

An Exploration of the Work *Kafka*

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Q: At the end of our last interview, after the screening of *sex, lies, and videotape*, you mentioned two projects and two other scripts that you had decided not to shoot. None of these four projects was *Kafka*. What led you to make this second film?

A: Indeed, at the time I thought that *The Last Ship* and *King of the Hill* would be my next films and that *Kafka*, about which I was already thinking, would come next. I gave up on *The Last Ship* after writing a first version because I couldn't find a solution for the third part. The book, on which the script was based, did not follow a chronological order and when I laid out the story for the cinema, it did not work. So I told Sydney Pollack and Universal that I wanted to put *The Last Ship* aside for a while and make *Kafka* right away. Finally, I completely abandoned *The Last Ship* because developments in the international situation rendered it obsolete. People today no longer worry about nuclear holocaust, even if in two years they start thinking about it again. It was a huge project and I had too many doubts to pursue it.

Q: How did you become aware of the script for *Kafka*?

A: In 1985, my first agent—she died in a car accident in 1988 and her younger brother took her place—gave me a script from Lem Dobbs as an example, and at the time I wanted to learn to write a script. I loved Dobbs's work, but I did not think that someone someday could make a film of it. I was afraid that those who would be able to raise the money for it would not appreciate its potential. Nevertheless, the first version contained many autobiographical details that I decided to exclude. There were many scenes with the father, Anna, the fiancée, etc. Today, many people complain that the film is neither a biography nor an imaginative

work, which is exactly what I did not like about the first version of the script. I wanted to stick to the thriller and, in a way, Kafka was the protagonist only by accident. So, I started cutting things out and we went from 140 pages to 110. Most of the scenes that were cut were family scenes.

Q: In what way did Lem Dobbs's script seem like a model of narrative technique to you and your agent?

A: He is a writer who knows how to suggest images without having to give directions for camera angles, etc. He is an excellent writer, very powerful, whose technical knowledge is rare in the U.S. nowadays. I now have in my possession all of Lem's original scripts, and they are great. Only one was shot, *Hider in the House*, but it was rewritten by someone else during the scriptwriters' strike. Now, he is getting ready to shoot his first film based on one of his scripts, *Edward Ford*, a fascinating work which I would have liked to make. It's about a Midwest character, a kind of Travis Bickle [the hero in *Taxi Driver*], who is obsessed with B films and who goes to Hollywood at the end of the fifties to become an actor in this kind of film, without realizing that it does not exist anymore. We follow him for twenty-five years while he tries to get a card from the Screen Writers' Guild. It's the funniest and the darkest piece of Americana that I have read in a long time.

Q: How did you work with Lem Dobbs?

A: It was a rather complicated relationship, and when the film came out, we had a public run in, of sorts. He reproached me for having changed his script, which was not entirely true. At the beginning, we worked closely together on the changes. He was present when we started shooting, then he left. There are a number of scenes on which I worked alone, especially those with Jeremy Irons and Theresa Russell. When I showed the first cut to friends, it became clear that the film was not working, that there were problems particularly with the scenes that I had rewritten myself. Lem's "voice" was very distinct and I was not able to recapture his tone. There were also scenes written by him that were not working either. Lem had seen the first cut and he thought it was a train wreck! So I drew up a list of all the scenes that did not work and I asked him to rework them, to help me. Which he did.

I really think that the film today, in its final form, is better than anything that ever existed on paper. Maybe Lem wouldn't agree, but that's what I think. This was a situation where you had two reasonably intelligent people, with very definite ideas about cinema, who often agreed,

and sometimes didn't. We talked every week, we planned to work together, he is a very intelligent person and I like him a lot. It seems natural to me that over a two-year period we would have some arguments. What happened is that, unfortunately, a journalist from the *New York Times* met Lem the day after Jeremy Irons had said in an interview that the story was not as successful as the visual aspect of the film! This made Lem mad, and the journalist chose not to publish the favorable things Lem had to say—because Lem liked the film, without loving it—and only reported on his dissatisfaction! One shouldn't exaggerate the significance of this incident because we are still planning on working together on another project. He simply felt that at times I was being arbitrary and I felt that he was sometimes difficult. But he also knows that, in the final analyses, as the director, I'll do what I want, just as he will when it's his turn to be behind the camera. I did not find him overly dogmatic, and maybe he is simply more demanding than I am.

Q: Did you shoot some scenes in London?

A: They were interior scenes. When we decided in February 1991 to shoot certain scenes, we knew, because of the schedules of some of the actors, that we had to start filming on May 1 for ten days. We were not going to shoot in Prague and since these were studio interior scenes—in the café, in Edouard Raban's apartment—we went to Pinewood. We also reshot all the scenes where you don't see the microscope, in the color sequences in the castle. I did not like what was happening with the first version of the film, nor the visual aspect. We had found these huge hallways, a hundred meters long, in the building of the military archives of Prague, but unfortunately you couldn't control the light. All the planes were equally lit and I did not have the various planes of light that I wanted. So I had to reconstruct the whole thing in the studio and this gave me the opportunity, at the same time, to change the unfolding of events inside the castle. The introduction of Doctor Murnau, for example, is very different from what it was initially. Originally, we simply had him come into the office. In the new version, Ian Holm has the freedom to go from A to B, to go from the image of a servant to that of the boss.

Q: For your second film, you could have shot a comedy of interior emotions like *sex, lies, and videotape*, which would have made you an auteur figure in the eyes of the critics. You chose, rather, to make a radically different film.

A: I know that some people had imagined an entire career for me because of *sex, lies, and videotape*. According to them, I should have shot a certain type of film, but I knew I wouldn't. So I thought that I might as well disappoint them right away by making something completely different but which, at the same time, corresponded to what I had been wanting to do for a long time since. As I told you, I had read *Kafka* three years before making *sex, lies, and videotape*.

Q: Did Kafka, the writer himself interest you as subject for a film?

A: I would have never thought about it before reading the script. I thought a biography of Kafka would be boring. As for Kafka's books, they have certain faults as cinema material, as is evident in the cinematic adaptations I've seen. His works are grounded more on ideas than on events, which does not really work for the screen. As fascinating as Orson Welles's *The Trial* is, it shows its limits. As a reader, of course, I feel differently and am very interested in his themes. I thought the connection that Lem Dobbs established between Kafka and expressionism was pertinent, and that Doctor Murnau was a logical development of these ideas. His script seemed to escape all the traps of a biography and of an adaptation, while keeping all that seemed interesting to me: the foreshadowing of Nazism by twenty years; the bureaucratic thinking leading up to the Third Reich, etc.

Q: The character also reflected your own preoccupations.

A: My two films have in common a protagonist who is alienated and disoriented, bewildered by the world around him. Kafka hides behind his camera and the hero of *sex, lies, and videotape* hides behind a camera! Both films are about digging in order to find a hidden truth. This also attracted me. You have to understand that I made my first film very comfortably, shooting a small film in my hometown, without witnesses. So I wanted then to go in a different direction and do something difficult, uncomfortable. I could afford it because things were going my way. I knew that making my second film was like crossing a street knowing that in any case a car was going to run over me. As it is, I chose to cross at the busiest intersection. Nonetheless, I was not able to foresee the possessive attitude toward Kafka of certain American critics. That an American would consider Kafka an icon seems a bit strange to me. This film mixes so many ideas and genres that the reaction would be to consider it either an utter failure, or a success that was difficult to attain. I have to admit that it was the first attitude that predominated.

Q: Unlike in your first film, here you had to recreate a world that you have not known.

A: In reading Kafka's biographies, as well as his works, his correspondence, his diary, I found many affinities with his way of thinking. When you go to Prague, it all falls into place. When you read Kafka before knowing Prague, it's as if one out of every six words was missing. But while walking around town, each of his words starts to fill in the gaps. I could not stress enough that there is something intangible that permeates everything in this city. I can't explain why, but it's a very mysterious place. At first, the city does not reveal herself to you easily, it's a very slow process. When I was scouting out locations, I realized that Prague would become a character in the film. After that, it was not difficult to keep that in mind. Every day we were confronted with strange experiences. If nothing else, because of our dealings with the Barrandov studio. For example, everyday we had to ask for electricity on a particular set. One day, we had no electricity! We checked that we had in fact filled out the forms, and they told us that we had not requested that the guy who turns on the electricity be there. We were right in our subject matter. I tried not to behave too much like an amateur in the way I shot Prague, and when I see the film I feel the city comes across well on the screen.

Q: When did you decide to shoot in black and white and to later use color for the sequences in the castle?

A: Everyone who read the script had no doubts about it: the film had to be made in black and white. Lem wrote it from this perspective. There were references to German expressionism all over the place. On the other hand, there were many debates about the use of color. One day, Lem told me in passing that Stuart Cornfeld, one of my producers, thought of using color because the castle made him think of Oz, the magician's town. I liked the idea of opening the door and, all of a sudden, allow the foundation that had been established during the first seventy-seven minutes to crumble at our feet, given the feeling that something was going to happen. Nowadays, the convention for using black and white is to reference a dream, a fantasy, the unreal. I liked the idea that in this case it would be the opposite. The more I thought about it the more I thought that certain story elements would be more forcefully expressed in color, like the idea of the microscope, of the brain and the eye. We did a test in black and white and it did not work as well. As a whole, the film expresses an intensified reality so it seemed to me we had to go a step further in entering the castle. For this part I wanted a colorful range,

strange, disquieting, and uncomfortable. The black and white photography offered us some challenges. The film stock has not changed in thirty years; it is not very sensitive. The image is grainy. The stock contains a lot of silver nitrate and it catches static electricity in an unpredictable way. We couldn't do anything about it, and we had to reshoot a number of scenes. The negative is very vulnerable between the time it is shot and the time it is developed. I imagine that when all films were in black and white, labs had ways to avoid this kind of accident, but today it's a lost practice.

Q: Did you show Walt Lloyd, your cinematographer, old black and white films which might inspire him?

A: In fact, we gave him a long list and he did not know most of them. I am a great admirer of Fritz Lang, and he was foremost on my mind. Any filmmaker who really cares about camera work owes a lot to Lang, and this goes for Welles as well as for Kubrick. He created images that are still present within us because they were so powerful, like that of a silhouette dominated by the architecture. So, I did in fact think about *Mabuse*, *M*, and *Metropolis*. Another source of inspiration was *The Third Man* and, curiously enough, Howard Hawks for two or three scenes, like the one where Kafka leaves the café, comes across the anarchists and says: "Gabriela has disappeared." The conversation speeds up suddenly, everyone speaks at the same time, runs into each other, and I thought about *His Girl Friday*. I would have liked for the film to be more that way, with that kind of energy. I like that about Hawks, and also the fact he would jump from one genre to another. I hate to be cornered in only one type of film. I would like for people not to take *Kafka* too seriously, not to look for a deep analysis of a writer, and to see the humor in it, not only in the scenes with the twins, but also in those with Armin Mueller-Stahl. For me, when he says "Kafka," that calls up an entire world.

Q: Like always, the humor comes from the gap between the world and our perception of it.

A: That's something else that attracted me to the script and connected it to *sex, lies, and videotape*: the feeling of disillusionment. No one turns out to be what you thought they were and this greatly frustrates Kafka. There is not a scene that unfolds the way he originally imagined it. He is surprised and disoriented every time. Jeremy Irons had never read Kafka when he was young, and according to him he is a writer one can appreciate when one is young. When he had to read him later in order

to prepare for the film, he admitted to wanting to shake him up, to hit him so he would do something, so he would marry the girl. According to him, Kafka's obsessions are those of the eternal adolescent: someone who does not know how to talk to women, who is dominated by his father, etc. And I think that in a way he is right. Of course, there are other sides to him: the manipulation of the individual by the State and the more or less unconscious complicity with evil. For example, he accepts the inspector's version of Gabriela's death. Many people in the U.S. asked me about this, why he accepted the suicide theory when he knew it was not true. I think his reaction is ambiguous because it is not completely untrue. Someone who is an anarchist in this type of situation is committing a kind of suicide.

Q: How did you work with Jeremy Irons?

A: Before making the film he asked me what he should read by Kafka. I told him it was not necessary, that I did not want him to develop a character based on autobiographical details. We would call him Joe or Fred, see him more like a brother but not necessarily like Franz. It was like a dream that Lem Dobbs had of Kafka mixed with other visions. There is no doubt that the title creates a problem for American audiences. Many people think that it's going to be a very serious film and that they are going to fail an exam while watching it. In fact, for Dobbs and me, the film is an exploration of what the word—and by extension the man—Kafka means to us. I am really curious to know how things went in Europe. Curiously, from the very first reactions, people here seem more open than in the States to the liberties we took; they are less protective of Kafka's image.

Q: In the credits you are listed as editor but under the rubric "picture editor" rather than "film editor." Was this for syndication reasons?

A: No, it was simply in order to be more accurate because I did not edit the film on a flatbed but on video, like *sex, lies, and videotape*. During post-production we speak of sound editing and image editing. Since I was in charge of the latter, it seemed more pertinent to me. This is the part that I find the most fun. I restructured the first ten minutes of the film. I also worked a lot on the fourth reel. At first, we had the action spanning several days, but that did not work. For instance, he was mugged in the elevator and the next morning he would go back to work. It was strange. Now, this all takes place in one evening and the next day he goes to the castle. What led me to make this change is that in the first version

everyone wanted me to cut the elevator scene because they could not understand how he could go back to work as if nothing had happened. Since it was one of my favorite scenes in the film, I desperately wanted to keep it and come up with something else. In the film you saw today, I established continuity between the moment when Jeremy is sitting in the bathroom and the moment he is in his office and Joel Grey (Burgel) tells him that he has to work late. He has a different shirt on, but because it is in black and white I don't think anybody noticed.

Q: Did you always have Jeremy Irons in mind for the role?

A: He has always been one of my favorite actors. He was the only one I had in mind for the role of Kafka, and I was lucky that he was free and that he accepted to play the part without asking for a huge salary. It would have depressed me to have to choose someone else. One of the great advantages of the success of *sex, lies, and videotape* is that it made it possible for me to meet people like Jeremy, Alec Guinness, and Ian Holm, and that they knew who I was. I talked to Jeremy Irons and, frankly, I don't think he really thought there was material for a film here. He trusted me. It's not an easy role to play because it's not spectacular in any way. His part is very passive; he reacts more than he acts. The danger is to overdo it, particularly since we don't shoot in chronological order. Jeremy was very conscious of this. He loves crossword puzzles and he was really into them during the shooting. One day, we were shooting in Alec Guinness's office, there were lots of people there, and we had to look for Jeremy for five minutes. Well, he was there, in a corner of the room, doing crossword puzzles! He told me he got in the habit of doing this because of the long hours of waiting on the set. At the beginning when we started rolling, he tended to overdo it because he had been thinking about the scene during his off hours. Thanks to the crossword puzzle, he was able to approach the sequences by under-playing. He and I share a preference for subtleties. He is a very smart, very meticulous person who knows film very well. You can't dazzle him with technique and he likes to ask you questions about what you are going to do. This did not bother me at all, nor was I afraid to show my hesitations. He encouraged me not to be lazy and always made interesting suggestions. This was a very fruitful collaboration. I would not have wanted to be a director he did not respect because, as I said, he is very intelligent and has a strong presence due to his stature and his voice.

I would not want to be an actor and have to put up with a director doing to me what he spends his time doing with other actors. I can imagine

how annoying it must be for a great actor to work for a director he does not respect. David Cronenberg told me about his experience as an actor in Clive Barker's *Cabal*. He couldn't stop asking himself why the director was doing this or that, why he had chosen this shot rather than another where he looked better. According to him, an actor only has his body and that makes you very self-conscious. At one point, he had to talk while crossing a room and he almost told Barker: "Do you want me to talk and to move at the same time!" Of course, everyone on the set would have laughed, but I can understand this pretty typical reaction from an actor. I would have reacted exactly like David, feeling totally powerless. In the States, people always ask me if I was intimidated working with Alec Guinness and Jeremy Irons, and I don't understand their question. They are professionals who agreed to play these parts, and I don't see why they would have wanted to attack me. But maybe American actors are different from European actors. Ian Holm told me he preferred being liked by the people he worked with than being thought of as a great actor. I like American actors a lot, but they tend to take on the character's personality and it becomes difficult for a director to manage them. European actors are better able to let go of their role at the end of the day and to go home.

During the shooting of *Midnight Express*, Brad Davis asked John Hurt: "How do you manage to play your character?" And Hurt simply told him: "I pretend!" Americans think that if they do not become the character twenty-four hours a day, they'll lose a grip on him; which does not mean that British actors, for example, don't take their work seriously. In fact, Jeremy Irons is the perfect blend of the two approaches. He has the training and the experience that many British actors have because of their work in the theater, and at the same time, like many Method actors, he has no inhibitions and is ready to do anything, even if it means looking ridiculous, in order to get somewhere. He knows how to be energetic and how to improvise, if necessary.

Q: The use of the cimbalom, the Hungarian instrument, in the musical score is very original.

A: I told Cliff Martinez that I wanted an instrument that was close to the zither because it seemed to go well with the atmosphere of the place. I had a Carol Reed experience. I was in a restaurant listening to a gypsy group playing the cimbalom and I knew this is what I was looking for. Cliff used a numerical recording of a cimbalom, brought it back to the U.S. and he was able to replay the sound of the cimbalom in his electric

drum—he is a drummer—while looking at the film on video. So many films nowadays overlook the extent to which music can be used in counterpoint, and even in irony. I think Cliff Martinez understands this very well.

Q: Was the sculptor based on Max Brod?

A: He was a synthesis of Kafka's friends. There is a reference to Brod in the sense that he liked Kafka's work while the latter asked him to destroy it. I think Max Brod was right. When Kafka would ask him to burn his writings, it was a way for him to make this request at the same time knowing that he wouldn't do it. Brod told him many times that he wouldn't do it, so I think there was a tacit understanding between them.

Q: It's strange that three recent Anglo-Saxon films—*Barton Fink*, *Naked Lunch*, and *Kafka*—all deal with a similar theme: the corruption of the world by the imagination of a writer.

A: What they have in common is that they evoke the world of the writer. But the difference, I think, is that *Kafka* does not deal with literary creation. It stops where the other two films begin. The implication, in *Kafka*, is that these events will become a fiction, will inspire him, while *Naked Lunch* and *Barton Fink* talk about the moment of inspiration, of creation. But it's true that it's a strange coincidence, and just as strange that Woody Allen's *Shadow and Fog* and *Kafka* are coming out at the same time. I don't think this is the beginning of a trend and that producers are going to launch into imitations! I don't know in what direction American cinema is going, but I feel that people in the business are worried and are not sure of anything. Movie tickets are so expensive that the public knows what to expect when they go see a studio film; but I don't think they are ready to take chances with a film like *Kafka*. By nature I am more pessimistic than optimistic, which is not a typically American attitude.