THE QUESTION
AS A TOOL IN FILMMAKING

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INTRODUCTION

This document is describing an artistic research trajectory developed at the Master of Film at the Netherlands Film Academy between 2012 and 2016.

For 5 semesters I have been exploring a method of abundant questioning.

The in total 12 chapters should provide a contextual history of the period between starting the master and the final exam.

I start with a short motivation letter, followed by an introduction to the set up of the research.

In chapter 1 I describe the start of the process of questioning.

Chapter 2 explores the possible limitations of asking questions, and what my attitude as a filmmaker should be in the context of making and research.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the meaning of production, in the context of filmmaking.

Chapter 4 reflects on involving other people to join the activity of questioning filmmaking.

In chapter 5 I ask myself what attitude a filmmaker should have, which results in the definition of 5 'roles' that a filmmaker should be able to play.

Chapter 6 informs about a change of research strategy. From a practice of reasoning, I decided to switch to other, differently focussed forms of questioning, such as by means of practical experiments.

Chapter 7 zooms in on the third exam, doing thing literally and experimenting beyond boundaries.

The 8th chapter is dedicated to the time I spent exploring the physical, in particular by zooming in on the acting craft, in particular directing actors and understanding acting techniques.

Chapter 9 is dedicated to creative thinking techniques. I elaborate on the origin and nature of ideas and memory and I try to find out how I can boost my creative output.

Chapter 10 describes how ideas, developed during the research, are implemented in 16 short film ideas, and how they will be presented during my graduation show. The idea behind this 'graduation project', is to merge research and practice, and to determine whether I have developed new feasible working methods. The goal of the presentation during the graduation show is to circumvent conventional presentation styles, avoiding mainly that of a synopsis.

At the end of the report the final conclusion is built from a set of short introspective passages. These last reflections are attempts to identify in what way I have or have not been successful in adding a new dimension to my way of filmmaking, and if there is any perspective of a benefit beyond the research itself.

MOTIVATION

Welcome to this Final Report and thank you for reading. Below I will briefly provide some background as to why I started the Master of Film studies in 2012.

Years before entering the Master of Film program, I had already received my bachelor in film, (directing fiction). But despite this past of film education, I perceived huge gaps in my understanding of cinema, which bothered me. A desire grew to start all over again. I wanted to ask: *What the hell is making films, really*?

The Master of Film program in Amsterdam offered an opportunity to do exactly this. Combining my love for the ideas behind Socrates' *elenctic* method, with an old dream of using Cartesian doubt to collect a personal set of fresh perspectives, this master study seemed an excellent environment to *rethink cinema*.

Having been admitted to the course, I went off to 'reinvent the wheel', for better or worse. I started questioning from scratch, formulating answers and structuring thought.

Throughout my entire studies I purposely sought states of insecurity and doubt. I promised myself I would not care if I was wrong, or what other people had said before. I hoped that the *process of (re)invention,* would yield a significantly better level of understanding for me, personally.

Now the Final Exam has arrived and I hope you will enjoy reading this report.

Fedor Sendak

NB
For those who wish know more about my background, my biography and artist statement are available in .

SUMMARY OF THE FINAL REPORT

During my studies, I wanted to approach filmmaking with as wide open a mind as possible. I chose to question all I knew about cinema and filmmaking, as if I were a novice. The research question *"Might a filmmaker benefit from a practice of limitless questioning?"* served as the methodological point of departure.

As a start for the investigation, I defined three types of research activities: thinking, trying and working.

Philosophising about these topics during the first semester, I came to the conclusion that personal motivation had to be leading in filmmaking, as inspiration is at the root of creativity. I planned to treat inspiration as 'holy'. Soon after I reminded myself that a maker has to *make,* and acknowledged the necessity of production in the context of inspiration.

To get a grip on how to be productive as a filmmaker, I defined what I regarded as the essential *attitudes* of a filmmaker. I distinguishing five roles tackling the makers attitude towards inspiration, education, production, obstacles and conformation to rules.

I interrupted my studies for a year due to private circumstances and when I returned to the master I noticed that my views on questioning had changed. I wondered if questions can also be asked more practically, by doing rather than 'thinking'.

Before trying out a practical methodology, I mapped some of my thinking habits. I realised I am a dualist thinker and I practiced forms of scientism. I tried to break these routines by becoming more action-oriented, less worrying about truth and reason. This led to practical experiments with actors, which in turn raised a strong interest in acting techniques, as it dawned on me that I did not really understand what acting was.

To learn about acting in depth, I organised two extended acting workshops combining actors and directors, as I had arrived to the insight that acting was always part of the dynamics between acting and directing. Furthermore I saw that a physical approach to acting was useful and workable; you can not direct emotions, but you can direct the body.

Studying acting provided some interesting views on filmmaking itself; I suspected that several parallels between the issues of the filmmaker and the actor existed, and wanted to look at approaching filmmaking through acting techniques. In the following semester I returned to non-acting activities and tried to implement some acting principles in the process of idea-development, such as 'readiness', 'being in the moment', 'creative state of mind', dealing with *fear* and how to achieve an outward focus .

I took time for testing ideas. From the first semester my practical and contemplative activities had been mixed with smaller and bigger experiments. Looking for novelty I even took the exam itself as an opportunity to try out something different. By messing up the conventional presentation format I got a bit lost in my exam 3 experiment and discovered the boundaries of what is acceptable within the master. This eventually was very instructive and moved the research forward.

Retaking my research activities through thinking, I then spent time thinking about my moments of inspiration, and how to capture ideas from a creatively active mind. I

realised that a form of memory enhancement was going to be helpful to capture ideas efficiently. I started to used a 32-piece box system, mirroring my topics of interest, and notebooks to record my ideas. Next, ready to capture creative sparks, I decided to use modified thinking tools to boost my creative outcome.

The time came to consider how I could apply the outcome of my research and experiments in a final graduation project, as I needed to test if my discoveries were valuable for my work as a filmmaker and so on.

I thought working on several short film projects simultaneously, would be a good way to continue my broad investigations. The availability of multiple projects would give me the freedom to assign separate experiments to separate films. My graduation project then evolved into "the 16 story project", including the development of 16 short film *proposals*.

The presentation I have designed for the graduation show aims at circumventing the synopsis as a conventional presentation format. The exhibition will entirely focus on input for all the sensory organs, including touch, taste, temperature and smell. While preparing the show, I continue to develop the projects further, and in this way I am incorporating idea development and presentation into one activity.

In the final conclusion of this Final Report I state that my research question can be answered positively. A filmmaker may benefit from asking questions uncurbed in several ways. Of course borders have to be set at some point, but starting without prior limitations proved to be of help. It opened my mind, stimulated creative processes and I reached a deeper understanding of my craft. My research strategy might be useful for others, as questioning can lead to ideas and insights for anyone. I imagine that "questioning uncurbed" renders very diverse interesting outcomes depending on the person that starts questioning.

THE RESEARCH

The research set-up

The research question, as my methodological point of departure, was:

"Might a filmmaker benefit from a practice of uncurbed questioning?"

The plan behind my practical research was to engage in a method of self questioning before and during the development of film ideas. I would ask questions on any occasion, at any moment, in any context, systematically or randomly to uproot any preconceptions I might have.

During the research I distinguished three types of activities in the support of questions, experiments and projects:

1. **Thinking** - to question intellectually

2. **Trying** - to question in practice

3. **Working** - to develop film projects

Like the slime mould

In the early stages of my research, some people I spoke with warned me that my research was too broad. Choosing to doubt everything was, in their eyes, a possible useless undertaking as questioning everything all the time would have a paralysing effect. My view on the research was more optimistic. A personal attraction to the research method came from a suspicion that sometimes efficacy might show only in hindsight, especially when using a simple method tenaciously. I was inspired by the self-organising principle that was seen in a type of slime mould during a experiment by Japanese scientist Atsushi Tero[1].

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1   The slime mould *physarum polycephalum* is a brainless organism that is very good at finding quick routes between different places. Researcher Atsushi Tero from Hokkaido University in Japan demonstrated how the organism operates similar to how human town planners work. He placed the mould in his food-based model of Tokyo. Soon complex, efficient networks formed which are strikingly similar to Tokyo's actual railway system. The mould had figured out the smartest solution to the problem. I reasoned that my loose cannon-style of research and abundant questioning may be a similar process. Despite a clueless method of questioning, the research might conclude with intelligent outcome.

See also: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwKuFREOgmo and/or the publication "Engineered Biomimicry", ISBN9780123914323.

Retrospective of the research

During my studies different components of the research developed simultaneously. Bit by bit, ideas, texts, statements, projects, actions, explorations and experiments accumulated.

Initially the plan had been to graduate with 10 essays on topics related to the filmmaking process. The essays would then be accompanied by a short 10 minute film and a feature film proposal (chapters in the short film, of approximately 1 minute each, were to correspond with these 10 essay topics).

Soon after the third exam it became evident that all the questioning had led to a very diverse set of ideas. Investigations and outcomes seemed better suited to application in various short film projects rather than the ten essays. If the process stayed limited to writing essays and one feature film, the most essential aspect of the research might be lost: that of the possible impact of the method on actual film work.

I would need to mix a number of creative projects with the intermediate outcome of the research to effectively test artistic value and meaning. This insight resulted in abandoning the essay plan and replacing it by the development of 16 short film plans. The short film ideas originated from an earlier experimental process developed during the master, called The Story Experiment[2], which originally dealt with a purposeful disrespect for intellectual property. The output of that experiment now became useful as a near endless source of film ideas.

Like the original essay plan, the 16 film ideas are linked with 16 specific topics coming from the research. The difference with the essays is that the question behind each of these is applied in a practical and artistic way, with the intention of making the graduation a display of the method's effectiveness to filmmaking itself.

The graduation set up

The final exam and the graduation show are composed of three parts:

    a) This final report.

    b) The 20 minutes oral exam.

    c) The presentation of a mock-up version of the graduation show.

*The following sections, chapter **1 to 10**, intend to provide a chronological overview into the research as it progressed.*

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2 - The Story Experiment is described in Annex V – Graduation, Appendix page 16-19.

1. QUESTIONING AS A PRACTICE: HOW TO BEGIN QUESTIONING

After a preliminary set-up of the research, I listed three types of questions, and defined what a 'question' and an 'answer' was, rather pragmatically[3]. But I did not want my approach to become too rigid, so to coordinate this, I tried a more poetic way to think about questioning, using literal meanings of synonyms and antonyms[4].

My study plan included to 'question by writing'. So while I sat behind my computer to type things up, I was still searching for *what* to write about. I opted for a deconstruction of the terms *'question' 'everything' 'change' 'filmmaker'* and *'artwork'*. The terms were all part of my (early) research question formulations[5] and I used a Q&A-scheme to interrogate myself about the terms.

I chose to use a strict writing format that would systematically touch all major phases of filmmaking: from idea development, to the actual screening. I planned to write 10 exploratory essays[6] about ten different *stages of filmmaking*[7], from conception to the birth of a film.

After having written several essays, I discovered that writing essays was time consuming and cumbersome. Soliciting opinion from others was one of its main original purposes, but I came to the conclusion that writing essays was not furthering my research fast enough, and that is why I dropped the essay plan entirely.

Meanwhile I intended to internalise the activity of *asking* and to make 'to question' into a personal habit; questioning every moment and in every occasion, adopting a *questioning attitude.*

A couple of slogans[8] came up to support this attitude. I did not so much seek one-liners, but I apparently had the habit to summarise my gut-driven intentions in short watchwords. That is how to 'carp on everything.' became a mantra of self-encouragement to dissect sentences.

From a rather timid start, the questioning activities now slowly devolved into something rather pathological. I recalled an amusing routine[9] by comedian Louis CK about a tendency to over ask in kids. He acts out a scene where his daughter asks him 'Why?' in an infinite regression, where the father has to explain the universe *and beyond*. Inherently unable to provide an infinitely satisfying answer, he finally tells her to shut up in a state of exasperation.

I wondered whether anyone questioning too much would be told to shut up. Can I ask every question I wish?

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3 - Definitions of 'question' and 'answer' are available in Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 49.
4 - Explorative notes on questions&answers are found in Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 49.
5 - During the research I reformulated my research question several times: "Does a filmmaker benefit from asking questions all the time?", "Does a filmmaker benefit from permanent doubt?", "Can I reinvent filmmaking by asking basic questions?". I changed my mind because I kept doubting about what the exact right formulation was. However, the changes however where never fundamental, and the research question stayed close to the original.
6 - The list of topics are found in Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 52.
7 - Purposely I reversed the productional chronology of the filmmaking stages on the list to break causal view on filmmaking. I isolated the stages from their role and place in the production chain.
8 - A list of the slogans I used are found in Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 51.
9 - The related Louis CK-video you find through this link: Louis C.K. "Why?" on YouTube

The answer might be 'yes', but in a social context you simply cannot ask anything you like and *expect a friendly answer*[10].

I concluded that the social limits embedded in our culture, would have considerable implications for the range of my inquiry, if I followed them blindly. To keep my research as broad and unrestricted as possible, I convinced myself that I should go somewhat beyond these socially accepted limits, even if this were to go against what is considered polite and normal.

I believed philosopher Slavoj Žižek once said that "*we need more idiots*"[11], as to say that we need to allow ourselves to ask foolish questions and behave awkwardly, to be receptive to new ideas. Sometimes we might have to behave like 'idiots' to break our habits and turn our preconceived view of the world upside down, accepting that our securities are maybe not that secure.

I started to combine the idea of 'being an idiot' with other ideas I had. Earlier I had come to believe that films, and arts in general, were built on a human need for 'amazement'. I had written an essay exploring this view, and now I adopted this idea as one of my axioms during the research.

Combining amazement with the 'need' for more idiots, I became interested with the expression 'being stupefied' and explored the term[12].

Coming back to my original point of departure, to ask in what social situations I can ask ignorant questions freely, my conclusion was that chances for a honest response to questions are optimal in *an environment of trust*[13].

> The permission to ask is related to social position. For instance children, at least in The Netherlands, are much more free to ask questions than adults are. I looked at the cheekiness which is tolerated in the young to copy their ways. Like Louis CK's daughter; the only thing that should stop me asking is a loss of interest for the anger of an authority that I can not stand up to. I tried to regain the rawness and naivety I once had had as a kid in order to look with fresh eyes to the familiar, becoming *little* again.

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10 - High school teachers ensured me that there is no such thing as a 'stupid question', but I always discovered that there were forbidden questions. Even for the most generous teachers there were limits.
11 - I recall this quote from a - now removed - video registration of a lecture by Slavoj Žižek on YouTube.
12 - I found out that to stupefy is etymologically coming from the same source as stupid, from the latin *stupefacere* (meaning: to strike dumb/stun with amazement, stupefy). I found it intriguing that people rarely wants to be stupid, but we do at times like to be stupefied. I explored the difference by writing about it. This notes can be found in Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 53
13 - Notes on circumstances for a meaningful dialogue: Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 54

2. ON ENDLESSNESS AND LIMITS

After the first exam it fully dawned on me that, as might have been expected, to simply question everything incessantly was not going to be an easy undertaking. Even if I structured my questioning with a strict method.

Maybe if I acknowledged possible pre-existing limits, the research would be less undirected. Limits existed within the master and within the physical world. I set out to explicitly accept and embrace any inherent limits I could think of. Natural limitations I would not have to invoke myself.

First I acknowledged the practical limits, such as time or budget. But I could also explicitly accept limits embedded in education and in human constraints

I acknowledged concepts of causality and logic, as the Master of Film program is rooted in these principles in part. To organise thought and confirm the underlying notions to myself, I composed a list of *unavoidable assumptions*[14] that I would adhere to.

I wrote a medium sized text redefining the most essential notions implied within the field of cinema and redefined all the terms connected to my research, following my 'carp on everything' methodology, I started with the simple question "*What is Cinema?*"[15], and continued from there.

After welcoming practical limits and other investigative borders concerning the master, I focussed on all the *personal limits* I had to take into account. My personal limits had radical implications. I found out that, in the context of working creatively, my personal interest, joy and curiosity, were in fact much more essential than anything else.

As a consequence I wrote about commitment to personal feelings of inspiration. In brief, it states that I, as a maker, should treat inspiration as being *holy*[16], placed above all other things.

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14 - Unavoidable assumptions that I listed you will find in <u>Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 56</u>.
15 - My extended redefinition of cinema you find in <u>Annex III, Appendix page 9-12</u>. The text, redefining of many aspects of cinema, became useful later as a reference for setting up experiments.
16 - My notes on my commitment to inspiration you will find here: <u>Annex VII, Appendix page 57</u>.

3. ON PRODUCTION

I had acknowledged that in the research and in the filmmaking process, inspiration is paramount. But without making films there are no films. After prioritising inspiration, I thought a filmmaker should recognise that *production* is essential.

As a consequence I adjusted my working environment to be optimally conductive to creativity and production. I designated a separated room in my apartment for working on creative, chose my furniture carefully, put up project related pictures on the wall and blocked all possible disturbing elements out of sight and reach. I once again saw that the *job of the maker*[17] is an awkward and unusual one. The filmmakers urges and instincts are not to be oppressed, avoided and controlled, but to be harvested. Besides that, there is no pre-set 'efficient way of working', no foolproof formula to creativity. We have to be sensitive to what makes us tick all the time.

I later set out even more radically to get rid of anything that blocks my inspiration. Not only in my 'creative room' but *anywhere*. In an attempt to get a grip on what is beneficial for a creative state, and what not and I added all my 'turn-offs' to a '*list of personal preferences*'[18] that I had composed earlier.

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17 - My reflections on the job of the maker: Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 57.
18 - List of personal preferences: Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 58.

4. SOLICITING OPINION FROM OTHERS

During the research I had come up with three writing projects: the Filmthinker-blog[19], the 10 essays[20] and a 8500 word quasi-philosophical text[21]. All three writing projects unfortunately failed to further the research efficiently. I had decided that I needed a way to proceed to solicit opinion form others without all this writing.

I came up with a new plan. I set out to collect *quotes from well-known film directors*[22] on cinema and filmmaking, and printed these on sheets of paper. Having first ommited the names of the filmmakers, I handed these sheets out to my classmates to see if this would spark an interesting discussion. My idea behind hiding the names was to make everyone think about the statements at face value, rather than being based on the importance of the director or other contextual preferences. One student seemed quite frustrated that the *names of the artists were removed*[23]. I explained I wanted everyone to think for themselves from scratch, but this experiment did not lead to an interesting dialogue.

On another occasion, I asked another group of master students to write down their definitions of certain terms related to our studies[24]. This approach was more successful. I discovered that most of us film students seem to have rather vague, sometimes poetic notions about what words like 'freedom', 'culture', 'cinema', 'research' and 'art' mean.

Then I thought of using provocation to involve people around me, and did so during exam 3 (see chapter 8).

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19 - To visit the (discontinued) Filmthinker-blog, click here: www.filmthinker.com
20 - A draft of my first essays you can read read here (uploaded as an annex to the exam 3 report)
21 - The unfinished text "The Bootstrapping Filmmaker" was uploaded for exam 3. Download it here.
22 - Quotes from well-known film directors: Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 55.
23 - From the responses I realised that some people become very uncomfortable in the absence of context. To link a quote to existing information provides a handle to quickly take position, which is reassuring.
24 - Definitions of terms related to our studies as jotted down by students in class, can be found in: Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 72-73.

5. ON ATTITUDE

After exploring inspiration and production, I wondered if I could develop more sophisticated ideas on the maker's attitude, and if I could determine the outlines of what the right attitude for a filmmaker could be.

Circumventing the word '*artist*'[25] I asked "What is the right attitude for the filmmaker?". I wanted to define what is necessary to *succeed*[26] as a filmmaker.

I defined five elements: inspiration, skills, luck, means, rules-to-kick.

I reasoned that...

> Without **inspiration** you are worthless as a developer of ideas. Inspiration needs to be treated as holy. In a way a filmmaker's life should be built around inspiration as much as possible.

> **Skills** are essential and may need to be enhanced. This is done through practice and study. I find skills a much better term then talent, as talent is about expectations and appreciation, and is a very subjective term, therefore confusing in most contexts.

> **Luck** is necessary. Even though success is unpredictable, serendipity can only occur when you engage in situations, and that is why sitting still is not an option. A filmmaker has to go out, try and do things. To work.

> **Means** to make come handy. A filmmaker might have to fight to get what is needed to make films. Maybe by robbing a bank, getting a second job, or using cheaply available things, or less inspiring: apply for funding.

> Finally, having **rules-to-kick**, is quite essential. Films needs to be remarkable[27]. Non-remarkable films do not attract an audience. That is why some expectations need to be broken or the film will surprise no-one, which will be the end of distribution.

From these five 'essential needs' I formulated 5 roles to play for the maker: *the devotee, the nosy parker, the mule, the warrior, the punk*[28]. Distinguishing such roles I found useful because as a maker they gave me clarity about different purposes of certain actions.

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25 - Reflection on the words 'art' and 'artist': Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 59.
26 - With 'to succeed' I mean that you succeed in making the films you want to make *artistically*.
27 - What is 'rule breaking' however, depends entirely on the context: the audience.
28 - Description of the 5 roles for the maker: Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 60.

6. ABANDONING REASON

In 2014 I returned to the master program after a one year break. I had lived abroad, interrupting my studies. My time-out had affected my views on the research.

Looking back on the first year, I realised that so far my research had been on a (semi-)philosophical tour, prioritising reasoning. I became tempted to see if I could instead use my impulses as a source of inspiration and discovery.

I started a new adventure.

First I accepted that my capacity for reasoning is limited. Much of the world around me is too complex to understand. Nevertheless I can continue to live without understanding all. Accepting my limitations, my urge to deconstruct the entire universe may get less prominence, giving space to other research activities.

Wanting to switch to non-textual forms of investigation, I spent some time to find out what kind of thinking patterns I regularly used. I wanted to enumerate them in order to actively avoid these thinking habits.

In particular I had noticed that, as a child of my time, I had become accustomed to refering to scientifically substantiated knowledge. I often consider scientific research as sources of 'truth'. Now I wanted to go against my own scientism[29].

Another notable habit was my use of language as a point of departure. I started to see language as a provider of *unwelcome* limits. I want to cross the borders, go beyond argument[30]. I reminded myself that the languages I speak are not present as innate skills and *wordless experience*[31] maybe an important field to investigate. Wordless experiences often precede a formulation, and when I am looking for new experience, wordless impulses may be essential as guides at moments where I would otherwise reason[32].

In fact *any* strategy that leads to exploration, can be seen as a question. I wanted explorations beyond words, or maybe *before* words. If I define a question as a invitation for a response, any action could become a question.

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29 - Text on abandoning reason, dualist thinking, science and scientism in <u>Annex VII, Appendix page 62</u>.
30 - 'Arguing against reasoning' fortunately is not the oxymoron it appears to be.
31 - Insights often render me 'speechless', finding myself having difficulties to express my ideas to others.
32 - No that I did not acknowledged that language is a very useful tool for exploratory activities, but I realised it is not the only tool available.

7. REDISCOVERING THE PHYSICAL

Trying to find ways to get more physical, I looked at acting, as acting has a prominent physical component.

I had been quite familiar with how to work with actors and had been engaged in a professional capacity as an actor on a few occasions. But in the spirit of ignorance I disregarded this previous experience and participated in two workshops aimed at 'directing actors'. One was in a *Hollywood-style*, taught by an American actor/director, and the other had a focus on working with uneducated and inexperienced players, taught by a Dutch acting coach.

To my surprise I discovered, after the first class, that in fact I did *not* understand acting very well. It amazed me that I had thought for years that I perfectly understood the craft. I became very curious what acting is really made of.

One thing I noticed was that the very different approaches in the two workshops were both based on *unbalancing* the actor.

The unbalanced actor has less time for self-reflection. Self-reflection in front of the camera is the enemy of spontaneity. Unbalancing is beneficial because it removes self-conscious concerns quite well. Staying in a vulnerable state, where prediction is hard, is essential for spontaneous, more credible performance.

That idea of unbalancing for spontaneity, seemed a concept which might be interesting to apply to the filmmaker as well. Acting principles seemed possibly related to issues I was dealing with as a screenwriter and researcher. A new goal became to see if I could take these acting methods and apply them to my own craft.

Thinking more about acting, the body and the physical, I watched my wife, Sara Alba, a contemporary dancer and dance teacher, teach her students using theatre games and movement. Seeing the learning curve of her pupils, I understood that there was in fact not one major gap in my knowledge of acting, but many. A little embarrassed I understood the depth of my ignorance, and that I was finally was the ignorant idiot I wanted to be.

My lack of insight in acting is not so rare as it may seem. From my observations of colleagues working with actors I believe that this lack of apprehension is quite commonplace in the film industry amongst film directors[33]. The problem is that film directors can get away with their handicap. As long as they frame their shots well, follow good scripts and their editing is good and so on[34], there is no clear urgency to have this understanding. Films that are made this way, can still turn out good, or even great.

I decided to organise my own acting and directing workshop to learn about acting more in-depth. In cooperation with my wife, I taught a 10 day workshop promoting a physical approach[35], giving extra space to discover the special relation between actor and

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33 - Quite remarkable in comparison to theatre directors, for whom it is unthinkable to miss this connection with their players.

34 - My notes on acting: Annex VI – On Acting, Appendix page 39-46.

35 - Many film actors know how to imagine a past experience to bring out emotion for a scene. And this might work sometimes, but emotion can not be staged, while the body can be. That is why I use physical action as the preferred starting point for acting.

director.

As I intended to apply acting techniques to filmmaking, I decided to redefine what acting is. The question "What is acting?" feels however, like an *incomplete* question to me. Better would be to ask: what is *acting & directing*, as there is always direction when there is acting. If the director is not there to do it, the actor has to do it, which is called *self-direction*.

I elaborated on the complexity of the subject by writing some *reflections on acting*[36].

> Film directors who do not serve the actor's needs, are forcing the actor to *self-direct*. To direct yourself as an actor takes a lot of energy. Experienced film actors are very good at helping out, as they need to survive in a world where directors often are not ready to work with them in a sensible way. But all the time the actor has to spend on self-directing, cannot be spent on acting. That is why it is usually unfortunate.

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36 - In , you find my supplementary notes on acting and directing.

8. EXAM TIME: DOING IT DIFFERENTLY

Shortly before exam 3 I became interested in 'outsider artists'[37]. Inspired by this unconventional type of makers, I tried to work against convention myself.

I was also influenced by a class we had had about *Kairos*[38], the Ancient Greek concept of time. I became intrigued by pursuing Kairos, as it seemed related to "being in the moment", used in acting, and Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's idea of "flow". Both already had become part of my filmmaking vocabulary. I now wanted to practice being in Kairos, not only talk about it.

One strategy I had developed earlier in the context of exploration, was to *literally* live up to my ideas, putting my blunt statements in to practice. The plan for exam 3 came from a similar way of reasoning. I would not only *think* something, new ideas would need to have *consequences*.

If I thought that being like a kid was beneficial, I should maybe literally behave like a child during my presentation. Or I should hang out with childish people, and try to be like them. Concrete, practical and *literally*. So if I was convinced idiocy would help me as an artist, I should try to be a true idiot. And if you are supposed to lose track of Kronos-time when in Kairos, maybe I should forget looking at the clock while performing my show to the exam committee.

I planned to present my third exam as an amateur absurdist performance, avoiding the monotonous talk + powerpoint slides I had offered before. I used a concept called 'Nuism'. Nuism was an imaginary artist movement I had joined, taking its name from the Dutch word 'nu' meaning 'now'. The movement prohibited using future and past tense and therefore only lives in the present. I wrote a speech to promote the movement[39].

Naturally I was uncertain how the exam committee would respond to an ad hoc performance full of pathos and experiment. But such insecurity I deemed good. It excited me. Above all, it reflected my research: asking questions. If the exam committee would be puzzled, that was not going to be a bad thing. It would illustrate the issues related to my research.

Following similar thought, I worked on the (intermediate) research report for exam 3. I focussed mainly on the paper material, instead of its content, as I was tired of reflecting on the research as we did so often at the master. Now I just followed my gut-feeling of wanting to play around with paper and print.

The response to the exam material was very strong. I learned a lot from that confrontation and different perceptions between exam committee (negative) and the students (positive). The confines of the master finally became more clear to me, which was instructive.

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37 Reflections on outsider, being literal and Kairos: Annex VII - Research Notes, Appendix page 63.
38 - Kairos is one of the two ancient Greek concepts of time, opposing the other concept Chronos, the idea of chronological or sequential time.
39 - The text of my Nuism-speech you find here: www.filmthinker.com/nu.pdf

9. PATHS TO IDIOSYNCRASY

I was inspired by working with actors. As a consequence my head filled with ideas and plans. Now within the scope of unbridled asking, I had to find a way to manage the hunches, ideas and insights I got. I needed ways to capture and organise efficiently, because I had already started to forget.

My mother used to say: „If you forgot it, it probably wasn't important". But I argue that she was wrong. What is lost by a failure of memory might be very valuable[40]. I suspected that certain hunches are lost more easily for a biological reason: those which do not have a clear direct application are less needed for survival.

Along this lines, I had noticed that if my ideas had no connection to *existing information*, they faded away more rapidly. The so called *useless* is exactly what is important in this research and as filmmaker, at least, I believed so.

Before my master studies I would preserve only the ideas that fit into a certain ongoing project during the sparks' occurrence quite effortless. But I wanted to see if I could exploit my additional sparks[41]. I knew that these 'spark moments', something would 'click'. I wondered if our most essential task as 'artists' is to capture intriguing sparks of inspiration, and share them through the work. If so, then I wanted an efficient method to capture these, so I started to look for a system to record ideas.

From my awareness of memory failures came an interest in tools for memory enhancement. Briefly I considered taking multi-coloured memory boosting pills, or other similarly shady solutions. My eventual practical solution was to purchase an extensive collection of notebooks and installing a 32-piece box system at the wall of my study. I wrote thirty-two topics on the cartons, inspired by the list of personal preferences I had defined during the first semester.

Having prepared myself to catch ideas efficiently, I now was ready to boost my creative output and speed up idea development.

Until then I had never looked into 'self-help' creativity books, aimed at improving creativity. In part because I thought that using a formula for creativity was a contradiction in terms, and in part because I saw myself as a 'creative' type, born with creative skills. In the context of my research method of doing things not accustomed to, my original evasion of creativity formulas was all the more reason to look into these self-help books now. And so I did.

Some books offering 'thinking tools' focussed on better reasoning. Others at the enhancement of creativity. Reading my way through, I was very surprised that several creativity enhancement concepts in the books were quite appealing.

To not be a dull follower of these creativity methods, I decided to modify the thinking

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40 - My notes on the use of useless you find in <u>Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 64</u>.
41 - On creative ideas, sparks, memory and organising: <u>Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 64</u>.

tools described. In my first essay exercise[42] on the cinematic event I had determined that the 'unexpected', a surprise, a breaking of patterns, something unexpectedly different, is an essential element in filmmaking. My axiom that 'amazement' is the essence of what an audience wants to experience, proved useful to direct my focus. In the slipstream of my conviction I figured that the best way to amaze, is to do things different.

An example of modifying a simple *thinking tool* is 'double inversion'. The normal 'inversion tool' does not come from any specific 'self-help book', but the technique is very wide spread, albeit possibly used subconsciously by many: changing the direction or orientation of that which we examine, for instance by picking up an unfamiliar object and studying it by turning it upside-down, inside-out. By manipulating the object or idea in a way other than its *intended use* or *application*, we broaden our understanding of that which is examined.

But in this research I wanted do things deliberately different from what I was used to. To just invert was not enough. I might invert I thought, and then invert *again[43]:* double inversion, and I applied this strategy to an experiment with light[44].

A second example, is an experiment where I used a strategy of refuting my own ideas. As I had worked on acting and spontaneity, I had become convinced that acting was about spontaneity. To contradict myself I made a short film using only non-spontaneous gestures[45] breaking my own rule[46] very hard.

A third experiment came up when I had learned from acting that it is important to *unbalance* myself.

I figured that I might be looking for an opposite of "thought-terminating clichés"[47]. I calculated that the introduction of *flippant, pathetic and off-point questions/statements* might be *thought-inciting*. Such statements might reveal dormant cognitive dissonance within the receiver, who then, would be urged to rethink these presumptions.

I called my new approach 'deliberate dereistic thinking'[48] and remembered Slavoj Žižek saying that we need more useless thinking.[49] Mybe this was a way to practice it.

To structure my efforts, I made a list of thinking tools[50] aimed at uprooting my habitual thinking styles.

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42 - A draft of essay on amazement was uploaded for exam 3 and still downloadable.
43 - Inversion combined with repetition is also used for audio in David Lynch's famous series Twin Peaks.
44 - The experiment with the inversion of light, was explained in exam 3.
45 - The short film using only gestures was uploaded on Vimeo for exam 3. Password: supafish.
46 - Rules coming from my ideas about the use of spontaneity in acting.
47 - "Thought-terminating cliché" is a term introduced by American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, are statements applied by oppressive totalitarian authorities to make cognitive dissonant ideas acceptable within their peoples.
48 - "Dereistic" usually negatively refers to thought patterns which are disconnected from reality, but here it is applied positively to solicit new ideas and break from previously held expectations.
49 - The source of this quote of Slavoj Žižek was one of the many Žižek-video's on YouTube.
50 - List of dereistic thinking tools can be found in Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 65.

10. GRADUATION

Questioning, reasoning and thinking had been, throughout the research, useful guides leading me to novelty, insight and creative ideas. I had explored non-lingual forms of questioning and early phases of the study activities made me consider various ways to develop films differently. However, I had not managed to involve my film projects substantially. That was something to be concerned about.

Meanwhile the confines of the master had changed during my one year break, and I was now expected to produce research-related artistic work, not only a method. I had to find a way to merge my work into research[51].

I made an inventory of what I had at my disposal. I had abandoned writing essays a long time ago, but the 10 topics of the essays where still there and as the list had become outdated and incomplete, I added twelve more topics to the list[52], counting up to 22 investigative angles. During my research I had become curious about these twelve additional aspects of filmmaking.

One thing I knew was that during the making of films, I would like to think again about what my listed aspects of cinema and filmmaking meant, and how I could work with them differently.

I thought to investigate these during actual filmmaking. In the filming itself, filmmaking aspects from the list could be reinvestigated: I could modify or abandon common approaches, turn these inside out and upside down, and apply creative tricks during *production[53]*.

Eventually I chose to continue work on multiple story ideas that had come from one of my experiments: the successful 'story experiment'. The 16 stories from this experiment are now the body of my graduation project, the '16 Stories Project'[54]. It will be presented during the graduation show, and I consider the presentation both as a fully integrated part of the project development, and part of the continuation if my master research[55].

Avoiding conventional forms of presentation, the guests of the graduation show will be introduced to the projects in an unusual but hospitable way. I will be 'doing things differently for the sake of doing things differently', also during presentation.

One form I will most fervently avoid is the commonly used synopsis[56]. Non-textual ways to communicate film plans are rare, but I found that presentations based on non-textual communication can appear quite natural and logical, as film encompasses many non-

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51 - The opposite, to merge the research into my work, had not been fruitful in such a way that I could clearly demonstrate the impact of questioning on the actual work.
52 - The updated, extended list of 22 topics: Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 52.
53 - In the action of filming my shorts, and while working with actors, editing, making a decoupage, I want to be able to look for the stupid, the naive, the ignorant, the idiotic, just like in the research. My investigative attitude can be leading, asking questions during film production.
54 - The story project: Annex V – Graduation, Appendix page 18-19.
55 - I aim to bring three aspects of my study together in an unconventional way: idea development, artistic research and presentation, the latter including sales, pitching and funding.
56 - To me the presenting of a film plan using a synopsis, is like introducing a person by showing an x-ray of their skeleton. Of course the x-ray reveals that the person in question has, or not, a support structure inside the body. But it excludes much more information you might want to know, to get acquainted.

textual dimensions. [57] [58]

For each of the 16 projects[59], I have recorded sounds, music, spoken text and movements available. I have made paintings, selected a specific type of tea for each story, collected objects, smells, food recipes. And I have thought about light design, colour palette, climate and weather, and I kept open to address all the sensory organs while brainstorming.

The process of preparing the graduation show I see as a way to further the development of my 16 short film ideas.

The show

During the exhibition the 16 projects will be presented in a minimalistic exhibition space. Guests will first arrive elsewhere, where they have to accept a blindfold and then are led by a waiter to the exhibit location. This entrance I consider important to disorient the guest. When the blindfolds are taken off, the guest becomes aware of a dark space with small stools in the centre of it, one stool per project. Lanterns and headphones are handed out, one set for each. After this, everyone is free to walk around. When a guest sits down on one of the stools, a menu is brought to her/him by a waiter, from which the guest can choose elements connected to the film project assigned to that specific stool. The waiter will take their order and bring an object, sound scape, picture, smell or any other element that is available[60]. This may continue until the guest decides to stand up again, and discover another project.

During the exam I will present a mock-up version of the exhibition. To get a picture of the show set-up already, the <u>description of the exhibition proposal</u>[61] is useful (see Annex V). For a peek into the related research and exhibition development process, my notes on presentation[62] can be found in Annex VII.
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Set-up with 5 project presentations, a welcoming waiter and a guest.

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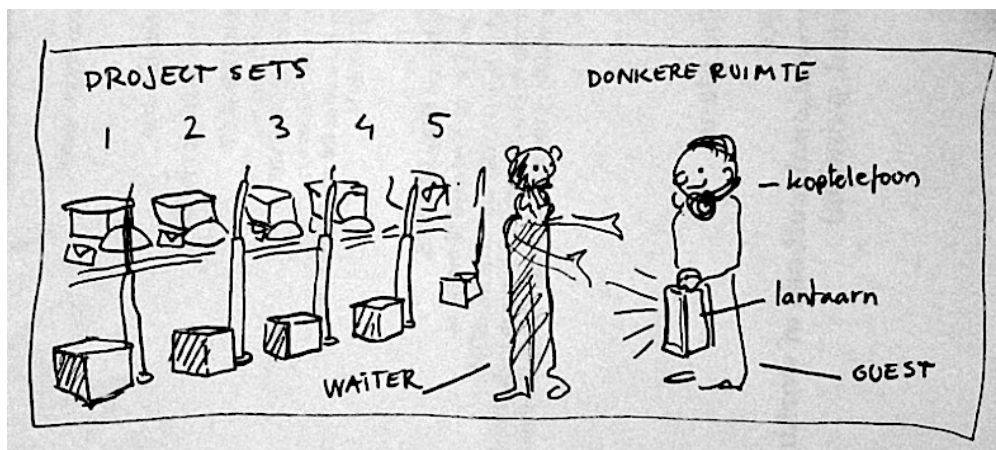
57 - In presenting a film project, maybe anthropologist Clifford Geertz' concept of 'thick description' is applicable in some way. In anthropology a 'thick description' of a human behaviour is one that explains not just the behaviour, but its context as well, such that the behaviour becomes meaningful to an outsider. (thanks to mentor Albert for pointing this out.)

58 - A text-oriented practice in the film industry appears awkward to me, in the sense that film financiers, committees and producers are so much oriented on writing, while audiences do not read films.

59 - Descriptions of the 16 graduation projects: Annex V – Graduation – Appendix page 22-39.

60 - In one version of the exhibition the guests have to pay a coin for each element they order.

61 - A detailed description of the show experience: Annex V – Graduation, Appendix page 20.

62 - Notes and drawings on presentation: Annex VII – Research Notes, Appendix page 68-70.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

For more than 5 semesters I have been asking questions abundantly. Now I want to look back and try to see what this approach brought me as a maker.

With the research question *"Does a filmmaker benefit from a practice of uncurbed questioning?"* I initially wanted to address habits I knew I had developed over the years. I felt certain beliefs I had internalised were blocking me, but I did not know which of these I had to deal with. I desired to base my need for change in a better understanding of cinema and filmmaking, and I wanted to know what motivated me to chase a filmmaking career so hard.

Choosing uncurbed questioning as a research strategy is a obviously an exaggerated position, taken for the sake of the study. But this radical approach was necessary to not overlook less obvious presumptions I was likely to have.

When applying this questioning as broadly as I have done, it sometimes felt untenable, or maybe counterproductive. But when applied in the specific confines of making a film, this method was helpful to me when making artistic decisions, by heightening my creative state of mind.

All this questioning made me very receptive to new perspectives. For the first time in my career I took significant time to sit down and think again about what was familiar. At times I would exaggerate and had to tell myself to stop reading, watching or thinking, as I would reach my physical and mental limits. There seemed so much to discover, too much to ever process during my studies, and I was continuously curious for more.

There were not only advantages. The method of questioning almost entirely failed to have impact on *existing* works-in-progress. Contrary to my expectations, my artistic approach towards the development of the two feature films and two short film projects I was already working on before starting the master, did not significantly change. I think this was due to the fact that I did not want the projects to be submitted to an external research process. I protected them.

On the other hand the method allowed me to produce 16 entirely new short film plans. The projects are deeply influenced by the questioning method I employed and originate in one of the experiments, The Story Experiment and I find this the most rewarding outcome, as actual films can be made from it.

Looking back I can identify four other important moments during my research that I want to mention.

The first important moment came when I realised that I should take personal inspiration very seriously, even if that feels awkward at first. Inspirational hedonism is not what my Dutch culture prescribes and I am not raised to be focused on self-gratification, or to be overtly introspective. But too much cultural modesty does not always help the maker either. A filmmaker cannot disregard inner emotional worlds in which ideas are born. The personal aspect of filmmaking has a significant role and it is important to value the conditions in which inspiration flourishes.

A second significant moment within the research process came when I saw that actors have many similar difficulties to deal with as any other creative makers. They, perhaps

more than any other artistic professional, are confronted with the fact they are what they sell. The techniques that are used in acting are so different from our daily problem solving strategies, that I am intrigued to such a degree that I think I am hooked on studying acting the rest of my life.

The third moment of discovery was the story experiment: I realised that if I say that authorship is not important - stories being retellings in some way- I could actually apply this idea literally, disregarding the author and not caring about copyrights, and this led to the development of various film projects. My main goal after graduation is to bring those films into production.

The fourth moment is the use of lists. When asking questions, I came up with dozens of answers which I often wrote down in a list so I would not forget. Later I could use this list as a part of a recipe to work in an alternative way. Following my (temporary) answers in practice, was a perfect way to change my rusty working routines. The graduation project is a demonstration of the application of my new creative strategies, which were unknown to me before my studies.

In retrospective I think that questioning can be seen as an extremely beneficial method for an exploring filmmaker. Using an exaggerated method of questioning I managed, without effort, to be 'pulled towards the unknown'. Merely by asking one question after another, I automatically arrived at new ideas, gathered insight and identified my blind spots in terms of knowledge and experience. To not skip immediately to production allowed me to focus on things I would have otherwise ignored.

I would be surprised if this would be not similar for other filmmakers.

In hindsight I think that the relevance of my research to colleagues might reveal itself most prominently after my graduation. The significance for others can lay in that I demonstrated that this questioning method can bring you to unexpected places and place the familiar in a new light. As most filmmakers are regularly expected to come up with something fresh and new, having a method to do so seems beneficial. And if questions do not bring new insights, at least it might strengthen existing understanding.

Returning to the similarities between the actors problems and my own as a filmmaker, I would be interested to see if an investigation into the use of acting techniques for non-acting aspects of filmmaking would have interesting results. Without having gone through this process during the master I would not have discovered how little I had understood for years about acting and creativity. As such I can recommend this method to anyone.

Another research angle that would interest me is to find out what happens if a filmmaker tries to entirely focus on *doing* and *impulses*. This would be sort of reversal of my own research, which had a question rather than an act as a starting point.

After having studied for some years, I believe that the best way for a filmmaker to find what is unexpected, is to be an explorer. To me it is a given truth that a film should contain elements of surprise and amazement. By being adventurous, the maker has the best chance to deliver such surprise and amazement.

Amsterdam, 2016, January 13rd.

APPENDIX OVERVIEW

Annex I. Abstract

abstract of the final report*

Annex II. Profile

biography of the student*
artist's statement by the student*

Annex III. Redefinition of Cinema

Redefinition of Cinema

Annex IV. Graduation Project

retrospective of the story project
16 short film proposals (**graduation project**)*
description of the graduation show experience

Annex V. Experiments

descriptions of all experiments related to the research

Annex VI. On Acting

On Acting

Annex VII. Research Notes

the slime mould experiment: intelligence without brain
notes on questions and method
research slogans
essay topics / investigative angles
notes on inspiration
list of personal preferences
notes on art, ignorance, stupidity and idiocy
notes on artistic research, art education
notes on abandoning science and scientism
notes on creative thinking tools
notes on outsider art and Kairos
notes on presentation (coming from brainstorms for the graduation show)
list of quotes collected during the research
survey results fellow Master of Film students
and more..

Annex VIII. Overview of the 2nd Year

overview 2nd year program*

* obligatory

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