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LEARN THE VOCABULARY OF FILM.

IT'S three o'clock in the morning. I'm standing on the boardwalk in Asbury Park, a community on the New Jersey shore that has seen better days. It is twelve degrees out, and though I am clad in Gore-Tex and goose down and fleece, the January wind off the ocean is cutting right through my clothes and skin.

I am surrounded by a seventy-five-member film crew, tons of equipment, and have only four hours and eighteen minutes until the sun comes up. Despite the cold, I am holding a walkie-talkie in my bare hand because I can't press the "talk" button down or turn the knobs with my gloves on. When I make the call, "First team's ready," a thought flashes through my mind. It is not "Will the camera freeze?" or "Will the dialogue be audible above the wind?" It is not "Will Robert De Niro and James Franco be able to navigate the icy boardwalk and deliver a performance in these conditions?" It is far more self-indulgent. At this moment, steeped in exhaustion and biting cold, I ask myself, How did I end up here? And I realize it is because I didn't want to wear a necktie.

When I got out of college and my peers headed off to Brooks Brothers and Wall Street, I knew only that one thing: that I didn't want to wear a tie to work. So I started reading *Variety* and noticed a small ad in the back announcing a training

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program offered by the Directors Guild of America. A few phone calls and a written application landed me in New York City, where I took a series of entrance exams given by the Directors Guild for a spot in a two-year training program for assistant directors. I had only a vague sense of what an assistant director did, but it sounded promising.

Of the nearly one thousand applicants, only seven of us were selected, and I was assigned to the first film to start up in New York that autumn. When I walked into the production office on day one in my white shirt and creased pants, I still wasn't wearing a tie, but I did feel something tightening around my neck. Not silk perhaps, but apprehension. I knew I had a lot to learn.

Film students and filmmakers often talk about the language of film—the lenses, method of framing, and shot selection—that are the brick and mortar of our trade. But I didn't learn this vocabulary and grammar from textbooks with pages of diagrams depicting camera angles, or by discussing blocking, aspect ratios, and the benefits and limitations of standard coverage while sitting in a classroom. I wasn't inundated with essays enumerating the mechanics of screen direction or the philosophy behind New Wave cinema and Jean-Luc Godard's use of close-ups, or Hitchcock's high angles, Kurosawa's preference for long lenses, or Fellini's brilliance. Instead, I learned what is referred to as the vocabulary of film in the total immersion of a film set.

I learned about long lenses and depth of field not from the course material handed out second semester, or during a day spent at the library with film journals, but from the syllabus of a long string of ten-week shoots on the streets of New York. My education occurring not over a few semesters, but over a few decades. Taught to me, not by professors in a classroom, but by filmmakers with dolly track at their feet and their eye to a

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viewfinder. My understanding of the differences between the styles of European and American filmmakers, explained not in the theoretical secondhand words of a textbook, but by the thick, accented voices I can still hear in my head; Lajos Koltai, Miroslav Ondříček, Juan Ruiz Anchía. . . . The Europeans' love for the zoom lens; its simplicity, its versatility and freedom, the fluidity of a single shot demonstrated as I witnessed its use in the hands of Giuseppe Rotunno and Sven Nykvist. Then there's Woody's masterful blocking, Emmanuel Lubezki's inspired lighting (*Great Expectations*), Carlo Di Palma's camera movement (*Hannah and Her Sisters*), and Gordon Willis's framing and technique (*Stardust Memories*).

I discovered the converging and dichotomous styles of the American and British cinematographers firsthand. The years and pictures come streaming back in the voices of Billy Williams (*Going in Style*) and Gerry Fisher (*Lovesick*). One could argue that the British style of working, where the director of photography (DP) has less involvement in actual shot design than an American cinematographer would, and is more of a lighting director, leaving the operator to work with the director designing shots, may not be the best system. But a quick look at the bodies of work of the great British DPs and the argument fades. Think about Billy Williams and *Gandhi*, or *On Golden Pond* and *Eleni*.

Which brings me back to Asbury Park and that boardwalk in New Jersey. The movie is *City by the Sea* and I am the assistant director (AD). Which doesn't mean I'm the guy fetching lattes for the director. It means I am the filmmaking professional running the set and managing the day-to-day operations of the movie. My job begins several months prior to shooting, in preproduction, when the movie is nothing more than a director, a script, and possibly a leading actor. As the cast and crew are hired, I break down the script, dissecting every scene into

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its component parts—location, actors, props. Then I schedule the film, scout locations, and, in coordination with a team of production people, create a plan to bring the project from conceptual idea to physical execution, from movie script to movie screen. On day one of shooting, I become a field general of sorts as we take over entire city blocks with a virtual army of talent and trucks and equipment.

Early in my career, Wolfgang Glattes, another assistant director, took a moment to explain about the compression that occurs with a long lens, creating the illusion that two objects are closer together than they really are. Two boats on a river, two cars on a street, can be made to appear to almost collide without ever coming very close to each other. In that instant, with that tiny piece of film vocabulary, a mere fraction of what I would need to know about the 150-mm lens, I learned that drama, which is so often the result of an actor's performance and delivery of lines, can also be created by a camera lens. Think of the impact, the independent and combined effect that blocking, number of frames shot per second, field size, camera height, and editing techniques can have on the drama, the suspense, the comedic timing of your story. What lens do you want on the camera? What filters? How is the camera mounted? What happens if you dolly in and zoom in simultaneously, or dolly in and zoom out? If you don't know, you will find your choices limited. I recall Alfonso Cuarón's (*A Little Princess, Y Tu Mamá También*) simple observation that if you're filming on an ugly set, go to a long lens. Only the actors will be in sharp focus and everything else will be soft.

I learned screen direction, knowing who should be looking camera right or camera left and why, while standing just a few feet from a camera, next to some of the greatest cinematographers in the world. The absolute necessity of matching an actor's visual direction is as significant as the choreography of a

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fight scene, where glances, rather than punches, are laid out with precision. Think of the complicated screen direction mandated by a sequence with multiple actors sitting around a table conversing. Then consider the brilliant shot in *Manhattan Murder Mystery* as the camera circles five actors around a table at Elaine's, all covered in a single 270-degree shot. The scene photographed in a way that gave complete freedom from the necessity to match for screen direction. The next time you are watching a film or television commercial, notice how often directors get the eye lines wrong. The sloppy work evidenced by actors looking the wrong way when the footage is cut together.

From both the explicit and the tacit knowledge gleaned from hundreds of professional filmmakers, I acquired a fluency and competence in the language of film. I can diagram a scene like a writer can diagram a sentence, because I know both the proper grammar and the street slang of film. I know the lenses, their depth of field, and when or when not to use them.

Whether you learn the vocabulary of film sitting in a classroom or standing on a set, your goal should be technical fluency. Once this is acquired, you then have the freedom to break the rules of perfect grammar, as Jean-Luc Godard did in 1960 in *Breathless* when he cut out small pieces of film, removing frames at odd moments, leaving the timing visibly off and a little jarring. The editing of *Breathless* is analogous to a visual arrhythmia, a sentence fragment for the screen, or a syncopated jazz line, a little ragtime for the eye. Or consider something as mundane as mounting a camera on a couple of two-by-fours and creating what Barry Sonnenfeld called the “whacky-cam” on *Big*, when he wanted to create a shot that amounted to a paddleball’s “point of view” as it flew toward a cement wall. Two grips ran with the camera mounted on the two-by-fours, fitted with an extremely wide-angle lens to eliminate any jiggling—as the camera traced the ball’s path.

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Then examine the handheld camerawork designed by Woody and Carlo Di Palma for *Husbands and Wives* and look at Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration*, the revolutionary work produced when a group of Danish filmmakers (Dogme 95) decided to break all the rules and change the vocabulary of film. Or perhaps you will become fluent enough to be able to recognize a roughly translated piece of the vocabulary of film outside of a movie screen, as director Arne Glimcher (*The Mambo Kings, Just Cause*) theorized he did when he noticed a parallel between elements of early cinema and the development of Cubism. He saw a striking similarity between the signature jumpy and fragmented movement of the cinematograph used in the early days of the Paris movie houses and what had emerged on the sketchpads and the canvases of Braque and Picasso. This led him to speculate that the jagged and jarring images of early film might possibly have been a contributing factor in the development of this revolutionary new style of art and the "fractured" movement seen in the work of these early Cubist painters. An impossible observation to make without a fluency in the vocabulary of film.

Each of these respected artists is contributing something of their own, something unsettling, unexpected, unconventional, controversial, to the vocabulary and the art of filmmaking.

The job of a filmmaker is to take a story and translate it into the language of cinema. Without a fluency in the vocabulary and grammar of filmmaking, it is an overwhelming task. So if you want to be a filmmaker, learn the language of film, the lenses, screen direction and blocking, shot composition and editing techniques. Learn it in the classroom or on the set, or begin to learn it here in the pages of this book, but learn it so well that eventually you can break some of the rules, leave the punctuation off, and follow the path of the great filmmakers and write something new.