



*About  
the  
Author*

Dr. Ken Kaleta, a member of the Communications Department, received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Villanova University. His dissertation at NYU is a study of the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald in its translation to film.

In summer 1992, at the University Film and Video Association's annual conference, he presented a paper, "Liquid Windows: The Filmmaking of Hanif Kureishi." In November 1992, the Twayne Filmmaker Series will publish his critical analysis of the films of David Lynch. This is the first book-length study of the writer-director.

Ken and his wife, Jane, travel extensively. Their most recent trip was to Russia, Germany, Poland, and Scandinavia.

## *On Creativity & Film*



*Kenneth Kaleta*

### SECTION 33 The Columned Corridors

33.14 Mirror-image: Medium shot.

A scribe with bloodied fingertips draws... in a book full of medical drawings—it is a book we shall see again later.

— *Peter Greenaway*, *Prospero's Books*

Film has an availability unlike any other art in students' everyday lives. Motion pictures are mass entertainment, but they are artistic creations as well. Students are well aware that the triptych, sestina, and aria are artistic creations to be studied in the classroom. They cautiously come to embrace or dismiss the works of Satie or Munch, Eudora Welty or Michael Clark. Students know they must study to appreciate the work of the creator. But there is no such reticence with film; students' familiarity with film prompts them to dismiss all the films of Luis Buñuel or the oeuvre of Billy Wilder or every single frame of James Ivory if they are bored watching any one of their films for more than twenty seconds.

Notice too how movie theater audiences rush out of a miniplex theater at the mall, pushing and maneuvering to

clear the parking lot. As soon as they leave the movie's virtual world, the audience is ready to move. Movie rentals have added to the problem. The domestic sport of fast-finger editing of videotape further isolates the film. Film credits are often the starting gun to signal leaving the movie's world. Time to hit the remote control rewind, the first step of tape rental return—time to find the car keys.

Whether at home or in the theater, few people consider film credits part of the film experience. That film is the creative product presented on the screen by a host of creative individuals is obscured. Film's enormous collaborative creativity further blurs understanding the creative process. In most cases, even viewed credits roll by too small or too fast. And one wonders how even the dedicated film-credit viewers are supposed to understand the jargon of film credits. Quick, what is a gaffer? How does the best boy become best?

As moviegoers, students certainly know their movies, but they rarely realize that film is an artistic process. A large part of that familiarity grows from film's ability to achieve a replication of reality that is singular in the history of artistic creation. No longer amazed by the motion in the world of the "flickers," students enter film's virtual reality. Films give students worlds as "real" as their everyday world: the street humor of *House Party* and the family meals in *Avalon* spark immediate audience recognition. Students all too readily accept film's power. What they need to develop in the classroom is an appreciation of film as creation.

On one hand, film replicates. On the other hand, film always creates its own reality. Film powerfully presents its own reality—albeit unreal—inviting students to invest their reality into "unreality." David Lynch's hemorrhaging poultry entree in *Eraserhead* is invitingly unreal.

Though less flamboyantly obvious, Mira Nair's Mississippi in *Mississippi Masala* is her creation—not replication, but representation. What moviegoers respond to is film's ability to depict the artist's imaginings as images so crea-

tively overpowering that they become a real part of collective experience.

In Kubrick's darkly prophetic *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex de Large only sees the real cruelty of his "ultra-violence" when he is relentlessly force-fed scenes of filmed assault. "It's funny how the colours of the real world only seem real when you viddy them on the screen," philosophizes Alex, eyes forced wide open. The movie character's misconception of film reality is as frightening as it is accurate.

How much reality is attributed to the movies? Fifty years ago Clark Gable devastated the underwear industry in *It Happened One Night*. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* put an end to stressless showering for generations of women. As audiences see Oliver Stone's Viet Nam, Oliver Stone's psychedelic concerts, and Oliver Stone's John F. Kennedy in his films, they understand Stone's vision as sixties history. As moviegoers, students must recognize that their cinematic experience is a reality intertwined with the unreal.

Audiences are urged to look for models, statements, apologies, and rationales of our current world in a movie's virtual world. Therefore, the power of cinema does not need academic reinforcement. Classroom reinforcement of that power further rationalizes the student bias to accept illusions as reality. It reduces art in film study.

Because film images are so powerful, students come to the classroom entranced by the virtual life in films, carrying film images in their subconscious as part of their collective experience. Film is perceived with a sense of its permanence and reality rather than with a recognition, understanding, and interpretation of its artistic creation. Students understand the motion picture as real, somehow concrete, and static. We marvel at *Die Fledermaus* being given exciting new productions, but we balk at a "remake" of *Casablanca*.

The scope of film today warrants acknowledgment of elements of film's characterizations, plots, and themes in a classroom. But it also warrants the scholarly investigation of aesthetics and techniques. In the classroom, students may

consider the nuances of contemporary film acting, the brilliance of special effects, and the stylistic choices of the director. Surely, the aesthetic sophistication of the motion picture today is impressive. But as surely, film is artistic creation to be comprehended and criticized, not a constant of some nether reality to be entered and assimilated.

One of the marvels of creativity, of course, is universality; it is recognizable. But appreciation can move beyond recognition. The beauty of a painting is visible: the colors, the shadows, the mood of a canvas delight the observer. But more is studied in an analysis of David's *The Oath of the Horatii* than its call to violence. A different level of appreciation is reached by a student through an understanding of the composition, perspective, and style of the artist's brush strokes. So too with film. Enough pop analysis of film peppers TV talk shows. In the classroom, we must use students' involvement with film to generate study and appreciation of film as an art.

In the classroom, other arts never lose their ties to creativity. Music, the plastic arts, and literature too are rightly recognized for the universality of their themes, the reality of their subjects. Wordsworth's "To My Sister" is not reduced to a mere rationale for truancy. A poem is a creative entity. The meter, figurative language, and rhyme scheme that create the poem are scrutinized. Investigating the philosophy of the Romantic movement gives the student an artistic context for the poem. So too, an awareness of film as art galvanizes its study.

Art, created with identifiable humanity in theme and subject, must have universality. But art is a created form of expression, with a unique charge, and a style distinctive to its creator. Isn't this, in fact, the paradox of creativity we so admire that we find creativity a term difficult to define?

The film student must also recognize that choices have been made to create the film, that a filmmaker has a cinematic style. For example, film is capable of presenting military battles with enormous verisimilitude. Film students

shouldn't merely view cinematic battles as history, but rather should investigate how and why creativity elevates Sergei Eisenstein's classic, *Alexander Nevsky*, and, fifty years later, elevates Keith Gordon's *A Midnight Clear* from military replication to two distinct works of art. Both films deal with war. Both films portray soldiers. Both films address power. But each film is produced, written, designed, acted, lighted, photographed, scored, edited, and directed as art. Myriad choices from casting to camera angles have been made by a collaboration of film artists. Choices have been made not only to create what the audience sees and hears, but to create how they will see and hear it. The selections of each artist constitute creativity in motion picture art.

Students need the classroom to distance themselves from film's hypnotizing reality and to study it as creation and process. Film is not life. Film is creation. Historically, film deserves inquiry. Culturally, film deserves recognition. Technologically, film deserves understanding. Artistically—film demands awe.