INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF FILM AND MEDIA ARTS (2025) Vol. 10, Nº. 2 pp. 141-158

ijfma.ulusofona.pt
doi: 10.24140/ijfma.v10i2.9458

PARTICIPATORY AUTHORING: FILM DIRECTING AS PARTICIPATORY SENSE-MAKING

KAREN PEARLMAN
(MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA)

Karen Pearlman, ASE is a filmmaker and scholar working on creative practice, distributed cognition, and feminist films histories. Her recent films have, between them, won 35 competitive awards from festival juries and professional associations. Karen's books are: 'Cutting Rhythms' (3rd edition: 2025, Routledge) and 'Shirley Clarke, Thinking through Movement' (EUP, 2025).

Acknowledgments
An earlier version of this article was first presented as a keynote for the 2nd International Baltic NeuroCine Conference 2024, at the University of Estonia. I thank the organisers and participants in the conference for their questions, and the reviewers for IJFMA for their illuminating constructive comments.

Corresponding Author
Karen Pearlman
karen.pearlman@mq.edu.au
Balaclava Rd
Macquarie Park NSW 2113
Australia

Schedule for publication
Paper Submitted: 30th May 2024
Accepted for Publication: 7th February 2025
Published online: 29th December 2025

Abstract

It is commonplace in the film industry to describe a film director's responsibility as being to have a 'vision' and communicate it effectively to cast, crew, and ultimately, audiences. A 'vision' in this sense is shorthand for the source of a director's signature or authorial style. But what, from a cognitive perspective, is meant by vision? This article will argue that a director's vision, far from being wholly contained in their brain, is developed through enaction. It is contingent, subject to responsive development throughout process, and manifests through participatory sensemaking with key collaborators. By doing a close reading of two director's decision-making processes, this paper will demonstrate that film directors are, among other things, central nodes of complex and dynamic processes of 'social cognising' and 'participatory sense-making', leading configurations of multiple experts whose efforts must both coordinate and achieve excellence individually to generate and realise ideas.

Keywords: Film directing; Creative practice; Filmmaking; Social Cognition; Vision; Participatory sense-making

Introduction

It is commonplace in the film industry to describe a film director's responsibility as being to have a 'vision' and communicate it effectively to cast, crew, and ultimately, audiences. A 'vision' in this sense is shorthand for the *source* of a director's signature or authorial style. But what, from a cognitive perspective, is meant by vision? The word vision can be troubling for its association with things like hallucinations, mirages, premonitions, and other internal mental images that are not widely shared in actuality.

This article will argue that an effective director's vision is not a fantasy they dream up. It does not "spring fully striped, from the head, like tigers" (Allen, 1995, p. 40). It is also not, or not solely, a visualisation of sequences of actions, even if those sequences have been through extensive planning and rumination while still in the head. Rather, I propose that film directing is a clear and materially verifiable instance of situated cognising. 'Situated cognition' is a broadly encompassing term for a range of proposals about minds and mental life. What these proposals share is a commitment to the idea that mind is not solely contained in brains. It is embodied, at least; embedded in tools and context; and enacted through social and cultural structures. This article will make use of ideas about situated cognition to propose that: far from being wholly contained in a brain, a vision is developed through its expert embodied and embedded enaction. It is amorphous, felt, and subject to continuous revision throughout process, manifesting in the moment-to-moment decisions and the social enaction of thinking together.

By doing a close reading of two director's decision-making processes, as reported in their own words, as well as drawing on my own experience as a director of multiple award-winning short films, I will demonstrate that film directors are, among other things, central nodes of complex and dynamic processes of 'social cognising' and 'participatory sense-making' (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007), leading configurations of multiple experts whose efforts must both coordinate and achieve excellence individually to generate and realise ideas.

Discussion of this proposition begins with a very brief introduction to situated cognition and 'participatory sense-making' (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007) followed by a look at the various ways the word *vision* is used in film criticism, and a short thought experiment designed to expose some of the complexities and contingencies involved in directorial decision making. From there I turn to verbatim accounts from two writer/directors describing the ways that crucial decisions about images, manifestations of characters, and even story points in films they have directed arose from professional interactions with collaborators. The writer/directors discussed herein have been chosen as the exemplars since, although they have in that dual role the strongest claim to individual authorship as can be mustered in large scale film production, they have made articulate public statements about the processes through which they share authoring responsibilities with others[1].

Towards the end, this discussion leads to some brief responses to questions that have arisen in film theory about how to understand collaboration, including a short discussion of

1 This paper's discussion of directing is limited to the work directors do with actors and crews during pre-production and production. In other words, two phases through which directors need to articulate a direction and move people and things in that direction to manifest ideas. It does not contend with the process of scriptwriting or even extrapolating a set of plans or intentions from a script, though it does consider how social interactions with expert actors and crews may become part of the authoring of the film's narrative. I refer interested readers to literature on creative process in writing for discussion of the cognitive processes of writers and leave the discussion of directors and writers collaborative working processes to another paper. I also do not spend significant time on the authorial input of cinematographers, editors, sound designers, or composers in this article. For a large body of work on the expert decision making and authoring input of editors see Pearlman 2009-2025.

the age-old question of how to quantify the authorial input of various collaborators. However, I do not fully answer this question, rather, my proposal on this debate is that while it may be a standard practice to try to allocate measurable amounts of authorial influence, it is not a good practice. It is a cultural habit that relies on an understanding of mind as an autonomous possession able to function fully in the isolation of an individual skull. Contra that, this paper proceeds from the premise that human minds are distributed, situated, and entangled, and aims to offer some insights into understanding how filmmaker's intentions are realised in film, and how social cognising could be developed as a form of expertise.

A final introductory caveat: although the idea that a vision is contained solely in a director's brain may be the source of a lot of misapprehensions about film authoring, the full range of cultural, theoretical, and practical complexities of the notion of authorship are not the target of the discussion. Thus, theoretical resources on authorship are only sparsely invoked, and the primary resources discussed are the first-hand experiences and reports of directors. These are viewed through the lens of specific proposals within the larger situated cognition framework. The targets of this theorising are: enriched understanding of the practices of directing; and flourishing of creative collaboration in filmmaking practices.

Underlying premises of participatory sense-making

Proposing that film directing is a creative practice of situated cognition builds on the work of multiple sources who have argued, in various ways, for a distributed cognition account of filmmaking (see: Pearlman & Sutton, 2022; Bacharach & Tollefsen, 2010; Pearlman, 2023). Amongst these are Pia Tikka's work on embodied aspects of cinema authoring process (Tikka, 2010). This paper aims to expand what Tikka calls the "kind of mental workspace that enables the author to imagine, create, and manage cinematic processes" (Tikka, 2010, p. 208) to include De Jaegher and Di Paolo's ideas about: 'participatory sense-making'.

My argument that a director's vision is not just something they visualise in their heads, but an emergent and shared understanding arising through participatory sense-making, rests on some background principles of situated cognition.

The first of these is that, following Sutton and Bicknell, I am:

> … using the word cognition in its broadest senses, not restricted to reasoning or to information processing, but to include the full diversity of embodied mental life: imagining, grieving, remembering, sensing, noticing, dreaming, wondering, listening, problem-solving, strategising, pattern detecting and indeed designing, balancing or creating. In this capacious sense, cognition includes emotion and motivation, and is not located in the individual brain alone, no matter how important neural processes may be. Rather, the term signals flexible embodied intelligence, manifesting in experience and in action, in a social and material world (Sutton & Bicknell, 2022, p. 4).

This means, in brief, that mental activity is richly responsive. It doesn't happen before an interaction, it happens during it, and it doesn't just happen in the head, it is embodied intelligence, "manifesting…in action" (Sutton & Bicknell, 2022, p. 208) that happens between us, amongst us, and in our shared environment.

In this process, human cognisers are 'autonomous' (Thompson, 2011, p. 407) but not 'self-sufficient' (Sutton, 2023, p. 374). By this I mean that while we experience ourselves and others as discrete, independently functioning physical entities, our minds do not do their work independently of the scaffolding of our bodies, our tools and each other.

We are profoundly entangled systems that make thinking possible and constrain what it is possible to think. Or as Sutton describes it, we are: 'intrinsically hybrid, holistic, or 'distributed' across diverse, dynamic, meshing or coalescing resources' (Sutton, 2023, p. 374).

For a film director, these resources include our own embodied cultural and social experiences, the ever-evolving tools and configurations of professional filmmaking practices, and, of course, our collaborators – the skilled experts on whom we rely to turn immaterial and dynamically sensed ideas into films. With these people, a director's thinking is "public, right there in the shared world" (Sutton, 2023, p. 374), and it is only through being public – shared – that thinking becomes directing.

In a filmmaking process, as in life: "meaning is generated and transformed in the interplay between the unfolding interaction process and the individuals engaged in it" (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, p. 485). The implication of this for film directors is that the expression of their ideas in cinematic form requires creating opportunities for responsive engagement with their intentions and development of possibilities offered by skilled collaborators to generate the 'meaning' that will be articulated by, and embedded in, the film. Communicating these seeds of possibilities often involves what Andy Clark calls 'surrogate situations' (Clark, 2005, p. 233) - limited stakes scenarios for interaction that develop the skills and relationships necessary for succeeding in the execution of the higher stakes, full activity. In filmmaking, the tools for developing the necessary skills and relationships of 'shared intentions' (Livingston, 2007, p. 88) might include sketches, shared image collections, beats sheets or dramaturgical notes a director makes as they work to come to an understanding of what they are after, what audience experience they aim to create, and how they will approach directing. When in the process of directing collaborators, the surrogate situations might include defining parameters for searching and sharing visual or audio references, decision making with models or storyboards, trying things out in rehearsals, collaborating on onscreen drafts, computer visualisations, shot lists, and more. These are 'restricted artificial environments that allow us to deploy basic perception-action-reason routines in the absence of their proper objects' (Clark, 2005, p. 233).

These are well known tools in filmmaking. They are also instances of externalized, public thinking by working with tools or people or both. Directors use these surrogate situations for communicating their vision. However, I argue that use of them is also a process of intersubjectively developing the vision. It is in the exchange of ideas, the introduction of possibilities by collaborators, and through the discussion, absorption, rejection or re-direction of these possibilities the director comes to know more and more about the direction they are leading everyone in. They can come to understand more about what they want or don't want through these situated, social cognising processes and can also come to know where the holes in their own knowledge are.

It is in this process of developing a vision together that the work of filmmaking truly becomes the specific refined sense of enactive cognising De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007) call 'participatory sense-making'. De Jaegher and Di Paolo define 'sense-making' by saying that humans as 'natural cognitive systems' are "not in the business of accessing their world in order to build accurate pictures of it. They actively participate in the generation of meaning in what matters to them; they enact a world" (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, p. 488). This definition of sense-making underpins the proposal that I am making: film directors are natural cognitive systems (at least at time of writing, we are not yet usually AI); the job of directing films is a job of generating meaning; and we do so by actively participating in the world, not by concocting an accurate picture of a film in our heads.

Expanding other scholar's ideas about sense-making, De Jaegher and Di Paolo define participatory sense-making as: "the coordination of intentional activity in interaction, whereby individual sense-making processes are affected and new domains of social sense-making can be generated that were not available to each individual on her own" (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, p. 497). The kind of sense-making not available to the individual on her own in this case is the dynamic manifestation of vision.

Shortly, I will turn to discussion of instances of coordinated intentional activity of director and collaborators and how they give rise to the domains of sense-making not available to either on their own. However, before applying principles of surrogate situations, situated cognition and participatory sense-making to film directing, it is important to first ask:

What is film directing?

Directing is a film crew role. It involves defining and articulating a direction that everyone else in the cast and crew can move in to get to a finished film. A director gives direction. This may be very specific, or very general, but in either case, giving direction is different from giving instruction in that it invites the activation of collaborators own insights and decision making into solving the problem at hand. From time to time explicit or precise instructions may be given to achieve a particular goal on set, however the job of directing is not primarily giving instruction, it is giving direction. Directors do this by posing bounded and specific creative problems and eliciting offers from their key collaborators of ideas, plans, uses of tools and time, and approaches to solving those problems. Directors make decisions to adopt, adapt, pursue, re-focus, elaborate, or re-direct ideas and approaches offered. Importantly, the directing crew role doesn't really involve making *things*, it involves making *decisions*.

But how do directors make decisions and on what basis do they elicit offers? As noted above, the most common term for the director's offer eliciting and decision-making mechanisms is vision. So, what is vision?

In the film industry, crew members, especially those working on independent productions, might say it is their guiding force, that their role is to realise a director's vision. This is not incorrect, but without a clearer understanding of what a vision is, this amorphous term can become a source of all kinds of nonsense in students, from a director's failure to listen (because they think some sacred, inviolate thing must already be intact within them) to drug-fuelled hallucination standing in for imagination. For purposes of development of filmmaking skills, a better understanding of what a vision is or does on the ground will be helpful.

In film criticism vision can be used to mean style. This headline for a review of a Wes Anderson directed film, for example, says: 'Anderson's loopy, lyrical vision is alive and well in "Asteroid City"' (Travers, 2023).

Vision can also mean perspective, as in this headline pointing to a perspective on the world that the director holds: '"Get Out": Jordan Peele's Radical Cinematic Vision of the World Through a Black Man's Eyes' (Brody, 2017).

Authorial intention is also something commonly implied by the word vision. For example, in this feature article on director Celine Sciamma, it is used as shorthand for what the director wants to say: 'the director presents a female-centred vision of equality, solidarity, romance and sex; she explains why she was determined to up-end the clichés and assumptions of traditional cinema' (Stevens, 2022).

In another context, the word vision can be applied quite generally to mean the cumulative effect of narrative and narration manifesting in a body of work or movement in film

culture. For example, Dargis writes of her formative experiences of cinema that: 'Claire Denis… Julie Dash… and Kathryn Bigelow… offered up new visions of what a woman could do and be onscreen' (Dargis, 2018).

Adding to these diverse understandings of vision, a google search for the phrase "film director's vision" yields a blog post that purports to be both instructive and re-assuring to the novice by proclaiming that 'A film director's vision is someone seeing a movie in their head. That's all' (Thier, 2021).

While this proclamation by a single blogger with limited theoretical backing might at first glance seem unworthy of serious consideration, the misapprehension that the vision is able to be fully 'seen' or visualised inside an individual's brain and that this can be used to guide the directing process is commonplace enough amongst students and novice filmmakers that it needs to be addressed.

Is a vision a movie you see in your head? This proposition can be tested by trying out the following:

> Close your eyes and imagine a kitchen in the morning as someone makes coffee or tea.
> Now, what happens?
> Let's say the person is making coffee and in comes their partner demanding that they come back to bed. They're torn. Should they keep getting ready for work or go back to bed?
> Based on that image "in your head", how would you answer the following questions:
> Whose story is it: the person making coffee or the partner? Why?
> What age, gender, physical characteristics are each person? Why?
> What are the desires of each person? Who holds power? Who gets what they want? Why?
> What do they do? What actions? How fast or slow? How do they take up space? Why?
> Where is the camera? Handheld? Tripod? Jib? Dolly? What lens are we using? What is the light? Why?
> Look around the kitchen – what does it look like? A tenement? An upscale suburban home? Country or city? Old or new? Shiny or decrepit? Colourful or grey? Golden sunlight or harsh fluorescent light? Why?
> Who chose this space to live in? Who filled it with objects? What are the objects? Why?
> What is in the space? Look at the sink - Filled with dishes? Just one cup? Who left it there? Why?
> And, in post-production:
> Could this scene start later? End earlier? Combine with some other scene? Why?
> What is this scene doing in the story overall? Keep it where it was written to be? Keep it somewhere else? Keep just the beginning or end? Drop it? Why?
> How does it unfold rhythmically? Abruptly? Languidly? Moderate tempo until a sudden change? Why?
> How do we shape the characters in the scene? Who gets which kinds of time, energy, motion? What qualities of these? Why?
> What sounds are in the scene? Trains shrieking by outside? Neighbours shouting? Birds chirping? Angels strumming harps? Why?
> What are the balances of colour tones and accents in the scene itself? Vis a vis the story overall? Why?
> What are the emphases in sound? Do we foreground voice? Atmosphere? Music? What qualities, tones, and tempi do sound and music bring? When? For how long? Why?

Even apart from the problematic classical idea about cognition that 'in your head' implies, these things cannot all be known or visualised. It is not simply that there are too many of them, though that is a factor. It is that these questions and many other questions like them, arise in context and from

collaborators or conditions – some might say vicissitudes – of the filmmaking process. Importantly, this process is not static. Each offer and negotiation influences the next. Each implementation of a decision influences the shape and direction the filmmaking process takes. Thus, as De Jaegher and Di Paolo might describe it, 'new domains of social sense-making can be generated that were not available to each individual on her own' (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, p. 497).

In other words, as different collaborators, forms of expertise, budgets, schedules, propensities and personalities flutter around, the list of questions, of things that could not possibly all be seen in the head from the outset, varies, expanding and contracting. As each new decision is made it impacts on all the others.

In this process the guiding question to which the director returns to support their decision-making process is the question of 'why'. Why have it one way or another? The 'why' is what a director brings to process. It may be partial and it will certainly evolve. It may or may not be declaratively known to the director before starting conversations. But whether consciously or pre-consciously present, it governs the decisions they make, and, as noted, decisions are what a director actually makes.

My personal sense of 'why' is largely kinaesthetic, and I will often answer questions with reference to how some performance, shot, design elements, or moment should move. Other directors will work with very different senses. For example, their sense of character, causality, context, community or conflict might inform their decision making and guide them in making offers cohere. I turn now to looking at some of these.

Vision developing through participatory sense-making

Several excellent online resources exist for finding commentaries from directors about process. These statements should, of course, be considered with the understanding that they were very likely created for purposes of marketing the films being discussed and therefore omit parts of the process that may have negative valence. Further, they will certainly be subject to the degrees of reliability or unreliability that all human memories are known to have. However, when they are published by major news outlets, such as the video publications by *The New York Times* and *Vanity Fair* that I will use below, it is reasonable to assume that they have been fact-checked as appropriate.

Further, these sources are in the director's own words. They describe the director's feelings and memory of directing and that is the key point for this discussion. The directors I cite below, Emerald Fennell and Sarah Polley, describe experiences of having ideas generated through processes of participatory sense-making. They are talking about directing they do, their work of giving direction and articulating their sense of why something should go in one direction or another. They acknowledge that what they are doing is eliciting offers from skilled collaborators and making decisions, through and with them, about which offers will cohere and ultimately constitute the film.

Saltburn

I begin with a video[2] of director Emerald Fennell's discussion of a scene from the feature film *Saltburn* (Fennell et al., 2023). A clever (uncredited) editor has placed a shot at the beginning of this video in which Fennell announces an underlying belief that she holds. Fennell says:

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlVtm5jrgoY

> When it comes to character in general, I don't think any of us are nice (Vanity Fair, 2023).

Two things about this quote are salient. The first is that it starts the video with discussion of character. Starting with this quote plants the idea that character is central to Fennell's conception of drama, story, and film, and this is borne out by the rest of the video.

The other thing salient about this opening quote is that Fennell reveals that she does not believe anyone is truly nice. This is a conviction that Fennell holds which will inform her decision-making process. In this process, she will elicit offers and make decisions about those offers for the ways that they express character. Since she does not believe that people are nice, she will make decisions that sub-textually or directly express this conviction. Fennell seems to be fascinated with characters as they embody people's complexities. For Fennell, the characters in *Saltburn* must manifest, in their behaviour and presences, a sense of the tension between beauty and mundane, a sense of the nice and not nice aspects of the world that seem, from her perspective, to both compete for attention and coalesce into a world that has a character of its own.

How could these senses become a vision or a movie? Fennell and her collaborators negotiate a series of strategic offers and decisions that materialise her 'sense' and concurrently further create it.

One set of these decisions are about casting. Fennell casts Barry Keoghan as her protagonist saying that Barry Keoghan 'seems to get that … he is both a real person and sort of feeling' (1:00). What happens when Fennell casts Keoghan is that his face, eye shape, skin quality, movement feeling, embodied markings of background and culture *become* her vision of the character. She may have always imagined the character as Keoghan, or she may have imagined him as someone else, or she may have imagined him as a vague or shadowy presence, or something else. That is unknown. What is known is that once cast, he becomes this film's manifestation of Fennell's abstract idea, or hope, for both a 'real person and feeling' (1:00). Keoghan offers breath rhythms, vocal mannerisms, human responses, and Fennell makes decisions, with him, and a lot of other people, to manifest the abstract feeling for character in space, time and narrative. This feeling, which is deeply grounded in her sense of the tensions between beauty and the mundane, is embodied in Keoghan. Fennell says that he understands both how to be 'super-grounded and real' but also to be 'other worldly' (1:04).

Fennell name checks every actor who appears in the scene she is analysing, acknowledging their creative agency and sense-making abilities as part of her process. She says about the actor playing the butler, Paul Rhys, that he is "one of the greatest actors of his generation" (1:51). He understood her abstract, conceptual description of the butler's character as being "one of the bricks" (2:20 mins) of the house immediately. The other actors Fennell auditioned were confused by this idea. But Rhys, Fennell says, affirmed it instantly in the audition, saying: "Absolutely" (2:13).

For Fennell, once she casts Rhys, he manifests her abstract idea materially through his embodied response to it. The vision, or sense that the butler is intrinsically part of the house, does not, indeed cannot, exist in material form without an actor embodying it. The choice of Rhys to embody it enacts, or brings into being, the vision in the particular ways that he is present and the choices that he makes about his character's timing, speech rhythms, tone, facial expression, posture and gestures. Fennell says that she saw other actors in the audition process. Thus, we can be certain she did not have a singular image of the butler. In other words, she did not see Rhys in her head as her vision of the butler before casting him. But she sees him there now.

Fennell finds actors who embody her sense. They offer an expert embodiment that resonates with hers and convinces her of what hers is. Before them vision is malleable. Once cast, vision is them.

Production design is also substantively discussed in this *Vanity Fair* video, with multiple instances of it being pointed to by Fennell as core to her vision of the film. Fennell describes the house where much of the film itself is set as a character in the film, and begins her discussion of it, and the production design placed into it, with "a huge shout out to the art department, because they were just exceptional" (2:40). The art department manifests the vision for the film through choices of props, furnishings, locations, and so on, as designed by the production designer based on conversations with the director.

Working together, production designer and director have agreed on the house they will use. In this process, the designer, or producer, or location manager, or all three would have listened to Fennell's description of what she was looking for, possibly shared references with her to further specify what it should (and should not) be like. They would have looked around the country, and possibly further afield, for places that seemed to fit the (possibly quite amorphous, possibly very specific) description. From this research, they would have offered Fennell a short list of places that were available, feasible, and close enough to amenities to work for a large crew's needs. They likely showed Fennell several candidates, but Fennell tells a nice anecdote about how she knew that this particular mansion, which had never been in any other film, was the right one because when she entered it, she saw silly hats had been placed on the priceless marble busts by the house's inhabitants. The beautiful and the mundane were already cohabiting amicably there. When Fennell sees the house, she sees her vision of *Saltburn*. Before that she has a sense of where she imagines the drama unfolding. Now she has a place.

This work takes place in pre-production. In the process the 'surrogate situations' (Clark, 2005) of drawings, photos, and shared references get replaced with a real place. However, envisioning place as film is not yet complete, even on the day of shooting. When looking at the proposed framing of a shot (the first one the audience sees on the interior of the house), Fennell says that "we need something" (2:40). She doesn't know what - a pair of knickers? A bit of Christmas tinsel? "Something old, something shabby, something that's been missed" (2:52). The shot needs this something, she says, because the film is about "our obsession with beauty, our kind of fetishisation of like stuff" (3:00). This is Fennell's "why". It is what she uses to give direction to the art department. She credits Dave, the set dresser, as responsively moving in the direction she articulates by going and making fly paper, replete with handmade dead flies, to sling over the chandelier and shoot the scene through. Dave does not get instruction from Fennel, he gets direction. He gets a sense, an articulation of an abstract concept, and makes an offer of fly paper in return. Fennell decides to accept this offer. Through this exchange she and Dave have generated both the specific contours and the material manifestation of her idea. Fennel's directorial vision of the culturally laden co-mingling of the beautiful and the mundane has been refined, specified, and materialised through Dave's participation in making sense of it with the creation of flypaper.

This kind of thing is discussed repeatedly in this video. Fennell is resolute about wanting a film that manifests the tension between beautiful and mundane, grounded and other worldly, sexy and creepy. This much she knows for certain about her vision. But she does not know, in advance of the socially situated directing process, what this will necessarily mean in practice. How will it manifest in objects, bodies, shots and moving image? Fennell translates her articulation of possibilities for manifesting this tension into different terms for different collaborators. For actors the terms might describe ways of being 'grounded and other worldly'. That

is a direction, not an instruction. Something to spark an actor's imagination, something to which they will apply their own skills and insights. For designers she talks about needing some*thing*. Things are what designers have the skills to manifest. They listen and respond with offers of things. Dark, tasteful, expensive wallpaper in the bathroom battles with shampoo bottles in hideous colours. Luminous but un-ironed linen shirts share space on beautiful bodies with the wearer's ratty string bracelets. The entire film, the actors, performances, designs, dialogue, narrative, shots, edits, sound, all breathe this underlying tension.

This sense of tension is Fennell's 'why', it is the engine of a vision for this film. When her collaborators understand her, and return to her an offer, her vision crystallises around that offer. Thus, the ideas these collaborators bring to the process become the creative ideas that embody the vision. This embodiment has been come to through and with the intelligence, skill, and responsiveness of collaborators – their participatory sense-making is integral to shaping the film.

Women Talking

In her discussion of *Women Talking* (Polley et al., 2023)for the *New York Times'* video series 'Anatomy of a Scene' (Murphy et al., 2023), director Sarah Polley talks about collaborators' offers and her decision-making process for a pivotal scene. *Women Talking* tells a story of the fraught negotiations of a group of women who must either stay as they are – silent victims of violent sexual abuse – or leave the devout religious sect into which they were born and in which they still believe.

In the 'Anatomy of a Scene' video[3], Polley describes the process of coming to an understanding herself of what the scene needed to be. Going into the collaborative process, she knows that it needs to be a 'reckoning' between the women on "how they have either judged Mariche for, or been complicit in, the ongoing domestic violence she has been experiencing" (1:23).

The need for a reckoning is Polley's 'why' for *Women Talking*. Like any theme, it is not explicitly stated in the script and another director could well have found a different thematic imperative in the same written material. For Polley, however, a 'reckoning' is her vision in the sense that she is intent on creating a film about, and an image of, the complexities of 'reckoning' under the pressure of beliefs, personalities, and necessities. Her process of recognising and manifesting that reckoning is richly and creatively entangled with her collaborator's processes. This short video illustrates the ways that, together, they come to an understanding of what 'reckoning' is and how it can manifest through interaction and dialogue in the scene.

Polley reports on a process that includes her own research, such as reading Harriet Lerner's work on apologies (1:30) and talking to an unnamed 'crew member who had had a parallel situation in his childhood' (3:06). Polley says: this scene, which is a pivotal manifestation of her vision for the film, was "a kind of collaboration between me and this crew member and Jesse [Buckley] and Shiela [McCarthy] trying to find what the most meaningful apology would be" (3:18).

The words "I'm sorry", which Shiela McCarthy utters three times in her portrayal of Mariche's mother Greta, were specifically requested by the crew member. Further, Polley reports that McCarthy "spontaneously said it three times. She just felt she had to" (3:40). Polley also credits the contributions of child actor Kate Hallett, who plays Autje, saying she "came up with so many things throughout the film that were not scripted" (3:59). Hallett, Polley says, came up with a key action of crossing the room to her mother Mariche after her grandmother says, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry". This action, according to Polley, expresses the child's recognition of

3 https://www.nytimes.com/video/movies/100000008795294/women-talking-scene.html

the mother's burden, and sets up the resolution of the scene which is a "moment of inter-generational recognition" (4:10). This moment, Polley says is something that happened "spontaneously in rehearsal" (4:17), in other words, the final scene's staging and key dialogue are built on the actions the actors came up with in rehearsal and a conversation with a crew member.

Rehearsal is an example of a 'surrogate situation' (Clark, 2005). However, the surrogate, in this case, isn't just there for the purpose of reducing cognitive load. It is generative of the insight and understanding that forms vision.

Polley says "I realized there was going to have to be some accountability" (1:40) after doing research and talking to a crew member. This realization is not in itself action or image. It is an opportunity for action and image, and as such is core to Polley's vision. Polley and the actors find the words and actions to manifest the 'accountability' (1:40) through their collaborative rehearsal and shooting process. Thus, Polley's vision is intrinsically participatory. She creates the opportunity for actors. She does not create the words or actions they offer in that context, but she does make decisions about which to include. Polley credits the crew member's memory and desire, the actors' embodiment of the moment and their embellishment of words and movement, and Lerner's discussion of apologies as entangled threads in the generation and manifestation of her realisation. These threads are woven together and become the embodiment of her vision.

Who came up with the line "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry" and the three tones in which it is delivered, each conveying a different level and kind of feeling? Who selected, ordered and sound designed the shots into the scene to give their phrasing and emphasis significant form? Who "authored' this scene? This is participatory authoring. Authoring occurring through the social enaction of process. It is an example of what De Jaegher and Di Paolo are talking about when they write 'Movements are at the centre of mental activity: a sense-making agent's movements–which include utterances–are the tools of her cognition" (2007: 289). As Polley, the actors, and the crew members move and speak, socially interacting and focussing on defining and understanding their common purpose, they all participate in authoring this scene.

I propose that the scene, like the film itself, was authored by 'Polley et al.'[4]. Polley is what in academia would be called the first author. The first author is the leader in process, scope and focus of a written work. They create the opportunity for other contributors to develop and manifest the idea through their research or experiments or writing. The first author manages process and makes decisions about which offers are developed and included. In the film industry we would call this first author function 'directing'.

Participatory Authoring

Cumulatively this article proposes that film directing is a process of discovery. It happens as a vision takes material form through the (planned or improvised) responsive processes of working with people and creative problems in the world. The directorial statements in the videos dissected above, and many others that can be found online, demonstrate two important principles that comprise what I am calling participatory authoring.

The first of these is that a director must have a guiding sense of purpose themselves in order to make decisions. This may exist pre-consciously and only be articulated through the

4 The 'et al.' referencing system has been proposed as a method of crediting authorship in film in Pearlman & Sutton 2022, and by Philip Cowan in his book *Authorship and Aesthetics in the Cinematography of Gregg Toland* (Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield, 2022) see chapter 3, p 68. I further expanded on the method in the video essay: 'Distributed Authorship: an 'et al,' proposal of creative practice, cognition and feminist film histories' first published in *Feminist Media Histories*, and now available here: https://vimeo.com/showcase/10576318/video/764499424

process of discovery. At some point in the process though, a director will be able to land on an articulation that identifies the contours of their sense of purpose to themselves and others with a degree of consistency that is responsive and not rigid.

A sense of purpose may be expressed in different words to different crew members. It might be described as a need for a performance that is both grounded and otherworldly to an actor who needs to emanate both qualities. Or it may be articulated as an obsession with beauty and fetishisation of stuff to a designer who needs to produce the beauty and the stuff. In any case, it needs to be of sufficient strength and clarity to do its work of guiding the process and bringing multiple diverse offers into coherence. This guiding sense of purpose is what I have been calling a director's 'why' as in why choose one offer over another, indeed, why make the film at all.

This sense of purpose may be called a vision, however, by definition, a sense of purpose is not a movie you see in your head. So, the word vision can be confusing. A vision, I have argued, is not something you see in your head. Rather, it comes about through collaboration with experts who are not only skilled at working with cameras or fabrics or acting techniques, they are also skilled at listening and responding. They are, in other words skilled at working with direction. Skilled at hearing something that may be directly or indirectly stated. The vision may, to the observant collaborator, be found embedded in a metaphor, or alluded to in an anecdote, or expressed as a reminiscence, or even apparent in the director's own choices about what to wear, how to move, when to speak and what to say.

This skill of working with direction is the second important point discussed, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, in these videos. The skill of taking direction is not precisely the same as the skill of following instruction. It involves responsive creativity - listening, generating and offering creative solutions/ideas, iteratively, until the material manifestation of the director's vision (or sense of purpose, what is important to them) is agreed.

When the directors quoted herein acknowledge someone's response to direction or their problem solving through their creative craft, they are acknowledging that their vision is ultimately authored - made into a film - through the responsive and engaged participation of multiple experts skilled at working with direction. By listening and responding with offers that are sensitive to the underlying 'why' the director is reaching for, and by working with the offers and decisions made by other crew members, these experts in performing, cinematography, design, visual effects, editing, sound, and music participate in the authoring the film.

To tie this theory back to the underlying cognitive philosophy of this article, I am proposing that participatory authoring is necessarily taking place, at least in part, due to the social nature of filmmaking. In the filmmaking process, crews follow the direction set by the director, but do not relinquish their autonomy or reduce their creative agency. Interactions between director and producer, designer, cinematographer, actor, etc, are what De Jaegher and Di Paolo would call 'properly social'. I find De Jaegher and Di Paolo's example illustrating what they mean by 'properly social' highly resonant:

> our emphasis is the autonomy of the interactors throughout their engagement with each other in order for the interaction to be considered properly social. For example, couple dancing involves moving each other, making each other move, and being moved by each other. This goes for both leader and follower. Following is part of an agreement and does not equate with being shifted into position by the other. If the follower were to give up her autonomy, the couple dancing would end there, and it would look more like a doll being carried around the dance floor.

> The same goes for conversations: each partner must engage from an autonomous standpoint (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, p. 495).

The same, I assert from experience on both sides of the 'dance', goes for filmmaking.

Participatory authoring and the quantitative problem

Is there a line between participatory authoring and just working on a crew? This question has vexed many theorists who argue for, and about, recognition of collaborative creativity in film authorship (see for example: Bacharach & Tollefsen, 2010; Gaut, 1997; Livingston, 2011).

As a filmmaker, I understand why this problem is vexing: filmmaking processes are precarious and complex. The line is always going to be blurry. However, the fact that this blurriness of authoring fits poorly into cultural systems of recognition and accreditation does not justify trying to harden or fix the line. Culture (and law) could instead think differently about distributed creativity and creative cognition.

To facilitate this, I offer the following method of clarifying how and when participating is part of authoring. My caveat: this clarification is also necessarily subject to the vicissitudes of process. It has and should always retain its blurry edges. My thinking, drawn from my experience of producing, directing, and editing and from being produced, directed and edited, is that if a production or post-production crew member needs to read the script or talk to the director to do their job, they are making a contribution to authoring. Importantly, this may not be all of what 'authorship' comprises – many layers of social, cultural, legal, and financial understanding of authorship are not approached in this discussion. However, in the interest of enriching understanding of the ways that collaborations can function in authoring a film, here are the rough outlines of how this works:

Crews are divided into departments. Mostly, it is only the heads of department (HoDs), who talk to the director about what they are doing or need to read the script to do their jobs. Directors talk to writers, dramaturges, performers, producer(s), the director of photography, production designer, 1st assistant director, costume designer, editor, visual effects designer, sound designer, mixer, and composer.

These people, once selected, are not interchangeable with other practitioners in their fields. They bring specific experience, taste, and perspective. As a director, I cannot do the work they do. I rely on their creativity to develop and manifest the vision. Their work is a particular and unique contribution to the film. These HoDs respond to direction with their own expertise and insight including their skills in directing the people in their departments. Everyone else in those departments talks to them, but usually not to the director.

It could be argued that everyone in their departments is manifesting the vision, too. However, I would push back on this by saying that what they are manifesting is their HoD's vision. The HoD talks with the director and makes offers responsively. Once a direction is agreed, then, in turn, the HoD can give direction to people in their departments (on a large crew) as to the specifics of manifesting their vision.

For example, a costume designer, having talked to a director about what they are trying to do with their film, and their taste and references, will return with offers, usually made through surrogate situations (drawings or photos or mock-ups or fabric samples or all of these). Once they reach an agreement (and this may also involve consultation with production designers, cinematographers, producers) the costume designer directs the wardrobe department (if they have the luxury of working with a wardrobe department) to build the costumes.

Thus, the wardrobe department takes direction from the costume designer, they respond to the costume designer's vision.

I hasten to add, however, that the cleanness of this outline of roles and responsiveness to vision is deceptive. A director may well come into the costume shop, talk to the people building costumes and make some choices with them. It is not considered good protocol to do this as it undermines the authority of the designer who must continue to direct their team after the director leaves, but it can happen, and can also happen quite amicably (see for example the *Saltburn* video in which Fennel credits the set dresser, not the designer, with authoring the flypaper). The lines can, and will, blur. My proposal is not that we try to harden the lines so as to have a definitive answer about film authorship. Rather, I propose that we understand authoring of a film's look, sound, flow, and feeling as a *process*. Not authorship, but authoring, with multiple and diverse crew members contributing their own creative and intellectual work by engaging with a director in participatory sense-making.

Conclusion and further questions

This discussion has proposed that directing a film is an instance of situated cognition and a director's work involves, among other things, leadership in a process of 'participatory sense-making' (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007).

My purpose in positioning film directors as central nodes of complex and dynamic processes of situated cognition is not to diminish their importance to filmmaking or dissipate the responsibility for style and creative coherence of a film. Rather it is to refine understanding of what directing is and what an expert director's skills are. Filmmaking is a process, and directors are artistically central to that process. However, the director's artistry is not solely in what they know or how they think about the film in their heads. A director's artistry is also found in how fluently and effectively they elicit offers and negotiate coherent decisions.

Earlier on I noted that critics may define vision as a perspective, or a sense of style, or what the director wants to say, or the cumulative effect of narrative and narration. These definitions are all compatible with the notion that directing is an instance of leadership in participatory sense-making. They are all, in fact, variations on the idea of a directors 'why' or their sense of purpose. However, none of them is particularly useful to understanding the creative process of directing.

I also noted earlier that very inexperienced filmmakers may use the word 'vision' as an excuse for not communicating effectively with collaborators. To counter this, a question arises as to whether some focus in filmmaking education could be given to participatory sense making as a creative practice skill. This education could, I propose, be informed by research and knowledge in the area of social cognition. In 2015, Di Paolo and De Jaegher called for an 'integrated effort of many disciplinary traditions' to study human sociality because:

> Our social lives are populated by different kinds of cognitive and affective phenomena … They include acting and perceiving together, verbal and non-verbal engagement, experiences of (dis) connection, relations in a group, joint meaning-making, intimacy, trust, secrecy, conflict, negotiation, asymmetric relations, material mediation of social interaction, collective action, contextual engagement with socio-cultural norms, etc. (Di Paolo & De Jaegher, 2015, p. 1).

Filmmaking includes all of these, too. Like all participatory sense-making, filmmaking is subject to vicissitudes of being alive, in the world, in cultural, social, temporal, spatial, embodied and embedded contexts. In her paper on enactive filmmaking processes, Pia Tikka describes the development of

mind by saying: 'the mind is made by living' (Tikka, 2022, p. 50). In this sense, a film is made by living too.

References

Allen, R. J. (1995). Tigers. In *The Air Dolphin Brigade*.

Bacharach, S., & Tollefsen, D. (2010). We Did It: From Mere Contributors to Coauthors. *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, *68* (1).

Brody, R. (2017, March 2). "Get Out": Jordan Peele's Radical Cinematic Vision of the World Through a Black Man's Eyes. *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/get-out-jordan-peeles-radical-cinematic-vision-of-the-world-through-black-eyes

Clark, A. (2005). Beyond the Flesh: Some Lessons from a Mole Cricket. *Artificial Life*, *11*(1–2), 233–244. https://doi.org/10.1162/1064546053279008

Dargis, M. (2018, November 30). What the Movies Taught Me About Being a Woman. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/30/movies/women-in-movies.html,

De Jaegher, H., & Di Paolo, E. (2007). Participatory sense-making: An enactive approach to social cognition. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, *6*(4), 485–507. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-007-9076-9

Di Paolo, E. A., & De Jaegher, H. (2015). Toward an embodied science of intersubjectivity: Widening the scope of social understanding research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *6*(MAR). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00234

Fennell, E. (Director). (2023, November 17). *Saltburn* [Video recording]. Amazon MGM Studios, Lie Still, Lucky Chap.

Gaut, B. (1997). Film authorship and collaboration. In Allen, R. & Smith, M. (Eds.) *Film Theory and Philosophy*, Oxford Academic. (pp. 149–172).

Livingston, P. (2007). *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study*. Oxford University Press.

Livingston, P. (2011). On authorship and collaboration. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *69*(2), 221–225. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6245.2011.01463.x

Murphy, M. (2023, March 3). Video: 'Women Talking' | Anatomy of a Scene. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/video/movies/100000008795294/women-talking-scene.html

Pearlman, K. (2023). Distributed Authorship: An et al. Proposal of Creative Practice, Cognition, and Feminist Film Histories. *Feminist Media Histories*, *9* (2).

Pearlman, K., & Sutton, J. (2022). Reframing the director: Distributed creativity in film making practice. In M. Hjort & T. Nannicelli (Eds.), *A Companion to Motion Pictures and Public value*. Wiley.

Polley, S. (Director). (2023, February 17). *Women Talking* [Video recording]. Orion Pictures, Hear/Say Productions, Plan B Entertainment.

Stevens, I. (2022). No Man's Land: Celine Sciamma on "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" BFI 09. 08 December 2022. https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/no-mans-land-celine-sciamma-portrait-lady-fire

Sutton, J. (2023). Individuals for Anti-Individualists. *Constructivist Foundations*, *18*(3), 374–376.

Sutton, J., & Bicknell, K. (2022). Introduction: The situated intelligence of collaborative skills. In J. Sutton & K. Bicknell (Eds.), *Collaborative Embodied Performance*. Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350197725.ch-00i

Thier, E. *What Is A Director's Vision: Film Directing Demystified - The Independent Film School*. (2021, March 10). https://theindependentfilmschool.com/film-directing-directors-vision/

Thompson, E. (2011). Living Ways of Sense Making. *Philosophy Today*, *55*, 114–123.

Tikka, P. (2010). Cinema author's embodied simulatorium – A systems intelligence approach. In R. P. Hämäläinen & E. Saarinen (Eds.), *Essays on Systems Intelligence* (pp. 207–234). Aalto University School of Engineering and Technology.

Tikka, P. (2022). *Enactive Authorship*. https://doi.org/10.3167/proj.2022.160104

Travers, P. (2023). Review: Wes Anderson's loopy, lyrical vision is alive and well in 'Asteroid City', ABC. 16 June; https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Culture/review-wes-andersons-loopy-lyrical-vision-alive-asteroid/story?id=100012916

Vanity Fair. (2023, November 20). *"Saltburn" Director Emerald Fennel Breaks Down the Arrival Scene | Vanity Fair* [Video recording]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlVtm5jrgoY