A film about the complex relationships between a young man’s memories, fears, and desires, and the reconciliation of his psyche, sensual appetites, and childhood recollections.
From an early age I remember seeing my father’s home movies, shot in 16 mm, and his 35-mm color-reversal slides, both projected on a screen we had at our home. I can see the beam of light in the dark and hear the sound of the film moving through the gate and the fan’s motor.

Often in the slides I could see the deep blacks and sumptuous colors, and projected, the images had a great presence and left a lasting impression on me.

In my midtwenties I was living in the American Hotel in a single room with a toilet and shower down the hall. The hotel, which was in the desolate and abandoned manufacturing part of downtown LA, had a bar and punk club on the first floor. I would often return to my little room from work to spend what amounted to another workday editing on a flatbed, and though the music was at full throttle below, I would eventually fall on my bed and pass out.

When I left the ad job and went to Propaganda Films, the most cutting-edge film and music video production unit then in LA, to write music video scripts, I was going to cinema houses and used-book stores, I was reading all the time, trying to have time while not spending much money. I had been writing spec film scripts, which is very demanding. It took me a long time to have a sense of a scenario that was something more than a screenplay. In time a script for me would be a blueprint for a film—a direction, not the film itself—and besides telling everyone where to go and what’s happening, it would continue to take on a life, evolving with its cast and the very shooting of the film. So what can a script be, with this idea that each page represents a minute and the film script needs to be 90 to 120 minutes long? Why so many words? The film scenario can be a three-to-five-page piece of writing, along with scenes and notes written along the way. But those three pages might be written, rewritten, twenty-five, thirty times and much of it thrown out. This kind of understanding of working took me a long time to develop, to in a sense hold the film inside me and to let it become what it wanted to be because it will never be that which is on the page. A film cannot be known and then recorded, it has to become an event of recording. It has to keep living and evolving.

My first long-form narrative as a director was originally titled Suitcase (eventually released as Exploding Oedipus) and was about someone quite alone, who only alone to himself could come to himself and open up a space to live. This could never be a compelling screenplay as it had very little dialogue, was very personal, and what happens is very moody and deconstructive of film and the image. I made a version as a paper movie, cutting the script up and placing it along with pictures that had the right mood. It is often the feel and mood of things that I want to capture and express in my films.
Before the talking cinema, film had to create a form that could rely principally on image and live music accompaniment. The film, though there were intertitles, would unfold by image, giving the audience direction about the time and place of events. In the films of the French filmmaker of the twenties Germaine Dulac, the essence of cinema was the visual, psychological, and poetic. The logic would be the visually associative, not the unfolding of plot or story per se, but the rhythm of the visual. Buñuel, Eisenstein, many cineasts took this up. With sync sound the expressive form of cinema became literature and the theater, privileging plot and language over picture and sound.

The more money to make a film, the more opinions, conditions, “restrictions” made on the film—unlike many other forms, cinema, like architecture, requires capital, and capital requirements came to shape film in the form of producers and studios. Most all of that shaping is done in the script and script approval. The script becomes the accountable document for the production of the film. Not always, as there are certainly some strong filmmakers who make the films they want to make and whose scenarios move and evolve with the production. But for the most part the script puts in the light of day, for all to see, the film before the film.
Exploding Oedipus is a 35-mm feature-length film shot on location in the San Francisco Bay Area. After his father’s heart attack, Hilbert leaves his past behind, taking 8-mm films of his childhood to a cheap downtown hotel where he obsessively compares the films with contrasting recollections of his youth. He begins to ask, How do we create narratives for ourselves? How do we construct and rewrite our memories to situate the present? From the juxtaposition of narrated flashback sequences to surreal visions, drugs, open sexuality, interactions and conversations with incarnations of himself and his parents at various ages, Hilbert discovers the sublime beauty of the everyday.

In my first feature film, my attention moved from the materiality of film to what the film had recorded. What had the film seen? How did it see? And how was what it saw, what it recorded, seen through the cinema? How does cinema see and structure recording? This was and increasingly became very different than how film scripts and film writing works, which is a different event of description. Writing and seeing. Cinema, film, movies, television, they all teach us how to see. They all show us a seeing.

When I finished film school, I wrote screenplays, scenarios for music videos, directed a few commercials, and in the evenings with my sister made the rounds of the burgeoning LA art scene. The screenplay is a very concise form with very rigorous rules, almost to the page, at least when it’s commercial. I had a good go of it and did enjoy it, more so when I was hired and it would be my telling of the story I was hired to write, mostly adaptations. But after writing maybe ten or more screenplays, the form could no longer work for me. I was more interested in new forms and new modes of recording that allow us to see ourselves imaged and narrated, forms that can give shape to a new kind and space of cinema. To have cinema look at recording itself.

After writing a number of film scripts, more and more I knew I wanted to make a personal film, to take account of things. The late seventies and early eighties presented for a brief moment an openness to explorations and experimentation in consciousness and sexuality. With the growing awareness of AIDS and gender and queer politics, things hardened into more of an identity politics, where it was all about taking a position. Play and experimentation was what you did when you were young, a passing game. I did not get to make Exploding Oedipus, which really was to be a reflection on things in my early twenties, until some fifteen years later. It asks the question, How do we come to know ourselves, how do we love. It sees the cinema not simply as a mirror but its own becoming. What is the relationship between the mirror, seeing, the law, and violence, both to oneself and others? Sounds rather heady, but it was all filtered through the pop idioms of all the books, criticism, philosophy, films, and music I loved, it was to be a reckoning, a coming to terms. It was to be behavioral and the analysis of behavior.
If you explode the mirror and put into play your image repertoire, let yourself be abandoned, where are you, without mooring, without tether? You would ultimately need to find a boundary, a limit. More accurately, that limit would find you.

How do we come to shape ourselves, form a self in the mirror? A self that is seemingly complete in the imaginary, in our image repertoire. Is there no bottom to the image repertoire—the feelings, thoughts, and dialogue inside, that set of relationships that both exist and not in the world—that seduces and alludes, that affirms and disparages us, that constitutes us? It will be a film about the spaces of the real and the imaginary. Those limits that prove to myself I exist.

I tape up my body, the wounds and hurt of it, I tape up the feeling to keep them from spilling out, to make an outward visible sign. I produce the visible sign of a body unwinding, of me unraveling—she is my mirror.
The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.

It staggered me to know I was composed of impurities.

In order to weather my desolation, I withdrew into myself.

In my solitude I became quite close to being all love, all devotion.

I'm lost. Drunk. Impure.

How do I come to know myself, to give shape to my life.

It's been scattered in books.

Once, if I remember rightly, my life was a feast where all hearts opened, and all wines flowed.

One evening I sat Beauty on my knees—and I found her bitter—And I reviled her.

You can’t erase the images, you can’t erase the past.
My courage consisted of destroying all the usual reasons for living and discovering others.

The discovery was made slowly.

Everything is true because everything is permitted.

Whoever invented the fourth wall was the executioner of human empathy.

I truly understand the need of a third wall, the wall that helps hold up the roof; you need roofs,

I know that, I understand that, but the fourth wall, the wall that separates me from my unknown neighbor, my possible savior, this wall I do not understand.

This wall I pray would crumble and collapse before my very eyes.

Then I could see my neighbor, my possible savior.

Maybe my neighbor, my possible savior would know what to say to me.
I'll buy him a beer, tell him a joke, he'll listen.

He'll let down his wall.

Not like my father.

It's a good feeling, like I've known him my whole life.

The phallus is the law, the tin star, the sheriff, I can see, feel the phallus as a fertility symbol, a cult object.

It divines a religion, a class, a sexual enchantment of the world.

I chase a beautiful boy, we take each other home.

I thought that love with a man would be different, but it's not.

It's the same.

It's still two hearts, two souls.

I had opened up something in me that was very private, I enjoyed it, but the liberation I thought was there was not.
It's just love with all the neediness and desire to be tender like all love.

When I found my mother drinking in this horrible ugliness, in her own disgust, my mother slapped me, I ran past my father and hid in the closet over and over and over again.

I kept saying: Why didn’t you protect me?

You’re my father; you’re the law; the tin badge.

You’re supposed to be Gary Cooper.

And so I dream of killing him, but I am becoming him.

I am you.

The tin star, the sheriff.

I’ll shoot you dead, Dad.

A beer? Want a beer, Dad?

It’s all right.

Fucking Gary Cooper.
I’m awakened, my soul, my emotions.
I have the anger to kill him.

But then his death is my suicide, a final separation, a final withdrawal, the beginning of a great travel, the ultimate sacrifice.

The ultimate narcissism.
I can imagine so many other solutions.

I’m ready to go back, I’m ready to crawl back into the earth.
Let the worms eat my body, and return as a sunflower.

My mother’s gone mad.
She’s a lunatic and they’ve finally locked her away.
Mother.
Mother.
Mother.
Life is a vast embrace of enormous beauty.
Mother, I hate you the most, I hate you more than anything.

You’re the reason that I hide behind this wall.
I have to protect myself from you.
I know what you can do to me.
I know how much you can hurt me.

So I make a movie and cast my mom in the lead role.

It’s a postmodern oedipal spaghetti western filled with dense symbolism and distance.

Art is making the invisible, visible.

Kill me.
I needed to die.

And my mother is beautiful.

The return to the mother.
Sexy, my first wet dream, wonderful.
More charming than Sophia Loren, Jeanne Moreau.
Mother, I hate you the most.
I know what you can do to me.

Self-loathing, disgust—so I experience her as she experiences herself.

A unity of suffering.
My desire to love is my hope for her to love me.
I love you, Mother.
(I love you, Mother.)
It yearns so deep, so loud (I love you, Mother) within me.

In this incest, everything is suspended: time, law, prohibition, all desires are abolished.
Nothing is exhausted, nothing is wanted, all our embraces, Mother.

Through my mother’s embrace I see myself anew.
Loved, lovable.
All our embraces, Mother.
I will persist in wanting to rediscover them.

Life is a vast embrace of enormous beauty.

This beauty, sometimes piercingly cold
sometimes torridly hot.

We can consider any road valid if it helps us come closer
to the object of our disgust:
the heroic male, the gunslinger.
I cast my father as the villain.
(On the horse)
We hunt each other down like we used to (Navajo) and
he lets me get close and closer (Landscape) finally he
lets me kill him.

The Trojan horse, Stagecoach, John Ford,
the Lonesome Cowboy, Andy Warhol,
cemetery in the middle of nowhere.
Now I’m the sheriff, I’m Gary Cooper, and I leave town in the Stagecoach.

I’ll shoot you dead, Dad.

Why didn’t he protect me?

I’ll shoot you dead, Dad.

I want to be Gary Cooper.

This time, he lets me kill him.

My father—reason based on the calculation of interest.

I don’t give a fuck for the phallus, for Father, for convention, for continuation, I’ll shoot you dead, Dad.

I become the post-oedipal, transhuman, newly made man.

Full of love and radiance, open to the healing energy of the world.

My soul hangs in the finest galleries, the greatest collectors each have a pound of my flesh I am marketable.