

The Writer II: An Interview With Alexander Jacobs

When I discussed "The Writer in American Films" in the Summer *Film Quarterly*, I deplored the neglect of writers and analyzed *Point Blank* as an example of a film made by a talented director, John Boorman, struggling with a flat script. Since talking with Alexander Jacobs, the writer of *Point Blank*, I have learned that my analysis was incomplete. In a sense I was right, because the original script for *Point Blank*, by David and Rafe Newhouse, was apparently a straightforward gangster melodrama that was imperfectly refashioned by Jacobs and Boorman. But some of the confusions and weaknesses in the film can be traced to disagreements between Jacobs and Boorman. In a way, my insistence on the importance of the writer was truer than I guessed. The contributions to even so visually brilliant a film as *Point Blank* are more complex than an *auteur* critic would want to admit.

Anyone who looks at *Point Blank* knows that it *is*, in many respects, a director's film. No writer could put into a script the exact details of lighting and composition that turn bland, familiar places—an airport corridor, a noisy nightclub, a Los Angeles storm drain—into such sinister, disturbing hallucinations. But some of the most striking conceptions in the film—the car-smashing sequence, the scene in which Angie Dickinson turns on all of the kitchen gadgets in an uninhabited ranch home—are in the script. And the script has a slightly different mood from that of the finished film. In the following interview Jacobs talks about his efforts to introduce more variations of tone into the film—particularly more expressions of tenderness and self-doubt in the central character. Had he been successful, *Point Blank* might have seemed slightly less

severe, and the characters might have had psychological depth as well as stark, nightmarish intensity.

For an example of the subtle kind of difference I'm talking about, I'd like to compare a section from the script with the comparable sequence in the finished film: what Jacobs calls the "wake sequence," Walker's discovery of his wife's suicide.

Walker cannot shake off the sense of danger. Somehow the fixed white stillness of the room has the aura of death.

He bends over the unmoving form of his wife. In the hand folded under her body is an empty bottle of sleeping pills.

Lynne has taken an overdose.

Expressionlessly, he turns the body over, listens for a heartbeat, then slips his heavy gold wedding ring onto her white finger before folding her hands over her breasts.

He leaves her be.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM — LYNNE'S HOUSE —
MORNING

From the window Walker gazes out at the panorama of Los Angeles below him.

The Strip is alight. Beneath it, other boulevards and avenues glitter.

He empties the remains of a Vodka bottle and leaves it on the window sill. Through the curved glass, a distorted Los Angeles can still be seen.

Walker drinks steadily for the next three days.

It is a wake, the ancient rite of marking a death: a final requiem from the living for the dead.

And a period for Walker to strip forever all that he and Lynne had built together.

The mass of trinkets and clothes deposited on the coffee table vanish; dresses are packed and go. He savors the perfume of one, the perfume of

her, the woman who had double-crossed their life. It is an end.

The SOUNDS of furniture being moved accompany the growth of Vodka bottles on the window sill. A sunrise sparkles above them; a sunset is distorted by yet another empty bottle.

At the window, Walker watches a day die, and Yost watching him.

The picture of Lynne and Walker on the coffee table disappears, shelves grow bare and Walker's FOOTSTEPS begin to ECHO through the empty rooms.

Lynne's body has gone, too.

Walker has grown shaggy, unkempt, creased.

But a mourning must pass and by the third day Walker is shaving, cleaning up, ready and expectant for Reese's messenger to call.

The KNOCK comes as Walker finishes.

MESSENGER (o.s., suggestively)

Hello there... it's the baker with your bread!

The emotional point of this sequence is simple and clear. In the film it has been curiously obscured. The sequence has been split into oblique fragments, cut together intriguingly but confusingly. In the film after Walker (Lee Marvin) finds his wife dead and slips his ring onto her finger, he walks to the window of the living room, looks out and sees Yost (Keenan Wynn). As Yost looks up at him, Walker's face comes gradually into focus—which seems to imply a passage of time; for when Walker walks back into his wife's bedroom, her body is gone. He drops one of the bottles on her vanity table, and the camera moves in close on the spilt liquid, which seems to imply another passage of time; for now the bed is stripped, and all of the furniture in the living room has vanished. Walker sits down in the corner of the empty living room and recalls the moment of his betrayal on Alcatraz. The sound of the gunshot in the subliminal flashback becomes the sound of a doorbell, and Walker goes to answer the door of his wife's apartment. But the living room is now furnished exactly as it was when he arrived. I have seen the film three times, and this sequence has never been quite clear to me. Perhaps the stripping of the apartment is to be taken as only a fantasy, a visualization of Walker's forlorn state of mind. But there is no way of knowing.

These abrupt cuts from furnished to bare back to furnished apartment are arresting, but Jacob's intention is unrealized—the sense of mourning, of a life gradually, painfully stripped away. We don't see any change in Walker that accompanies the dismantling of the rooms.

Although I am not entirely happy with the puzzling character of this sequence, it is not really out of keeping with the rest of the film. The austerity of composition and the absence of emotion fit perfectly with the stylized nature of the film as a whole. Whatever Jacobs's intentions, Boorman has successfully made the film his own—he has frozen it, altered it from a study with a measure of psychological truth to a bleakly beautiful symbolic poem about a peculiarly contemporary—and American—kind of death-in-life. The film does seem to me to work on those terms. The imagery is all of a piece. And I cannot be sure that Jacobs's approach would have worked as well; perhaps it would have turned the film sentimental. But either interpretation seems to me legitimate. The slight difference in tone provides a pertinent insight into the kind of tension in the relationship of writers to directors that produces exciting films.

Careful analysis of scripts, besides clarifying the importance of creative collaboration to effective film-making, can be helpful in defining the nature of the cinematic form. The late Robert Gessner's book *The Moving Image* is an attempt at just this kind of analysis—Gessner studies dozens of film scripts in an effort to arrive at some general rules about what Bazin called "the language of cinema." What is disappointing is that Gessner's analysis so seldom goes beyond discussion of plot structures, character conflicts, "obligatory scenes"—textbook definitions of drama that would be equally appropriate to a discussion of theater and the novel. A pertinent study of scripts would investigate the effects *unique* to film. Obviously the notion of cinematic time—which Gessner discusses very crudely—is one of the key areas worth exploring. But the conception of individual scenes may be as important a factor as over-all structure. We usually think of composition as being ex-

clusively the director's province, but that is too simplified a view. Some of the most strikingly filmic ideas are writers' conceptions. Most people in Hollywood, as Jacobs notes, think that a good writer is someone who writes good dialogue—in other words, someone indistinguishable from a playwright. But dialogue is a minor part of a gifted screenwriter's contribution. I think a few passages from Jacobs's screenplays may give some idea of what film writing *can* be. It is worth noting that Jacobs does not write every camera angle into his scripts, and yet the scripts are clearly meant to be *seen*. The ordinary Hollywood script is so cluttered with precise camera movements—likely to be disregarded anyway—that the essence of the visual conception, if there is any, is lost. Jacobs's scripts are less formalized, more evocative. These passages should not be read and judged like the prose descriptions of a novel, but as attempts to give an *impression* of a piece of cinema.

This is the opening that Jacobs wrote for *Point Blank*:

FADE IN:

INT. ALCATRAZ – NIGHT

WALKER walks down a long, dim corridor of gray stone walls. He passes a grill in the brickwork; then a steel mesh; and another grill.

No real light yet, just shafts of fitful illumination peeping through gaps in the corridor walls.

Now Walker passes some scrawls chalked on the wall: amongst them a nude figure; a pair of crossed hearts and the legend: I DIED HERE. The corridor leads through a steel-barred door to a main hall with steel-stanchioned balconies all around it.

Walker's FOOTSTEPS GRATE.

His walk is deliberate, characteristic, and a groundeater. The arms swing slightly, ready for a fight.

No face yet, just a powerful silhouette.

He stops dead: frozen, alert, remembering his bearings.

He looks up and then gropes over his head into an open, rusted elevator shaft. Finding a foothold in the wall, he raises his head to the level of the recess. He shines a flashlight into the rust and cobwebs. The shaft is empty. He lowers himself down slowly. He walks past the succession of

cells, then he stops at one.

Walker stands before an iron-barred door, gripping its bolt. He slides the door sideways—rusted steel SCREECHES.

He enters a small cell-like room beyond.

He is a pilgrim, returning to the source of his strength.

CUT TO:

INT. CELL – ALCATRAZ – NIGHT

Walker stands framed in the doorway.

A small window high up filters some light.

To the right is an iron bedframe let down from the wall. In the corner by it a basin and lavatory bowl.

For a long moment he looks around the small enclosed space.

Then, crouching, he begins a systematic search: his hands stretch beneath the bed; he flicks a dusty corner clean; a crumpled cigarette pack is thrown aside.

He stretches over and behind the bed and then finds what he seeks—his talisman: a bent and twisted brass belt buckle of curious design.

Imperceptibly, a tension has taken possession of him. The buckle acts like a crystal in the palm of a soothsayer. The compelling face is damped with the effort to contain the strain within.

The buckle bites deep in his clenched grip.

Walker will allow nothing to emerge from his compressed mouth.

But memories escape.

He rises slowly, swiveling from the hips.

CUT TO:

INT. CELL – ALCATRAZ – ONE YEAR

EARLIER – NIGHT

The swiveling movement is taken up by the Walker of one year before, the Walker whose face SCREAMS with pain as BULLETS smash into his stomach at point blank range.

They tear the buckle from the belt around his waist.

Walker staggers backwards to the floor in agonized, reluctant defeat.

LYNNE WALKER, the faithless wife, and MAL REESE, who shot him, framed in the doorway of the cell, are Walker's last images before unconsciousness.

The opening was not filmed exactly as written. Walker does not return to Alcatraz. The idea of the belt buckle was abandoned. The point is that this kind of writing gives a director some striking visual ideas to develop and refine. In its atten-

tion to detail, to sound as well as visuals, in its leanness and lucidity of description, in its fluidity of movement between present and past, this seems to me genuinely filmic writing, writing that can stimulate a gifted director.

In *Hell in the Pacific*, the new film that he wrote (with Eric Bercovici) for Boorman, about an American and Japanese soldier alone on a Pacific island during World War II, Jacobs uses almost no dialogue, simply sound and image. Sound can dominate a sequence as during the terrifying battle of wits between the American Red (Lee Marvin) and the Japanese Brown (Toshiro Mifune):

EXT. JUNGLE – DAY

From the cover of the trees, Red watches with considerable pleasure as he blows into the Mae West, inflating it. Sweat pours off him with the effort. When the life jacket is inflated, he begins squeezing the air out, pinching the end of the tube, making a high pitch squealing SOUND. He moves on a few yards, then does it again.

EXT. CAMP – DAY

In the cave, Brown twitches at the high pitched SQUEAL—which seems to come from all sides, reverberating inside the cave, seeming to come closer. Then a long NOTE goes on and on and on. Brown covers his ears, but he cannot blot out the SOUND. It becomes unbearable and he grabs two sticks and beats a frenzied TATTOO on the side of the cave to drown out the sound. Brown stops and listens, sighs with relief. The squealing has stopped. His arms quiver from the drumming, the sweat now dripping off him. But the SQUEALING begins again, and almost hysterically Brown begins his drumming again.

Jacobs is working on two more screenplays right now, and he hopes to direct within the next year or two. This conversation with Jacobs reveals some of the complexities of the writer-director relationship on *Point Blank*, and Jacobs's approach to screenwriting in general.

How did the script for Point Blank come to be written?

There were three main versions of the script. The first I did during my first stay in Hollywood, in four weeks, and that consisted of writing the script once and then rewriting it completely. I only had four weeks because I was working on

a picture in England. John gave me the script that the Newhouses had written, which was a craftsmanlike piece of work but very old-fashioned. And the idea was to make a thriller that was enterprising. What I argued from the beginning was we couldn't make an *Asphalt Jungle*, we couldn't make a *Harper*, we couldn't make a *Sweet Smell of Success*. I thought all those days were over—television had scraped them clean. We had to do something completely fresh. We wanted to make a film that was a half reel ahead of the audience, that was the whole idea. We made a vow that we'd have no people getting in and out of cars, no shots of car doors opening and closing, unless there was a really important reason. And then I wrote a second version which consisted mainly of long letters from me in England to John in Hollywood, plus long telephone conversations on casting and all sorts of things, and of course letters from John, which were amalgamated into a second-draft script. And then I went out to San Francisco on the shooting of the picture the first two weeks. The ending and the beginning of the film take place in San Francisco and that's where we shot. I then wrote a lot more stuff including a completely new ending and a new beginning, some of which was done in script form, some of which was in discussion, and some of which was literally dictated to a girl and rushed out to location as they were shooting. This included the whole idea of using the sightseeing boat as a means of linking the past and the present. I wrote a new ending which wasn't used. I don't really agree with the ending in the film at the moment—I think it's evasive—but that's the one that was finally shot.

What was your ending like?

We had a grandstand ending which I liked very much, because it seemed to me to be sort of Wagnerian in its own way. In this fort, Fort Point in San Francisco, you had Yost revealing himself to Walker and tempting Walker to join him, and Walker is half-tempted and half-shattered by his experiences and by the fact that he's been used as a dupe for the whole film; all his passion, all his energy, all his madness were being *used*—he was like a puppet being manip-

ulated—and he becomes absolutely incensed, and he advances upon Yost who has a gun, and Yost is suddenly terrified by this mad force, because Walker is now completely insane. And Walker just advances upon him—he's going to kill him with his bare hands, a complete animal, he's frothing at the mouth. And Yost shoots him three times and the three bullets miss. Yost actually cannot shoot this force. He tries, his hands shake, and he suddenly realizes his age; suddenly his age sinks through him like a flood, like a great stone sucking him under, and he's a completely old man, and he steps backward and falls off the parapet and dies. And Walker comes to at the edge of the parapet, and shaken and quivering is led away by the girl out into the world again. This was the ending we had. And I thought it bordered on the melodramatic, I thought it was really dangerous, but I thought it was a marvelous way of going for an ending to a myth, if you like. And I don't know the ins and outs of it, but it wasn't played that way, so I came up with other endings.

Were there other disagreements over various scenes in the film?

I can give you a very specific example—the scene when Brewster (Carroll O'Connor) arrives home and Lee has been waiting for him, and demands his money. John shot that scene before we went to San Francisco and ran the picture for me so I was completely in touch with what was happening. Now the Brewster scene was quite clearly shot wrongly. He had shot it almost as scripted but in fact had cut out a crucial love scene which is prior to the Brewster scene. It's a scene where Angie and Lee not only make love but become extraordinarily intimate, and he begins to talk to her for the first time and tell her his fears and in fact reveals that this drive is something that he's generated in himself and that is now dissipating him and wearing him out and crumbling him, and that he's frightened of it. He's frightened of where it's going to lead him, he's frightened of the way he cannot control it. And I think that would have matched in with my ending very well indeed. Well, John said it wasn't possible to shoot it or that he couldn't shoot it and he didn't

want to. So in this sequence with Brewster the trouble was that because you didn't have the previous love scene, and because the actor, Carroll O'Connor, is a very strong and intelligent actor, you got a complete unbalance to the scene. There are three peaks in the scene, and Carroll O'Connor took them all from Lee, which is not only dramatically wrong, it's psychologically wrong, and it's plot wrong, which is the most crucial point. And I pointed this out to John and he agreed, and he reshot the second half of the scene, and I think if you look very closely you'll see that the second half of that scene is shot with a different light and at a different area, because I don't think we could get back to the original location again. We changed it so that in the end Lee became the dominant one, which led on to the ending that we finally shot, but I think if we'd had the love scene, the scene as originally scripted in Brewster's house could have worked.

Another change was in the wake sequence, the sequence when, after his wife's committed suicide, the house is sort of stripped bare. The whole idea in that sequence was to show Walker completely revealed, but to no one else except himself. And the second revelation is when Walker at long last comes out of the abyss and reveals himself to the woman. The first time is when he's in this house and he looks round and a wall is stripped bare; he looks again, the bed is gone; he looks again and the carpets have gone and his feet begin to echo over the place, and he starts packing his wife's goods and he smells her panties and a bra, and he packs away photographs or trinkets or Welcome to Hawaii or something like that. What you get is a great sense of revelation, which is very strange and completely inside his head in many ways. And this isn't shot in that way. I think John argues that there are really subtle touches where Lee does show certain sorts of warmth, but my general impression is that he's too frozen-faced throughout. We showed the film to Hashimoto, one of Kurosawa's scriptwriters, the man who's worked with him a long time. He loved it, was very excited by it, but he said, "I think you should have been closer on his eyes," which is a

marvelously perceptive view of the film, because that's the trouble—it is, I think, too cold-blooded.

How do you feel about the wake sequence as it is filmed?

I don't think it works. I don't like it. I like some of its ideas, I think it is very strange, but I think it's strange because it's baffling and not strange because it's got quality and atmosphere. It isn't developed properly. You should see each room vanish as he walks through it; instead, there are times when you really don't know whether he's just walked from an empty room into an empty room. There should have been changes in his shirts and his face. John argues that there are changes; he says the beard gets a bit longer, but who's going to notice that? You needed something much bolder, much clearer.

The differences in the wake sequence are interesting, because they do reveal a real difference in temperament. He did make the film colder, as you say, just through very subtle sorts of changes.

Well, I think that's exactly the sort of relationship between writers and directors that is interesting to discuss. I mean, when you have a director as strong as John, and I suppose when you have a writer with ideas like I have, many times it's a very happy amalgamation, as it has been with him. And of course the next step is for the writer to direct. Incidentally, the film did extraordinarily well. I don't think it's the greatest blockbuster of all time, but I know MGM are happy with what it finally made and all the rest of it; it's done very well in Europe and so forth. In fact, it's given us all a great boost. But I would argue that the film would have been even more popular with this warmer quality to it. I don't mean by that pandering to the audience, but I mean making Lee more human, less monsterish, less zombie, less *killer*, if you like—although he doesn't actually kill a single person in the picture. I think the problem is that that sort of implacable, never-let-up drive is *not* human, and while it would have been marvelous to have continued our myth that he literally comes from the underground, roams over the surface of the earth for a brief while, then goes back into the shadows—well, by in-

troducing the girl and all sorts of other things, we obviously go away from the essential myth. But by making him variable, by giving him variations of pace, by giving him changes of character, we would have made him human, and I think much more understandable. I think it's quite possible that lots of people were repelled by the drive of the picture, which is frenetic. We did it for a reason. Both of us were extraordinarily attracted by Los Angeles—I still am—and we both hated San Francisco, hated it in the sense that it wasn't for our picture, and it was very much a touristy sort of town, a town sort of on the asshole of America, it seemed to me. If you couldn't face the Middle West and the West and what modern America is, you retreated to San Francisco and hung on for your dear life. It's a very sweet sort of city, but it's obviously not America. I love LA because it seems to me to be absolutely what America is, at least one aspect of America, and it doesn't kid around, you know, you either take it or you don't take it.

What are some other examples of differences between script and film, where you feel this warmer quality is lost?

Well, where he does come alive in a much richer way is the wooing of his wife down by the waterfront, the whole of the flashback sequence there, which I think is beautifully done and far beyond any hopes I would have had at that point. And I thought there should have been indications of that sort of thing in the rest of the picture. But it doesn't come again. The whole absence of Angie at the end of the picture is a very important clue. But the crucial change is the sequence when she beats him and falls to the floor and then taunts him through the intercom about "You're really dead . . ." Now it seems to me that those lines are absolutely crucial, and they've got to be *said*. You can't have them in this abstract way over the soundtrack through a round black piece of mesh through which the girl's voice floats. That's exactly the point where it's got to be a confrontation between two human beings. And while I think it's brilliantly shot sequence, and some very inventive ideas, it's really for laughs, and I think the



Lee Marvin and Angie Dickinson

audience reaction is one of laughs basically, and it isn't revealing on any other level. And then if you'd gone into that very long and tender love scene after that, you would have obviously had a different picture.

Another change, which is more indirect but equally important, is the first time he meets Angie, when he awakens her in her bedroom and she finds out her sister's dead. And at the end of that scene, I wrote that a certain intimacy begins to grow between them—she's lying there in bed, the blankets back, her hair tousled, one shoulder bare, and suddenly a sexual element enters the scene, and it's the temptation that is going to grow increasingly. Now that's not shown in the film at all. It's done in a two-shot, a lot of it done from behind Lee's head or just to the side of Lee. But what you don't see is a growing intimacy that should have come through a track-in, a slightly different composition, a feeling of warmth and then a drawing back again. This is in the script, it's not in the picture.

All of those changes are consistent.

I think another point worth thinking about is that I feel there is very definitely an Anglo-Saxon attitude towards art and a non-Anglo-Saxon attitude towards art, particularly visual art. I think Anglo-Saxon culture tends toward a form of social observation. The artist sees himself and is seen as an observer of society, in which personal investigation and a personal viewpoint and a personal passion about life are less important than a highly skilled, very effective, and brilliant sketching in and drawing of a social page.

Whereas it seems to me that the non-Anglo-Saxon attitude is much more towards personal investigation, a personal, passionate view of a situation, of people, often hopelessly unfair, but uniquely and individually the maker's own. And it may well be that part of the tension between writers and directors in English-speaking cinema is that if the writer isn't Anglo-Saxon, as I'm not—I'm Jewish and I'm certainly not Anglo-Saxon—whereas the director isn't Jewish and is Anglo-Saxon, it could be that that's where the dichotomy really takes place; in my view in the script, which is more passionate and warmer and richer, to my mind, than John's, is eschewed by John because he does have this Anglo-Saxon training. I think that's one view of it which is perfectly possible.

There's another factor that's strange. I think the great problem with writers and directors is to know when to change the role in the progress of the picture. I think at the beginning the writer is totally inside the picture, with the director and occasionally the producer, if you've got a genuinely creative producer—like Ray Wagner, the man I'm working for at the moment—outside the material, and it's the tension between those two positions which creates the material. Then I think when the picture begins the director becomes totally involved with the material, he's totally inside the material, and it's the writer, and perhaps the producer, who is outside the material. But of course in most cases in the English-speaking cinema, the writer's paid off and that's the end of it. In *Point Blank* that was exactly my position. At the end of four weeks, I was sent back to England and that was that. It was only because of my relationship with John, these constant phone calls and letters, that I was able to have any effect whatsoever. And then of course John's plea for me to come out for two weeks in San Francisco and help him again, which the producers agreed to. But under normal circumstances, you complete the script and that's the end of it. And of course if you write pictures which are purely a stimulus for the director to go on, you've got to make sure you've got the director who can do that. I mean John is someone—I may disagree with his view

of the picture—but I know that he can take it on from there. He's a very strong director, and this means that he'll argue and fight for what he wants and be prepared to give up the picture if he doesn't get it. In that sense he's very good, in that sense he deserves everything he gets. But there are many directors who are very craftsmanlike interpreters and no more. One needs to give them a different script.

How do you write for a director who is nothing but a craftsman?

Well, the first thing you have to do is to turn down work if you think that in the end you're not going to be happy with the director. I mean one of the great problems in the English-speaking film business is your own artistic growth. A Bergman can do twelve, fourteen films before a *Seventh Seal*, and each of them some form of development, some form of change, some exploration. In the English-speaking cinema it's hit and miss, catch as catch can, what comes up. Under those circumstances writers and directors and to some extent actors, I believe, have to shape their careers as purposefully as they can. And I think this involves somehow or other not doing pictures that you know are just going to be shot, trying to work with the best directors you can, and if you can't, if through reasons of finance or contract you've got to take pictures—and this happens to all of us sooner or later—then I think you've got to find themes that you can exploit or explore to some extent in terms of your own progression. For example, I think in the English-speaking cinema, to survive, you've got to accept that certain genres work, certain modes are in, certain modes are out, and there are times when you can only set up films under certain conditions. Now it seems to me if that is the case, what you've got to do is find a way through that genre, say with *Point Blank*, through a thriller, to investigate certain aspects of life that interest you. I mean I would not have chosen a thriller, frankly, but that was the way it came up. Obviously to some extent this maims you, you can only limp; you can run certain times and limp at others, but at least you make progress. It seems to me in the English-speaking world—and I make this distinction very sharply,

because I think the view towards the cinema by producers and by money people in Europe is a bit different, it's not vastly different but it's a bit different—in the English-speaking cinema to survive either you sit in the hills like a Bresson and come down once every five years, or else you've got to get in the middle and put your talent on the line every day. And one hopes the talent will be there at 75 and not go out at 57, or be there at 57 and not go out at 27; but you've got to put your talent on the line every day. And you do put it on the line every day, because there's an enormous amount of money to be made, there are lots of temptations, it's very easy to relax. I think that with a writer or a director in the English-speaking cinema, then, you've somehow got to fashion your career as a series of progressions. An interesting example is someone like John Ford, whom I admire enormously as a film-maker and as a man. Choosing his Western world, and surrounding himself with this sort of Irish defense as it were—you could never get a sane word out of him because he was a "mad Irishman"—was the absolutely marvelous decision he made about Hollywood. It allowed him to work in complete harmony and peace within his chosen world. He saw the dangers of Hollywood and he decided to protect himself; the problem is that he may have over-protected himself. When one sees a film like *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, which is a remarkable picture, which I think lays down Ford's intellectual and artistic credo—it's an incredibly brave film for a man to make in his sixties after all the films he's made, because he's ventured way outside his Western field really. When one looks at that film, or even *The Last Hurrah*, which is nowhere near as good, it's flawed, in the way that *Liberty Valance* is flawed—but when you look at those films, you see the potential in the man, but maybe if he hadn't stayed in a Western world, if he hadn't stayed in Hollywood, he'd have been another sort of artist, perhaps a larger artist; or maybe his talent would have gone earlier. It seems to me that's exactly the sort of problem you face. On the other hand, I might argue that someone like Huston or Welles *needed* the abrasiveness of

American life to keep themselves sharp, that leaving for Europe the way they did, moving into a sort of eighteenth-century cultural cycle, seems to me equally wrong. And I think this is exactly the dilemma. I don't think there's one solution, I think there are individual answers, and each one is a risk. I'm only interested in exploring my own development, and obviously I must go on and direct as soon as I can, and I'm trying to direct now. In one sense it's easy to be a writer. You don't have to deal with actors and actresses, you don't have to fight with money men very often—not to that extent; you may have rows with the producer. It's one thing to write it, another thing to shoot it, believe me, and there's a huge difference between the two. So I think the challenge for a writer is either to go on and become a director, or to become a producer, which is less of a challenge but I can see it, or else to shut up. If writers see their work going down the drain, if they see scenes not realized, if they really are not too happy with directors, if they find in the end they settle for a good craftsmanlike director, or if they find that a really inventive, individual director mangles their material, then they must direct. If they don't, they've got to take their money and run, or else write their novels and write their plays or write whatever they want.

I'm interested in what you said about working in a cinema which is not oriented towards personal expression. You have concerns and obsessions that you want to explore, and yet everything in the film industry is working against that. Is this finally crippling?

Yes. Yes. I suppose I'm being very pessimistic now actually; normally I'm much more optimistic. I think that in the English-speaking cinema our development is maimed. We will never reach our full potential. And I think like everything in Anglo-Saxon life, you settle for the next best thing. You hope to fight till the day you die. You try and keep yourself as sharp as possible, you do this very consciously. That's why I like Los Angeles so much. It's not a city, it's an area to live in, and it's not seductive. London and Rome, Paris, all the big cities are very seductive—your

friends, your bookshops, your theaters, everything's around you, you can live a pretty slack life. What I love about LA is it's got none of these things, and to get what you want you may have to motor 20 or 30 miles to a good bookshop, or you may have to go to a little tiny theater somewhere, or you may have to chase up a film or even import it and run it privately. But you find out what sources are really important for you in LA. How long you can survive in it is an individual decision. LA says "Be what you feel, but you've got to *want* what you feel, and then seek what you want." And in that sense it's marvelous. It's a town to get very tough in; I don't mean callous and cynical, I mean you've got to find out what sources are important to you and serve them. LA is a desert, it's on desert land, it literally lives on desert land, and as you know, if you live on desert, you've got to know where the watering holes are and drink pretty deeply from them.

I think we do limp, we don't develop to the same extent. I think it's also true that we do use an incredibly expensive medium, even on the most modest basis, and if one is at all creatively ambitious, the need for money increases almost immediately. All I feel is that the English-speaking cinema is undergoing certain changes, and when 16 millimeter becomes as easy and as definitive as 35, and maybe even 8 millimeter, when as Cocteau says, making films is as quick and as cheap as putting pen to paper and as cheap as a pen is to buy, then I think we might get a different kind of cinema. I think the Underground cinema to some extent reveals this, although I find that it's practice without theory to a large extent. One can look through dozens of these films of the Underground, and there's a really marvelous ten seconds, twenty seconds, fifty seconds of excitement, where they've really stumbled on something fresh. And then you see the next film made by the same film-maker, and it's the same film again, you know they haven't digested what they've worked through and then gone on from there.

That's what depresses me about the Underground. I don't think it's the answer.

No, but it's like America generally. America

is one huge experiment. It's the first time in the world that a country decided to get people from every other nation, put them together and say, "Right, you're Americans, and shut up." I mean, America is a fantastic experiment, and as in any experiment, there's great wastage, huge mistakes, and discoveries. And I think the Underground must be seen in this light—I think it's indiscriminate and very often without thought, real thought, it's often almost a form of masturbation in its own way. But I think it's very American in the best sense—it's a huge number of skyrockets into the air, and they illuminate areas. I mean, they may very well illuminate areas that other sorts of film-makers may not need to venture into.

I agree, it's just that I wonder whether finally what you say about Huston and Welles doesn't become relevant. I wonder if you don't have to come to terms with the pressures of American life, somehow play against all of the constrictions that the industry and the society place on you?

I think you're absolutely right. It seems to me almost inevitable that tension is necessary for creative elasticity. I really think so. The great danger that a Welles or a Huston can suffer from is to relax into a sort of "poetry." One thing about American life that interests me enormously is that it lacks a poetic level. It hasn't got a fantasy element like English life—you think of Carroll or of the Goon Show or things like that. And it may be that one of the great problems with the Welles-Huston syndrome is you go to Europe and you become "poetic," you see these thatched cottages and eighteenth-century crafts and all this aristocratic culture, which of course America hasn't got, thank God, and you go into Shakespeare and all the rest of it, which Welles should *never* have done, no matter how interesting the experiments. I mean Shakespeare does it *better*, you know, it's no good kidding oneself about that. It's like you're asked to do *The Brothers Karamazov*—who in the hell wants to? Honestly, Dostoevsky did it *better*; *War and Peace*, Tolstoy's *better*; you do Dickens, Dickens is *better*. But to take the theme of a family, as in *Karamazov*, and write

your own response and make a picture about your own response to family, or take a theme like *War and Peace*—now clearly you've got to be Tolstoy to take the theme in the first place—but all right, aspects of *War and Peace* fascinate you, then make your film, but to try and match Tolstoy or Dostoevsky or Dickens or Shakespeare seems to me to be a total waste of time. The most admirable attempt, it seemed to me, was Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, where there was a genuine attempt to evoke the whole of the samurai world and the whole of a court world in Japanese terms with some crucial changes, all of which are very interesting. But even that fails. And you know, I don't think Kurosawa's a bad film-maker, I just think it's that how can you beat Shakespeare, how *can* you? So the temptation is to turn away from your own society, and you lose. In my own case, I left England because emotionally and temperamentally I found it unfulfilling, and I found this increasingly so, and I found in America that my emotions and temperament are being served fully. I've never been so emotionally free and so creatively free in my life, and it may very well be that America in many ways is my spiritual home, I should have been here twenty years ago perhaps; but maybe I wouldn't have survived the way I have, and maybe America is a period for me to pass through before I go somewhere else, I just don't know. All I know is it's ideal for me at this point. Now it could well be that Welles and Huston would make the same argument, except I don't think their films quite support the argument.

Let me ask about the kinds of things that you write in a script. You mentioned that you try to evoke a mood for a scene rather than writing details of camera angles.

Oh, I never write camera angles, ever, because that's entirely the director's prerogative anyway, and very often they're impractical, because you write without seeing locations or anything else. Now that I'm in a position to choose, I try only to work closely with a director. The director's nominated in advance, so I know with whom I'm working. Secondly, I now try more and more to work directly with a star. I think in English-speaking cinema you've got to work with stars,

because that's the reality of the business; and the thing to do is to find out the archetypal image of the star you're working with and fashion something according to that. Now that doesn't just mean horses for courses, but it means working with the star, as in Lee Marvin's case, to reveal not only the peaks that his audience is used to seeing, or her audience is used to seeing, but also the valleys that the audience has never seen before. If I can't work directly with the star, I try to write a general sort of image figure of what we're after, and then as soon as the star is nominated, I would come back on the picture even for free and write for a week to try and get the dialogue nearer the image of the star. But of course ideally, as on *Point Blank*, we worked closely with Lee, on the script, on the floor, on the cutting. He was a very important contributor. That's the first thing. By the very nature of my interest in the cinema, I have a shrewd idea of what directors are about. That is, a certain director is suggested to me or else he's going to work with me; I see his films or I've seen his films, I have an idea about his particular interests and obsessions. Over four or five films, certain patterns in the director's personality begin to emerge, if the director's of interest. If he's a run-of-the-mill director or a good studio director, then obviously, you know, you won't find this coherence. But if he's an interesting director, who are the only people worth working with, then you get an idea of his themes and obsessions, and of your own—you should have a pretty clear idea of your own—and you see where there's a common meeting ground. You find certain attitudes and areas in common, and then I think you must work within those areas. This is a sort of limitation, I suppose. But this is one of the realities we face within the business, and I want to work within the business. And then my personal desire is to go right into the center of a subject in the first scene. Normally I do not like to have a long buildup. I think you've got to get the audience by the scruff of the neck and shove them into your mood and into your milieu and into your atmosphere and into your world straight away; if you don't do that, I think you have lots of

problems. I don't think it's a matter of pace or speed or action, because all these things are unimportant. In *Point Blank*, for example, again and again the dynamic comes because of the cut. We never show policemen, we never show explanations, we let the audience think about them afterwards. Like when Angie's house is smashed up, well, obviously, the gang have been there, why bother with all the explanations? That's all nonsense. I like to get the audience and well, you know, really push them onto the bed as it were, really get them going. I hate unnecessary explanations, I hate spare flesh on a script, I'm absolutely obsessed with cutting off every inch of spare flesh. This even goes for descriptive lines in the paragraphs, for instance if it was "John and Mary walk across the road," I'd rather say, "They cross," and leave it at that; I'm as stupid about it as that. But I do feel that that gives it a ranginess and a sparseness. You know, the ribcage is well-stretched, it's on the balls of its feet, it's dancing. And I like to do that with the dialogue and I like to do that with the story, I like to do it with the characters. But this doesn't necessarily mean it's going fast—I'm not mad about galloping horses—but what I like is that sense of tension, that sense of dynamism, which is often the juxtaposition between two sequences. You know, you jump a whole passage of time, and the audience pant up with you halfway through the scene, which I think is the way to go.

So you don't feel dialogue is most important in writing a scene?

Oh no, no, no. I mean, one of the great problems in Hollywood is a "great script," it's got "great lines," and I hate those sorts of scripts, because I think that at best most film dialogue is what I call signpost dialogue—"Go here," "come there," "grab this," "go after this," you know, or "how are you." I think much more is done with looks and with body movements. Obviously a certain amount of information has to be given over, and obviously one doesn't do that in the dullest way; one does that in the freshest way one can, obviously dialect and colloquialism have to be taken into account. But I think dialogue should be kept to a mini-

mum. In fact, I think in *Point Blank* the first script had under 100 lines of dialogue, and that included words like "Yes" and "Okay" as a line of dialogue. I think you say one or two words or one or two lines that are really pithy, and the rest goes by the boards. That's why my scripts are very much directors' scripts and often make the studios a bit uneasy when they read them, because they don't have "great lines" and they don't have "great descriptions." What I like to do is to evoke a mood, I think that's very important. I don't think our words are sacrosanct. The stuff we write is very much the stimulus for a director to take off. The script is something that the director looks at at five in the morning on his way to the studio, and it's somehow got to give him a charge, it's got to send the adrenalin running, it's got to help him. It's got to help the actor when he reads it, and I think that comes much more through the way you write your description, even the introspective lines of what a character is thinking or feeling. I often try to give an image like "He was built like a tank," and that's it, no more, or "He runs his hand over the wall of nude photographs, drops of perspiration from his hand run down them like tears." It's almost a bit purple in its prose, to somehow invest it with a feeling of what the image will be like. Of course very often you're bitterly disappointed when you see it on the screen.

That's another thing I want to ask. It seems to me you really have a sense of the way a scene should look. And yet you don't film it yourself.

No, well this is the great frustration. I did direct some television in England, but I was taken off it because what I was directing they didn't like. You know, they wanted simple heads speaking to camera, and I was much more interested in other things. And to make progress I went into production. I was in the cinema originally as a salesman—I was a publicity man, and I was a distributor, and then I went over to production, and I became assistant director to Lindsay Anderson on *Every Day Except Christmas* and then I worked on other pictures and slowly made my way and started to write. Then I went into television in 1957, and the only way I could make progress was as a producer and as

a writer; they wouldn't let me direct. And I was perhaps rather silly, I should have perhaps toned myself down, but I couldn't. I used to get behind that camera and images would come to me that I had to shoot, and of course it was strange stuff, I agree with them—I mean strange in terms of television, in terms of film it was absolutely straightforward, but it wasn't a talking head, or else it would be a talking head but I'd reveal other things, I'd go very close in on the teeth or the mouth or the way the lips curled and all that sort of thing. I did quite a lot of current-affairs directing, but they'd never let me go into drama. Also, the subjects I wanted to tackle weren't exactly safe. So I went into producing and writing as a means of getting on to cinema and at least working.

I'm sure that many writers in Hollywood are dialogue writers, maybe are interested in characters, but they don't have a strong visual imagination. And when you have that quality, it must be terribly frustrating not to be directing yourself.

Yes it is, because those visuals are often very indicative, very important in terms of character. You see, I think that's the great thing about the cinema—it's the visual manifestations which are important, it isn't the beautiful composition, it's what the characters actually do, the way they talk. For example, in *Point Blank* the whole of that car-smashing sequence is really indicative of his state of mind. I don't think it's fully shot that way, but that's what it's about. Or sending Angie up as the Trojan horse is really indicative of character, it isn't just a bright idea. Or the sniper on the freeway is shot that way for a very special reason. Or just the fights, or anything that goes on. It must work on more than one level. That's why dialogue is so unimportant, because all dialogue does is give you information. And film dialogue has got to be colloquial and have a certain syntax, whereas literary dialogue and stage dialogue are highly stylized. In novels, of course, the dialogue is often a lead into a whole introspective stream by the author which you can't do in the cinema. And in the theater it's often great statements being made not just for information—at least I'm speaking

about the best level—but also for other reasons. Whereas in the cinema the moment you have great declamatory statements of this sort, the whole film collapses. The one interesting exception I can think of is in *Force of Evil*, Polonsky's early film, where the dialogue really is a very interesting counterpoint to the action. I think it is too literary both in plot structure and structure of dialogue—it was Polonsky's first picture—but nevertheless it's a very interesting play on dialogue. But he was forced to put a commentary on it eventually to make the film understandable. And I think it's not understandable because the words—brilliant words, lovely words, very rich words—took precedence over visual movement. It's not action, it's visual

movement that is the real secret. And that involves the emotive use of the camera, the actual camera *movement* can be evocative. And that's what the writing's got to be about. I mean when I write in *Point Blank* about a sense of intimacy between Chris and Walker on their first meeting, one hopes that that's going to be done by the director—I mean, it wasn't done by John in that scene, but what happens is suddenly they become conscious of each other. And that you say without dialogue; you don't have a line, "You're looking good" or "I can see your breasts" or something, it's done through men and women looking at each other. But of course sooner or later you have to take your finger out and do it yourself, otherwise you've got to shut up.