Everyday Cinema: The Films of Marc Lafia

Marc Lafia, Daniel Coffeen

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Interview with Jisu Song, TriBeCa Film Institute

Q: In your film *Exploding Oedipus*, there’s experimentation through the editing using straight, quick cuts, harsh coloring, low, noir lighting, and fragmented images. How would you describe the style that you’re using in your film, and how is your style experimental? Why did you choose an experimental style for this film?

A: Hilbert, a young man who can only see things through books and films, wants to find something more, so he withdraws to the Tenderloin in San Francisco, to be alone, to be invisible. In the small room of his decrepit hotel, he wants to figure out where his feelings are, where he is going. He begins to explore the art scene, the possibilities and spaces of his sexual desires and the use of drugs. He’s experimenting with himself. And so the film has this look and design that is as you say, experimental.

Q: I see those two things together. Yes.

A: He wants to know who he can be. He has to explode the image of himself, his past, his sense of self. He sets about this tentatively, self-consciously, in a bookish kind of way. He wants to know how he came to construct an image of himself. He comes to ask, how can the cinema be more than a reflection of ourselves? He wants both to run from himself and to discover himself, the self that he is not in touch with but wants to find and connect to.

In the small hotel room he repeatedly watches 8-mm films of his childhood taken by his father. In one of these home movies he sees the image of himself as a little boy, walking away from his mother’s vanity. She finds him in the reflection of her mirror, looking on at her, drinking in a stupor. She gets up to hit him when his father comes in, shooting his 8-mm camera. In his hotel room he plays this scene projected on a sheet on the wall, it is this piece of film that Hilbert keeps looping and returning to. So to break this film, he makes his own film, he creates a new narrative, a new image, what he calls a post-oedipal spaghetti western. And in this film inside the film he shoots his father dead-dead.

Unconsciously he wants to explode the cinema of seeing, the cinema that is a mirror. He wants to create a cinema of sight. He wants cinema to do more that represent the world that already is and wants with cinema to bring something new into the world, to be a way to see the world anew. So this experimentation you speak of performs his desire to explode Oedipus, cinema, himself, everything.

Q: In your film *Revolution of Everyday Life*, the characters’ use of recording devices such as the camera to document their personal lives contributes to the film’s experimentation and blurring of genre. It appears the use of technology is the impetus for cinematic experimentation. Why did you choose to experiment using technology in this piece?

A: In *Exploding Oedipus*, Hilbert makes a film to see an image of himself. In *Revolution*, the two girls ask, What is the image that we want to bring to the world, to make the world? How is the world our image? With social media we create an image, a narrative of ourselves. We are always already recorded and recording. We change our profile, our picture, and our stories—the project of psycho-schizo analysis. Of any self-knowing. To create an image that is a double of us, that we can say is us, that is us becoming.

We are always an image today, a profile, that’s the larger technology you are talking about. The long wish of writing ourselves into “history” has happened. But what does it mean, to be one of millions of stories. The use of the camera and the actors documenting themselves does blur this line of fiction documentation, what’s staged, what’s really happening. This is the very same line we have blurred in our use of contemporary and social media. What happens when you turn the camera on and speak to it, perform for it? When you use it as a way to say things about yourself, about your everyday?

I got to a certain point with *Revolution* where I could sense that to know the actors intimately, and more so, to have them reveal themselves intimately, I should ask them to record themselves, alone, away from me. When I brought this up I was surprised by how keen they were to do it. So over the next months I gave out flip cameras and asked
them to make recordings of themselves. I gave them very open instructions that came from performance and video art, asking them to simply be a body in space, for them to have no fear of the mundane, to just be. Which is not easy. Actors want something to do, a script.

The cameras come back, and just seeing them is extraordinary. They are performative, acted and enacted. You see them, their rooms, their lives, their rhythms. And the two modes of the two actresses who are to be the leads in the film are radically different. One lets herself be seen, she is a presence for the camera to see. The other presents herself to the camera, addresses it directly, we never see her, so to speak, she talks to us, performs for us, always coming to the camera. The other is there, allowing the camera to see her as if the camera is not there.

I have everyone’s recordings. And each of them in every way is extraordinarily revealing and interesting. I asked them then to form a collective that gets together to do private and public recordings. Together they will argue about what it is they are doing and why. And in all of this, the two girls are falling in love. Until, that is, they see each other through the group that sees them. Through the group each recognizes the great distance between their views on love, revolt, and art. And then everything falls apart.

The recording became part of their everyday, and the conflict, how do we stand toward it.

Q: What drove you to transition from filmmaking to media installation work such as your exhibition Eternal Sunshine in Shanghai? Why did you choose this direction rather than make another film?

A: I wanted to make a different kind of film, to find new ways of making film, that’s one reason. The other is that, while in the film business there’s been this continued, intensified commercialization and narrowing down of the film form and language, contemporary art conversely locates cinema within the broader landscape of visual culture. And in this environment there is more freedom to openness of form and format. At the Minsheng Art Museum in Shanghai, for example, I could play the eight-minute video Raindrop Ecstasy and the feature Hi, How Are You Guest 10497 together in one room, as they share narrative elements. In the museum space it does not matter when you enter or leave the film, you pick it up where and when you do and leave when you want. This is much more in keeping with the way people watch films at home and in the art context today. Also one film is a diptych, the other a triptych, and so the mise-en-scène is multiple, moving in many directions at once. This kind of film viewing and making has a different sense of resolution and tension, it’s a different order of expectations and the demands of a more commercial cinema.

Though there are always exceptional films made year in and year out, filmmaking today is for the most part a producer’s medium. Most filmmakers are spending their time looking for money, not making work. And soon enough they internalize what the cinema demands and what it should be. So if you are interested in cinema as a possibility, as a language, a means to discover something new, you have to define your own agenda. You can seek refuge and find it, at times, in the visual arts in such places as museums, galleries, and biennials.

Q: Most articles and reviews define you as a new media artist. How would you describe yourself as a filmmaker and artist? What does new media mean to you?
A: I went to the UCLA film school, which is right next to the art school. So I was going between the two departments. Shirley Clarke was teaching in the film school, and she had a very different sense of making films then, let’s say, the screen-writing teachers. For her film was a process, a search, you found your way in the making of it. In the writing department, you made a film on paper, it was all in the writing. It was made on the page. In the art department, I was taking more theory classes. During and after film school I was doing a lot of music videos, mostly as a conceptualist, and I was teaching at Art Center College of Design, courses on game design and music videos, and there with some students I started designing a number of interfaces and applications that I took to San Francisco, which eventually led to the founding of artandculture.com. At the same time I was always going to art shows and openings.

In the late nineties there was interest in the digital, in new media, from the art world, not quite yet the network. They were also interested, as was everyone, in the new condition and disruption of Internet culture. During this time I made a number of works, including the Vanndemar Memex or Lara Croft Stripped Bare by Her Assassins, Even; Ambient Machines; Variable Montage; The Battle of Algiers; and other works that started to be shown in museums and at art festivals. It was just before this that I made the 35-mm feature Exploding Oedipus in San Francisco after trying for some time to find financing in Los Angeles.

Q: So you were doing both films and new media work?
A: Very few films then. Though I was writing all the time. I still had not figured out a way to make narrative films in terms of how to put on a production and think in a new way. It was still you write, you find interest from an actor who is worth so much at the box office that you get attached to your film or you find a small production company. You needed all those things to mount a production. Today the issue is distribution, getting your films seen. In time if I wanted to make films, I had to work outside of those constraints and let myself be more of an artist looking for ways to explore film language and its reading. And with that, as things became more and more digital, with Final Cut and digital cameras and phone cameras, and the culture became more networked, I started working to find conceptual approaches to the problems of how to make a film. Not just logistically but how to make a film speak, from the very way it articulates itself to the way it moves. How to make a film alive from the inside.

As to new media, its defining characteristic is software. In software, all the hardwired technology constraints of film can be rethought, the things we don’t even think of or take as natural, the things we think are constitutive of film, one screen at a time, a beginning, a middle, an end, the short format, the long-form format, the use of sound, the linear production processes, et cetera. These are all industry standards. When you think of film as software, it all becomes rewritable. There is also computation and the network, both with distinct properties challenging our sense of what cinema might be in
terms of time, duration, grammar. There is this but there is also the necessity to rethink how to make films. Most filmmakers use these new tools to simply streamline the older production processes of filmmaking.

Cinema is based on a technological substrate of recording and playback and has for the most part in narrative cinema been generated from a written format that is then photographed. In contrast, cinema in software and computation is generative, responsive, iterative, often driven by algorithms and correlative instructions, even crowdsourcing, so its characteristics or properties as a technical substrate, as an instrumentation, have changed. Similarly, cinema and its history in the network becomes both an archive and a set of files for remixing, renarrating. But we’ve hardly explored this, because there is no standards for it, no industry for consumption of it.

With cameras on our computers and phones we continually create images and narratives of ourselves, we transact through moving images. Though network culture is pervasive in the way we think and represent ourselves, in the way we image ourselves and narrate ourselves, you don’t find any of this in today’s cinema. Why is that? Well, not only is the cinema an industry that wants to protect itself, it’s also a language that has to be reinvented. It’s a form that demands we reinvent it, discover it, undo it, and make it our own.

Q: How do you define your movies? They’re not narrative or documentary, they’re on the borderline between video-art experimental and narrative. Looks like a new genre of cinema. Do you have a name for it?

A: I had to come to invent a way to make films for myself. Not to depend on other people’s money, proscribed locations, the perfect actor, reproducing a set script—none of this would do. I saw that I had to fold my reality into fiction. To see fiction in my everyday. To film my scripts in the environment of my lived life, with those around me, to see in the everyday the fiction I was writing, and to see the real as having the potential to become fiction, and to bring these two together. I don’t know what to call the films, but a filmmaker friend of mine from Japan reminded me of John Grierson, who believed in cinema’s capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, and that cinema could photograph the living scene and the living story, which was everywhere. To add to this I think the living scene, as he calls it, can also interpret the scenario or fiction in your head, to be folded into it. As William Burroughs found, all the words and images are there, you’ve got to put them together through you. So yes, they are experimental, but not in this old school, antinarrative or structuralist way, and yes, they are video—as video can record in only a way that video can—they are both immediate and constructed, found and invented, and they use direct recording of sound and are not there to then narrate an argument on top, but the recordings are their own argument, a becoming recording. They seem to me a very contemporary cinema, a cinema of the everyday, a cinema not made by numbers.

Q: You work very intimately with your actors. Where do you find them? How do you establish such a strong and intimate relationship with them?

A: At some point you realize an actor brings him or herself to the role. It is the actor playing the role. There is no role in that sense, there is the actor who invents, plays, plays with and along with this role, that he or she goes on inventing. To do that inventing I want the actor to feel completely at ease in taking on this role, making this role, becoming it, bringing themselves to it. The actors are essential to me, the key collaborators. We spend time together, doing physical exercises, improv, dance, trust exercises, just talking. Seeing if we can get on. Just being with each other. Really taking time with each other. After a while you get a feel for those who want to be creative. Who want to invent. To collaborate. Then I e-mail them a lot of images, film clips, music. In the new film, they take home cameras, film themselves in some cases. So through this physical work and exercising and conversing, we come to understand the situation we want to construct, and the language, their dialogue reflects that, so the language becomes theirs, as they and the role are now inseparable. We do not shoot many days, but we prep a long time—just enough, not too much—so that when we shoot, there is a lot inside that comes out.

Q: In some of the work it is almost as if you are documenting the actor finding the role, bringing themselves into a relationship to the ideas of the work.

A: Yes. Very much so.
Q: What is the future of the cinema?
A: There are a lot cinemas, but it all becomes one, all competing for the same spaces and attention. I am not the person to answer about the future. Today the movie has already started, is always playing, you get spliced into it, take up the story. Maybe that’s simply what reality television is or immersive multiplayer online video games are or what it means to be in an always-networked environment. As a language, the availability and immediacy of self-representation through digital recording suggests a new kind of mise-en-scène, very new kinds of narrative, a different distribution of logic, of a story that has already happened. But who knows. Maybe for some time, because what I am describing is so everyday, most cineasts will look for the extraordinary. There are few films like Michael Haneke’s *Amour*, quiet and intimate, or *Spring Breakers*, that bring you into the delirium of wanting to live inside pop culture and live out the media. Two films very much about the ordinary.

Q: A lot of filmmakers find your movies inspiring. Who is your audience beside filmmakers and film theory people?
A: I don’t know about “a lot.” My films are rarely seen. But I suppose people who like film, visual arts, literature, music, who see something of themselves in these films. Who see something of what it is to approach film as a medium. Who see that we do not know what film is. That film is always a possibility in front of us, that we are always inventing the cinema, film, video, its formats, forms, and possibilities. This excitement of its invention is the experience. The audience, then, are those who want to make cinema with me. That’s a very small group. Very small.

Q: From *Exploding* to *27*, how would describe the difference?
A: Where *Exploding* was a presentation and analysis of desire, of things that had already happened, the recent work of *27* enacts the tactics of film to propel a real-time search—the film becomes a site not for representation but for discovery; the film is this set of rules that everyone knows, it’s like a game we are all going to play, it’s a construct, a structure, for things to happen. It becomes the site for performing, for acting, for asking questions, it’s the documentation of that. It’s not so much about representing desire and memory, but enacting it or enabling it—it becomes then an expression of a certain immediacy and urgency and a way of seeing the world.

Q: Between 2005 and 2010, you made five long-form narrative films that you are only now beginning to show. I am curious to hear how you made these films and why you haven’t shown them.
A: In 2005 I was coming out of a period of making small film works with algorithmic instructions called *Computations*. I had created in software a programmable “film” projec-
tor to assign an envelope of iterative values to any number of film files—each generating sound. Many of the films were made from sequences of still images, so it was as much a way to look or relook at photographic practice and the imaging event as to the precise image and now see the image in time and in variable time—not quite a moving image but an image that moves.

Q: So then what happened?
A: Well, I started using these small Canon PowerShot cameras to shoot more and more videos. And so I wanted to find a way to order these videos. So I started a project called Permutations. With Permutations I again wrote a film projector in software, but this time one that played the audio files, each separately, one at a time, from left to right, while you are seeing all the video files play simultaneously. Very quickly the viewer learns to look at the video whose sound is playing. So yes, they are seeing all the videos at once but truly focusing on the one whose sound is playing. Once they locate or learn this way of seeing and reading they begin to see both the one event and the whole of the piece. Again, like in the computations, I was playing multiple recordings next to each other, but in this case the recordings were played without any manipulation other than their arrangement, each being looped while the audio track of any given video would narrate the videos playing left to right, going through the entire tableau or set of videos on the screen. What we think of as natural in the mise-en-scène of film language today is simply something that we’ve become habituated to learn to read and see in a particular way. But it is an industry standard. Just as painting moved from the wall and frescoes to the portability of canvas and then to outdoor or plein air painting, this in turn changing the content of painting, or album recording moved in the digital era back to the focus on the single, the technosphere and money change the images and sounds we produce.

Q: Your software cinema sounds very technical.
A: It isn’t, really. It’s only that our contemporary film playback system has become so invisible to us that we don’t need to explain it. In fact, we learn how to read film as a language. It came to a point where to create a new kind of cinema required that I think about it from the ground up, that I think about recording and playback. Recording and playback are particular kinds of events, particular kinds of effects of instrumentations. For the viewer, this technical underpinning, the program, the machine limit, or constraint, is most often not thought about—but if we think about vinyl records, for example, or our iPods as one big variable record, you can begin to sense how these apparatuses both allow and constrain meanings. When an audience today goes to see Christian Marclay’s video Téléphones, a 7.5-minute compilation of brief Hollywood film clips, it creates a narrative of its own, one that allows them to see film history; as they follow the image of the phone, they soon see more and more things.
Audiences very quickly learn how to read these works. The *Permutations* were all multiwindow works, and there were any number of ways to organize these images, these recordings, in a sequence, one shot after the other, but all at once, simultaneously. Each sound rerereads the video before and after it. Sound reads the image. Sound tells us what to see. The image sees the sound. Narrative is a way to read the world. Narrative happens with the constituent elements of sound and image. And so yes, we as readers and as an audience read them, even if they are ambient, structural, experimental; this legibility is in the realm of a large sense of narrative. We are always finding new articulations to narrate narrative.

Q: So how do you go from a tableau or single-sequence film to multiple sequences?
A: That’s exactly it. In *Permutations*, each film is an all-at-once event, an all-at-once sequence, whose simultaneous shots are rearticulated by the sound of each distinct recording moving shot by shot, from one to the next, through the entirety of the film, in a sense narrating, renarrating the same and a different film again and again.

Q: It sounds complicated.
A: When you see the films, it becomes so easy and obvious. Most people are not even thinking about the how. What they see is relationships.

Q: How do you go from this to narrative?
A: I made a great number of permutations, these small little films, and found many ways to order them—these were films made by rules—each day I had to make one or more films from the material I shot. Each would be a multiscreen film using the source sound of the films. With that in mind I was always recording image and recording sound. Arranging images and arranging sounds. I was seeing sounds and images, and while recording seeing, hearing a possible sense, until I would get home and with all the recording at hand find yet another sense of arrangement, of montage, narrative, which is a kind of sense, a logic of sense, with a repertoire of devices and strategies. So these small films, these permutations begin to delineate a tropology of narrative. Remember, I am not going home and editing these films in Final Cut. No, I am placing them inside my software player. I am arranging them and the player plays them. I have made in software an instrument that plays, composes, if you like, my film, multiple films. For the most part I am producing my own recordings. In that sense I am not remixing, I am not sampling; in these works the meaning comes from the arrangement and sequencing of the recordings. Though I used the software instrument for samples later on. So the more I made the films, the more I could then in recording seek them out.
Q: So you are recording these little clips with what in mind?
A: Yes, just seeing, observing things around me, everyday things. As I was doing this all the time and with these very innocuous small cameras, I was in a habit of recording anything and everything around me, art openings, conversations, dinners, things on the train, family events, time with friends, artworks, books, the sky, the city, cinema, myself.

Q: I see. So the rules gave you a way to organize this material.
A: Yes, exactly. At the end of the day there was at least one film, more often two to three films or more. Each complete unto itself. Each with its own sense. Each demanding their own sense. Some of these are fifteen seconds, some as long as two, three minutes.

Q: Was it difficult?
A: Yes and no. I wanted to come up with any number of new tropes. So I kept looking and looking. So it occurred to me that this was a way I was looking at the day, where was the event, the event of recording, and to get into the space, it happens in time because you’re recording, recording, recording. Warhol was doing this. He was after the good recording, the tape. All his phone calls recorded, everything, he was living in recording. Nan Goldin, the same. They both explored recording and lived within their recordings.

Q: I don’t think they explored how to present the recordings.
A: That’s very true. Warhol accumulated the recordings. Playing them back wasn’t what he was interested in. It was his way to be in the world and to be in it forever, in a sense. When he says the world is pop, it is the world recorded, from the Electric Chair, to Silver Car Crash, Jackies, on to his films, his modeling work—they all turn on the recording, self-recording and recording—his seeing through recording his time and taking possession of time, being recorded.
Q: Is this why in your most recent film each of the actors records themselves?
A: Yes. Out of convenience more than anything, I came to be more and more in my films. I was always available, and those around me were too. This way when I needed to shoot something and the moment was right, in that moment they became and were on the set. In front of me I am seeing the scenario, seeing them, myself in this movie.

Q: So now you are on the set. And that set happens to be where you are.
A: Yes. I had to create my own set. The set of the films, it turns out, is always the part that is so hard to produce. Art direction and sets, you can control. That’s the backbone of films. That’s why, for example, with Paradise I had to stage it in a park. It had to be open and possible at any time with available light and it had to fold into everyday life.

Q: And you’re in the movie.
A: Yes. Out of convenience more than anything, I came to be more and more in my films. I was always available, and those around me were too. This way when I needed to shoot something and the moment was right, in that moment they became and were on the set. In front of me I am seeing the scenario, seeing them, myself in this movie.

Q: So how did you get to your Chatroulette project, but let’s get back to the films.
A: Well, as I was making the Permutations, everything I saw was the possibility of a recording. Once you see recording—recording means to look here and not there—it means looking, seeing and hearing in a particular way. In a way that you see and record what you see to be somewhere else. You see it already in your film. If I could see the things in front of me and overlay them with the film scenario, then reality with a little tweaking could be the film. I started then to see that I could fold the everyday by slightly adjusting it this way and that way, into the context of the film inside me. I had a film script I had written several years earlier called Zanzibar, and at one moment while staying at a lake house with my family, I could see Zanzibar. I could see those around me—myself, my wife, Irena, and our child, Lola—as this story. I was staying by the lake and I was shooting in my permutations way, and in front of me I saw the narrative of Zanzibar unfolding. I could see that I could narrate an abstraction of the scenario into the everyday. I had internalized the story so well through the written script that it gave me the scenario to bring to the world or to see the world in. I realized I did not need to film the script, per se, I just needed to film things around me through the “lens” of the script.

Q: The film in a sense was happening before you?
A: Yes. At times they were just perfectly in the right setting, doing the right things, and at others, I would move the narrative along by asking Irena or Lola to say this or that in the setting they were in. I am certain Godard at some period was working in a similar way. This is why his films remain so vital and alive. Just look at Notre Musique and For Ever Mozart, let alone so many of his other films. They are happening in front of you, in front of him.

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Q: How did you work with them?
A: These characters in the scenario, I began to visualize them in a much larger sense then, this known actor or that actor, I could see them as living people right in front of me. At first you think Philip Seymour Hoffman or James Franco, they would be so perfect for this role. But you have to let go of that and see the guy on the subway across from you as that character. When I saw this actor was right, these two or three together were just perfect. I started to film them right away as if they were in the movie. And creative actors are quite wonderful this way, they want to play and invent, and that’s what we did, staged and blocked the scenes and got on with it. So, yes, there is a mix between actors and family members playing the scenario, the everyday, and then me, both on camera and narrating while recording my search for the film in the everyday.

There is a metanarrative to this work and to so many of the works, but it is something more or very different that a kind of self-reflexive cinema.

It is not about being a film, but How is this film and recording making sense and What is the sense we are looking for in making recordings? Because that is the sense you bring back to the cutting room. If it is not in the intention of the recording it will not be in the film. The film sees, presents the thinking of recording, which is at one and the same time emergent, in the logic and sense of the film. Not in the sense of coverage or shot to shot but in the event unfolding in front of you on screen, its sense. That’s actuality in the film, the film event is that.

Q: The next film, Love and Art, there are no actors in this film.
A: Yes and no. It appears to be a documentary and that everyone plays themselves. In the end that was the best way to make the film, to let it appear as if everything between this couple is real and they are playing themselves. But after doing Zanzibar, I could see that people want to move along trajectories or narrative hooks. They, the reader, the audience want to say to themselves, oh, this is about this—once they are looking for the “this” then you can move along other lines, all the while building on the suspension of narrative urgency.

Q: It is a documentary though, yes?
A: Maybe it is a fictional film within a documentary or vice versa. All films are some version of the two, no.

Q: It documents the New York art world very well.
A: I think so, a certain affect of it, yes. I had been living in New York and knew a number of artists, and I was making permutations in real time and was recording every day. I wanted to ask, what is it that compels one to make art? So I started to do that and look
Interview with Jisu Song (TriBeCa Film Institute)

around and ask that question at openings, at fairs, to friends, at conferences. Again, just observing and listening in, in a seemingly very casual way, but in a way that was already seeing the recording inside the film I was making. Wherever I was, I would set up or perform the film I was in search of. I would fold it into the context of my own given reality and produce a fiction inside this world I was documenting.

Q: How do you do that?
A: By already having a certain dialogue going on inside me, so it all seems very continuous or natural, by seeing the situation already, by seeing the event as the film event, by writing with the camera into the event. By bringing people into the scenario in a very easy way for them. And of course I am using available light and cameras so simple in that film to use that with a simple explanation I could give the camera to someone around me and they can record me and I’m in the movie.

Q: You do that seamlessly with Irena, her filming you, you filming her.
A: She is very good with the camera and on camera, and she is so often with me. So in this film, folding Irena and myself into this personal story while framing a documentary about art in a larger sense, in the sense of being in the world and her and I being in the world and enjoying art, it made sense. By doing this, I could more easily shift from foreground to background, putting one thing, ourselves, or art, in relief and taking the other away. In such a structure I have many narrative places to go.

Q: Are you really suffering in the movie?
A: Well … it’s a film.

Q: The next film, My Double, My Self, that’s definitely a documentary, no?
A: To me, whether it’s a documentary, which of course it is a document, or not, isn’t really the most interesting question. It’s really about the recording event, where does it start, where is it going, and when do you know it is going in some direction.

Q: Tell us more.
A: Sometimes I am just recording, and the more you record, like Jeff Koons, says, in Love and Art, once the recording or object is there, the recording moves into this objective realm and stands by itself in the world. But not quite, not yet, it has to stand envisioned inside a reading envelope, a context, and a form. It needs to have a shape, and that’s where all these strategies of fiction, the “real,” cinema, video art, documentary, acting,
Converstation with Peter Duhon (screening of Paradise at Anthology Film Archives)

Q: Your film confronts a typical Hollywood narrative and convention. It also questions—even challenges—politics, testing borders, boundaries, and the notion of excess and what encloses excess. You use, for example, the element of the bomb in the film. What were you exploring there?

A: Paradise tries in a very abstract way to be an allegorical film, a kind of science fiction film about control and society. But of course we don’t have all the sets and costumes, so we have to take an approach of defamiliarizing the familiar, like Alphaville or Symbiopsychotaxiplasm. The present is so familiar and things gets so internalized it is hard to see it when you are in it. At some point in the film the characters go to this other side of what is ordinary or everyday. In the park we put up this large plastic sheet and thought of it as a membrame, a border, like you say, that has this place of isolation on the other side. A camp, a detention, where there is this neurolinguistic programing. By creating this zone we get this sense of both sides having within them containment, propaganda, border control—all the logic of capital. All those things we don’t see or want to see in the everyday.

As to the bomb, the two children who cross over and became young adults are the sensualists, and one of them convinces themself that there is only one way to break through: by getting a weapon. And the other convinces themself that the other side, whatever that is, is to be found through the poetic displacement of yourself.

Both then become strategies of excess to deal with what is presented as excessive and invisible, the runaway logic of global capital, algorithmic systems, and control.

Q: Is that what you are going for in Paradise?

A: There it widens to question narration itself and ask how, as social beings, we narrate ourselves and are narrated. How do we speak, who has power and in turn whose narration speaks us.

nonacting, narrative, installation, long form—these are all mobilized to create a reading event, a viewing event. Film, or video installation, or seen online, these become contexts, environments, and situations that allows something to be seen—they create different “kinds” of legibility. So recording is an event of the above that leads to a legibility. That’s what the films turn on, the bringing together of events of narration through strategies of recording and instruments of forms, of playback. It is the construction of film as that syntactical event that is to be read.

Conversation continues with Peter Duhon (on the occasion of screening Paradise at Anthology Film Archives)