How I Make Films: An Interview with John Huston

Meeting John Huston in Rome, where he was shooting The Bible, turned out to be easier than meeting any other director I had ever interviewed. The day after I moved into a new apartment in Rome, people began calling me on the phone and asking for Huston. It turned out that I had accidentally moved into the apartment that he had vacated when he went to Egypt to shoot exteriors. I called up the studio and said I had some messages for Mr. Huston. He invited me out to the set to watch him shoot the sequence of Noah’s Ark.

The De Laurentiis studios are the biggest in Europe today, and they are brand new. When I got there, I found myself in the center of a circus—a typical travelling circus with caravans and cage carts, with animal noises and smells all around, and with a whole stationary zoo that had been constructed near the studios to supply the 200 land animals and 1,000 birds that were participating in the shooting of the ark sequence. The ark itself was inescapable—it wasn’t just there once, but five times, in various sizes and in various stages of completion. Huston—who had less time than Noah—needed five arks to shoot the various stages of development of the vessel and in order to be able to shoot interiors or exteriors at will in any kind of weather.

Our actual meeting took place at the enclosure of the hippopotamus. Huston himself plays Noah in this sequence, and he was busy trying to convince the hippo to follow the requirements of the script. For an entire morning, while the cameras turned, the lights blazed, and Huston in his sackcloth costume endlessly repeated his biblical words, the animal refused to cooperate. Finally, in exasperation, Huston said to me: Let’s give the poor beast a rest. What was it that you wanted to talk to me about?

And so right there, among the giraffes and the peacocks, the lions and the Himalayan goats, I asked Huston how he made films.

Bachmann: I think this is one of those rare times when I can start an interview [for radio use also] without any introductions. You’re the kind of person who creates around him not only the normal fame as a director of the kind of films everybody has seen, but also a kind of personal aura, a sort of romantic halo, which means that you are as known as your work, and I don’t have to go into a lot of explication remarks. And in any case, all I am interested in at this time, is how you make films.

Huston: I wish you had a better reason for omitting the introductions. On the other hand I am really happy that you go straight to the heart of the matter. This also corresponds to my method of working—it never seems to me that my films start with much preparation. In fact, I often get the feeling that my films make themselves. By this I don’t mean that I don’t take part in the production process, but very often I couldn’t tell you exactly how ideas start to crystallize. For example, I never start off by saying “I’m going to make a specific film,” but some idea, some novel, some play suggests itself—very often it’s something I read 25 or 30 years ago, or when I was a child, and have played around with in my thoughts for a long time. That was the case with pictures like Moby Dick, The Red Badge of Courage, and several others. Suddenly, surprisingly, I discover that I am actually making it. There’s a film that I am going to make after I finish The Bible that has the same background: The Man Who Would Be King, the Kipling story. The first script on this film was written about ten years ago, but it was based on my reading of the story at age 12 or
I'll have to tell you that, in the first 15, and my impressions of it, that have remained with me. Most of the time my pictures begin with this kind of inbred idea, something that lives in me from long ago. Sometimes it's more erratic, though, someone has a picture they want you to make and if you think it's good enough to take a shot at, you step in as a sort of surgeon or practitioner. The only safe thing I can say is that there are no rules.

**How does the script get written? Do you do it alone? And how long does it take you?**

Again, there are no rules. I've written scripts and made pictures out of them in two weeks. At other times I've worked a year and a half just on a script. The Maltese Falcon was done in a very short time, because it was based on a very fine book and there was very little for me to invent. It was a matter of sticking to the ideas of the book, of making a film out of a book. On Treasure of Sierra Madre, I wrote the script in about 3-4 months, but I had had quite a long time to think about it before. The actual making of the film didn’t take very long, but I had had the idea of making it since before the war. It was the first film I made after the war.

**You wrote that one alone, and got an Oscar for writing it. But don’t you sometimes write together with other people? Or, when other people write for you, do you take a very active part or do you leave them pretty much alone?**

When I do not write alone—and of course you must remember that I began my film career as a writer, not as a director—I work very closely with the writer. Almost always I share in the writing. The writer will do a scene and then I’ll work it over, or I’ll write a scene and then the other writer will make adjustments later. Often we trade scenes back and forth until we’re both satisfied.

**You don’t like to work with more than one other writer?**

Not really. But sometimes other people make additions. For example, the writer of a play or a book on which I am basing a film. Tennessee Williams, for example, came and worked with Anthony Vay and myself on the script for Night of the Iguana. He didn’t come there to write, but once he was there he did do some writing, and actually he did some rather important writing for the film. But such cases are the exception.

**Could you put into words some principles you employ in order to put ideas into film form? Do you feel there are any rules a writer for the cinema must follow?**

Each idea calls for a different treatment, really. I am not aware of any ready formula, except the obvious one that films fall into a certain number of scenes, and that you have to pay attention to certain limitations that have to do with time, according to subject. Depending on what you are writing about, you have to decide the time balance between words and action. It seems to me, for example, that the word contains as much action as a purely visual scene, and that dialogue should have as much action in it as physical motion. The sense of activity that your audience gets is derived equally from what they see and from what they hear. The fascination, the attention of the man who looks at what you have put together, must be for the thoughts as much as for the happenings in your film. In fact, when I write I can’t really separate the words from the actions. The final action—the combined activity of the film, the sum of the words and the visuals—is really going on only in the mind of the beholder. So in writing I have to convey a sense of overall progression with all the means at my command: words and images and sounds and everything else that makes film.

**This brings up one of the basic questions about films that adapt literary works: in a book there are many things that you can’t see or hear, but which in reading you translate directly into your own, interior images and feelings. Emotions that are created in you neither through dialogue nor action. How do you get these into film? The monologues from Moby Dick, for example?**

Well, first of all, I try to beware of literal transfers to film of what a writer has created initially for a different form. Instead I try to penetrate first to the basic idea of the book or the play, and then work with those ideas in cinematic terms. For example, to see what Mel-
ville wanted to say in the dialogues, what emotions he wanted to convey. I always thought *Moby Dick* was a great blasphemy. Here was a man who shook his fist at God. The thematic line in *Moby Dick* seemed to me, always—"to have been: who's to judge when the judge himself is dragged before the bar? Who's to condemn, but he, Ahab! This was, to me, the point at which I tried to aim the whole picture, because I think that's what Melville was essentially concerned with, and this is, at the same time, the point that makes *Moby Dick* so extremely timely in our age. And if I may be allowed the side-observation: I don't think any of the critics who wrote about the film ever mentioned this.

I suppose you are speaking about the problem of taking personal responsibility in an age where the group has largely attempted to make decisions for the individual. This is an interpretation of Melville; or perhaps I should say ONE interpretation of Melville and so in the attempt to understand the basic idea of a work (in order to translate those ideas into film) you are really doing more than that: you add your own interpretation, you don't just put into images what the original author wanted to say.

I don't think we can avoid interpretation. Even just pointing a camera at a certain reality means an interpretation of that reality. By the same token, I don't seek to interpret, to put my own stamp on the material. I try to be as faithful to the original material as I can. This applies equally to Melville as it applies to the Bible, for example. In fact, it's the fascination that I feel for the original that makes me want to make it into a film.

What about original material, where you are not adapting a play or a book? Are there any ideas of yours, basic ideas, which you try to express in your work? Do you feel that there is a continuity in your work in terms of a consistent ideology? In short, do you feel you are trying to say something coherent to mankind?

There probably is. I am not consciously aware of anything. But even the choice of material indicates a preference, a turn of mind. You could draw a portrait of a mind through that mind's preferences.

Well, let me do that for a minute, and see if what I see as a unifying idea in your work is indeed a coherent feeling on your part. I see that in your films there is always a man pitched against odds, an individual who seeks to retain a sense of his own individuality in the face of a culture that surrounds and tends to submerge him. I would call the style of your films the style of the frontier, or what the frontier has come to symbolize in American culture: a sense of rebellion against being put into a system, into a form of life and into a mode of thinking rigidly decided by others.

Yes, I think there is something there. I do come from a frontier background. My people were that. And I always feel constrained in the presence of too many rules, severe rules; they distress me. I like the sense of freedom. I don't particularly seek that ultimate freedom of the anarchist, but I'm impatient of rules that result from prejudice.

In any case, you believe that at the basis of every film of yours there is a basic idea, whether an idea of yours or one of another author. But how do you proceed to put that idea into film form? In writing, what do you do first, for example?

I don't envisage the whole thing at the beginning. I go a little bit at a time, always asking myself whether I am on the track of the basic thought. Within that, I try to make each scene as good as I can. This applies both to the writing and to the directing—to the whole process of preparation and production, in fact—which are only extensions of the process of writing. It's hard to break down into details.

Do you mean to say that you do not write the whole script in the beginning?

Oh yes, oh sure. I am speaking about the making of the film. I try to make it in sequence as much as possible, to develop the making of the film along with the development of the story within the film. I try, for example, to give my actors a sense of development not only within the troupe, but also a sense of development within the story of the film. And I improvise if necessary. This is not a luxury; when one shoots
as much on location as I do, improvisation is a necessity. Everything that happens in the process of making the film can contribute to the development of that film’s story. But of course one always tries to remain within the bounds of the controllable as much as one can, to stay within the bounds of the script. But one must be open to take advantage of the terrain, of the things that the setting can give you.

Do you write your scripts with the idea of change and improvisation already in mind?

Improvisation is used more today than it used to be. Partly this is caused by a new, less rigid approach to film-making, and also partly by the decentralization of the production process. Actors have become producers, they have commitments of conflicting sorts, and it is no longer possible to prepare a script in great detail in a major studio set-up, and then call in your contract actors, whose time you control completely, and make the film in exact accordance to plan. It has simply become essential today to be more flexible, to adjust to new conditions, both practical and aesthetic.

Do you see this as a positive or a negative development?

It has certainly helped some directors to come into their own, people who could never have succeeded under the old, less independent system. Some French and Italian directors—Fellini in the vanguard—have found it possible to tell much more subjective stories, often their own, in a valid cinematographic way. Like 8½ for example.

What is the technical process of your script-writing?

I usually write in longhand first, and then dictate a later version. I use a standard script form: action on the left and dialogue on the right. When it’s finished it’s mimeographed and distributed to the people who need to see it. I often change again later. Sometimes I finish the final version on the set itself, or change again something I’ve written as a final version the day before. Mostly these changes come to me when I hear the words first spoken by an actor. It’s always different once it comes out of a living person’s mouth. By this I do not mean that I try to adjust to an actor’s personality—I try to do that as little as possible. When I write, I don’t have in mind an actor, but a character. I don’t conceive this character with a specific star in my mind. I guess what I am trying to do with this constant changing, is to try to put to work more than my own imagination, or at least allow my imagination the liberty of play, the liberty of coming out of its cage—which is me, my body, when I am alone and writing—and in this way it begins to live and to flower and gives me better service than when I put it to work abstractly, alone, in a room with paper and pencil, without the living presence of the material. Then, when the character has been born out of this extended imagination, I have to look for someone to play the role, and this someone isn’t always necessarily the person who I thought could play it originally, because often it no longer is the same character. In fact, I’ve often—at least, sometimes—delayed the making of a film because I couldn’t find anybody to play the new and adjusted character that I had finally arrived at construing. Although in my experience you usually find someone; there are enough good actors if you are willing to wait a little.

Is it possible for you to tell how much of your writing comes from inside you, at the start, and how much is written in adjustment to a situation or to hearing your words spoken? And do you also adjust to location, for example? I mean, when you write about Sodom, do you write for Vesuvius, for the landscape where you decided to shoot those sequences?

It’s the same thing as trying to interpret Melville. You write for an ideal. Then when you make the film, you try to live up to that ideal. Casting, locating, shooting: you try to stick to what you start with. Sometimes there are problems when the material changes in my hands, sometimes I have even miscast my own films. But generally these adjustment problems can be overcome. I’ve been pretty lucky that way. In fact, I can usually do pretty much exactly what I set out to do. I’ve been lucky.

Is that what gives you this tremendous peace that you seem to have on the set? I have watched
perhaps a hundred directors shooting, and nobody is as calm. And you have this kooky set: this silly ark with all these animals, peacocks flying among the long necks of giraffes, hippos who refuse to act the scenes written for them, a hundred breakdowns a day with technical things caused by the animals, and you just stride through the whole thing in your Noah costume, feeding the giraffes, smiling and taking it easy...

I am astonished myself. And I marvel at the patience of everybody, especially the animals, who are among the best actors I've ever worked with...

All typecast, too... But, is that an answer?

In a way, yes. You see, in working with actors, I try to direct as little as possible. The more one directs, the more there is a tendency to monotony. If one is telling each person what to do, one ends up with a host of little replicas of oneself. So, when I start a scene, I always let the actor show me for the start how he imagines the scene himself. This applies not only to actors; as I tried to indicate before, I try to let the whole thing work on me, show me. The actors, the set, the location, the sounds, all help to show me what the correct movement could be. So what I said about the animals wasn't only a joke. Because, you see, the animals have one great advantage as actors: they know exactly what they want to do, no self-doubts, no hesitations. If you watch them, quite extraordinary opportunities present themselves. but you must see them. Here in the Noah's Ark sequence of The Bible this has happened a number of times. Animals do remarkable things. The hippo opened his mouth and let me pet him inside.

Is that when you wrote the line, which you say to Noah's wife at that point: "There is no evil in him, wife. Do not fear him!"

Exactly. And very fine actors are as much themselves as animals are. I would rather have someone whose personality lends itself to the role than a good actor who can simulate the illusion of being the character. I do not like to see the mechanics of acting. The best you can get, of course, is when the personality lends itself exquisitely to the part and when that personality has the added attribute of being technically a fine actor so he can control his performance. That is the ideal.

What do you consider to be the attributes of a fine actor?

The shading he can give a line, his timing, his control, his knowledge of the camera, his relationship to the camera—of course, I'm talking about film acting.

What should an actor's relationship to the camera be?

He must have an awareness of the size of his gesture, his motion, in relation to the size that his image will be on the screen. It isn't absolutely an essential quality, but it is very useful. I don't mean that I tell him the focal length of the lens I'm using and expect him to adapt himself accordingly, but a good actor has an almost instinctual awareness of these things. When an actor comes from the stage, he usually has to make adjustments of this kind. He doesn't need to project, he doesn't need to make his voice heard over a distance. He can speak very quietly. He can be more economical in every way before the camera than he could be on stage. And he can work with the small details of his face.

Does a good actor, one with all the best technical attributes, make a star?

Oh, no. One doesn't have much to do with the other. Of course, the star must know how to act, and a good actor can become a star, but what a star really is, is hard to describe. There are many fine and beautiful actors who would never be stars. I don't think that's a lack in their personalities, because it's beyond that—something very mysterious happens. Some personalities seem to take on another dimension on the screen. They become bigger than life. When that happens, there is a star. Some stars are not good actors, but a lot of good actors aren't stars.

Can you recognize this star quality when you meet a person, or do you have to see the person on the screen first?

I recognize it more or less. For instance, I had Marilyn Monroe in her first real film role
[in *The Asphalt Jungle*] and I can’t claim to have had any notion of where she was headed, but I could feel that she was going to be good in this film and I chose her over a number of others. But still I didn’t dream of the places she would go.

*How did you meet her?*

She was brought in by an agent in Hollywood.

*Did you have one of those ideal characters ready in mind when you saw her?*

Yes, and she was it. I guess it was an interesting moment, but I didn’t know it at the time.

*How do you—even more or less—recognize the star quality?*

In certain instances, it stands out all over the individual, just as it stands out in certain horses now and then. You look at an animal and you know it is top class. It’s the same with certain persons—with an Ava Gardner, with a Humphrey Bogart, with a Katherine Hepburn. There’s no mistaking that quality when you see it any more than there is a chance of mistaking the looks of a great horse in the paddock. It’s hard to put in other words, and it varies from person to person.

*In any case, you are speaking of something that isn’t just a flamboyance of bearing?*

On the contrary. Flamboyance is something that people assume when they feel a lack of structure in their own characters. But this, too, is not invariably the case. I’ve known some flamboyant people who were extraordinary too. Flamboyance is all right when it is a natural expression of something that is really that person. It’s like every other characteristic that a person has: it’s good only if it’s real. I don’t like it if people put on false surfaces, and I think by now I can tell when they do. And it always works against my choosing a certain person to play in a film.

*Let’s see if we can follow your film-making method through logically and go on to a description of the process of turning the script into film.*

Actually I don’t separate the elements of film-making in such an abstract manner. For example, the directing of a film, to me, is simply an extension of the process of writing. It’s the process of rendering the thing you have written. You’re still writing when you’re directing. Of course you’re not composing words, but a gesture, the way you make somebody raise his eyes or shake his head is also writing for films. Nor can I answer precisely what the relative importance, to me, of the various aspects of film-making is, I mean, whether I pay more attention to writing, directing, editing, or what-have-you. The most important element to me is always the idea that I’m trying to express, and everything technical is only a method to make the idea into clear form. I’m always working on the idea: whether I am writing, directing, choosing music or cutting. Everything must revert back to the idea; when it gets away from the idea it becomes a labyrinth of rococo. Occasionally one tends to forget the idea, but I have always had reason to regret this whenever it happened. Sometimes you fall in love with a shot, for example. Maybe it is a tour de force as a shot. This is one of the great dangers of directing: to let the camera take over. Audiences very often do not understand this danger, and it is not unusual that camerawork is appreciated in cases where it really has no business in the film, simply because it is decorative or in itself exhibitionistic. I would say that there are maybe half a dozen directors who really know their camera—how to move their camera. It’s a pity that critics often do not appreciate this. On the other hand I think it’s OK that audiences should not be aware of this. In fact, when the camera is in motion, in the best-directed scenes, the audiences should not be aware of what the camera is doing. They should be following the action and the road of the idea so closely, that they shouldn’t be aware of what’s going on technically.

*Am I right in assuming, then, that you do not share the modern view that the form of a film can be as important as its content? I take it, from what you say, that you are interested more in what is being said than in how it is being said.*

When you become aware of how things are being said, you get separated from the idea. This doesn’t mean that an original rendering
isn’t to be sought after, but that rendering must be so close to the idea itself that you aren’t aware of it.

*If the optimum is to stay close to the original idea without imposing one’s individuality upon it, then the old Thalberg-Ince system of having a script written by one man and then farming it out to another to shoot, wouldn’t appear to be so bad.*

That’s carrying a principle to an extreme. Let’s be sure to have enough regard for *style.* I am not saying that the director who is carrying onto film the idea created by another man should obliterate his individuality. After all, there are many ways—as many as there are people—to do any one thing, including the direction of a film. One sticks to an idea within one’s own ability and with the means that are native to oneself, and not through employing means that are so commonplace that anybody could use them. What goes for film also goes for literature, for any form of art; the originality of Joyce is in no way to be divorced from what he was saying. There’s no separation between style and subject matter, between style and intention, between style and—again—the idea. I do not mean to indicate, in anything I say, that the work of a man shouldn’t bear witness to the personality of that man, beyond the fact that he expresses a specific idea in that work. It’s the combination of his personality and the idea he expresses which creates his style.

*How do you define style?*

As the adaption of the word or the action to the idea. I remember when I was a kid this question of style puzzled me. I didn’t know what they meant by the style of a certain writer. One day Plato’s *Apology* fell into my hands. It was an accident, but it was an eye-opener for me as far as style was concerned. I understood that the words of Socrates were in keeping with the monumentality of his conceptions.

*Do you adjust your style to what you consider the intelligence level of your public to be? In other words, if you made a film today about Socrates in the style of Socrates (if I may oversimplify for a moment), this style itself would stand between the ideas you are trying to express and the person in some small town who might see your film.*

I don’t adjust to what they call the level of the audience. The mentality of an audience is something I consider as quite extraordinary. Audiences can feel and think with a celerity and a unison perhaps beyond the power of its most intelligent members. They laugh instantly if something is funny, and in other ways, too, they react in the most extraordinarily perceptive way. So I think it’s nonsense to listen to producers who tell you “they won’t understand you.” When I make a picture I go under the assumption that if I like something, there are enough people like me who will like it too, to make it worth doing.

*Does that mean that to make something worthwhile it must be accepted by a major number of other people?*

Yes, there’s that requirement.

*I mean, beyond the financial requirement that films be sold.*

Well, you can’t go beyond that.

*I mean in terms of your own personal satisfaction. Is it very important to you that your films be seen by many people, and understood by many people?*

I don’t make pictures for myself. And I do believe that if I like a film, others will like it too. I make films with the intention that they be seen. I make a picture for others. It’s not just a personal satisfaction that I’m seeking. On the other hand I don’t try to imagine the reactions or to figure out, ahead of time, the minds of others. It’s hard enough for me to understand my own mind and to understand myself. I couldn’t possibly speculate on what fifty million people might like or not like. I can only hope that among those fifty million there are enough who resemble me in taste.

*Do you think that a film is better if more people like it?*

Sometimes. But this is quite a question that you’ve asked me there. We’re getting into quite an abstract area. Films are not always immediately popular. Sometimes films acquire popularity slowly over the years, as has happened with some of mine. For example *The
Red Badge of Courage. And also Beat the Devil, which was a complete bust when it came out, and now it has a sort of cult following. Over the years these two pictures have probably had bigger audiences than Moulin Rouge, which was immediately successful.

Let’s get back to the film-making process. You’ve assembled, changed, and rewritten your script and chosen your actors. Do you give them the script to read before they come on the set?

Yes, of course. They read the script before they ever get any instructions from me. Sometimes they then like to talk about the role before they appear on the set in make-up. But I try to tell them as little as possible, because I want to see what they can give me. There’s always time later to give them what I’ve thought about. In the beginning I want them not to be influenced by my predeterminations, because that would close up their individual creativity, it would eliminate their ability to give me something new, something I might not have thought of myself. The best illustration of this is the story of my first film, the first one I directed. I made drawings. I wanted to be very sure. I was uncertain of myself as far as the camera was concerned and I wanted to be sure not to fumble, not to get lost in the mechanical aspects of the film. So I made drawings of every set-up, but didn’t show the drawings to anyone. I discovered that about 50% of the time the actors themselves automatically fell into the drawings, and about 25% of the time I had to pull them into the drawings, which were, in fact, set-up designs. But another 25% of the time they did something better than I had thought of myself.

That means you work through the actor’s intellectual comprehension of your material?

Of course, and I benefit from this comprehension very often. In fact, even before Stanislawski I think actors always functioned this way. The only reason it became such a fad, was that so many young people were marching out onto the screen without any preparation, so suddenly the emphasis shifted strongly towards preparation and it was made into something of a religion; I mean “the method” and the Actor’s Studio, etc. And of course many good actors came out of that school. Personally I don’t prefer conscious actors, or actors with that particular training, nor do I reject them, because I believe that every good actor prepares, maybe not always so consciously.

Do you let them rehearse a lot on the set?

It depends on the scene. I don’t let them rehearse too much, as a rule, but some scenes call for more rehearsal than others.

What kind of instructions are you likely to give an actor?

Anything that will give him a sense of security. In the initial conversations, I may talk about the idea of the role, what its relation to the whole picture is, the background of the character. Some actors like to talk a lot. It helps them.

Do you, yourself, like to talk a lot?

Not very much. But I find it my job to do anything I can to help the actor, to make him feel at ease, to give him a sense of independence, of importance, if you will. I’ll do anything for this, even talk. But I always keep hoping that it will be the actor who will show me, rather than the other way around.

What then do you tell them, in precise terms, when they get on the set? Do you tell them where to stand . . .

Not even that. I let them stand where they please. Sometimes they wait to be told, and I always try to get them to take the reins themselves. I say, let’s rehearse the scene, you show me. Mostly they do this of their own accord. I’d say four out of five times the actors—especially if they are very good actors—take over right away. I don’t have to say a word. If they are talented and intelligent they expect to be let alone. For example, working with George Scott, I seldom even gave a clue of direction, and he did exactly what I wanted without any of us ever saying a word, practically. Only occasionally I would have to ask him to move a bit to the left or the right. His approach to the scene would be so real and true that I couldn’t add anything, except those mechanical camera directions. Not all actors are that good, and some you have to work a lot with. Sometimes very good actors need a lot of direction, too, but
if they are gifted and intelligent one is on the same wavelength anyway and one can talk in a kind of code. They catch immediately what you want, and they fit right in. They catch what you want, use it, and it comes back to you stronger, better than you gave it to them, because they have digested it and are using their talents to put it into reality. Sometimes I have directed people in ways which disappointed me, and have later discovered, that when I left them alone to do what they wanted, it came out better. I suppose it’s because a good actor knows what he can do well and how, and through this self-knowledge he can produce something I couldn’t abstractly imagine. Sometimes I shoot a scene both ways: mine and his, and often—like for example with Clark Gable—I found that his version was better on the screen.

Do you consider the actor raw material for your manipulation or an alive organism that you must adjust to? Does he retain his personality in what you make him do or is he only a means to your end?

He’s a means to my end only insofar as he retains his personality.

You try not to impose yourself on him at all?
I try not to. He must be a very bad actor for me to try to do this. And, by the way, on the part of the director there is as much work in concealing bad performances as there is in developing good ones.

What else, besides controlling the actors, does your job of directing include? How much control do you exercise over the camera, the light, the sets, the other mechanics?

Lighting is almost completely up to the cameraman, who of course must be in complete sympathy with the director. The set-up is something else. There you’re telling the story, the composition will appear on the screen, also the movement of the camera. The variety of material to be included in the shot, and its displacement, those are things I try to control. Again, when I decide about these things, I go by the rules that are imposed upon me by the central idea, by what I’m trying to say, and how I’ve decided to say it. And I choose set-ups and camera angles that will tell my story as quickly and as strongly and as surely as possible.

Do you have the precise set-up in mind when you write the script?

No. I write first, then seek the set-up that demonstrates. And I find that if the set-up is chosen well, I hardly ever have to change a line for a set-up or a set-up for a line. The fact that I write the words first, doesn’t mean the words have precedence. I find that dialogue and camera set-up are not at war. I don’t seek a set-up to carry a certain word; I seek a certain word and a certain set-up to carry a certain idea. Sometimes one single word is enough for this, or even complete silence, if the image is right.

Do you think the less words spoken in a film, the better a film it is?

Depends on the film. Some films depend on words. Take Night of the Iguana. Take the spoken words out of that, and you won’t have very much.

Is that only because that particular script was based on a play? Or do you feel that scripts that are very word-oriented could also be read as literature like a play can?

I don’t think you can make rules. In the case of Iguana the words were important because they carried Tennessee Williams’ thoughts. But I think a good screenplay could be read as literature, too. It simply depends on the particular material.

You are not taking sides, then, in the perennial controversy over what’s more important in film, the word or the image?

I don’t see that they are in conflict. Depending on what is being said, they complement each other in the hands of a good craftsman.

Well, there’s a difference in impact, of course. I’m thinking of the aesthetic problems of the intake of stimuli by a man sitting in a dark hall. If you put words and images on the same level, certain problems arise. Sitting there in the dark, his ears can be unbusy for some length of time, so you can introduce silences on the sound track. But there’s got to be something on the screen to see all the time.

The problem of the attention of the audience to the screen has occupied me quite a lot. Be-
cause of the dark tunnel in which he sits, the spectator in a film has nothing else to fix his attention onto, only that oblong of light which is the screen. This causes a whole different time factor to operate in his process of perception, than in other forms of spectacle, like plays. Two or three seconds of delay in a scene in a film can immediately cause a dull and laborious effect, and the viewer can begin to behold himself, rather than the screen. He shifts in his seat and coughs and scratches and feels his internal organs at work. So you must work to this different time factor when directing a film. Film isn't like most arts, where you can stop watching for a while—you can put a book aside, stop watching a wall with pictures while taking a cup of coffee—but in film all the viewer can do is watch, watch constantly, and the filmmaker has to fill him the screen all the time. It's a requirement of film-making that the viewer's attention be held all the time. It's a requirement, unfortunately, that's not often lived up to. I only know of very few instances in my own experience of film-going where this requirement was constantly being met. On the other hand, making films where something is constantly happening, also imposes greater demands on the viewer than is the case in any other medium. But there are many things inherent in the medium that work for you; the whole immediacy of the experience, and the subjectivity of the emotions that can derive from a good film. The ideal film, it seems to me, is when it's as though the projector were behind the beholder's eyes, and he throws onto the screen that which he wants to see. Films are usually very good for their first two or three minutes. The audience is completely taken outside of itself. They are not aware of themselves. And then comes that awful moment, when they become self-aware once more. It's the film that allows this to happen, of course. I think that one of the problems of the people who make films is that they have not realized that most of the devices of film are inherent in the physiology of man. I mean, all the things we have laboriously learned to do with film, were already part of the daily physiological and psychological experience of man before film was invented, and if we only knew how to make a bridge between these natural experiences and that which we put on the screens, we would be able to eliminate those dead moments, those dull and laborious times, when the human being begins to feel the distance between his real experience and that which is suggested to him via the screen. Let me make an experiment, maybe you will understand better what I mean. Move your eyes, quickly, from an object on one side of this room to an object on the other side. In a film you would use the cut. Watch! There—you did exactly what I expected: in moving your head from one side of the room to the other, you briefly closed your eyes. Try it again, in the other direction. There! You see, you do it automatically. Once you know the distance between the two objects, you blink instinctively. That's a cut. If you were to pan, like we could do with the camera or as you could do with your eyes, from one side to the other, passing all the objects on the way, and then back again, it would become tedious beyond endurance. This does it for you. In the same way, almost all the devices of film have a physiological counterpart. It's a matter of learning—again—to use it.

And you can look at most other filmic devices with this point of view. Take the dissolve. Your thoughts are changing. There's that moment of impingement of thoughts and images where you are aware of your surroundings, or perhaps looking at something else, outside your direct field of vision. Thoughts change while the things you see intermingle. And take the fade-out; that corresponds to sleep. It's an opportunity to rest, to change completely. Exactly as we use it in film.

I'm particularly intrigued by what you said about the time factor. Film is the only graphic medium in which the intake period, the time it takes to receive the stimulus, on the part of the spectator, is controlled not by that spectator, but by the maker of the film. You control how long he looks. In fact, it has always seemed to me that this possibility of controlling the time element is much more important, is a more basic
aesthetic element in film, than the fact that it moves. Movement is simply one of the functions of time. Film is the only art form in which you can manipulate time. In fact, I would say one could make a film in which nothing moved, which would be composed entirely of stills, but which would still be entirely “filmic” because it controls the psychological experience of time in an artificial way. Sometimes I wonder how many film-makers are aware of the power they possess through this capacity to change man’s concepts of time.

Most film makers are aware of the time element in the sense that they are worried about the lagging attention of the viewer. That means they are aware of the problem of time manipulation, but not consciously. They know they’ve got to speed up a scene, for example. They don’t know why—they don’t know what they’re doing. But then I don’t necessarily believe that complete consciousness makes better artists.

What other elements of film-making do you try to control as part of the creative process?

One of the most important elements is to control the producer. Artistically, I am most concerned with controlling the color. Some films would suffer from being in color. Color, like camera acrobatics, can be a distraction unless it’s functional in the film. But both are important, black-and-white and color film. Artists have pigments, but they continue to draw. Certain subjects are better in one and others in the other medium. I would never have made *Freud* in color. There was a certain projection of a unilateral thought, the development of a logic. Color would only have distracted. I wanted the audience to follow the logic that was as real as a detective’s pursuit of a criminal, without distraction by visual elements. And by the same token, I would never have made *Moulin Rouge* in black-and-white. And in *Moby Dick* I tried to combine both by inventing a technique of printing both types of film together.

Do you always try to experiment with new ideas? Do you feel that there is a continuity, in this sense, in your work?

As far as I can say, talking about myself, I think there is a certain uniformity in my work from the beginning up till now. And the one thing I always try to experiment with, is accepting suggestions from the people who work with me. I don’t like to dictate, I like to receive stimuli from all: not only the cameraman and the actors, but the grips and the script girl, or the animal trainers as in the case of *The Bible*. I try to create an atmosphere on the set where everyone feels they can participate. I guess this is as much as I can say in terms of having a basic theory of directing: letting the material have complete freedom, and imposing myself only where necessary. That’s what I meant when I was guilty of that original cliché by remarking that I let my films make themselves.

How do you finish your films?

I shoot very economically, sometimes not enough, even. I shoot as if I were editing in the camera. Then there’s usually only one way to cut the film. I look at the rushes every day, again allowing for my collaborators’ views in choosing the final takes to use. Then, when the film is cut, I choose the music with the idea that it has to have a dramatic purpose. I hate decorative music. I want the music to help tell the story, illustrate the idea, not just to emphasize the images. That means that it must have a certain autonomy. And there should be economy.

Would you say that your principle of making films, and your principle of using the various elements, like music, for example, is this economy?

Everything must serve the idea—I must say this again and again. The means used to convey the idea should be the simplest and the most direct and clear. I don’t believe in overdressing anything. Just what is required. No extra words, no extra images, no extra music. But it seems to me that this is a universal principle of art. To say as much as possible with a minimum of means. And to be always clear about what you are trying to say. That means, of course, that you must know what you are trying to say. So I guess my first principle is to understand myself, and then to find the simplest way to make others understand it, too.

[Recorded in Rome, January 23, 1965]