

The Possibilities of Contemporary Cinema: Film Creation: Master Filmmakers Lecture Series II

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Lecture Transcript

I am genuinely delighted to be here. It is rather cold today, but the sunlight is beautiful. Xiao Pan just showed me around. I remember that the last time I came was because of the director Wei Shujun. He was still a student at CUC then, deeply passionate about cinema, and he and his small team invited me over. I have even forgotten which of my films they screened; it was more than ten years ago. In the years since, I have noticed that a number of directors who graduated from CUC have advanced remarkably quickly and have done outstanding work. Their films display qualities unlike those of graduates from the Beijing Film Academy—people of my generation, for example—or the several directors who came out of the Central Academy of Drama. They have characteristics of their own.

Cinema is a curious thing. It seems to possess an extraordinarily tenacious life force: however often people pronounce its decline, it somehow keeps living. When sound cinema emerged, people said cinema was finished. When television became widespread in the 1950s, they again said cinema was finished. A few years ago, when 3D cinema arrived, I said, “This time cinema really is finished”—the aspect ratio was different, the depth of field was different, everything was different. But I was wrong. Cinema still did not die. So I began to wonder: why?

Some time earlier—during the pandemic, I think—I gave a lecture at Tongji University in which I mainly discussed Gilles Deleuze. He wrote *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* and *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*.¹ He approached cinema through his philosophical concepts and, in those books, revisited a number of masters of avant-garde film. His conclusion was that cinema had the capacity to revive contemporary philosophy. That is the encouragement I want to offer you. Contemporary philosophers have spoken of concepts as something approaching exhaustion, and language above all. Even Wittgenstein suggested that philosophy was reaching an end, because human beings try to use language—something that is, in essence, a system of signs—to investigate and represent the essence of the world. We depend too heavily on language. Human language is continually being alienated, and human beings themselves are continually alienated by language. Breaking through it is extremely difficult.

There is another point. At least at the beginning of the twentieth century, cinema was the equivalent of AI today: it was absolute high technology. That is why, at the start of the last century, artists of every kind—from the foremost painters to the foremost poets—threw themselves passionately into cinema. Later, however, cinema divided into different branches. One branch was developed by the American D. W. Griffith into a form centered on storytelling: what came to be known as “narrative cinema.” Once narrative cinema appeared, the elite artists no longer wanted to play; they thought it was too lowbrow. Those artists retained an

¹Deleuze’s two-volume study appeared in French as *Cinéma 1: L’image-mouvement* (1983) and *Cinéma 2: L’image-temps* (1985). The standard English editions are Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Deleuze’s established terms are “crystal-image” and “crystals of time”; “crystal-time” below retains the lecturer’s recurrent shorthand.

“experimental spirit” and followed a path of artistic exploration, which became what we call “experimental film.” That path has developed to the present and merged with contemporary art. In contemporary art today, the most important medium is plainly no longer easel painting; it is the moving image.

Cinema has not been eliminated because the core of film art—what we call “the cinematic”—remains intensely alive, whether it takes the form of experimental film or contemporary art. It has prompted first-rate contemporary philosophers such as Deleuze, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Jean Baudrillard, and Jean-François Lyotard to reconsider and rethink fundamental questions. Cinema may be capable of saving many things because it is sensuous and possesses a Dionysian quality of celebration. It has the kind of Dionysian character Nietzsche described. It carries no burden; it exists only in the present instant: I film, therefore I am.

There is also Plato. He tells us that human beings live in a cave and that our lives amount to watching our own shadows.² From that point of departure, I believe cinema is, in essence, a retelling or reconstruction of the Platonic cave. Cinema is a theater. It can therefore answer the immense question: why will cinema never disappear? Because something irreducibly human resides both in cinema and in the form through which we watch it. Human beings are accustomed to sitting in a theater and watching their own shadows. Before cinema was invented, Plato’s philosophy remained a rational judgment. But once cinema appeared—once a screen was stretched across an ordinary Italian piazza and people gathered to watch human conduct in light and shadow—humanity finally disclosed something fundamental about itself.

At this juncture, we truly need to restore our confidence. We need to understand that cinema’s fundamental nature is continuous with something fundamental in humanity and with the origin of the world itself. This is also what leading contemporary philosophers such as Deleuze and Badiou have thought. I remember that, after Sartre saw Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Ivan’s Childhood*, he was so moved that he wrote a long essay for *Libération*. Sartre argued that the film did more than reflect on human nature: what mattered was “seeing,” being seen, and being remembered.³

To trace my earliest interest in cinema, I really do have to return to my adolescence, in the latter half of the 1970s. Foreign films had not yet reached us, and what we could see were films bearing the imprint of the Cultural Revolution. What films were there? One that made a deep impression on me was *Start an Undertaking* (Chuangye).⁴ Your parents’ generation may be the only one that still knows it. The film was about the oil worker Wang Jinxi. If you asked me which film image first stirred me most powerfully, I would not name a shot by some great master. I would answer honestly: it was probably in 1975. I was ten or eleven years old, watching *Start an Undertaking*, the film about the Chinese oil worker Wang Jinxi, in the auditorium of the

²In Plato’s allegory, the cave’s prisoners watch shadows cast by artifacts carried behind them rather than, strictly speaking, their own shadows. The lecture’s wording is an interpretive condensation. Plato, *Republic* 7.514a–517a.

³Sartre’s defense of *Ivan’s Childhood* was a letter to Mario Alicata, editor of the Italian Communist newspaper *L’Unità*, published October 9, 1963; it did not appear in *Libération*. The French text was later included as “Discussion sur la critique à propos de *L’Enfance d’Ivan*” in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations VII: Problèmes du marxisme*, 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

⁴*Chuangye* (1974), directed by Yu Yanfu and produced by Changchun Film Studio, is catalogued in English as *Start an Undertaking*. Its protagonist, Zhou Tingshan, was modeled in part on the celebrated Daqing oil worker Wang Jinxi (“Iron Man”); the lecture’s statement that the film is simply “about Wang Jinxi” is a condensation rather than a literal identification.

Nanjing Automobile Factory. There was an impassioned face. I remember almost nothing else about the film; I remember only that face on the screen. Films of that period loved close-ups and loved displays of fervor. I did not understand what the characters were so stirred about. But to see human emotion magnified to that degree—to have it made visible before you—was something I have never forgotten.

Looking back, I understand that what affected me was the close-up. The close-up is the most cinematic of shots. A long shot belongs to theater, does it not? Early cinema was largely composed of medium shots. What truly marks the birth of modern cinema is a close-up: the eye being sliced open in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*. For me personally, however, the close-up is Wang Jinxi's face. I found that face in close-up extraordinarily, extraordinarily powerful.

Seen in this light, true cinema remains autonomous. It elevates itself through its own means and does not depend too heavily on literature. Even the most formidable contemporary philosophers draw spiritual sustenance from the cinematic; cinema becomes their best instrument and method for reviving contemporary philosophy. To revive philosophy, in their sense, is to revive the world—to save it. They really do treat cinema as a means of saving the world. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, for example, Deleuze surveys an enormous number of films. He regards the best cinema as the cinema of what he calls “crystal-time.” In 2023, I gave a lecture at Tongji University titled “The Camera as the Eye of the Spirit,” which you can find online.⁵ In that lecture, I said that Deleuze himself was a film fanatic. He remarked that the film department was next door, that he often went to screenings, and that he was also a regular at the Cinémathèque. But he never made a film. So when I read his explanation of “crystal-time,” I become a little impatient. I have, after all, studied film and made films, and I am also an amateur of philosophy; I know how that crystal is produced. Yet he firmly refused the word “poetic,” and I think he was absolutely right to do so. The instant in which a “crystal” forms in cinema is indeed more than merely poetic.

Before Deleuze's film theory appeared, semiotics dominated film theory—above all, Christian Metz's film semiotics. After Deleuze, people joked that Metz had killed himself. And indeed, after Deleuze's theory appeared, film semiotics lost its market.⁶ Deleuze refused to explain cinema through its symbolic content—or, to put it differently, he opposed explaining cinema by means borrowed from literature, mythology, or deconstructive art. He grounded his account wholly in cinema's own ontology. For him, this was “crystal-time.” A mysterious instant appears in a film. You do not know what it means. It has slipped entirely out of order. It has no before or after, no surrounding context. It exists wholly in a single present: the present mind cannot be grasped, the future mind cannot be grasped, the past mind cannot be grasped—and yet

⁵A revised text associated with the Tongji lecture was published as Wang Chao and Li Xiaofeng, “Chengwei ‘jingshen zhi yan’ de sheyingji” [The Camera as the “Eye of the Spirit”], *Tianya*, no. 2 (2024): 24–37. The supplied transcript dates the lecture to 2023; no independent event notice confirming the exact date has been located.

⁶Christian Metz was a foundational figure in film semiotics. Deleuze's French *Cinema* volumes appeared in 1983 and 1985; Metz died by suicide in 1993. The statement that Metz “killed himself” after Deleuze is retained as an oral joke about a perceived theoretical displacement, not as a causal historical claim. See Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, “Tribute to Christian Metz,” *Discourse* 16, no. 3 (May 1994): 3–5.

something becomes graspable through that very ungraspability.⁷ That mysterious instant is what we call a crystal of time. Those of you who are interested might learn something about Deleuze's idea of crystal-time, then look back at the classic moments in the classic films you have seen and ask yourselves how those moments were produced. That would be immensely meaningful. Its significance is this: whether we approach cinema through its nature or through its beauty, we must allow it to become something like a religious conviction. The beauty of cinema must become a religious conviction. Only then will it spur you on. If I hope to bring one classic moment into being in the course of my creative life, I should stop worrying about awards. I should pursue that moment as an article of faith—or play with it and enjoy it as an absorbing game.

It would be a great pity if we loved cinema, chose to make films, and then spent every day lamenting the obstacles: there is no financing, the censorship process will not let the film through, and so on—until all these practical matters leave us so disheartened that we finally say, “Forget it. Perhaps this age simply has no place for me as a filmmaker.” We need to establish conviction. I know several architects, and I have found that directors resemble architects: both work through projects. Cinema, in fact, is project work. That is where its challenge lies. On the surface, directing is certainly a job and a project. But the conviction and confidence contained within the work are its most essential elements. And today, if you truly have talent, I do not think any difficulty can frighten you. A few days ago, I visited Mount Song. An excellent calligrapher and painter has withdrawn there, and a group of children who originally did not know how to paint are studying with him. When I arrived, I thought: at worst, I could simply come here. His students could all act for me and work as my assistants. Why not shoot with a phone? It would be no great problem. Phones today are extraordinary—the iPhone 16 Pro, in particular, produces genuinely excellent images. Nothing should frighten us. Go to the county towns in your home region: many of them are full of vitality, and filming there need not cost much. It can be no more expensive than taking a trip.

That is why love—love for cinema—is, to my mind, especially important.

We must also know film history. This does not mean accumulating historical facts for their own sake. It means giving yourself strength. Standing within history is not the same as standing outside it. Studying film history and film theory gives the solitary filmmaker greater inner resources—something capable of sustaining you. That is the value of historical and theoretical study. Without such accumulation and perspective, the slightest setback can be painful; it becomes very easy to give up. With that foundation, you will think: I am someone who intends to enter history. Can I abandon the work so easily? No. This is important—genuinely important.

Nor, in my view, do we need to fear the age of short-form video. Some short videos are truly excellent. Not long ago, I wrote about two heavyset performers, a man and a woman, who make videos in imitation of Wong Kar-wai's manner. You must have seen them; they are apparently quite famous. They dress in Republican-era clothes and specialize in parodying Wong Kar-wai. They are enormously talented. I think their videos are unquestionably better than Wong Kar-wai's films. Wong Kar-wai's work is too self-consciously arty; they have none of that artiness—they satirize it. I do not mind saying this publicly: they are definitely better than Wong

⁷The line alludes to the *Diamond Sutra*, where the canonical order is past, present, and future: “past mind cannot be grasped, present mind cannot be grasped, and future mind cannot be grasped.” The lecturer reverses the sequence and adds a paradoxical final “graspability” (*kede*) to the repeated “cannot be grasped” (*buke de*); the English preserves that play. See Red Pine, trans., *The Diamond Sutra: The Perfection of Wisdom* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001), sec. 18.

Kar-wai. Compare them for yourselves. Both bodies of work are there; once you compare them, you can see. This is not a question of respect or disrespect. They can simply stand there and toss off a few satirical lines, and in my view that too can be cinema. Cinema is not necessarily a matter of manipulating the camera with great virtuosity. If you have Chaplin's ability, a single fixed shot is enough: the instant he appears, the frame overflows with cinema. We therefore need to rethink the cinematic itself. The cinematic is not a matter of making every shot look dazzling. Quite the contrary: the true masters often appear "clumsy." I love Chaplin. He does not show off with the camera. What matters more is his love and his enduring trust in cinema.

Cinema's history of little more than a century is extraordinarily rich, and it has always existed in relation to many other things. At a time when certain other arts were declining and seemed to have lost their future, cinema rose with unexpected force. Everyone rightly regards the Latin American Boom as a great achievement. But look at some of its representative works—Mario Vargas Llosa's *Conversation in the Cathedral* and *The Green House*, or Julio Cortázar's "The Southern Thruway." The structural consciousness and narrative methods of these works were unquestionably learned from cinema, as the writers themselves acknowledged. They learned, however, from a different branch—not the Hollywood branch, but the Eisensteinian one: intellectual montage and the montage of attractions.⁸ Montage theory has found less and less room within narrative, especially within vulgarized Hollywood narration, yet it has continually stimulated genuine internal transformations in art cinema. One would scarcely imagine it, but Eisenstein's theory—what we take to be a theory of cinema in its purest artistic form—received some of its fullest development in Latin American literature. Much contemporary art cinema and contemporary art work in a similar way, although they still do not possess literature's formal freedom. Literature, frankly, costs little: the writer can go wherever thought leads.

In any case, I believe that knowledge of film history and film theory is indispensable. Perhaps I place such emphasis on it because of my own inclinations. But I sincerely believe film history gives us the strength to face the future, helps us persevere, and reminds us that none of us makes films alone. The moment a person picks up a camera, that person is no longer filming alone. Especially now, when film art is said to be declining and commercialization has become so pervasive, you can still pick up a camera—or a phone—and make a narrative that belongs to you alone. You know that you are extending a lineage, carrying on a tradition. You need that confidence. Whatever you film, the act can stimulate many things in you: it can impel you to keep learning, awaken humility, and develop a wide range of skills.

You also need to watch an enormous number of films—and you must watch them in cinemas, on a large screen. I was fortunate. In Nanjing during the 1980s, before I entered the Beijing Film Academy, I was able to see films by major directors on the big screen: *Paris, Texas*, *The Last Metro*, *Tess*, *Lili Marleen*, *Mephisto*, and others. Those screenings established in me a conviction about the beauty of cinema. The first issue is not simply how many films you have seen. Watching films must become instinctive; to make it an instinct, you have to keep watching. When I was at the Film Academy, films were projected at the laboratory two afternoons each week. The same film would be shown once in the afternoon and again in the evening. I attended both screenings. I remember a Fassbinder retrospective at the China Film Archive during which I

⁸*Biaoyi mengtaiqi* (表意蒙太奇) is conventionally rendered "intellectual montage," while *zashua mengtaiqi* (杂耍蒙太奇) is "montage of attractions." See Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), and "The Montage of Attractions," in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 29–34.

watched six films in a single day. What I mean is that, for at least three to five years, you should maintain a rhythm of three to five films a day. The point is not the number as such. The point is to make film language instinctive. It is as simple as that. The process resembles learning Chinese calligraphy. I have practiced brush calligraphy for seven years, and only now can I use the brush freely. I used to be unable to handle what calligraphers call a “long-point” brush. Those of you who practice calligraphy will know that the longer the bristles, the harder the brush is to control. A short point reaches its limit as soon as you press down; it is relatively rigid. Only recently, after seven years of practice, have I become able to use a long-point brush.

Mastering film language is much the same as mastering calligraphy, or learning English. You have to learn it until you can speak it at any moment as naturally as your mother tongue. These capacities are built little by little. Love and interest come first; then you turn them into habit. You are young, all under thirty. There is still time for you to do anything, which is why I am speaking at such length. I did not make *The Orphan of Anyang* (Anyang Ying'er) until I was thirty-six. Surely you have not all reached thirty-six? Starting late had its advantages: I was well prepared. Yet even my preparation could not match what is available to you, because resources were far less abundant in our time. My preparation was chiefly literary. At the very least, literature helped me solve the problem of narrative before I began making films.

Since we have arrived at narrative, let us set aside purely experimental cinema for the moment. Let us consider films released theatrically. Even the films of great masters are, in one way or another, narrative films. So-called anti-narrative cinema is still, at bottom, a form of narrative cinema. Narrative demands patient, solid work because cinematic narration does not arise spontaneously. If you want to narrate, you must learn—without equivocation—from literature and drama. A filmmaker must cultivate, if not literary expertise in the strict sense, then at least a deep interest in literature. Anyone who wants to become a screenwriter obviously needs a strong literary foundation. But anyone who wants to become a good director should at least develop the habit of reading novels. A director who does not read fiction is unlikely to travel very far creatively.

The text underlying a first-rate Hollywood blockbuster—an Academy Award winner or a box-office champion—is invariably first-rate. Some may look exceedingly vulgar, but however vulgar a box-office champion appears, examine its narrative foundation: its core will come from the Bible, ancient Greek mythology, or the Homeric epics. There will always be an underlying motif. The same is true of contemporary Japanese animation. I recently saw a Japanese animated film that was so good I worried it might leave theaters, so I hurried to see it. The narrative cores of many Japanese animated films are motifs drawn from literary classics. I hope you develop a habit: after watching a feature film, condense it into a synopsis of one or two hundred Chinese characters. You will discover that the film's core closely resembles some myth you have read. You therefore need to understand literature. In principle, you should read the literary classics. It does not take as long as one imagines; one or two summer vacations would be enough to get through the essentials.

The earliest generation I have in mind—not the makers of silent films, but those working after the advent of sound, when cinematic narrative was beginning to take shape—initially drew the motifs of their screenplays from literature. The earliest Hollywood screenwriters did this in particular. That first generation consisted of literary fanatics or novelists. William Faulkner, for example, wrote for Hollywood. What did they learn from? Above all, from Dickens: works at once popular and profoundly humane, in which religion, human nature, and secular life are held

in exceptional balance and brought into the texture of everyday life. The central problem of classical literature and classical cinematic narrative is the conflict among those three domains.

I often advise young people to read David Copperfield. The novel is useful not only to someone who wants to make films. Its spirit of youth can also illuminate the development of a young person's character, the shock of looking at the world for the first time, and the ways one might respond. Its lessons for narrative progression scarcely need mentioning. Bleak House also had a major influence on cinema in its time. Fewer people may know the novel, but in my view many courtroom scenes in Hollywood films—and many film-noir plots in which ordinary people become entangled with institutions—pay homage to Bleak House. Those who are interested should read it. It is quite a substantial book, and it offers a way of examining the relationship between ordinary individuals and systems of power.

Yet when literariness enters cinema, it often produces pain and moments of irreconcilable tension. Faulkner is an example. Early on, he wrote a screenplay for Hollywood that was made into a film; later, things went badly and he withdrew from the film world.⁹ The conflict between literariness and the cinematic—and the question of how to mediate between them—has remained a lasting problem for writers and directors. What Faulkner encountered may resemble the problem faced today by art-film directors and ambitious young filmmakers: how to negotiate commerce and art. I have had a commercial film approved for development this year, and I am thinking about how to bring my own authorial signature into it. Balancing the two is difficult, but we must believe that a path always exists.

Over roughly the past decade, cinema throughout the world has been changing direction. Consider a film such as *Parasite*: is it an auteur film or a commercial film? The distinction is difficult to make. We too should be prepared to adjust our position and direction at any time. Whatever else we may be, we are products of our age; we belong to this generation. We should be humble about that and not imagine ourselves superior to the times. We are merely “children of the age.” Some directors think, “I too can make a *Joker*, a *Shoplifters*, or this or that.” Here one has to be especially careful not to banalize oneself. I see *Shoplifters* as an instance of Kore-eda banalizing himself—the weakest film in his body of work. He may have been adjusting his direction, of course, but in my view the adjustment was less successful than Bong Joon Ho's in *Parasite*. *Parasite* incorporates commercial elements yet remains exceptionally sharp. As for *Joker*, I think the second film, *Joker: Folie à Deux*, is better than the first. I did not care much for the first film, but I loved the second.

Let me return to the preparation required to become a filmmaker. I have mentioned three forms of preparation: film history and theory, extensive viewing, and literature. I often wonder how your generation comes to know the world. There is so much fragmentation now, and I genuinely worry about young people. The world we faced in the 1980s was rich with the promise of the future. Now, however, I feel that the world is developing toward disorientation and loss. Perhaps, precisely under these conditions, rescuing the self becomes especially important. Even if your only aim is to be able to say, “I did not live this human life in vain,” you still need to place the classics of the past in your mind and heart. Unless you simply intend to drift along and perish with the age—in which case there is nothing more to say—then, so long as you remain conscious of yourself as a human being, it is crucial to carry within you some of the classics

⁹Faulkner's Hollywood career was much longer and more extensive than this oral summary suggests. From 1932 to 1954 he worked on approximately fifty screenplays for several major studios. See Stefan Solomon, *William Faulkner in Hollywood: Screenwriting for the Studios* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017).

from the history of human art: to hold many classics in the mind, even to absorb them into the bloodstream. Frankly, the thresholds and difficulties you face are more severe than those we encountered.

We do not read classics merely because we want to make films. The deeper issue is how, over time, you can distinguish yourself and retain a vivid human presence—retain humanity—in the digital age. This depends on your thought and memory. It depends on how much you remember of the brilliant things human beings have created, things saturated with human feeling. Do not imagine that something stored on your phone has therefore been stored in your mind. I am not asking you to memorize texts. I am asking whether they have formed you. A person who has been steeped in such works has a different bearing; no recitation is required.

Why can some people simply stand there and already be a film? Why does Chaplin become cinema merely by standing before us? What gives him that power? It comes from the life he lived and the education he acquired—from everything in which he had been steeped. He possessed a view of the world and a view of humanity. He understood the proper measure in his dealings with people and things. He stands there and flicks an eyebrow, and you feel that you are watching cinema. That is because he was formed by culture and had educated himself. This is extraordinarily important.

Originality, then, depends on your position within history. Only from within history do you dare to be original; only there can you find the tension that originality requires. Human beings are born carrying genes—prehistoric genes, ancestral genes, genes of every kind. We have always lived within history. You must continually establish a tension between yourself and the present, but also between yourself and your history—your previous lives, as it were. Your creativity lies in that tension.

That is how I began preparing *The Orphan of Anyang*. The film was not adapted from a true story, although it emerged during the so-called wave of layoffs.¹⁰ In the act of creation, some motif is always stimulating you: a gene from a previous life. In a certain sense, at least one-third of that inherited gene lies dormant in the history available to us. Human history has gathered and distilled some of humanity's shared memories and motifs. For a creator, this is tremendously important. We have to remain in dialogue with them; that dialogue stimulates creation in the present.

When I wrote *The Orphan of Anyang*, why did I set the story in Anyang? Anyang is the location of Yinxu, the Ruins of Yin; it was China's first site where human beings gathered into a settlement. I am from Nanjing, so why should I tell a story about Anyang? The choice came entirely from reflection. The story needed an allegorical dimension and a philosophical proposition. I wanted to pose a question about humanity in the contemporary world: suppose a man has been laid off and has no money. He finds an infant on the street. At first he intends to walk away, but then he discovers a small note tucked into the baby's swaddling clothes: if he agrees to care for the child, he will receive two hundred yuan each month. What should he do? I wanted this event to form a paradox between me and my "previous lives," between me and history, even between me and the various things I believed I knew about human nature. Such a paradox has to emerge from within the self. Only after one has accumulated a certain amount of

10The "wave of layoffs" translates *xiagang chao* (下岗潮), the mass displacement of employees from Chinese state-owned enterprises during market restructuring in the 1990s, especially the latter half of the decade. See Dorothy J. Solinger, "Labour Market Reform and the Plight of the Laid-off Proletariat," *China Quarterly* 170 (June 2002): 304–26.

literature and philosophy—and reflected with sufficient depth on the present and on human nature—can one attempt to pose a question of this kind.¹¹

To make a story is to pose one question after another to yourself, to set yourself one problem after another that must be solved; only then does a film emerge. Every director is different. Some create entirely from lived experience—Fellini, for example, and a number of directors in China. Others work differently. Antonioni was more abstract. I too incline toward abstraction; I do not rely exclusively on lived experience. Although most of the films I have made are described as “realist,” they do not all derive directly from my life. Several are wholly rational explorations directed inward. *Memory of Love* (Chonglai) is one; *Day and Night* (Riri Yeye) is another. *Day and Night* was my second film. Although its story takes place in a mining district in Inner Mongolia, it is really a story about my inner life. I have always been interested in philosophy, and at the time I wanted to make a Chinese version of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Its core was this: a man commits an error; he tries to correct it; the result of his correction is that he commits another error. From that concept came everything else, including the problems and predicaments faced in real life by the newly rich of that generation. Those people were not me, but the film was my expression. It was like *The Myth of Sisyphus*: we push the rock up the mountain; when it reaches the summit, it rolls back down; then we push again, it rolls again, and the tragedy continues without end. Thinking in this way does not require you to become a philosopher. It requires only that you retain an interest in philosophy.

Let us return to narrative and literature. Before literature, we should always remain humble. A filmmaker must be humble before literature’s history of thousands of years. Consider Chekhov’s fiction. In terms of length or linguistic form alone, it is quite simple: the two-volume *Selected Stories of Chekhov* published by People’s Literature Publishing House can be read in a week. Yet for contemporary filmmakers, especially those working today, Chekhov is essential. His narratives do not abolish story, but they resist plot. More importantly, resisting plot does not mean having no plot. He does not oppose plot in the absolute sense of denying it a place among the elements of narrative. Rather, he interrupts plot with poetic moments and, through that interruption, allows a new plot to emerge. His deepest achievement is to let the characters themselves generate the action, instead of having the author seize them and drag them into a newly opened narrative space. The work rests on a complete grasp of character: once you have thought the character through, the character must go where that character would go.

From this perspective, we should return even further, to Tolstoy.

When Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina*, he submitted to *Anna Karenina*’s inner world and the logic of her actions. On the basis of his earlier plot outline, Tolstoy had inferred that Anna would not choose death—or, put differently, that the ethical outlook she followed still inclined toward rationality. But when he pushed his consideration and demonstration of Anna’s state of mind and conduct into a much deeper psychological register, he discovered that the situation was different. Tolstoy then suspended judgment and continued further into Anna’s inner life. Many critics subsequently argued—this became a long-running controversy in literary history—that Anna did not have to die. Could she not have left herself some room? Why was that impossible? The controversy has continued to the present.

¹¹Yinxu is not China’s earliest human settlement. UNESCO identifies it more precisely as the first site of a capital in Chinese history confirmed by historical documents, oracle-bone inscriptions, and archaeological excavation. The body retains the lecturer’s extemporaneous formulation, while this note supplies the correction. UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Yin Xu,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1114/>.

Recently, a friend of mine on WeChat, a devoted reader who lives in Chengdu, raised the question again. He argued that Anna could certainly have survived, and then discovered to his surprise that literary history had already debated the matter. I, however, believe Anna had to die. I can understand the instant in which she wanted to die. The thought of death occurs in an instant: for Anna, it was the instant when she stood before the railway tracks. Her movement toward death had already become unmistakable, but the final decision still contained an element of contingency.

This brings to mind Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, shown at Cannes one year. The film concerns three people: two close female friends and a man. The man is the boyfriend of one of the women, and the three travel together. Not long after the story begins, his girlfriend suddenly disappears. The man and the missing woman's friend search for her. As a spectator trained by conventional cinema, you naturally expect the film to tell you in the end whether they find her. But *L'Avventura* does not do that. Midway through the film, a second love story begins: during the search, the man and his girlfriend's friend fall in love. That structure profoundly shook contemporary cinema. Sometimes cinema runs ahead of literature. Consider also Antonioni's *L'Eclisse*, starring Alain Delon. It too presents a love permeated by bewilderment—the entanglement and uncertainty between the two lovers in that old building are extraordinarily beautiful. There is another crucial passage in *L'Eclisse*: the sequence on the stock-exchange floor. I have often said that those directors whom you think of as masters of “art film” could make commercial cinema better than anyone. Analyze the stock-trading sequence shot by shot. As commercial filmmaking, it is extraordinarily exact. Without it, the uncertainty of the society represented through the stock exchange could not become visible. Antonioni is saying: this is what the world is. I put something down; through a mechanism I acquire wealth; yet that wealth is controlled by a machine that links each person to every other person and thereby becomes the whole world. This, in Antonioni's eyes, is the essence of the world. That is what the sequence says. If he had not filmed it with such rigor and precision, the uncertainty of the love story would amount to no more than self-indulgent lamentation.

This is what I mean when I say that, in watching the films of great directors, you cannot understand them unless you understand contemporary humanity: the predicament produced by the alienation of modern people, and the question of where human beings are to go within consumer society and the spectacle of consumption. Without anxiety about such matters, you cannot truly comprehend those films.

I grew up in the 1980s, and my generation benefited enormously from the reform and opening-up of that decade, when Western currents of thought entered China in great numbers. At the time, I was not only a young devotee of literature but also a young devotee of philosophy. To be honest, I read even more philosophy and aesthetics than literature. Because I spent those ten years cultivating an interest in philosophy, I was able to understand many films. I entered the Beijing Film Academy in 1991, and some of my classmates genuinely could not understand certain films. Without that accumulation—without at least a basic familiarity with contemporary Western philosophy, Western psychology, and even anthropology; not necessarily deep knowledge, but some understanding—you cannot comprehend what we call contemporary Western cinema. You cannot comprehend modernist cinema, still less the later films of Antonioni and Fellini. You certainly cannot understand *8½*, and you may not understand *La Dolce Vita* either. At most, you grasp the surface “story”: what happened to the father, how the protagonist seems somewhat decadent, and so forth, while the deeper implications remain inaccessible. Nor should you assume that these subjects and themes belonged to the 1960s and therefore have no

bearing on what we might make today. Think of Mondrian's cool abstraction: the grids he painted can now be found on thermos flasks and bed sheets everywhere. At the beginning of this century, those images were genuinely contemporary art; forty or fifty years later, they became a popular style.¹² In the same way, the films of Antonioni and Fellini that I am discussing were taken up again by New Hollywood and profoundly influenced Coppola and his generation.

Nothing I have said today can teach you how to make a high-grossing film. I want to be explicit about that. I am only asking what we might do, by working together, to help Chinese cinema continue making even a modest contribution to film art in the fullest international sense. That is all I can discuss today. At CUC, I believe I can speak with you about these questions; elsewhere, I might need to be somewhat more cautious. Those of you in your twenties are at an age when there is still time for everything, and you really should learn something about philosophy. What counted as contemporary philosophy for me in the 1980s is now taught to French secondary-school students as part of a basic education in life. These questions are treated as fundamental questions of life and human nature. It is as simple as that.¹³

On reflection, the problems of human nature exposed in contemporary China provide an exceptionally strong point of entry. What do I mean? In my encounters with people in the West, I have often felt that many of their problems are concealed, whereas China is living through an age of great exposure—an age of primitive accumulation, a second round of primitive accumulation, and an age in which accumulation itself has assumed a mutated form. The shock this produces in human nature, and the many faces into which human nature fractures during that process of accumulation, may be inaccessible to people in other countries.¹⁴

In the present—and I am saying this to myself as well—we must remain sensitive. What we can perceive here is more than sufficient to place us at the forefront internationally; I truly believe that. People elsewhere have, for one thing, enjoyed good times for too long; for another, they can be diverted by other problems. Europe, for example, now faces the central question of how to deal with Islam. In New York City, meanwhile, voters have elected a socialist. In the course of “developing” and “solving problems,” those societies have come full circle. They too

¹²The transcript reads “at the beginning of this century” (本世纪初), although Mondrian's mature grid paintings date from the early twentieth century; the phrase may be a slip for “at the beginning of the last century” (上世纪初). The transcript also places New Hollywood's appropriation of Antonioni and Fellini in the 1980s, whereas New Hollywood is conventionally centered on the late 1960s and 1970s and extends into the early 1980s. The body preserves the lecture's chronology. See Museum of Modern Art, “Piet Mondrian,” accessed July 31, 2026; and David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹³Philosophy is a common required subject in the final year (*terminale*) of French general and technological upper-secondary education and is assessed in the *baccalauréat*; the current schedules allocate four hours weekly in the general track and two in the technological track. The lecturer's “French secondary-school students” should therefore not be understood as all pupils at every secondary level. France, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, “Programme de philosophie de terminale générale,” *Bulletin officiel spécial* no. 8, July 25, 2019.

¹⁴“Primitive accumulation” renders *yuanshi jilei* (原始积累), the Marxian term commonly translated in recent editions as “so-called primitive accumulation.” The lecturer's “second round” and “mutated form” are his own rhetorical extensions, not standard categories in Marxist political economy. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), pt. 8.

have begun to examine the most sensitive and acute points in human nature—the points at which our defenses are most easily breached.¹⁵

Today everyone has a phone; the camera is already in my hand. It is that simple. Cinema now lies between our two hands. In the past, making a film meant renting a camera. Now anyone can film with a phone. To be honest, everything I have said to you matters less than your actually going out and filming—trying to enter the great problems of the world through a crack in some small, ordinary event.

Recently I have kept feeling that we are living through everything all over again. I lived through the 1990s, and now, whether we look at the world or at everything around us, it all seems to have returned. Look at the United States or at Europe: what is justice? We can no longer see it clearly. In the 1980s, the word “justice” shone brightly. Now it seems covered by a layer of gray haze; I cannot make it out. “War” and “humanity” were likewise words that blazed like searchlights in the 1980s. They told me what I should do. Today I cannot see clearly. Even when I think I have seen something, I no longer dare to proclaim with the same confidence that I have seen it. This is the contemporary.

My most pessimistic view of contemporary society is that we have handed too many things over. Shopping and everything connected with it have been surrendered to systems that constantly remind you that you like to buy this or that. Now AI has arrived as well. If the development and transmission of civilization can be imagined as an advance from one point to the next, then in one sense we are fortunate. We are fortunate to be able to witness the point going astray—to see that, at the terminal position of this sequence, it is not a human being who stands there, but a “non-I” that we ourselves have created. We are fortunate to witness it, but it is also terrifying.

This is why I return again and again to the importance of cinema and to the importance of remembering anew. Over the past two years, I have increasingly felt that the more classical a work is, the more necessary it is to read it. Such memory matters. It should not be something you retrieve only at the moment when you supposedly “need” it. At that moment, the declaration that “you need it” may not originate in you at all. Someone else compels you, demands it of you, or entices you into believing that you need it; you then seek out a memory that someone else has supplied. The real question is how, in the present, we can revive an autonomous sense of responsibility toward the memory of civilization. I myself must say: I want to look; I wish to look; I have seen—and use what I have seen to reflect back upon human nature and the world.

Opportunities of this kind are becoming ever rarer, and that is where cinema’s significance reappears. Why, at this moment, has humanity begun once again to attend to cinema as an important art form? Why has cinema suddenly recovered such force? Because cinema has not been “alienated.” Technically, cinema is a recording. The problems of the contemporary world may corrode me, but they cannot corrode a camera. Once I switch the camera on, it records by itself. Consider how easy it is to corrupt a human being. If you ask whether I too am now being manipulated by something, all I can say is that I am doing my utmost to keep hold of my own

¹⁵The New York reference is to Zohran Mamdani, who was inaugurated as mayor on January 1, 2026 and stated in his inaugural address, “I was elected as a Democratic socialist.” The colloquial verb *pofang* (破防), literally “to have one’s defenses broken,” is contemporary internet slang for an abrupt emotional or psychological breach; the translation renders its function rather than reproducing the slang mechanically. New York City Mayor’s Office, “Mayor Zohran Mamdani Inaugural Address,” January 1, 2026.

hair so that I am not submerged. None of us can claim that the “I” of the present fully represents the “I.”

The camera’s value lies precisely in the fact that, whatever else may be said, it retains a certain degree of objectivity: it captures objectively. This brings us to the root of the matter. Today, perhaps even more urgently than at the beginning of the twentieth century, we need to insist on the cinematic. In the present, we cannot even trust language. Wittgenstein told us that language is untrustworthy—ordinary language in particular—and that it is precisely what we must resist. Human beings first connected with the world through sound and vision. Only later, when there was no other way to destroy the beasts that wanted to devour us—and later still, when we wished to destroy enemies divided off from among ourselves—did we invent language and create stories and organizations. I am not arguing that we should oppose civilization. I am arguing that human beings should be liberated and restored to direct communication with the world.¹⁶

We also need to relax from time to time. Sometimes what rises within us is too disorderly. If you have read too few classics and use your phone as a substitute for reading, the interference produced by the world becomes enormous. Gathering information in this way may be less useful than emptying your mind for half an hour each day. Even when you are not trying to think, something may emerge while you sit in meditation. Whatever arises after such calm sedimentation will be purer.

Once you genuinely understand something of what I have been discussing—once you have some knowledge of the history of philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and the classics one ought to know—you will retain sufficient humility before literature whenever you approach narrative. The core of genuinely modern narrative is philosophy. It is as simple as that. If narrative interests you, you will ask: why does this person narrate in this way? At that point, you will inevitably become interested in philosophy and psychology.

Please do not be frightened by everything I have mentioned. When I say that you should read philosophy and psychology, I do not mean that you must gnaw your way through massive books. Those of us who grew up in the 1980s were, in fact, nourished on short booklets. Learn to read good short books. We are not historians of philosophy; we do not need to follow every logical step in a philosopher’s derivation. Moreover, almost one hundred percent of those derivations—99.9 percent, in a Wittgensteinian sense—are what might be called “nonsense.” Everyone is saturated with prejudice. I am therefore not asking you to believe anyone’s conclusions. I am asking you to consider a different question: where, in the minds of people in the past and the present, did the greatest tensions lie? That is what you need to understand. You need to understand Freud’s point of tension, Jung’s, Sartre’s, and Foucault’s. Short books are enough to begin. Of course, you must learn to choose good ones. In the 1980s we had many excellent short books: Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, Paul Tillich’s *The Courage to Be*, and others. As for Sartre, who would dare begin directly with *Being and Nothingness*? You can first read *Existentialism Is a Humanism*—a very thin volume. Or, instead of reading existentialist

¹⁶No exact Wittgensteinian source has been identified for either the earlier assertion that philosophy was “reaching an end” or the present categorical claim that ordinary language is “untrustworthy” and must be “resisted.” Wittgenstein instead diagnosed many philosophical confusions as products of language “going on holiday” and urged that words be returned from metaphysical to everyday use; see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §§38, 116. The evolutionary account of language arising from predation and conflict is likewise the lecturer’s speculative formulation, not a position established by Wittgenstein or contemporary anthropology.

philosophy, you can go straight to several of Camus's novels; those are surely accessible. Camus's philosophical books are also short.¹⁷

In sum, I hope you will preserve your curiosity. None of these things is difficult to obtain. Yet the difference between encountering them and not encountering them, between loving them and not loving them, between being interested and being indifferent, is immense. The threshold for making cinema is extraordinarily high. Why? In literature—to speak frankly—if you train yourself to write the language well and read several literary classics, you may genuinely be able to publish a novel. Cinema is different. It is a comprehensive art in every dimension. If your narrative is weak, if you lack appropriate visual training, or if your intellectual formation includes no philosophy at all, then in my view you cannot make a good film. Anyone can make a film. But if you want to make one well, and to make something distinct—not even in the sense of competing with others—then think of a game such as Go. Before you dare to begin at first dan, you must at least know that the game has nine dan ranks. In the same way, you first need to know where cinema's highest level lies. That knowledge depends on an understanding of film history—not merely on learning other people's history, but on placing yourself within it and thinking from there.

I remember reading Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and feeling that the words might have been written by me—that the sentences seemed to flow directly from my own heart. In other words, you must place your own questions inside what you read and ponder them there. Then you will become interested, whether you are reflecting on history or reading the classics. A classic is not a mountain blocking your path. In a previous life, those classics were your own “mountains”; someone else simply built them there first. They are related to you by kinship—indeed, by a direct line of kinship. If you approach all classics in this way, they become intimate. We are interlocutors of the classics. As I read *The Brothers Karamazov*, I felt that it confronted the most fundamental questions. You need the capacity to empathize with classics. Only when you achieve that fellow feeling—what we call “empathy”—are you truly reading them. Empathy with the classics matters because they too concern the most fundamental, ordinary, and everyday dramas of the world: dramas of life's truth, hope, and despair. There is nothing willfully obscure about them. We must first learn to empathize with the characters in classic works; only then can those works stimulate our creation. Without empathy for the classics, and without empathy for literary and philosophical history, how can your creativity be awakened? What you produce will not be enough. The moment you possess even a little empathy and understanding, your work acquires the possibility of transcendence.

I am now in my early sixties. Last year I served as a juror at a youth short-film festival. People of my generation can assess young people's work at a glance. A young creator's cultivation—whether that person has educated himself or herself, whether that person has developed thinking that is wholly his or her own—becomes visible immediately. Sometimes that is precisely where the stature of a work lies. The classics therefore need to be reread. I too have recently been rereading some of them.

I remember something Kurosawa said, and it has always made me feel ashamed: he said that he had read *War and Peace* seven times. I am a lover of literature and even call myself a

¹⁷The “99.9 percent” remark evokes *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.54, where Wittgenstein likens his propositions to a ladder that is discarded after it has been climbed. “Nonsense” is therefore used playfully in a technical Wittgensteinian sense, not as a statistical rejection of philosophical argument. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961), 6.54.

writer, yet I have read it only once. I have long wanted to read it a second time but have never summoned the resolve. Kurosawa read it seven times, and he did not even claim to be a young man of letters; he was “just a painter.” From the beginning, I have asked myself why Kurosawa was able to become such a master. I return to that question from time to time. Look at the films he made from Russian literary works: they are all excellent. The Idiot, for example, is superb. His films adapted from Shakespeare are equally accomplished: Ran, for instance, and Throne of Blood.^{18,19}

Cinema unquestionably stands upon all the existing arts. It is a new artistic form generated through their synthesis. Someone said this a century ago, and we continue to say it today. Badiou makes an even stronger claim: he says that if we are to save the world and save philosophy, we must rely on cinema.²⁰

¹⁸The claim that Kurosawa read *War and Peace* seven times has not been confirmed in a primary Kurosawa source. Later secondary accounts commonly report that he said he had read it at least thirty times; see Peter Tasker, *On Kurosawa: A Tribute to the Master Director* (Tokyo: Zen Foto Gallery, 2018). The transcript’s “seven” is retained but should be treated as unverified.

¹⁹The Chinese transcript gives the nonstandard title *Zhu Wang Gong Bao* (蛛网宫堡), which does not correspond to a recognized Kurosawa title. The context clearly indicates *Kumonosu-jō* (1957), released in English as *Throne of Blood* and commonly titled 蜘蛛巢城 in Chinese. *Ran* (1985) reworks *King Lear*; *Throne of Blood* reworks *Macbeth*. See Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

²⁰The lecturer’s wording is an emphatic paraphrase rather than a located verbatim statement. Badiou does argue that cinema “requisitions” philosophy and functions as a democratic emblem and mass art. See Alain Badiou, “Cinema as a Democratic Emblem,” trans. Alex Ling and Aurélien Mondon, *Parrhesia* 6 (2009): 1–6; and Badiou, *Cinema*, ed. Antoine de Baecque, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).