is that film, unlike literature, as we all know, is moving at a certain tempo. That’s the great advantage of DVDs and Blu-rays: we can stop the film and we can go back and watch it again, but previously most people couldn’t attend to a film in this way. And a lot of things were missed, like the gesture I was referring to in *The Caine Mutiny*. I wanted to test the intensity of this minor gesture further by comparing it to Robert Altman’s version of *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial* (1988), which just focuses on the court martial and not the whole story, based as it is on Herman Wouk’s

play version of his own novel. And it's interesting to see in the Altman version that the defense lawyer's hand is not bandaged. Nor does he make this same gesture with his left hand. So, this is clearly a detail that is not conceived of as narratively central, or even central to the characterisation of Barney Greenwald. The only thing we know is in the Bogart version of *The Caine Mutiny*, when Greenwald first arrives to introduce himself to his potential clients, his hand is bandaged, and one of them asks, 'Did you have a crack-up?' And he replies curtly, 'Yes, something like that.' It's never explained further. I believe that in the original source, maybe in the novel or the play, it's explained that he's a Navy carrier pilot when he's not working as a lawyer, and he's had a crack-up on one of the carriers and burned one of his hands, his right hand. Still, we don't need to know that. There it is in the first version; it is absent in the second version, perhaps missing. It's that gesture with the left hand just dismissively crumpling up the note that captivates me, brings me to attention, perhaps *back* to attention, and compels me to describe this detail in equal detail to figure out why it is the way it is and what other details may be lurking about unnoticed.

Mowchun: Of course, my having seen the film – seen its story, recalling its major dramatic events on ship and in court – will not help me much in following your micro-response here. So let me get this straight: the lawyer crumples up a note from his client with his unbandaged hand, dismissing the content of the note while drawing our attention (or I should say your attention) to the crack-up which is never explained. My initial thought may be useless but let's see: If his right hand were not all bandaged up, he would probably have used it to receive and crumple the note. Instead, he does it awkwardly with his left and is questioned about it.

Ray: He is probably right-handed. Maybe that's why the crumpling gesture stands out: it's the first time he's doing it like that, the character and, possibly, the actor too. Rarely are actors deprived of their 'good hand' in films.

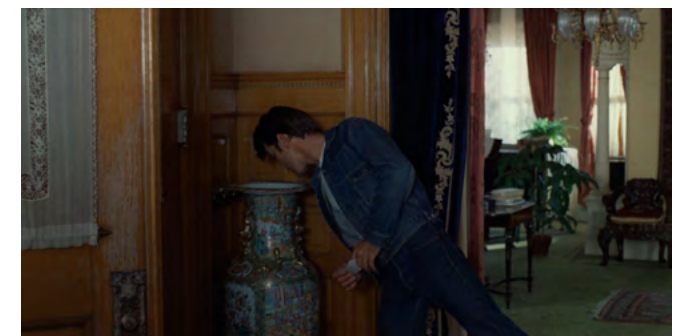
Mowchun: Not to mention their good looks! Jack Nicholson's nose injury in *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) is coming to mind, but I better nip this tangent in the bud. Okay, yes, this moment from *The Caine Mutiny* does appear to leave

something unsaid in terms of what you might call the history of this injury about which another film could delve into – but not this one. It's also describable as a contingent moment, an unnecessary yet by no means arbitrary state of affairs that reminds us just how singular, unpredictable, and cryptic everyday life can be even when its representation pretends to status quo normalcy. Perhaps it's not all that far removed from those seemingly mundane moments in Thoreau's *Walden* that call for keen and recurrent (if not obsessive!) observation. But I would also suggest that such a moment or gesture could be intended to give the viewer pause (to induce perplexity) while still embodying the accidental-for-itself character of something 'natural' which may or may not pique our interest. What I mean is that it is always possible for a filmmaker or any artist to not know the reasons *behind* their intention. I will put down my own example of a film moment featuring the crumpling up of a note, from *Badlands* (1973), Terrence Malick's first film with Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek. Have you seen it?

Ray: A long time ago when it first came out. I haven't seen it since.

Mowchun: We can do some rhyming with our respectively cherished film moments that leave us perplexed, even though (or perhaps because) the film pays such moments no further regard. The one in *Badlands* occurs when Kit (Martin Sheen) and Holly (Sissy Spacek) are holing up à la Bonnie and Clyde after a string of murders perpetrated by Kit. For a luxurious rest-stop the couple invade a palatial 'rich man's' house reminiscent of the farmer's mansion in *Days of Heaven* (Terrence Malick, 1978). Having restrained both the owner and maid before plotting their next move, someone unexpectedly knocks on the door asking for the owner of the house. Kit, who looks very suspicious right now, claims the owner is indisposed. The well-dressed man at the door concedes, somewhat reluctantly, but mostly puzzled, and says he would like to leave a message for the owner. This message comes in the form of a written note which Kit takes into his hand before closing the door. Now he's holding this note in the foyer, at a loss for what to do with it. He seems to want to get rid of it as quickly as possible, as if it were a crucial piece of evidence against him – and it may very well be. In the corner of the foyer stands a

tall vase. Without further thought, Kit crumples up the note and drops it inside the vase, staring down after it as if its base were bottomless. It is a very good hiding place considering he isn't thinking things through very carefully at the moment. I am always struck by the arrival of this note, how Kit becomes so frazzled by it, and what he ultimately decides to do with it under pressure. A decorative vase that is merely for show (like so many things symbolising splendor) suddenly lurches out of the background and becomes very useful. Things get more interesting (and funny). The man who wrote the note, calling it 'a message', is the film's director, Terrence Malick himself playing what may be an architect, complete with a set of 'blueprints' under his arm – the grand telltale message of the film. It's like a comedy routine at this point: the director's message is handed over to the main actor who is either perplexed by it or, seeing its truth, is eager to hide it from himself. The 'message' is crumpled up dismissively, no doubt for the better, and the film continues along without it – yet I do wonder what Malick's message whispers at the bottom of that dark vase.



Ray: Let's call it the mystery of contingency – conceding to the unpredictable and ambiguous. Clearly the weather at Walden is contingent. Thoreau has no control of it. We'll never know the origin of the detail of José Ferrer crumpling this piece of paper up with his left hand – did the director tell him to do this? Is it the kind of thing that would appear in a script? Doubtful. He could have been told to do it, or he just did it himself, perhaps in only one of the takes. We'll never know. Now as I think about it, the incident from *Badlands* is clearly all intended. Perhaps it's a parable about the limits of intentionality, but that's not the same as contingency – though it might *feel* contingent. I'm interested in both kinds of details – do we have names for them yet? – but I do want to distinguish between those two.

Mowchun: It's strange how compelling contingencies in film can be without necessarily being central to the films in which they function (or fail to function). Such moments keep me from knowing for sure that what I am seeing is merely ('merely') a fiction. In theory, I suppose, I want the line between intention and accident, necessity and contingency, fiction and fact, to blur in art, but when a film actually succeeds in blurring this boundary beyond recognition, I find myself wanting back the line, with some sort of confirmation of where the film stands with respect to its events. To return one last time to the scene from *Badlands*, the man leaving a message (the director leaving a message for his actor) is certainly all intended, as you rightly point out; but thinking about it again – particularly the shot of Kit scrambling in the threshold, not knowing what to do with the note and impulsively dropping it inside that vase – that part seems improvised to me (or it was made to feel that way). Suddenly the character is reacting to a situation that the film itself, so to speak, has no knowledge of, as if the film is also reacting to the suddenness of it, reacting to the instincts of Kit / Sheen. When a work of art flows like nature, beautifully patterned yet wildly unpredictable, how are we to speak of it? Abbas Kiarostami's middle section in *Tickets* (Ermanno Olmi, Abbas Kiarostami & Ken Loach, 2005), which you write about at length in your book, quietly stumbles onto this kind of flow where all the events – not just the more dramatic or punctuated ones – embody both the spontaneity and mundanity of

everyday life. There's some kind of alchemical give-and-take interplay between intentionality and improvisation in 'getting things right'. I'm sure we will come back to this film. And I may come back to this word 'alchemy' too.

Ray: Such an obsession may be a consequence of trying to convert a purely philosophical or speculative question into an empirical one. Because presumably, if you want to know whether an apparent contingency was necessitated or not, you could ask the people involved in making it. Did they intend this gesture? Did they shoot it multiple times, and then pick this one for whatever reason? So that would be an empirical research problem. It's like shot length: you would know how to find it even if you may not be able to find it right away. But the more philosophical question relates to this elusiveness between documentary and fiction film, as you point out. Let's come at this again from another angle: Should film scholars study film scripts? One of the things I ask in the book is why film scholars generally don't study scripts. We could but generally don't, which is strange because many directorial intentions and answers to our various questions and perplexities could be found there. Despite that, my answer would still be: only in special cases should we study film scripts. At the moment I'm interested in *All the President's Men* (Alan Pakula, 1976). Christian Keathley has shown me that the scripts for this film (there are several) are much less narratively opaque than the resulting movie, which is marked by ellipses and contradictions that Woodward and Bernstein objected to. I find this interesting because as journalists, they privileged clarity and communication over aesthetics – but clearly the filmmakers wanted something that straightforward storytelling, marked by logical transitions, would not have achieved. In a case like this one, scripts can prove very useful. In general, however, we don't study a script because, unlike the text of a play, it doesn't constitute the definitive instance. And that fact alone tells us something important about the cinema. In 'The Third Meaning' (1977), Barthes referred to what he called 'the filmic' and its fundamentally indescribable meaning. In other words, there's something essential to a film that is not possible or communicable in the script. Yes, a script could contain a direction for Greenwald to crumple up the note with his

left hand or for Boudou to kick up the dust that thrilled Bazin, but the gestures themselves, no matter how meticulously described in writing, are inexhaustibly specific, individual. And the movies consist of such gestures, over and over again. They are determined to some extent, I think, by the connection between the nature of a recording and an experience of astonishment or surprise. What would a book on the connection between the nature of recording and surprise be like, or between movies as recordings of unpredictable events and our capacity as viewers to be continually surprised even if we have seen them more than once? Now, before the advent of digital manipulation (CGI, autotune, and so on), films and records were essentially recorded improvisations. Of course, we know that the filmmakers and musicians rehearse and work hard to get things as intended, but recording reveals human differences, and some of them surprise even their makers. Take a thoroughly professional actress like Audrey Hepburn. Watching her work in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Blake Edwards, 1961), Buddy Ebsen, who was in the movie, noted that 'No two takes are identical. The 'nowness' of one moment is gone forever and can only be played back, never duplicated. In one's delivery the timing varies by split seconds or the weight of the word switches by audible milliseconds' (Wasson 2011). And anyone who has spent any time making a movie or record (and I've done a lot of the latter, you the former) knows how often you can be surprised by the rushes or the playback. The camera and the microphone don't see and hear exactly as we do in the room. We have photogénie or, in the case of music, its audio equivalent. Katharine Hepburn used to say, 'I photograph better than I look'. And some singers sound better when recorded than they do live (Marvin Gaye would be a good example). The absolute best case of the connection between recording and surprise is the record of 'Louie Louie'. I have a CD that collects 16 versions of this semi-novelty song, many by professional musicians like *Paul Revere & The Raiders*, *The Beach Boys*, Otis Redding, and *The Kinks*. But only one version, by a shambolic group of semi-amateurs (*The Kingsman*) is any good, and it's the one we know. It was made in one take with an overhead vocal mic that the singer had to stand on tiptoes to sing into. The drummer loses the beat midway through, and the singer starts to come in too soon after the

ragged guitar solo. In other words, it's a mess; and yet, in a way, it's perfect. Any book on how the recording arts differ from writing should start with 'Louie Louie'. Why? Because of the mystery of recording. A performance, however deliberate and well-rehearsed, is caught on tape and sounds surprisingly good for reasons unknown to you. It's also the reason why in recording people spend a lot of time chasing demos. A musician or one of the songwriters does a demo of the song on a handheld or portable cassette player, or something like that in those days, and then brings it in the studio and you can't quite recreate the sound that you wanted, that was on that cassette. That's how Keith Richards said 'Streetfighting Man' arose. He recorded the acoustic guitars on a portable cassette player which had a built-in compression. And the acoustic sound was so good; it sounded like a punched up electric. And they couldn't get that sound in the studio, so they had to play the acoustic guitar cassette – the demo – back through a loud-speaker system and record that and put it on the track. But that's a common practice of chasing demos. The extremes to which people will attempt to repeat something caught accidentally in a recording – in a futile attempt to recapture the original sense of surprise – is absolutely common. In this sense filmmaking involves hoping, or less desperately trying to ensure, that when the shooting happens the actors, the technicians, the director, etc. catch a really good day where it is up to the camera, as it were, to capture something truly special, inimitable and lasting. You can keep trying until you do, but sometimes it just doesn't happen.

Mowchun: So, there's an element of luck at play here? To press 'record' is to roll the dice?

Ray: Yes, but we should be careful not to romanticise the role of chance in the creative process too much.

Mowchun: Well, you must have some solid insight into the complexities of this process from your experience as a musician. During your time playing with *The Vulgar Boatmen* you produced a few commercially released records. How did making these records shape or expand your understanding of the specificities of film art in your work as a scholar?

Ray: Answering this question requires a bit of autobiography. I grew up in Memphis where the dominant culture, for obvious reasons, involved music rather than film. I saw Elvis before he went into the Army, and he was truly something. Astonishingly, people like Bo Diddley, Jimmy Reed, *Hank Ballard and The Midnighters*, and *The '5' Royales* regularly played for high-school parties, and the big auditorium shows included Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and Jackie Wilson. A little later, those shows would also have James Brown, Sam and Dave, and Otis Redding. At this early age, I was much more interested in music than film. Certainly, I went, or was taken, to an occasional movie. I remember seeing, for example, *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen & Gene Kelly, 1956), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1956), *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959) and two art-house choices of my parents: *The Red Shoes* (Emeric Pressburger & Michael Powell, 1948) (which I still don't like) and *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot / Mr. Hulot's Holiday* (Jacques Tati, 1953) (which my whole family loved). I also recall Saturday morning movies on a local television station, especially the Charlie Chan, Andy Hardy, and Basil Rathbone Sherlock Holmes films. And I was lucky to have a superb high-school English teacher (apparently a former Lionel Trilling student) who quickened my already existing interest in reading. In my fourth year at the University of Florida, a decisive event occurred. With *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema 1930-1980* (1985) on the verge of publication, I joined a band called *The Vulgar Boatmen* that was started by art majors who had studied with me. I had played in groups during college, but not ones with their own songs. Over the next decade, I became the engineer, producer, and co-writer (with an exceptionally gifted Dale Lawrence) of three records, commercially released and reviewed. We had a *success d'estime*, if not of money, and managed to perform two numbers on Jools Holland. While this music work almost certainly caused the ten-year gap between my first and second books, I have absolutely no regrets about that time. Given where I was from, music had always been crucially important to me, and now it began to inform my career as a film scholar. Because of both the microphone and camera's automatism, recording music resembles filmmaking. As

a result, I became attentive to the effects of various artistic and technical choices made at every stage of production, and I began to apply that attention to the cinema. I think about music all the time. The other night, while watching a DVD of *Roxy Music's* 2001 tour, I began thinking about the oddness of that group's sound. The next day, I happened upon one possible explanation: *Roxy's* songs often originate from Bryan Ferry's limited, two-finger piano playing, which tends to leave out the third of a chord's triad. Since whether the third is flat-tered or not determines whether that chord is major or minor, Ferry's chords are ambiguous, and so is the band's sound: he sings as if in a major key, while the musicians (at least some of them) seem to think it's a minor. I'm interested in exactly this kind of thing, and with film study I increasingly think about how such choices, limitations, and anomalies at various levels of production contribute to a film's specific rhythm and style.

Mowchun: Perhaps your next book should be on music in film! Of course, all artistic mediums are susceptible to this tension between control and chance, intentionality and ambiguity, in different ways, but I am tempted to say that your equal commitment to film and music as recording mediums suggests that they are immune to being wholly grasped by will or reason, be it in the mode of a maker or scholar. The artists do their work and the medium, i.e., the recording devices at the heart of film and music, does its work too. I imagine theatre actors experience this effect forcefully, if not traumatically, when crossing over into the medium of film.

Ray: The very lesson that Jimmy Stewart said Margaret Solomon taught him when he moved from doing theater work and entered the movies. She kept telling him, 'less, less'. In other words, meet the medium halfway.

Mowchun: Directors give this sort of criticism to actors all the time. 'Less is more', 'take it down.' Of course there are exceptions. I know you're not a fan of Stanley Kubrick's work, but his unusual approach to directing actors by doing take after take, recording after recording, as a way of bringing the actors back up to a level of intensity and excess verging sometimes on irony that is not realistic at all, that I would say is often

deliberately *unrealistic*, perhaps this exception proves the rule that the camera, in the end, is the decisive critic, the great unblinking eye, the convincing of which is anyone's guess. Jack Nicholson and Shelley Duval in *The Shining* (1980) had to undergo what must have felt like an endless procession of cinematographic recordings in order to *surprise* Kubrick. I'm fascinated by the various approaches filmmakers take to catch what appears to them as real or true, whether it's on the side of spontaneity, subtlety or extreme artifice. In the case of Kubrick, an actor may feel he has given the right performance at take 10, however the director often pushes his actors well beyond that, forcing the actor to do things he has never done before, or never thought would fly on film. There's also the legendary story of Hitchcock pouring cold water on Janet Leigh in the hopes of getting the ideal scream. Filmmakers in this sense 'trick' actors into losing control in the right sort of way so as to deliver something substantial and living (not necessarily realistic) to the camera, a technique by which character is revealed through the actor's voluntary or perhaps involuntary self-revelation.

Ray: And sometimes it's the actor who calls the shots because for whatever reason he can see himself more clearly from the perspective of the camera than the director can. My favorite instance of this features an actor I really like although he's not very well known: Peter Riegert, whose two most famous roles are in *Animal House* (John Landis, 1978) and *Local Hero* (Bill Forsyth, 1983). The movie I'm thinking of now is *Crossing Delancey* (Joan Micklin Silver, 1988). Riegert's character has just had a quarrel with a woman with whom he has fallen in love. There's a scene where he gets in an elevator, and he just stands there, idling, before the elevator finally closes. Silver shot this and said, 'You got to give me something. Give me some emotion here.' And Riegert retorted, 'It'll be okay.' And she persisted, 'No, I need something.' 'No, it'll be okay.' She kept insisting that he amp up expressiveness, and he kept refusing. Then when she looked at the rushes, she saw it was perfect. He knew what the camera was seeing. So sometimes it's not always the director behind the camera but a good actor in front of it who can see himself as a recording more clearly. In general, though, it's the directors who are having to do so because actors tend to project too much.

Mowchun: They have to reel them in and keep the performance balanced. And, there's no science to it. The art of film, however, does depend on science or technology, that is, the machines which are doing the recording. This is a fundamental complexity, or better yet contradiction, of cinema – this tension between the mechanical and the poetic, which is echoed in the tension between the commercial and the artistic, or the institutional and the auteur.

Ray: There's another point about this. This is from Bill Evans, the jazz pianist who played on *Kind of Blue* with Miles Davis. He's been talking about Miles in this interview, specifically about experimenting with improvisation. And that's what we're talking about here, essentially. When thinking about jazz, Evans says, 'Unfortunately, many of our best performances are out there in the universe someplace, and you still as professionals have to go in at 10 o'clock on Wednesday and make a record and hope that every few records you might catch a really good day.' So that's what it's like with recording music. Even though musical improvisation is different than recording rehearsed performances, you're still hoping when you film, say, an actor or a scene, that it's a good day, that there's chemistry between the contradictory elements.

Mowchun: There are some filmmakers who seem to rely almost exclusively on improvisation. The recent work of Terrence Malick immediately comes to mind. He has been known to work without a script, gravitating towards contingencies like the weather or qualities in the light as the basis for what and how to film. For a less obvious example, I was just listening to some audio interviews that Kubrick did with Michel Ciment, and it was surprising to hear Kubrick's openness to chance given how controlled his films are. While it seems that very little is left to chance, Kubrick confesses that despite all the preparation that would go into a film like *Barry Lyndon* (1975), in the end he would arrive on the set and feel the pressure to *rediscover* the scenes from scratch. For example, the camera position was a surprisingly open question 'on the day'. You can't necessarily entrust a scene to meticulously planned storyboards if it doesn't feel like the right decision anymore. Some of those striking visual compositions as they appear in the film, many of which were modelled after paintings from

the period, were in a sense discovered or rediscovered on the day of shooting – but, I want to add, only because so much research and preparation had already gone into it.

Ray: I would've thought that everything was storyboarded, in advance.

Mowchun: It was, but the storyboards were not, let's say, copied out by the camera. Preparation puts you in good shape so that when you are on the set you have a better chance of having 'a good day'. I would make a distinction here between preparation and memorisation.

Ray: The specifics of the situation demand acknowledgement. To insist on your preconception, despite what a situation affords, amounts to acting rotely.

Mowchun: Yes! Fritz Lang and Jean-Luc Godard have debated the very same issue. Have you seen this remarkable filmed conversation between them? Godard still feels like the student here, genuinely appealing to Lang to explain the way he directs films with such force and conviction. Lang basically says, I think a director needs to have an intention, a clear plan. I know Jean-Luc, you like to improvise, and that's all well and good when it works. But I, he says, I just can't work that way. I can't improvise in the studio, for the most part, because I absolutely must know where the camera has to be in relation to the actors and their environment. He goes on to describe a hypothetical director's situation where you have an actor at a desk in the corner of a room preparing to leave, but if it turns out that the exit door is on the other side of the room, it becomes clear only during shooting that it will take too long for the actor to get from the desk to the door, and vice versa. He says he doesn't want to waste any time with such problems that real locations present, not to mention improvising in those locations, so he needs to work in a controlled environment like a studio and plan out everything in advance. If he's well-prepared he can be both creative and economical. In avoiding the unexpected he can avoid the disaster of falling behind in the production schedule and going over budget. Now Godard's reply reveals just how irreconcilable these filmmaking approaches are: he says I can't just move the position

of the door in the built set to wherever I please for the simple reason that I've chosen a real location; I've cast rather than built my set; I must respect in a documentary sense the location that I've chosen. If I really can't stand where the door is, then I need to find a different location, a different apartment or café to shoot in. In the end the two filmmakers agree that a good film needs both methods, and yet in doing so they confess, I think, that they are who they are.

Ray: The best thing I've read recently on this problem is a book, *The Cinema Hypothesis* (2016), by the former editor of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Alain Bergala. Bergala was working with the Ministry of Education in France. And he was part of an organised discussion of how to teach film to young kids, not just high school age, but younger, middle school, even elementary school. And so, part of the book is clearly that kind of bureaucratic document that has to be filed, but parts of it are really interesting. One thing that Bergala says is, there's always a resistance, or a gap, between a script or the original intention that the filmmaker has and the actual filming of it, the actual result. And he said part of it is rooted in the locations of moviemaking. You know exactly what you're talking about here: you choose a room to shoot in and then you have to fill it with things. He gives the example of *Le Mépris* (1963) where Godard rented an apartment in order to film some of these scenes between Bardot and her husband played by Piccoli. And he said, okay, the room's empty, and I've got to put furniture in, choose what colour the furniture is, put something on the walls, arrange all the furniture, and so on. These are the kind of constraints, already the kinds of resistances to the original idea that a director has of what he wants to shoot. But this is the real point: the single greatest resistance is the actors themselves because you have some vague conception of the film in your head. But these are specific and complex human beings, with their own distinct voices and distinct physical appearances and ways of moving and walking. And if you can't accommodate them then you've either got to recast it or you've got to give up on your original idea, however vague it may have been. That's a really interesting idea. So, to a certain extent, some films are conceived from the start with actors in mind, and the director is always thinking

about this particular actor. For example, Howard Hawks liked to work with well-known stars because, as he said, they're more predictable. Perhaps at times this reliance on the same stars was a kind of laziness on his part, but even then, he still had to cast all the other roles. There's some kind of gap there in the art of casting, of people as well as places, that cannot be traversed in a controlled or predictable manner.

Mowchun: Is this the sort of ontological gap / resistance that we should be pointing out to our students as a possible storehouse of ambiguity or mystery that cannot be easily ascribed to an author, and so a possible starting point for the analysis and interpretation of films on their own terms?

Ray: I think a lot about ways of getting my students – and myself no less – to experiment more with film analysis. I first started citing student work in *The Avant Garde Finds Andy Hardy*, and I've continued to do so in the four books that have followed. We often hear the cautionary platitude about combining research and teaching, but in my case the platitude has proved useful. I wouldn't have written any of my six books if I hadn't been teaching. I'm not saying that I wouldn't have written *any* books, but certainly they would have been entirely different and probably less interesting to me. This way of working with student responses resembles somewhat Duke Ellington's compositional method. By most accounts, Ellington, for all his skills with harmony, orchestration, arrangement and rhythm, was not especially gifted melodically. Many of his most famous songs ('Mood Indigo', 'Don't Get Around Much Anymore', 'I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart') had their provenance in snatches of melody that one of his musicians had improvised while warming up or just noodling. Ellington would overhear these phrases and build a song around them. Sometimes he would give a co-writing credit; sometimes (as in the case of Barney Bigard's 'Mood Indigo' melody) he had to be badgered into doing so. One of his disgruntled bandmates once confronted Ellington by saying, 'You're not a composer, you're a compiler.' And he was half-right: Ellington was a compiler, but he composed out of his compilations, and the musicians who provided source material never achieved as much on their own as they did with

him. He established a collaborative context that enabled an enormous amount of music. I certainly don't want to compare what I've done to Ellington's monumental accomplishments, but I have also composed or at least found inspiration in what I've compiled from my students, which often amounts to their noticing something I had missed. And I've always given them name-credit when I've used what they wrote for me. My point is this: Ellington kept his band going until he died, long after the big-band, swing era had ended, and long after keeping a large band together made any kind of financial sense. He used his royalties to keep the band going because he said he needed to hear what he wrote, but he also needed the compositional collaboration. Some important film professors like James Naremore and David Bordwell have continued to produce books after their retirements. Without the stimulation of teaching – preparing for class, thinking through the material, the class itself – I'm not sure I would be able to do so if I'd stopped teaching. I've been lucky to spend my career at a university where, despite its enormous size, most of my undergraduate classes are between 20-30 students, so I rarely lecture, and discussion is the norm. I'm not sure, however, that student responses are always necessarily fresh. Especially juniors and seniors often bring certain theoretical equipment with them, for example race, class and gender templates which predispose them to thematic, even social science ways of looking at films. I'm not saying such things are without value, but they aren't exactly 'fresh'. To summon the kind of attentiveness I'm after, I rarely confront such theoretical habits head-on. I prefer giving specific assignments that, by summoning a different kind of response, often surprise the students who write them. Take, for example, someone I cite in this book, Harvard Ed school Professor Eleanor Duckworth and her moon-watching assignment as described in *The Having of Wonderful Ideas* (2006). My daughter took her course and on its first day Duckworth tasked the students with observing the moon every night over the course of the semester, recording their observations and any questions that came up. My daughter reported that initially these sophisticated graduate students scoffed at what seemed to them childish work. Nevertheless, it very quickly began yielding interesting things. One student noted that a half-moon seemed to open towards both the

left and the right on the same night. Is that possible? It turns out, yes. In my chapter on cinephilia and method, I report on some of the results of using Duckworth's framework. I asked students to choose a brief scene from *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) and watch it for seven consecutive nights, doing nothing but recording what they noticed, and how what they noticed gradually evolved. I got wonderful work from students who said they would never have predicted what they eventually wrote. Duckworth's maxim is one of the best starting points for film study: *Tell me what you notice, not what it means*. Students have been trained since middle school to do the latter, to say what something means; getting them to report on what they notice requires a different kind of assignment. In *The Avant Garde Finds Andy Hardy*, I found that certain surrealist games proved especially effective in generating surprise (which the field of information science saw as the necessary ingredient of information). After all, if you know the message in advance, the learning process contains no valuable information for you. We have to learn how to see all there is to see, which may involve an act of un-learning, seeing *before* thinking. It then becomes possible to be taken by surprise by what we've been calling perplexities, because to see and hear everything there is in a film – and especially in nature – is almost by definition to be perplexed.

Mowchun: I found it interesting (no, surprising) that sometimes, at the end of a chapter, one of the student responses to a prompt or perplexity is framed as an example, but actually we're not quite sure what's being exemplified here. It's more the experience of perplexity and surprise that you successfully introduce inside the text. You then resist the temptation to bracket these experiments in observation and discovery with your own concluding summations – a 'motionless' ending to the chapter. Instead, a chapter can end with this kind of dialogical shift, dramatising a genuine moment of perplexity. I also see this method as an attempt to preserve the latent energy of these student responses by allowing them to stand on their own terms, to a certain extent, speaking from within the hold of perplexity itself.

Ray: Yes, but that's not always true. For instance, in *The Avant Garde Finds Andy Hardy*, but especially in the Thoreau book, *Walden x 40* (2012), I often use something a student had noticed as the generator for my own comments. And I typically indicate in different ways whether I was quoting a student directly or using his or her remarks as the starting point for something else. So often the valuable thing that students will do is simply point to something and say, 'Look at this', and not necessarily say what it means or not necessarily have any kind of extrapolation. And, obviously, we know more than they do. We're more ready to extrapolate. And we can take it in other places, we know more films, we know more books, we know more things. And that can be a disadvantage too, however, because it can prompt a rush to interpretation or rush to a conclusion, instead of leaving things open-ended. So, I just want to make it clear that I'm not always leaving these discoveries, these perplexities as we've been calling them, just as they are, such that I don't have anything more to say about them. Often I do have much to say about what the students point out. I prefer to look and see before jumping to conclusions.

Mowchun: These strike me as questions about writing too, and writing about film specifically. To return to the moon-watching assignment you adapted from Duckworth where students write repeatedly on a particular film, initially they may worry that they will just be repeating themselves, but they may also discover that every time they watch the film, or a particular scene, they will notice different things, if they are paying attention (and altering their angles of attention). I'm wondering if we are trying to get the students to expand their awareness and appreciation of the filmic elements so as to be able to come to an understanding or a meaning that is going to be interesting, pressing, and in tune with the filmic text itself; or is the goal rather to cultivate in their consciousness as viewers a kind of film grammar, as it were, as if they (all of us) don't really know – or too easily forget – how exactly film functions and signifies. In other words, we don't really know (or keep forgetting) the language or the grammar of cinema because generally we're too eager to reduce it to a narrative or

to a thematic so as to make better sense of it and apply it to our own lives. Do you think that we actually have to cultivate a form of criticism where we just completely avoid any kind of interpretation in terms of what might be going on in the story, the minds of characters, or the filmmaker's intentions? And then once we have a robust criticism in hand, one that can handle as many variations as possible, only then are we fit to read films and reach conclusions about them, however tentative they may be?

Ray: That's a very complex question. And one that I've thought a lot about. I'm extremely interested in pedagogy. I'm extremely interested in pedagogical methods and communication. And the first thing I would say is, I think we would be – how can I put it? – disappointed would be a mild term, *devastated* might be better, to see how little our students remember of what we've said even a month after classes end. So, if we impart to them a general series of abstract theoretical points about the cinema, those are going to be forgotten fairly quickly. One of the things that's interesting from a pedagogical standpoint is that if you choose a concrete example, and the concrete example has *embedded in it* the points you want to teach, they're going to remember that example – but only the example and not necessarily what was said about it or 'the point' of it. Maybe some of the general points that you're trying to impart to them through the example will be retained, but they'll remember that example and they'll know there's something about it, something at stake in it. I'm really interested in that phenomenon. I'm probably as interested in Wittgenstein's teaching method as I am in his philosophy. The method is so eccentric, as you know, with one of his lecture series famously beginning with the remark, 'What we say will be easy, but to know why we say it will be very difficult' (Ambrose 2001). And as far as I can tell his method was to proceed by one concrete example and problem after another, with very few connected links and even fewer, if any, general theoretical summaries of what he's doing. One case study after another, to use today's terminology. And he cared a lot about teaching and seems to have depended on teaching to generate

ideas. A lot of people said he really needed the classroom to properly work out his ideas. William Gass has remarked that it was almost impossible to remember anything Wittgenstein said, and yet it was the single most intense pedagogical experience of his life. It's a performance, thought in action, a real process of discovery with all its accompanying pitfalls. I'm interested in that. I'm also interested in what Kierkegaard called 'indirect communication,' which he understands as the inability to change someone's mind or even convince them of something by confronting them head on. You have to tell stories or jokes or something like that to get them to see differently. Claire Carlisle, the writer of a biography on Kierkegaard, claims that indirect communication is common practice in debates on religion. Jesus works in parables whose meanings are not readily apparent. This makes sense for a discourse like religion which is based on faith, but we're not used to that so much in philosophy, and we're probably not used to it in film studies either. Telling stories, making jokes, pointing to things – these are rather strange methods but I think they can be extremely valuable ways of teaching.

Mowchun: It's true that often we don't remember the words of our teachers or the philosophers we read. We may not even remember being convinced by them! Can we know something without remembering it? Perhaps the unremembered knowledge has made our minds and hearts more pliable, more open to new knowledge. Or perhaps it exists in a dormant state, coming back to us when it proves to be useful in some way. Life experiences *can* be had from books and in the classroom. In any case, we may not really want to possess the words at all. What would that get us save for a sack of readymade quotations? The power of an idea is best measured by whether or not it has an effect. How do we know if ideas have, let's say, causal and constructive effects? We don't. And what would count as a meaningful effect 'beyond the words'? That's not for us to say. But if the teacher is *affected* then there's a good chance the students will be as well. You find yourself genuinely perplexed while teaching – it's a struggle, of course – and you let that perplexity affect you so that you have

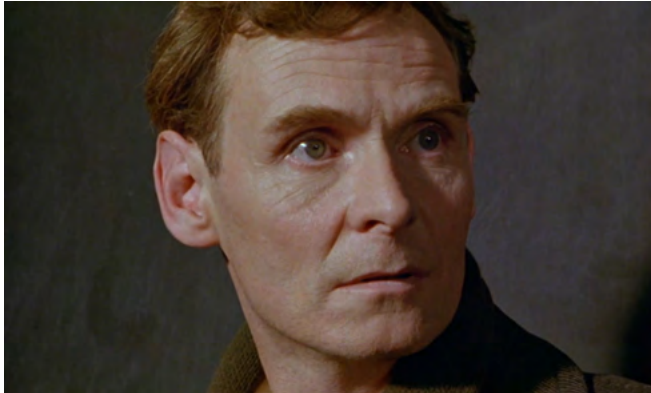
trouble finding the words or perhaps are at a loss for words, the right words – 'stopped', as Cavell says in conversation with Klevan. Mid-thought silence can be striking if the urge to dance around one's limitations or violate the strict demands of patience with empty talk is finally resisted. Coming from a position of knowledge and authority, we may feel that we're not at liberty not to know, to be silenced in this way. But that really could be what the students will remember most – the problem that gave us pause and compelled us to reject the easy way out. Now isn't that much easier said than done!

Ray: Right. As it happens there are accounts of Wittgenstein just stopping in the middle of a class and there would be – though it's hard to imagine – 2-3 minutes of dead silence. But he was trying to think his way through a problem and not give voice to anything less than the truth. I must admit, I'm neither self-confident enough, or perhaps self-absorbed enough, to do that in front of a class. If I'm stumped for something I'll just simply say, I'm sorry, I don't know. I'll have to think about it. But I can't answer it right now. I suppose I am silencing myself on an impassable question and will move onto something else about which I can speak.

Mowchun: While we're on the subject, it seems to me there aren't very many compelling, edifying, yet unsentimental depictions of teaching in movies. These figures tend to be rapidly inspirational, like Robin Williams' character in *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989), or completely disillusioned with their profession, which can manifest in a speaking voice that is either too authoritative or bereft of conviction, like Jake Gyllenhaal's teacher-character in *Enemy* (Denis Villeneuve, 2013), to take a recent if unusual example that's been on my mind. Of the handful of films on the lives of individual philosophers, few to my knowledge show much consideration for their work in the classroom. Movies generally regard the classroom as a space to escape from, not unlike the stereotypically dehumanizing depictions of office space in movies too numerous to name. It's *outside* the classroom where the real drama of teaching / learning begins, according to these

films. However, I do greatly admire the scenes of Wittgenstein (played by Karl Johnson) teaching in Derek Jarman's eccentric biopic *Wittgenstein* (1993), a film constructed entirely in a studio against black undressed backgrounds. I love all those scenes of him teaching to a small group of reclined, enamored, yet mostly frustrated students. And if you recall, there's a genuine moment of learning – call it an epiphany, without sentiment – that occurs (and this is crucial) *after* one of the classes comes to an end, during that special interval where students can approach or even confront the teacher with questions they weren't able to ask during the class itself. Here a student (played by Ashley Russell), unconvinced by Wittgenstein's argument against the existence of a private language, confesses that he still feels it is possible or natural for him to say, 'I know I am in pain.' So, in a way the class was a failure, because the student is still tempted to say something that Wittgenstein demonstrated makes no logical sense. Wittgenstein's response to the student comes in the form of a rather straightforward example – but just an example for him to think about. He asks the student a question along these lines, 'Why would you want to say that the sun revolves around the earth and not the other way around?' The student hesitantly replies, 'Well, I suppose because it appears that way.' Now here comes the moment of silence we were talking about. Wittgenstein looks deeply into the student's eyes and waits with baited breath for him to make the realisation for himself. He does not intercede by saying, 'It's natural to say the sun revolves around the earth, but that does not make it so. We cannot leave truth in the hands of appearances. That is why we have logic ...'. Instead the Wittgenstein character's method is to go back to Copernicus and invite the student to apply an old fallacy (the sun revolves around the earth) to a new one (I know I am in pain). The student is no longer on the defense, his mind has been opened, he's willing to *change* his mind. He says, 'Yes, I see what you mean.' See. And he's smiling joyously in the light of insight and truth, a light he has chosen to face, however blinding it may be (think Plato's parable of the cave). It's the Achilles heel of the human condition to become arrogant when in the know and hostile when questioned or

proven wrong, but the combination of Wittgenstein's gentle, non-didactic method and the student's well-timed humility and openness make this a victorious moment that surely will be remembered, by both student and teacher.



Ray: This is what Wittgenstein calls effecting an aspect change, which for him is always subject to the will. You can be prompted, but in the end you must take it upon yourself. And in fact, he said aspects invariably involve communication with another person. 'Don't you see the duck?' 'This person looks like this other person.' So, a request for comradeship is also involved in aspect change. But I wonder if higher education in general is going in a different direction where

such things are being devalued. I don't think we've quite fully digested how much the economic / business model and its vocabulary colour everything universities now do. Simply by talking about how college education is a good investment, for example, we've immediately deployed the economic model, as if that's the only reason you should go to college, because it's an investment and it will pay off professionally and financially. Part of that economic model is the measurement of outcomes. The economists want to measure whether this is a productive enterprise, whether it's an efficient enterprise. And so, we have these silly student learning-outcome models that we have to figure out. But the humanities are marked by curiosity, digression, and a sense of delay. So much of a humanities education and the way it affects us will only show later on, after the classes are long over or even years later, when you've had the time to contemplate how it has affected you. My colleague, Greg Ulmer, now retired, once said that the humanities proceed on a sort of time-bomb theory: you know, there's a bomb here, but you don't know when it will go off until 10 years after you graduate. Oh, so that's what that was all about! In reality, the 'I see' moment experienced by the Wittgenstein student happens much later, and probably more gradually than this bomb metaphor suggests. In this sense the humanities is a tough sell. It's not like science where you can measure the outcome more readily. You absolutely must know x, y, and z about physics in order to proceed to the next stage. For us, we are not even sure what we need our students to know. And if we think we know, we all disagree about it.

Mowchun: My feeling about this is that as soon as we find ourselves in this corporate environment where we have to justify what we do by quantifying and monetising the value of humanities work, we have altogether lost what is uniquely valuable about the humanities. We lose what most people, not just scholars, I think, regard as the value of life beyond mere survival, success, or conventional paradigms of progress. In the classroom we may feel that the audience of students is looking for some concrete results, which we could actually give them by saying, 'the point of x is y' or 'this particular

detail in x amounts to y', etc. But in making this assumption do you think we might be completely mistaken in underestimating what our students actually value? Is it better to assume, whether we are right about it or not, that students who sign up for a film or literature course are doing so precisely because they are looking for values and experiences outside of or opposed to the university's corporate model, that they are actually seeking out classroom environments that serve as reprieves from the corporate capitalist culture that seems to have infiltrated the university, not to mention everyday life in so many parts of the world?

Ray: Yes, I think that's certainly true of some students. I also think some students don't know why they're there.

Mowchun: Which could be a good thing ...

Ray: What better way is there to be surprised and enlivened by perplexity than not knowing the subject and not knowing yourself, at least not fully. It may also be the key to the power of movies. Too much knowledge about film – call it film studies – can have both positive and negative effects.

Mowchun: Do you think the field has done more harm than good in that respect?

Ray: Not exactly, although this question has started to get asked about MFA creative writing programs. A recent book analysed what they called 'program writing' for its effects on fiction and poetry. The Coen Brothers, whose movies I don't care for, seem an extreme example of the film school aesthetic – sophisticated irony about genre conventions. But I think film history has seen at least three more significant influences on moviemaking than film schools. The first, of course, involves the emergence of sound which, as Pauline Kael observed in her book on *Citizen Kane* (1996), brought the movies back down to earth, away from the pseudo-poetic melodramas of the worst of silent cinema. The second was the Hollywood studio system whose structure and stable of contract players

and technicians enabled the production of a huge volume of work. If you're making 50 feature films a year, as MGM was in the 1930s and early 40s, you can afford to experiment because your hits will cover your flops. The studios had embraced Taylorism as a production model. Remember when Universal opened the first Hollywood studio they didn't get a show-business figure to cut the ribbon, they got Henry Ford. That was their ideal. Another enterprise that did the same thing was Motown, the recording studio in Detroit whose founder Barry Gordy had worked in the automobile factories. If you have the singers and the studio musicians and the songwriters and the producers all under contract, and if you maintain a strict division of labor (at the outset, only Smokey Robinson performed his own songs), you can make a lot of hit records. Of course, the studio musicians don't participate in the royalties, and the would-be songwriter / artists get frustrated, but as soon as Motown relaxed that division-of-labor rule things went downhill. The third biggest change is the one we're now living through. It is partially demographic, mostly technological. With the rise in digital streaming services and the retreat from theatrical exhibition, American film production has increasingly concentrated on super-hero comic-book movies, reliant on CGI, to appeal to the remaining part of the audience, young people who still go to the theaters (though this is changing too). The best thing written about the effect of CGI and other digital tools on the movies is Dai Vaughan's little essay, 'From Today, Cinema is Dead' (collected in his book, *For Documentary*). There Vaughan says, and I will quote him at length:

'Let me make it clear that I am not concerned here with mendacity. I am not concerned with the possibility that people may be misled by a doctored picture. What concerns me is that we shall wake up one day and find that the assumption of a privileged relation between a photograph and its object, an assumption which has held good for 150 years and on which ciné-actuality is founded, will have ceased to be operative. And when that happens, it will not be because some thesis has been refuted but because the accumulation of countervailing experiences—of the simulation of the photographic idiom, of the electronic recombination of photographic elements,

of 'photographic' processes where intervention between the registration and reproduction of the image is not only easy but inescapable—have rendered null that 'trust' for which the idiom has simply been our warranty. And once we have lost it, we shall never get it back' (1999: 188-9).

So, the more we move towards the digital, the more we regress to making cinema a kind of writing rather than a break from writing. Because what digitisation is frequently used to do is to control or eliminate improvisational errors. My wife (who's a professional violist) and I were talking about this last night. Take something like auto tune, which corrects micro pitch adjustments to make the singer hit the note in the center all the time. According to her, that's not the way genuine musicians work. There's such a thing as expressive tonality. Sinatra is famous for it. Sinatra has micro pitches as he's singing, and he's not always in the center of the note. He's around the note rather than dead center all the time. So, it's remarkably expressive and moving. And it's the same way for string players: they are not just hitting the dead center of the note every time as auto tune would have you do, rather you're moving around the note. I think the same is true for acting: if you use digital actors, you just don't have real people. They will have a kind of rote, perfect behavior, whereas a live actor may have an idiosyncratic kind of behavior that's not quite what the director had in mind but is pleasantly surprising to the director. To me, that's even more important than the ubiquitous conversion to comic-book movies. But I wonder: has the spirit of digitisation been constant throughout the history of film? I think from the start either filmmakers themselves but mostly people thinking about film were trying to make film a kind of writing again, because writing is fully controllable. When we were talking about surprise earlier, a painter can't really be surprised by something. There's the old story of people making period films, and all of a sudden an oil derrick appears in the background or something like that. And they have to retake it. But you can't imagine a painter doing a crucifixion scene, saying, how did that oil derrick get here? So, the painter is much less likely to be surprised by his own work unless he's working in some kind of surrealist way. And a writer is in the same situation too. We know that the surrealist

exercises like free associative writing, automatic writing, and so on, were designed, as Breton said, to be like a snapshot of thought. But now we've reversed it. And film keeps being dragged back into a kind of writing because it's so controllable. After all, that's what's so appealing about film – it animates things. Someone can just sit at an animation table or use digital equipment and produce something that's no different than writing. I have very little interest in animation for this reason. I like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Walt Disney, 1937) as much as the next person, but what I'm really interested in is how film differs from writing.

Mowchun: It's true that most moving images today are being heavily manipulated and controlled on computers in some way. As a result, you have so many films where a formulaic look has been grafted onto each shot, crushing the contingencies of the world into a colourized uniformity that is mistaken for mood. At least this is the case for the post-production side of digital filmmaking. On the production side, however, digital cameras are smaller, lighter, cheaper, and more efficacious than they've ever been. You can turn on a digital camera and see an image right away, the world is there on a dime, as it were, whereas on celluloid you have to know how to light and expose it – the world is not necessarily ready-to-hand. You actually have to exert some cinematographic control in order to get a good exposure, and then it has to go to the lab for processing before you can see it the next day. Digital is strange in this regard: first the world pours in and then, in post-production, it's shut out or, to use your term, overwritten.

Ray: Has this been your experience as a filmmaker who has worked with both film and digital?

Mowchun: My first feature film, *World to Come* (co-directed with Daniel Eskin, 2015), was shot on film and was even colour-timed on film, but for various reasons the project was finished digitally. I definitely felt the ontological shift from one medium to the other (though I never used that term with any of my collaborators!). During the shoot (and I did most of the camera operating myself) I was hyperaware of the heft

of the camera and especially the vibration of the film running through the gate, hence of the finitude and fragility of film stock. Planning a shot under conditions of celluloid is like getting dressed up for a special occasion, for once the take begins and the film starts to roll I think everyone involved feels a certain invigorating pressure, a silent respect for the medium. It's hard to describe. The shot is being recorded, etched, onto something physical. It's not permanent but it will likely outlive its makers. The shot is also being recreated to serve as a potentially invaluable piece in a larger whole, the film, whose 'greatness' beyond a mere sum of parts depends on what is accomplished in a given part, rather than on how these parts are made to fit or flow in editing. Even though the part ultimately serves the whole, when you're shooting on film the feeling, for me, is that the part is also its own whole, and if it's not alive at the moment of shooting then you know ahead of time to cut it out. Now with digital cameras being the way they are, including the cell phone as camera, almost anyone at any time is in possession of a movie camera, and they can just turn it on and start filming, spontaneously and without thinking. In principle, this is a perfect set-up for being surprised by the world. But *who* is being surprised? I would say generally it's the filmmaker and not the viewer, or at best a niche group of viewers. The average viewer, so to speak, may be indifferent to what, for the filmmaker, is a personal novelty or obsession. Viewers today are also oversaturated with the sheer volume of moving images and their instantaneous accessibility. Did you ever think you'd see the day when you could watch the films of, say, Andrei Tarkovsky or Stan Brakhage at the click of a button? Or the day when the Criterion Collection, which began by distributing their home viewing releases on laserdisc and charging top dollar for their rare DVDs, would start their own streaming channel with access to what feels like their entire library, arranged as immaterial tiles of information on a screen, for a relatively small monthly fee? I don't mean to complain about such a cinematic paradise, but I do want to register the fact that as quantities increase so dramatically, certain qualities like *attention* can slide into decay, especially in the realm of arts and culture. I associate quantity with

'information' and quality with 'art'. It's as if the film as artwork has lost its gilded frame and is walking casually, almost anonymously, in the streets as part of a dense crowd crudely referred to today as 'content'.

Ray: I've written about this before, but the quick way to say it is that to a certain extent cinephilia is a function of scarcity. The more obscure or difficult it is to find something the more it is likely to be valued, and often for the wrong reasons. I can remember when I first got interested in movies. I was at Harvard Business School, of all places. And this is just before the advent of videotape and DVDs. But Harvard, and Boston at large, was a fantastic place to start seeing movies. Near Harvard was the Harvard Square Theater, the Brattle Theater, and the Orson Welles Cinema, all of which were repertory houses. Then each of the Harvard houses had its own Film Society, and they would show one movie on Friday and another on Saturday night. And you know, they each cost 50 cents or something like that. You could see a lot of amazing stuff. But I can remember, when I first started attending, a Marx Brothers movie that was the most difficult to see was *Animal Crackers* (Victor Heerman, 1930). For some reason there were just no prints of it circulating. They would have other revivals of Marx Brothers movies, but not that one. And all of a sudden it showed up at Tufts. I remember making my way to some student union or something at Tufts to see it. The result is I probably greatly overvalued the movie when I saw it, given how difficult it had been to see. But when everything's available all the time, you may put off forever watching Rossellini's *The Rise of Louis XIV* (1966). Because it's there, and you can see it whenever you wish, you may say to yourself, 'I don't need to see it today.' Whereas if it were obscure and only came around once every 10 years, you would probably drop everything and go see it, devoted cinephile that you are.

Mowchun: I wonder if we are less likely to watch the Rossellini film in full than to catch a glimpse of it somewhere in the digital ether, perhaps recontextualised or reappropriated beyond

recognition. Today, a clip from a film can stand in for the whole film, and these clips can be woven together with clips from, say, other Rossellini films that may reveal a pattern of aesthetic or thematic development. Movies can be contextualised or recontextualised within a much bigger picture, the great epic movie that is the internet, and the specific details of the whole are glossed over or forfeited because there isn't the same time and attention for them. It's like being satisfied with a trailer, whereas the point of a trailer, of course, is to tempt you into watching the *entire* film. We must commit (in the sense of monogamy) to watching an entire film these days.

Ray: It's interesting. Alain Bergala, whom I mentioned before, has a chapter called 'Toward a Pedagogy of Fragments.' One of his first experiences with the cinema was through a TV show in Paris that simply showed little clips of things, one after another, without any explanation, without any discussion – here's a fragment of this movie, here's another, and he said it was surprisingly compelling and interesting. Connecting this back to pedagogy, he said one of the ways you can awaken student interest in film is by showing them a film fragment, a fragment here, a fragment there, and say 'look at this!' So that's not necessarily a bad thing. It can be a good thing. While I'm still very partial to the grain of the camera working with film as opposed to digital, it's the digital medium that better allows us to teach by pointing and recalling film fragments that carry some special meaning for us.

Mowchun: If mediums have corresponding moods, celluloid could be called contemplative while digital is more casual in its means. Both have redeemable qualities and, more importantly, both 'moods' can be activated aesthetically, with or against the specific cinematic substrate that is being used. And this brings me to the rich work you do in *The Structure of Complex Images* with Abbas Kiarostami's contribution to the omnibus film *Tickets*. Am I justified in describing his section as both contemplative *and* casual, drawing on possibilities inherent in both mediums? Like much of Kiarostami's work,

on a first viewing the film can appear haphazard and we may not give it a second thought. But it beckons, doesn't it? The question is *how*, when it so lacks the seriousness of conventional arthouse cinema while at the same time preventing us from having a routine, predictable experience at the movies.

Ray: Seemingly haphazard, dashed off, just for fun ... But no, no, not at all.

Mowchun: It's one of Kiarostami's signature tricks as a filmmaker to downplay dramatic importance, negate aesthetic pretense, only for the film to creep up on you in its own peculiar and often revelatory way. And upon rewatching this simple story constructed through a series of contingent encounters on a train, I thought I detected what may be a parable on the digital medium itself – a digital consciousness even – as a systematic thwarting of the poetry and perplexity of a life unmediated by technology. Do you know what I mean?

Ray: Maybe.

Mowchun: It emerges in the longer conversation scene between Filippo (Filippo Trajano) and the young girl (Marta Manguicco) he meets on the train, whose name I can't recall ...

Ray: We don't ever learn her name.

Mowchun: Okay, another interesting fact that I think is relevant to her character. At first we see her listening to music on a portable player while riding on the train. As many travellers know, the experience of listening to music on a moving vehicle has the power to synchronise the music with the landscape scrolling through the window, making for one of life's many special sensorial concoctions – but it occurred to me that she may not be savoring this experience as someone whose default consciousness is, in a way, already conditioned by technology. She lives a 'plugged in' existence, as it were, until Filippo interrupts her virtual solitude, forcing her to remove her earbuds and engage with another person face-to-face. In this sense it is fitting that she remains nameless, for she seems to be only half-present. The ensuing



conversation between the two characters bears all the freshness and urgency of birds debating life on a branch. Through Filippo's inquisitiveness she recalls that they actually met before, during a game of hide-and-seek outdoors where she chose a tunnel for a hiding place. She is a young teenager now from the looks of it, reminiscing about her childhood, her age of innocence, while appearing at the same time not to have lost this innocence. We gather from her story that she remained hidden away alone in that tunnel for far longer than expected; she emerged from it all wet and fuming at having been excluded from the game by Filippo, who, it turns out, was playing a very different 'game.' She then confesses that only later, upon growing up and awakening, did she actually understand what Filippo and his lover were doing there. She had known nothing – or nothing of what she now knows – about the sexual exploits of the adult world. So for her, this experience became quite a pivotal moment of change. At

the time she was merely annoyed, but in retrospect, having thought about it more, she turned this memory into what we call an *experience* and kept it with her as she set forth along the path of adulthood. Then Filippo asks her, 'What would you do now?' She is taken aback, thinks about it, and responds with a hint of melancholy, 'We don't play there anymore.' 'You don't?' 'No, we just text and we watch the internet.' Kiarostami may be suggesting here that the digital world has severely limited the scope of play and passion in today's youth culture. We don't play hide-and-seek anymore, and who would dare venture deep inside a dark dank tunnel, for all our discoveries, such as they are, lie before us on a sheltered screen as a never-ending stream of options, effects, and (for the most part) instant gratification. It makes me wonder what the chances are that a child or teenager today will have an experience like the one she describes? What will the memories of the future be like? ...

Ray: Hiding in that tunnel and getting wet and finding oneself thrown into one's solitude while waiting to be found – it's all relayed through casual conversation on a train and yet you can picture it so vividly. It turns out trains and tunnels are connected. This is Kiarostami's autobiographical memory, by the way. He was hiding like that. And he didn't realise these people were trying to get rid of the kids in playing this game. It was his memory that he gave to this young girl and in doing so he gives her an inner life.

Mowchun: Interesting. There is absolutely nothing autobiographical about the film per se – nothing sentimental, nothing self-reflexive – and yet it uses autobiography as raw material for building a character that one would never imagine to be a surrogate for the author.

Ray: Yes, it does in that moment. Other moments are different. The film is like a succession of moments.

Mowchun: And there seems to be no desire to tie them all together. They don't need to be tied together. In fact, this looseness is vital to the film's versatility and spontaneity so as to better shift its emotional weight, to pivot in new directions.

It is what allows for this feeling of melancholy over the loss of childhood innocence and predigital adventurousness to pervade briefly in an otherwise lighthearted and playful film.

Ray: The moment becomes melancholic, I see, but another moment soon comes – the film shifts its weight again, as you say, and you can't stop the train, as it were. Nothing is more cinematic than a train.

Mowchun: (laughs) The train flows like the creative process itself in dialogue with a world of others, rather than like a river whose flow is more constant and introspective, let's say. To be honest I don't fully grasp the logic (that's probably the wrong word) of the film's creative process, the passage it takes through / on the train of life. It all begins with a large well-dressed woman on her way to attend the wake of her husband. She is accompanied by Filippo, a man half her age. We don't know the nature of their relationship; this unfolds gradually in time but is never really confirmed. Rather than answer these narrative questions, the film shifts its focus from the woman to Filippo. Kiarostami changes his mind, becomes interested in something else. Someone else. Filippo. He's the main protagonist – or is he? We are curious about Filippo, too. Someone else is curious about him – the young girl we were just speaking about. Through Filippo she remembers the tunnel, the game, childhood, and her first vague glimpse of sexual awakening. And this is actually Kiarostami's memory, as you point out. What narrative versatility, controlled improvisation, life as poetry! (Kiarostami was a true lover of poetry, especially Persian poetry.) You discover the film's liveliness near the end of your book. Did these qualities strike you immediately upon seeing it?

Ray: It took me time. The first time I saw it I was just charmed by it, and I was interested in it. It took me awhile to figure out why because nothing much seems to be happening, and yet, I'm interested in it. It's strange. It's maybe one of the hardest things to do in art: to create the effect of off-handedness or improvisation. Like an organic piece of music, it feels totally off-hand and improvised and yet, it's not. It's all

worked out meticulously – it has to be to get it that way. That's really the hardest thing to achieve. For instance, I'm not at all interested in Cassavetes because the improvisation has not been sufficiently worked out. Cassavetes has not accepted or internalised this paradox and therefore I'm bored by it. You don't want life in art but the *effect* of life in art. Kiarostami, somehow, creates that effect – you have pointed out some features of it, but no one actually knows *how* he did it – and I'm enchanted by it.

Mowchun: It's as serious an enterprise as it is an amusing one for Kiarostami, I think. He pours his soul into it, while laughing. He's playing a game, very seriously playing, blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction, life and art, the most beautiful and dangerous game, perhaps. In fact, this is something he has always done, and by the time he makes his piece for *Tickets*, he has mastered it.

Ray: Those boundaries were always being blurred. Well, it's the movies. That's the way the movies work. I'm very taken by something Irving Thalberg once said: 'In the future, the movies will be the best record of how we once lived.' In other words, just the documentary evidence of how people dressed, talked, what slang they used, how they checked into a hotel or got out of a car. All of those things are just there. To give you a concrete example: after Jean Harlow's husband, Paul Bern, had either killed himself or been murdered (when Harlow was not at home), she took only two days off from work before returning to making *Red Dust* (Victor Fleming, 1932) at MGM. If you want to see documentary evidence of what she looked like just after her husband's shocking death, I can point you to a scene in the film where she comes down the stairs to greet Clark Gable – deliberately filmed from a distance, in soft focus to obscure slightly her face, swollen from crying and exhaustion. That shot is documentary evidence in a fictional movie. And it's always been like that – watching fiction while witnessing fact. We should keep reminding ourselves of this mystery of the movies, and of the need to find ways of talking about it without losing its magic.

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