



Close to the Edit

The films of Nicolas Roeg by Richard Kovitch

‘The motion picture is still such a magical and mysterious combination of reality, art, science and the supernatural—as well as the gateway to the nature of Time, and perhaps even the first clue in solving the puzzle of what we’re doing here on this world.’ – Nicolas Roeg

Born the 15th August 1928, director Nicolas Roeg has been alive almost as long as cinema has mixed sound and vision to such hypnotic effect. His career began amidst the austere gloom of post-war Britain. ‘In those days getting a job at a studio was like getting a job in a factory,’ he notes in his memoir *The World Is Ever Changing*.¹ This was an era before film schools and theory influenced the medium. Work fixated upon the industrial; the application of machinery and technical knowledge to document stories. But it was from learning this trade, by immersing himself in the industry’s conventions, that Roeg would come to challenge the methods of working, and from there ‘the art grew.’

Roeg’s formative years were spent at De Lane Lea on Wardour Street before he moved to MGM at Borehamwood. He was originally a camera operator, then a focus puller, then cinematographer. He worked with the greats and observed them, always learning, always inquisitive. Roger Corman’s *Masque Of Red Death*, David Lean’s *Lawrence Of Arabia*, François Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451*—‘it was a magical time, mysterious’ and underlined to Roeg how much more there is

¹ Nicolas Roeg, *The World Is Ever Turning*, Faber & Faber, (2013)





to film than merely writing, theatre and photography. ‘Oscars are won with two or three shots,’ he told the *Guardian* in 2005.² It is emotion that burns on the memory: the human face, the panoramic view, the instant when image and sound combine to create moments of triumph or defeat. Roeg extrapolates on this: ‘An image makes more emotional sense than words because it helps the imagination on its way visually rather than just by interpretation.’ Films show, they don’t tell, even if—in the case of Roeg—what they show is elusive and illusory.

Roeg’s directing career began in 1968, when he made *Performance* alongside Donald Cammell. It is fitting that a film about the mutability of identity not only has two directors but that their collaboration was so total their influence is impossible to distinguish in the final cut. The film began with a script by the inexperienced Cammell, who sought Roeg’s expertise as co-director and camera operator. Cammell originally conceived *Performance* as a ‘light hearted romp.’ The final film was anything but. After exchanging ideas with actor/gangster David Litvinoff, the tone of Cammell’s script quickly darkened, as London’s street level blur between show business and crime found its voice. Roeg’s camera added a further layer of imagery that exploded colour and voyeurism in every direction. Much maligned upon its release by critics and the studio who financed it—Warner Bros presumed they were getting *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964), albeit with the Rolling Stones—the film’s release was delayed for over two

² Jason Wood, the *Guardian*, Friday 3 June 2005. Nicolas Roeg at Hay Film Festival transcript: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/jun/03/hayfilmfestival2005.hayfestival>



years as re-edits and law suits flew. Legend has it when the Warner Brothers executives finally saw it one of the wives in attendance ‘vomited in shock.’ It caused lead actor James Fox to walk out on his film career, propelled into Evangelical Christianity by a toxic mix of his father’s death, smoking the hallucinogen DMT and the stress of playing Chas. ‘*Performance* gave me doubts about my way of life,’ he noted ominously. For filmmakers it marked something equally as significant: the moment British film finally mirrored the dramatic social shifts of post-war culture. It was a frenzy of ideas; a kaleidoscopic vision of a culture in flux—a film about vice. And Versa.’ So radical was its impact that forty years later critic Mark Cousins would note in his acclaimed fifteen-hour documentary *The Story Of Film* (2012), ‘if any movie in the whole *Story of Film* should be compulsory viewing for film makers, maybe this is it.’

Part Artaudian identity crisis, part Borgesian psychosis, *Performance* also established the signature themes that would preoccupy Roeg for the rest of his career and liberate him from the lethargic thinking that had marked his formative years in the industry. Dread, sexuality, the uncanny, alienation and identity—all are explored in provocative fragments, then spliced together into a dream-like whole as coherent as it is elusive. Roeg felt he was emulating Max Ernst in this respect, creating ‘utterly strange things from the utterly familiar.’ Revisiting his work today, two things strike you. The first is his ability to elicit great performances from rock stars—Mick Jagger, David Bowie and Art Garfunkel. Few directors can claim casting a pop star was a great decision. Roeg can claim a hat trick. Second, that visually Roeg is one of cinema’s most



distinctive and original practitioners. His films operate as mosaics, elliptical and distorted, a series of crash zooms and crosscutting propelled by emotion and imagery, less linear storytelling and reason. All editors fragment time and space to propel a film's narrative, but most try to disguise it. Roeg does it explicitly to make a philosophical point.

Through the 1970s this approach to film would establish Roeg as one of Britain's greatest film makers. From *Performance* to *Eureka* (1983) he delivered a body of work that continues to mesmerise, even as its mysteries deepen. There is a curious British kink that pulses through Roeg's work. He likes to watch, not least his then real-life wife Theresa Russell, whom he has filmed countless explicit sex scenes with, with many different leading men. This perversity was there from the start; he took Jenny Agutter, star of TV's *The Railway Children* (1968), stripped her of her school uniform and filmed her swimming naked in the lagoons of the Australian outback. He filmed such an intimate sex scene with Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland in *Don't Look Now* (1973) that Christie's then lover Warren Beatty pressurised Warner Bros to cut the scene from the film.³ Suspicions that Christie and Sutherland had really fucked were encouraged by *Variety* editor Peter Bart, amplifying the rumour and elevating a bleak, occult thriller into a box office success. In *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (1976), Candy Clark (Roeg's then girlfriend) has alienating sex with David Bowie, before urinating on the floor when the Thin White Duke shape shifts before her eyes. In *Bad Timing* (1980)—'a terrifying love story'—Art Garfunkel fucks

³ Mark Sanderson, *Don't Look Now*, BFI Classics (2012)



Theresa Russell's recently deceased body in a desperate bid to possess her one last time. The impotent rage of Oliver Reed in *Castaway* (1985), the Oedipal incest at the heart of *Track 29* (1988), the earthy lust that drives *Puffball* (2007): sex and anxiety are regular bedfellows in Roeg's work, entangled but conjoined, as desperate as they are beautiful.

But as Roeg testifies in his memoir—itself shapeless, random, but always compelling—‘time’ has long been his greatest obsession. Its malleability hypnotises him. His moment of revelation that within the arts only film could truly explore this topic arrived when he was working with editor Anthony Gibbs on Richard Lester's *Petula* (1968), a dark, non-linear drama that saw Julie Christie and George C. Scott falling away from each other in Flower Power-era San Francisco. This non-linearity is the calling card of Roeg's subsequent films, the first of which, *Performance* and *Walkabout*, were cut by Gibbs. In his memoir, Roeg recalls his thrill at discovering the Editola—a primitive, reel-to-reel dubbing machinery—whilst working at De Lane Dea. It enabled him to play footage both forwards and backwards, even displace sound, and revealed how shifts in speed could alter ‘reality’. The experience expanded Roeg's thoughts dramatically on what a film might be: ‘I realised there was another way of telling stories, of passing on information—not on the page but through the retention of the image, the moving image.’ In *Walkabout*—marketed as ‘a place where time stands still’—two children (Jenny Agutter and Lucien John) find themselves disorientated by the infinite space that envelops them in the Australian outback after their father has committed suicide. The key image that expresses Roeg's obsession with time is



the scene in which the kangaroo is killed. As its body falls, the film reverses and it is seemingly brought back to life. ‘We were showing what’s going on in the imagination,’ explains Roeg. Gibbs went on to edit *Performance* and *Walkabout*. The language of cinema had taken another great step.

Roeg’s preoccupation with the editor is worth emphasising in an era where the credit for film still remains unjustly carved up between the director, performer and writer. If you remain unconvinced of the relatively low esteem the editor is held in by the wider public, then consider how many famous editors you can actually name. A movie fan might muster Walter Murch, Thelma Schoonmaker and Dede Allen; the wider public would have drawn a blank long before. And yet the editor is arguably as crucial to shaping the film the audience will encounter as even the director. To understand the editing process is to understand what distinguishes film from all other art forms. It is also key to understanding Roeg’s work.

‘The notion of directing a film is the invention of critics - the whole eloquence of cinema is achieved in the editing room.’ – Walter Murch⁴

The history of ideas are difficult to trace, but Roeg’s signature, non-sequential editing style—most brilliantly expressed in the sex scene with Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie in *Don’t Look Now*—has its origins in productions that Roeg was involved in prior to his directing career, not least the films of Richard Lester, edited by Antony Gibbs. Gibbs

⁴ Walter Murch, *In The Blink Of An Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing* (2001)



delivered the original edit of *Performance* in 1968; the version finally released was re-cut in L.A. over the following two years by Donald Cammell with editor Frank Mazzola, who was responsible for the film's highly revered opening sequence. What this serves to illustrate is how collaborative the making of a film is and how quickly radical new ideas can take hold and spread. Indeed, late 60s Hollywood sees a proliferation of this rapid cut style in several key films —Dede Allen's work in *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967), Lou Lomabardo's work in *The Wild Bunch* (1969), Donn Cambern's work in *Easy Rider* (1969)—as the radical style of Godard and *La Nouvelle Vague* finally infiltrated the cutting rooms of Hollywood, though as Dede Allen illuminates, all these techniques had originally been pioneered in the 1920s by Russian filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov and Vsevolod Pudovkin.

Roeg's celebration of the editor as a lynchpin of the cinematic process not only sends praise to a much under sung profession, but it also helps us to understand what a film really is. Stanley Kubrick cited editing as being the only craft exclusive to filmmaking: 'I love editing. I think I like it more than any other phase of filmmaking. If I wanted to be frivolous, I might say that everything that precedes editing is merely a way of producing film to edit.' For anyone who has ever inhabited an edit suite for a prolonged period of time, Kubrick's assertions will strike a chord. It is a womb-like environment, isolated from the chaos of everyday life, where craft and technology can transform incoherent, disconnected images and sounds into a dream-like whole, capable of conveying both intense emotion and meaning. How the editor interacts with the material is open to differing



practice.⁵ Some editors disregard the script after a preliminary read and try and make sense of the story from the rushes alone. Others have been on set and taken notes. Most begin editing the film long before the director has finished shooting, shaping it in solitude far removed from the wider mayhem of the production. This is why coverage—the amount of footage there is to work with in the edit—is a key obsession of directors and editors alike.⁶ Without coverage, they limit the options in the edit. Roeg reiterates this point, ‘Shoot a lot. Never say ‘cut’. In the edit you can live the film again.’

‘Scripts are very curious things. I mean, they very rarely—I can’t stress this enough—reflect what is the final movie. You can’t see the beauty on the page.’ –
Nicolas Roeg

If the editor of the film ultimately controls the story, where does that leave the writer? There are still major misunderstandings about what a screenplay is, which is why so many problems arise in assessing its importance to the final film. As Colin MacCabe notes,⁷ a screenplay’s definition remains ‘bizarre and elusive,’ and there is still no agreed format it should take. Significantly, the function of a screenplay mutates depending

5 *The Cutting Edge: The Magic of Movie Editing* (2004) (98 min), dir. Wendy Apple

6 Film Editing: Jarrod Walker takes us round the mind of a film editor: <http://www.closeupfilm.com/features/filmmaking/filmediting.htm>

7 Donald Cammell, edited by Colin MacCabe, *Performance*, Faber & Faber (2001)



upon who is reading it. For the financiers at the studio, it is an outline of what the film can potentially be and whether it can be marketed (this is why studios now prefer two-page treatments followed by a forty-five to sixty word ‘scriptment’ as it minimises read time). For the actors it gives them lines to say and intimates emotions to convey (although dialogue and actions will ultimately be finalised in performance). For the director it’s a list of scenes to film (though as Roeg notes there are so many variables during production much of what is shot will be spontaneous). This is why Roeg refuses to storyboard, because he does not want to circumnavigate chance. Mistakes are honoured as hidden intentions. Indeed, it is worth remembering that many of cinema’s greatest moments—‘You talkin’ to me,’ ‘We’re going to need a bigger boat,’ Indiana Jones shooting the swordsmen, ‘I’ll have what she’s having’ etc—weren’t scripted and materialised through performance. For this reason Roeg warns against making the screenplay too complete in case ‘there’s no room for anyone else.’

There are also the enduring myths that a bad screenplay will automatically make a bad film. Harrison Ford may have lamented of the *Star Wars* screenplay ‘you can type this shit, but you sure can’t say it’ but the film’s visuals enabled it to transcend any literary shortcomings that were on the page. That a great screenplay will make a great film is another perception, yet Cormac McCarthy’s revered screenplay for *The Counsellor* (2013) has somehow resulted in ‘the worst film ever made,’ according to several critics. And we are still led to believe by the screenwriting industry that a screenplay provides the film’s structure. Yet Quentin Tarantino’s full



script for *Django Unchained* (2013) ran to a rambling five and a half hours coverage, where as the final film—still arguably thirty minutes too long—had been edited down to just two and a half hours. Screenplays change explains Roeg because ‘life changes, locations change, everything changes—dictated by the money and the finance.’

Still, Roeg has worked with many great writers and cherishes their contributions to his work. No wonder. It is an extraordinary list that includes Edward Bond, Daphne Du Maurier, Paul Mayersberg, Dennis Potter, Roald Dahl, Joseph Conrad, Edgar Allen Poe and Fay Weldon. Bond believes his screenplay for *Walkabout* remains ‘the best thing I’ve done.’ That it amounted to fourteen pages of notes—just vivid descriptions of scenes—adds further irony. Inevitably, Twentieth Century Fox were unimpressed with this and demanded embellishment. To secure financing Roeg reluctantly expanded the notes to about fifty pages. The truth is the film really began when the cameras started to roll in the Australian outback. ‘We found the film as we made it,’ Roeg later reflected. This is really how a film materialises. When movies are successful the director transcends the writer’s presence (*Walkabout*, *Don’t Look Now*), when they’re less successful the writer’s hand stays present (Dennis Potter’s screenplay for *Track 29*). Film ultimately remains a director’s medium, irrespective of the extent to which the director must collaborate to achieve their vision. If there is no governing vision, the film will fail to impose itself. As writer Ian McEwan once lamented, fed up with the lack of influence a writer could exert on a film production, a screenplay is ‘at best a recipe. The cooking really begins with the filming and editing.’



With all this mutability in mind, it is no wonder screenwriters often feel marginalised from the process. They know that whoever edits the film ultimately controls the film. The writer is at the wrong end of the production line. Similarly, actors know that an editor can build a performance. Early test screenings for *Basic Instinct* (1992) rejected Sharon Stone's delivery as hammy; after re-cuts test audiences declared her a star. An actor may assume 'take 5' was their best take and the one selected for inclusion. The editor will know the final scene was actually amalgamated from every take, trimming the best bits from the coverage and stitching them together anew. When to cut is as vital as when not to cut. Individual frames take on the importance of musical notes. Editing is a process of composition. The final film should flow like a symphony, not divide into chapters like a novel. This has always been Roeg's approach and he cannot state the point enough. 'Film has nothing to do with theatre because the theatre is driven by language—but film is not driven by language, it's driven by image. Images drive the plot, images drive the action. Words cover up a lot of embarrassment, truths, inner thoughts, all kinds of things - but cinema works in a completely different way. Our stories move forwards on a lateral not a linear fashion.'

'No one sums up the decline of British cinema better than Nicolas Roeg—from *Performance* to Guy Ritchie.'
— Mark Fisher.⁸

⁸ 'You Remind Me of Gold: Dialogue with Simon Reynolds,' (Originally published in *Kaleidoscope* magazine, 2010): <http://markfisherreblog.tumblr.com/post/32185314385/you-remind-me-of-gold-dialogue-with-simon-reynolds>



In his later years, Roeg's career lost its momentum; it is no coincidence that this was after *Heaven's Gate* (1980) nearly bankrupted United Artists, ushering in a period when the studios re-instated their tight control on the process. Accountants and focus groups accrued greater power. The marketing spend increased. The movie poster became as important as the film it was promoting. Roeg continued to work but his obsessions were checked, even if the themes were retained. The explicit eroticism of *Hotel Paradise* (1995) (which contains the line, 'You did not fuck a swan—but you sure came close'), the unearthly drift of *The Sound Of Claudia Schiffer* (2005), the unsettling experimentalism of *Puffball*, much maligned by critics yet packing images so powerful they are impossible to erase (not least the explosion of sperm into Kelly Reilly's womb at the climax of an explicit sex scene). This desire to dwell on the essence of things suggests Roeg was a frontrunner of filmmakers such as David Lynch, David Cronenberg and Gaspar Noé, men fixated with the very pulse of existence, even as his early lead was pegged back by more restrained, later work (*Castaway*, *The Witches* (1990), *Cold Heaven* (1991)).

Yet Roeg's influence still serves as a gateway to understanding the present. In the internet age, we increasingly perceive culture to be non-linear. As the critic Simon Reynolds has observed, this is 'a world of flattened out temporality.' Everything is present all of the time. New art is presented alongside old art. We look backwards and forwards simultaneously. For modernists this shift in perception presents a challenge; the visible state of progress they demand of culture—of rejecting the old in the quest for the new—





has collapsed in on itself. Everything is consumed laterally. Any sense of teleology has been obfuscated. Everyone is an editor now. The experience of communication on-line is not dissimilar to the cross-cutting that defines Roeg's best films; they pre-empt this way of seeing, preparing us for the here and now by presenting information all at once, rather than unfolding it sequentially. These flash frames and bursts of data evoke the way information is presented on-line—one hundred and forty characters or less, six second Vines, endless Tumblrs that stockpile image after image after image without chronology or clear links—yet these are all traits that dominate the unfolding chaos of Roeg's greatest work.

No wonder then, among contemporary filmmakers, his work continues to resonate and inspire. He remains a pioneer who imposed upon cinema a distinct, new way of seeing. As Roeg once explained to a Studio Executive who feared the audience would be confused, 'They won't get it, Nic.' 'No, they'll get it; it's you who's not getting it, because you're trying to force something that's different into being the same.' Being the same is not something Nicolas Roeg could ever be accused of and therein lies his greatness. He is a different type of film maker, but one who makes more sense now than at any time in his long career.

