

# **On the Nature of Vision and My Personal Vision**

A Critical Reflection

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In its interim report, the Assessment Committee requested that I return to the critical reflection to re-examine the core questions of the artistic research project *Being the Director* – namely "What is a vision? And, what kind of vision do I have as a director?" – focusing on *Torpedo* and *Red*. I appreciate this opportunity to do so.

When I started out, I saw vision as something project-specific and practice-oriented, in most ways instrumental. Now I have a more holistic understanding of the concept, inspired by my experiences with *Red* and *Torpedo*, and the artistic research project as a whole. My intention was to express this transition in the documentary *Being the Director (BtD)*.

The Assessment Committee acknowledges the complexity of the documentary form, and so do I. In a documentary, the majority of the reflection is in the selection (editing), and thus invisible. So in returning to the same questions, I prefer to do so in writing. The committee has asked for a personal and probing account. I will do my best to provide just that.

## **WHAT IS A VISION**

I started off the research project using the term vision rather indiscriminately. In fact, the whole research project can on a personal level be seen as a search for that very question, as in what is *my* vision.

In a recent article in the Norwegian filmmakers magazine *Rushprint*, I wrote the following, in my own translation:

Is [vision] about how you mentally envision the film? If so, vision is reduced to form, and your job as director is in many ways completed before your first day of shooting. The rest is just painting by numbers. Or perhaps director's vision is a chosen method, a strategy for the set? Could it be that director's vision is about an emotion, or a statement you want to express? If so, the experience for and/or the understanding in every audience member is what matters

most. Can it really be that a director's vision is about how something is perceived by others? Or is your vision really about who you are, how you see and interpret the world around you, and how that again determines not only what you decide to direct, but also how? I prefer the last and most holistic version (Diesen, 2010)

I will still stick by that definition. Taken out of its rhetorical setting, let me rephrase it as follows:

**Vision is about who you are, and how that makes you see and interpret the world around you, and how that again determines not only what you decide to direct, but also how.**

As such, vision encompasses both style and substance. And it is something you have, but also something you give, or infuse, in your works.

This definition evolved through several discussions with my main advisor, the Swedish director and professor Suzanne Osten. Most took place after I was finished shooting both *Red* and *Torpedo*, and my experiences and early cuts of *BtD* was the framework for our talks. Suzanne maintained that her idea of directing is that it is a philosophical approach, or stand, to the human condition, a stand that is seen in how we tell stories about people. By then I had also heard Brian Cox say "great directors, the great ones, are great humanists with enormous compassion for the human condition" (*BtD*). Most importantly, I had realized that *Torpedo* was not only probably my best work of recent years, but also why, because it was personal, an extension of me. My hopes and fears, inclinations, life experiences and stylistic preferences came together in *Torpedo*, and gave it life. I might not have known exactly what my vision was, or been able to fully verbalize it, but I had it. And even my insecurities, my fear of losing control, of failing my vision, helped create a nervous, conflict-ridden atmosphere on the set that helped give it its intensity. Who I was, how I saw and interpreted the world, had defined not only what I directed, but also how. And it shows. I had also realized that *Red* was to a lesser degree a product of my personal vision. And that shows, too. I will soon go more in detail on both projects, but a more pressing question needs to be answered first:

Why did I only reach this definition towards the end of the research project?

When discussing the issue, throughout the research period, the concept of a director's vision did seem to be, in the words of the committee, "extant and understood". By that I mean most initially seemed to believe to have a pretty clear idea of what I was talking about; it was the discussions that followed that proved it was all rather murky. Very few could give a precise definition of a general nature. The same turned out to be true when I posed the question to directing students at the Norwegian Film School. In general, there were two quite different approaches, either placing the emphasis on the word director or vision. Let me generalize by paraphrasing: There was the passive how it was seen (the vision) by the director, or the more active how (I) the director see it. If you place the emphasis on the vision itself, like it's something tangible, a style, the vision can, if it is possible to present it in a clear and understandable manner, serve as an instruction manual of sorts for the people around the director: This is what we will make, or at least: This is what it will look like. When the emphasis was on director, it became more personal. It was more about the dispatcher, the sender; it was an expression of intent, and thus less tangible, but also more open and dynamic.

My idea of a vision was originally of the first kind. It was project-specific, practice-oriented and related to style and execution, to some extent to texture and process. This way of looking at a director's vision most likely came from a yearlong professional existence as director for hire, especially in television. I had become accustomed to interpreting a script within a strictly set framework. Personal touch would come from mastery of craft, and/or by choosing to focus on specific parts of the given story. And with so many overseers - producers, writers, network executives (sometimes also actors and union representatives) - the more you chose to illuminate something specific, or to deviate from the norm, the better the general mastery of craft had to be to get away with it. The mental image of a director swimming with sharks snapping at his heels was born in episodic television. And the frustration of not having proper command, never

having enough time or resources, of so often being forced to curb your ambition, lead me to believe that it was all about power. That if I had the formal power to decide, I could express myself, in fact, I believe I assumed that power would make me express myself. I took for granted I would have something to express. I always felt I did, within the confines of a project. To me, vision was how I wanted any specific film or TV episode to look, feel, and be received. And personal vision was about how I'd do it differently than another director. It was not so much about why. And for practical purposes, and for confined projects like a TV-episode, this can be a useful approach. But the reason I started this research project was to find meaning beyond the practical realm. So when I wrote *Maintaining Your Vision while Swimming with Sharks* in the project title, I referred to the lack of respect I felt I got for making stylistic, directorial choices. But perhaps I should have looked a little further, and realized that my shortcoming was not about power or directorial prowess. It was more about substance, and meaning.

Of course, it is hard to talk about meaning.

When I asked Danish director Per Fly what his personal vision was ("What is a Per Fly film?") he became silent for quite some time. And then, to his own obvious relief, he came up with a pretty good answer. But for now, let me concentrate on the awkward silence that preceded it. A lot of great directors, like Per Fly, are reluctant to talk about the "real meaning" of their work. Some of course seem to enjoy shrouding themselves in mystery. Some artists believe that the work should speak for itself. If they need to explain it, then what's the point? Then it's not expressing what they want it to express; the very question is indicative of artistic failure. (Others, like Brian Cox in my documentary (*BtD*), would argue that a work - like a film - could take on a life of its own. But I'll leave that for later).

Vision, as defined above, is about who you are, what you decide to do, and how you go about doing it. Of course, that could apply to any kind of production, and says nothing of the quality and significance of the work that follows.

In the Revised Project Description I also brought the concept of art into the discussion, and asked: "What is a personal artistic vision, and can you call yourself a director without one?" (Diesen, 2006)

In my mind, "film artist" was long a honourable title best bestowed on you by others, not something I'd ever claim for myself. For many years, I was even reluctant to think of cinema as art, and the director as a potential artist. This reluctance was probably a result of my young years as a film critic, where I watched so many films by self-proclaimed artists I found lacking of craftsmanship. Still, there have always been films I'd label art, the usual suspects like *Metropolis*, *8 ½* or *Battleship Potemkin*, watershed films proven by time, and undisputable in their significance as well in their applied skill. But in current works I often associated the word "art" with pretentiousness, a bad excuse for lack of cinematic aptitude. I decided to go to the Hollywood-oriented University of Southern California (USC) for my basic training, and still "usually work in the story-oriented and effective Hollywood tradition as often seen in (Anglo-) American film and television. Suzanne Osten would call it filmmaking as craftsmanship." (Diesen, 2010).

In *BtD*, I stated that one of the main reasons for joining this programme was because I wanted to become a better, bolder director. I now wonder whether my reliance on craftsmanship, on learned skill, has hampered my ambition and ability to be novel, to create something new. Am I recreating rather than creating? Gradually, I've realized a need to look at and reconsider my stance on the term and the idea of art. "What is art" is arguably a far bigger discussion than the one I'm undertaking in this essay. So for now my goal is to find at least one criterion I can bring with me to the discussions of *Red* and *Torpedo*.

The Danish philosopher K. E. Løgstrup does not really discuss cinema, but has pointed thoughts on the nature of art. Løgstrup uses the expression "avstandsløs sansning" about the nature of art - and in lack of a better translation I'll call it "sensory experience without distance". It's like when you look at a forest with a

pair of binoculars - you're there, the distance is irrelevant, you see the forest in itself and not in relationship to where you are standing. It's about being, sensing, experiencing, not about rational cognition. And it's not about objects, but about what they can evoke or make you experience. As such, art is ephemeral and personal - a sensory experience may be shared, but will never be the same for two individuals. So what does art do? Art expands our universe, how we perceive things; it deals with life's possibilities and impossibilities by shedding new light on them, so we can see things that we could not see otherwise. And thus, of course, art can both give and rob life of meaning. You can also deduct it has to have some element of novelty, if it is to shed new light on something familiar.

Lets say cinema is art, and the director is an artist. Then, in Løgstrup's terms, his/her artistic vision could be said to be an attempt to bring this extremely delicate notion, this "avstandsløse sansning", to expression. Of course, in its pure expression, art is hard to imagine in any art form. And particularly in collective art forms, like cinema. And if it were even possible to create pure art in Løgstrup's fashion, what would be the point? Why should the artist make something that has already found its expression? If you could precisely articulate it, that in itself would render the work pointless. The articulation would be the work.

Inspired by Løgstrup, you can say art is not something that is, but something that might happen in given circumstances. For me, the strongest venue for these given circumstances has always been the cinema. To sit in the dark, where poetry (well, dialogue), music and photographic images fuse to give a whole that can be far greater than the sum of its parts. All fleeting, and per definition in motion, it's even called motion pictures. Cinema offers a shared experience, but always different, always individual. I'd argue it's as close as you get to "sensory experience without distance", and the cinema is a great place to shed new light on life's possibilities and impossibilities. In fact, it was in the dark of the cinema I decided to be a director. I was 17, and emotionally touched to the point of tears by a film I realized was terrible. By then, I had been trying to write prose, and also dabbled in photography and Super-8, and wrote film reviews for the local

daily. But it was when a really bad film touched me to tears (I believe it was *Sahara*, starring Brooke Shields) I truly realized the emotional force and potency of the medium, especially combined with the power of story. My experience of *Sahara* also illustrates another important point when discussing art and cinema. There can be moments of merit (also artistic merit) in otherwise forgettable works, and banalities in the most profound films.

What I want to bring with me in the further discussions is this: Do my projects, *Red* and *Torpedo*, in any meaningful way “deal with life’s possibilities and impossibilities by shedding new light on them, so we can see things that we could not see otherwise.” In other words, do they, to some degree, possess the qualities we associate with a work of art?

## **WHAT IS MY VISION AS A DIRECTOR**

Film historians like to look at whole bodies of work to find singular vision. Usually that will include themes, story or stylistic elements and ideas that are repeated, and thus form a pattern. An obvious, but telling example would be Hitchcock, and his affinity for murder, his well-known use of blond heroines/ice princesses, the domineering mothers, the recurring visual elements of birds, trains, looming stairways, etc. This can of course merely be seen as his professional palette, the tools of an eminent craftsman well versed in cinema history - but also as a glimpse into the mind and inner psyche of a great artist. The sum of his fears, hopes, background and beliefs, and how that influences how he sees and portrays the world in his films, consciously and/or subconsciously.

If I look at my films in a similar manner, there are a few things that seem to stand out. Genre-wise, I tend to do thrillers and crime stories. Of course, some of this can be attributed to the fact that in my line of work, you get pigeonholed. Producers often prefer to hire you to do things similar to what you’ve done before. But for me, an affinity for crime stories and thrillers goes all the way back



to film school, and is also witnessed in the scripts I write. My thesis film at USC was a short called *Death Row*, and was about a widow who dresses up as a nun to get into a high security prison in order to kill the man who murdered her husband. I wrote and directed it, and *Death Row* introduced what would become the recurring elements of revenge and deception, in the context of family/responsibility. Typically, my films have a protagonist that sets out to rectify a wrong that has been done to them, while gradually realizing that things are not as clear-cut as s/he first believed. And the stories are all played out against a specific socio-political backdrop that somehow involves family. In *Death Row*, the widow forgives the prisoner/murderer, but he is still shot to death by the prison guards, with *America the Beautiful* blasting on the soundtrack. It was my comment on the American practice of capital punishment, and admittedly not a very subtle one.

My first feature was called *Isle of Darkness*, and even though it was marketed as a horror film, it was really a thriller, about a young teacher who takes a post on a remote island, only to discover that some of her teenage students are abused by her own love interest, the local vicar. And even though my second feature, *Hold My Heart*, was more of a straight drama, it still had the pace and structure of a thriller, with revenge and retribution as integral elements. *Hold My Heart* is about a desperate father who kidnaps the daughter he has been legally banned from seeing after an ugly divorce and subsequent accusations of sexual abuse. The audience only gradually realizes that the accusations are false, while father and daughter rekindle their relationship as they're on the lam. I consider *Hold My Heart* to be my best feature. It was made with love, but born in anger and fear. A friend (who also co-wrote the script) went through an ugly breakup, and only rarely got to see his son for years afterwards. I could not believe how easy it was for a mother to get sole custody, and shut the father out of most aspects of a child's life. I had two sons at the time, and it was deeply disturbing to me. For *Hold My Heart* we made the stakes higher with the abuse charges, but even without that element it would still be a telling tale of how legally chastised fathers in Norway were at the turn of the millennium (things have since improved). I also know the film was important to a lot of men (and sometimes

their mothers and sisters), as I was approached with similar stories for years afterwards, from Norway and abroad.

The father-child (or as in *Isle of Darkness* teacher/caretaker-child) relationship has become the most significant recurring theme in my work. This is of course at the very core of *Torpedo* as well as *Red*. And it is also pivotal to *Prize*, the feature I'm currently writing. *Prize* is a war drama that has two fathers in the centre - an Afghani opium farmer and the Norwegian ISAF soldier that ends up both saving and accidentally shooting the farmer's son, a boy who happens to be the very same age as the son the soldier left behind in Oslo.

I first became a father at 21, an unplanned event that radically altered the course of my life. At the time I was concerned about how it would delay me going to film school. It didn't take long to realize that that was the least of my concerns and worries. Now I'm the proud father of four sons, and have all the more to worry about. And fatherhood for me is far from just centred about love and parental angst. It's a struggle to be worthy, and a constant fear of failure. It's about obligations and sacrifice - and guilt, in part for being distant and away (mentally and/or physically), as you often are as a director. Since the age of 21, everything I have done has played against that background. My experience with fatherhood, with all the love, fear, doubts, regrets and obligations that follows, is crucial to how I "look at and interpret the world around me". It is what I know, and how I use my own experiences and myself best. It is the most important part of my filter to the world. I had never given this much thought before starting my current artistic research project. Of course, as explained above, it had infused my work for years. But now that I realize that I have in many ways kept telling the same story many times over, I've decided to focus my efforts. So in the script for *Prize*, for example, the father-son stories have been given more room, and been pushed to the foreground. The result is yet to be seen.

In *BtD*, Per Fly got four sentences to answer the question "What is a Per Fly film?" Let me conclude this point by asking myself the same. In fact, I also did during the making of the documentary, but the director in me wasn't happy with

the performance of the actor in me, and left the answer on the floor of the editing room. So I'll repeat it here, a little more succinct, and in writing:

So... what is a Trygve Allister Diesen film?

**A Trygve Allister Diesen film is, in some way or another, a film about fatherhood, or a similar kind of responsibility. Its about a protagonist that has a duty to something he finds to be greater than himself, and has to face and overcome his/her own shortcomings in order to live up to that responsibility.**

Personal vision is far from static, and can and will change over time, as who I am, and how that makes me see and interpret the world, and how that again determines not only what I decide to direct, but also how, changes. But until this point in my professional life, the personal vision stated above sums up at least the best of my work with surprising accuracy.

Personal vision has as much to do with story as style or the visuals. At least that is true for me. I have always seen myself as a director that writes, rather than vice versa. I might have to reconsider. Perhaps I'm not writing to have something to direct, but just as much directing to have control over my stories?

## **TORPEDO**

For *Torpedo*, however, at least the genesis was more about visual texture than story. I had these dreamlike flashes of grainy, gritty, hand-held images for years, for some reason usually taking place in a bedroom. And music in my head - I had heard deep bass, and just knew that it (whatever "it" was) needed an electronic score. But mostly, for a lack of a better word, the initial, creative spark was about a feeling, or a pulse. With *Torpedo*, I wanted to re-create the excitement I felt thinking about it in the people that were going to watch it. I was a director with an idea, and wrote it to be able to direct it. I did not write it alone, but it was

based on my idea, I was in charge of the process and strongly involved in all episodes.

The title came to me in a lobby bar at a film festival. And it has stayed with the project all the way. To me, the latter is always a good sign. Løgstrup discusses how art often is to simplify, to take away the clutter, to see the core, or at least a specific part or element, and focus there. It's my professional experience that a good title can give a script not only an identity, but also clarity, for the writer, the director, for the readers, co-workers, and of course the audience. And through clarity it can also get longevity. It must be close to 15 years since I first started thinking about the idea that became the series. And here I am, still talking about it.

I have already stated that I regard *Torpedo*, with its flaws, as the best work I've done in recent years. I have also argued that it is personal, and imbued with my vision, that it is in fact a Trygve Allister Diesen film. I will suggest it does have some artistic qualities. But what are they? And how does *Torpedo* compare to film and TV standards, both nationally and internationally?

Nationally, *Torpedo* was considered a success. It got good ratings for the broadcaster and co-financier TV2 (around 550 000 viewers per episode), which gave them a better-than-average market share for the time slot. *Torpedo* was nominated for two Gullruten awards (the Norwegian TV awards), for best TV Drama and Best Actor, but did not win. Our international distributor, Oslo-based Nordic World, had great hopes for its international appeal. So far it has only been sold to a handful of countries, mainly in the Nordic region. Nordic World expected to sell it also to bigger markets, like Germany, Spain and France, but they all turned it down. Their response was that it was too dark, from the story down to the high-contrast images themselves. They could not find suitable slots for it. If we are to judge the series on its commercial merits, *Torpedo* has not been an international success. It has, however, been an important door opener for me as a director and writer, also internationally. It was a late-night screening of *Torpedo* that convinced producer/financier Norman Dreyfuss to offer me the

chance to take over the reigns of *Red. Torpedo* was also the main reason why I was offered to direct the two pilot episodes of *Inspector Winter* for Swedish television (SVT) in 2009. *Torpedo* has also lead to director meetings with several US networks, and all major Hollywood film studios. In fact, almost every job I've been offered as a director the last three years have in some way been related to my work on *Torpedo*. Considering the fact that *Torpedo*, despite not being a commercial success, still stirs up so much interest, it is fair to assume that it holds up well to international standards in other ways.

To what extent *Torpedo* pushes the boundaries of these standards, or “deal[s] with life’s possibilities and impossibilities by shedding new light on them, so we can see things that we could not see otherwise”, is of course a different question. I would argue that it does in at least one respect, and that is story-wise, particularly in relation to the ending, the conclusion of the overarching story. By the ending I refer to the last part of the fourth episode. In fact, this ending, pushing the realistic grittiness of the story to the extreme, combined with the use of high-contrast, dark images, as a direct, directorial response to that choice, ended up being detrimental to selling the series to the mainstream, European market. Artistically, I still believe it was the right choice to make, it told a more honest story that way. I consider *Torpedo* to be a tragedy in the classic sense, in which the hero falls victim to his own character flaws. In this story, he had several: Jealousy, pride and lust. But it was an act of parental love that marked the kiss of death to his professional career.

Let me return to the ending, the finale: To let your protagonist set fire to his best friend, and then drive into the sunset together with his pregnant girlfriend that he now knows killed his wife... This is most definitely pushing boundaries in a network TV format. It was by no means done for a shock effect. To me, it was the logical conclusion to the protagonist’s journey. The core of the idea was to explore whether it was possible to live by the sword without dying by the sword, to see if what you do can be closed off in a separate compartment from who you are. Is it possible to be a torpedo at night, and a loving father and husband at day? It’s a little like in Robert Altman’s *The Player*. That film shows how it’s

impossible to simultaneously be a successful movie executive (player) and a nice, decent guy. Only when Tim Robbins' character has become a murderer, liar and cheat, is he ready to be a true player, a Hollywood executive. *Torpedo* has a defining scene in episode 1: Everything goes off the rails after Terje, the protagonist, makes one wrong (but morally right) decision: He decides to stay for his daughter's birthday party instead of doing the scheduled pickup. In this moment, he is a good father, but a bad torpedo. And they all end up paying the price.

Surprisingly, TV2 had few concerns about the ending. They were mainly focused on the first episode. In their experience, it is all about pulling the audience in from the beginning. And they always liked the dramatic build of the pilot episode. By the time you get to episode four, it doesn't really matter; by their instrumental logic you have already either succeeded or failed. My producers, however, both voiced strong, personal concerns for the amount of violence, and a more professional worry for what it would mean for future sales. I argued, like I did above, that it was necessary for the story arc, that this was a tragedy. In retrospect, we were both right. They were right in how it probably resulted in fewer sales. And I have to apologize for that. But I will argue that the confidence that comes from having final say, final cut, of not backing down, personally and story-wise, was crucial in giving the series the edge, and the directorial signature, I believe it has. The fact that I knew where I was heading, gave the story a purpose and a direction. By taking a stand, it stood out. Ironically, at one point I was almost ready to give in, and look for a slightly more uplifting ending. My closest creative collaborators, actor/star Jørgen Langhelle and DoP Harald Paalgard, convinced me to stick to my guns, and maintain the original intention, for better and worse.

Stylistically, I believe *Torpedo* was quite radical, at least in a Norwegian setting. It might have been less of a novelty seen from an international perspective, but it still stands out. The DoP and I looked to thrillers from the 70's for inspiration. Films like *The French Connection*, *Three Days of the Condor* and *Mean Streets* were among our references, as was *Taxi Driver*. I would say *Torpedo* adheres to a

film aesthetic more than traditional TV, with very few talking heads, and limited use of shot/reverse shot in dialogue scenes. I also tried to shy away from the TV-favourite MCU (medium close up), opting for closer or wider shots. *Torpedo* also has an editing rhythm where perceived cuts often in fact are camera movements. Our colour timer commented on this. He had just come off the very classically edited Danish period TV series *Better Times (Krøniken)*, and was surprised to find that our higher paced, dark thriller had significantly fewer cuts per minute (about half, if I recall correctly).

Also, as a director, I'm more interested in reaction than action. I usually make the camera trail rather than push the storytelling. I tend to focus on reaction to dialogue, rather than seeing the words being spoken. It's more about what a line means, or how it is perceived, rather than the line itself. A lot of television is, in my opinion, filmed dialogue, where both conflict and subtext ends up being verbalized. I find that dialogue often is the weakest way of saying something. With *Torpedo*, we tried to "make TV as film." I was very pleased when the critic in Norway's leading newspaper *Aftenposten* ended his review with the following sentence: Now TV is film (Haddal, 2007). This all came with a price, documented and commented on more in detail in my documentary. You can definitely say that my idea of making TV as film, with the focus on the visuals that followed, was the main reason that the sound department never got a fair shot on the set. And that again lead to poor production sound we were never really able to rectify. Another problem was the lack of time the audience was given to reflect upon what they were experiencing.

With *Torpedo*, it is hard to say where the screenwriter in me ends, and the director begins. For example, the pace is amplified by the directing, but still very present in the script: Dramaturgically, my idea was to build the story as five features, over two levels. Level one is the overarching story of the complete miniseries, where episode one is act one, episode two is act two until the midpoint, episode three act two until the second culmination, and episode four is act three. Writing features, I break the story into eight sequences, leaving two for each episode of the miniseries. Level two would be the episodes themselves, also

all having eight sequences and of course three acts. This gives each and every 45-minute episode of *Torpedo* the same amount of major turning points usually found in a 90-120 minute feature film. I insisted on this form mostly to make sure that the story always moved, but also, frankly, because it is how I know to write. TV writers, at least in the American tradition, often write in five or even seven acts. They also tend to spell things out more. I tend to believe that less is more; at least when it comes to exposition, and that's something I also brought to the set as a director. Not only in the scenes themselves, trying to avoid over-explaining things, and cutting scenes to the bone, but also in dealing with the crew, where I did not share all pertinent information. I will not reiterate that debate here, as it is also covered in the documentary, and relates more to process than analyzing the result. My point here is the fact that the upbeat tempo undercut the impact of the tragedy I was telling. For the audience there was very little time for reflection, or to invest emotionally, as the story perpetually moved forward. The audience was chasing information, not digesting it.

Another concern is that my preoccupation with tempo and the thriller form might have skewed my attention in the direction of form. The same critic that wrote "Now TV is film", also suggested that the mechanics of the thriller form in fact was what we, as the creators, found most interesting. When I first read his comment, I dismissed it. In retrospect, I realize it is a valid concern. If so, you can argue we put the cart before the horse, or form before content. Why did/do I believe so strongly in the ending? Is it the logical conclusion to the life choices of the protagonist, or merely the logical conclusion to the self-imposed dramaturgy, with its ever-winding and escalating twists and turns?

I knew how the story would end before we started plotting the episodes. In fact, the beginning and the end were pretty constant throughout the process. So the climax was not merely a result of a dramaturgical exercise. But in the other episodes, especially two and three, we did work hard to create strong cliff-hangers, as well as story turning points, and arguably pushed the character to places where he didn't have to go. The scene where he kills a woman for the



second time (to get a key), in episode three, is such a (violent) moment that might be gratuitous.

I said above that I realize “*Torpedo* was not only probably my best work of recent years, but also why, because it was personal, an extension of me. My hopes and fears, inclinations, life experiences and stylistic preferences came together in *Torpedo*, and gave it life.”

Some years ago, I had the pleasure of attending a master class in screenwriting conducted by Paul Schrader. He said something that stuck in my mind: Write the metaphor. The idea is to take something close to you, and disguise it in a new and more exciting setting. As an example he used the following: In almost every freshman screenwriting class, Schrader found that there is a handful of stories that surface. One is the coming out of the closet-story, the story of a homosexual (often a young man) that is about to finally tell his friends and parents about his sexual identity. This story the world has seen a million times. What if, he would suggest, what if the budding writer instead wrote a story about an undercover spy who had to do the same, to come out of hiding and let the people that thought they knew him find out he had been lying all the time? Or at least that he had not been who he pretended to be. This would give the writer the benefit of emotional closeness to the story, making it personal, without becoming too private. It would provide a certain distance, a perspective. And let me add, on my own accord, that in this particular case, it also shifts the moral responsibility in the story. It’s not just about how the others will react to the real me. It’s about the personal responsibility the protagonist has to take for lying to his close ones. It makes the protagonist active, not reactive. It makes for better drama.

I believe that with *Torpedo* I wrote and directed my metaphor. *Torpedo* resounds with my male insecurities of fidelity, of my fascination of physical aggression as well as fear of the same, of a life in what we in Norway call the “tidsklemme”, or “time-squeeze” (best defined as the cross-pressure between the demands of your work/ambition and your family). In so many ways Terje is a man that embodies the fight between traditional male values and reaction patterns and the demands

a modern, softer and more feminized world. And he doesn't really know how to deal with it – at least not before it's too late.

## **RED**

With *Red*, the initial and perhaps also the most difficult directorial decision was to decide whether to take the job in the first place. And it started as that, a job, a challenge, and an opportunity, more than a strong, personal urge to tell the story. That urge, however, was kindled when I read the script, and developed and matured during the process of making it. Even though I did not enter with a vision, like I had on *Torpedo*, I will argue that I developed one. Whether that vision was strong or just strongly felt (as witnessed in *BtD*), is a valid question. To what extent that vision was genuinely mine, or just shaped by circumstance and opportunity, another. Not only was I forced to build my interpretation on previous work done by another director, Lucky McKee, but was also – as seen in my documentary – pitted up against a wilful star, with a vision of his own, and financial backers with final cut. In *BtD* I state that one of the things I learned from *Red* is that there can be several visions on a film, and still be one film.

So why did I take on *Red*? This was addressed in the documentary, but let me briefly reiterate for our purposes here: First of all, I really liked the script; the story spoke to me, and dealt with issues I tend to be drawn to. Secondly, I was impressed with the performances, and wanted to work with Brian Cox. Thirdly, I was in the midst of my academic research project. I believed I needed another film or TV-project as comparison to *Torpedo*. *Red* was also a unique opportunity, as another director, with another vision, initiated it, and I was exploring the nature of vision. In retrospect, I see that I did not manage to follow up this latter perspective sufficiently. I did do video diaries, and had assistants videotape during shooting, but reflecting on process, vision and artistic ownership became secondary to making the film as soon as the decision to move forward was made. I needed to focus, and wanted to succeed. A failure could be interesting academically (and make a good documentary), but also detrimental to my career,

especially in the US. Here we are at core of the last of my reasons for taking on *Red*. Ever since my second feature *Hold My Heart* was Norway's Oscar contender in 2003, I have had US representation, with the goal in mind to have a Hollywood career. By the time *Red* appeared, I had read innumerable scripts, developed several projects, only to see them wither away. I had flown back and forth to LA taking meetings for four years. *Red* could (and can still) have been my best shot at that Hollywood dream. I'm sure that ambition also played a part in making the decision. And ambition is, of course, a part of who we are, and integral to the decisions we make, and thus, arguably, to vision, as stated in my definition:

**Vision is about who you are, and how that makes you see and interpret the world around you, and how that again determines not only what you decide to direct, but also how.**

This leads to the question why I've strived for a Hollywood career, and the implications of that ambition, not only for *Red*, but also for my work in general. I will save that for the conclusion. And I have not addressed why I was so much in doubt, why it also was hard to say yes. Fear of failure was part of it, but just as important was an ethical dilemma. Is it morally acceptable to take over a film a colleague has been removed from? I told myself *Red* would never be finished if I turned it down, and how that would be a shame. Since I in fact did accept, I prefer to discuss what that decision led to.

As the new director on *Red*, I believed the task at hand was more about saving the best of what was there, rather than creating something entirely new. In short, I wanted to tell the story well, and take care of the potential I saw in Brian Cox's performance, also using the already shot footage. So the form and directorial approach was from the onset not only shaped by Cox's sturdy performance, but also stylistic choices made by the first director. I disagreed with quite a few. With a limited budget, and a short timeframe of availability for Brian Cox, any thought of reshooting the whole script was quickly dismissed. I had to build on what was already there, and I knew that signing on. This amounts to what is arguably as much of a mission as a vision. But given that setup, and the

rather harsh, practical limitations in time and resources, I had to be very specific in my directorial choices. The situation dictated clarity as well a flexibility. I relied on experience and skill, more than artistry. Gradually, through rewrites, shooting, and editing, *Red* crept under my skin. In the end, I could hardly tell what I had shot, and what my predecessor did under his watch. More importantly, I didn't care, nor did the editor. But for the record: McKee shot most of the scenes with the boys, all of the scenes with Tom Sizemore (he was not available for my shoot), Amanda Plummer and Richard Englund. My core scenes include the scene where the dog gets shot in the beginning, everything in Av's house, including the monologue, and all scenes with Carrie (Kim Dickens), as well as the gun shop scenes. You could say that production-wise, McKee did most of the action, while I got to deal with most of the emotions.

I stated earlier that compared to *Torpedo*, "*Red* was to a lesser degree a product of my personal vision." So whose vision did in fact shape *Red*? Was it Lucky McKee, Brian Cox, producer Dreyfuss, screenwriter Susco, novelist Ketchum? I'd say all of the above, and add the peculiar production process to the list of progenitors. *Red* is something that *happened* as much as it was created.

It is hard to discuss and address *Red* without delving on process. In the interview in *BtD*, Brian Cox talks about how he has experienced that a project can take on an identity of its own, become its own artistic entity. It's everybody's vision. In this case, I believe that has some validity. But at the core of that identity, for all involved, was a strong, simple story. And that came from the original novel, and I would argue, constitutes one of the strongest visions. I believe Brian Cox's performance gave that story layers other actors would have been pressed to find. And the most important work done by us directors - McKee by his casting and me through editing - was to give room for that to happen. Cox's position also gave him the clout to make demands on what scenes to keep in the shooting schedule, also after the change of directors. He did not, however, wield any power in editing or post-production, except through the quality of his performance. That, however, turned out to be significant. The producers, represented by Norman Dreyfuss, were important in financing the production,

and changed *Red's* course by replacing the original director. Dreyfuss did employ final cut when it came to the sex scene (as seen in *BtD*). Personally, I would still say that vast majority of creative decisions, if not control, was in the hands of the directors. Lucky McKee had been part of the script process for years. He shot for 13-14 days, and did most of the casting, and had set a preliminary look and visual style for the film before leaving the project. I shot for 11 days, supervised rewrites, recast some parts, adjusted the look and rhythm of the film and story, and was in charge of post-production, where our footage was merged into what is now *Red*.

In royalty disputes, The Director's Guild of America looks at numbers. They count minutes of shot footage in the finished film. And according to the numbers, McKee directed 46% of the finished film, and I directed 54%. That is an easy way to settle arguments, and can also indicate that pre-production and post-production can be weighted relatively equally. In the case of *Red*, however, the casting, especially the choice of Brian Cox, was of such vital importance, that I would argue that McKee exercises equal, if not more, influence over the final product.

I don't know how Lucky McKee would articulate his vision. In fact, I've never spoken to him. I wanted to be free in my assessment of the existing material, to evaluate the footage at face value. His departure was painful to several parties, and I thought it better to let sleeping dogs lie. I was also afraid a call would be personally uncomfortable, and make it harder to complete *Red*. So when I refer to his vision, I'm in fact talking about my interpretation of his vision, based on the existing material, in form of the script, the casting, the shot footage, the rough/assembly cut that had been made of some scenes, as well what I was told by other involved parties (particularly screenwriter Stephen Susco). I have also studied McKee's debut, the feature *May*. I do believe I have a relatively clear idea of what *Red* would/could have looked like, the film's rhythm, pace and form, if he had continued.

It was also clear from the shot material that the script was directed “as is”, at face value. I could not detect irony. To McKee’s credit, his footage had consistency in style, and was original, albeit, in my opinion, a tad affected, especially in the framing and the slow pacing. In general, we found the camerawork quite static, the lighting stark, and the performances varied in quality as well as timbre. Cox, the boys and Tom Sizemore were all solid. Several of the smaller parts, however, were cast with less experienced actors, and to some degree amateurs, and it showed. I say, “we found”, because I watched and discussed the footage with core collaborators Harald Paalgard (DoP), and Jon Endre Mørk (editor). We decided to add some movement to the camerawork, and a more nuanced lighting, also using less depth-of-field (we later used a lot of digital windows in post to match up the existing footage). We wanted to keep to the same visual world, but added a little more colour and, I hope, warmth, to the images, as well as locations and performances. We also applied our Scandinavian approach to giving actors’ marks. Usually Harald and I try to avoid marks, to offer the actor freedom, and the images and framings a greater level of spontaneity. This was highly unorthodox to crew and cast. I do believe this made of the scenes more naturalistic, matter-of-fact, and counter-balanced some of the rigidity of the existing material. The general pacing within scenes, however, was still set by McKee’s footage. It was an integral part of Cox’s performance, and befitting of the story. I would probably have chosen differently, but Cox and McKee’s choice was arguably better, more original, and worked very well within scenes. It became a problem when several long, slow-paced scenes came in a row. We tried to solve it by removing heads and tails of scenes, and cut out scenes deemed unnecessary. The idea was to keep the internal pace in Cox’s performance, while making sure the film moved forward. Based on the assembly cut, I suspect McKee’s film would have run at least two hours. We ended up with just over 90 minutes.

Before we started shooting, Stephen Susco and I spent a week working on the script. The rewrites were to great degree motivated by the practical challenges we were facing: Very limited time, few locations, and the availability and willingness of the actors. A number of the smaller parts had been cast with friends and previous collaborators of McKee, and they did not want to return. At

one point this seemed like an insurmountable problem but ended up being a blessing. Their reluctance forced me to cut several actors down to a minimum, and others completely out of the finished film, adding more tempo and drive to the core story, and giving Brian Cox proportionally more screen time. To give room for Brian was definitely part of my vision. But this process also altered the core story. For example, Emma, the grey-haired woman that worked in Ludlow's store, was supposed to be the one who gives him the puppy at the end. In the book and original script, Ludlow has a short fling with the reporter Carrie, but Emma is the one who sticks around, and represents his hope for a better future, along with the puppy. The actress playing Emma refused to return, and recasting her would mean having to reshoot the fire and all the scenes in the store. So I – along with writer Stephen Susco - decided to let Carrie bring him the puppy instead. In her mouth, as she's leaving, the same words "you give her [the puppy] the time you can, she'll do the same", has a different meaning, altering the tone of the ending. From Carrie, it's as much a sad goodbye as a new beginning. In Emma's mouth, it would come out much more hopeful, and take away from the sadness and loss now prevalent. It would go from bittersweet to sweet. I certainly prefer our altered ending to what was originally scripted. But this is also an example on how the production process itself shaped the story and film. That is of course true of all films, but this time more than usual. The role of Carrie was also recast. In *BtD*, I talk about some of the reasons why. In short, I found the original actress, Angela Bettis, too young for the part. She is also a friend of McKee's, and was reluctant to return. I was happy to replace her with the slightly more mature Kim Dickens, especially with the sex scene in mind. I do believe that her presence and persona gave the film more warmth, and that she was a better match to Cox. The fact that Dickens and Cox knew each other well from the HBO series *Deadwood*, was also helpful. Just like I was happy to have my longtime collaborator Harald Paalgard at my side, Cox was pleased with her presence. He did not, however, have anything to do with her getting the part. Dickens came strongly recommended from an American director, Allison Anders.

To qualify as my vision, according to the given definition, it is not enough to exercise a defining influence over the final film; *Red* must also somehow reflect a personal, philosophical approach I can stand by.

The latter was initially quite problematic. Of course, *Red* deals with many of the same questions I tend to return to again and again - fatherhood, responsibility, crime and retribution. It has a lot of the elements usually found in “a Trygve Allister Diesen film”. But on a personal level I was also provoked. There were elements in the story and script I found morally questionable.

Jack Ketchum told me how the story came about: A friend informed him about a news story on the radio. Some kids had tried to rob an old man that was out fishing, and shot his dog when dissatisfied with the loot. “I thought, what if that was Clint Eastwood’s dog,” Ketchum said, and smiled. He also dabbles in acting himself, and played the small part of Jack, the bartender, in *Red*. Having a particular star in mind, and using this specific star persona as a guiding light when writing, did make for a succinct and cinematic novel. In fact, I have never read a script adaptation that (successfully) sticks so close to the original material. But the reason the radio story resonated so strongly with Ketchum, was not just about the injustice of it all, but particularly because he is an ardent animal lover. When I spoke to him, he had three cats, two of which he personally had to give daily insulin shots. At the core of the genesis of *his* vision, is the idea that animal life is just as important as human life. Ketchum had no problems with the fact that a man seeking first justice, then revenge, for the death of a dog, also leads to the death of two young boys. In fact, in the novel, as in the original script, Av Ludlow never accepts any personal blame for pursuing the dog killer to this extreme. And that is where the story rubbed against me, and in fact most of my Norwegian collaborators. In my discussions, with screenwriter Stephen Susco, novelist Jack Ketchum as well as Brian Cox, I was surprised that the thought never seemed to have crossed their minds. When I brought it up, Cox and Susco agreed, and we addressed my concern with three lines of dialogue. In his farewell scene with Carrie, Av Ludlow now states: “Two boys died! I couldn’t let go. I just couldn’t.” In the context of the scene, it is clear that he does regret his



actions, that he, in dramaturgical terms, has learnt something. For the character arc in *Red*, this is my small, but vital contribution. Without that change, *Red* would not “reflect a personal, philosophical approach I can stand by.”

Other story-related issues that came up during shooting and post, like the sex-scene, and the monologue, are discussed more at length in the documentary. Thinking back, those issues seem to be less about personal vision, and more to do with personal pride and stylistic preferences. By that I mean they are not essential. They are not issues that would make me accept or reject the project, had it been written one way or the other. They upset me because they rocked with my freedom and autonomy as the director, and thus bruised my pride. I didn't like being told what to do, or being told off. But the truth is that both scenes stayed in the script, and got shot, because of Brian Cox's insistence. It was a thinly veiled ultimatum; he would return to finish the film, and accept changes, but wanted to keep those two scenes. So we had to comply, if we wanted to move forward. Still, in post, I (or rather, the producers and I) knew we were free to make whatever changes deemed necessary. I gradually realized that the monologue was our greatest asset, and kept as much of it as I felt I could, and persuaded the other producers. With the sex scene it was different. I never wanted it in the script, but once it was there, I modulated the other Carrie and Ludlow-scenes to build up to it. Removing the sex scene made our work look less refined, their performances, I feared, somewhat hammy. All this was not just unfair to them – it made my work suffer, and also made it all too clear that I didn't have autonomy. Somebody else had final say. It was humiliating. It was *Torpedo* reversed, this time I was overruled. Still, as mentioned above, the sex scene was not essential. And having to accept removing it was a minor issue compared to how I – willingly – took on a project that already had been given specificity and form. A more interesting question could be: Did the very knowledge of not having final cut, lead to self-censorship and artistic cowardice? When discussing *Torpedo*, I postulated that knowing that I would have final say, gave confidence and helped secure a directorial signature. Was the opposite true of *Red*? I would have to say that to yes, to some extent. During shooting, I had enjoyed freedom, and hardly, if any, interference. But things were different in

post. And the fact that I knew that my decisions could be overturned did encourage a certain self-censorship, especially after the sex-scene discussions. For example, the other producers did not approve my initial choice of composer, and I had to find another, very different in tone and style. There was also a constant pressure to cut the film down, to make it leaner, faster. And as long as I got to say where to cut, I kept on trimming. I'm not certain that that was always an improvement. But it did, at least to some extent, leave me with a certain control.

*Red* has received positive recognition through acceptance to Sundance, and numerous other festivals, including Edinburgh, Warzaw and Sitges, where Brian Cox also was awarded as "Best Actor". It was released in theatres in both the US and Norway, although on a small scale. Financially, it has done well on VOD in the US, but has by no means been a goldmine for us involved. For me as a director, it has not really generated opportunities. Even in the US, the Norwegian-language *Torpedo* is still the project my agent and manager use as my sample. *Red* may tell a good story in a decent manner, but it does not stand out. It does not have a strong, directorial signature. In the end, it turned out to be another opportunity to use my skill, my craftsmanship, to tell a story, in many ways similar to my TV work. To what extent *Red* has artistic qualities; "deal[s] with life's possibilities and impossibilities by shedding new light on them", I am in doubt. I have noticed that the film has had a strong effect on some. In particular animal lovers in the US and UK have been quite vocal, on the Internet as well as in person at festivals. In those cases, I'm not certain whether it is about shedding new light as much as tugging receptive heartstrings. Another, sizeable group seem to be strongly moved by the Av Ludlow character, his back-story, and Brian Cox's performance. This is also what I found most meaningful. I believe the monologue to be a moment touching on art, based on a strong performance. What Av Ludlow talks about is remorse, lost opportunities, and love, and Cox's restraint makes for a scene that for many sheds new light on life's possibilities and impossibilities. In the end, it is the strength of the story and the performance that stands out.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

When discussing *Torpedo*, I mentioned Paul Schrader and his example of writing a spy story as a metaphor for the coming out-story, and how that shifts the moral responsibility of the tale. It is no longer just about how they will act in relationship to me, but what I do/did to them. In some ways, that is true of my “sharks” metaphor in this artistic research project as a whole. Without doubt, there are forces and structures inherent in film and TV-production counterproductive to creating strong, inventive and meaningful works. But by the time I got to write this essay, I had long realized that it would be far more fruitful to examine my own actions and inactions.

Recently the Danish director Thomas Vinterberg came to Oslo to discuss his new film *Submarino*, as well as his career. He is mostly known as one of the original dogme brothers, and as the director and co-writer of *The Celebration*. Vinterberg talked about his formative years in film school, and how he there (he claimed) had realized what interested him, what he wanted to make films about. For him it was about death, departure and loss, and at least his best work always seems to circle those themes.

I learned a lot in film school, but I never found that core. I believe that to be true of many film students, and many working directors. Instead, I’ve relied on acquired practical skills, a knack for writing, and ambition, partly disguised as a strong and persuasive drive. I started this research project because I wanted to be better, bolder, as a director. I now ask myself if I have to get rid of that very want, that very train of thought, to get there. The problem with too much ambition is that it can cloud your judgment, when you focus on the perceived fruits of the labour, rather than the labour itself, you separate the head from the body. Have I been fighting to get somewhere else, be someone else, when I should have focused on where and who I was, and what I was doing?

Don't get me wrong. I do still believe in ambition, in setting goals, and acknowledge that a certain strategic cunning can be important in cinema – as the dogme movement and Vinterberg are just two of many good examples of. What I am saying is that the very fact that I asked the questions I did in my application, is telling of the fact why I felt the need to. In screenwriting we talk about needs and wants. I will argue that my want was to become “better, bolder”, but that my need was to stop trying so hard, to relax that ambition, find a personal core, a personal footing, even a vision. I do believe that this research project has helped in that respect. I have gained a greater understanding of how I work, and why. And that will shape my future choices, and at least make them more informed.

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