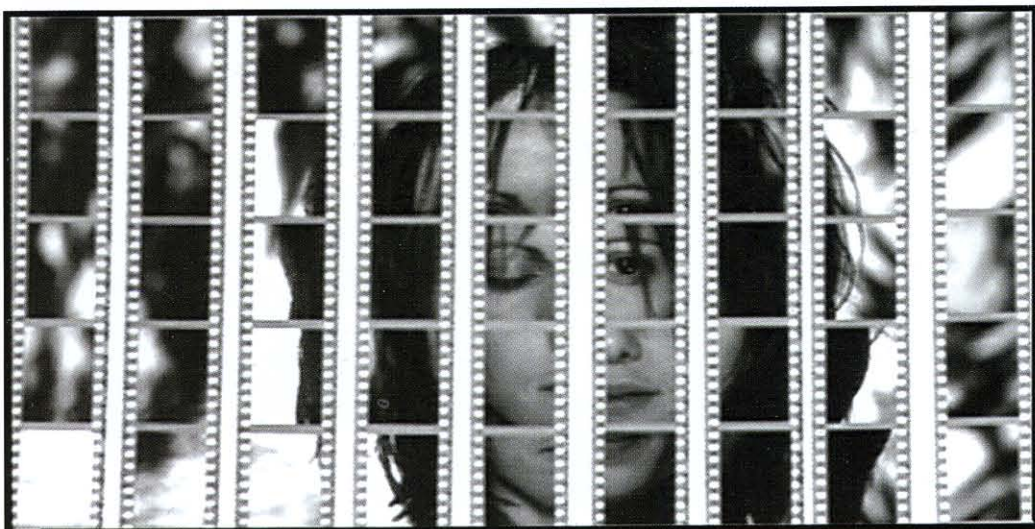
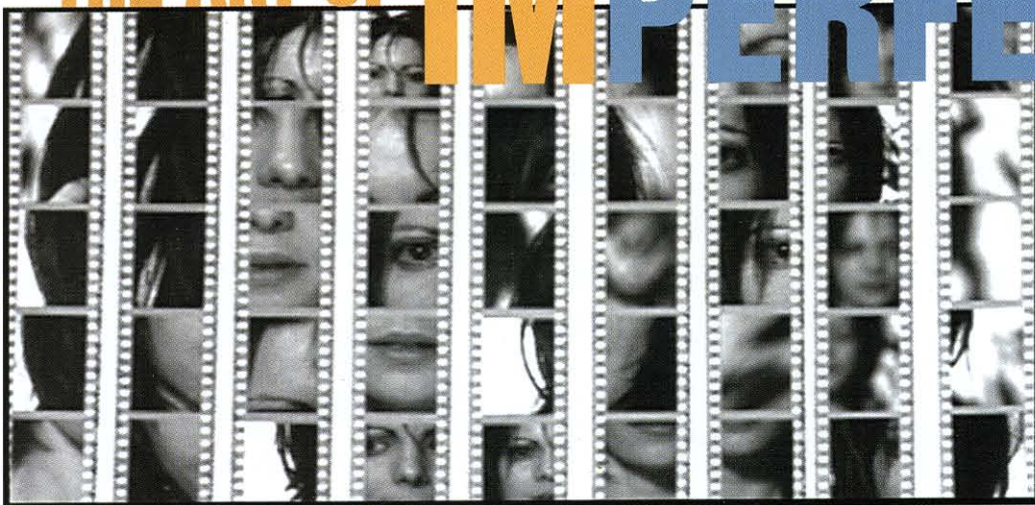


PERFECTING THE ART OF IMPERFECTION



Cinema has plundered the other arts since its invention. Within the confines of the camera frame, the cinematographer and the production designer conspire to imitate painting and theatre. The makers of movies mercilessly pillage music, and especially literature; the exchange has never been what you'd call fair or reciprocal. A movie is a creature with a voracious appetite, consuming everything it can find to give the illusion of perfection: of life cast, designed, lit, framed and edited, enhanced with unreal colours and a musical score. It's for that reason that I try not to complete a picture. Sometimes what works is the absence of a set, the lack of light, or the missing object. I often take things away and wait

with curiosity to see what is going to fill the hole.

As a director, Atom Egoyan allows his collaborators huge freedoms to interpret and experiment. I was thrilled to be able to design a long dark hallway in the Bide-a-While Motel in the film *The Sweet Hereafter*. The underlit hallway was purposefully made just a few inches larger than Maury Chaykin, the man who would be walking down it. I wanted to put him in the scene earlier than scripted to see the shadowy, looming approach of this large-framed man before he delivers his lines. The effect is more than expected; the hallway became a decompression chamber that separates the public lobby from a sad and private inner life. Later in the scene, it becomes a

no-man's land where the lawyer retreats when he receives a phone call from his drug-addicted daughter.

I never considered production design as a career. Since graduating from the Ontario College of Art and Design, I have worked part time in the film industry to sustain an addiction to making art. I make film-based installations, projections in public places and "art films." My personal work is partly motivated by a rebellious desire to break down traditional ways of perception, especially how we perceive film. We are not nocturnal creatures, yet we have trained ourselves to sit in the dark for two hours watching a film, without moving. Not even in sleep do we stay so still for so long.

I learn about myself by watching other people. When I watch film however, I am always aware that the people on the screen are actors. Actors are people who are trained to believe they are not being watched. Similarly, as a production designer, the less I consider the "film frame" (the line between fiction and fact), the better. I try to work with eyes closed. The set I am looking for will eventually reveal itself from the darkness, with all its rough edges, the incongruities of the real world.

This is why I relish the human foibles in film, mistakes gone unchecked. Mirrors and windows that reflect the world of the film crew. Colours too dark or too bright, water leaks, unexpected rain, fog and floods. People in crowd scenes who look at the camera. Crying children during a happy scene. Contradictory key light, eye-lines that are crossed, lens flares and jerky zooms. I enjoy when actors miss their cue and cry too soon or too late, or sneeze, fumble, stumble or walk into things.*

When things go wrong, possibilities present themselves. Accidents are like miracles that cure blindness. (I can see again!) A Ferris wheel

Above: *Soul Cages*, Phillip Barker (Canada 1999), production still Opposite: *Ararat*, Atom Egoyan (Canada 2002)



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arrives late to set, and I see that it takes on new meaning in a half-constructed state. An unexpected arc welder is found working at night on a rooftop. The flickering light is beautiful, put two welders up there! Give me anything that's real, something unscripted that gives film life.

It is real life on the film set that inspires me, and informs my own work. Mira Nair's mother said a prayer on the first day of shooting *My Own Country*, then blessed each member of the crew by smudging red Tikka powder on our foreheads.** During the school-bus crash scene in *The Sweet Hereafter*, the stunt driver's wife ran down the road blowing kisses to her husband through the rear-view mirror, as he drove the bus through the guard rail and dropped over the cliff. The driver gave us strict orders that the only two people to arrive after the crash would be the medic and his wife.

Sometimes simulations can contain their own truth. For the film *Ararat*, I designed a market street of an old Armenian quarter of the city of Van, circa 1915. The street was adorned with carpets, bibles, jewelry and other possessions generously loaned by the Armenian community, some of whom were direct descendants of those who fell during the 1917 genocide. During the filming these same people filled the street as extras, performing their duties as merchants and marketgoers with heart-aching sincerity. For a few sun-drenched hours in July, this was their Armenia.

Cinema died for me in April, 1967. That month, my father brought home a Super-8 camera and projector.*** The projector came with a short demo film, a war drama called *War Is Hell*. At the impressionable age of eleven I was to discover that war, as a recreated spectacle for the camera, could be a gruesome, frightening hell. But war as a projected phantasm, as a flickering light across my living room wall, was deliciously seductive and strange. One click with my finger on the "still" button and I could freeze those soldier-actors just before they were shot. I could hold them cryogenically, indefinitely. When they were blown-up, I could give them back their life with the projector's reverse button. This was my first interactive experience. Since then I have been in love with cinema's illusions, fakenesses and falsenesses – and distrusted them deeply.****

A lot has been written about the future of film in a digital age, and most of it will probably prove to be wild speculation. As with music, the technical means to make films has become undeniably cheaper and more accessible. One day, digital video cameras and inexpensive software might allow us to completely create feature films of undeniable quality in our bedrooms. But when there is no longer a need for production designers, cinematographers, costume designers and directors, I will be the first in line to lay down my career.

*"The future of multimedia is theatre" – Robert Lepage

**Mira's mother, Praveen Nair, runs Salaam Baalak Trust, a foundation that provides support for street and working children in India, founded from the profits of her daughter's first feature film, *Salaam Bombay*.

***For Peter Greenaway, cinema died in September 1986 with the invention of the remote control.

****There remains in existence only one, short, unsatisfying piece of footage actually shot in the trenches of the Western Front. It's probably just one film – Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, made twelve years after Armistice Day – that provides those billions of us who never saw the trenches with our mental picture of World War I.

Phillip Barker is a filmmaker, installation artist and designer for film and theatre. He worked with Atom Egoyan on the films *Ararat* and *The Sweet Hereafter* and the operas *Elsewhereless* and *Salome*. Barker was the subject of a retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1999.



Ararat, Atom Egoyan (Canada 2002)
The Sweet Hereafter, Atom Egoyan (Canada 2000), production still



Campos Mageticos, Live outdoor performance and film projection in Madrid, Spain, 1991
Above: *Soul Cages*, Phillip Barker (Canada 1999), production still



I Am Always Connected, Phillip Barker (Canada 1998), production still