

— You say it can't be done, but I'm going to prove you wrong.

—No, I didn't say it 'couldn't be done' —I said it'd be hellacious boring and inconsequential, something no one would *want* to watch.

— It's not going to be an entertaining film; it's going to be explicatory. A film about writing is inherently boring and by definition closer to documentary than narrative. There's no sight gags or yucks or even voice-overs to help the story along. But that doesn't mean you can't tell a cinematic story about storytelling or the act of story construction.

—Which all sounds like an indulgent joke, something a grad student might concoct for his thesis and then slather in theory. I just don't see the point of the exercise, the big 'why' of the whole conceit.

— Following from what you were saying earlier —that because cinema is overwhelmingly visual and so dependent on images it can't deal with inner states and emotions? That an inner process has to be spelt out in big clichéd cues and histrionic faces —and therefore false and removed from emotional reality? Which again seems to imply that only the novel can adequately deal with this turf. Or maybe poetry if you're that way inclined.

— Or the theatre.

— The theatre is claptrap and you know it Adam. Everything's arch and 'staged' and boils down to talk in the end. I can't think of anything more contrived than the stage. Its longevity is absurd.

— You can't seriously believe that. It's because you hate actors and want to make a film punishing them by forbidding them lines. Which has been done to death already. A movie in grunts. The silents. Sweden.

— What I want is to make a film about writing. Pure and simple. And this is why: because every representation of writing or writers in the movies has been false, unrealistic or romanticised in a garish way. 'Oh, you're a writer?' a character will say, and eyebrows will arch. 'I'm working on my novel.' another cliché says, and wouldn't you know it, by movie's end he's either published or absorbing a valuable lesson about life. Now, if the film is brave enough, or if they've paid good money for incidental music and decide to keep the footage of the writer actually at work (especially in front of a typewriter, squinting through cigarette smoke), then the scene is worse than clichéd, it's just wrong. It's made to look easy, too natural, too flowing. I challenge you to think of a film with a realistic writing scene, and I mean realistic in the sense you know it. The blank look and blank spaces, the restless distraction involved in getting down to it. The sheer grind of revision and correction. The cringe and creeping hatred of the rough first draft; the redrafting to nine or ten versions. The trips to the dictionary. And above all: the sheer absorption of time.

— Now you mention it I can't, just like I can't make an instant mental stack request. But there's a memory of a film with Chevy Chase afflicted by writer's block, and that wasn't very funny.

— But it's a joke, isn't it? Writers on screen are a joke. A romantic figment of a scriptwriter's wet dream of what he thinks writing should be. The drama, the contextual story surrounding a 'writer' is always

more interesting. His shags and his drinking. And that's because writing itself is totally and disgustingly undramatic and boring.

— But again, why would you want to visualise something so boring? Why do it unless you're setting out to bore the audience deliberately?

— Yes I know you're going to say Warhol's already done it. Bludgeoning people with his twin obsessions boredom and repetition. Ten hours of *Empire* or *Sleep* or whatever it was. No. Here it is — and I feel it's going to come out in a nutshell: I want to make something that does justice to the process and real work of writing. It's really simple in the end and I don't care how avant-garde or kooky it comes out. Because I feel it can be treated and done well — that there's enough technique in cinematography to pull it off.

— And because no movie has done it fairly before?

— Well you name me one. Movie or documentary or conceptual art piece or radical cinema. Henry Miller: *Henry and June*. Poor old Fred Ward got the hat and the Brooklyn brogue and a nice little Nin delivering his typewriter. But when he gets to composing *Tropic of Cancer* and the music starts up and the smoke swirls and time's truncated with sloppy cross fades, the director has him gingerly tapping out his beast of a novel with girlish timesteps. Like he's doing needlepoint with his sleeves rolled up. My point being that Miller was a tornado at the machine, a kinetic steam engine of writing. An oiled and elemental force, not some nancy typing out a recipe. Or that Dorothy Parker one with the vicious circle. When they're bored in the office with their vintage machines, playing taptaptap at each other. At least that film got the drinking right. Or any Woody Allen film with a writer-character. Or any Godard for that matter too. Godard filmed himself writing his own films and no one complained. These manic idiots cribbing notes from the radio or reading aloud from books. I could go on, and I will. *Barfly* and that other Bukowski film with the head butting. Writing equals drinking. *The Rachel Papers*. Raging clichés one and all.

— But you know they can only show the process obliquely. You can't point a camera at a writer, shout Action and expect to make something real and engaging from a narrative point of view? The whole thing wouldn't work visually. Commercial, art house with or without voice-overs. It just becomes typing.

— OK so you agree it hasn't been done adequately before.

— Well I suppose; but it's in the nature of the medium to make it difficult.

— Oh, and French movies. For a while there it seemed the only place in visual media you saw a writer was in French movies. They've got more writers than dinners over there. It must be so easy to get published in France because their films make it seem quotidian. Like a bona fide career stream or a way to regular income. Everyone's either reading books — and then every book — or writing them. Over wine.

— Rino, you're a bastard. But Woody Allen can make a film about Paris and writers and get people to watch it. In droves.

— And he used to *write* films. Look, what my motivation comes down to is not wanting to feel embarrassed or galled whenever a writer's trotted out on screen. A realistic film or a biopic about the lives of writers is one thing, especially if they can make it relevant for today. But a film about the process, the actual creative magic and the difficult but satisfactory slog of the work, that hasn't been treated fairly or in adequate detail. The process has been discussed and interviewed and promoted at book fairs and readings and writer's festivals for millennia. There's plenty of interest in the secret life and gossip of writers, their movements and friends – just very little realism on what the work really involves. And what's more indulgent or solipsistic than listening to a writer discuss his mental processes. But a film – or rather, to explicate that problem cinematically, through the art of cinematography, that is something different. It could really show something.

— I guess there's an abstract validity to what you're saying. But I'm having trouble seeing how you'd execute and make something watchable, into something that proves what you're saying while also suggesting the choices involved in putting one word after another. And without all the raging boredoms just referenced. Because I don't think the realities you call for should be put on the screen. They're just abstractions, ultimately, and pretty unemotional ones at that.

— No, but you're half right there Adam; and if you step away from the window and sit yourself down in this chair and take one of my cigarettes, I will share the vision of how I see it.

The core of it, the essential intent, is to be diligent or to honour the process involved. Writing is difficult and strained and only mottled with occasional genius or inspiration. Multiplied by the factors of tedium and habit established by long dry routine. And yes, to a large extent it is boring and uninteresting to represent. Just like I'm sure you know what it's like to edit a piece up to publish quality. But the process, the process. You remember that Rivette film with Beart in the lead, about the artist making a last great painting. *La Belle Noiseuse*. You remember more than her eyebrows. The endless scratching and fiddling of the old artist. The way he fusses over quills and pens and all the preparatory work before making a mark. And the brittle sound when he does finally commit to paper. His model standing stiffly posed nearby, and vaguely humiliated, both her and the viewer afflicted with his process to create. Totally subjected to it. And he always gruff and demanding, almost fiendish: move your arm like this, jut your hip that way – and literally forcing her limbs into position. It's the most unglamorous and unromantic representation of an artist at work. And hours go by just this way. No inspiration or airs or feelgood blather; and very little dialogue or discussion. Gruff commands. There's narrative dressing about jealous husbands but it's token cladding. The whole timeframe of creating the work takes over. The quotidian falls away, and that clinical subjection to his eye, and an indifferent eye at that, turns the whole movie or should I say fictionalised documentary into an act of gazing. And not in that floppy feminist sense. Although there is cruelty in it, uncomfortably spread over its full four hours. The subjection to process is total, is what I mean. For a moment the viewer is on the same visual level as the painter, in the same frame of creation. And to this end the film plays along by not revealing the final masterpiece because it was only ever the process that's all-encompassing.

— That's right, he bricks it in. Total let-down.

— But the film is never disengaged or lost in an abstraction or simply anti. I'll bet you never considered how an artist *sounds* when he works. Or how time becomes the real canvas on which art is made. Or the endurance and cramping of a sitting, the forced absurdity of the posing process and the stretching of hours. And it all comes out clear and unhurried, nothing is forced or laboured as it unwinds. Everything is detailed with care and timing so that what we see on the letterbox canvas of the screen becomes the artist's way of seeing the world. It's a fair and insightful trading of the visual for the visual, except of course it's edited for loose narrative. But the narrative doesn't matter – just like no one would go to see this film for the narrative values. All narrative falls away before the first sitting is brusquely terminated by the artist. Within minutes of starting. The process is total, all else secondary or inevitable. Beart or no.

— And you're going to make the same deliberate statement about writing? Over how many hours do you propose to stretch this experiment?

— As many as it takes of course.

— Watch the writer sharpen his pencils and shuffle blank pages? Watch him walk over to the teapot again. Surfing the internet for research or checking his balance. Picking his nose and going to the toilet. A warts and more picture of the writer at work – to kill off forever the image of the writer at work.

— No, you ass, none of that claptrap. A private film, with something of inner communion. To present, with cinematographic care and technique this most singular and private inner process. But this is all presage and interpretation before the fact. Before you grimace and kill off the idea before I speak it, I want to paint for you an outline of a basic storyboard.

— Ah, and here is the moment.

— We fade up from black, the total black of nothingness.

— Because even a cliché is true.

— But a very slow fade, revealing a large loft. A bed in one corner, a mess of books and chairs. An empty birdcage on a stand. Some uplights on very low setting, projecting not enough light. Plates, glasses and bottle on the floor – not from social consumption but solitary meals. A window on the opposite side of the bed letting in no light, or maybe some vague grey. And fixed centrally in the room: a small antique-like table and chair, almost impossibly compact and covered with papers. And surrounded by stacked papers on the floor. And seconded by a much larger table made of an old door, backed against the other wall, covered also with papers roughly grouped. Not a sound and certainly no music, and only a little light, but enough to imply a symmetry and not some sloven disorder or chaos. But already: it feels like personal space, lived in and functional. If a cleaner was to come in and rearrange or change the order, you'd feel it was wrong. A quiet, but careful disorder.

— OK.

— Even if the order looks contrived or set-up for the frame, that's all right. I want it to seem slightly composed, a hint of controlled disreality.

— But I thought —

— Now an alarm clock rings and there's muffled groans and a movement of the bed covers (it has to be surprising that someone's actually in it), revealing an arm as it arcs sideways to slam on the alarm clock — which doesn't stop ringing until a second impact. In a few beats the person rises fully from the bed and flex-extends his back. Wearing what looks like a normal day shirt and indistinct pants, he covers himself with an oversize gown like the ones you get in fancy hotels, and shuffles scratching over to the corner where there's a small kitchen bench. A darker, greyer corner of the loft, but it should be clear from his motions that he's making coffee. The tap squeak, the fitting together of percolator, the striking of match and ignition of gas. The clang of metal on stovetop. Now — and this is deliberate — I'm going to have him stand there waiting for the coffee. A vague cast of blue light from the gas. Maybe rolling a cigarette from a plastic pouch and lit with the open flame, holding hair back from the forehead. All still in the middle to long distance. But essentially a static scene in that corner of the frame, waiting for the coffee for a full four minutes. Which is then poured, and smelled, and carried to the small desk in the centre and consumed standing as he flicks on the desk lamp, which then also lights the rest of the room. By which a good eight minutes total should have elapsed. And by the coffee and the hair and the light I think you'll recognise the features of our mutual friend Cameron who is of course the perfect cast for the role.

— What, you're joking?

— No. He's the man for the role.

— But he doesn't know how to act. He hates making any effort that resembles acting and he certainly wouldn't do it for anyone else's projects.

— I know, and I know. And he said he'd never do anything on that side of the camera. In all likelihood he won't even hear out my casting pitch. But he does have that something I need. It's not just the hangdog hair or bundled charisma — he certainly has the nose to portray a writer. It's more in the way he makes his personal expression seem distanced or defensive that I want to use in this. The blazing humour that burns at your expense, and the vibe of someone living and laughing in the third person — I think this will translate visually just so — enough to engage and just enough to bounce a viewer off and back. So that visually there's an appeal, but also subtly and reactively, enough of a grating to imply difficulty — and over the full scope of the film, a complexity of character to make one hungry or hopeful of revelation via the writing at hand. No, he is not a writer and so I can't expect realism from him — but he can execute the charm that desires association in exactly the way that readers go to writers festivals to meet their imagined heroes and come away pricked and deflated at reality's disjunction. That cloudy difficulty in person.

— And all that just from his face, his visual presence? I hope your crew are the best in the business. And as a writer? I'm stretching my imagination in all kinds of ways to make sense of that.

— Well remember he's a dead ringer for Balzac. That's the talisman idea of the film, the one due to build the film on. To dress him like a monk in his cell and observe him at work on his devotions. Waking up at nine and working through the night. On coffee.

— But wait, is there going to be dialogue? How's the viewer going to pick up on all this charisma and difficulty if they don't hear him speak?

— I trust in the camera to reveal enough. It's an essentially silent film.

— Hm, and getting more abstract by the minute.

— No voiceovers, no spoken thoughts, none of those distractions. And also, Adam, it's a film about writing, not talking. It has to stay pure.

— You mean abstracted, conceptual.

— Naturalistic, more. So he drinks his coffee standing beside the desk. The act of waking up and composing the brain. The camera gently tracking as he switches on more lights, consults papers and looks out the window. It's a loft so there's diagonal beams and a good sense of height or being higher up in the building. But the decor and scheme of the set is mostly white, grey and neutral – so that when we shoot with reasonably slow stock the colours such as there are will jump out. The camera will mostly pivot from the one location, but when he sits down at the desk he's facing us – the centrepiece of the frame – and with diagonal borders at each extreme edge of shot. It should look completely composed and calm, and it should suck up a generous swathe of minutes before our friend begins to do anything. And here I'm going to rely on his native behaviour. Mostly he's just looking through yesterday's writing, making grudging or groaning faces at what he's written. Looking as though he's about to crumple or tear up every page; arresting the motion and making a correction in pencil instead; running his hand through his hair, looking away or draining the last of the coffee, rolling another cigarette. And also waiting for something. The process has to seem like the slowest engine warming up.

— At which point someone shouts 'Action!'

— At which point, the actual point where pen makes deliberate, belated contact with the paper, that's when the camera begins a microscopically slow tracking on the writer. We're coming in from medium wide to close, and just close enough to keep the writing paper and hand in frame. I want to pace these shots out at a good three to four minutes at a time. It's not much ground to track in on, but I want to establish a rhythm of perception that will inform the pace of the rest. A bit like a tidal rhythm or very slow breathing, a focusing of attention. And each time the final frame of focus will be different: the face centred, or the writing hand centred, or the background over his shoulder with the window. And this pattern repeated with the compass points of the room; tracking slowly in profile from each side several times, and also from the rear. I particularly want to get in the stringy aspect of his hair, the thinness of it, and the shifts in posture at the desk as seen from behind. And then every third or fifth shot increment there's a strict overhead view of the page, with the writing semi-legible. It has to be an odd-numbered pacing, to see the hands and the tip of the pen making words in a kind of counterpoint. The net effect of all which, these multi-directional sets of shots, is to make an exposition by cinematography. A regular

order and pacing of shots covering the five angles of writing. So that the novelty of the structure is quickly dispensed and the viewer can concentrate on the subject and the literal space of writing. Or headspace, rather.

— OK, and then what.

— Well, then nothing what. This goes on for a full 90 minutes. Watching the writer from every angle. Watching the page gradually filling with words and corrections and asterisked footnotes and marked insertions in the margins. Watch him start again and copy a paragraph from the first page. Watch him sigh and scratch his neck, shift gluteal position in the chair, mouthing a sentence to savour its rhythm. Watch the gathering ink, the corrected cross-outs and continual edits. The near-physical distrust of an imperfect line and the staring blankness of waiting for a better variation.

— OK, I think I get the plot. Perhaps it'll be interesting as an exercise, but not very enjoyable as an experience. To watch.

— Well, this isn't a fun film. It's showing the drudgery and slog of writing, the work of it. And only that. No pretty mistresses knocking at the door, no bombast and charm at the cafe, no change of scene or bed. Like I said, it's more of a documentary, a documentary with intent. I want it to be an endurance test, a forced meditation on something that's difficult and irksome and filled with long staring gaps. I want the viewer to start noticing the petty details of the room and set, the wood of the desk and the fluff of the dressing gown. Have you ever noticed the gentle grain of cherry wood. I want detail to become conscious, noticed into existence. I want their low-grade symbolism feeding into the process of watching. I want the viewer to have reactive imaginations and draw inferences because so little's going on, just like the writer is imagining vague abstractions and concreting them with words. Why is there a birdcage. What is that pile of yellow-spined paperbacks. And yes it's cunningly boring but I want the viewer's mind to fall back on itself, imagining little stories in the detail of the set. Or looking at the window in the hope of a change. But above all and again: to give a real taste of what 90 minutes in a writer's day feels like. Ninety minutes and maybe more. Locked in. So that when change does come – the finished pages, the laying down of pen or the growth of dawn in the window – then it feels like a small revelation. And that will be the end of it. No storyarc resolution or change of pace. Maybe he goes back to bed.

— I hope you're not counting on my money to fund it.

— Oh I know it's got limited release all over it. I'm even willing to go for private and unreleased. But in my head I want that image of the writer to be corrected, to be dealt with properly. To know that at least once it was done honestly and without glamour.

— Maybe you should stick to novels.