DUMBSTRUCK: Lessons in Silence

Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of
the degree of Masters of Film and Television
(by Research)

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ABSTRACT

I write and make silent films – the kind where trees fall silently in the forest whether you are there or not. This practice-led thesis, **DUMBSTRUCK: Lessons in Silence**, examines the creative possibilities that this anachronistic practice offers contemporary filmmakers and screenwriters, arguing that taking away synchronous sound encourages authors to re-imagine cinematic story space as a physical, even sculptural place, not one driven by text-based tales alone.

Through the presentation of a feature screenplay, a short film and an accompanying exegesis, **DUMBSTRUCK: Lessons in Silence** will investigate what it is to write ‘silence’, what it is to shoot ‘silence’ and what it is to critically consider ‘silence’. And how might the anachronistic practice of silent filmmaking offer contemporary filmmakers and screenwriters new ways to imagine cinematic story space and foster different ways of knowing?

(Please note: it is recommended that the creative components of this thesis - including the additional two short film works included as appendix - be read and watched prior to reading the exegesis as they are a critical access point to the arguments and thoughts and experiences contained within.)
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DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters degree except where indicated in the Preface,
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) the exegesis is 12,501 words in length, inclusive of footnotes and captions, but exclusive of tables, maps, bibliography and appendices.

PREFACE

The exegesis and creative components A & B of this practice led thesis, DUMBSTRUCK: Lessons in Silence, is entirely my own work except where indicated via bibliographical reference. The screenplay, Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living, a ‘silent’ adaptation of the 2005 Australian novel, Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living, written by Carrie Tiffany. The screenplay, while based on Tiffany’s original story, is entirely my own work. The short film, Donkey in a Lion’s Cage, was written, directed and edited by me. All other contributors to the work are acknowledged in the film’s credits.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Annabelle Murphy – my supervisor – who pushed me with patience and intelligence. Thank you.

Morag Fraser, Catriona Jackson, Andrew Fraser and Frank Jackson – my personal, familial, editorial team – you make me smarter than I am – for that I am forever in your debt (a debt I intend to grow).

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Max, Bella, Elsie, Lucca, and Essie – I would have finished this thing much sooner had it not been for your excellent company – but, heck, slow and steady wins the race.
DUMBSTRUCK: Lessons in Silence

Exegesis
Introduction

or

Brontosaurus Brains

I write and make silent films, the kind where people talk but no sound comes out of their mouths; the sort where lightning strikes silently and, if a tree falls in the forest, it doesn’t make a sound, whether you are there or not. I have written and made films where people’s talking can be heard and sounds sync with actions but directing and writing silence has taught me the most. That may not always remain true. But it is true for now. The act of making in this dumb space has taught my head, my heart and my hands something I had forgotten, or perhaps something I had never fully understood, about the act of making.

_Dumbstruck: Lessons in Silence_, is an attempt to define and share that ‘something’.

_Dumbstruck: Lessons in Silence_, is a practice-led research thesis comprising of three elements: a short film, a feature length screenplay and an accompanying exegesis. The short film, _Donkey in a Lion’s Cage_¹, is the second in a trilogy of silent films collectively entitled _Killing Her Quietly_ (the first and third films in the trilogy, 1, 2, 3² and _Night Night Pretty_³, are included as appendices). The screenplay is a silent adaptation of the 2005 Australian novel, _Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living_⁴, written by Carrie Tiffany. The accompanying exegesis explores the kind of thinking that makes me make and the kind of making that makes me think – who thought it, how it came to me, and what I did with it. The exegesis is made up of words and pictures. Some pictures move, others don’t. Some of the pictures illustrate written thoughts, others are thoughts in themselves. Each image and screenplay excerpt included in the exegesis is coupled with a written thought – a caption of sorts. These textual musings are not intended to give the viewer/reader an interpretive leg up. Rather they are intended to act as a benign, creative exoskeleton – an aid to tease out, indulge, encourage, crowd, delight and enthuse the space around the creative work. The works are themselves,
first and foremost, not illustrations of their captions. This notion of the visual artifacts presented being ‘thoughts in themselves’ is central to the conceit of this thesis and illustrates (literally) it’s desire to test a controversial suggestion, so elegantly described by eminent filmmaker and visual ethnographer, David MacDougall, that:

“As writers, we articulate thoughts and experiences, but as photographers and filmmakers we articulate images of looking and being…A filmmaker’s knowledge is often believed to lie in a film’s conclusions, expressed by a visual rhetoric that juxtaposes shots and scenes, or at a more general level explains behavior through narratives of power, exchange, belief, and emotion. These are the “messages” that the film communicates. A kind of visual reasoning has taken place. Yet the filmmaker has seen and knows much more than can be communicated in this way. Is it possible to transmit this knowledge—which cannot be conceptualized—to others? In academic writing this question is generally dealt with by setting aside such knowledge as superfluous, or inaccessible, or outside the domain of the problem or discipline or the problem at hand. But in films and photography, it is far more difficult to cordon off statements about reality and the immediacy of the reality shown. The kinds of knowledge we gain from images and texts may have to be approached in quite different ways.5

_Dumbstruck_ will posit that ‘the knowledge we [might] gain’ from its creative components (a short ‘silent’ film and the blue print for a longer ‘silent’ film) should be given the opportunity to ‘transmit this knowledge’ in the specific and particular way that only they can – _Dumbstruck_ considers them to be constituents of knowledge, not instruments or illustrations of knowledge.

Put simply, the screenplay and short film are examples of what I make, how I think and how I share knowledge. The exegesis is an examination of why I make and how I make. All three, reflections of what and why and how I think and share knowledge.
Fig. 1. *J, Z. 3.* (dir. S. Jackson. 2007) These are my first frames of ‘silence’ – the literal beginning of my experiment with contemporary silent cinema and how I could share new understandings with audiences, performers and the camera. Initially the image and frame remained relatively empty. Things were visually reductive, almost crude, as I searched for a clarity and focus in the form. Click on image to play.

Fig. 2. *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living.* (S. Jackson. 2017) An early scene in my first feature length ‘silent’ screenplay demonstrating how radically my frame would fill, moving away from my initial more reductive approach. Even blatant ‘sound’ elements, shown but not heard, would fill my frames. Click on image to play.
I understand things best through my hands. I call them, my hands, Brontosaurus brains, lumps of fat and nerve cells that feed information (critical, physical, practical, emotional, even metaphysical) directly to my actual brain, just as the massive herbivore’s ‘second brain’ ferried information from its back half to its front half so that it didn’t make embarrassing jerky movements in front of other dinosaurs grazing on the prehistoric savannah.

My hands, those lumps of thinking fat, are crucial intermediaries between my doing and my knowing. Without them, and their ability to absorb the meaning in things, my thoughts would be jerky and discordant indeed.

What I call my brontosaurus brains could equally be described as my agents of praxis. In her essay, *The Magic is in Handling*, artist and academic, Barbara Bolt, describes praxis, or more particularly, praxical knowledge, as ‘a very specific sort of knowing that arises through the handling of material in practice.’ She continues, quoting fellow artist and academic, Paul Carter’s useful phrase, ‘material thinking’, to describe,

…a way of considering the relations that take place within the very process or tissue of making. In this conception, the materials are not just passive objects to be used instrumentally by the artist, but rather, the materials and processes of production have their own intelligence that come into play in interaction with the artist’s creative intelligence.

I find great comfort in considering ideas such as praxical knowledge and material thinking.
Because, despite working and teaching in a university and thinking deep and hard and long about important stuff, my brain doesn’t order knowledge in a tidy or methodical way – I’m an enthusiastic gleaner not a systematic learner. I’m a practitioner who thinks critically but understands practically. I find answers in making and that process of discovery is as rough and dumb as it is sincere and subtle. I’ve found no other way to sustain the act of making or explore the critical limits of my craft. I am a *material thinker*, although I prefer the expression *dirty thinking*, because it reminds me that thinking, for people who make stuff, is a physical act as much as an intellectual one. It literally makes you dirty. I have to wash my clothes more often than many of my academic colleagues.

It is in the touching, shaping and manipulation of my materials of production (cameras, key boards, actors, locations, costumes, time, plot, donkeys) that I come to understand the things that my mind, and the world, throws up for consideration. It is through, what Bolt calls the ‘logic of practice’\(^\text{10}\) that my critical conundrums are tackled and given rest – or at least partially quelled. This exegesis is interested in how that apparent fact affects the doing of my research and research of my doing.

To successfully explore that nexus between myself as a thinking artist and myself as a doing artist it made sense to take a broadly auto-ethnographic approach to this exegesis - describing and systematically analysing (*graphy*) my personal artistic experience (*auto*) in an attempt to glimpse a broader cultural/critical (*ethno*) understanding and experience\(^\text{11}\). An exploration of how *what* I know or think about things affects *what* and *how* I make things, and vice versa?

Broadly speaking these *what’s and how’s* could be described as different ways of knowing: the way of knowing *about* and the way of knowing *through*. Film academic Allan J Thomas
talks of the difference, as it applies to film thinking and filmmaking, very clearly.

The dominant tradition of ‘film research’ is one that wants to know something about film - ‘what are its histories’, ‘how does it work’, ‘what does it mean’ (this film, these films, this body of work, this career, this style), even ‘what is it’? But alongside this there lies a tradition which asks a different question: ‘what do we know through film’? Rather than treating film (in its broadest sense) as an object of knowledge, or potential knowledge to be researched, it treats it as a way of knowing in its own right, and perhaps even a way of thinking.\(^\text{12}\)

While I know a lot about film, it is what I have come to know through film that I find most interesting. And it is that knowledge and those new understandings that inform the writing of this exegesis. As such, \textit{Dumbstruck: Lessons in Silence} is as much about illuminating new knowledge through the act of making as it is about allowing the objects I make to share knowledge all by themselves.
Fig. 3. *Night Night Pretty.* (dir. S. Jackson. 2014) What is it to know something ‘through’ film rather than ‘about’ film?

Click on image to play.

Fig. 4. *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living.* (S. Jackson. 2017) What do we understand about Mr. Ohno’s love for Jean ‘through’ cinema is entirely different to what we know ‘about’ cinema that depicts love?

Just as there is a complex intersection between the knowing *about* and the knowing...
through worlds, so there is also a complex contrapuntal space lying between knowledge gained through looking or visual encounters, and knowledge gained via concepts described in written or spoken language.

As academic and librarian, Pauline Dewan, reminds us, in her 2015 article, *Words Versus Pictures: Leveraging the Research on Visual Communication*:

Librarians, like the population at large, have a subtle bias against pictures. We tend to think of them as a slightly inferior form of communication. After all, children develop intellectually by moving from picture books to chapter books, and then to books filled with even more words.¹³

But, as she goes on to suggests, it is worth keeping in mind that:

Humans have used pictures to record their experiences for 250 centuries, pictograms and ideograms for the next 20 centuries, and words for the remaining 15 centuries… Communicating visually is what we have done for the vast majority of human history. And as Brown points out, “We are neurologically wired with an overwhelmingly visual sensory ability.”¹⁴

Given that I make and write silent films, understanding the difference between looking and language, and between understanding through and about is of vital importance.

I find it helpful to think of the following examination as a conversation between two heads attached to the same body, my body; two minds negotiating a single corporeal vessel. Both heads talk a lot, and at the same time; sometimes the sounds are discordant,
other times a harmonious duet.

How do these conversations go? What does this two-headed monster, with fatty lump hands, have to say? What lessons has it shared? The short answer is, many. The long answer follows in this exegesis.

The exegesis is composed in three chapters, or, as I like to call them, lessons. I use the term lessons to suggest the nature of my own learning – they are not lessons I am giving, rather lessons I have learnt. Each lesson is an illustrated tale of what and who and why silent filmmaking came to dominate my creative and critical landscape. My aim is to render this landscape of thoughts and understandings as a kind of picture book for grown-ups.

Great children’s picture books always suggest the possibility of adventure and understanding beyond the limits of their pages, and a truth that does not always lie in fact. Where would Alice be if the actual laws of physics determined her narrative trajectory? Certainly, we would be none the ‘curiouser and curiouser’15. I find that to be a very exciting way of thinking and an irresistible way of sharing ‘true’ understandings of both the critical and creative kind. And that, in essence, is what I hope to do and how I hope to do it.

‘Curiouser and curiouser!’ cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English).16

– Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

According to journalist, Malcolm Jones, the children’s picture book author and illustrator, Maurice Sendak, trod similar ground. Sendak ‘understood that there are riddles and
dilemmas in life that have no easy answers and maybe no answers at all, and he wasn’t afraid to put that uncertainty into his books.’ In Sendak’s Kafkaesque tale, Higglety Pigglety Pop! we hear his heroine (a Sealyham terrier named Jennie) divulge her discontents to a potted plant, and in doing so she reveals something fundamental about the ‘riddles and dilemmas’ of life (and I’d argue, storytelling and the nature of its production – literary, cinematic or otherwise). Upon being reminded by the plant that she has everything, ‘You have everything … two pillows, two bowls, the red wool sweater, eye drops, ear drops, two different bottles of pills, and a master’s love,’ Jennie replies, ‘I am discontented. I want something I do not have. There must be more to life than having everything.’ A line, not only the wit of which is worthy of Oscar Wilde, but the wisdom, worthy of a life time’s artistic exploration.

In this little terrier’s expression of discontent, I expect every artist recognizes something of the reasons for making, the instinct that drives creative endeavour – the possibly futile but essential search for more than everything, or the answers to the riddles and dilemmas that have no easy answers, perhaps no answers at all.

But how does one begin to poke around in this wonderful conundrum, this philosophical paradox, this idea of ‘more than everything’ and ‘riddles without answers’?

Well, Sendak does it by telling a story, and Jennie by going on an adventure. Are these sound forms of critical and creative exploration? I say, YES! Jennie does the fieldwork; Sendak writes up the findings.
While I am neither as adventurous as Jennie nor as fearless as Sendak I do look to them both to help define the research methods I intend to employ in the following pages, and the approach I have taken to the accompanying screenplay, *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living*¹⁰, and short film, *Donkey in a Lion’s Cage*²¹.

Sendak and Jennie’s examples act as a megaphone clapped around my ear, shouting:

“*Do not be afraid of uncertainty; consider giving up everything to understand something and don’t forget to tells us a story about it all!*”

I haven’t given up everything, but I have given up sync sound, and uncertainty abounds in the exploratory nature of the highly auto-ethnographic narratives that form the backbone of this exegesis. As I said, I am neither as adventurous nor as fearless, but the results are the start of what I hope is a tale worth telling.

And a tale, or ripping yarn, I intend it to be. As a writer and maker of narrative fiction I believe that sharing ‘truth’ and ‘new understanding’ lies deep in the bones of storytelling. I’m not suggesting ‘make-believe’ is truth but rather that the compelling form and structure of storytelling can encourage a greater illumination, sharing and understanding of new things. And even more so if the form is an unexpected one, a structure that disrupts the norm and encourages what might be described as lateral, exposed, or even ‘badly behaved’ thinking and understanding. It is for that reason I have chosen to dress my critical thinking, arguments and observations in story shapes. And relatively personal story shapes at that.
The Man Booker prize winning novelist, Arundhati Roy, makes a compelling case for the way we tell stories being key to engaging, disrupting and inspiring new thinking and understanding – encouraging, perhaps, a certain calculated disobedience.

…Unless fiction becomes disobedient it will become irrelevant, because you cannot contain what fiction is meant to do if you are just going to do a sort of, ‘here are the main characters, and here is the political background and this is the play and this is the stage and enter right and exit left’…we are being trained and domesticated [to] put everything under little subheadings…everything loses its power unless you can somehow show the insanity of it all. For me a novel can either be a very weak thing or it can be incredibly powerful if you break the rules and you say ‘no’…nothing happens in one language…how do you find a way of absorbing those cadences? …You can’t do it in some obedient way. 22

I believe the same is true for the sharing of non-fiction ideas and critical investigations. The unorthodox, even disobedient style of this exegesis, for me, is key to creating a space in which ideas can potentially incubate more fully and gain greater traction, in both the author and the reader.
Fig. 5. *Donkey in a Lion’s Cage.* (dir. S. Jackson. 2013) The film’s opening image, an ironic play on free as a bird? Really, two birds trapped. The visual negotiation between intellect, emotion, metaphor, audience, maker image and understanding begins.

1. INT/EXT STEAM TRAIN DAY

Through the window of a steam train pale yellow wheat fields can be seen stretching in all directions.

A bright sewing needle pushes through the fine weave of taught linen, deftly guided by a young woman’s hand.

The train rattles through endless, flat, dry landscape. Sharp horizon lines dividing land from sky in all directions.

The sun burns.

2. INT COUNTRY SCHOOL ROOM DAY

A large map of Australia hangs on the classroom wall. A wooden pointer strikes the centre of the map with gusto and traces an invisible rectangle in it centre.

Jean (6yrs, grubby) sits at a desk surrounded by older girls. The older girls wrap baby dolls in swaddling cloth.

A small circle of boys surround a man in military greens. He addresses the boys enthusiastically. Two boys fold brown paper into aeroplanes and fly them through the air like bomber planes, one crashes onto the girls table. There is commotion and giggling.

Fig. 6. *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living.* (S. Jackson. 2017) The first two scenes and the last two scenes of *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living.* Suggesting and grappling with the physical and metaphysical needs of the story. Drawing the first and last moments together – bookending visual meaning.
Lesson One:

Mon Oncle, The Green Grocer and Granny Jackson

or

How I Learnt That Seeing Can Be Knowing

Fig. 7. Donkey in a Lion’s Cage (dir. S. Jackson, 2013) A young soldier lost in looking – no longer able to see. A vision of moral damage. Click on image to play.

Fig. 8. Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living (S. Jackson, 2017) A ring finger made too fat for its wedding band by the heat – an environment unsuited to love. What chance happiness? Specific and obdurate images.
In the late 1970’s my grandmother took me to see Jacque Tati’s, *Mon Oncle*, after a recommendation from her green grocer. She went to see it first to be sure it was the right kind of film to be taking children to. My grandmother was a very frightening woman. She looked like a man, she taught philosophy at university and she tore small pieces off her breakfast toast in a way that made me think more of vivisection than food consumption. I loved her very much. It would have been dangerous not to. So, when she turned to me as the lights were going down in that velvety cinema and said ‘this is the greatest film ever made’, I was genuinely afraid. But there was no need for fear, she was right – well – more or less. Since her death, a few other films have been allowed to challenge the pinnacle status of *Mon Oncle*, but only as equals. In my opinion, nothing has surpassed it.

I didn’t speak or read French as a child, and nor do I now. I was too young to read subtitles and too inexperienced, in fact, to even know what subtitles were. But more important than inexperience was that my grandmother didn’t deem it necessary to read them for me, and for that I will be forever grateful. She knew that on this occasion neither written nor spoken language defined meaning or rendered truth to image. She knew I didn’t need to comprehend the talking to fathom story meaning. I didn’t even realise they were talking – those sounds that I could hear when characters moved their mouths they were just that, sounds, part of the non-synchronous ambience of Tati’s increasingly mad and wonderful world of mechanical insistence. To me it was a silent film, a film without relevant sync. And that was exciting. My formidable grandmother and a tall man with short pants taught me my first lesson in the wonders and possibilities of silent cinema without taking me to one or making one. The perversity of that excites me, and to this day keeps me alive to the idea that the most salient lessons in a Life of Art are as likely to come via the green grocer or your grandmother, as from a great master.
I also began to understand something else. Something that afore mentioned filmmaker and visual ethnographer, David MacDougall, describes this way,

Images reflect thought, and they may lead to thought, but they are much more than thought...[an] encounter with visual images demands more of us than the mental facility that language has given us. There is a specificity and obduracy to images that defies our accustomed habits of translation and summation.\(^{24}\)

What appeals to me in these astute observations is the suggestion that images have a stubborn wonder that defies translation into language, and that the use of language to measure, describe or analyse cannot adequately capture the truth of ‘encounter[s] with’ the visual. This could equally be said of encounters with my grandmother.

I am not, for one moment, suggesting that understandings gained through visual means are richer or better ways of knowing, simply that they are a different and equally valuable way of knowing. I am very glad that in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr, spoke the words, ‘I have a dream, that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character’\(^{25}\) rather than hosting a slide night showing his kids doing impressive things, but equally I’m delighted that Leonardo daVinci, took brush to canvas to describe the face of the *Mona Lisa* rather than making a note in his diary. Clearly there is a difference between these rhetoric modes and the ways in which one wields either the visual, spoken or written ‘faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.’\(^{26}\)

But, why do I care to highlight or acknowledge this difference? Why care about the
difference? Knowledge is knowledge is knowledge? Right? I think it is more complicated than that.

Fig. 9. Night Night Pretty (dir. S. Jackson, 2014) A young woman watches and thinks. But does the audience look and understand? Click on image to play.

Fig. 10. Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living (S. Jackson, 2017) Abe, the cat, wees and walks. Easy to see what’s happening but what does it mean? How does seeing translate to knowing?

American aphorist, Mason Cooley’s quip, ‘My thought has been shaped by books; my desires by pictures’ suggests (albeit delightfully) the presence of a hierarchy of reliability between pictures and words. Thought, an analogy for intelligence, desire, analogous with pleasure. As aphorisms so often do, it affords a sharp glimpse into assumed truth, or generally agreed cultural assumption, in this case, a general belief that pictures talk to our emotions but words
inform our ideas. If one wants to use images in an academic discipline to create and express meaning, this assumption is a roadblock to doing so successfully or being taken seriously for doing it.

MacDougall suggests, and I wholeheartedly agree, that if we are to crash through the barrier of this general assumption, and stop questioning the worthiness of images as conveyors of intelligent new thought and knowledge, we need to start developing a greater respect and conception of ‘how visual images create human knowledge in a world in which the value of seeing has often been eclipsed by words.’ And, that ‘in considering our use of images [to create or express new knowledge], it is no good to simply insist that we do a better job of adapting them to the rules of scholarly writing. This will only lead to bad compromises. If we are to gain new knowledge from using images, it will come in other forms and by different means.’
Fig. 11. *Donkey in a Lion’s Cage* (S. Jackson, 2013) What can a film see or understand of itself? A moment of ‘looking, and a moment of ‘understanding’ for both audience and character - literal and metaphoric. Click on image to play.

While MacDougall’s focus is on visual ethnography, the ideas are cogent across genres and visual forms. *Mon Oncle* taught me my first memorable lesson in visual agency and the specificity of visual knowledge. It demonstrated to me that pictures are knowing and inspire new understanding outside the capacities of language. At the tender age of seven I saw story, I didn’t translate it back to myself in language, I understood it because I saw it.

Of course, I heard it too. I am not hearing impaired, the cinema had a working sound system and the film is not silent, in any sense of the term. But the sounds and language, to me, were abstract by virtue of their ‘foreignness’ and design. Whether spoken or heard, it was musical in character, rather than linguistically specific.

Tati has long been lauded for the variety and interplay of his sounds. It has become a truism to speak of his arrangement of sounds as a kind of “musique concrete” …Tati’s sounds, through their repeated use, come alive and assume personalities. Inanimate
objects peep and swark at Tati’s confused humans, chiding them with humour and derisiveness.30

Of course, even if Mon Oncle had been silent in the conventional sense of the term, I would have heard it. The descriptor, silent film, is slippery at best (a notion I will address later, in more depth). But on this particular occasion, for this particular child (me), Mon Oncle was not a master class in sound – sync, spoken, ambient or otherwise. On this day, for this child, Mon Oncle and Granny Jackson encouraged a reverence for visual experience that lodged a burning curiosity in me. Unwittingly, I began my search, that day in the cinema, for those other forms and different means of knowing and understanding the visual. Without the language to name it or the knowledge to recognise it I started negotiating with the visual world to see what it could do, how it could help, what it knew, how it knew it and how I could know it too! At present, it demands I write and make silent films – that is my most present and cogent form and means of generating and sharing new understandings of visual agency and possibility.

Fig. 13. Donkey in a Lion’s Cage (S. Jackson, 2013) Tragedy, humour, clowns and animals. Tried and tested agents of collective visual knowledge and shared cultural story understanding. Click on image to play.
Independent American filmmaker, Kelly Reichardt, revealed a personal hierarchy concerning words and pictures in a public conversation with Grant Moninger in 2011. She suggested, in relation to filmmaking, that it is wise to remember, ‘The lies are in the dialogue. The truth is in the pictures.’ Another aphorism? Perhaps, but this time it plays for my team.

What is this *truth* Reichardt speaks of (not to mention the lies)? The comment is far from a factual issuing, rather it is a maker’s instinctual observation of the materials of her craft. As a teacher, she advises her students to focus on visual film making, and I suspect she uses the above catch cry to discourage their employment of expository dialogue to repair plot holes. But the attribution of language insinuating ethical judgment, *lies* and *truth*, to the actions of words and pictures, suggests that Reichardt believes the statement beyond its catchy quotability.

Reichardt’s statement is not an academic one. It expresses an instinctive, *makers* truth lodged
hard in the head, heart and hands of Reichardt. A fact discovered through film rather than about film. It is not a testable fact; it is a praxical discovery; something gleaned through the ‘logic of practice’ 32. These discoveries matter and the non-verifiable nature of their expression is important too. Because that is, to some extent, the point. Her making self knows it to be true. For Reichardt, pictures have authority. They are not emotion bubbles feeding only desire and pleasure; they are conveyors of truth and knowledge. She knows it. Her screen stories know it. And David MacDougall, it seems, agrees.

A filmmaker’s knowledge is often believed to lie in a film’s conclusions, expressed through a visual rhetoric that juxtaposes shots and scenes, or at a more general level explains behaviour through narratives of power, exchange, belief, and emotion. These are the “messages” that the film communicates. A kind of visual reasoning has taken place. Yet a filmmaker has seen and knows much more than can be communicated in this way. Is it possible to transmit this knowledge—which cannot be conceptualized—to others? 33

MacDougall continues by suggesting that:

In academic writing this question is generally dealt with by setting aside such knowledge as superfluous, or inaccessible, or outside the domain of the discipline or the problem at hand. But in films and photographs, it is far more difficult to cordon off statements about reality from the immediacy of the reality shown. The kinds of knowledge we gain from images and texts may have to be approached in quite different ways. 34

In Reichardt’s 2010 revisionist Western, *Meek’s Cutoff* 35 a very particular visual conversation unfolds between the filmmaker and the audience; a conversation that is both
narratively exacting and undeniably engages image, or visual encounters, to do the lion’s share of intellectual, critical and emotional talking. Reichardt’s cinema is a particularly striking flag-bearer for MacDougall’s idea, and additionally both (Reichardt and MacDougall) highlight the important distinction between ways of knowing about and the way of knowing through.

The film’s lead, Emily Tetherow (played by Michelle Williams), the matriarch of one of the film’s pioneering families, fires a warning shot from a rifle. The scenes narrative rigour and clarity is wholly due to Reichardt’s visual design and audacity. The films thematic concerns; cultural and personal isolation, fear of the unknown, physical punishment, anti-triumphalism and the erosion of traditional American values are all on display in this scene. We see, in this uninterrupted single take, what cannot be said, or perhaps that there is no need to say.

Reichardt’s trust in the physical and visual, rather than the verbal, to relay story, is breath taking.
Film critic and writer, Michael Smith, describes the austere but resonant aesthetic employed in this sequence thus:

Too many filmmakers would be tempted to compose these sequences out of multiple shots, most likely close-ups of the objects themselves, but Reichardt employs an economy that is precise and intelligent. Not only is this journey physically demanding, it requires considerable fortitude and patience. Her aesthetic is entirely in harmony with her subject matter.36

As a maker and writer, I aspire to employ Reichardt’s level of narrative physicality and visual story density. It is haunting.

As it is in Reichardt’s film, *Meek’s Cutoff*, both *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living* and *Donkey in a Lion’s Cage* examine the social constraints and physical struggle of a central female character. One of the women dies, the other survives. What could my audience understand of this survival and demise from what they saw? What could I *show* so they might *know*?
Fig. 16. Donkey in a Lion’s Cage (S. Jackson, 2013) A woman dies in front of us. No-one has made an effort to save her. A young girl has just stolen her shoes. Her silent death, her transition from life to afterlife, is almost invisible. It is our fault. We made no effort to save her. We see everything, we do nothing. ‘Seeing’ and ‘knowing’ can be a confronting business. [Click on image to play.]

She bleeds onto the dry ground. She lies with her legs twitching about, trying to escape the pain. Jean sees Robert intermittently through gaps in the fire wall. The horizon/fire wall is vertical and Robert stands off the earth sideways.

Ern comes running into Jean’s view. As he looms close, Robert’s body sharply takes flight and runs towards Jean also.

Ern attempts to lift Jean off the ground, but struggles with the weight. Robert arrives a moment later, in a state of possessed panic, scooping Jean off the ground.

One of Jean’s legs drags in the flames as Robert carries her out off the burning paddock. Her sandal smolders.

The flames continue burning against the night sky.

160  INT DISTRICT HOSPITAL WASTE ROOM NIGHT

A tiny wrapped corpse is thrown in a waste trolley.

Fig. 17. Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living. (S. Jackson, 2017). In order to survive Jean must endure Hell. Hell is what we see. Robert is less willing to see the truth. His test will come later.

This lesson – seeing as knowing – became the first principal in my silent filmmaker’s manifesto? A manifesto I was unaware I was writing. I was just making pictures. But the fatty lumps were feeding the two heads and a rich conversation was brewing.

Let’s call the manifesto, Dumbstruck.

DUMBSTRUCK – A Manifesto
The Principle/s:

1. SEEING AS KNOWING

Producer, actor, writer and all-round great mind in early cinema, Mary Pickford, mused on the refined and specialized nature of silent cinema, suggesting, ‘It would have been more logical if silent pictures had grown out of the talkies instead of the other way around.’ I was beginning to agree.

My love of paradox makes Pickford’s utterance an irresistible battle cry for Dumbstruck – my newly acquired and salient poster girl was describing something of my unfolding artistic reality? For me sound had given way to silence (or at least sync-less story) and it seemed logical. Visual rhetoric was driving my cinematic conversations and Pickford seemed sympathetic.

Pickford’s provocative sentiment was closely shared by her even more famous cinema colleague, Charlie Chaplin, who famously dismissed the arrival of sound as a novelty that wouldn’t last. ‘I give the talkies six months more. At the most a year. Then they’re done,’ was Chaplin’s 1929 dismissal, and Pickford’s further observation, while wittier, was no more prescient – ‘adding sound to movies would be like putting lipstick on the Venus de Milo.’

I don’t invoke these giants of silent cinema to snicker at their naivety or in an attempt to revive sympathy for their long subsumed cinematic styles. I am interested in something else – something that goes straight to the heart of this seeing as knowing business, and to test whether MacDougall’s idea that “encounter[s] with visual images demand[s] more of us than the mental facility … language has given us” has legs. Chaplin’s 1931 masterpiece, City Lights will be our testing ground, its final sequence our focus.
The final sequence of *City Lights* was described by influential American film critic and poet, James Agee, as ‘the highest moment in movies’.

Having been lauded up hill and down dale, film critic Zachary Wigon asks, ‘what is there left to be said about *City Lights*? Everything that can be written, it seems, has been written. The greatest ending in the history of cinema. Orson Welles’ favourite film. Chaplin's masterpiece.... And so on, and so on.’

But what about what can’t be said – the stuff that is beyond the capacity of language? How do we talk about that?

Peter Lord, founder of Aardman Studios, sensibly tackles this irony of communication with brevity.

I feel awkward talking about the final scene [of *City Lights*] because it’s just so perfect as it is, what does a comment add?

The slightly wordier Wigon concurs:

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*Fig. 18. (City Lights dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1931)* No words. Silence speaks. Click on image to play.
How much of a purpose can writing about the final scene of *City Lights* serve? It's so complex, yet it is so simple…When going through the reams of literature on *City Lights*, I couldn't help but feel as if some of the film’s magical essence had been infringed upon. Language is inadequate. Talk is cheap.45

I agree.

What appeals to me in the words of both Lord and Wigon is that neither indulge in the dull duel of sound v silence – they simply (and unusually) privilege *looking* over *talking* in order to properly acknowledge the extraordinary complexity of the picture play on display and its profound relationship with the creation of thought and understanding.

Neither Lord nor Wigon fall for what MacDougall, criticises in saying:

The way we use words all too often becomes a mistaken recipe for how we make, use, and understand visual images. By treating images – in paintings, photographs, and films – as a product of language, or even a language in themselves, we ally them to a concept of thought that neglects many of the ways in which they create our knowledge. It is important to recognise this, not in order to restrict images to nonlinguistic purposes – this merely subordinates them further to words – but in order to reexamine the relation between seeing, thinking, and knowing, and the complex nature of thought itself.46

In taking me to see *Mon Oncle*, my Grandmother had unlocked a door that many others would subsequently push open. A door from behind which a flood of idea about *seeing*, *thinking* and *knowing* would be unleashed. I am forever grateful.
That opening door also showed me something else - that an artwork was not a stable, consistent or defined object. It’s meaning could shift wildly and its formal resting place depended on the viewer. A sound film could be silent, a slow film could be fast, a maker’s thought could be lost, a viewer mood or need could change a comedy into a tragedy or vice versa. Art was not fixed, even after completion, it was fluid - a conversation between strangers without defined edges. Exciting indeed.
Lesson Two: Playing Catch

or

How I Learnt About the Disposition of Things

My Grandmother’s green grocer also juggled fruit (no wonder he liked Jacque Tati), and once tossed me an egg. Of course, I dropped it. He didn’t care. I did. I cried. He felt guilty and tried to comfort me and I felt guilty because I’d made him feel guilty and on the cycle went. Even as this was happening to my childhood body and brain, I knew it was important. I knew I was experiencing something that mattered. I didn’t know how or why, but it was big. I dropped something and it broke – a simple physical truth, but what a complex emotional ripple effect it had.

I realise now I was discovering, amongst other things, a great storytelling tool. Somewhere inside my bones I realised that the movement of story, both emotional and physical, could be manipulated by the disposition of people or things. Or perhaps, more specifically, the manipulation of their dispositions. A person or an egg or a handbag may have certain physical or mental dispositions or tendencies; the person may tend to tears, the egg to fragility, the bag to an extreme weight to strength ratio. The tendency of those things can, and does, directly affect the emotional and physical resonance of story. I also discovered the green grocer was a really nice guy even though his actions made me cry. Or did they? I’d claim they didn’t: it was the physical disposition of the egg that made me cry. Had he thrown an orange I would not have learnt the power of physical disposition; I would just have picked it up off the floor and said thank you.

Things or people may also have ‘latent’ dispositions or tendencies. A state just as
dramatically useful.

A glass sitting on a shelf is unlikely to shatter. Nothing has changed about the molecular make-up of the glass (its disposition remains the same): it is simply protected from falling by the shelf. In effect, it is waiting for circumstances, or an act of drama, either to reveal its true disposition or disguise them. It is this combination of known disposition and circumstances that provides drama with tension. A drunk teenager in a nightclub, a clutch purse concealing a hand gun, a wedding gown covering a pregnant belly. Latent disposition is subtext; a powerfully suggestive tool; an invisible layer of drama; a ticking bomb: a narrative gift.

How could these ideas, the disposition of objects (latent or manifest) and seeing as knowing talk to the screen? And more specifically what did they usefully suggest about writing and directing for the silent screen? How would the tale of the egg, the green grocer and Granny manifest for me as a maker?

Quoting film editor Dai Vaughan’s comfortingly honest comparison between life and film, ‘Film is about something, whereas reality is not.’ David MacDougall reiterates and continues the contrast thus,

…films and photographs remind us that in the end life is not ‘about’ something – life is not like that…Framing people, objects, and events with a camera is always ‘about’ something. It is a way of pointing out, of describing, of judging. It domesticates and organises vision. It both enlarges and diminishes…

The filmmaker in me wanted to make my childhood experience and subsequent lessons learnt
to be ‘about’ something, I wanted to enlarge them, frame them – I wanted to lift them out of
their ‘background and look at [them] more closely, as [I] might pick up a leaf in the forest.’

To do that I felt compelled to clear away anything that might muddy the waters – anything
that was a distraction from the things I had learnt. But what was it I had learnt? Not that eggs
break if you drop them (I knew that already), but rather that the emotional truth and
resonance of story is inextricably entwined in the physical nature of the world. I wanted to
see that. I wanted to share it. I had no interest in hearing it. Seeing became everything. I
harboured no dislike or distrust for dialogue or synchronous sound as story tools – they just
seemed a distraction from the main game, and as such they were the first things to go. As
MacDougall says, I was craving an ‘encounter with [the] visual’, and, for me, that manifest
as creating story with moving pictures that illustrated how it is that the essential nature of
things, their dispositions, can dictate or draw emotional states.

That’s all very well, but how does one embed an abstract idea, a metaphysical notion, into
story material and make it matter, in practice? You can’t just drop an egg and expect the
whole picture theatre audience will go gaga. They won’t. They’ll most likely yawn. Silence
held the key. It insisted I think about the physicality of human emotion; how could I
embodie it in a physical action? Not explain it, as I have done above, but embed it inside the actions of
a body.

In my first silent film, 1,2,3. the egg became a character named Frances, a new bride, who
has woken up alone in a vast and empty landscape. She thinks her husband, to whom she has
been married less than a day, has left her. She thinks she has been dropped.
Directing my actor to repeatedly fall, and then watching her character, Frances, collapse, physically and emotionally, over and over and over again, proved to be artistically and critically hypnotic. It went deep inside me as a maker and silently haunted my practice from that day forth. To me it was frightening and beautiful and anarchic and reflective and ugly and desperate and perfect in its physicality and silence. Those two words were the key – physicality and silence – that’s what I wanted to explore. A silent language of movement and physical disposition that created a story language that was emotionally specific but not burdened with plot detail. It was not dance but it was like dance. It was not sculpture but it was like sculpture. It was not poetry but it was like poetry. There was no choreography in the traditional sense. There were no three-dimensional artefacts to exhibit, and nothing rhymed. It was what it was, and what it was pleased me.

This first attempt at cinematically embedding ‘complex’ emotion into ‘plain’ physicality became my touchstone for future silent making and writing. In *EMRFSL* I found delight in
writing physical shapes and movement and activity. Love might be expressed in the peeling of an orange or the riding of a pony, despair in the accumulation of dust in a tea cup or the cutting off of one’s hair. Of course, that could be true of a film with sync sound and dialogue also. The difference being that when all you have to carve story with is physical shapes, tendencies or latent dispositions, you are not able to smooth or cajole meaning with a spoken aside or a procedural sentence. It is nakedly physical. There is no verbal frame, no distraction. In silent cinema, old or new, what you see dominates the story landscape, and because it is not a reflection of nature - after all we do talk and live in a world of relatively synchronist sounds - it has the air of the artificial, the staged, the deliberate. Every gesture a performer, or camera, or object makes is studied for clues, meaning, metaphor. I found myself in a new space where story lived in gesture and movement and disposition (latent or blatant). Rebecca Swender, a scholar of acting style and technology during the transition to sound, talks of fellow academic and film scholar, Roberta Pearson’s work describing a transitional period in silent film performance where she sees “a perceived dichotomy between two distinct styles of silent-film acting: The histrionic and verisimilar”. Both styles spoke to my new adventure into the physicality of story.

“Roberta Pearson has described silent-film acting of the 1910s as a transition from the former to the latter. According to Pearson, histrionic acting is a style dependent on posing. The actor utilizes a repertoire of conventional gestures executed in isolation. Each gesture is distinct and held for a length of time. Poses are struck and full body extension is executed. Histrionic acting is good for articulating narrative (ie., speakable) events; however it is inadequate for expressing character psychology (ie., Internal motivations).

The verisimilar code…has no lexicon and no repertoire of gestures from
which actors draw…Actors instead make more specialized and individual decisions about how to express emotion.”

Both styles, histrionic and verisimilar, offered me possibilities – I was already playing outside historical trends so fashion or public preference for one or other was immaterial. I would employ big and small, grand and subtle, contemporary and anachronistic.

_I, 2, 3._ was my first silent film, and reflecting back on it, I can see I was primarily, although unconsciously, testing the strength of my first two lessons: seeing as knowing and understanding the disposition of things. I was also toying with the possibilities of ‘silent’ performance and its emotional range.

_I, 2, 3._ also marked the first time I had gone into a film project, again, unconsciously, wanting to discover something about the very nature of making, and not just to get a story in the can. I realise now how pivotal that was for me as a filmmaker, or a maker of any kind. My brontosaur brains were gathering a whole lot of ‘praxical knowledge’ and feeding an insatiable hunger to more clearly understand the formal disposition of the kind of cinema I wanted to make.

The next film projects were _Donkey in a Lion’s Cage_ and _Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living_. A writing project and a making project. Both would be silent – I was smitten and literally struck dumb by the possibilities.
Because of a young soldier’s threats, a woman lies broken and dying. The soldier dances to avoid thinking about or taking responsibility. It is beautiful. On this occasion, he avoids ugly thoughts by manifesting his disposition. His disposition is avoidance. His movements carve story and emotional truth out of space.

Fig. 20. 1, 2, 3 (dir. S, Jackson. 2007) Because of a young soldier’s threats, a woman lies broken and dying. The soldier dances to avoid thinking about or taking responsibility. It is beautiful. On this occasion, he avoids ugly thoughts by manifesting his disposition. His disposition is avoidance. His movements carve story and emotional truth out of space. Click on image to play.

Fig. 21. Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living, (S, Jackson. 2017) Visual curiosity – the writer and audience still toying with ideas of possibility and hope. What are we seeing and what does it mean? What are Robert’s tendencies? How is Jean disposed? How will/are their tendencies and dispositions manifesting physically? Robert tastes soil. Jean watches. What are we to make of it?
The Dumbstruck manifesto had defined its second principle. A principle that acknowledged the importance of the disposition of people and things.

**DUMBSTRUCK—A Manifesto**

**The Principles:**

1. SEEING AS KNOWING
2. EMBRACE DISPOSITION

A list was forming.
Lesson 3:

Ditzy Solutions to Difficult Problems

or

The Trouble with The Talking Bits

You know there's many different languages, and one of them is film. Or painting. And a lot of it is done without words.  

– David Lynch

At the end of each academic year I sit on an interview panel to select film students for the following year’s intake. Every year the interviewees nervously offer up responses to the panels questions; questions about storytelling, cinema, screenwriter and directing. The answers to our questions come in all and any combinations of delightful, arrogant, knowledgeable, daft, nervous, sensible and humble.

In one particularly memorable interview, a young woman said something that will be forever inked in my personal lexicon. In response to the panel questioning a plot hole in her story pitch and asking what she might do to address this story confusion, she responded blithely, ‘Oh, easy-peasy, I could just add more talking bits.’ Dazzled by the speed and poise of her response I was compelled to asked her what those talking bits might have to say. She wrinkled her forehead, looked straight at me and replied, ‘They’ll say the bits you don’t get, so you get them.’ She clearly thought I was an idiot but what she didn’t realise was that I was absolutely captivated by her blazing honesty and inadvertent whistle blowing. She was on to something.

What she said is what many of us do – we patch story holes with talking bits. I’ve done it,
my favourite films have done it, and I’m sure anyone who cares to call his or herself a
screenwriter has done it. I, we, just have more sophisticated ways of justifying it, and hiding
it from ourselves. Or perhaps we’re just better at making it work. But screenwriting guru,
Robert McKee, and the great film director, John Carpenter, pair perfectly to remind us, that
expositional dialogue is for the birds.

Somehow we must lead the audience to interpret the inner life from outer behaviour
without loading the soundtrack with expositional narration or stuffing the mouths of
characters with self-explanatory dialogue. As John Carpenter said, “Movies are about
making mental things physical.”

I had already made 1, 2, 3. before the talking bits incident, so silence was already on my
cinematic dance card. But it was this strange and misshapen conversation that encouraged the
next phase.

British writer and academic, Marina Warner, in an essay on Jean Vigo’s 1934 masterpiece,
L’Atalante, talks of Vigo’s lithe and autonomous camera, one that captures ‘many
mysterious images, non-sequiturs, and peculiar moments.’ Warner argues that this freedom
enlarges the scope for emotional engagement by freeing up the audience’s ability, via Vigo’s
camera placement, to observe from anywhere. Warner suggests too that this freedom is rarely
on display in films today because of the ever-increasing desperation of filmmakers to achieve
‘narrative logic by keeping the camera in line with a character’s point of view in plodding
shots one way, followed by a reverse-angle shot the other.’ I agree. But, there is something
I’d add. I think the ever-increasing desperation manifests most commonly in two places,
camera placement (as Warner suggests) and in a reliance on language.
Cinema storytelling strives to achieve narrative coherence, and a good thing that is (sometimes). But, if screen storytelling prioritises, or just gently drift towards, vagueness, plot non-sequiturs, story peculiarity or plain weirdness, it is, more often than not, considered a less good thing. I don’t intend to enter into an argument about what constitutes good narrative coherence and what constitutes bad. Let’s just say there are differing degrees of narrative coherence to be found on cinema screens and my interest lies in the first-aid tools we most commonly use in comprehension triage.

Talking bits girl went straight for words to (ad)dress her story wound. And why not, it’s the easy-peasy option. But what if they, words, weren’t an option? What if we just took them off the gurney? Not because they are bad – they’re not. In fact, quite the opposite. They are tempting because we know how powerful, rich, sophisticated, subtle and right they can be. So right and powerful are words, and concepts (as described by words), that we oft times neglect other ways of knowing, of understanding, of comprehending. Visual imagery is one of those other ways. And let’s not forget that visual imagery doesn’t just show us what words tell us. Pictures are not simply a visual aid to words. As I argue in Lesson One and Two, visuals create human knowledge and they can be human knowledge. Pictures, without language, can stimulate knowing in their viewer. British screenwriter and novelist, William Boyd suggests that when one watches silent cinema ‘you discover that, quite unconsciously, a different set of mental gears has been engaged in your head -- you consume the film in a wholly different way and the experience is exhilarating.’ In sympathetic tandem with the idea of engaging ‘a different set of mental gears’ is the oft avant-garde notion that in order to discover something new, one may necessarily need to take something familiar away. Influential American film thinker and critic, Jonathan Rosenbaum, reflects this sentiment succinctly in his essay, Fill in the Blanks, on the deliberate exclusions found (or rather not
found) in the cinema of the late Iranian master, Abbas Kiarostami, situating Kiarostami’s pared
back cinematic language plumb in the centre of a rich, and radical, tradition:

…for them to offer us something new, it was necessary to take something away —
something familiar about storytelling that got in the way of fresh perceptions. If the
major additions to film art offered by Antonioni, Bresson, Godard, Rivette, and Tati —
as well as by Chantal Akerman, Carl Dreyer, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Abbas Kiarostami,
Andrei Tarkovsky, and Bela Tarr — are at times perceived as subtractions, this is
because we tend to bring old habits with us when we go to movies. New habits are
unlikely to be formed without some conflict…

To the great director, René Clair, cinema was a ‘medium of dreaming’ in which words did
not matter, only pictures. Spectators became dreamers, swept along by pictures. Clair made
great films, with words, and without, because his point was not that words were unnecessary,
rather, additional and certainly not essential to knowing. Vigo, and perhaps MacDougall,
would agree.

I’m no master like René Clair, but I am arrogant enough to believe I can learn from his
sentiments and utterances. If words didn’t matter to him, if they were not the be all and end
all of story meaning or nuance, then I would remove them from my work to figure out why.
This was the habit I would subtract in an attempt to gain fresh perceptions. And, as
previously suggested, I understand things best by touching them, by seeing them, by
manipulating them and by working them in material form. I felt certain that to understand
what words did do or didn’t do to cinematic form I would simply take them away. I would
ban words. This decision reminded me of the women in Aristophanes hilarious 411 BC
comedy, Lysistrata, who withhold sex from their warring husbands and lovers in an attempt
to force the men into negotiating peace to end the Peloponnesian War. Not a straightforward strategy, but one that certainly forced a reassessment of the assumed norm. Like Rosenbaum suggests, ‘new habits are unlikely to be formed without some conflict’.63

The Dumbstruck manifesto had written its third principle.

**DUMBSTRUCK – A Manifesto**

**The Principles:**

1. SEEING AS KNOWING
2. EMBRACE DISPOSITION
3. NO SYNC SOUND – DIALOGUE OR OTHER

If you have an artistic pulse, you are programmed to break rules. Principle 3, the NO SYNC SOUND – DIALOGUE OR OTHER rule, I would break (in tiny and tall ways) in all of the silent films I wrote or made, but the journey that bought me to imagine the importance of making without written or spoken language reshaped how I understood storytelling in fundamental and useful ways.

As suggested in Lesson One, I’m not breaking any secret covenant by admitting that silent film, as a descriptor, is something of a lie. For me and my films, it is certainly a relative term. Of course, none of the films from the classic silent film era were actually silent either. Most were soaked with orchestral scores and dramatic sounds that drew out all sorts of story nuances, details and emotions. Silent film is short hand, a notional cultural frame, a slippery artistic agreement. This exegesis is, in part, an attempt to define what the words means to me and the movies I make and write. I
blatantly employed a sync track in *Donkey in a Lion’s Cage* (see clip below) and the truth is I’m in a constant state of narrative and dramatic negotiation with picture and sound, despite my claims to pictorial privilege.
Writing, and then breaking rules, is the bread and butter of Danish filmmaker Lars Von Trier. In 2003, Von Trier put fellow Dutch filmmaker (and his former film teacher), Jørgen Leth, through an almost perverse game of reinvention and reassessment of his practice in a filmmaking experiment captured in the documentary, *The Five Obstructions.* Von Trier insisted Leth re-make his 1967 short film *The Perfect Human* with a variety of obstacles or restrictions to negotiate.

Von Trier mischievously states, early in the experiment, that Leth’s original film is ‘a little gem that we have to ruin,’ provocatively positing the anarchic wonder in breaking things in order to see how they work – or how they might work better, or differently, or even to see that they were, in fact, perfect as they were. Von Trier is a troublemaker (and thank God for...
that). Together with Leth, he reminds us never to assume mastery, not to rest on laurels, and to always remain mischievous, even irritating – reminiscent of Sendek’s ‘uncertainty’ perhaps, and his delight in ‘chasing riddles and dilemmas without answers.’

My self-imposed obstruction was not allowing audible words, language or text. In practice, this became no synchronous sound. This was not, as I’ve already suggest, because I thought it wasn’t a useful storytelling tool, but rather because I felt somehow compelled to get serious about exploring the image alone. I began my career as a visual artist (in the mostly mute mediums of painting and sculpture) and my experience told me that mute work could pack a real narrative punch (linear or otherwise). But how did that punch translate to the moving, electronic image? How could/would/did films communicate without talking or familiar natural sound? I wasn’t just making stories that happened not to focus on sound; I was consciously making pictures that removed it, in an age where high quality sound recording is a given, almost a cinch.

As a result, the creative production, the praxical learning, was certainly feeling more self-conscious. It was a reaction, a response to a critical question. And there was no doubt the conscious decision to restrict the practice in order to address a critical question made the work feel different. My way of making changed. The thinking aspect of the making was leading the practical aspect making. My brontosaurus brains would let my actual brain call some of the shots for a change.

The resulting works, Donkey in a Lion’s Cage and Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living, would be artefacts of critical thinking as much as creative doing. This was new for me. My practice became consciously led by my critical thinking. Or was it my practice getting all
haughty and leading my research? Which was it? If only my films could talk! Or, better still, think? If my hands think through the act of touching and making, then why would I assume film couldn’t do much the same thing?

Film academic, Allan J. Thomas, tackles this notion of the thinking film by considering the ideas of Heidegger and the intelligence of an octopus.

… when I go to the movies, my centre of action, of perception is taken from me and replaced with something alien. My perceptions, my point of view, my head is replaced by the point of view of the projector that sits behind me in the projection booth… It organises the world (the image) I experience through it…constructs a world it insists I live in, thinks a world for me. It cuts off my head and replaces it with its own.68

Thomas takes this one step further by suggesting:

“Isn’t this film thinking? Or film-thinking? As Heidegger pointed out, when we ponder what being itself is, we can only do so from our own position as beings ‘within’ being, necessarily inadequate to the task…film sees and knows a world we do not, and to lose one’s head at the cinema is thus to be, at the very least, exposed to thinking differently…. an article on cephalopod intelligence that ask[s] how we can judge if an octopus is ‘intelligent’ or not when the only standard we have is our own? What does ‘intelligent’ mean when a third of your brain is in your tentacles, when touch and smell are the same, when you can ‘see’ through your skin? Can we apply the same logic to the film? The cinematic apparatus of ‘thinking’ (of organisation of images) is not ours: the
disjunction of the point of view of the camera from that of the projector…is a formal principle of non-human thought.  

Fig. 24. 1, 2, 3. (dir. S. Jackson. 2007) For reasons I don’t fully understand, in all the silent films I have made, the central female character dies. I guess I kill them. In Donkey in a Lion’s Cage ‘The Woman’ throws herself out of a window rather than face the advances of an intruding soldier. I wonder what the films make of this - being conveyors of such unreasonable outcomes for women. If they think, with what do they generate thought? How might they comprehend morality and gender representation? Click on image to play.
Pictures (moving or still) seem to me to be the *octopus* in Western cultural hierarchies of concrete understanding because they don’t think or transfer knowledge in the same way as words. How could my *mute* cinematic worlds help me talk to that idea? How could I re-shuffle the hierarchy and be seen to be doing so? How could I take an axe to the expectations of my audience and show (rather than tell) them to look and therefore understand? To understand *through* seeing cinema the way an octopus sees *through* its skin? Watching people/characters talk, without hearing what they said, struck me as a simple way of doing just that. Highlighting, perversely perhaps, that the concrete understanding we expect to glean through words was off the table (inaudible). In my cinematic universe, words would be pictures too.

It’s one thing to watch characters who have no need to talk, moving about on the screen (whether the sound is obviously non-synchronous or not). It is quite another to watch them
talking, to themselves or others, but not be able to hear what they are saying.

Now, of course there’s nothing new in that. Watch almost any film pre-dating *The Jazz Singer* and you’ll see what happens when people talk but no sound comes out. People still make traditional silent films (occasionally) for contemporary commercial audiences (*The Artist*, a relatively recent example, even won a bunch of Academy Awards) where characters chat, sans audible words. But I’d argue that a number of factors mark these historical and contemporary examples as different. They occupy an entirely different critical and artistic space because silent pictures made in the early days of cinema were conceived and consumed under an entirely different set of technical rules and social assumptions. Synch sound was an impossibility, and the very technology of the cinema was so new that much enjoyment was derived from the novelty of just seeing flickering light transmit story of any kind.

An idea given shape by film academic, Teresa Rizzo, in her essay describing the influential ideas of cinema scholar Tom Gunning, who describes early cinema as *The Cinema of Attractions.*

The cinema of attractions was dominated by acts of display that manifested themselves through sudden burst of presentation such as a still shot of a train suddenly coming to life through movement and rushing forward. These acts of display produced a sense of immediacy and presence and therefore were highly affective and engaged the senses.

And for present-day viewers, of course, these same silent films (whether contemporary, historical, wonderful, awful, or anywhere in between) are viewed with the overlay of sentimentality that comes with distance and a longing for some imagined past. Film critic,
Roger Ebert’s, 2011 review of The Artist, highlights this point by describing the virtual impossibility of divorcing oneself from the charm of the anachronistic and quaint allure of historical transportation.

Is it possible to forget that "The Artist" is a silent film in black and white, and simply focus on it as a movie? No? I've seen "The Artist" three times, and each time it was applauded, perhaps because the audience was surprised at itself for liking it so much. It's good for holiday time, speaking to all ages in a universal language. Silent films can weave a unique enchantment. During a good one, I fall into a reverie, an encompassing absorption that drops me out of time.  

No one looks at my work with a winsome smile or a sentimental eye, and, why should they? I’m not making or writing love letters to the cinematic past. My artistic odysseys settle in a different place – a place where hands think and skin can see – where octopuses ride pillion on brontosaurus. In this place, my pictures think. In this place, my thinking can see.

Fig. 26. 1, 2, 3 (dir. S, Jackson. 2007) I asked my actor to learn Shakespeare's, "What a piece of work is man, How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, In form and moving how express and admirable, In action how like an Angel, In apprehension how like a god, The beauty of the world, The paragon of animals. And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?", speech from Hamlet. He did. Here is his delivery of that text. To de-text Shakespeare seemed a suitably perverse test of what happens to story when people talk but no one can hear them. A lack of science to the testing, perhaps, but the result was, to me, visual poetry. Click on image to play.
A small paddock by the side of the train is lit with colourful paper lanterns. Small tables and chairs line the fence rail. People dance. Mostly men with men. There are only three women to go round. Some of the men are dressed roughly as women.

Jean is dancing with Mr. Baker. Mr. Baker is a terrible dancer but makes a huge effort, his face is red with concentration. Jean giggles a little as Mary swings past in the arms of a stock hand. Both women are having a wonderful time.

Mr Ohno offers his hand to Sister Crock, who is sitting by the refreshment table. She resists strongly, shaking her head emphatically. Mr Ohno doesn't give up and Sister Crock, blushing a little, weakens and takes Mr Ohno's outstretched hand. Mr Ohno bows and leads her into the paddock.

Fig. 27. *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living* (S. Jackson. 2017) When ‘knowing’ what is said is more powerful than ‘hearing’ what is said. An ironic play on ‘silence’. On these two occasions ‘silence’ plays a double role – it is a way of both sharing and keeping a secret. Doubling the ‘silence’ of a whisper, while simultaneously amplifying it’s meaning.
Conclusion:

or

What Silence Knew

When something confuses, or intrigues me, my instinct is to tell a story about it. I tell these stories to myself and to others – on screens, in person and in writing. Stories make sense to me – they help me think and they help me understand. Irish novelist and educator, Colum McCann suggests that one should ‘write about that which you want to know. Better still, write towards that which you don’t know.’ This intelligent play, on the ever bandied advice write what you know, makes perfect, ironic sense to me. Stories (and telling them) help me work out what I know, allow me to share what I think and help me understand why I think it. Recently the screen stories I have told have been silent. Silence knew something that I didn’t, and telling silent screen stories, it seemed to me, might help me understand it too.

Silence it seemed, offered an opportunity to explore the physicality of story rather than bounding it in verbal rhetoric. What might it be like to explore cinematic story, and the knowledge carried within it, by prioritizing the visual over the textual or verbal, as the conveyor of that knowledge?

What was it to write ‘silence’, what was it to shoot ‘silence’ and what was it to critically consider ‘silence’. How might this anachronistic practice of silent filmmaking offer contemporary filmmakers and screenwriters new ways to imagine cinematic story space and foster different ways of knowing?

What did silence know?
There were some key people and ideas that helped me track down this thing that *silence knew*.

The first idea, both chronologically and critically, and perhaps the most important for me as a practitioner, came to me via Jacque Tati, Granny Jackson and a local green grocer. I *saw* story without the aid of written or spoken language. It was a revelation that took 30 years to process. Slowly and steadily I came to question our cultural proclivity to assume text and spoken or written language to be king in the jungle of knowledge and thought.

The ideas of filmmaker and academic, David MacDougall, helped me order my childhood storiescape into a structured idea by suggesting that images do not just help along the evolution of *other sorts of knowledge* – like ‘data from observations’ or secondary ‘instruments [to], rather than constituents of knowledge’\(^76\). They *are* knowledge. They *are* what we know or have known. It became clearer and clearer to me that images needed defending from this notion that they could be no more than a washy kind of implied knowledge, in need of appended writing or speech. I believe images constitute pure and complete thought, in and of themselves. Tati knew this in his bones. My films became visual thought experiments – employing my Grandmother’s ‘this is the greatest film ever made’ hypothesis as my working guide. Knowing would be in the seeing; understanding in the looking.

Barb Bolt’s argues ‘that art can be seen to emerge in the involvement with materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice. It is not just the representation of an already formed idea.’\(^77\)

I agree, and to prove it I dropped an egg. The egg was my material and it was through my
encounter with it that I understood something crucial about myself as a maker and how and what I wanted to make.

The egg (and the scenes and characters and story-thoughts that flowed from my experience of it) helped me see my films as a physical reflection of what I had learnt from material experience, not a product of the things I had been taught intellectually about film, but rather what I had learnt through film (and life and memory and things). My clearest understandings (artistic, critical, practical) come through involvement with the material reality of things and ideas. I must touch things to understand things. I must drop eggs.

This also taught me to look for the visceral in the emotional and intellectual. Posing the question, how could the physical and/or emotional disposition of an object or a person or even an idea be employed to tell screen story better? Silence insisted on getting in on this idea. It argued for the removal of synchronous sound so my stories could explore the purely physical side of understanding – a sort of cinema that might physically sculpt story either from revealing or concealing the disposition of people or things or ideas.

Silence was not essential to these ideas but it seemed sensible and logical, to clear the decks and get serious about focusing on ‘seeing’ the results of this way of thinking. Sound felt like a third wheel to this experiment in physical understanding. Whether this feeling was true or essential I’ll never really know. But synchronous sound was off the table, for better or for worse.

The highly regarded British psychotherapist, Adam Phillips, talks about his highly cognitive discipline as a kind of poetry.
I read psychoanalysis as poetry, so I don’t have to worry about whether it is true or even useful, but only whether it is haunting or moving or intriguing or amusing—whether it is something I can’t help but be interested in.\textsuperscript{78}

Silence was haunting me and, as a maker, it felt right to honour that. There was something else haunting me also, or rather, someone else: \textit{Talking bits} girl – my poster girl for silence. She represented the last nail in my coffin of doubt. I already believed that \textit{visual encounters} could equate to knowledge, and that a richer understanding of physicality and meaning was a good thing. \textit{Talking bits} was the final piece in the puzzle. Dialogue (or synchronous sound of any kind) was banned from my making. I would explore what was essential to cinematic storytelling by abandoning talking.

There was no science to these decisions. Neither was there a direct linear logic to how the ideas unfolded. Bits and pieces of thought and experience and making and feeling and delight and fear formed into an overwhelming need for silence in my practice. I was charmed by its possibilities, its \textit{lessons}.

There is a necessary naivety in makers, I believe. If everything made sense, there would be, after all, no need to make.

Peter Lord, describes the silent artistry of Charlie Chaplin as being ‘better than logic, because it’s charming.’\textsuperscript{79}

Enough said. Now, silence.
Jean enters the poultry car. The incubator lights bathe the carriage in a warm orange glow. Jean can see Mr Ohno crouched behind a patterned curtain roping off his bunk. She coughs to alert him of her presence.

He stands and holds back the curtain in a welcome gesture. Jean approaches. Ohno drops into a low bow.

There are two cushions laid out on the floor by the bunk. Between them is a tiny green porcelain tea pot sitting on a wire grill with a candle flickering underneath it. Ohno motions to a cushion while deftly lowering himself to the floor. Ohno politely looks away as Jean wraps her shirt to one side and makes an ungainly descent to her cushion.

Jean opens her mouth to speak. Mr Ohno looks up sharply and raises his finger in front of his mouth - abrupt but not impolite. Jean watches Mr Ohno prepare tea with great precision, despite the rocking of the train.

Jean copies his use of both hands to lift her bowl to drink.

They drink tea, silently.

Jean's skirt is pulled tight across her folded thighs. She drains her bowl as the train rounds a bend. They both lean sideways to maintain their balance.

Mr Ohno's clothes hang above them like apparitions.

He holds a small package wrapped in crimson silk.

He hands the vibrantly wrapped gift to Jean and bows with a polite melancholy.

Jean begins unwrapping. Mr Ohno puts his hand firmly over hers. She stops still. It is clearly meant for another time.

They sit, opposite one another, finishing their tea. Mr Ohno's hanging clothes swing gently with the movement of the train. The moment is perfect.
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