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## Chance and Change

Rod Stoneman

### 1. *The Role of Chance in Film*

Alea iacta est / The die is cast.

Our understanding of abstract concepts is often inflected through working with them in the rough tumble of concrete experience. Arriving in Maputo, Mozambique in November 1990, just after the feature film *Child from the South* had commenced production, I discovered that over 90% of the money in the contingency section of the budget (normally 10-15% of the total) had been spent by the second day of the shoot, and I could immediately see that the production was in trouble. When the producer tried to reassure me that there would be no need for further contingency spend for the rest of the shoot—"because nothing else is going to go wrong"—I found myself trying to outline and define a conceptual basis for the essentially contingent nature of experience, which is inevitably subject to unforeseen circumstances or chance effects. This would be true in relation to any film being shot in much easier conditions, let alone one with logistics, transport and communications that were not trouble-free, in a place where there were limited periods of electricity most days and where we were warned not to travel beyond city limits into country areas after nightfall as the lethal armed groups of RENAMO were lurking on the outskirts of Maputo and the civil war raged on.

\* \* \*

Beginning with some reflections on the functions of chance, representing the uncontrollable and often unpredictable factors in filmmaking, I will try to connect these thoughts to my experience in commissioning television and film in Britain and Ireland over twenty years. I worked for Channel 4 from 1983-1993 for the first ten years after it was set up as an innovative British television station and as one of the first European ‘publisher broadcasters’ to commission independents to make all the programmes it transmitted. In 1993 I moved to Ireland to help set up The Irish Film Board, a newly reconstituted national film agency. Inevitably there were many differences between these roles and organisations, but the concept and practice of working with risk had much in common. To face the risk involved in making any film is to acknowledge the role of chance in the uncertainties of the world.

Chance always has an important role in film, and can be deployed in more benign and generative ways in creative work. Avant garde explorations in the visual arts have brought a conscious use of procedures that draw chance into focus: the French artist Marcel Duchamp, who had some association with the Surrealists,<sup>i</sup> made *3 Stoppages Étalon* (*3 Standard Stoppages*, 1913-14). He dropped three one-metre lengths of string from a height of one metre onto a horizontal plane, the cord “distorting itself as it pleases creates a new shape of the measure of length”; he recorded their random, undulating positions, describing them as “a piece of canned chance”.<sup>ii</sup> This anticipates his *Elevage de Poussière* (*Dust Breeding*) which allowed dust to collect on a glass surface, Man Ray photographed the dust in 1920 registering



*Dust Breeding*

the passage of time, the chance accumulation of secretions. The string shapes are transposed into Capillary Tubes to the Malic Moulds and the dust fixed with spray adhesive on the Sieves of *La Mariée mis à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1915-23). Indeed the accidental played an unanticipated role in this major work, also known as *The Large Glass*. In 1926, badly packed and laid flat for transport, it bounced on a long truck ride from the Brooklyn Museum to Connecticut, after the journey the glass was found to be shattered in great symmetrical arcs. When this was discovered and the owner, Katherine Dreier, brought herself to tell Duchamp about the disaster, he accepted the breakage as some kind of “chance completion” and declared that the piece, which had taken him eight years to make, was finally finished.<sup>iii</sup>

In historically disparate periods modernist projects have continued to experiment with and examine the parameters of the process of drawing chance forward as a structuring factor in making art works. Recalling the 18<sup>th</sup> century Romantics’ Aeolian harp, which made music as the wind played gently upon its strings, Chris Welsby’s *Seven Days* (1974) placed a camera on an equatorial stand and set in train a pattern of image and sound controlled by the specific local weather

conditions as they happened. Systemic films like Malcolm LeGrice's *Berlin Horse* (1970) or Mike Leggett's *Shepherd's Bush* (1971)



*Berlin Horse*

ran loops of different lengths in motion together in order to create and discover the final pattern of their interaction. This paralleled adjacent work in minimalist music by composers like Steve Reich and Terry Riley. John Cage's conceptual pieces invited unpredictable factors into their composition and performance. John Cage conceived *4'33"* in 1952, often called *Silence*, it actually focuses our awareness on the unpredictable role of ambient sound in public spatial environments. He explained its provenance: 'Many people in our society now go around the streets and in the buses and so forth playing radios with earphones on and they don't hear the world around them.'<sup>iv</sup>

Whether in music or film this time-based work was unique in its embrace of the aleatoric, characterised by accidental or indeterminate elements, allowing the entrance of enhanced chance factors to make a form. Some of the experimental film was labelled 'structural materialist' and many exemplary and systematic pieces were created within the interactive and discursive context that existed around the London

Filmmakers' Co-op in London in the 1970s. Made for smaller audiences some of the more acute examples of cinematic art explicitly drew the role of chance and thus non-authorial elements into focus within 'open works'.

Leaving aside experimentation by denizens of the avant garde, there should be some degree of openness to chance even when filming the largest budget work. While the element of chance can be limited or reduced by filming under controlled conditions in a studio rather than on location, there are so many factors and determinations on the fine distinctions of sound and image that pass in front of the camera and microphone in the moment of recording, that even highly controlled conditions encounter a complex of unexpected nuances. This is the unruly, perverse, obstinate or unmanageable texture and shape of the real; referred to by Noel Burch, in his chapter 'Chance and Its Functions' in *Theory of Film Practice*,<sup>v</sup> as the "refractory nature of film material."<sup>vi</sup> Anyone who has worked with editing processes will have glimpsed both the plasticity of sound and image and also their occasional recalcitrance.

Historically there are filmmakers who specifically embraced a conscious degree of improvisation in their method of realisation: Roberto Rossellini, while filming *Viaggio in Italia* (*Voyage in Italy*, 1954) in Naples was contacted when the newly discovered imprints of bodies of the dead were discovered beneath the volcanic ash in nearby Pompeii. He constructed a scene that integrated the (re-)staged unveiling of the plaster casts of the bodies of a male and female, presumed to be lovers who died together, in front of Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders, the actors playing Mr and Mrs Joyce<sup>vii</sup> whose relationship has reached a crisis and is in danger of disintegrating. The glimpse of the ancient lovers who died in each others arms in

79 AD emerging from the ashes of centuries is emotionally pivotal in the finished film narrative.

John Huston specifically threw himself into the arms of the aleatoric: as he put it himself, “I court accident”.<sup>viii</sup> For *Beat the Devil* in 1953 he assembled a cast and headed for Italy with a draft scenario described candidly by Peter Viertel, who co-wrote it with Anthony Veiller, as “Lacking a central plot. The dialogue was good and the characters were unusual, but the structure was lacking”.<sup>ix</sup> Humphrey Bogart, who invested in the film, initially saw it as “a chance to make some real money”,<sup>x</sup> but then Huston warned him “We haven’t got a script, and I don’t know what the hell is going to come of this. It may be a disaster. In fact, it’s got all the earmarks of a disaster.” He was relieved by Bogart’s irrefutable response “Hell, it’s only money”.<sup>xi</sup> They arrived in Italy with a cast and budget but no script or scriptwriter, apparently finding Truman Capote “on the street in Rome” following which they all decamped to a villa in Ravello, a small town South of Naples, to make the movie.



*Beat the Devil*

By all accounts the shoot was a bunch of friends having an extended party. Approaching the film on a highly improvisational basis those involved in the production process essentially made it up as they went along. With production

manager Jack Clayton, Huston developed a number of ruses, withholding scripted dialogue from actors until the moment before they had to perform, on the pretext that he wanted them to remain fresh by not anticipating their lines. This gave him time to write them en route. Arriving on set in the morning, Huston made use of delaying tactics: devising elaborate set-ups, laying track for complex camera movements, removing walls and setting lighting, manoeuvres that would divert and preoccupy the crew. In the meantime he would go upstairs with Capote to script the scene to be shot later that day: “We worked very hard and tried to keep ahead of the picture”. This inventive strategy embodied an openness to the aleatoric, the role of chance; Huston wrote that actors, if “given time and freedom, will fall naturally into their places, discover when and where to move and you will have your shot”.<sup>xii</sup>

There is visible evidence of the dramatic interaction with chance when filmmakers take production into environments that are beyond their control. In *Medium Cool* Haskell Wexler placed his lead actress (wearing a bright yellow dress so that she could be seen in the mêlée) in the demonstration staged in front of the Democratic convention in Chicago on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1968. A sketchy narrative plays through a situation which rapidly and spectacularly became what many witnesses described as a “police riot” with substantial indiscriminate use of state violence. The filmmaker, dissolving those permeable boundaries between documentary and fiction, took his fictional protagonist, playing a journalist, and inserted her into a factual situation that was evidently and dramatically a long way beyond his control.<sup>xiii</sup>

One can see the experimental domain as a space for research taking place outside the mercantile pressures of commercial film, but there is considerable continuity between these works and the examples of larger scale feature enterprises that work through different degrees of openness to chance and develop diverse ways



of bringing this process to the foreground. They share an approach to creativity that welcomes the dynamic of improvisation, and elicits fast and inventive responses; a dialectical interaction between unforeseen, unpredictable factors and planning and anticipation. The intrusions of ‘natural’ contingencies set up patterns of interference between the controlled and the accidental. Artists’ use of chance is a small scale encounter with the aleatoric and what we know as ‘risk’ takes place within chance for the operation of factors outside prediction or control may lead to either harmful or fortuitous results.

Boethius, writing *The Consolation of Philosophy* in 524AD, refers to Aristotle and defines chance as an “unexpected result from the coincidence of certain causes.” As he makes clear, it may be unforeseen but that does not mean that it is random or outside causality.<sup>xiv</sup> Thus chance is understood as the non-controlled and often unexpected factors that can be invited into filmmaking as beneficial elements, or guarded against as negative or even dangerous intrusions. American underground filmmaker Kenneth Anger condemned the imposition of “rigid intellectual control” leading to works which become “‘ends in themselves’—exercises in highly refined style but lack the irreplaceable qualities of improvisation.”<sup>xv</sup> Clearly chance can be catalytic in the stimulation of new forms of image / sound and narrative play; ‘homo ludens’<sup>xvi</sup> finds different ways of operating within the oxymoron of ‘controlled chance’.

## 2. *Industrial Experience*

### a) Television

“Slightly or nearly indecent”

– definition of ‘risky’ in *The Penguin English Dictionary*, G.N Garmonsway, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 592.

The unlikely experience of emerging from *Screen* theory into commissioning programmes for the newly set up Channel 4 television in 1983 certainly involved coming to operational terms with actual risk in film production processes, although this was never posed as a dilemma or reason for trepidation at the time. There were of course wrong calls, miscalculations and mistakes that I made, risks that I took that didn’t come off at all well. Yet, somehow the complex reflexivity of the structural theory I had encountered as a student,<sup>xvii</sup> and as a member of the *Screen* board,<sup>xviii</sup> was helpful in trying to understand the process of film commissioning.

The foundational principles in Channel 4 began with a radical pluralism that embraced range and diversity. “There will be some diamonds, but also some dogs,” was a phrase from those times that pointed towards an understanding that supporting an increasing multiplicity of independent production and taking greater risks would inevitably lead to some programmes and films that just didn’t turn out well. I worked in the Department of Independent Film and Video<sup>xix</sup> and we were at the further edge of the station’s constitutional remit to support “innovation in form and content”, pushing the boundaries of what was available on British television. We absolutely did not see it as our job to “play it safe”.

Of course we could easily have reduced risk and saved money by commissioning a smaller proportion of new programmes and by using our budget to purchase a much larger proportion of finished films. If one goes to a festival or a market and sees films that can be bought and transmitted, what one is acquiring is completely clear and fixed in advance. This approach would also have made the

budget go much further—paradoxically the market logic inverts a reasonable rationale—for purchases were significantly cheaper than presales or commissions. Committing support to a film before it was made would cost 5 to 10 times more than purchasing the same film as a known quantity, as a finished product. But we were all clear that the hazardous business of commissioning and making new programmes and films kept our screen lively and energetic, fresh and topical.

Dangers and risks took many forms. An example from the political domain arose when I commissioned *Mother Ireland*, a documentary directed by Anne Crilly, who was a member of the Derry Film and Video Workshop, located in the nationalist Bogside in that city—a clear, if implicit, position in every sense. From our point of view in Channel 4, the workshop represented direct speech from a community often talked about, but rarely able to speak directly, or to air its own views through its own programmes. But a dramatic and entirely unforeseen transformation in *Mother Ireland*'s fortune occurred for, within days of the delivery of the completed programme on 2nd March 1988, Mairéad Farrell, one of eleven people interviewed in it, was shot by the British Special Air Service in Gibraltar. I remember seeing her photograph on the front page of *The Sunday Times* and vaguely recognising her,



eventually working out that I must have seen her interviewed in the various rough cuts of the documentary (which would not have had names or captions) I had viewed in

the previous months. Her status as interviewee was instantly transformed from an ex-prisoner, who had become a Sinn Fein activist while studying at Queen's University Belfast, to someone who had clearly rejoined the Irish Republican Army on release and who had been killed on active service. In an unprecedented procedure the entire Board of Channel 4 watched this now problematic programme and, to cut a long story short,<sup>xx</sup> this unexpected turn of events led to a change in the status of the programme and extensive delays. It was eventually transmitted three years later in 'Banned', a season about censorship.

Issues of politics leading to the dangers of censorship were not the only unexpected risks that could intercept transmission. Calculation of the potential transgression of the parameters of sexual mores often necessitated careful discussion with the filmmaker in advance. The excisions and reductions necessary to make a film transmittable were approached with the intention of keeping as much as possible of the meaning and integrity of the work while frankly softening some of the impact of its deliberately aggressive transgressions. This was achieved by decreasing the duration of the assault or by covering over specific images. Apart from the principle of cutting with the filmmaker's consent we always tried to use black rectangles to blank out offensive parts of the frame in order to make cuts overt—to show what we couldn't show. In order to be able to transmit Dusan Makavejev's classic 1971 film *WR Misterije Organizma* (*WR Mysteries of the Organism*) the director superimposed



gently moving goldfish over the tumescent genitals depicted in the (faked<sup>xxi</sup>) Sexpol newsreel in the opening sequence and a psychedelic spiral over the plastercaster's work with the editor of *Screw* magazine.

This version of the practice of censorship also arose in relation to *Salt, Saliva, Sperm and Sweat*, for example. Made in Australia during 1987 by Philip Brophy, it espouses an aggressive strategy of shock in order to attack the repetitious, alienated routines of office work and everyday life. The hour-long film was constructed with rhyming sections organised by the alliterative bodily fluids of the title. The necessity of editing a version that could be shown on television had been discussed in advance and agreed in principle with the director, as it had been clear enough from the most cursory glance that the complete, un-cut version could not be transmitted. The parameters of the avant garde, bad taste and perversity exceeded the limits of what was broadcastable in Britain at that time by a wide margin. Editing to achieve a transmittable 'television version' was carried out at Channel 4 with the filmmaker present: we obscured a scrotum shot from behind during intercourse, removed a turd

dropping into a transparent toilet bowl, excised the verbal exclamation “Sprog of fucking Jesus!” (in response to food in the office canteen) and softened the protagonist’s incestuous stare (angle / reverse / angle) directed towards his younger brother’s buttocks being dried after a bath. On transmission at 11 pm on a Monday night, long after the ‘family viewing threshold’, the film was preceded by a presentation announcement specifically warning the audience and indicating that they were about to see a ‘television version’ of a film that still “may offend some viewers”... There was no significant, discernible reaction from the viewing public.<sup>xxii</sup>

Across the first ten years of Channel 4’s existence I witnessed the sad slow process of tightening and standardising the systems of production and truncating the range of content that appeared on screen. Cost controllers couldn’t understand how precarious, low budget projects came through and were invariably completed—the personal, political and artistic motivations and determinations of an artisanal independent working on a small production were unfamiliar to the average television financial executive who would thus begin to seek to impose an ‘executive producer’ with more experience. This procedure was rarely efficacious and generally wasted too much of the already tight budget allocated for the programme. But the apparatus felt more secure with the delusory safety of a known name (known to the Channel 4 Cost Controller) ‘supervising’ the project. In fact the evolution of the channel in the ten years I was there saw the virtual eradication of programmes produced by artisanal filmmakers ‘out of their front rooms’. A growing professionalisation required that any individual director’s bright and original idea for a film be housed in established independent production companies that supervised production and took sections of the budget and the eventual production fee (previously used to finance speculative research for new projects). Smoothing out some of the rough edges of personal

programme-making no doubt reduced the number and nature of the ‘dogs’ in the schedule, but it also eliminated a significant proportion of the ‘diamonds’.

The bravery of Channel 4’s period of initiation gradually receded and concurrent with tighter supervision of production there was an introverted movement towards our own conception of our needs. Commissioning meetings stopped being about asking independents the question “What idea for a programme do you have that’s fantastic?” Instead the possibility of production was increasingly posed as “Can someone develop a format that will introduce young people to gardening? We’re thinking about 13 times 26 minutes, to be scheduled mid-week in the early evening?”

At some point preceding the slow descent of Channel 4 the founding Chief Executive Jeremy Isaacs proffered me some specific advice, writing the Latin adage “*Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*” (soft in approach, hard in deed) on a scrap of paper. Risk taking was the centre of our commissioning activity, and it was somewhat protected as an accepted and inevitable dimension of the complex and sometimes awkward work that it was our role to encourage. There had to be some explicable basis for making a judgement or taking a decision; institutions demand something more of a rationale than, in Michael Grade’s apocryphal phrase, “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”<sup>xxiii</sup> As individuals making commissioning decisions we had to be something like fearless, but not reckless. I remember withdrawing tentative support from a project when it became clear that a young Croatian filmmaker intended to place herself in jeopardy while filming the 1991 siege of Dubrovnik during the break-up of Yugoslavia and the foundation of Croatia. We were not a current affairs department and there was no reason to encourage someone deliberately to put herself in physical danger in order to achieve something that could be broadcast.

Sometimes people constructed their explanations after the event, I came across a rare example of defensive documentation being manufactured retrospectively when, after an educational series had not worked well and received a bad reception at the weekly internal Programme Review meeting, an assistant showed me a colleague's backdated and unsent memo warning the independent producer that he foresaw serious problems with the series of programmes. There may have been considerable pressure on those executives who sought advancement in their careers, but I came from a different and more critical perspective outside television and at some level was surprised to be there anyway. There was always a sense that risks were taking place over the horizon, but, like Alfred E. Newman<sup>xxiv</sup>, I always felt "What me worry", or in Gertrude Stein's version: "Anything scares me, anything scares anyone but really after all considering how dangerous everything is nothing is really very frightening".<sup>xxv</sup> It seemed to me that as long as there was a reasonable explanation for the original commitment we could deal with the eventuality of a film moving into crisis or coming off the rails.

I remember ringing the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) when, during the making of *Hush-a-bye Baby* (1990), a feature film being directed by Margo Harkin, another member of the same Derry Film and Video Workshop, a leading actress was arrested during the shoot. She had already been extensively filmed and for continuity reasons was essential for the filming of further scenes. It was clear from the brief dialogue I had with a rather dry RUC Special Branch policeman that we came from very different worlds:

"I'm from Channel 4 and we are supporting the production of a low budget feature by the Derry workshop. Your arrest of Rosena Brown earlier today is



a big problem for us as she is one of the main actresses in the film and her continued detention is threatening our production schedule”

“Well, it may not have occurred to you, but we are fighting a war here...”

– Pause –

“Would it be possible to give a specific time or date for her release from questioning in the near future so that we can factor it into the schedule for filming?”

“We find in general that indicating the precise end of the interrogation process in advance renders that process less effective.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

When he took over from Jeremy Isaacs in November 1987, Michael Grade made a liberating remark to commissioning staff on his accession; speaking in the small basement studio he said pointedly “I would rather you made the wrong decisions than no decisions”. His affirmation was a necessary release for over-cautious commissioners who might hover hesitantly around a swathe of possible proposals, and it was helpful for independent producers who were held indefinitely in limbo while waiting for commissioning decisions to be made.

Too often in our department we felt we were an alibi for the Channel as a whole—a high proportion of still images from our programmes illustrated the annual report as examples of innovation, and yet we always found it difficult to extend our overall budget or airtime. However gradually we supplemented those transmissions in the tundra of the schedule for *The Eleventh Hour* and *Midnight Underground* with mid-evening magazine formats like *Out*, *South*, *The Media Show* and *Critical Eye*, and occasionally there were examples of our most audacious programmes taking centre stage. During the 10pm transmission of Derek Jarman’s *Blue* by Channel 4 and

Radio 3 on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1993 the television screen radiated a pure, Yves Klein blue into living rooms while a cluster of voices circled the filmmaker's desperate predicament—going blind through retinal deterioration brought about by AIDS. As with Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) it was understood that this particular film could not be interrupted with ad breaks, and so the station took the brave decision to forego the advertisements and revenue for the duration of the programme.

## b) Cinema

Moving in 1993 from television to film production funding when I was appointed CEO of Bord Scannán na hÉireann (The Irish Film Board), the reconstituted Irish national film agency, I saw some continuities in the approach to different scales of exposure, although there were also some differences and specificities as a result of working for a government semi-state agency in Ireland at that time. I tried to formulate something specifically about the risk-taking involved in these roles in a section of an essay on the differences involved in these two media, as section 6 of 'Nine Notes on Cinema and Television', published in *Big Picture, Small Screen*:

### Risk

Novitatem meam contemnunt ego illorum ignaviam / They despise my novelty, I their timidity.

In their different ways the commissioners and financiers of film and television nearly always avow some commitment to taking high risks, working with first time filmmakers, making films without well-known actors or stars. Everyone manifests a predisposition towards the new, the

innovative. Indeed television uses cinema to provide it with new ideas, new material, to take risks for it. The desire to “bring in new talent” has led to the proliferation of a plethora of short film schemes. It is also a way of cordoning off and placing troublesome new talent in a safety net: surrounding a tyro director with the scaffolding of experience – “they can’t go too far wrong with a brilliant cinematographer in front, an experienced editor alongside, an established producer behind”.

But, despite good intentions, it is very difficult to achieve consistent risk-taking under sustained pressure. Hesitancy, timidity and conservatism take different forms in cinema and television. Television is governed by the ineluctable algebra of *high risk equals low audience equals lower levels of investment*. Actually it can be argued that the opposite is true: first-time directors need significantly larger budgets to support longer preparation, an editor working alongside them from an earlier stage, and five- rather than six-day weeks in order to take pressure off the process of the shoot. But this would be to invert the logic of the market. However there are some advantages in working with lower budgets because there is less pressure on this production space.

The television micro debate about innovation and risk takes place following the dangerous change in climate that has occurred over the last decade in European public service broadcasting. The insertion of commercial pressures has had an inevitable long-term effect on editorial postures even in some non-commercial stations...<sup>xxvii</sup>

Setting up the new operation of the reconstituted Irish Film Board we would generally provide 30-50% of the budget of feature films, and the biggest dangers often arose around closing the convoluted, many layered co-production agreements as production began. Somehow the pressure of the commencement of the shoot was necessary to push the final, formal legal and financial agreement through, a distracting problem for all involved while the film lifts off. Once the financing was closed the film was fully insured or 'bonded'. Like traditional forms of insurance there was a calculation of financial risk and redemption within the specific terms of any claim, but bonding companies worked closely and co-operatively with financiers at all stages. As the completion bond was not valid until all the interlocking contracts (sometimes the paperwork would be two or three feet thick) were closed this was a moment of real jeopardy. The fact that it took place in the demanding first week of the shoot was a potential distraction, and this at a time when everyone should have been concentrating on the intricate and multifarious effort of making a film work. More than one project collapsed in preproduction or the first weeks of production in this period—with extremely negative side-effects for casts and crews who worried about being paid, and for potential co-financiers who were nervous about losing their investment. For these reasons we, at the Board, were involved in the strenuous exertions to avoid films collapsing in this period, although these attempts stopped short of bailing a film out by pouring extra Film Board money into its budget.

At Easter 1994 the Irish language fiction, *An Gobán Saor*, started production in Feakle, Co. Clare with only a small proportion of its finance in place. Initially disconcerted by the startling irresponsibility of engaging a cast and crew and beginning the production of a film without the money to make it, I drove out to the

location on Easter Monday, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1994, and found that it was left to me to explain the seriousness of the situation to a very disgruntled crew, during the lunch break in the bus used for location catering. I promised them that the Film Board would use its best endeavours over the next seven days to pull the rest of the funding together.<sup>xxviii</sup> It actually took ten days, the film came very close to collapse after seven and I learned not to make promises and offer deadlines that I could not deliver.

We became used to the delicate and difficult question of how much cash flow we should advance to a production that had not stabilised: not enough would mean the oxygen of production is cut off, while too much takes pressure off finding solutions; and it would be difficult to justify having advanced large amounts if the production grinds to a halt. It was always necessary to limit the Board's exposure in case a project collapsed before it was fully funded; it would have been irresponsible to over-commit (tax payers') money to an unstable production that might end in disaster.<sup>xxix</sup>

Sometimes we were party to the miscalculation of cash flow needs and a few years after *An Gobán Saor*, Deborah Warner's *Last September* (a much bigger feature project) was in great jeopardy in the second week of its shoot in October 1998. As one



of the producers Nik Powell was working with lawyers to interlock and make two complex national tax incentive schemes compatible in the financial structure, the electricians (a crew of sparks imported from Britain) threatened to abandon the production unless they were immediately paid. Searching for €10,000 in cash Neil Jordan, an executive producer on the project, turned to me with the half-joking but memorable remark “do you know any drug dealers?”—presumably they might be a source of ready cash. I had to admit that I had no such relevant acquaintances and in the end it was said that the urgent money was borrowed late that night via Paul McGuinness (manager of U2) from the safe of the Clarence, a Dublin hotel that the group owned.

These financial and production issues are separate from what one might term aesthetic or formal risk, although they have effects on it. They play into and eventually interact with the myriad factors that lead to what appears on the screen and, at a later stage, in some ineffable way, they impact on the factors that determine cultural or commercial success. A film is as strong as its weakest element and not its strongest, and lining up consistent and correct choices of scripting, casting, shooting, editing and music are necessary for a film to succeed on its own terms. Any attempt at a balance sheet of the 100 feature films we were involved with over 10 decades will indicate a good number and spread that ‘worked’ if we can define that in terms of lucid intensities, films that are coherently themselves at various levels of budget. It is because they are more artisanal than industrial that there is no simple relationship between financial investment and return in European cinema.<sup>xxx</sup>

We had an average ratio of one film going into production from every ten that we had provided with development funding, and there were those who suggested that the higher attrition rate of Hollywood’s twenty to one development ratio would lead

to more commercial films and better returns. I argued the opposite—that as some would-be commercial projects were receiving €50,000 or even €75,000 in long drawn-out development periods we should deploy equivalent sums to encourage the notionally much riskier process of ultra low budget films being “developed in the camera” as part of an improvisatory and artisanal production process.

It was essential for a national film agency like BSÉ / IFB that there be some combination of success in both cultural and commercial domains. Film agencies and institutes in the 1960s and 1970s had more of a purely cultural remit, but the neo-liberal economic discourses of the later 1970s and 1980s provided pressure for economic performance. In Ireland the Coopers and Lybrand Report from 1992 argued for the reconstitution of the Film Board, which had been dissolved in 1987, on the grounds that it would stimulate economic activity and thus employment. Of course these were important arguments to make and we produced figures to show the economic effects of our support for production. However we were concerned to maintain a judicious equilibrium between cultural, social and financial motives; there are always reasons for ‘thinking of the audience’—if one is to avoid solipsistic or unthought-through forms of filmmaking practice.

It was important to keep the relentless financial tendencies at bay by balancing them with cultural arguments and so I wrote polemical comments like “In all its forms film is at its most innovative when it is experienced as unexpected, challenging social norms and complacencies of taste, extending the boundaries of the possible . . .” in the annual report.<sup>xxx</sup> In 2003 we came up with a mission statement: “We intend to encourage bravery and embrace creative risk. Paradoxically, in cinema, the further you push artistically the more genuinely commercial you can be.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Uttering these ‘neither/nor’ verbalizations and myriad other oxymoronic policy formulations seemed

like indispensable discursive manoeuvres and the only way to absorb and deflect the implacable pressures of increasingly economic discourses. Utilising public monies for the expensive business of film needed justification as right-wing public representatives and a hostile tabloid press were always pleased to indulge in a feeding frenzy the minute we failed to maintain a robust sense of purpose allied with some quick footwork.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of global versions of ‘currently existing Socialism’ at the end of the 1980s led to the public sector being pushed towards increasingly market-led approaches, in all areas of its operations. This general shift led to extreme, macho commercialist stances being taken by some film funding agencies in the late 1990s, by the UK Film Council or the Australian FFC (Film Finance Corporation), for example. Posing as commercial with public money is a contradiction in terms—real commercial activity is different and should be left to itself. As Sergio Leone put it in a 1984 interview “American studios have a way of facing problems that is very realistic, very drastic and very hard, because the product is money and money must be protected...However, in my view, they often forget that we are dealing with an artistic work and that artistic values must contribute to the defence of the product”.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

### *3. The Terms of Timidity*

“The Middle of the Road is a Very Dead End” – Alexander Kluge, 1974.

The development of discourses surrounding the idea of risk has taken place within a set of material determinations and a specific historical context. Encouraged by



contemporary mercantile mentalities there is the sense that the performance of discursive routines will eliminate uncertainty and unpredictability. On the whole present day attitudes and approaches are models of containment that attempt to enclose and restrain risk taking. A crisis of governance in a government department leads to journalistic exclamations calling for “a major overhaul of risk management procedures to ensure taxpayers get better value for money”.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This is a voiced diversion and a disingenuous euphemism as improved planning procedures may well be a good idea, but it is unlikely that they will pre-empt and preclude venality and corruption. The development of different versions of risk aversion in different spheres of public life attempts to coerce film production into less adventurous forms. It becomes even more difficult openly to embrace the fundamental risk taking of the artistic imagination.

In Los Angeles in September 2008 I could hear the sound of the machinery of commerce in action; I remember hearing the admiring phrase “They can run the figures so accurately now” from many different people. It was the moment of the release of *Prince Caspian*, the second in the trilogy *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the media city was admiring the level of precision of calculation and financial modelling currently possible in ‘franchise movies’; the succession of sequels in blockbuster trilogies and series are sometimes also referred to as ‘brand-based properties’.<sup>xxxv</sup> This film was made for a high budget of \$225m with something like \$100m spent on marketing, but it earned \$55m from the saturation release in 4000 theatres across the United States on its opening weekend. The total domestic box office of this film was \$141m, while the foreign was \$278m; and with total box office receipts of \$419m one can assume a profit of something like \$100m during the first year of distribution. This

is an industrial cultural process with a high proportion of return on investment and the scale of the machinery ensures that there is little risk involved.

In cinema, marketing has come to dominate production and the researched premonition of audience taste has now become powerful and pre-emptive. Thus to some extent, across time, marketing works as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is a mechanism increasingly deployed to reinforce patterns of desire in which the audience asks to receive that which it expects it should want. At worst this becomes a closed loop, replicating learned forms and received formulae. Clearly despite careful testing, publicity and advertising cannot achieve success for each and every specific product, for there is still a degree of risk that the thoroughly checked and verified version will not succeed. Nonetheless, a cumulative and pervasive effect is produced by the process, and it works to make occasional failure less likely.

These shifts in cultural formation invoke a relevant adjacent political movement whereby since the early 1980s (the launch of the short-lived Social Democratic Party in England would be a key example<sup>xxxvi</sup>) political parties began to research their policies in advance of arguing for them. Instead of developing, proposing and convincing people about ideas and politics, parties now start with procedures employing focus groups, with research polls designed to “see what people want.” With the results of these market research methods the new policies, which have thus already been tested, are formulated. Of course this kind of process easily becomes a pre-emptive forecast whereby ideology moves around in a circle to reinforce itself.

While such procedures are the basis of most commodity manufacture and distribution, and function proficiently in the context of the introduction of myriad new domestic products and FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods), there are problems in

applying them to different domains. In the field of film and culture they have the predictable and deleterious effect of reducing diversity, and of creating a less variegated cultural landscape. What may not be a problem for a breakfast cereal becomes detrimental for a television serial as marketing changes taste across time and induces a persistence of formulae and repetition.

Different motives lead to the same end—conservative risk aversion in commercial companies parallels well-established pusillanimous attitudes in the public sector. Civil servants are long used to inhabiting an organisational culture of inertia or indecision: “better not to take a decision in case it might be a mistake”. This is not an encouraging environment for clarity and decisiveness. “We must protect our minister” is a phrase I have heard many times in government departments and one English civil servant even confided in me his technique of calling for the relevant file and sitting on it—“action cannot be taken without the file”.

The public sector in Europe has been subject to modernising reforms based on policies and practices with a provenance in MBA (Masters in Business Administration) programmes. These courses were developed in American colleges in the Sixties and were motivated by a perceived need to formulate new templates to analyse, plan and manage very different types of businesses and organisations. However the clear benefits of these powerful tools can also lead to problems when MBA-style analytical formulations are applied clumsily by those who do not have an adequate grasp of the specificity of a particular area of work such as film. To be effective business analysis needs to be coupled with a feeling for the nuances and specificities of the arts. At its worst half-digested jargon is wielded as a weapon and well-paid consultants conduct risible seminars on Risk Management. At a Institute of

Public Administration briefing session for semi-state agencies held in Dublin in 2001 the following were listed amongst 21 ‘risks’ for any organisation:

- 15) coming in under budget,
- 16) coming in over budget,
- 19) not recruiting high quality staff.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

In the context of contemporary media production education students are now taught new replicas and grids of risk modelling for their projects. Risk analyses, quantification and management, when they are not stating the absolutely obvious, offer formulae for false comfort by containing and denying the unpredictable aspects of the creative process. Risk quantification subjects organic processes to the misconception of the metrical. Although the ‘Probability / Impact Matrix’ (sic) of risk calculation should notionally include positive outcomes—opportunities it is symptomatic that it only dwells on negative possibilities—threats. The delusion that uncertainty can be systematically managed may offer a reassurance to those who lack the confidence or the competence to face, let alone embrace, the existential reality of artistic processes, but it does not alter that reality.

The mirage of protection from exposure is reinforced at an educational level as over the last decades institutions have moved towards craft-based vocational training which leads to industrial assimilation and mimetic production. If the aim is to train for independent thinking, to train critical practitioners, then the educational process should be devised in a very different way, and should involve a different approach to understanding risk.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Creating a new generation of technicians with craft skills but unused to reflection will not encourage genuine artistic exploration, and intelligent imaginative adventure is the only basis on which to create something striking or original enough to attract an audience whose taste has been formed elsewhere.

#### 4. *Embracing Risk*

“Control is an illusion” – apocryphal Feminist maxim.

It is often worth reminding oneself that in film production there is always and only risk; although producers work to minimize certain dangers, every batch of newly made low- and medium-budget films in Europe serves to indicate how undependable even the biggest, most ‘bankable’ names turn out to be. Filmmaking should be careful, and it may be calculated, but it ultimately involves facing factors foreseen and unforeseen; in Donald Rumsfeld’s notorious formulation: “There are known unknowns... but there are also unknown unknowns”.<sup>xxxix</sup> If we needed reminding that comprehensive foresight is not available to us, the terrible movement of the earth’s tectonic plates in Lisbon in 1755 and Haiti in 2010 indicate that the ground on which we stand is not entirely secure.

Most people do not look for the hazardous for its own sake, but there is an sense that moments of mortal danger provide exhilarating existential stimulation. One evening during the filming of *Beat the Devil* John Huston left an all-night poker game and stood swaying on the terrace of the house he had hired near Naples. In a reverie, Martini in hand, he found himself falling through the air. Luckily a tree broke a 40 foot fall, continuing the close encounters with mortality that Huston had celebrated throughout his life, and adding to the successive near death experiences with waterfalls, cars, explosives, tigers and sea-snakes recounted in his autobiography *An Open Book*.<sup>xl</sup> In John Huston’s case his psychological dalliance with danger was

consonant with a wider trust in chance, with his “courting accident” in an open creative process.

Outside film production the concept of risk plays a role in the framework of social judgement placed on adventurous individuals: unsuccessful reckless, successful brilliant. Although the general climate encourages risk aversion there are formations of generally individualised risk that are supported or proposed by dominant representational regimes. These specifically include spectacular individual danger: the heroic mountaineer, the extreme sportsman or explorer. *Touching the Void* (Kevin MacDonald, 2003) would be a recent example of British derring-do or daring action, restaged for the camera. Such exploits are generally an extension of an expansive and most masculine ego, although female variants, like aviatrix Amy Johnston, do occur. The film *Man on Wire* (James Marsh, 2007) about the Frenchman who walked a tightrope between the Twin Towers in 1974 is disingenuous as it takes its meaning from the unspoken context of 9/11. His motivations, as the documentary reveals, are personal and psychological, but the making and reception of the film at this time are influenced by other factors. It is not that this deed did not embody extraordinary and heroic risk taking, but the eventual film hides the way in which its poetry and significance are entirely and inevitably embedded in the post 9/11 implications of the buildings he walked between. American invulnerability was destroyed with the towers and in the film Philippe Petit’s feat is a reassertion of the pride of the West in its quirky, but ultimately triumphant, bravery. There is always one soldier in the fox hole in a war film who is eccentric but, finally, courageous. These representations function ideologically: in Britain the quiet heroism of the dangerous risks taken by ‘our boys’ in Afghanistan is stressed by the media as a conduit for support for untenable foreign policies. These people in peril are exceptional, and the images of danger and hazard

faced by others in society are precisely far enough away to comfort us during our quieter quotidian experience.

It is astonishing to discover the way in which a pervasive image system crosses the globe, reiterating authorised narratives that disclose events deceptively. This socialised representational background constantly impinges on the arena of creativity in film. There is a pervasive context, shaped by the discursive hegemony of a stable image system and a centripetal process, and this context reduces the variations of taste. Of course cinema is a subsidiary element in this complex image system which works to stabilise subjectivities and social formations, themselves the domain of the dominant illusions, falsities and selectivities that sustain our culture. Some of these happen intentionally (conspiracies), many are determined unconsciously (ideologies), and some are even occasionally the result of the passage of chance. Most representations are the result of the specific interactions of these three factors. The third factor of the accidental, is rarely seen from outside and often incalculable, but although it plays a significant role, it is the most difficult to integrate into the model and also the least discussed.<sup>xli</sup> Unfortunately the understanding of reciprocal reinforcement of symbolic and social systems is not widely developed and does not seem to lead to any imminent prospect of change.

We need to be open to the spaces of dangerous creation, to films made in a brief passage where cinema can embrace the risk involved in the imaginative process. Now, with the pervasive emphases on industrial modes of production, the forces of mechanical repetition have increased their dominance. In a climate of risk aversion the written scenario moves from constituting a firm base for singular film-making, to a way of avoiding an encounter with the uncertainties of both art and the world. There is a danger of a veritable tyranny of the script (in contemporary Bollywood apparently

it is known as ‘the bound script’) as the only basis for gathering production monies. Increasingly the script is becoming an editorial gatekeeper which focuses creative movement on particular ways of fabricating fiction films.

Creating a space where a greater range of calculated risks might be taken is essential for the project of pluralism. Health and safety precautions reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes from potentially dangerous actions, but they do not stop the activities taking place. A desire to embrace adventurous ways of working is a starting point for opening the envelope of the possible. Pluralism is the space of difference and challenge through other potential orders. As William Blake wrote, “Without contraries (there) is no progression”. There should be contention between a very wide diversity of styles and subjects, for this makes it possible to recognise the extent to which chance is a portal for many aspects that we cannot control and do not know. We need to encourage and maximise the dynamic of the daring, the possibilities of the perilous, in order to enable the realisation of new images and sounds that may contribute to social and cultural transformation. In a recent interview Eric Hobsbawm suggested: “Historically, communities and social systems have aimed at stabilisation and reproduction, creating mechanisms to keep at bay disturbing leaps into the unknown.”<sup>xlii</sup> Aesthetic modes which face an encounter with chance suggest more dynamic modes of bringing about change. Perhaps the variegated range of films achieved by artistic risk taking will also in its way help to sustain radical and imaginative solutions to the urgent human and political developments we face.



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<sup>i</sup> It could be argued that the Surrealist embrace of chance was a premonition of later modernist work. They used games like the Exquisite Corpse, assembling sentences and images by chance procedures as routes to the unconscious. The point was to achieve “Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason and outside all moral or aesthetic preoccupations” as André Breton’s formulation in the *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924 indicated. Ironically when they turned to film they had to involve a basic level of planning; making *Un Chien Andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*, 1929) or *L’Age d’Or* (*Age of Gold*, 1930) involved a cast and crew assembling at an agreed time and place with appropriate costume and props—constraints not involved in the immediacy of games or automatic writing.

<sup>ii</sup> “This experiment was made to imprison and preserve forms obtained through chance, through my chance.” Notes in *The Box of 1914*.

<sup>iii</sup> Dawn Ades, Neil Cox and David Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 94.

<sup>iv</sup> Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 10.

<sup>v</sup> First published in French in 1967, the English translation was published five years later (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973), 105-121.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>vii</sup> In reference to James Joyce as the film has an intertextual relationship with Joyce’s short story ‘The Dead’.

<sup>viii</sup> James Goode, *The Making of the Misfits* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1986), 46.

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- <sup>ix</sup> Peter Viertel, *Dangerous Friends* (London: Viking, 1991), 174.
- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.
- <sup>xi</sup> John Huston, *An Open Book* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 246.
- <sup>xii</sup> Lesley Brill, *John Huston's Filmmaking* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 238.
- <sup>xiii</sup> The 1989 demonstrations that ended the Ceausescu regime in Romania in December 1989 are utilised by Robert Dornhelm in *Requiem for Dominic*.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. W.V. Cooper, 1902, available from: Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, Book V.
- <sup>xv</sup> "Modesty and the Art of Film," *Cahiers du cinéma* no.5, September 1951.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003).
- <sup>xvii</sup> University of Kent at Canterbury 1972-1975 and the Film Unit, Slade School of Fine Art, University College London 1976-1978.
- <sup>xviii</sup> I was a member of the editorial board from 1980-1985.
- <sup>xix</sup> With Alan Fountain and Caroline Spry from 1983-1993.
- <sup>xx</sup> Cf Derek Jones, ed., *Censorship: A World Encyclopaedia* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 593-594.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Although they are black and white (tinted puce), and grainy and integrate plausibly with the Wilhelm Reich material from the 1930's, the images of the couple making love in the open air were actually shot on video during the Woodstock music festival.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Censorship: A World Encyclopaedia*, 357-358.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Michael Grade, *It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time* (London: Macmillan, 1999). There is a 1976 film and at least twelve other books utilising this phrase in the title.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> The supposed founder and figurehead of *Mad* magazine.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (London: Heinemann, 1937).
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Rosena Brown was charged with playing another role that would have involved acting—as a Mata Hari in a 'honey trap' allegedly gathering information about a senior prison officer who was later killed by the IRA. She was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment and released under the Belfast agreement.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Martin McLoone and John Hill. eds., *Big Picture, Small Screen* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1996), 118-132.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> We were driving back from the location and, after a long silence, my six year old son Adam, sitting in the back of the car, chirpily remarked "Those people in the bus, Daddy, they weren't very happy were they?"
- <sup>xxix</sup> This same approach is evident in relation to the Film Board financing of a documentary production: Rod Stoneman, *Chávez: The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (London: Wallflower, 2008.) 26.

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<sup>xxx</sup> Rod Stoneman, 'Under the Shadow of Hollywood: the Industrial Versus the Artisanal', *The Irish Review*, Institute of Irish Studies, Queens University Belfast, n24, Autumn 1999.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Irish Film Board, *Review/Athbhreithniu 1993*.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Irish Film Board, *Review/Athbhreithniu 2000*, "Icons of the imagination," in *Ten Years After*, ed. Kevin Rockett (Galway: BSÉ, 2003), vi-vii.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Italy: The Image Business*, directed by Rod Stoneman, 1984, made as part of the *Visions* series for Channel 4.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> "Spending watchdog's report highly critical of FAS controls," *The Irish Independent*, February 29, 2010.

<sup>xxxv</sup> "H'W'D Slashes final-cut list," *Variety* 25-31 January (2010):6.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Led by the 'Gang of Four' – Labour Party 'moderates' Shirley Williams, Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers from 1981 -1988.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> "Risk Management and Governance" (presentation at the briefing session for a Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, Ireland, December 18, 2001).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> In 2003 I left the Irish Film Board and have been involved at setting up the Huston School of Film & Digital Media at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Rumsfeld's comment was originally made at the Department of Defence Briefing on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2002, he used a fuller version in June that year: "Now what is the message there? The message is that there are known 'knowns'. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know. So when we do the best we can and we pull all this information together, and we then say well that's basically what we see as the situation, that is really only the known knowns and the known unknowns. And each year, we discover a few more of those unknown unknowns. Donald H. Rumsfeld, "Secretary Rumsfeld Press Conference at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium," U.S. Department of Defense, June 6, 2002, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=3490> (accessed February 20, 2010).

<sup>xl</sup> Op. cit., 248.

<sup>xli</sup> Perhaps this recollects E.H. Carr's account of the role of unpredictable events (his example is Trotsky's taking a duck shooting weekend away from Moscow at exactly the moment when Stalin moved to take control of the Soviet state) in the broad sweep of history understood through economic and social determinations in E.H Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin, 1961).

<sup>xlii</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, "Interview – World Distempers," *New Left Review* 61 (2010):150.