VISCERAL VICARIOUS VOYEURISM: BOORSTIN'S PRINCIPLE
OF THE THREE EYES AS APPLIED TO THE SHORT FILM

REBIRTH

A Project
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by

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DEDICATION

For those innocent souls affected by war, as well as the not-so-innocent.
Freedom is what you do with what has been done to you.
—Jean-Paul Sartre
ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT

Visceral Vicarious Voyeurism: Boorstin’s Principle of the Three Eyes as Applied to the Short Film Rebirth
by Ángel Granados
Master of Arts in Television, Film, and New Media Production San Diego State University, 2011

Noted film theorist and author Jon Boorstin once wrote that the basic feature-length motion picture audience evaluates his or her connection to a given film by using three criteria, or “eyes.” According to Boorstin, the visceral eye evaluates how well a viewer is brought into the story by the reptilian thrill of sex or violence. The vicarious eye evaluates their perceived social connection to the protagonist. It is what keeps the viewer tuned into the hero’s plight, provoking concern for his/her fate. The third eye, the voyeuristic eye, observes the film for the sheer sake of being carried away. These three criteria determine the film’s ability to engage an audience, hold its attention, and transport them to another world. Without any one of these elements, Boorstin argues, most audiences would be bored, disengaged with the protagonist, and/or unimpressed by the mise-en-scène that directors construct to seduce audiences into participating in an involving, voyeuristic experience.

From its inception, the short film Rebirth was written with the idea of incorporating Boorstin’s three eyes. It is hoped that the use of these elements will promote audience identification with the drama, protagonist, and overall experience. In other words, that the audience will be more fully engaged.

The screenplay for the film can be found in Appendix A. The DVD is available for viewing in the Media Center of Love Library.
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*The DVD is available at the Media Center of Love Library.
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CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

The atrocities of warfare and other traumatic episodes of violence affect the lives of witnesses for years. Growing up with a father who still suffers from the effects of his involvement in the Vietnam War over forty years ago, I have often questioned the reasons and affects of war on humankind. Growing up in a family indirectly affected by war through my father’s experience, I became interested in historical and political films that depict war and its impacts on those involved. Many films set in the midst of combat aim to humanize a protagonist by building empathy for him or her, if not sympathy, as he or she struggles to survive in horrible, dehumanizing conditions. After reading Joseph Campbell’s *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, it became apparent that the success of stories to humanize the victims of war, as well as entertain us and teach us something about the world, directly relies on the storytellers’ ability to build empathy for the protagonist. Beyond creating an empathetic connection between audience and hero, storytellers engage us as voyeurs, often gazing upon locales and situations that we do not normally experience. Finally, the storytellers’ visceral depiction of combat and the carnage that comes with it reminds us of the gravity of the situation, thus sustaining our interest in watching.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a civil war in El Salvador erupted. Fearing communist state support of the Marxist rebels and eventual Soviet involvement, the US government became directly involved in the conflict. They sent financial aid to the ruling
class to help them fight the rebels. As the conflict became more violent, the US government
sent weapons and military advisors to the right-wing government. The government in El
Salvador was using its army, now funded, trained, and armed with American tax dollars, to
hunt suspected Marxist rebels in the cities and countryside and eliminate them. Despite all
the stories surrounding this conflict, we now know that the information dispensed by the
mainstream media in the United States during the conflict was inadequate and often
misleading in favor of American political goals (Soderlund 60). It could be argued that,
unlike the Vietnam conflict, the atrocities committed in the civil war in El Salvador failed to
connect with a general American audience because mainstream American media tended to
focus on news that supported its involvement (Soderlund, Wagenberg, and Pemberton 582).

As in all conflicts, past and present, many civilians having nothing to do with the
combatants and are often simply caught in the crossfire of political and military action.

*Rebirth*, or *El Renacimiento*, is set during the war in El Salvador. By using Boorstin’s three
eyes theory as a guide, its aim is to build audience empathy for a particular protagonist caught
in the civil war in El Salvador as a way to add to the historically incomplete discourse about
the effects of the war on innocent civilian populations, both in this particular war and all
other wars in which the US has been involved. The story, despite all of the death and
destruction, centers on the slivers of hope that can sometimes be found in war. It is about
how one boy finds inspiration in the midst of genocide. By recording his experience as a
young witness, the protagonist decides to use these terrible events for good, and in the future,
convert them into opportunities to spread the truth about war.

Contemporary story-telling conventions in films, in which protagonists are usually
introduced during the first act of a classic three-act structure, provide audiences with much
opportunity to engage their prejudices about the protagonist before identifying with their struggle in the narrative. In the case of films involving war, this early introduction provides opportunity for the audience to easily dismiss the victims of war and as unavoidable collateral damage, especially after the audience has been exposed to so much pro-American news media saturation that focuses on the virtues of American military might, rather than its consequences. *Rebirth* challenges and subverts this notion of victims of US-led invasions as being simply collateral damage by encouraging the audience to first identify more closely with the protagonist’s situation through its formal design. In *Rebirth*, the introduction of the protagonist is delayed until the second act, only after we understand the context in which this character resides. When we finally meet him, we know him in the context of his experience that we have shared with him rather than by means of *a priori* judgment made on the basis of physical appearance. This is achieved by establishing an objective shot of war atrocities unfolding before an objective camera, at a distance from the action. This objective shot appears initially as the audience’s point of view.

Second, after the atrocities are committed and the context in which the protagonist lives, I reveal through montage that the objective shot was in fact the point of view of an innocent boy hiding in the nearby jungle; the real protagonist.

Using film theorist Jon Boorstin’s theory of effectively engaging an audience through what he calls the “eyes” of cinema. In the first act, I have employed a cinematic technique of engaging the audience’s voyeuristic tendencies by cinematically building the world in which the story will unfold. In doing so, I am effectively placing the audience in the protagonist’s “shoes” so that they may witness this shocking event as objective observers. What they do not know is that when I reveal the boy, they will have witnessed this event through the young
boy’s eyes without knowing it, thus affording a more empathetic bond with him at the point at which we the audience finally meet him. This technique shortens the emotional distance between the audience and the protagonist which is otherwise inherent in traditional three-act narrative structures where the protagonist is introduced in the first act. Additionally, a further distance may exist for a number of other reasons related to the audience’s simple inability to empathize, such as possible preconceived and biased notions about the socioeconomic class and/or race of the protagonist. By “borrowing” the protagonist’s eyes without the audience’s knowledge (because they are engaged in the visceral events unfolding before them), viewers first experience the traumatic events the protagonist is going through before they have a chance to identify with the protagonist and draw conclusions about his color and/or socioeconomic status. Afterwards, the protagonist is revealed and the audience has someone with whom it can empathize, thus breaking down barriers of prejudice.

The celebrated photojournalist Harry Mattison, who won the prestigious Robert Capa Gold Medal for his photography of the civil war in El Salvador, once said of the “impossibility” of shooting “war photography”:

War is a state of affairs between peoples. A photographer can photograph soldiers, or military equipment, the smoke of exploding mortars, the flames devouring villages and cities, but none of these are war itself. Many of the most powerful examples of so-called “war photography” are not photographs of soldiers or combat at all, but photographs of a child running down a road, a father holding his dead child in his arms, an old woman’s eyes shining with grief. (Mattison 1)

While Mattison was talking about his experiences as a photojournalist in the midst of the civil war in El Salvador, his comments illustrate what I intended to do with Rebirth. The power of a war narrative isn’t necessarily in its pictures of soldiers, guns, and jeeps. Instead, the narrative’s power lies in the effects the war has on the people that are forced to endure its
atrocities. My hope is that this film will serve as a reminder to the audience of the true costs of war. I also hope that the lessons I have learned from the experience of making my short film will endure and help others share their own narratives.

**STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

A central problem of *Rebirth* was how best to build empathy for a protagonist when the contexts surrounding the narrative tend to work against audience empathy and identification with the protagonist, such as in the case of audiences’ desensitization to images of violence or ethnic and/or socioeconomic prejudice. This could be especially true, as in contemporary narrative structures where the audience is asked to identify with the protagonist before they get to know the context in which he exists, thus allowing the audience time to judge the character first based not on his circumstances but on what ever visual codes he may present and therefore represent in real life.

*Rebirth* is confined to three scenes (each scene being a very short act) that makes use of a cinematic technique I developed with the aim of creating deep audience empathy with the protagonist using all three of Boorstin’s “eye” elements. The technique focuses these elements into one moment in one scene. I call this technique “VoViVi,” a name derived from a combination of the three of Boorstin’s eyes.

**STATEMENT OF SUB PROBLEMS**

My sub-problems center chiefly on (1) capturing the attention of the audience; (2) re-creating a true-to-life physical environment similar to the time and place of El Salvador in the early 1980s; and (3) in working with child actors.
**Engaging the Audience**

One possible sub problem I may run into in screenings, with regards to executing this VoViVi technique, is that some audience members may not understand the film grammar behind changing the meaning of an objective shot into a subjective shot by solely changing its context through montage. By cutting to a shot that reveals that the previous shot, coded as an objective shot, is now actually a subjective shot that is part of a particular character’s point of view may simply confuse the audience at a crucial time when it is necessary to understand the reveal of the boy. Confusing them would remove them from the immersive film experience and engage the audience’s critical sense that destroys verisimilitude.

Additionally, holding on to an objective shot for a long period of time, while the atrocities are occurring at the end of Act I, may run the risk of boring the audience. Expressed in Boorstin’s terms, the length of the shot could weaken the sense of visual novelty or pleasure. The new image, when held for a long period of time, may thus disengage the audience’s voyeuristic eye.

Finally, the audience may be surprised when the close up reveals that we have been experiencing the events through the boy’s point of view, and yet they may not fully understand that he is the protagonist, which would lead to the erroneous conclusion that the army officer is the protagonist. The voice over at the beginning and end of the film is only spoken over the images of the boy. It is at the end that we understand that this adult voice is from the boy, presumably many years later. It is a voice that reminisces on events in the past and interprets what the protagonist boy must have been feeling at this pivotal moment in his life and career.
Production Design to Achieve Authenticity

With a small student budget of roughly $4,000 for pre-production and production, it was difficult to find a suitable location in southern California that could serve as rural El Salvador, rent a 1980s model military jeep, clothe the soldiers in authentic uniforms, find authentic replica weapons and a period-correct camera that the officer could hand to the boy, and ultimately find or build a shack structure similar to what one would find in El Salvador during this time period.

According to Boorstin, the voyeuristic eye with which most audiences experience movies and enjoy being in a new world, is very critical of any visual element that destroys this suspension of disbelief. In other words, the audience will not “buy it” if what is supposed to look like the civil war in El Salvador actually looks like a student movie filmed in southern California. Luckily, I was able to overcome this problem in part by borrowing a friend’s avocado ranch in Valley Center—north San Diego County. The rural unpaved roads, green rolling hills, and lush avocado groves really helped visually to sell rural El Salvador.

Also, a small shack, similar to the ones found in El Salvador, was located on the property next to a stream and in the middle of a secluded, jungle-like avocado grove. It had the plywood construction and corrugated tin roof that I had originally wanted. More importantly, it was worn down in the right places so it didn’t look like something I temporarily built for a film on my budget. Also, I didn’t have to transport it or pay extra to have it built on-site. It was a temporary home for migrant workers who pick avocados during the season. Ironically, many of the workers were from Central America.
Directing Child Actors

Another sub problem was my lack of experience as a director working with child actors. I can cast and rehearse with many professional child actors, but a child’s ability to deliver a suitable performance is a challenge in casting, rehearsals, and on-set. I was not sure I would be able to get a suitable professional child actor that would relate to the gravity of the narrative and react credibly on-camera. My character witnesses the murder of a woman and a baby. I was unsure of the techniques to work with the child actor to achieve the desired performance.

After many auditions I found Joseph Montes, a ten-year-old from Riverside County whose family was from El Salvador. He didn’t speak Spanish but was able to fake a convincing accent if you fed him a phrase or two. After many rehearsals with him alone, I was confident that he would do a good job. He was a serious actor and not easily distracted. I waited to introduce him to the officer until on-set rehearsal because he mentioned that he was recently cast in a film in which someone kidnaps him and his sister. He told me that he got good results from the performance because he had not met the kidnapper until the day they shot that scene. The kidnapper was in character the entire time, so he said he felt a sense of true fear from the man he had not met. After meeting Elbin on-set, the officer character that murders the woman, he said he felt the same sense of fear of a mean adult who could hurt him.

On-set, Joseph proved to be a very focused and talented professional actor. He was truly interested in the creative process of getting into character. I was relieved that he worked out so well for the production. Clearly, part of my success came from careful casting, which led to such a proactive, young thespian.
GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

My primary goal was to create a compelling short film, with great verisimilitude, that entertains, as well as informs an audience about the gravity of war and how survivors cope with its brutal consequences. It seeks to re-humanize those people caught in the horrible effects of war and violence.

By seeking to engage the audience in the narrative, a secondary goal was to create and successfully execute a cinematic technique, using Jon Boorstin’s concepts of the “three eyes,” which a filmmaker could adapt and utilize when attempting to build a sympathetic protagonist caught in a life-changing situation. The technique, called “VoViVi,” blends the concepts of Boorstin’s eyes with a suspenseful story to create a rich viewing and educational experience. VoViVi would be most useful to the director to build an empathetic bond between the protagonist and mainstream audience when the audience may be desensitized to violent images and images of war, and/or resistant to empathy for on-screen characters otherwise not of the same socioeconomic status or origin as their own.

My tertiary goal was to improve my skills as a director by relying on long takes to tell my story. Long takes require less skill in editing a story than normal-length takes, and instead rely on the abilities of the actor and director in creating a suitable performance for the camera in production.

My quaternary goal was to produce this short film with very little resources available in terms of funds and time.
DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

**Objective shot:** Shot taken from a camera angle that promotes the idea of an audience’s gaze as an observer of an event, but not from the point of view of a particular character.

**Point of View (POV):** Particular type of subjective shot that derives its meaning from the context in which it is paired or edited with a shot of a particular character while he or she is actively gazing upon some event or object.

**Protagonist:** The character on which the narrative revolves around.

**Subjective shot:** Shot taken from camera angle that mimics a particular character’s gaze. It is through this shot that the audience vicariously experiences what a character sees.

**Suspension of disbelief:** A phenomenon or semi-conscious decision by the reader to put aside his/her disbelief and accept the premise as being real for the duration of the story. Suspension of disbelief only works to a point. It is important that the story maintains its own form of believability and does not push the limits.

**Verisimilitude:** The appearance of the mise-en-scène of a film as being true or real.

**Vicarious eye:** Jon Boorstin’s concept of an element in films that engages audiences by influencing them to relate to the protagonist on a sympathetic level. It is what encourages viewers to continue through a character’s journey and ordeal to see if they make it through to the end of the story.

**Visceral eye:** Jon Boorstin’s concept of an element in films that engages audiences on a gut-wrenching and thrilling level.

**Voyeur’s eye:** Jon Boorstin’s concept of one singular quality that audiences use to immerse themselves in a film where the audience is engaged solely through the pleasure of
watching. It is the “. . . mind’s eye, not the heart’s . . . watching out of a kind of human curiosity” (12).

**VoViVi:** Cinematic technique developed to bolster audience identification with a protagonist. It involves combining all three of Boorstin’s eyes concepts and concentrates them into one moment in one scene. It also involves subverting an objective voyeuristic camera shot by revealing that what was once thought to be objective is actually subjective and part of a point-of-view shot, thus re-appropriating the context in which it was originally defined.

**DELIMITATIONS**

The short film *Rebirth* is set in the early 1980s civil war in El Salvador, but it is not a comment on this particular war or a specific time in history. Although great effort has gone into establishing a historically accurate *mise-en-scène*, it is meant merely to serve as an authentic, engaging setting for a timeless, universally placed statement on how violence and warfare affect innocent civilian bystanders.

Additionally, though the film may include many long takes, this thesis is not meant to be a debate in the merits of long takes vs. the merits of montage.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF PROJECT**

Cinema has historically been an important medium to our culture. It has allowed us to experience many aspects of history and the human condition to which we may not otherwise have the ability to access. Additionally, it has served as a mirror on which we are often allowed to see a reflection of ourselves in a philosophical sense. In this cinematic tradition, *Rebirth* serves as a small window into the world that focuses on the human cost of war and
how those that survive it endure its impacts. It also serves as a reminder of the gravity of war and the tragedies of combat not only in Central America, but also in Iraq, Afghanistan, Columbia, Panama, Grenada, Vietnam, and anywhere else where civilians are threatened by our weapons of war.

Most importantly, the cinematic technique called VoViVi helps directors further humanize and promote a powerful empathy for their protagonists, especially protagonists who would otherwise be easily dismissed as distant and exotic or foreign. The technique also provides a place for audiences to invest their emotions about what they just experienced as witnesses. My hope is that it will help directors to persuade audiences to resist thoughtless consumption of stories about real people caught up in real tragedy, especially when the tragedies portrayed on the screen are representations of actual atrocities caused by one’s own government.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

AND FILMS

In *The Hollywood Eye: What Makes Movies Work*, Jon Boorstin theorizes that all successful Hollywood (feature-length) stories contain three important storytelling elements called “eyes.” These elements are the Voyeur’s Eye, the Visceral Eye, and the Vicarious Eye, and are spread throughout a narrative feature film story. The most important to the narrative journey, the Vicarious Eye, is the quality in many films that allows an audience to invest its emotional energy in the protagonist, thus drawing that audience into a story. Conversely, the Visceral Eye is the gut wrenching, gory, and often violent and/or sexy elements of the story that makes it near impossible for the audience to pull their attention away from what they are witnessing. Finally, the Voyeur’s Eye is what gives the audience the pleasure of gazing into the scene and being a passive participant and temporary resident of the *mise-en-scène* of the world that the director builds. According to Boorstin, “The voyeur’s pleasure is the simple joy of seeing the new and the wonderful. . . . The voyeur’s eye is the mind’s eye, not the heart’s, the dispassionate observer, watching out of a kind of generic human curiosity” (12). These three eyes that Boorstin identifies serve as a basis for how the narrative in *Rebirth* was developed from the beginning.

In *Producing and Directing the Short Film and Video*, Peter Rea and David Irving present a checklist of important elements to consider when scouting and choosing a location
for shooting (140). In particular, they discuss technical elements such as sound, lighting, availability of restrooms and green room space, etc. More importantly, the authors discuss the “power of illusion” in choosing a great location that serves the story. Finding my avocado ranch location in San Diego County was pivotal in engaging the audience’s voyeuristic eye by being able to place them in rural Central America.

In *The Film Director Prepares: A Practical Guide to Directing for Film and TV*, Myrl Schreibman discusses some of the ways that directors can prepare for working with child actors (164). One of the most useful pieces of advice was to keep in mind that children have a much different bag of references from which to draw to help them establish their characters for your film. He also mentions that it is important for directors to create scenarios off-set that help children to understand their roles so that they may have a better context to draw upon when in production. Finally, he adds that having an arsenal of jokes and references that the child actors can relate to will help relieve on-set tension that may otherwise hinder your actors ability to perform.

In *The Five C's of Cinematography: Motion Picture Filming Techniques*, Joseph Mascelli reveals the basics of visual film grammar by explaining the differences between types of shots such as close-up, wide and medium shots. These differences illustrate how our film-viewing culture has assigned meaning to how we essentially experience film. In particular, Mascelli discusses the aesthetics of objective shots that draw the audience into the narrative as passive observers, as well as active observers, of events presented in the narrative.

The theme of *Rebirth* centers on how violence impacts innocent bystanders and civilians, particularly young impressionable children who must deal with witnessing the
horrors of combat or other violent events. Considering that the protagonist represents innocence through his young age, I found inspiration in four films that depict similar themes. In *Witness*, a young Amish boy ventures into the big city with his mom for the first time. The entire sequence of their journey to the main train station where they are to transfer is depicted through his eyes. He watches people outside of his culture perform daily activities from the train car, literally wide-eyed. He wanders the train station in awe of the strange people, architecture, and statues. While in the restroom stall, he clandestinely witnesses the murder of a police officer. He cleverly evades the murderers, who later suspect that someone was watching, and lives to tell the story. The murder seems all the more violent precisely because we are placed in the bathroom stall, watching the brutal murder through a crack in the door, precisely from the perspective of the young innocent boy.

In *Road to Perdition*, a young boy in puberty sees his father come home dressed in a suit and unload his pistol. He starts to question what his mysterious father actually does for a living. One day he hides in the trunk of his father’s car to follow him to “work.” The answer to his question is shockingly revealed by an objective shot of the backs of the father and his gangster co-worker from behind, taken from the point of view of the car trunk (which was under the back seat in old 1930s cars). The characters are discussing the meeting that they are about to have with an enemy of their boss. A (reverse) shot of the trunk reveals that the boy is peeking through the seat and watching the mobsters driving and discussing that whomever they are going to see is not to be killed, only intimidated. The men get out of the car with their guns and walk into a secluded warehouse. The boy follows them shortly afterwards and finds a hole in the warehouse through which he can watch what happens inside. While in hiding, he witnesses his father, a gunman hired by the mob, brutally killing
people with a machine gun when the job goes awry. The killings seem all the more violent and powerful because the young, innocent boy is the protagonist and we are experiencing these brutal multiple murders through point of view, thereby augmenting the scene’s emotional impact. The young boy (the protagonist of this story) sees the world in a completely new way after he realizes that his father is a professional killer. He grows to understand more about adulthood and his relationship with his dad as his father’s partner turns on him and he suddenly becomes the hunted. Father and son are then forced to trust each other and must now stick together to survive.

In the introduction scene of *A History of Violence*, a young man and a middle-aged man casually emerge from a motel room and discuss some mundane details about the heat. In one long take, they approach a car and unload their bags. The middle-aged man walks enters the office to checkout while the other brings the car forward to the office entrance. The objective camera tracks slowly with the second man in the car rolling up to the office. After a few seconds, the first man exits the office and climbs into the driver’s seat. After the young man realizes he forgot to fill up their water jug for their next journey, his partner admonishes him to fill it up inside where there is a water cooler. A second objective shot follows the young man inside as he looks for the water cooler. The shot eventually reveals that two people lie dead in pools of blood behind the counter. The man does not react. Another objective low angle shot establishes the man kneeling to fill his water jug from the cooler. A shocking reverse shot reveals a little girl who is clearly traumatized as a result of witnessing the murders of her guardians—the clerks of the motel. When we return to the original low angle shot of the man getting water, we realize that the same objective shot of the man kneeling now becomes her point of view. The same shot now becomes a point of view shot.
When the man sees the girl he slowly hushes her and then calmly shoots her in the face with a pistol. Again, the violence, also perpetrated against the young witness, seems all the more shockingly sinister and challenges our acceptable standards of violence (in film) because there is a moment during which it is revealed that a child has witnessed the killings and becomes a murder victim herself.

While all three of these film examples represent important segments in film, they are also moments at which all three of Boorstin’s eyes come together at one singular moment to shock us into experiencing the truly heinous nature of the violent act by involving a young witness to the crimes. The fact that the person we are vicariously following is a child juxtaposes an innocent witness and an extremely violent perpetrator. They are effective methods that the filmmakers have introduced using young, innocent protagonists to promote audience empathy and propel the narratives forward. What is different about *Rebirth* is that it waits to reveal the protagonist until that specific VoViVi moment, at which that moment propels the character to do something about the violence in the third act. The introduction of the protagonist is delayed until this moment so that the audience does not build pre-conceived notions about his character. Instead the violence occurs before the introduction of the protagonist. The intention is to help the audience relate to the protagonist more through the terror of the shared violent experience. Using VoViVi is especially helpful to solidify the relationship of protagonist-to-audience when the protagonist’s ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic condition, or any other physical character trait disinclines the audience toward the protagonist on the basis of cultural bias.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

I built *Rebirth* as three distinct scenes, and therefore three distinct acts. In Act I, a character named Lieutenant Pirallo is photographically established as a major character entirely from one objective camera angle. He wears a green military uniform and a maroon beret. Though he is not the protagonist, he is prominent in opening scene and thus, by dint of film convention, it is implied that is the likely protagonist of the story. An unidentified voice over talks about how some children do not know what they want to do in life, but that his destiny on this strange day was sure.

Next, in Act II, an objective shot through bushes presumed to be near the location of the jeep reveals a rural shack in the jungle with a woman sweeping its porch while caring for a young baby in a sling. Suddenly, she hears a car in the distance. She looks around the corner, sees the vehicle, and goes inside and closes the door. In the same take, the soldiers arrive and dismount the jeep seen earlier. The officer who was previously seen driving orders another soldier to post himself in front of the shack and cover him. The officer then beats on the door, forces his way into the house, and questions the woman. When she refuses to tell him where her husband is, the officer creates a ruckus to intimidate her, throwing things and kicking furniture over. The baby she was holding screams in terror as the soldier beats her, and finally shoots her. At this moment, we cut to the close-up shot of a young boy witnessing all of these horrible things. It is now when we will realize that what we thought was an
objective shot, was actually a very subjective shot of what the boy was witnessing all along. After this, we see the soldier posted outside becoming very physically uncomfortable about what is happening inside the house. He is especially disturbed when suddenly the baby inside the house stops crying at the sound of a thud. The sound of furniture and objects shifting inside the house continues for a few more seconds until the officer appears at the door he forced open. The soldier outside snaps back to attention. The officer carries a camera, an AK-47 assault rifle, a red scarf, and other items he collected as evidence. He and the soldier get back into the jeep and drive off.

Act III begins with a close-up shot of the boy reacting to the jeep driving off. He is obviously scared. He then decides to investigate the house to see if he can help the woman or the baby, but just as begins to move, we hear the jeep stop, and then suddenly back up. The boy realizes he was discovered and backs up into the jungle slowly. We see the officer quickly get out of the jeep and approach the boy before he has a chance to run away. As we hold on the boy’s close up, the officer’s hip and pistol appear in the frame. He reminds the boy that he told him to stop following him. Scared by what he just witnessed, the boy says that he just came to see. The soldier displays the camera that they took from the shack as evidence. He takes the film out, stashes it in his pocket, and hands the camera to the boy, reassuring him that it is not loaded. The boy takes it reluctantly. The mysterious voice over from the opening of the film again insinuates itself, confirming its identity with the boy. He says that on this strange day he had no idea that he too would become a warrior. He tells us that he learned that a photojournalist fights for humanity, and that his weapon may not shoot bullets, but it still shoots. The officer walks off and gets back into his jeep and drives off. In a close-up of the boy, we see him lift the camera up and snap a photo of the men driving off.
Although my story is not particularly about the civil war in El Salvador during the 1980s, I had to pay attention to the mise-en-scène of Rebirth for the sake of satisfying the audience’s voyeuristic eye. It was, therefore, essential to establish a high degree of verisimilitude in the people, objects, and setting.

My story called for a small rural structure where the murder of the woman and baby occur. I wanted to evoke a visceral sense of violence in the story to illustrate the brutality of the soldiers, and to accomplish this, I evoked an elliptical strategy that would prompt the audience to co-create the violence as a function of their imagination. Thus, the violence occurs inside the shack and the audience experiences it from afar as the boy does.

It was important to me that the violence perpetrated against the woman and baby symbolize an attack on the institution of the family and the home as a sanctuary, so a humble dwelling of some sort was seemed appropriate. The idea that this was the victims’ village and the army personnel were outsiders invading their sanctuary was central to the theme. I had done some research on the civil war in El Salvador through other films and news photos that gave some clue as to the architectural styles and geographical landscape of places around El Salvador that were affected by the civil war. I was interested in the textures and materials used in those places at that moment in time. What I found was that in the rural areas most houses consisted of well-built wooden shack structures with corrugated metal roofs. These roofs seemed to be constructed with a moderate pitch, presumably to discourage the collection of water and therefore mosquitoes in the rural jungle environment. I was considering building this period and geographically-correct dwelling, but was running into legal and logistical problems of building, transporting, and staging it in any location in
southern California that seemed otherwise available. Even with the locations that were available (which were expensive), I was not willing to use them because most looked like substandard southern California versions of El Salvador.

A friend offered his parents’ avocado ranch near Temecula. I scouted it and discovered that in addition to the thick jungle-like cover created by the lush avocado trees, there was already a wood shack with a corrugated metal roof on the property. Since the fictional characters that were supposed to live there were presumed to be of working-class origin, I added some shovels and rakes in the front of the house and painted over some modern graffiti on the facade. Had I not been so lucky with finding the perfect (and free) location, I would have definitely had to hire a skilled production designer to help create such a scene.

Other important ingredients in my recipe for verisimilitude were the vehicles, costumes, and props that appear in the story. I was able to use an authentic military type jeep for several days of shooting that was loaned to me by the still photographer’s brother-in-law. I also had to ensure that my actor would know how to safely and convincingly drive the jeep. As for the costume, I researched photographs taken from the civil war in El Salvador. These showed that most of the government troops wore plain-green fatigue field uniforms and basic black combat boots, very similar, if not identical, to uniforms used twenty to thirty years earlier in all branches of the American military. In El Salvador, these uniforms were presumably US military surplus received from the United States as military aid. The M1 helmets and other headgear worn by the military were also American. These uniforms were easily found for sale in a variety of sizes and conditions, along with the real helmets, boots, and other gear, at a local army surplus store called G.I. Joe’s Army Navy Surplus in El Cajon,
CA. Since these basic green fatigues were used and outdated for the American military, the prices fell well within my costume budget.

I have watched several films about the war in El Salvador that were actually filmed in El Salvador to get some ideas as to what a rural housewife and a ten-year-old boy would wear during this period. I also studied journalists’ photos from the war to get an idea of what kind of clothes I would need to buy for my actors. I found most of this basic attire at the local thrift shop or Goodwill store for very little money.

The rifles and pistols that the El Salvadorian army used in the war against its citizens, thanks again to US military aid, were also American made M16-A1 model rifles and M1911A1 model pistols. I found exact replicas of both these models of weapons on a website that sells “airsoft” and paintball guns to the public at a very affordable price. I ordered an M16 rifle for roughly $20 US and was surprised by how authentic it looked. Except for the much lighter weight of the real rifle, it is an exact replica that from afar looks like it is made from plastic and metal like the actual weapon. I also ordered a pistol and was pleasantly surprised how authentic it looked.

**CAMERA**

I believe that contemporary audiences have come to associate “reality” with a certain style of camera work, namely, hand-held camera work. This is no doubt a function of documentary camera practices, as well as other familiar forms that trace back to the early days of MTV and alter, Dogme 95. Therefore, in order to create a feel of authenticity or “realness,” I felt a hand-held “documentary” camera style was most appropriate. Since I wanted the audience to be a voyeuristic participant in the unfolding of the story, I felt it was
important to give the feel of actually sitting in the jeep in the first act, and actually watching from the bushes in the second act. Before it is unequivocally revealed that we are witnessing the atrocity from the boy’s point of view, I felt it was important subliminally to hint at the idea that it was not an entirely objective shot without giving away the boy’s participation prematurely. This suggested sense of subjectivity augmented the atmosphere of tension. To that end, I decided against camera movement in the form of dolly moves or crane moves, or any other camera movement that feels too “cinematic.” Instead, I favored movement derived from a cinema verité style. I feel anything other than hand-held would have been too artificial for the “being there” aesthetic I had aimed to achieve.

Since the entire story takes place outdoors and in a rural location, I planned on using a high-speed film stock capable of recording objects with available light even under tree cover. I used 500 ASA speed film because I also wanted to employ deep focus photography that would simulate the sense of space as perceived through the naked eye; that is to say, because of the phenomenon of “local adaptability” associated with the human eye, we see in deep focus, not in shallow focus the way motion pictures, especially 35 mm motion pictures, record space. For the scenes involving the jeep arriving at the shack, to the soldiers climbing out of the jeep, to the soldiers entering the house, I did not want to rack focus to each plane in the same shot because I knew it would draw attention to optical mechanism of the camera and lens rather than to the drama unfolding. Additionally, the grain inherent in film stock gives the film a subtle gritty and organic texture that by dint of convention we associate with veracity. No matter how processed or manipulated in postproduction, the digital image could not offer me this texture. Fuji motion picture film has an amazing new 500 ASA film stock
that has very subtle film grain that most 500 speed films lack. Fuji also offers very good student discounts.

Finally, sound design plays a major role in my film since I relied on using it as a story-telling device. In Act II, the audience remains outside the house the entire time, after observing the officer chase the woman into the house and force his way inside. What transpires inside the house is not told through photography, but rather through the audio: their conversation, their argument, objects being violently kicked over and thrown, and eventually, a gunshot. After the officer shoots the woman, the baby cries, and a loud thud is heard, after which the baby immediately stops crying. This elliptical audio device clearly conjures the image of that the military officer barbarously throwing the baby on the floor or against a wall. The “aural image” it prompts in the audience imagination is, in my judgment, much more powerful than a literal image would be. More shuffling emanates from the house before the officer appears at the door with his “evidence of rebel activity.”
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS: EVALUATION OF GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of this film was to engage the audience using the Boorstin technique to achieve a sense of being truly immersed in El Salvador during the civil war in the early 1980s. Although I was very limited in resources and funding, by incorporating the “VoViVi” technique, I was able to re-create the visual and emotional results that I had envisioned for this film.

DIRECTING THE CAMERA

A strategy that could have improved the film would have been to capture more footage of the boys playing soccer. This not only would allow me to introduce the boy in a more innocent context that would sharply contrast with the brutality that follows, but might also have afforded me a subtle way to foreshadow the boy’s later appearance when he is revealed to be the lone observer or the atrocity. In short, the “VoViVi” moment could have been more powerful and potentially less confusing if we had more opportunity to see the boy in the beginning of the film.

Better choreography of the exit and eventual return of the jeep and soldiers, as well as the manipulation of the boy’s point of view shots at these moments could have helped the audience from being spatially confused as to which character is looking at what object. I would have benefitted from taking the time to map out eye trace in production to ensure that
the boy was always looking the in the correct direction of his attention, be it towards the house where the murders were taking place, or following the jeep as it left the location and eventually return so the officer could confront the boy. I could have also tried to anticipate the time it would take for the jeep to leave, stop, and return to the scene by understanding what kinds of coverage I needed to build suspense in this moment in post-production. In addition, this moment would have been more effective had I employed a shot from the officer’s point of view in the jeep of the little boy; perhaps through the rear view and/or side mirrors of the jeep, rather than cutting from the officer’s gaze to our original point of view.

**DIRECTING ACTORS**

The strategy of using takes of relatively long duration taken at a distance from the action panned out well. Working with the actors to understand all their emotional beats, while making sure they hit every mark without error, was challenging. However, with stepped rehearsals where the actors were able to rehearse the long takes piece by piece until they felt confident that they could handle all the beats, they were able to deliver strong and credible performances.

Once on-set, there was a series of technical rehearsals that were intended to ensure the actors were fluid with the long list of marks and movements they had first developed. These technical rehearsals reminded them where they were expected to be and what they were expected to do at any moment. For example, first they were to drive up and sit at a specific mark, then the officer was to turn off the jeep while the rifleman climbs out of the jeep. The officer was to then quickly meet the rifleman at the back of the jeep and order him to look out for rebels. These technical rehearsals also allowed the actors to develop blocking that felt and
looked natural. This technique was entirely “mechanical,” and did not require the expenditure of emotional energy. It was designed to make their physical moves second nature and to preserve their emotional expression until the moment of the actual take. This afforded me a kind of freshness that I felt supported the verisimilitude of the human presence on the screen.

**PRODUCTION DESIGN/MISE-EN-SCÈNE**

Finally, considering our resources, I was very pleased with the production design of the film. I believe that diligent location scouting paid off in terms of authenticity. I was able to achieve a suitable authentic rural Central American look with the avocado ranch and a very believable shack structure that replicates what I was looking for in terms of a rural home for the suspected rebels. If I had a bigger budget, I would consider actually shooting on location in Central America for more opportunities to more accurately represent the flora and fauna of rural El Salvador, but for the scope and narrative thrust of my short film I was pleased to be able to use what was, after much searching, suitable and available for very little money.

Overall, the experience of writing/producing/directing this short, Spanish-language, historical piece with Boorstin’s eyes in mind on a very limited budget was very challenging yet educational and enjoyable. It taught me about working with many variables in all stages of production. Most of all, I feel I have a better sense of which variables can be managed before shooting so that the unforeseen ones that creep up in production can be handled in a professional manner. I am ultimately grateful for the opportunity and experience and very appreciative of the crew that made it possible.

The script is included in Appendix A. A DVD (Appendix B) is available for viewing in the Media Center of Love Library.
WORKS CITED


Road to Perdition. Dir. Sam Mendes. DreamWorks Distribution, 2002. Film.


APPENDIX A

THE SCRIPT
OVER BLACK: THE SOUNDS OF A RURAL VILLAGE. A MYSTERIOUS VOICE, MALE, LATE 30'S, SETS THE SCENE

MYSTERIOUS VOICE (V.O.)
(in Spanish)
Few people know growing up what they want to do in life. (beat)
It was a regular Tuesday like any other. Little did I know that on that day, my destiny was as sure as the sun gives us life.

EXT. DAY MOUNTAIN ROAD

A young military OFFICER in a maroon beret, 25 riding in a jeep. He checks his pistol for bullets. Something catches his attention. A random boy kicks a soccer ball around in the dirt.

TITLE CARD - EL SALVADOR, 1980

EXT. DAY - RURAL SHACK SURROUNDED BY HILLS

A voyeuristic, low angle shot of a lone, skinny, black goat grazes, tided with a frayed rope to the front of shack. Its SILENT except for its bell CLANKS every few seconds and an occasional bird CHIRPING and cicadas SINGING. A woman with a baby slung to her chest SWEEPS the front porch.

Off-screen, the sound of an older vehicle DRIVING on gravel approaching on the left. The woman hears the approaching vehicle, peeks around the corner and hurries inside.

After a few seconds, a beat-up and muddy jeep pulls up and stops 30 meters in front of the shack, brakes lightly SQUEALING. The engine stops. A pause. SILENCE. Then two men get out. They are wearing green military fatigues and combat boots.

The driver and RIFLEMAN, 17, thin, with a helmet, carries an American-made assault rifle. The officer points at the rifleman, then to the spot he wants him to wait around the back of the shack. He wears the pistol on his hip.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

The officer casually walks up to the door. The driver with the rifle reluctantly walks around the back. The officer KNOCKS on the door but there is no answer. He KNOCKS louder, but still no answer. There is a pause before the officer KICKS the door in. The rifleman jumps at the NOISE.

At that moment, a WOMAN inside the shack SCREAMS in terror while a baby CRIES — startled by the sudden intrusion.

The officer enters the shack calmly as he disappears into the darkness. We are left outside to hear. (ALL DIALOGUE IN SPANISH).

OFFICER (O.S.)
Where is he? Your husband?

WOMAN (O.S.)
What do you want with us?

OFFICER (O.S.)
We know he's working with the rebels. We know he's been going to those meetings.

WOMAN (O.S.)
I don't know where he is...

OFFICER (O.S.)
Yes you do, and you are going to tell me.

WOMAN (O.S.)
No I don't! I swear! You can't come in here like this! I have a family! Please!

OFFICER
I lost five good men last month to your little war. One of them I had to tell his mother...

WOMAN
I don't know where he is! He's a decent man!

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED: (2)

OFFICER (O.S.)
You know what's going to happen if you don't tell me, don't you?

WOMAN (O.S.)
Please!

OFFICER (O.S.)
Do you want to end up like your neighbor?!

WOMAN (O.S.)
No!

The officer starts to get LOUDER and more physically violent.

OFFICER (O.S.)
Do you remember what she looked like after we found her husband?

The rifleman outside is physically disturbed. He tries to cover his ears.

OFFICER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
She lied too, didn't she?!

WOMAN (O.S.)
Please, no!

A physical struggle ensues as table is KNOCKED over.

The woman's SCREAMS suddenly fall silent. The baby suddenly stops CRYING.

After the sound of some items being MOVED and KICKED around, drawers and cabinets being OPENED, the officer appears at the entrance of the shack and walks out with some items in his hands - papers, clothes, and a camera. He holds the camera up to the rifleman.

OFFICER
(to the rifleman)
These Indians make my job so easy.

He chuckles to himself shaking his head.

(Continued)
CONTINUED: (3)

OFFICER (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Probably pictures of the base. My men.

The two men walk back to the truck.

OFFICER (CONT'D)
Call Victor 8. Tell them were done here. No contact with target but obtained intelligence of value.

Physically shaken, the rifleman looks back at the shack before he reaches the truck. He sits in the driver's side and picks up the radio.

RIFLEMAN
(to radio)
Victor 8, this is Sierra 2-4.

The officer stops at the back of the truck and pauses to light a cigarette.

A VOICE ON THE RADIO comes back.

VOICE ON THE RADIO
Sierra 2-4, this is Victor 8.

The officer takes a big puff of his cigarette. He rests his hand on the pistol on his hip.

RIFLEMAN
(to radio)
Victor 8, we are done at Cielo Rojo. No contact but obtained some intel. Some uniforms, and a loaded camera. We are continuing on to Sector 4.

OFFICER
Lets go.

The rifleman starts the jeep and drives off.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED: (4)

The dust from the road clears as we are left on the same frame - a rural shack in the hills, with a goat. Smoke starts to pour out of the shack as we hear the sound of the truck driving away to the right. The goat bleats as his BELL TINKS.

CUT TO:

A boy, ALEX, 10, stands behind a tree in front of the shack, stunned. He was behind us, watching the entire scene. An orange glow from the fire grows brighter and dances on his face. We hear FIRE CRACKLING and the GOAT BLEATING.

He looks off to where the jeep DROVE off. We hear the truck STOP, then BACK UP and RETURN. With engine still RUNNING, we hear the officer get out of the jeep and APPROACH the boy.

The officer's pistol and hip come into frame in front of the boy. The officer has his hand on his pistol. The boy stares at the pistol, frozen with shock of what might happen, and then looks up at the officer.

OFFICER (CONT'D)
I told you to stop following us.

ALEX
I came to see.

The officer's arm reaches into the burlap sack and PULLS OUT an old camera. He opens the back where the film goes, TAKES the film out and PUTS it in his pocket. He hands the camera to the boy.

OFFICER
Don't think about it too much.

Alex takes the camera and stares at it, running his finger over the shutter.

The mysterious voice breaks in. We realize that we are watching a scene in the mysterious voice's past.

MYSTERIOUS VOICE (V.O.)
That Tuesday, little did I know that I would become a warrior.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED: (5)

OFFICER
Its not loaded.

The officer WALKS back to the jeep, WHISTLING HIS TUNE. We are still on a shot of Alex.

OFFICER (CONT'D)
(to rifleman)
Let's go.

Alex watches the truck DRIVE away. He looks at the camera, fiddles around with it for a few seconds.

The mysterious voice continues. It's Alex in the future.

MYSTERIOUS VOICE (V.O.)
...not just any warrior. A photojournalist fights for humanity. My weapon may not shoot bullets, but it shoots.

He picks it up, points it towards the jeep as it DRIVES off, and SNAPS a photo.

CUT TO BLACK.