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Auteur Film Directors as Contemporary Shamans

CATHLEEN ROUNTREE

The imagination is not a state: it is the Human Existence itself.

—William Blake (Bachelard 1988)

You are a pajé [shaman] like me.

—An Amazonian shaman to director John Boorman, during the filming of *Emerald Forest* (1985)

The Divine Lineage

God teaches us through movies.

—Arturo Ripstein (1997)

The practices of shamanism and filmmaking require a high level of sensitivity to maintain contact with the spirit or invisible world—the world of inner vision. Both filmmakers and shamans need a heightened accessibility and responsiveness to the inner landscape of the self as well as to the physical and emotional cartography that surrounds them. Like shamans, most filmmakers have enhanced powers of seeing, hearing, and dreaming, and move easily between different realities without experiencing the boundaries to which many of us habituate ourselves. Their efforts are remarkable, even heroic. And, as they have developed their talents and craft, a world unlike any other (literature, painting, sculpture, or photography) has been extended to us, the viewer/participant.

Shamanism does not rely on a belief or adherence to any doctrine. In the hands of creative and technically skilled filmmakers, the value of shamanism can become an entry point

into and a means of affirming other realities. When using the medium of film to shift attention from a consensus reality, directors as shamans expand their consciousness and the consciousness of their community by offering blueprints for spiritual development.

Jacques Maritain describes this process of creative intuition as

[The] soul spiritual unconscious, [which] plays an essential part in the genesis of poetry [art] and poetic inspiration. Thus a place is prepared in the highest parts of the soul, in the primeval trans-lucid night where intelligence stirs the images under the light of the Illuminating Intellect, for the separate Muse of Plato to descend into man, and dwell within him, and become a part of our spiritual organism. (1955, 74)

Maritain further expounds on the meaning of the Illuminating Intellect as a “spiritual sun ceaselessly radiating, which activates everything in intelligence, and whose light causes all our ideas to arise in us.” This phenomenon he calls “the birth of ideas.” However, he adds, this profound occurrence happens beyond the area of our awareness, for it remains “unconscious or scarcely perceived in the process, at least for the most part.” He elucidates that this is a process of illuminating “these very images, without which there is no thought” (73). Hence, it is a small step to say that the unconscious Illuminating Intelligence contains, organizes, and conducts images, which in turn, are the source of all creative and artistic acts and accomplishments. Like Prometheus, the mythic Greek god who brought fire to humanity, shamans were considered fire-bringers. And each filmmaker (for instance, the inventors of cinema itself, the “Lumière” Brothers) has the ability to be like Apollo—a god of light—or like Lucifer—a fallen bearer of light, a demon of shadow and darkness.

The connection between the archaic discipline of shamanism and the modern art form of cinema spans great distances in time and differences in cultures, but the functional similarities between these two are striking and significant. Largely unconscious, spontaneously produced parallels between various symbols and images have been and are currently utilized by both worldviews. Each, shamanism and cinema, shapes reality through a form of ritual. As Jung observes, “The primitive mentality does not *invent* myths, it *experiences* them” (1980, CW 91, ¶261).

The primary functions of the shaman are that of healer and seer, and as such, he or she is able to foretell a future outcome well before it surfaces; the primary sense of the filmmaker is that of vision or, to use Maritain’s expression, an “Illuminating Intellect,” and films often are disconcertingly prescient. A director *thinks* in pictures, hence Wolfgang Giegerich’s statement, “Image is thought represented in form” (1998, 114). The shaman’s vision is primarily an “inner” one and her or his “seeing/healing” cures both internal and external injuries (psychological and physical). By analogy, the alchemical filmmaker heals wounds of the mind, heart, soul, *and* body. Witness Norman Cousin’s theory in his book *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient: Reflections on Healing and Regeneration*, that the laughter induced by watching comedies such as Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers helped cure his cancer (1979, 39).

The healing that takes place communally (through a process of initiation, transformation, and enlightenment of self and community) begins with each individual—from the screenwriter to the director to the actor to the spectator. As in the shaman’s cave, in the cinema we discover a concordance between film itself and our human metabolism. Even if a movie seems totally lacking in any higher purpose, the relaxation factor of “entertainment” alone can be construed as an opportunity to forget our troubles, which in itself is a form of “healing.”

Still, most modern auteur filmmakers, like shamans, are engaged in their work because of the redemptive power of imagination itself. As Oliver Stone suggests:

The act of imagination, the act of seeing beyond yourself, stepping outside your ordinary, small, mundane life, living a larger life through [movies]—that can only help you in your everyday life. . . . If you can preserve the imagination, it’s a wonderful thing. It will make your life so much more joyous, less painful. . . . It was the retreat to a walled world, an imaginative world, that allowed me escape and freedom. (Breskin 1992, 22)

Auteur Directors as Wounded Healers

. . . happy people never make phantasies, only unsatisfied ones. Unsatisfied wishes are the driving power behind phantasies; every separate phantasy contains the fulfillment of a wish, and improves on unsatisfactory reality.

—Sigmund Freud (1961)

As a counterpoint to Freud’s notion of an individual’s need to “improve on unsatisfactory reality,” Jung developed his notion of “active imagination”—a place between consciousness and unconsciousness in which we consciously attempt to contact and dialogue with imaginal figures and concepts that offer insights into unconscious behavior and states of being. Mary Watkins, author of *Waking Dreams*, describes this process as “the spontaneous movement of thoughts and images [that] begin to emerge into awareness” (2000, 222). The path to artistic self-knowledge and understanding encompasses both Freud’s “phantasies” and Jung’s active imagination.

Many directors pursue their art form because they cultivate seeking their own knowledge as a form of pleasure, as in Aristotle’s notion of “art as learning and the notion of learning as pleasure” (1981, 295). Others may unconsciously attempt to heal themselves from traumatic childhoods or other inter- or intrapersonal difficulties. These

formative experiences shape the way a person thinks and imagines; they become part of one's psychic DNA, as it were.

Freud's quote at the beginning of this section directly links a fantasy life to a means of escape from an unhappy existence. Jung's "active imagination," a state of conscious reverie, takes fantasies to a deeper level through many directors' use of painting, cartooning, music, puppeteering, and, of course, filmmaking. For examples of the efficacy of these theories, we will examine the childhoods of several directors: Francis Ford Coppola, who was bedridden with polio; Martin Scorsese, who suffered from asthma; French auteur, Francois Truffaut, who was emotionally and physically abandoned by his parents and became a juvenile delinquent (before movies "saved" his life); Swedish director, Ingmar Bergman, who suffered from childhood neglect and abuse; and the above-referenced Oliver Stone, a veteran of the Vietnam War, who experienced various forms of physical and psychological woundings. All have undergone some manner of psychic and/or bodily "dismemberment" and in shamanic terms have become "wounded healers."

Dismemberment is an expression used by shamans to characterize a time of severe emotional crisis—which psychologically resembles a neuro-physiological disorder—that a shaman undergoes in order to be initiated and transformed into a healer and spokesperson for her or his tribe. We experience a similar initiation and transformation as a "temporary tribe" in a darkened movie theater.

By the time Francis Ford Coppola was stricken with polio at the age of nine, he already carried a profound sense of being an outsider. Because his father, the late noted composer, Carmine Coppola, went from city to city seeking orchestral work, the family moved so often that Coppola attended more than twenty-four schools (Blake 2000, 178). The natural outcome of this experience was to evermore

feel the loneliness and ostracism of starting over with yet another new group of children, who could be particularly withholding from, even cruel to, newcomers. In addition to seeing himself as "gangly and homely, and cursed by an oversized lower lip" (and disliking his name because he thought it was a girl's name), Coppola felt a longstanding sibling rivalry with his older brother, August, who was considered the prize in the family: handsome, intelligent, and talented (Schumacher 1999, 7).

Coppola was bedridden for the entire year of 1949, during which time his imagination became a cornucopia of expression. He described himself as "a lonely, ugly duckling, sad and sick and thinking" (Breskin 1992, 9). Many decades later, reflecting on this period, he depicted it as a growing experience when he said: "I think any tough time you go through any real crisis where you *break down*, then survive, leaves you in a far different place from where you were. . . . generally," he said, "I feel that people who have been traumatized tend to develop levels and wrinkles that really add something to them" (Schumacher 1999, 9–10. Italics added).

He was isolated and quarantined from other children ("I lived in bed," is how he describes that year), and it was the television set, the radio, the record player, a tape recorder, and a 16-mm movie projector that became his companions and learning apparatus for a future career that the "Illuminated Intellect" was already setting in motion. A metaphoric antecedent to his later career as a filmmaker, aside from the obvious movie projector, were the puppets he created for his amusement and companionship. Inventing stories and conversations were his first escapades into the art of managing his own unhappiness and loneliness—an attribute that every director depends upon in his dealings with others, whether actors, crew, studio executives, or audience. As it did for Ingmar Bergman, puppetry afforded Coppola his first "rudimentary experiences with directing his own little stories" (Schumacher 1999, 10).

Alfred Hitchcock once remarked that “one’s early upbringing influences a man’s life and guides his instincts” (Blake 2000, 49). Without doubt, the imbuing of imaginal, devotional, and corporal elements that Martin Scorsese acquired from his Roman Catholic upbringing, functioned both as a principal source and foundation for his cinematic vision. The origin of Scorsese’s “break down” was also a childhood illness: asthma and pleurisy, which caused him “acute physical and mental stress” (Thompson 1996, 54). As a child, he wanted to be a painter and taught himself to draw, but he was also fascinated by films. Scorsese grew up in the Little Italy neighborhood on New York City’s Lower East Side. And, although he “rarely ventured outside,” the “short, frail, and sickly momma’s boy” was often taken to the movies by his parents (Biskind 1998, 227). As he recounts, because he was house-bound with asthma, “they didn’t know what else to do with me” (1996, 3). The enormous images, which amazed him, became new material for his drawings and made-up stories, as he sketched out his favorite sequences after seeing a movie.

The Scorsese family was the first household on their block to purchase a television in 1948. Scorsese recalls the magnitude of influence these movies had on him as a (unbeknownst to him) budding film director. Through the British and Italian films that were repeatedly shown on late-night television, he had the opportunity to study “the camera’s movements and the theatricality of the gestures by . . . actors . . . [and] about the relation of camera to music” (Thompson 1996, 4). In addition, Scorsese’s “framed reality” was watching, through his bedroom window, as the neighborhood children played stickball in the street.

Even as a young child, Scorsese recognized the artistry in cinema. “The images, the darkness of the clouds, the silhouettes against the hills, and the music,” he recalls thinking, “what you’re noticing, I guess, is poetry” (Biskind 1998, 227). As a “lonely outsider

in [a] macho neighborhood . . . [the young Scorsese] found in the movies a sense of excitement and adventure denied to him in reality” (Wakeman 1988, 28).

In each of these accounts of directors’ young lives, we have witnessed what Jung called *individuation*, the process of coming into psychic balance by recognizing a sense of one’s own unique individuality as well as one’s connection to the greater experience of human existence. According to Anthony Storr, “Individuation means parting company with the crowd” (1983, 20). This isolation naturally accentuates the loneliness, the sense of oneself as “other,” about which these directors speak.

Similarly, since his early childhood, French film director Francois Truffaut immersed himself in the dream world of the cinema. Movies played a significant tutorial, even pivotal, role in his life, as they did for many film directors in their youth. It is not hyperbole to say that from the age of about seven-years-old and continuing throughout his life, movies served as his babysitters, best friends, confidantes, and teachers. One could even say that—just as books did for the fatherless illegitimate son, Jacob, in Mike van Diem’s film *Character* (1997)—movies parented this adolescent “truant.” They were emotional surrogates, who “saw” him just as deliberately—and consciously—as he saw them.

The cinematic gaze cradled this nascent cineaste, enthralled him, and became his eyes. Celluloid magic transmitted hope to Truffaut—and every other conceivable emotion—through its unique and endlessly variant ways of perceiving the world. Movies and the “cinema situation”—the “cave,” the darkness, the stream of projected light, the “presence” emitted by only a dozen or three thousand other souls (in the words of Arturo Ripstein) “taught” him about the human existential condition, about human drama, about story. Truffaut loved movies. They were his whole life and the only source of his pleasure as a neglected child. As he displayed in his critical writings and films

only a few years later, his imagination and senses were ignited and nourished by viewing movies, illustrating Jean Cocteau's maxim, "A child's eyes register fast. Later he develops the film" (Insdorf 1997, 18).

In every country in the world, cinema is a "deliverer" of delight and delusions. "Cinema cultivates people," says a character in Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Once Upon a Time, Cinema* (1991), a film about the birth of movies in Iran in 1907. And they certainly educated and cultivated the unconventional Truffaut, who kept a journal of all the films he saw. "He would see favorite films as many as ten times, even memorizing the songs on the soundtrack," Truffaut biographer, Annette Insdorf, writes (1997, 18).

In *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (*The 400 Blows*, 1959), Truffaut's first feature-length film, the glow from the screen of "unreality" reflects on the enraptured face of Antoine Doinel (portrayed by Jean-Pierre Leaud), the fictional character who served as Truffaut's alter ego over the course of five films. This autobiographically based story of an unparented twelve-year-old, who often cuts school classes in order to attend the cinémathèque, represents that of every other child, woman, or man who finds refuge, sanctuary, and asylum at the movies.

Heinz Kohut, the post-Freudian psychoanalyst, believes that empathy in and of itself cures—that "the experience of a prolonged empathic immersion [which surely happens in movie theaters] is curative" (Strozier 2001, 347). This psychological therapeutic translates into both shamanic and cinematic restoration of the psyche as well. As Truffaut recalled, watching movies and talking about them "was the first happy time of my life" (1994, 4). This "empathic immersion" and "curative" process was Truffaut's induction into shamanic healing and transformation, which, as an adult auteur director, translated into cinematic shamanism.

As for cinema's healing affect on Bergman—in terms of dealing with the terror of death

ingrained in him as a child—he once said about the making of one of his films: "I wrote myself out of my fear of death in *The Seventh Seal*" (1962). His autobiographical 1983 film, *Fanny and Alexander*, provided another form of creative exorcism. It tells the story of two young children in a rural Swedish town in 1907, whose privileged, happy lives are disrupted when their mother marries a tormenting, cruel Lutheran pastor.

Creating their films allows these directors, who have experienced a "dark night of the soul" through physical, psychological, and spiritual challenges, to repossess their "lost" souls, just as they assist us, the spectators, in reclaiming our own through a formed and shared imaginal experience. Filmmaking (and viewing) can, therefore, be a method of reintegrating fragmented elements in the mind-body-spirit complex.

Auteur directors are interested in transforming, enlightening, and often healing to empower their audiences through the channel of an "alert consciousness," a "condition in which people are fully aware of their surroundings and are able to react fully with those surroundings" (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998, 13). This aware consciousness is necessary for both a voluntary movie audience and, as in the example of Plato's cave, an imprisoned one.

An awakened consciousness has the ability to *respond*. This point is important because it addresses a fundamental principle of cinema: the inherent interactive nature of movies. Italian director Francesco Rosi believes that "my films demand a little work from the audience, I ask them to cooperate with me. . . . I try to have the public collaborate in my search for a possible truth. The public should not just be passive spectators of a story that's being told" (Georgakas and Rubenstein 1983, 128).

The root of *respond* is the Latinate *respondere*, which means to reply, to pledge, to promise in return. The Middle English meaning is literally "to sing a responsory." The emotional response elicited by certain films

overwhelms and “moves” us with the sensation to “sing” (even if silently or with tears) our sentimental, perhaps passionate, reaction.

For instance, a film such as Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves* ferries the viewer through a series of emotional interactions between two protagonists, Beth and Jan, a young married couple deeply in love, who must deal with an accident that renders Jan paralyzed from the neck down. We are swept away by Beth’s alternately transcendent communication with the divine, her horror at Jan’s predicament, and a descent into her sacrificial semi-prostitution to please him. The film agitates, even harasses us, into responding, cooperating, and collaborating. It predicates our involvement with, if not enjoyment of, the story. The visceral urgency of the film’s circumstances and visual images oblige a cathexis of responseability, our ability to respond, to “sing” with compassion through the fullness of our senses, intelligence, memories, and emotions. As Christopher Hauke suggests: “Why not think of the film director as the ‘God with a very big imagination’: one that allows us to project our punier ones onto it with a view to transformation and growth” (2000, 1).

The Shamanic Process of Filmmaking

A painter paints to unload himself of feelings and visions.

—Pablo Picasso (Maritain 1955)

Filmmakers and shamans alike seem to possess what Federico García Lorca called *duende*, or spirit, “an inexplicable power of attraction, the ability on rare occasions, to send waves of emotion through those watching and listening to them” (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998, ix). Lorca believes true artists are aware that “the *duende* [they are] pursuing has leaped straight from the Greek mysteries [and myths] [...]” into their works of art, whether they be music, painting, poetry, dance, theater, or film,

the latter of which contains all the previous forms (1998, 49). The *duende* has the power to seize “not only the performer but also the audience, creating conditions where art can be understood spontaneously with little, if any conscious effort” (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998, ix).

And from where does the *duende* originate? Lorca writes that artists “who have muses hear voices and do not know where they are coming from. They come from the muse that encourages them and sometimes snacks on them.” He continues: “There are neither maps nor exercises to help us find the *duende*. We only know that he burns the blood like a poultice of broken glass, that he exhausts, that he rejects all the sweet geometry we have learned, that he smashes styles, that he leans on human pain with no consolation [...]” (1989, 50).

Lorca is a poet, after all, and his visceral descriptions of the artist’s subconscious creative processes have the familiar odor of the “wounded healer’s” psychic lesions shared by both the auteur director and shaman. In fact, according to Lorca, meaningful art is impossible without anguish. “The *duende*,” he says, “takes it upon himself to make us suffer by means of a drama of living forms, and clears the stairways for an evasion of the surrounding reality” (1998, 59).

This is an apt description of “reel” movie life in that it has the ability to confiscate an awareness of anything outside our umbilical connection to the action and emotion perceptible on the screen. And, through the psyche of a skilled director, “reel” movie life sinks us into the matrix of the collective unconscious, where each hallucination, every revelation has credence. Director Ingmar Bergman, who is both a martyred object of and ecstatic recipient of *duende*, writes, “No art goes beyond consciousness as film does, straight into the soul” (1989, 73). But in his deeply disturbing and provocatively raw portrayals of the disintegrating psyche and tormented human soul in such films as *Through a Glass*

Darkly (1961), *Winter Light* (1963), *Persona* (1966), and *The Hour of the Wolf* (1968), he is also in the service of *duende*.

Shamanic filmmakers include those whose work changes or shifts the consciousness of the viewers of their films and helps them to see the world and their lives differently. These filmmakers are “shamanic” because they intentionally (and unconsciously through the service of *duende*) invest their work with numinous content. Numinosity represents a mysterious power, a divine entity, or spirit that may precipitate or include a religious or spiritual experience. A *numen* could be an actual object or entity, a place, or an atmosphere, all of which are elements in cinema.

A brilliant example of numinosity and *duende* is found in two of Australian director Peter Weir’s many films: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *The Last Wave* (1977). Both films inhabit a landscape that is, in itself, a mysterious presence—indeed, a primary character, given that each site, respectively, is titular. The *Rock* and the *Wave* are, essentially, personified as they beckon various human characters to them. The film’s supernatural, enigmatic qualities hover in the interstices between the beneficent and the ominous, but ever in the sphere of the numinous. The numinous is a different “country,” another state of consciousness, apart from quotidian concerns.

A master transporter to numinous territory, Peter Weir conducts his audience into the nether world, like Hermes guiding souls across the River Styx. In an interview Weir says that he consciously embarks on this task with “something approaching the hypnotic, that is, the rhythm of the film lull[s] you into another state and you begin to go with the film and drop your expectations” (Rayner 1998, 53). Bergman, too, addresses this notion when, in a film interview, he says, “The lifeline of film is rhythm and breath” (*Ingmar Bergman Makes a Film*, 1962).

When Lorca speaks of *duende* in the masculine personal pronoun (inherent to the

Spanish language), we can easily substitute “poet” with “auteur director” who, “with magical power . . . changes a girl into a lunar paralytic, or brings an adolescent blush to the broken old man begging in the wineshop [. . .] and he works continuously on the arms with expressions that give birth to the dances of every age” (Rayner 1998, 53). It is the director whose “magical power” transforms our identities as it revolutionizes our minds.

Filmmakers’ Shamanic Tools

. . . seeing through is a process of deliteralizing and a search for the imaginal in the heart of things by means of ideas, we should not assume that it is mainly intellectual or a work of intuitive abstraction.

—James Hillman (1992)

Like shamans, the genius of the auteur director, his or her gift, is an enhanced power of seeing, hearing, and dreaming. He “sees-through,” or to quote James Hollis, has a “phenomenological encounter” with transcendent personal or tribal experience and moves easily between different realities (1995, 188). Film directors may be considered alternately tricksters, shapeshifters, magicians, puppeteers, sorcerers, and because of their personal power and celebrity, gods. As tricksters, they have the ability to make us “see” and experience that which is intangible and does not actually exist on a physical plane.

Auteur filmmakers journey into nonordinary states of awareness (even if unconscious of that evolution) and experience emotional, psychological, mental, and sometimes physical descents, usually with support from only their close peers and small inner circle, and generally without any experience of traditional shamanism. Instinctively, I believe, they have been looking for their shamanic roots through the means of healing the self and society as they, quite spontaneously, use many of the shaman’s tools: employing art, images, and symbols as a “medium”; making visible the

realm of the invisible; steeping their work in depth psychology; working within ritual and ceremony; serving as bridges for crossing between metaphysical provinces; providing ladders for ascending to the upper world and descending to the underworld.

Both shamans and film directors use sound and music as a way of inducing heightened emotional or psychological states of consciousness that are capable of transporting the viewer to different locations and periods as well as to invisible realms. Witness Bernard Hermann's piercing score for Hitchcock's *Psycho* and his restless, even obsessive score for Hitchcock's *Vertigo*; Angelo Badalamenti's elegant but creepy scores for all of David Lynch's films (especially *Blue Velvet*, *Mulholland Drive*, and the television series, *Twin Peaks*); Nino Rota's carnivalesque scores for all of Fellini's films (especially *La Dolce Vita*, *Juliet of the Spirits*, and *Amarcord*); Zbigniew Preisner's hauntingly elegiac scores for all of Krzysztof Kieslowski's films (especially, *The Double Life of Veronique*, *Blue*, and *Red*); Toru Takemitsu's alternately screeching and melodic scores for *Woman in the Dunes* (Teshigahara), *Dodes'kaden* (Kurosawa), and *Empire of Passion* (Oshima). Some directors, however, prefer to use long-standing contemporary songs that contain already established associations for the audience for their soundtracks. Woody Allen (*Manhattan*, *Radio Days*, and *Sweet and Lowdown*), Martin Scorsese (*Mean Streets*, *Goodfellas*, and *Casino*), and Oliver Stone (*Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *Any Given Sunday*) come to mind.

A few examples of auteurs whose films pilot the spectator-participant to the regions of the transcendent are Krzysztof Kieslowski, Francois Truffaut, Satyajit Ray, Abbas Kiarostami, and Steven Spielberg. Those directors who usher their audience downward to a dark, often dismal emotional underworld of pain and despair are Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Martin Scorsese, David Lynch, and Nicholas Roeg.

It is difficult to surpass the elevating spirit of any Kieslowski film, perhaps, especially the enormously accomplished and beautiful *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*. The story is about a woman (Juliette Binoche) who spends most of the screen time passively grieving for her dead husband and incrementally emerging from the interstices of the living and the dead to a renewed sense of liberty and, if not optimism, at least hopefulness. At the extreme human condition is Pasolini whose films are weighted with gravity and decadence. And, yet, even films like *Teorema* and *Medea* stream with an undercurrent of poetic ecstasy and an almost romanticized humanity. Pasolini's underworld is dangerous and damaged, yet compassionate and soulful.

Shamanic techniques offer essentially nondestructive means for film directors to invite visions of "transcendental insight" and gain knowledge about themselves as they give it form and bring it forth into the province of visibility and thus to engagement with the social whole. Works of art evolving from these visions (impelled by "ineffable inspiration") continue to nourish their audiences: Kurosawa's *Ikiru*, 1954; Fellini's *La Strada*, 1954 and *8 1/2*, 1963; Ozu's *Late Spring*, 1949; Bunuel's *Nazarín*, 1958; Bergman's *Winter Light*, 1963; Chaplin's *City Lights*, 1931; Truffaut's *The Green Room*, 1978; Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, 1950, and *Au hasard Balthazar*, 1966; Cassavetes' *A Woman Under the Influence*, 1974; Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*, 1996, and *The Wind Will Carry Us*, 2000; Kieslowski's *Decalogue*, 1988, and *The Double Life of Veronique*, 1991; Ray's *Apu Trilogy*, 1952–1959; Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant*, 1992; Erice's *Spirit of the Beehive*, 1973; Herzog's *Mystery of Kaspar Hauser*, 1974; and Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, 1988. Surely these films operate on all levels of consciousness: the personal and collective conscious, as well as the personal and collective unconscious.

The opportunity for filmmakers to make positive contributions to society may also

eliminate their own feelings of alienation and exclusion. Oliver Stone recalls that as a child he “always felt like an outsider. . . . [It’s] just a quality of one’s character. It’s an existence, an anguish that you have” (Breskin 1992, 104). Later he remarks that “the world of the imagination” and movies were “a sanctuary from real life. . . . I loved being in the dark, and seeing movies” (105). A curious psychological paradox emerges here in Stone’s account: On a subliminal level of unconsciousness, as we sit in a darkened movie theater and are ingested by “shadow,” we forget “reality.” Conversely, it is *because* we are in shadow that we are baptized by the “light” of the ineffable, the illumination of consciousness. One precedes, even necessitates, the other.

As such, movies provide a primordial mirror or graphic illustration of human, divine, and demonic expression and become a source of scholarship, devotion, and redemption. Essentially, cinema is an alchemical cauldron for psychological and spiritual transformation. As willing participants who are immersed in this cauldron, we shift from unknowing to understanding, from disconnection to compassion. This alchemical process is utilized by directors, psychologists, and shamans as, each in their own way, can either renew, reform, and restore souls, or, conversely, distort, disease, and disrupt them.

Cinema of Redemption

Since the beginning of the century, ethnologists have fallen into the habit of using the terms “shaman,” “medicine man,” “sorcerer,” and “magician” interchangeably to designate certain individuals possessing magico-religious powers.

—Mircea Eliade (1974)

Ever since the cinema was first developed at the beginning of the century, both film historians and critics have used terms similar to those used by Eliade to define directors of moving pictures. In fact, as early as 1895, one of the

first French filmmakers, Georges Méliès, was a known “magician,” a conjurer, who filled his shorts with tricks and sleights-of-hand that dazzled French viewers from all walks of life.

Eliade inadvertently links what I call “the cinema of redemption”—films that speak to the issues of initiation, transition, and transformation—to shamanism when he suggests, “discoveries and contacts must be extended through dialogues. But to be genuine and fruitful, a dialogue cannot be limited to empirical and utilitarian language.” For Eliade, “A true dialogue must deal with the central values in the cultures of the participants” (1974, 96).

Through the medium of cinema, shamanic filmmakers have become a means for this “true dialogue.” Cinema is not solely one-directional; exchange is an inherent component. The gaze extends both ways and dialogue occurs somewhere in between. As exemplified in Keaton’s *Sherlock Jr.* and Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, films look back and judge us as much as we judge them.

Bergman speaks to this idea of reciprocity between a film and its spectator when, during a 1962 interview, *Ingmar Bergman Makes a Film*, he describes that a film begins to take on a “real life, the moment [it] meets the audience”. He continues by saying, “I don’t think a film becomes a film until it has encountered the audience. It’s still only a partially finished product. The work isn’t *born* until that strange and terrible moment of encounter.” Bergman believes that a director perceives his or her work as “incomplete and *unprotected* until it’s surrounded by the *consciousness* of the audience.” His use of the terms *born* and *unprotected* bear the sense of a film as a breathing sentient being, as well as indicating the concern of a paternal figure for a beloved child.

Filmmaking is a process of directors—much like shamans—excavating their own and the entirety of humanity’s memories and unprocessed emotions through particular stories, locales, and characters. By means of a procedure both methodical and magical, this

vulnerable emotive material is systemically transposed onto the films they create. The ritual of viewing films created by shamanic directors can be a profoundly transforming, even transcendent, experience.

For instance, in a post-film experience, we can witness in the expressions on viewers' faces as they exit the dark initiatory space of the theater that they have been the beneficiaries of a cinematic transmission. The world they reenter on the street seems less authentic than the threshold they crossed into movie life. The *reel* and the *real* have been transposed. It is as if they are encased in a transparent bubble: Everything external to that ephemeris is in slow motion and detached from significance. In trance, their eyes remain inaccessible. They have experienced a tremendous mystical resonance in the film world they were initiated into and are now exiting.

Three components, as practiced by shamans and exercised by film directors—transformation, consciousness, and imagination—all merge during the ineffable encounter between a human soul and a moving picture. These pictures do indeed “move” the viewer emotionally and transport him or her to the *mundus imaginalis*. It is here that image, language, movement, and sound merge to generate what David Denby calls, “a flush of emotion” in an experience that is “the opposite of escape; it is... an absolute engagement” (2007, 56).

The connections between the ancient concept of shaman and the contemporary auteur film director are indeed both broad and specific. Auteur film directors, like their predecessors, psychoanalysts and psychologists, in addition to being artists, storytellers, and mythmakers, are shamanic magicians, medicine men and women, priests, tricksters, conjurers, shapeshifters, wounded healers, soul-retrievers, and metaphysicians. The implication is that shamanic directors and their product—movies—metaphorically and literally “hunt” for magic, for meaning, for a method of transforming our immediate

experience and even our way of perceiving reality. In addition, cinema is an existential potential in the present that, through sacred action, communicates this potential to and makes participants of all world spectators.

Thomas Edison, one of the inventors of motion pictures, said, “I had some glowing dreams about what the camera could be made to do and ought to do in teaching the world things it needed to know—teaching it in a more vivid, direct way” (Putnam 1998, 13). The sources of this “teaching” are the contemporary shamanic film directors.

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ABSTRACT

This essay illuminates and explicates the author's theory that auteur film directors are contemporary embodiments of ancient, primitive shamans. They are figures of the same archetype but inhabit different eras, cultures, and costumes. Throughout history and cross-culturally, the mythical role of shaman and artist were inseparable. Shamans were, in fact, the most gifted of artists who recorded their visions in poetry, song, painting, and drama. They came to serve the functions of priest, doctor, psychotherapist, writer, actor, and, in the twentieth century, auteur film directors. From their invention during the 1890s,

movies have served the mythic function of reestablishing for community members an ancient connection in the safety of a darkened, cave-like dwelling, which signifies both tomb and womb. Every person in the theater unconsciously agrees to come together as a collective and share this particular life experience. This essay also closely examines the notion of the auteur director as a “wounded healer” using the examples of Ingmar Bergman, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Francois Truffaut, and Oliver Stone.

KEY WORDS

Auteur Cinema, Ingmar Bergman, cinema of redemption, cinematic shamanism, contemplative cinema, Francis Ford Coppola, depth psychology, *Duende*, film, Sigmund Freud, C.G. Jung, Heinz Kohut, Federico Garcia Lorca, magicians, movies, *mundus imaginalis*, Plato's Cave, David Putnam, Martin Scorsese, Shamanism, Oliver Stone, tricksters, Francois Truffaut, the unconscious, wounded healers.