

Media Studies Senior Thesis Paper - *Falling Planes*

Eamon Stein

Theory and History

I began this project by writing a story. A story that I entitled, *Falling Planes*. Although the title *Falling Planes* seemed as though it had been born of my own mind, I carried forward a sneaking suspicion that I had encountered it somewhere before. One evening, after a day of shooting, I discovered where it had originally found its way into my head. It was not the title of a movie, or a line in a book, but merely a short piece of dialogue in Russia film directed by Larisa Shepiko, entitled *Wings* (1966), that I rewatched on that day of shooting. A boy, standing in a field next to an airplane base, looks up towards the sky and exclaims: “Auntie Nadya, look. A plane is falling.” Nadya, the film’s protagonist and an ex-military pilot who spends the film struggling to adjust to her peacetime-life, states that the plane is falling on purpose, because it is doing a barrel-roll. The boy then asks if the sky is very far away. No other interaction better summarizes the whole of the film than this simple exchange. It is both powerful and articulate, and carries a world of feelings strong enough to guide me to my title, *Falling Planes*, without me even noticing. I am moved by the idea of a character who wants so badly to “fly,” but cannot manage to leave the ground, and I was curious to explore this impression with my thesis film.

Interestingly enough, I only realized what had piqued this curiosity after I had all but finished filming.

Here I want to draw attention to the fact that Larisa Shepiko's *Wings* was not a film that I noted as a reference for this thesis project, or a film that I consciously drew from in the writing and directing of my film. Rather, it was a film with influence that only revealed itself during the final stages of filming... and while it did not hit me over the head with its influence, it influenced me nonetheless. I draw attention to this discovery because I feel as though it provides great clarity in regard to my original thesis statement, which goes as follows: calling upon all of my practical and theoretical filmmaking experience, as well as the many cinematic and written influences which have informed my understanding of art and story, with this thesis work I will cultivate and present my unique filmmaking voice. When I wrote this thesis statement, the "cinematic and written influences" that I was referring to were quiet clear in my head, and were, in fact, critically important to the construction of my project (these were influences such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Robert Bresson, Lisandro Alonso, Leo Tolstoy, and Susan Sontag, all of whom I will discuss over the course of this paper). However, I have now learned from my second encounter with *Wings* that the strongest influences do not always arise in a concrete and direct manner. Many influences exist only within the subconscious, and reveal themselves slowly over a period of time. Thus, the conscious distillation of influences can only go so far in the way of developing one's unique filmmaking voice.

That being said, I will continue this discussion with an influence that clearly and consciously informed the trajectory of my thesis project - the Argentinian Filmmaker, Lisandro Alonso. Specifically, I want to refer to his three films (known as the "Lonely Man Trilogy") entitled, *La Libertad* (2001), *Los Muertos* (2004), and *Liverpool* (2008). Each of these films

follows the simple journey of a single man, set against a backdrop reflective of their character and temperament. Although lacking in a linear narrative, Alonso's methodical pacing and precise shot selection lead to a production of "feeling" quite unlike anything in a conventional film. The viewer is placed alongside the character into a sedated world of isolation, and, as the film progresses, the viewer begins to learn, think, and feel with the protagonist. During the writing of my story, I quickly discovered that the film would not be a conventional narrative insofar as having a linear plot arc. Thus, Lisandro Alonso became a necessary teacher in how to build a story based around a character and his surroundings.

The French Filmmaker, Robert Bresson, also had great influence on the creation of this project. Bresson, quite possibly the greatest cinematic auteur, has a style unlike any other, whether that be his way of building scenes from only bits and pieces of wider action, his way of working with actors, or his emotional, painterly sensibilities. Many of the aspects of Bresson's style are profoundly captured in his book, *Notes on the Cinematograph*, a collection of his notes on film which span the course of his career. Although I have previously read *Notes on the Cinematograph*, I returned to the book prior to filming. Here are some of the quotes that jumped out as most informative for my project: "Let it be the feelings that bring about the events. Not the other way." (Bresson, 21), and "Movement from the exterior to the interior [in regard to actors in the film]... The thing that matters is not what they show me but what they hide from me and, above all, what they do not suspect is in them." (Bresson, 6), and, finally, "Dig into your sensation. Look at what there is within. Don't analyse it with words. Translate it into sister images, into equivalent sounds." (Bresson, 35). These quotes, along countless others, went a long way in guiding my approach to directing and capturing images. Although I did not set out to copy Bresson's style (which would have been the result of my project if I labored over his

notes any more intensely), many of his ideas on how to work with actors, and how to generate feelings with the camera, helped me tremendously as a beginning filmmaker, and lended the film a subtle Bressonian sensibility.

Another filmmaker who has greatly influenced not only this project, but also me as a human being, is Andrei Tarkovsky, who I want to introduce with a quote from his book, *Sculpting in Time*: “By means of art man takes over reality through a subjective experience... An artistic discovery occurs each time as a new and unique image of the world, a hieroglyphic of absolute truth... it appears as a revelation... its beauty and ugliness, its compassion and cruelty, its infinity and its limitations. The artist expresses these things by creating the image...” (Tarkovsky, 37). In answering questions such as: *why do we make art?* and *why spend time making film?* (questions which arise from within oneself even more than they are posed by exterior “others”), I will always turn to Tarkovsky. Film and art represent a way for one to at once grapple with one’s existence and present the world in which one inhabits. Through this process, universal truths can be born. (Here, it must be noted that assessing a work as “universal” can be very complicated. It is important to acknowledge that all individuals [based on factors including race, religion, gender, class, and many more] have their personal experiences informed by social, cultural, and economic conditions. Therefore, a “universal” work, as described by Tarkovsky, may not be a “relatable” work to many. It may even go against the individual experiences of those who do not find it relatable. But if an artist can authentically bring to bear on screen a work that is derived from the essence of their being, it will inevitably strike a chord with certain of its viewers. This, in turn, will foster its universality. The acknowledgement and understanding of positionality and its societal effects are prerequisites for the creation of this form of universality, for the latter cannot exist without the former. Lao Tzu, in his Daoist text,

the *Hua Hu Ching* [translated by Hua-Ching Ni], describes this notion much better than I could myself: “He [who is spiritually mature] considers the world his family and accepts all people as his brothers and sisters. He offers his service to all and asks no recompense. He has broken through all perceptual obstructions and can see through all the diverse names which create discrimination and hostility, yet he respects natural variety and differences and treats all things as equal...” [Tzu, 169-170]). Although Tarkovsky’s films appear on the surface to be quite different from what I have created with *Falling Planes*, the lessons I have taken from Tarkovsky have undoubtedly guided my thesis project towards the height of its potential. Tarkovsky believes that film is not something one can simply “use” over the course of their life... not something that can be detached from a director’s living experience. Film and life must mesh completely in order for film and life to respectively reach their highest capacities. Exercising this philosophy is incredibly difficult, and something much easier said than done. But I hope to have taken a first step in this regard with the creation of *Falling Planes*.

Two more artists/writers who have had a profound effect on me, and strong influence on my project, are Susan Sontag and Leo Tolstoy. Beginning with Susan Sontag, I want to point directly to her essays: *Against Interpretation*, and *On Style*. In her essay, *Against Interpretation*, Sontag analyzes the “interpreters” role in art, noting that, “the interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, is altering it. But he can’t admit to doing this. He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning.” (Sontag, 6). Sontag goes on to write that, “It is always the case that interpretation of this type indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else. Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories.” (Sontag, 10).

Articulating her claims by citing artists such as Ingmar Bergman, Franz Kafka, Alain Resnais, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Ermanno Olmi, Sontag paints a damning picture of society's need for artistic interpretation. However, Sontag is not simply condemning those who seek to understand works of art, but rather is pointing out the how overly aggressive interpretation can be detrimental to one's own understand of said work, and that the publication and transmission of an aggressive interpretation can go a long way in dismantling and "replacing" meaning in the original. Rather than attaching overarching sociocultural symbolic meanings to works of art, Sontag urges viewers to engage with the material that is contained concretely within the work of art itself - within the naturally arising world that exists in and around every individual artwork. A direct engagement with the "world" that has been created by the artist will allow the audience to draw deeper and truer lessons from an artwork than they would be layering only their own cultural knowledge over said "world," thereby doing away with the unique and individual essence of that artwork.

I bring up Sontag's essay, *On Style*, in conjunction with *Against Interpretation* because it does a good job of laying out the terms on which an artwork "succeeds," and thereby can be analyzed within the bounds of Sontag's assertions in *Against Interpretation*. In *On Style*, Sontag identifies *style* and *content* as the two respective parts that make up a work of art, and claims that the best art will be such that style and content are completely interwoven and unified. In other words, the style *is* the content just as much as the content *is* the style. If style (be that a unique filmmaking style, painting style, writing style), is derivative and simply a vessel for content (be that the message the piece wants to get across, or the idea the piece wants to explore), then the artwork will not feel complete. Conversely, if the content is bland and meaningless, and simply exists in order to provide raw material for an extroverted style, then the artwork will also not feel

complete, but, rather, may feel “excessively narrow and repetitive, or... unhinged, dissociated.” (Sontag, 20). Sontag notes Orson Welles’s *The Lady from Shanghai* as an example of this later situation, in the film’s, “visually brilliant denouement... and the rest of the film” (Sontag, 20), where “content” and subject matter is not given the same level of artistic attention. On the other hand, Sontag cites the films of Bresson and Camus’s novel, *The Stranger*, as examples of art in which style and content are fully interwoven. Sontag’s lessons, such as the ones I have brought up here, have given me much to consider in regard to engaging with art, as well as creating it, and they continue to inform my work throughout the progression of this semester.

I find Tolstoy incredibly important to this conversation because of his thoughts on art as a general concept... thoughts that he expresses in his book, *What is Art?* Without first defining for oneself what *art* truly *is*, there is little point in pursuing artistic theories and philosophies like those put forth by Sontag. However, an idea as grand as “what is art?” can little be expanded upon at this stage of this essay (as it is a question that has riddled the minds of artists, scholars, and philosophers for thousands of years), and, therefore, I merely present the concise definition of art that Tolstoy presents towards the beginning of his book:

To call up in oneself a feeling once experienced and, having called it up, to convey it by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, images expressed in words, so that others experience the same feeling - in this consists the activity of art. Art is that human activity which consists in one man’s consciously conveying to others, by certain external signs, the feelings he has experienced, and in others being infected by those feelings and also experiencing them. (Tolstoy, 39-40)

As far as concrete definitions for concepts as vast and ethereal as “art,” I find this one by Tolstoy to be extremely satisfactory. By placing his focus entirely on the idea of *feeling*, Tolstoy (unlike other artists and philosophers, who remain stuck on the idea of *beauty*, which requires an equally rigorous processes as defining “art,” itself) narrows in on what I find to be the most important aspect of any artistic work - how well it elicits feeling from an artist and audience.

Production

However, despite my rigorous formulation of an artistic canon from which I could draw creative influences, and throughout my theoretical study of all that goes into art and filmmaking, I always understood that it would be impossible to fully prepare for all that would occur during the physical processes of creating the film, and that my creative flexibility, improvisation, and openness to the unexpected would be called upon to account for that which I could not account for. Thus, I dove into this project with a clear mind and a self-imposed freedom to wander in the direction to which my camera pointed.

Bearing this thought in mind I moved into location scouting. After I finished writing the story of the film, and after I had finished discussing the story with Graham (the main actor), the two of us set out to find the best spots to film around the Claremont / Upland / Montclair area. I had recently re-viewed films from directors such as Kiarostami, Bergman, Tarkovsky, and many more with Graham, who, like myself, was consumed by a new desire to engage in the creative aspects of life. Graham became a great help to me throughout the entirety of the project in ways that went far beyond acting in the film, as he took on the role of my primary collaborative partner, and somebody deeply attached to every part of the work from location scouting to editing... his presence in and around the film was crucial to its success. The location scouting went incredibly smoothly and seamlessly. I had a few ideas of specific areas I wanted to check out, and locations I thought could work well for certain scenes, but, besides these brief, tenuous images, Graham and I searched with completely open minds. Fortunately, almost every location we were drawn to worked within the context of the film, and even those locations that did not make it into the final cut could have been used had this been a longer project. Moreover, the locations that we found provided us with many naturally occurring symbols that I could never

have accounted for beforehand. Take, for example, the deflated, beaten-up soccer ball in the scene where Graham takes off his sweater. I had no intentions of shooting some sort of dilapidated object in this scene... but the soccer ball presented itself, and I took advantage. Also, take the scene with the two plants that have sprung seemingly from nowhere by the gravel dunes where Graham sits to write his note. How could I have accounted for these two plants, which so elegantly resemble the figures of Graham and Greer (the other actor and Graham's roommate), and so powerfully depict the life that can arise from a desolate sea dust and rock? Plenty of other naturally occurring symbols and beautifully bleak locations arose as a result of this location, and therefore I must credit this location scouting as the strong foundation on which much of the project rested.

Although the location scouting itself was undeniably successful, simply finding locations does not account for the complete success of a film, or the success of a beginning filmmaker in his attempt to discover his cinematic voice. The next step would be to begin "directing." As far as cinematography was concerned, I was fairly confident in my ability to compose frames and tell a visual story. However, I have never truly worked with actors, and did not know what to expect in this regard. How would the actors respond to my instruction? Would I be able to convey to them exactly what I desired? Discussing film in a theoretical sense has always come easy to me, but accurately articulating my most complicated thoughts and subtle feelings in real time is a different story. In preparation for my directing duties, I studied Robert Bresson's and Andrei Tarkovsky's books, *Notes of the Cinematograph* and *Sculpting in Time*... both of which delve deeply into theories of acting and how to work with actors. But merely studying the written words of these directors could have never fully prepared me for the task of directing. In the end, I decided to approach directing with this philosophy: I would explain to the actors my

interpretation of the characters they played and the scenes that they occupied, and then have them work towards that interpretation in the ways unique to them as individuals. Explaining my interpretation proved to be the easy part. Deriving the individual essence of the actors, and having that come through in their acting, proved to be more difficult.

A prominent example of this difficulty came while shooting Graham at the train station. Although his action was fairly simple (watching a train off into the distance, picking up a bag, and walking away), developing his performance was very complicated. In order to find the delicate balance between over-emoting and under performing, we were forced to shoot the scene countless times... each time feeling as though something was off in a look or a gesture. Both he and I could feel the exact moments when he would lose himself in superficial, over-acted emotion, or find himself not portraying the character in a way authentic to himself. However, both he and I could also feel the exact moment when something clicked, and action felt natural. We found ourselves in a similar situation during the note writing / cigarette smoking scene, but, as we progressed in filming, I began to feel more adept at drawing out of the actors what I wanted to see, which was also helped by their growing confidence in themselves and the characters they played. Here, I also want to note the differences I felt in directing Greer as opposed to directing Graham. With Graham, a long time friend and someone with whom I have felt at ease for a major part of my life, I felt totally comfortable expressing myself in the ways I truly desired. With Greer, Graham's roommate and someone I had only met this semester, I was much more timid in my directing and my articulation of what I felt was right for the film. Therefore, Greer had a much longer leash than Graham, as I was less inclined to "redo" shots that involved Greer. But I am happy to say that Greer's natural look suited her role to such a

degree that I did not need to take such a hands-on approach to her acting. I was lucky in this regard... but I may not be so lucky the next time I work with an actor I am not familiar with.

Another complication that affected my ability to direct came from the fact that I alone was in charge of every role in the production. In addition to being the director, I was also the producer, sound manager, and, most importantly, cinematographer. Often, I found myself capturing intricate and complicated shots that required both steady camera movement and sharp choreography (not to mention proper performances on the part of the actors). It was incredibly difficult to focus on framing, performance, timing, and camera movement all at the same time; I understood that perfection could hardly be achieved. However, from this struggle I feel as though I gained a capacity for pre-planning, multitasking, and quick decision making. If we only had a certain amount of time to shoot a particular shot (an amount of time that had to be imposed by me, the producer), then I knew I had to quickly figure out my framing and camera movement in order to have as much time as possible to work on performance. If I could quickly and efficiently solidify my job as cinematographer, I could set myself up for more success in my job as director.

Overall, I would say that the physical execution of this project presented tremendous filmmaking lessons and important learning opportunities. Whether it was the writing of a script that I knew I could bring to life all on my own, scouting for locations around the Inland Empire, working with actors, or juggling multiple filmmaking roles, I feel as though all parts of the experience will contribute greatly to progress as a filmmaker moving forward. As far as the development of my unique filmmaking voice is concerned, I would say that this project represents an important first step. Many of the images that I captured, and the sequence that I put together, undoubtedly display a unique style that I would like to follow in the future.

However, not all moments in the film convey the truth that I wish to achieve through film, and, therefore, I cannot say that this film represents the totality of me as a filmmaker. What I can say is that I am very proud of the film's symbolic moments, cinematographic style, and overarching atmosphere, and I look forward to using all that I have learned from this project as I move on to the next.

Work Cited

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