Exegesis and Screenplay for a film entitled:

1000 LOVERS

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP

"I hereby declare this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which, to the substantial extent, has been accepted to the qualification of any other degree, or diploma, of a university, or other institution of high learning, except where acknowledgement is made."

Signed:

Bronwyn L. Sprague
30 January, 2011

Abstract

Auckland in 1987 is an ebullient city on the threshold of great change. Daniel, a golden youth born with a silver spoon has all he needs and everything in front of him but he just can't seem to grow up. The daily round of pleasure and diversion no longer mask the unpleasant realities of life and death. Everyone around him wants something he is not able to give; his best friend Ash wants his money, his mother wants her boy at home and his girlfriend Caroline wants all of him.

Ava is a young woman off to see the world and who is prepared to bend a few rules to get there. Still raging at her parents' divorce, fearful of being hurt again, she hides her feelings from herself and others and is not the easiest girl to know.

When Daniel's and Ava's paths cross there are consequences for both of them and Daniel may finally have to wake up.

Exegesis

The original impetus behind the current draft of the screenplay, *1000 LOVERS* was an ongoing interest as a writer in several interconnected concerns: the family as a site for the formation of individuality and self, the dramatic possibilities which occur when assumptions held about the self begin to unravel and the power dynamics inherent in everyday relationships.

The script is a belated coming of age study of a group of Aucklanders in their early to mid twenties who are finding the transition to autonomy difficult to negotiate. They are at an age when new identities are assumed from a range of possibilities but these choices are often determined by earlier childhood experiences and circumstances while the apparently limitless freedoms of youth are curtailed by the exigencies of adult life. Both of the main characters are in a period of crisis, external and internal, which is manifest in their disordered personal relationships. The screenplay is set in Auckland in 1987, days out from a global financial collapse. It is a time when New Zealand society itself was in the midst of great change which would alter the social landscape completely.

The process for a writer is about discovering their own voice and vision but it is also in part, a response to models which inspire and resonate with that personal vision and offer an insight into possible creative directions. This exegesis explores the influences from art/independent film and the cinematic strategies and principles which helped guide the process of writing this first draft.

An early influence on the project was the multi-protagonist or choral comedy of

manners, with interlinked, character focussed storylines. This genre appealed as it allows for the exploration of identity and power within a range of familial and intimate relationships across social groups. It also gave scope for a lightness of tone and an easy movement between the comic and the dramatic. The genre lends itself to the educative, in the sense of a shift in consciousness and re-accommodation of the self on a gentle scale without a rigid redemptive arc. The lessons learned are small ones and the salutary effects if any may be transitory.

In an early essay David Bordwell (1979), analyses the stylistic, thematic and narrative principles that consistently occur within art film practice. He finds art cinema is marked primarily by a loosening of the narrative causal chain with attention given to tenuous and arbitrary connections, an interest in depicting a 'real' social reality, greater moral and emotional ambiguity and psychologically complex characters. Lacking the narrative advance provided by specific and signposted goals, the result is an unresolved, episodic turn to the narrative and an open ended and arbitrary ending. The loose structure allows characters room to explain themselves and to interact, "art cinema is less concerned with action than reaction; it is the cinema of psychological effects in search of their causes'
(Bordwell, p.58).

In the writing process there was an immediate and ongoing tension between the desire to explore reaction through character and the need to provide sufficient forward narrative drive to engage a potential audience. The classical Hollywood paradigm of the three act arc with its neat reversals is such a dominant form of cinema that it would seem hard wired into the creative thinking around narrative and exerts quite a pressure on a novice screenwriter. Janet Gaines describes this paradigm as "the protagonist

driven story film, valued for the way it achieves closure by neatly resolving all of the enigmas it raises as well as the way it creates perfect symmetry by means of ingenious aesthetic economies" (1992, p.1). These "economies" are in practice a restriction on and a filtering out of material that would impede plot and narrative drive. However, it is this extraneous material itself, the under-dramatic, everyday exchanges which play on unresolved and confusing, fascinating in what they imply obliquely about character and situation that are of most interest.

Raymond Carney (1994) in his study of the films of the quintessential independent, John Cassavetes, examines the essentialising "Romantic" nature of classical Hollywood film making. Here the viewer is asked to read from the surface of a film's objects, characters and events to an understanding of a deeper, more symbolic interior. The viewer, attuned to the conventions of the model and the intentions of the film's makers is guided to a reading of the meaning behind the glance. The visual and visionary is privileged over the verbal and social. Carney sees the 'economies' which are demanded of this conceptual form of filmmaking come at a cost to, "practical social expression . When concepts replace percepts the world is subtly drained of some of its sensory content, its idiosyncrasy, it prickly particularity, its mutability" (p.10). In contrast, an audience to a Cassavetes' film, (*Faces* (1968), *A Woman under the Influence* (1974), *Opening Night* (1977)) has a different experience. Their understanding is not directed to the realisation of a deeper explanation of the exterior rather, " what we see and hear is, is in the most profound sense, all that 'is'."(p.11). It follows that the expression of consciousness is not wordless or 'frictionless' but conveyed in speech and action which is imperfect, ambiguous and difficult to read. The audience is an observer of this social interaction and is asked to create its own meaning from the 'raw data' of gestures and words.

As a result the stability of a predictable, non negotiable identity is opened up to a more dynamic and fluid self which forms and reforms in relation to others. The defined ego boundaries are blurred and the "I" is up for negotiation. Carney sees the 'insulated subjectivity' of the Hollywood protagonist as the result of a culture which has placed great value on the fiction of a unitary, autonomous self.

The perceptive approach in practice, would seem to provide opportunities for a writer to develop complexity of character within social interactions. The scene becomes an independent episode and is less a compound element of the larger act. It can be opened up to behaviour which is not directly tied to narrative drive but which is developed to explore identity in the particular moment and circumstance. As a result dialogue is freed from its role of effectively advancing plot or conveying background information (Berliner, 1999). The focal point is the interaction and audiences engage on an emotional level with dialogue that arises from that moment. The information it conveys is not primarily a source of reliable information about character or possible outcomes.

The focus on "practical social behaviour" Carney (1994) lends itself not only to the episodic but also shifts the dramatic function from one character to two or more. There is greater interest in the dyad, or several dyads in a multi-protagonist screenplay. The hierarchy of characters from central protagonist/antagonist to secondary characters is flattened. It frees the writer to give greater detail and range to contributory characters at a remove from the main storyline and narrative arc.

The notion of the art film itself is a contested one. It is dynamic, reflecting social, cultural and industrial changes and is constantly undergoing revision. Art cinema or

independent film now coexists within the wider commercial Hollywood cinema systems rather than an alternative produced outside that system which was often the case in the past. (Wilinsky, 2001). The current cultural environment in which the art film or independent film operates is markedly different from the films of the 1960s and 1970s. The raw psychodramas of Cassavetes have become one of the myriad of influences on a new generation of filmmakers and the brash naivety of his earlier films has been tempered and tamed to reflect current mores.

Jesse Fox Mayshark, in his book, *Post pop cinema: The search for meaning in New American film* (2007) sees the challenge for contemporary artists as that of creating meaning in an environment of tyrannical irony, where media-saturated audiences are chary of and alert to any conventional 'Hollywood' manipulation of their emotions. This Pop postmodern ironic sensibility which finds all sentiment inherently fake and manipulative, results in work which distances the audience from the diegetic material and any emotional investment on their part is transformed by the strategies taken to undercut the affect and give the material 'straight' to the viewer.

Jeffery Sconce (2002) distinguishes a group of filmmakers, similarly identified by Mayshark, including Todd Haynes, Todd Solandz, P.T. Anderson, Spike Jonze, Michel Gondry, and Wes Anderson among others whose films share a dark and ironic sensibility which he labels "Smart" as opposed to the so called 'dumb' blockbuster of mainstream cinema. These artists are mining elements from the European art film tradition, with its ambiguity, lack of motivation, looser causal chain, and absorbing them into a modified traditional three act Hollywood narrative structure. The anomie of earlier art cinema, alienation from the larger political and social institutions has become individual, personal and inward looking .

Sconce sees the shared 'tone' of these films conveyed by a dominant style of 'blankness'. This is achieved by the use of dampened affect with long takes and static composition and minimal cutting. The use of 'static tableaux' often of domestic interiors or neighbourhood environments in longer takes de-intensifies the continuity. A loose cause and effect narrative, episodic scenes and the use of multi-protagonist casts weakens audience identification with a single character. These stylistic choices create a sense of disengagement which distance the spectator from the diegetic world and puts them into the position of observers of seemingly minor dramatic moments.

Mayshark identifies "a sort of self-conscious meaningfulness" (2007, p.5) that has emerged from among the work of this loose grouping of filmmakers. Their work is an attempt to find meaning and an ethical accommodation in daily life and relationships. They look closely at the dynamics of family, parent/child and sexual relationships in everyday situations as a source of drama, comedy and satire. Children or young adults in the 1970s, they are a generation who have grown up with divorce and the reordering of the nuclear family structure. Their work reflects the consequences of this social change and they share, " a sense of domestic life as a nexus of abandonment, alienation and frustration" (ibid, p.9).

It would seem that the hipster audience which both Mayshark and Sconce see as the consumers of these films are witnesses to the 'prickly' nature of social behaviour as is an audience to a Cassavetes' film. However, the expressive energy and unpredictable movement of the earlier filmmaker is replaced more often than not by static tableaux. In these films of social drama, characters appear contained and repressed by the self regulation of a late capitalist, liberal society. Each is driven primarily by their

individual needs and desires, isolated even in close personal relationships. A conflict of desires and the insecurity born of isolation give rise to power struggles between parents and children, lovers, friends, colleagues. Antisocial behaviour although appalling or outrageous is carefully encoded and is subtly destructive of relationships, trust and self belief.

In terms of scriptwriting practice, the question that arises is how to engage and affect an audience when disengagement is a result of tone and narrative strategies.
This is highlighted in *The New Yorker* reviewer, David Denby's (2008) comments on a noticeable   trend in recent films towards, "a chaste and rather refined new style _ a style devoted to minute perceptions of character that lead to small revelations of how life works." (p.2), which he provisionally names "the cinema of observation" .

The practitioners he sees sharing this style are filmmakers; Noah Baumbach (*The Squid and the Whale* (2005), *Margot at the Wedding* (2007), *Greenberg, (2010)*)), Nicole Holofcener (*Friends with Money (2006)*), Tamara Jenkins (*The Savages (2007)*) and Noam Murro (*Smart People*, (2008)). All are filmmakers whose work would comfortably sit with the 'Smart film' classification. Their films share several similarities in that they are 'under-dramatised', "offering small sharp intensities" (ibid), with static camera work, a group cast and a middle class domestic setting. The major limitation Denby finds with this observational style is the lack of a satisfactory dramatic climax as, "these movies cannot end as a good short story might with a mere pinprick of insight" (ibid).

Interestingly one of the screenwriters/directors cited, Noah Baumbach has said that he finds that conventional Hollywood narrative filters out opportunities to engage an audience emotionally. He feels that although slight domestic material may be seen as

stuff of the literary, slice of life short story, it has its place in film. Speaking about his satiric drama comedy about the effects of a badly managed divorce on two teen brothers, *The Squid and the Whale*, he says:

> . . . . we accept this kind of material in fiction a lot, and in memoir, and in popular fiction, even. Why are movies more filtered? I feel like in a lot of cases, for this kind of subject matter, filmmakers often look for books to adapt. Which doesn't mean you can't make an incredibly immediate version of a book, but why not make something that is personal and emotional from your own perspective? Something that you feel directly, right from the screen? I never thought twice about writing this as a short story. Why not make a movie that gives some kind of equivalent experience? (Murray, 2005, p.2).

The subject matter of Baumbach's films is not the conventional dramatic moment but the 'drip-drip' of daily life. He sees his material in, "the intimate situations and moments between people that are somewhat every day . . and the movies are accumulated experiences and moments and often in-between moments. Not sort of trial room events" (Capone, 2007, p.3).

Working initially from character (ibid) he follows up in the drama found in these 'in between moments' of social interaction. There is foremost a sense of immediacy, with a focus on the here and now. Events which have occurred in the past influencing diegetic events are murky or underdeveloped in the script. Characters who are spoken about and who carry some emotional weight in the lives of the main characters are not seen or seen only for a scene or two. What we receive is very much what is happening to the characters in the present. As a result, a receptive audience is implicated in the diegetic

behaviour in much the way a live theatre audience is. There is an inescapable directness as "non-stop accumulated moments" (ibid) blur together to create a specific emotional climate and situation. The emotional situation is primary. The climax is often the summation of a growing awareness of the gravity an event(s) which has wounded or altered a character. This is an understanding of an underlying truth which has sustained the dramatic tension all along, Denby's "mere pinprick of insight" (p.2) .

These qualities are found in all of Baumbach's films, but it is *Margot at the Wedding* which is closest to the ideals of perceptive cinema and Baumbach has acknowledged Cassavetes as an influence, particularly in this film (Quart, 2005; Lawrenson, 2008). This is evident in terms of the filming and editing itself, with the use of handheld camera to capture movement within a scene and the fluid movement creating a bleed from one scene into another. The use of retro lenses and stock to give a claustrophobic and highly selective mis en scene.

As a script, the influence is most marked in the effect of immediacy. There is little or no establishment of background information or set up to the scenes which often play *in media res* and weight is given to complex, repetitive and contradictory dialogue. The characters reveal themselves through what they say and these selves are not stable, coherent unified ones. The story is not able to be reduced down to a simple concept or plotline but is an unruly tale of many strands, some developed and others hinted at.

Margot, a short story writer, travels from New York city to rural Long Island with her 12 year old son to attend her sister Pauline's and fiancé, Malcom's wedding. The film is reminiscent of a Chekov play in that it is set almost entirely in Pauline's house and its environs, apart from the bookend arrival and departure. It is structured in a series of

intimate family encounters establishing with almost equal weight a number of emotional situations: a fraught history of idolisation and betrayal between the sisters as Margot has used her sister's life as material for a successful literary career; Margot's snobbishness and antagonism towards everybody who crosses her path, particularly the hapless fiancé, Malcom; Malcolm's and Pauline's insecurities about their social status and relationship; Margot's fragile mental state and the difficulty she has with the role of wife and mother; her son's concern for her mother and his struggle to create an identity in his relationship with her.   There is no clear hierarchy to these threads as they intertwine and overlap into one another. The ending of the film is not one of resolution, and there is a sense that the film could run indefinitely, and the slice we have seen is just part of a longer ongoing drama.

Dysfunctional adult behaviour plays out against the puzzled, rapidly diminishing innocence of the children who are witnesses or dazed participants in the power play between the adults. The audience is implicated as a witness to a series of conversations between characters as they talk with one another and about one another.   These dialogues are wide ranging, contradictory, reflecting the deep dissatisfaction of each of the characters. They are highly reactive and raw as characters respond to the challenges particular relationships presents to them. Characters lie and distort or reveal confidences to gain leverage over one another, driven by overwhelming insecurities.

To a sympathetic audience, this often uncomfortable and constant interaction within a family group is compelling viewing and the momentum created by the unrelenting pace of the interactions does provide a satisfactory dramatic tension and climax. The resolution maybe smaller, more ambiguous or tentative than a more conventional one but there is an emotional resonance as a meaningful connection with the characters is

established over the journey of the film. What makes it all the more rewarding is that an emotional and sympathetic response can vary markedly over a number of viewings as there is such a shifting complexity of character and interaction.

Baumbach's films and *Margot at the Wedding* in particular were of interest not only for the risks they take in terms of subject matter and narrative strategies but for the respect given to "minute perceptions of character" (Denby, 2008); the detail of social human behaviour, the valuing of the 'so what' moment and what it reveals about the nature of ourselves. It was a belief in the validity of such material that underpinned the initial draft of *1000 LOVERS*.

The preliminary notes for the screenplay consisted of character studies of all the main characters and secondary ones. These were quite specific and reasonably detailed and the initial impulse was to place them together in groups of two or more and see what evolved through dialogue. However, this inclination was tempered by the fact that it was a first feature length script and the confidence and experience to produce something out of such seemingly chaotic beginnings was challenged by the need to have characters 'doing something'. As previously mentioned, there was a surprising and strongly internalised need for some degree of narrative causality. So the first draft as it evolved was written around a simple plot backbone, of comeuppance/wakeup for Daniel, and escape for Ava as she reaches her goal.

In this process, the 'economies' of traditional narrative came into play and the level of detail in characters interactions was sacrificed in order to get the story out. There was a reductive effect on character and depiction of character. The dialogue was much more sparse and information driven than was initially intended. A future draft then would

work back to revisit character interaction, particularly interfamilial relationships so that we get a more complex picture of the characters' emotional lives beneath the surface reality, a closer look at the "prickly particularity" of those lives.

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Searchlight Pictures, Lone Star Film Group, This Is That Production.

Cast of Characters

Daniel Gould. A young businessman.

Barbara Gould. Daniel's mother.

Daniel Gould Snr. Daniel's father.

Ash Springer. Daniel's oldest friend.

Caroline Browne. Daniel's girlfriend.

Jacqueline Newsome. Ash's girlfriend.

Becky Hazlett. Caroline's university friend.

Ava Devlin. A waitress.

'Chef' Rieker. Ava's boss and boyfriend.

Coral Devlin. Ava's mother.

Cliff Devlin. Ava's brother.

Chris Bentley. A friend and associate of Chef.

Mark Bentley. The twin brother of Chris.

Maurice Thom. Coral's fiancé.