

**FRAMING THE ETERNALLY PRESENT**  
**The Use of Detail and Moment in the Film**  
**Brannigan's March**

By  
**Dr Erik Knudsen**

**Introduction**

In this article, I will be discussing a number of formal issues in relation to my fiction feature film, *Brannigan's March* (2004)<sup>1</sup>, which, while an independent film produced and distributed outside the framework of a university, nevertheless forms part of my ongoing research and publication activity.

What drives my research activity are the issues that relate to the problems I am trying to solve and the questions that arise out of these problems. In seeking to answer these questions, I argue, first, that I need to carry out my research through practice because I am not primarily seeking to understand existing practice, but to shape future practice and, second, my intent is not to contribute to, or enhance, the existing theoretical discourse on practice, but to contribute to, and enhance, the practice itself.

We are, of course, dealing with an artistic medium and the question of the relationship between the filmmaker as academic researcher and artist needs clarifying, too. At the core of my intent, there is no distinction between my research objectives and my artistic objectives. There is, however, a distinction in terms of articulation of this intent. As an artist I may not want to articulate my intent in the language of an academic, or to frame questions and problems within the paradigm of intellectual discourse. As an academic, however, there are traditions, disciplines and methodologies that provide a framework for articulating intent, though there is an increasing acknowledgement that when it comes to artistic work, the work itself must be a significant part of the articulation of the intent. Both can, of course, be challenged and may overlap.

The question of form and content is also an issue that I have sought to clarify in my ongoing research activities. I believe that a good film is one in which form and content are inseparable. When we speak about art, therefore, we are talking about a special union between form, content and, eventually, experience. It is a special tripartite union that gives us access to dimensions to our lives that are as important as the physical dimension. Content is nothing without form, form is nothing without content and neither exists if they are not being experienced.

When I therefore think about what it is I am researching, it is not primarily the content, nor primarily the form, nor primarily the experiences of the spectator, but it is that special tripartite union between the three.

---

<sup>1</sup> Erik Knudsen (2004). Distributed in the UK by One Day Films Limited  
[www.onedayfilms.com](http://www.onedayfilms.com) .

## Synopsis of Brannigan's March

Brannigan's March is a fiction feature film. It revolves around the character Philip Brannigan who, unable to face returning home to his family after being made redundant, embarks on an evocative journey on foot across the UK carrying a sandwich board bearing a religious message. Heading towards his childhood home, his encounters and experiences along the way present challenges that prove to be instrumental in the awakening of a new man.

## Research Questions and Artistic Intent

The research intent behind Brannigan's March has its roots in a number of key problems. The main problem for me is that the classic cinematic narrative paradigm, and its variations, has limits in its portrayal of human experience. While this may be generally acknowledged, it is perhaps less apparent why this is the case, what it fails to achieve and, therefore, what it could achieve with a different approach.

Our Anglo-Saxon cinema is dominated by an approach to narrative which is heavily rooted in a materialistic view of human experience, including psychoanalytical psychology. A neo-scientific view of cause and effect, exemplified by the cause and effect of psychologically explicable character motivations, lies at the heart of this paradigm. The consequence is an approach to narrative film geared to engaging with our self-assertive emotions, typically associated with the physiology of our sympathetic nervous system, which manifest themselves mainly in externalised actions and reactions. Such an externalisation of experience, indeed of narrative itself, in which our emotional reactions are guided, allows for a more familiar understanding of the language as it perhaps reflects a dominant materialistic perspective on life within our 'Western' culture.

However, what happens when we want the cinematic narrative to go beyond the materialistic and the psychologically explicable in human experience? What of the participatory feelings we may harbour, those feelings typically associated with our para-sympathetic nervous system, which encourage the dissolution of the ego, and its need to assert and externalise itself, by seeking a more internalised sense of transcendence? How can one create narrative films which reach these more transcendental aspects of our experience of life and what are some of the key practical elements one might work with when creating a narrative film, which may help in the creation of work which allows for the experience of the transcendental and its relationship to the palpable world in which we live?<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> 'To experience means to become aware of, but not in the way in which we become aware of the world of sense-and-intellect. In the latter case, we always have a subject that is aware of something and an object of which the subject is aware, for the world of sense-and-intellect is a dichotomous world of subject and object. To be aware of *sunyata*, according to Zen, we have to transcend this dichotomous world in such a way as not to be outside it'. (Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D T Zuzuki, Image 1996.)

To go into detail about why I believe it to be important that audiences gain access to cinematic work which address the transcendental in us does not fall within the scope of what I wish to do here, but suffice to say that I believe many of the individual, social and, indeed, political problems have a connection to what I would call spiritual poverty. This is a longer philosophical debate. However, while I believe that many artists working with other mediums – and, indeed, conceptually driven moving image work such as installations - do create work that appeal to and address the transcendental in us, narrative film, the most popular art form of the day, has relatively few examples of work that do this. There are, of course, also socio-historical reasons for this, which also fall outside the scope of this article.

There are some key elements that, arguably, one could say form the basis of a classic narrative film; whether realised in very obvious ways, or in more subtle ways. Numerous texts exist that identify these elements, consumed by budding filmmakers seeking the magic ingredients to success. Even where authors have tried to propose alternatives to the most obvious elements<sup>3</sup>, they are still rooted in the same paradigm. The whole process of focusing on scriptwriting as a key part of the production process in itself helps to reinforce these key classical elements.

These assumptions cover such areas as the need for characters to have psychologically explicable motivations; actions and reactions generally caused by these psychologically explicable motivations and external events; plot as being the basis of story and narrative; the cause and effect of a narrative flow in which scenes and events serve the purpose of ‘moving the plot along’; dramatic conflict, rooted in the notion that a story has to be dichotomous; the dramaturgy as the main narrative driver; and so on.

There are some striking examples of filmmakers who have worked, and who are currently working, with narrative film in a way that would fall into the territory of transcendental realism with which I am concerned here. Most notably, Bresson, Ozu and Dreyer<sup>4</sup> and such contemporary filmmakers as Kiarostami<sup>5</sup>, Samira Makhmalbaf<sup>6</sup> and Erice<sup>7</sup>. My work grows out of, and compliments, the work of these filmmakers, in particular Bresson and Ozu.

For the purposes of this discussion, I have identified two elements, out of many, with which I have been specifically working in Brannigan’s March. While it can be difficult, and perhaps misleading, to discuss particular elements outside the context of the whole, I nevertheless hope that by highlighting these specific elements I can give some idea of the practice of research that has been taking place in Brannigan’s March<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ken Dancyger’s *Alternative Scriptwriting* (Focal Press, 2002) or Christopher Vogler’s *The Writer’s Journey* (Michael Weise, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> See *Transcendental Style in Film* (Paul Schrader, Da Capo, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *The Wind Will Carry Us* (2001) or *Ten* (2002).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Blackboards* (2000).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *Quince Tree Sun* (1992).

<sup>8</sup> It is not my intention to discuss the process of the making of Brannigan’s March, but it may be of interest to note that there was no script for the film. There was a

## Narrative Detail

It should be clear from the outset that detail in this context does not mean ‘close-ups’. Detail here is used to refer to a range of things; for example, what we know and what we don’t know about characters; what we learn and what we don’t learn; positive and negative actions, in the sense that one might talk of positive and negative space of a painting; choice of details and how they might be observed.

One of the problems I set out to address is how, in the classic narrative film, we are given detail in order to direct our emotions into particular territory, usually the type of emotions that relate to our self-assertive tendencies<sup>9</sup>. I refer to this as the positive detail of a story, in that the purpose is to give us the actual shape of the story. I set out to try and do the opposite; that is, in a sense, rather than create a full bowl for the audience to lap up, to create an empty bowl which the audience has to fill themselves. Or, to use the painting or drawing analogy, rather than define the figure, to define that which is around the figure. I set about doing this in two broad ways: first, the story itself has no elements whatsoever about the home life of my main protagonist or the direct issues and conflicts arising out of his situation; second, the detail of the incidents and experiences that the protagonist experiences are not directly related to his situation. The protagonist is clearly in a crisis that relates to the loss of his job and the consequent knock on effects with regard to his family, maintaining his income and material wealth and his status, but what we see are the events that surround this. My aim was, therefore, to engage the audience in a different way with the events unseen, as well as the events seen and to, hopefully, relate these in a different way<sup>10</sup>.

In this context, I then wanted to look at the whole issue of motivation, what we know about the character and what we learn about him. There were times during the development and production of *Brannigan’s March* where I nearly lost my nerve and was tempted to include scenes that would reveal details about the character’s past, his broader situation and so on, in an effort to justify his motivation and direct the audience to engage with that motivation. However, in reminding myself of my intentions, I reduced the information about the protagonist to one factual detail: namely the fact that the day before the film narrative begins, he had lost his job. We don’t know why, we don’t know what job, we don’t know anything else about this. When he attempts to return home, we learn from the images and his reactions to seeing his family, that he has a modern home and that he has a wife and two daughters. However, we know nothing more about the circumstances within the family.

More often than not in a plot driven narrative, we would expect the central protagonist to make some sort of predominantly psychologically positive decision, the outcomes

---

treatment and, for some scenes, the dialogue would be written the night before the shooting of that particular scene, or even on set.

<sup>9</sup> See a full discussion of the relationship between the creative act, emotion and physiology in Arthur Koestler’s *The Creative Act* (Pan, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> ‘Accustom the public to divining the whole of which they are given only a part. Make people diviners’. (Notes on Cinematography, Robert Bresson, *Urizon*, 1977.)

and consequences of which we then become engaged with as the narrative unfolds. Brannigan's inability to face his family is not so much a decision as a failure to make a decision one way or another. After he sees his wife taking the children to school, while hiding from them, he returns to the park where he had woken up after a night of heavy drinking. There he waits, wondering what to do. The sandwich board which was there in the park when he awoke, is still there. There is a brief encounter with an elderly woman in the park, who thinks the board belongs to him, and this encounter leads to the woman accusing him of being a coward for denying any knowledge of the sandwich board. Brannigan's instinctive reaction is to challenge the elderly woman by putting on the board, but what follows, in terms of him starting to wander around with the board, does not necessarily make sense in terms of a psychological motivation.

I sought not to give that neat clarity and to incorporate such notions as 'coincidence', 'fate' and 'calling' into the whole issue of motivation. These sorts of elements would normally be rejected in a classical narrative, mainly because they do not necessarily fit into the paradigm of psychologically justifiable premise, motivation, key turning points and cause and effect. What we are left with is a lack of causal character detail, while we instead are given transcendental detail; i.e. detail of influences on the character which go beyond psychology and in which there is an inseparable union between the explicable and inexplicable forces at work and where there is less of a separation between the protagonist and the world around him<sup>11</sup>.

The reason for this lack of causal detail is that my audience is forced to engage, not in his motivation and aims, but as purely as possible in what they see in front of them, and only in what they see in front of them, without the baggage of past and of possible future. In other words, the here and now. By engaging in the here and now, my intention was to create scenes whose purpose was not to 'move the plot forward', but whose purpose was to engage the audience in the present as much as possible, to engage not their anticipations of the future on the basis of their knowledge of the past, but to engage in the present, for its own sake: the eternally present<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> 'A calf is born with two heads and five legs. In the next village a cock has laid an egg. An old woman has had a dream, a comet appears in the sky, there is a great fire in the nearest town, and the following year a war breaks out. In this way history was always written from remote antiquity on down to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. This juxtaposition of facts, so meaningless to us, is significant and convincing to primitive man. And, contrary to all expectation, he is right to find it so. His powers of observation can be trusted. From age-old experience he knows that such connections actually exist. What seems to us wholly senseless heaping up of single, haphazard occurrences – because we pay attention only to single events and their particular causes – is for primitive man a complete logical sequence of omens and of happenings indicated by them. It is a fatal outbreak of demonic power showing itself in a thoroughly consistent way'. (from Carl Jung's essay *Archaic Man, Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Routledge, 1933)

<sup>12</sup> Time Present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present

All time is unredeemable. (Eliot, T S, *Burnt Norton*, from *Four Quartets*, Faber & Faber 1944, p13)

It is then that the detail of each scene can start to play a new role. By freeing up the details of any particular scene in this way from serving the purpose of ‘moving the plot along’ or revealing information about a character’s motivation and aims, I was able to start thinking about these details in terms of their ‘transcendental’ associations. The minutiae of the elements in a scene – the gesture of a hand, the hesitation of a footstep, the holding of a look, the role of sound – begin to have the potential to be looking glasses to epic and eternal themes and to provide the spaces into which the audience can project their own associations and experiences.



*Brannigan arrives under a bridge after his first day of walking. It is the end of the day and he is tired.*



*He watches the river flowing by.*



*He sticks his hands in the water and savours it.*



*He washes his face.*



*He washes his feet.*



*Brannigan dries his feet and puts his shoes back on.*



*He goes to sit by the pillar of the bridge.*





*He brings out a photo of his family and studies it.*



*Brannigan listens to messages from his wife on the phone.*



*He is distracted by a couple passing by who are arguing.*



*Shocked by his presence and his sandwich board, the rowing couple shout abuse at him.*



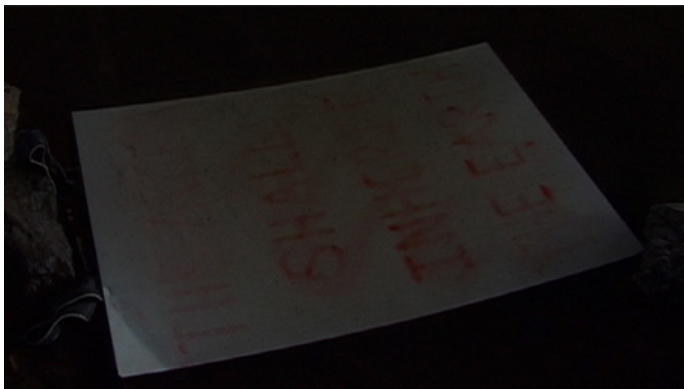


*He kicks the board into the river.*





*Brannigan sits down by the pillar again and starts falling asleep.*



*Meanwhile, the text on the sandwich board is starting to fade altogether.*

In the above scene example, the aim was to engage the audience in some very simple elements which, when juxtaposed, would hopefully create a number of associations. Much of the detail is almost banal – the tying and untying of shoe laces, the feeling of the water, the washing of face and hands, for example – and fulfils the role of ‘negative’ information in that it is not directly related to any plot elements, character motivation elements or elements concerning aims. Nevertheless, through these ‘negative’ details I aim to frame his predicament and inner crisis in a different light to that which might be psychologically explicable. We are engaged in the moments themselves, and, hopefully, the object of that with which we engage is not directly visible or palpable through meaning, but directly experienced by our own projections, thereby making subject and object one.

### **Narrative Moments**

Another important feature of my exploration involves pacing and rhythm. Much narrative imagery is concerned with providing us with information whose purpose ties in with the demands of the classic narrative: character motivation, aims, plot development and so on. Often the pacing of such classically driven films is determined by the needs of this purpose. When the information has been imparted, for example, the image often becomes redundant and it necessitates moving on to the next image, the next bit of information. And more often than not, this imagery is based on ‘positive’ information that relates directly to the needs of the plot. This kind of approach to imagery leads to a faster, more efficient approach to narrative information

and often results in this information being made up of familiar elements which can be quickly understood by the perceiver.

First, in line with my discussion about detail, I have sought to question these tendencies in Brannigan's March by exploring the way in which the details are observed and revealed. Aware of the fact that when the brain sees things quickly, it utilises existing mental imagery and modes of meaning to decipher an image. In other words, the faster the imagery is presented to us, the less we actually see it and the more we rely on previous constructs to construct the image in our mind's eye.

To this end, I have set about slowing down the experience of the imagery with the aim of making us see what is actually there, rather than what we have constructed. By using details in the narrative which are very familiar and simple, and by slowing the pace and rhythm of the film to such a point where the perceiver cannot expect to be taken away immediately they have received the initial information of the image, but have to keep looking at it, I hope that the viewer will not be able to rely on their pre-conceived construction, but will have to re-evaluate what they are looking at, thereby helping to see it in a new light.

Second, by focusing our attention on the detail in this way, I am seeking to draw the attention of the perceiver not merely to the action itself, but the negative space around the action. We are invited not merely to follow the action, and the detail that signifies the action, but the visual and aural spaces around the action. By doing this, my aim is to build on this notion of the 'negative' details by adding the notion of, almost literally, 'negative' visual and aural space in order, as mentioned earlier, to reveal the actual theme of the story by having the perceiver bring their own experience and feelings into the film.

What I hope to achieve, are narrative moments from which we know what is going on, not because we have been told, but because we haven't been told.

If we look at the scene that follows the one discussed earlier, we can see an example of this. The following morning, under the bridge, Brannigan wakes up a little confused about where he is. He notices the board in the river, by now completely blank, fishes it out of the water and puts it to dry. He considers what to do and eventually makes a decision:



*Brannigan  
positions the  
board in the sun  
and leaves frame  
left.*





*We hold this shot, as we hear his footsteps on gravel, off.*



*One of the pillars under the bridge.*



*Brannigan enters from frame right, looks at board, then leaves frame left.*



*We hold on pillar, while we hear Brannigan's footsteps, off. They stop and then we hear them coming back.*



*Brannigan re-enters from left, looks at the board, then leaves frame left again.*



*We hold on pillar, while we hear Brannigan's footsteps, off. They stop and then we hear them coming back.*



*Brannigan enters from frame left, stops and looks at the board, then walks back and leaves frame left again.*



*We hold, while we hear Brannigan's footsteps, off. They stop and then we hear them coming back.*



*We hold on pillar, as we hear Brannigan's footsteps approaching.*



*Brannigan enters from frame left, stops, looks at board, then leaves frame left.*



*We hold, as we hear Brannigan's footsteps move away. Then silence.*





*We see  
Brannigan  
walking into a  
shop.*

In capturing the moment in which Brannigan decides to continue carrying the board, I have directed the audience's experience of this decision very much into the spaces around the decision. A feature that is consistent through the film, is this use of the space around action and moments of decision. Almost all the film is made up of static shots, into which the action moves, or from which the action moves. In these cases, we often hold on the space left by the characters, or the space which the characters are going to occupy.

The combined effect of the 'negative' details and the 'negative' spaces is to allow the audience to, as Bresson says, 'divine' a new reality.

One consequence of working with this 'negative' space, is the enhanced role it can help to create for setting and location. Setting and location are important in any film, but in Brannigan's March, I set out for it to play a different role than one might expect. While setting in most cases provides a canvas with which the protagonists interact, respond to and change other characters and events, the relationship between character and setting in Brannigan's March is one of union, rather than separation. In other words, with reference back to Suzuki's notion of transcendence being a state in which there is no separation of subject and object, I have sought to make the setting and location an equal manifestation of the inner life of the character as his actions or the events<sup>13</sup>. They are not predominantly a 'stage' on which the narrative events play themselves out, but are as much the inner mind and soul of the protagonist.

### **Some Conclusions**

I have briefly outlined some of the elements of my research. It is in the film itself that the body of the evidence lies, hence the methodology of practice. How does one evaluate, or document the evaluation, of the outcome of the research?

This I think is an immensely difficult question, for inevitably opinions will differ and the baggage that one brings to any evaluation may not be appropriate or recognise the qualities of the outcome. Peer review obviously forms one mode of evaluation, as does some form of self-evaluation. However, any form of artistic expression is by its

---

<sup>13</sup> And Michaelangelo Antonioni of course worked with this very kind of relationship between character and setting, too. See, for example, *Red Desert* (1964).

very nature ephemeral and unquantifiable and if one is working with outcomes that fall outside the dominant paradigm within which most film criticism operates, then, of course, this poses its own problems<sup>14</sup>.

Brannigan's March was released to cinemas from February 2004 onwards and as part of my own search to evaluate the outcome of the film, I have taken part in a number of question and answer sessions following screenings. Out of the discussions, questions and comments I try to glean whether the specific elements with which I am working seem to have had a desired effect. It is not a precise art, but nevertheless a very useful indicator.

Reactions have been very positive indeed, suggesting a latent hunger for films that use different non-classical modes of cinematic story-telling to address feelings of transcendence and their relationship to the world in which we live. One of the things I find interesting is how audiences have expressed surprise by what they have seen. Expectations of what a film should consist of, particularly when defined as a 'feature film', has meant that many audience members have found their normal reference points undermined from the very beginning and have had to engage in the film in a new way. Most responded very positively to this challenge. And, in discerning in what way they have engaged, it is clear to me that my research and artistic intentions are being largely realised, in that audiences, without my prompting, have often used the word 'transcendental', or variations of this term, to describe their relationship to the story. We were able to discuss themes which many audience members claimed they never had opportunities to contemplate or discuss in the context of watching a film.

As one person unknown to me wrote in a letter after seeing the film in one of the cinemas: 'The storyline of your inspiration, empathised with thoughts that I have had during the past ten years. The silent, and dark scenes, lent me space for poetic licence to use my own imagination... The film had hidden depth which will remain with me'. I don't know what these hidden depths are. I have merely constructed a looking glass through which this person is seeing a world which clearly exists, but which, perhaps, is not very visible in much of the classically dominated contemporary cinema.

One of the issues I hope to further look at in future work, is the relationship between causal motivation and action and non-causal motivations and reactions, such as the role of what we would normally categorise as coincidence. Our world, and the way we live in it, is largely constructed, and in this world most events we see in the context of direct, and ultimately explicable, cause. I am curious to see how our world would look if 'coincidence' were the main conduit of story.

---

Dr Erik Knudsen is Programme Director of the MA in Television Documentary Production at the University of Salford and Head of Editing at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Television, Cuba. His production company, One Day Films Limited, can be reached through [www.onedayfilms.com](http://www.onedayfilms.com) where you will be able to

---

<sup>14</sup> Think only of Van Gogh or Blake as examples of a long list of artists whose innovative work was simply not recognised by their contemporary peers or audience.

find more details about his work. Erik can also be reached at [e.knudsen@salford.ac.uk](mailto:e.knudsen@salford.ac.uk)

---

### **Bibliography**

Bresson, R, *Notes on Cinematography* (Urizon, 1977).  
Dancyger, K, *Alternative Scriptwriting* (Focal Press, 2002).  
Eliot, T S, *Burnt Norton* from *Four Quartets* (Faber & Faber, 1944).  
Jung, C G, *Archaic Man* from *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (Routledge, 1933).  
Koestler, A, *The Creative Act* (Pan, 1970).  
Schrader, P, *Transcendental Style in Film – Bresson, Ozu, Dreyer* (Da Capo, 1972).  
Suzuki, D T, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D T Zuzuki* (Image 1996).  
Vogler, C, *The Writer's Journey* (Michael Weise, 1998).

### **Filmography**

Antonioni, M, *Red Desert* (1964).  
Erice, V, *Quince Tree Sun* (1992).  
Makhmalbaf, S, *Blackboards* (2000).  
Kiarustami, A, *Ten* (2002).  
Kiarustami, A, *The Wind Will Carry Us* (2001)  
Knudsen, E, *Brannigan's March* (2004).

---