

Cinematography & Meaning

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A BEAUTIFUL BLUE-EYED BLONDE sits anxiously on the edge of a bed. She has waited for hours now and only has a foreign embassy contact in hand. Her husband got a ride back to the airport with their friend, to collect the rest of their luggage. Now, there is no sign of them. The *kayaba* fence around the bungalow is as thirsty as the parched lawn, and the panting mutt on it, all under the quickly dying December sun. She prays *Zdrowaś Maryjo, laskiś pełna, Pan z Tobą...* as the events of the last month flash by—as if on cinematic celluloid. Everyone is hopeful for this new start. What she does not yet know is that their charming host has lurched his Ford into the ditch at the end of Embakasi Road, her dashing young husband catapulted into the shattering glass, the driver's ribs smashing against the vinyl of the Cortina's steering wheel.

What does this mean?

Meaning. One could say that cinematography is essentially about the dissection and manipulation of meaning. An interest in the nuance and detail that construct an image on the screen presupposes awareness of meaning. Without, at the very least, a curiosity about what links the depicted emotion, intended onscreen creature or imagined cinematic world to the story at hand and its message, the desire to learn, practice and share the art and craft of cinematography has an airless quality. Because cinematography is about distilling meaning, it bears the fascinating affect on human being, with all the signs and symbols the human being avails for the purpose of exhibiting who we are, what we desire, what we believe, what the essence of our inner core is, what animates us. Some mistake cinematography for a mastery of the operation manuals of gadgets—cameras, light meters, parabolic aluminized reflectors. But cinematography isn't about or for things, but for and about us.

Every story is one of learning. An audience latches onto a story when both the essence of the presented hero or heroine and their goal resonate with them. With the different story genres come variations in protagonists and antagonists. Although we are all human, the source of our core identity is no longer understood in sympathetic terms; we increasingly see and manifest our core essence antithetically, or apathetically. This is reflected in our image and likeness onscreen. We attempt to illustrate the story of our common dignity—one still proclaimed through a wondrously varied array of visual expression. But we proceed to do it even through the unfiltered faces of dehumanized protagonists, and the unblushing consecration of their vice. Young cinematographers hear that it takes the right mix of work ethic, enthusiasm, skill, sense, enterprise, determination, ambition, appetite, contacts, and an extraordinary eye to have a long, fruitful career.

What cultivates this “eye” of a cinematographer? And, doesn't this “eye” actually tint onscreen imagery with a particular tone—regardless of, or in spite of, screenwriters' script? The idea that a cinematographer's personal constitution, their beliefs and cultural affinity stamp themselves on his or her dissection and portrayal of meaning onscreen may seem intimidating. Such an idea may reassure one director or producer. It may, and perhaps even should, goad the thoughts of another. Some players may actually feel that such enunciated constitution creates barriers to artistic expression. The language of the art of cinematography may thus be misconstrued as necessarily a tool of inclusion rather than one able to assert exclusion or exception. Talent becomes disassociated from human, personal core. However, arresting imagery is one that is unique and uncommon precisely when it most directly expresses or speaks to what constitutes essential, authentic human being—we

all want to know ourselves, and we all want to be loved. Why the images of one storyteller, one cinematographer, are entertained and understood over the images of another has much to do with meaning and the ability to express meaning precisely or obliquely, as necessary.

Cinematography manipulates the signs and symbols forming likeness, as much as it reveals the identity of the image's author and the identity of the viewer. Cinematography can, therefore, repeatedly serve multiple, even questionable, signs and symbols. The signs and symbols of who we are and what we believe or don't believe can be too habitually construed as expressions at the mercy of skin tone, or some exaggerated allegiance to land. Our signs and symbols can telegraph a certain formed attitude towards possessions, and the sense of cultural and economic security these are meant to provide. Though very personal, our cinematic displays are steeped in connotations and references extracted from society and reflecting our heroes and villains. Indeed, these signs and symbols are couriers of altogether simpler reality. They always end up commenting on beauty; they unceasingly infer authenticity, they agelessly seek to reflect virtue. The search for meaning forever enters inner space because human being always seeks the reflection of truth in image. A negation of objective truth, as of meaning, can and does get put forward as a remedy to troubling image or frightening likeness. A negation of soul does have reflections in image and likeness. Our signs and symbols may pretend universalism when they are invited to thrive only on mystery and surprise, on ambiguity and conflict, to express equally the profound and the banal.

Cinematography, then, is exaggeration and generalization. It tempts to be served raw and edgy, as much as polished and genial. Resultant simplification or overstatement can misrepresent what our art form stands for—truth. Thus, the signs and symbols employed by the cinematographer may express a lament and a longing for better perspectives on truth. But such perspectives, increasingly, aren't welcomed unless sufficiently affable, and not too earnest. It is this insolent symbiosis between truth, lies, exaggeration, ambiguity, candor, restraint, appetite, shame, fear, singularity and community, which alter image and likeness.

Cinematography—perceived as an expression of identity—is fertile with the triumphs and failures of our individual families and communities. Fertility and family are indeed some of the most potent, often unspoken, terms affecting life and art. Injury to either fertility or family precipitates emotive, deep undercurrents expressed both ostentatiously and tacitly. To better serve up the mystery, and reveal the fake allies and fake foes onscreen, we temper or deface our own. Consequently, notions of family and fertility quietly trump all else in the construction of identity, and so in the dissection and depiction of meaning. Cinematography wants to express us in shorthand. This is why narration guides images through love stories, where the plot's so-called double reversal teaches both hero and opponent something new about themselves. Cinematographers cannot really reveal the protagonist without revealing ourselves too. Expressions of beauty, in every culture, are a synthesis of perceptions of fertility and love, of the male and the female; so is our cognition of justice and now the often startling basis of law, the reason for innocence, guilt, ethics and morality. The firmness of right and wrong, the free admission of fact and fiction, the constancy (or the suspension) of belief are all tied to the human grasp of fertility, love, truth and beauty.

Images reflecting the fear and animalization of the human being have been re-introduced relatively recently. They haunt old tales anew. Darkness distorts light again. The tension between bright and dark supplants any graceful building blocks visual stories had. The elevation of art above truth grotesquely exaggerates mankind's creativity and ability. Errant ideologies would wish we were all still preterhuman East Africans, recently evolved into brutish humans, only now looking to leave the Eden of the acacia woodlands and the savannas of the Great Rift Valley for the unexplored distant shores, the temperate steppes, deciduous forests, northern taiga and ice fields beyond. Yet, genuine science and ontology

reveal the fallacy of macro-evolutionary misrepresentations and affirms our and God's—the Creator of Adam and Eve—unchanging stature. Beauty, happiness, hope, compassion and love are all interrelated; they are necessarily intertwined. Our filming of these is thus linked as much to human purpose, knowledge, experience and instinct as it is an epiphany of a deliberate conscience and of its real source. The artistic contribution of a cinematographer is, in the end, to engage conscience. The viewers' reaction to what is on the screen—delight, dread, marvel, fear, disbelief, awe—are thus achieved by juxtaposing those multiple elements of the screen with the philosophies that constitute for the viewer the quintessential, elevating elements of human being. Cinematography is about weaving clarity out of mystification.

The use of light and shadow, colour and contrast, camera choice, placement and movement, composition, measure and rhythm, time and space, the application of the most sophisticated digital, logistical, financial tools available, the operation of machines, are not so much that you see, or even that you feel, but so that you know. Feelings and beauty are not life's *summum bonum*; holiness is. Feelings and beauty only point to and help us grasp what is pure. The exactness of the feelings brought about in the viewer often depends on that subtle and nuanced use of the elements at the cinematographer's disposal. These elements go in an unspoken tandem with mutual cultural nuances that are implicit themselves.

You believe because you know and you experience—not via guile or force. The motivation behind the screenplay and its intended onscreen impact indicates as much about the author as about the viewer. Here is where notions of being are laid bare; here they are also masked, confronted, rebuffed, mocked, and spurred. On the screen, the signs of error and abuse are meant to be exposed and attacked. Here, too, are supposed to be dialogues and monologues on virtue, honour, courage, empathy, and purpose; on youth, on ageing—on life, on the temporal, and on the eternal. For some, the screen is a stage to show that humans are vile, purposeless and in accidental diversity. For others, the screen is a stage to show purposeful uniqueness—convinced that our identity springs ultimately from a dignity transcending our individual, or even familial, societal or cultural ideas or vices. Others, still, would have us escape being human altogether—arguably, the most insidious and damaging use of the screen. Remarkably, all these paths to and away from the human person are meant to happen in the darkened halls of cinemas, on flat, beady screens constructed specifically to fool the eye. It is all meant to pierce through television's glass—shielding the latest in high definition digital capture and emission. Believability is supposed to unfold on a canvas of flat-screen illusion—illusion of tri-dimensionality, illusion of depth, illusion of movement, illusion of concreteness, illusion of reality, even illusion of sincerity. Despite all the illusion, verity is meant to actualize in our hearts. Cinematography is meant to be for this.

Cinematography is a profession that depends on one's ability to collaborate with numerous artistic and technical opinions of crew and production, yet it is built on one's comprehension of creativity and beauty. Cinematographic expression—just as meaning, identity and culture—is at once intensely personal and communal. In this, cinematographic expression is meant to be forthright, not servile or egocentric. Cinematic legacy mirrors a broader cultural dilemma—a primal struggle between selfishness and charity, a temptation to settle for the counterfeit—not the true. Aesthetic dexterity isn't artistic creativity. Utility isn't creativity. Diversity is but dissimilarity—hardly a defining good, or goal. Dominant narration is too often lost in a dishonest, unholy likeness of the human being, a confusing image of reality, the lure to withdraw from actuality, to a knee-jerk fear of fact, or an ill-equipped effort by the cinematographer, the director, the screenwriter, or the producer. Discernment and courage have, perhaps, never needed to be clearer underlying cultural traits than they do today. For, as the anti-hero becomes the domesticated face of our dialogue on life, the image of a cavorting, even psychotic villain becomes the only acceded likeness.

No, not all happens as a result of ignorance or benevolence. Filming can indeed be about deliberately dividing, distracting, diverting, deluding. Imagery of a confused or misleading protagonist does mask very rationalized choices. And when screen likeness sets out to deceive both viewer and author, the cinematographer's role is even more vulnerable. The images created by us are increasingly post-manipulated without our input or knowledge. The treatment of genre, scenes, sequences and subject generally, is affected by seemingly minimal reallocations of cinematic technique. Such cinematography characteristically substitutes tricks for beauty or vice for conscience; sarcasm and narcissism are easily next in its arsenal. Cinematography can just as easily be used to incinerate what edifies family and community when onscreen "gifts" give viewers neither fidelity nor excellence. It takes forethought to produce genre-blending imagery that entertains but does not humanize. Cinematography can do this too. Just as terms such as pluralism, globalism, diversity, and prosperity seldom refer to a truly universal good, so spin and propaganda about mass communication, cosmopolitanism, ubiquitous connectedness, mono-civilization or cultural integration present ever-new signs and symbols for old, concupiscent reality and imagery.

Meaning and identity are entangled. Cinematography is about using nature and technology to effectively depict human essence as conveyed by our interaction with the real world, and with God. Cultural prejudice and ethnic bias can fixate on virtual self, and on craft, at the expense of fact, meaning and the broader ideals they serve. It then seems easier to make fetishes out of gizmos for their own sake rather than to study detail and nuance, and genuinely depict any identity, any culture, any meaning, and any story, in any genre. Indeed, rather than willfulness and an ill-understood artistic freedom, it takes good work to clothe meaning with the kind of imagery that epitomizes our identity as human beings. Elegant, distinguished entertainment requires premeditation—not ersatz emotion or alien alchemy.

Cinematography ought to be a rich, cumulative art form that meshes both a surprising and a revealing array of elements. A combination of anthropology, biology, psychology, physics, literature, philosophy, political and art theory, history, economics, chemistry, and religion leads to thought-provoking cinematography. Yet, you may have heard that there is no space, no time for metaphysics in good, fast, riveting cinema; and that cinema is good and riveting particularly when it sheds rationality or is simply visceral. Is soulless cinema the goal of the talented cinematographer? No. Can the best cinema sell itself and its ideas globally, and be universal while being relativistic? No. A movie never is single meaningless frames. Exploring the stories around us, and the genres employed to visualize them, ultimately underlines that, and reveals the ageless nature of our wants and needs.

Our understanding of self, our assertions about what being human is ultimately about, provides us all with a particular foundation on which to structure images. But, when the act of cinematography is tied only to *Weltanschauung*, and utility, then appetite and willfulness play a central and obtrusive role in it. Cinematography can let us transcend our own worldview and enter and depict another—if we but study our own nature and purpose more truthfully. The practice of cinematography never has severed that volatile link with our inner self. Form without context is just irreverent excess. Pride always begets impurity, while beauty necessarily engages conscience and, by natural inference, it eschews iniquity.

The Swahili say that "*Mficha uchi hazai*"—one who hides their nudity is barren. We cannot procreate without baring our private parts. We cannot create—co-create with God—without being vulnerable, trusting, but reverent. Cinematographers can use the language of excess and generalization, of desire and nuance to mask their constitution and culture. And we, cinematographers, can also bare *your* soul. Cinematography has aimed to impersonate meaning, treating imagery as a veritable handbook to being human. Foolish, you may say. Yet, in concert, the language of cinema, poetry, music, the language of art, the language of

faith, and the language of the body expose who we are. Truth is irrepressible—even when it is a prisoner of our distorted signs and symbols. For cinematography to depict (broken) humans or (heroic) events, particularly, it must confront a culture of fraud, neglect, solitude, and of death with a culture of life—one with sense of right and wrong, one full of hope. The art and craft of cinematography is then less about proving or scoring plot points, but rather about revisiting questions on meaning, and probing sensitivity to lives really lived, and lives well imagined. We do this to learn, to entertain, to provoke and, hopefully, to repair.

The two men from the opening paragraph were my dad and his close friend, both of them Kenyans who had studied at universities in Poland. That sunset, they were rescued by Good Samaritans. Their injuries, quite miraculously, were minor enough. Both got back home before sunrise that very night—stitched up and bandaged, an official from the Polish Embassy in Nairobi helping both men hobble out of his vehicle onto the moonlit gravel. My youngest sister was born only weeks later, perhaps touched in the womb by the events of that day. In a few short months, all six of us were very far away, my parents having taken up their post as the only medical doctors at a provincial hospital. Mom and dad got to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary not too many miles from the erstwhile Embakasi Road.

Yes, the beautiful, blue-eyed blonde is my mother, and that was her very first evening in Africa. I was barely five years old that hot December. My sisters, brother and I had just landed in dad's—and indeed our—country, and were on that bed, that evening in Kahawa outside the quizzically named “Green City in the Sun”—listening, and wondering.

But, were you Polish, you would have already assumed the woman's identity from the language of her prayer. Were you Kenyan, you would already have known where old Embakasi Road was. Core identity is not centered on skin color, language and geography—as some cinema proposes. Beauty is not facsimile, ersatz and false multiplicity. Each cinematographer tacitly paints images on a much deeper canvas. For, we are embodied souls, and our core reflects a staggering image and likeness. For me, a Roman Catholic, this inner self desires God who chooses an astonishing, personal, familial intimacy with us. My Triune God's unending grace is reflected in natural laws; His omnipotent will never lies or goes against virtue, never contravenes justice or reason, never violates human liberty or conscience, and His unlimited power never enslaves human being or requires our mindless obedience. God loves us, humans, His crown creation, so immensely that Christ Jesus, the Incarnate Word, *Logos*, God's Only Son, shows us that death, in fact, has no power over us if we pursue holiness. God—Our Father—rescues and redeems us from error so that we may live fully—if we but freely choose to love Him back, and reject sin. The signs and symbols we use reveal who has become our Interpreter of *Logos*—the Holy Spirit, or a spirit unholy. When denuded of God's Living Utterance, humans attempt to animalize or deify ourselves, and grave error delivers death. When one's inner core dispenses with a soul, does away with purpose, everlasting life, creation, sin, sacrificial love, hope, joy, resurrection of the body—humans presented as mutant, amoral, carnal atoms—and God portrayed as archaic, brutal, vengeful, weak, legendary, arbitrary, invented, unknowable, corporeal, worldly, political, or bogus, then the detail and nuance employed to construct apt cinematography reach for very different associations with signs and symbols. When life and love mean something else, so does human dignity, humility, and so will fertility, family, beauty and truth. Resultant image and likeness shall exhibit or mirror urge and essence of an altogether contradistinctive kind.

Cinematography is not what defines meaning, but *vice versa*—*Logos* gives likeness. My mom nurtured us in the Catholic faith; my dad presented us the Digo, Mijikenda culture. Blending ostensibly disparate Poland and Kenya into a seamless reality was a daring, early lesson about the true nature of things, and self. Because, you see, a “cinematographer's eye” is but a lens with a bent, a talent, a skill acquired, a gift—not for ourselves, but to others.