Terrence Malick

Newsday *film critic Joseph Gelmis planned to write an interview piece to follow his review of Terrence Malick's* Badlands, *which was published in* Newsday *on March 25, 1974, but that never happened, and this material, recorded sometime in 1974, is presented here for the first time. (The film is also mentioned in Gelmis' overview of the 1973 New York Film Festival [September 13, 1973]: "The advance word from those who've seen it is that Malick's study of loneliness and suppressed rage in a South Dakota hamlet in the 1950s is powerful stuff.")*

Questions and comments from Gelmis, who was sometimes too far from the tape recorder to be audible, have been edited for clarity. Malick's contributions are, as much as possible, given technical limitations of the recording, verbatim. A female voice (D) can be heard throughout. This is Deborah Dobski, who married Gelmis in 1973, and between 1972 and 1979 was an assistant professor in the film department of Columbia University's Graduate School of the Arts. The recording suggests that the three are in a hotel room—probably Malick's, who at one point orders room service on the phone.

This archival material is important, not least because the number of published interviews with the intensely private Malick about Badlands *can be counted on one hand—and he hasn't spoken much publicly since then. (Malick, moreover, appears to have embargoed transcripts of his AFI seminars, some of which detail the production of* Badlands.*)*

Friendly, voluble, polite, laughing throughout, clearly at ease in Gelmis and Dobski's company, Malick sheds light on many things in this 15,000-word transcript, which may be the most forthcoming interview we will ever get from him. He talks about the tensions that creative freedoms offer, the production intricacies of Badlands, *being part of a new wave of Hollywood filmmakers, his discomfort at talking about his own films, his time at the American Film Institute, and his admiration for Elia Kazan's* America America *and Walker Percy's novel* The Moviegoer.

We're lucky to have this valuable material. Gelmis (on contract to Newsday *when he conducted this conversation)*

retained very few of his interview recordings from this period, generally re-using his tapes after pulling what he needed from them.

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No, no—leave the tape recorder on. Just don't get me in trouble with the unions, that's all.

Just tell me which parts I can use. I don't want to screw you up.

The only thing that I'm reluctant to talk about is the Caril Ann Fugate and Charlie Starkweather [issue], the case on which this [film] is loosely based, it is alleged by some.

What's the problem there?

Well, the problem is that Caril is still in prison. Her sentence has recently been commuted, which has made her now eligible for parole. But she's a sort of hot potato in Nebraska, where the governor supports her case but the attorney general doesn't and the pardons board is see-sawing—3-2, 2-3. And I got a release from her before I went out but I promised her that I myself wouldn't give support to any connection between these two things. She knew from the way I described it that people were going to make that connection.

Why do you need a release from her?

Because I was thinking of doing something even closer at that time to the real events, and this [film] really just has the loosest relationship to the real events. What suggested it to people has not been anything that happens in the movie, but the fact that it's a teenage killer and his girlfriend on the loose in '59 in the Midwest. It's been at that level. There are a few things that are the same. Starkweather was a garbage man, and Martin Sheen is too.

How can you escape the fact that there are some people who are going to make those connections?

They're going to, but all Caril asked me—and I don't think it really makes sense, but I'm just respecting what she asks…

She asked you not to promote or emphasize anything?

Yes. I actually do understand why she wanted that. And so I'm reluctant to talk about anything that… You see, it's as though something I might say might just somehow, in some odd way, become grist for the attorney general's mill, and I want to avoid that. And the other thing is the unions or the IRS or…

The SEC [Securities and Exchange Commission].

The SEC or any of these agencies that we ran afoul of. The IRS is a whole other story.

With an independent film you have a certain amount of control, but it sounds like you had a nightmare experience. Why was that? It sounds like the actors weren't the problem.

It's that everything is coming apart at the seams, Joe. And the psychology of your schedule on an independent production has to be to just hold out as many weeks as you can. Inevitably things are going to disintegrate. The Alamo will fall. But if you can hold out six weeks—great. If you can hold out eight weeks… I think we held out six weeks. And then just… murder…

How does Warner Bros. release this film without a bug [the IATSE union logo, which can be purchased once a film has finished production]?

They got Philadelphia lawyers. It's okay with the union. The language of their contracts prevents them from "acquiring"—that's the word that's constantly repeated—a non-union picture. But if they don't acquire it, if they merely lease it, then you can do it. This is just exactly what this arrangement with

Warner Bros. is. Another very sensitive area. This is just for your own knowledge. But roughly what happens is that… and this is just totally confidential. You give them a lease that's for all intents and purposes a sale, and they have just nearly every right. But taxwise, and sometimes not even then, it's okay. But it's very delicate and the studios are very… You've just got to be very ginger about it. It's a shame. It makes me furious that you have to dance for these unions. These IA people used to come and show up out on the set from time to time.

What were they doing?

They were going to close us down. I *knew* that I was supposed to bribe them, that they wanted a handout. I actually didn't know quite how much—whether a hundred dollars would be an insult or whether a thousand dollars would be just over-tipping. I was so angry at them that I didn't bribe them. Not out of a feeling that bribery is wrong, but I just didn't want them to have whatever it was. We had done this quietly and not announced it in the papers or anything that this thing was going off. The crew almost had sealed orders. They didn't know until the last moment exactly where they were going—just that it was outside California.

It sounds like the problem here was one of personality. I'm curious if you could describe to me what you think your personality is.

I think the problem wasn't actually one of personality. It was appearances. And a crew, if you're going to be the leader [of it], has to know that you just know your every step. And this was my first picture, really, and they had all worked on dozens of pictures—mostly [Roger] Corman pictures and porno flicks. Dozens of them.

Why did you end up with them? If you went out again, not knowing anything more than you do today, do you think there would be an alternative you might have tried? Do you think there's a better way to choose your crew? Is there a pool of underground talent?

Some of them are but very few independent films are done. You've got to realize that. You couldn't make a living as a crew member on an independent film. Most of these guys had other jobs they held down from time to time, like lived at the beach and just hung out there and when they needed some juice they get a job on a picture. But they were doing something else, because there are just not that many independent pictures done a year. You think there are a lot because of the way *Variety* uses that term, and the way people in the film business use that term. They talk about an "independent" picture, and by that they mean a picture that's done on a negative pick-up deal. But you take your script to the studio, and [they] say, "Rather than the studio directly financing this—we're a little cash short now—we will give you a guarantee that if you deliver a picture which faithfully…"—I believe the operative phrase is "reasonably reflects this script"—"then we'll pay you a million dollars when you bring it in." And you take their guarantee—they're a dependable institution. And you take it to the bank and discount it. You borrow money against it. The bank then requires you to get a completion guarantee, to make sure the funds will be available should you go overbudget, because they want to know that they'll get their money back, that this picture will be presented to the studio. And for that you give up usually five percent of your cash budget plus a number of points. But the worst thing you give up, and the place [where] you immediately begin to lose your independence, is that they have the right, should you go overbudget, to step in and fire the producer, the writer, the director—anybody—and finish out the film as they see fit. Now, as a matter of practice they don't step in and disrupt things that way. But on the other hand too, if you go overbudget at the end—a surprise on the last day, $1,200,000 rather than a million… You're held to a cash flow chart which is really unrealistic against you in the first couple of weeks. If you go over that weekly schedule, you get yourself in trouble. But right there you've begun to lose your independence. If the film goes overbudget you've lost your independence. But the real place you lose it is when you come back and turn the picture in to the studio, because then they can—I don't care who you are—they can re-cut the picture,

and they can re-cut it any way they like. And it's not really an independent picture at all.

Was your film significantly cut or re-cut by the studio?

No, it wasn't cut at all. They were told, as I went to show it to them, "We can argue about the financial terms, the arrangement, but one thing to know going in is that you just won't touch a frame of it." That's absolutely forbidden. For censorship, *I* can make the change to satisfy the censor in Italy, or somewhere, but you can't. It's just the way it is. That was important not for the myth of final cut, or not as I should say a point of artistic privilege, but just because you know when you've worked a year and a half or two years on something, all you have to speak for those two years is your picture. It's like the relationship of any sort of laborer to the fruit of his labor. It's not something mysterious and artistic and highfalutin. It's just that. So that's why I went the way I did, and why I never thought of approaching a studio until the picture was all finished. And I had to approach a studio to get it distributed. But then you see the power is with the picture. For all these nightmares you've gone through, what you've suffered in terms of production value and working at your budget in terms of the look of it because you couldn't shoot as you liked or with the right people, that's where the real pleasure of the thing comes, because you have the power of the copyright, which is the only realistic power in a movie situation. It's the first thing they pry out of you as a writer. And once they have that, once you make your assignment, they have it and they control the director through that, and they control the producer. That's as it should be. That's economic self-interest. I don't think that Hollywood is a place that acts out of ignorance. It's a place that acts out of economic self-interest, and you can't expect anything else.

Do you see yourself as always writing your own screenplays?

Not necessarily, but I've just had a lot of ideas for pictures. I have ideas about four pictures from now, if I can get that far.

Hitchcock would bring Ernest Lehman and others to work with him on any ideas he had. Do you think that would somehow breach your integrity?

Not my integrity. In other words, I don't think a director has to be a writer. It doesn't make him any less a director that he didn't write his screenplay or any more a director that he did. Writing the screenplay really keeps the heat on you because it's not like you're sentenced to anything. You're not sentenced to what this bastard screenwriter did, that this is the only thing the studio will finance [and] they've asked you to come and save it. You aren't the slave of some decision that's been made before. And you really want to make yourself that too, I think, when you're out on a set. You want to be the slave of something because there's just this overwhelming anxiety. Sometimes it's not anxiety, it's a thrill that you get from the feeling that just anything goes. I'm doing this scene, but I *could* be doing something that's fifty times better—I just don't know what it is or how to get it. It's like the anxiety that comes from total freedom. That kind of freedom can make you very nervous because it of course always throws you up against your limitations. You have a sense of terrible freedom. You could be doing anything, and look at what you're doing. It's so pathetic. And so every day you get a lesson in humility. It's not that the lesson in humility is bad, but the daily dose is just discouraging. How did we get to here [in this conversation]?

I have so many questions but I'd rather just let you talk. It's such a pleasure. There are things I realize I want to ask you as we go.

Sure. I feel evangelical about independent production, by the way. And even feel like sometimes before I'm old and sitting under the apple tree I'd like to actually write this down because the knowledge isn't collected anywhere. Some stuff I'd heard from a guy who did oil deals and then sort of a little bit tag-end of an article in *American Cinematographer*. You know, there are no standard contracts of any kind that a lawyer can just pull out of his file and plug in the right names, the way you can with most [documents]. It's difficult for the lawyers too

because there are no precedents. Really the only precedent for an independent picture is a Broadway play. That's just how things work financially. You work on a limited partnership format and investors recoup and split 50/50 with the creative side. Split profits. But it's not a very good precedent. Any place you pick, for instance the level of completion guarantee—there's no completion guarantee on an independent picture. You can't afford one. Or, it's not that you can't afford one, [it's that] a completion guarantor would not touch you with a ten-foot pole because your budget is just optimistically low. He knows that you can't possibly do it for that budget, which is why they're always running over, which is why investors don't invest.

D: *Did you run over?*

We went over [by] $35,000…

D: *And your original budget was $300,000?*

…or $40,000. Yes, that's another thing. If you're going to say anything about that in print, if you could say "under half a million dollars" or "under a million dollars."

They don't want a precise figure to make it sound like too low a budget for a film.

Yeah, because if it takes a dive it could embarrass Warner Bros., and also the lawyer might have said something in negotiations that suggested it had a higher budget, which would embarrass him.

The film looks like it cost a lot more than actually went into it, just like American Graffiti *looks like it cost a lot more.*

Right. But it [still] can't throw sand in the big boy's face.

I'm curious as to what you think you bring to being a filmmaker, the quality of the credentials.

I know what you're asking, in a way. It was certainly not my academic credentials. In other words, I thought, when I went out there, that I could slide these [university diplomas] on the table and everyone would go, [*intake of breath*] "Give the man a job!" But they were totally ignored. It just wasn't a help. It was something that I learned to cover up and not mention. There were other reasons too—I felt like a total failure. I *was* a total failure as an academic.

Were you fired?

No, I wasn't fired, I resigned. And it wasn't at the level of career options that I was a failure. I just wasn't a good teacher. I wasn't a philosophy teacher and I certainly wasn't a philosopher. I felt I was doing my students a disservice, which is a worse failure than being a career failure.

Why didn't you make a living as a writer or a critic, as opposed to a filmmaker?

I don't know why I got into that. I think when you're an academic, everything in the outside world seems equally impossible as a life. You can't imagine yourself doing anything except this thing you were groomed for. And so I guess I really thought, "Well, I'll just do what I really like to do, and I'm not going to change." If it's impossible, then all these other things are probably impossible too to make a living in. You see, I'd also worked as a journalist, and [had] not been a very good journalist, and so I was scared of doing anything else. So this was a rash act.

Was this between teaching philosophy and filmmaking?

No, that was in the summers when I was on vacation in graduate school. For instance, I worked for *Newsweek* in London. The summer after my first year in graduate school I worked for *Life*, then while I was supposed to be working at my second year in graduate school out of residence I was actually working for *The New Yorker.*

Was your father somebody? I don't mean to be facetious.

No. My father works for Phillips Petroleum Company.

I ask because Time *magazine seems to hire people who are the children of writers or something.*

No. They were sort of recruiting Rhodes Scholars at that point. Somebody had come to London and given a speech. Then you applied. And they really got burned! [*laughs*] Most people just ripped them off for a summer's wages.

What about the next step? You came out of MIT and you went to AFI?

Right. And I was there for two years.

[*There is a two-minute gap in the conversation.*]

I was fortunate to have a good agent, who got me work as a scriptwriter. While I was at the AFI I supported myself, and my wife who was going through law school at the time, as a scriptwriter. Totally.

Was that easy?

Yeah, it was easy because this agent was really doing it for me. At first I thought I was just knocking 'em dead with my material. They hadn't seen the likes of me! [*laughs*] Then I found out they just weren't really reading [what I was writing]. I quickly got a reputation as a sort of re-write man. I would do dialogue polishes, so I would usually work only a very short time on the pictures. But I wrote one original script which was produced finally. It was a disaster, and never released. Then I worked on another picture. [I] re-wrote it. On and on. Two days' work doing a polish on *Drive, He Said*. I worked six weeks on the predecessor to *Dirty Harry*, when Irv Kershner was working on it. That's how I got to know him. I just really bounced around. It was insane. *Dirty Harry*—I should say I worked four weeks on. [For] two weeks I hadn't known that

I had been fired and was just kind of working along, assuming that I was still on this thing. [*laughs*] But I didn't really learn much about screenwriting from them. You can fool yourself as a screenwriter when you learn that form: "EXTERIOR. LAWN. DAY." You think, "Well, what I'm writing is a script. There just can be no doubt about it, with how it lays out on the page." And yet you weren't really. That thought didn't hit me until I was actually working on *Badlands*.

What qualities do you think it takes to be a successful director, someone who gets to make films his way?

Well, I think that's very hard. That always depends on the terms of the financing and what kind of financing you get. And usually that depends on the success of your past pictures, usually your most recent pictures. That's how you get control. You don't get control from being a salty personality, like Raoul Walsh or something like that. Raoul Walsh lost control of his pictures [when] he lost control of his financing.

Automatically become your own producer?

I think that's the best way: to be your producer. That is just the best way to do it. But that gets you into trouble too, being your own producer, because people direct feelings towards you as a producer you don't then want them to have towards you as a director. And that was *the* real reason for my bad experience with the crew on *Badlands*. There are people in between that usually maintain a fiction about this—an associate producer or an AD [assistant director] on the set. He should be the person that everybody hates. They should love the director. But I had trouble with my AD, and he was always saying, "Ah! It's five thirty. Let's go in," and say it in front of the crew, and then I'd have to say, "No, let's work another three hours." And the crew would hear that, so they knew that I was the person who was making their lives miserable, and this fiction fell down. It's not just that it was a fiction for me—it's a fiction for everybody. That's what an AD does, is maintain that fiction.

If you were shooting in an urban situation, would you be in a better position in terms of the labor pool?

Sure. I think the real secret though is to do something I didn't do, which is to work with a small crew. You work at the beginning and do your interiors. That's what takes a large crew. Do your interiors, and also any big moves that you have, any big dolly or crane moves or something like that, where there's going to be a lot of lighting or where you've got to push a dolly around and build tracks. If you can get that out of the way then you can shoot with a crew of four. We shot at least the last five weeks [of the film], the last month certainly, with a crew of four, and we got more set-ups per day than we did with a full crew. Now, there are things we couldn't do then. We couldn't have moved the camera around.

Were you shooting with only one camera?

Yes. Sometimes when it was like a stunt, we would shoot with two. And I tried that once and the scene didn't work, because it limits your lighting when you're shooting with two cameras, which [set-up] you're going to light for which camera. And I think you have to do it in a particularly intimate scene or particularly violent scene where an actor just has one shot in him, or you have an actor that often does just get it best on the first take, or does his best work on the first take. Some actors are famous for that. Bobby Duvall, for instance.

Is there now a collection of young actors and directors who all know each other?

No. Lucas and Coppola are maybe aware of each other and work together, but most of these people don't know one another. I've never met George Lucas.

Spielglass? Is that his name?

No, I don't know him either. Spielberg.

D: Who's that?

He's the guy who did…

D: *Duel*?

Yeah, Duel *and* The Sugarland Express*. I thought you were all aware of each other somehow because you were all at film school, AFI, Roger Corman—a string of people who are in some way in contact with each other.*

No. I met Marty Scorsese a couple of times, but just [to say] "hello."

There's the guy from Harvard, Michael Crichton.

I know Michael. His brother was boom man on the picture.

There's a group of film-loving directors who seem to be of a certain age.

I don't feel, and never have felt, part of that. Most of those people I've never met. I've not wanted to not meet them.

Do you have any sense as to what kind of system is going to replace what is leading us now, all the studio conglomerates?

I don't think that's really going to go [away] for a long time. It seems that [Hollywood is] making a different kind of picture than they were before and they're making less pictures too, because they sold off their collateral and can't get as much credit as they used to be able to get. I'd say even the people, the studio people, are more enlightened now than they were [and] you have a better chance of… It's not a matter now totally of getting something past them. They can acquire a film because it is different and threatening, but they feel out of largesse, and often out of good motives, that they like to have one…

D: *Weird film.*

…yeah—weird film in their portfolio, one weird stock. And besides, you produce this picture for a fraction of what it

would cost them. They haven't had interest running on their money in the meantime and they get a free look at it. They even get a free look at scripts that [would] cost them $75,000. Here they have it, and they can even pay you a fair amount of money, but it's not that much for them. They get investment tax credit if it doesn't work out.

It's almost all negative pick-up deals these days.

But that doesn't change the pictures though. Negative pick-up deals are just like studio pictures—they just have a different kind of financing. All you've done with a negative pick-up deal is avoid the studio seniority system and studio overhead charges.

If the distributors aren't around, what are the alternatives?

There's no alternative, I think, to them distributing your picture.

You could go make films for television.

Right. If you can put up with it. But I don't think that you ever will really be able to avoid [distributors]. I just don't think it's moving anywhere new and unprecedented. There's that feeling—it seems cyclical—with the *Easy Rider* wave and the sudden spate of pictures by young directors that came out then.

Apparently there are films that are unreleased and will be sold to television.

Right, well that happened on about five or six pictures. They really got stung.

Why do you think that was?

In some cases the pictures that lost money were really good pictures. There was a picture by Bill Norton, for instance, *Cisco Pike*, that I really enjoyed, but that was regarded as

a scandal. Some of them were bad pictures, there's no doubt about it. And I think it's because the studios thought that the only real credential you needed was youth. If you're a youth and you're kind of hanging around and they knew you, that was enough. But [there was] no sense that you needed absolute preparation as a director to do this. They got burned by the participants on *Easy Rider.*

What are your strengths as a director? What special quality or talent?

I really don't know how to answer that question. Not because it's not a legitimate question.

What makes you want to be a director?

I think it's a hard question though. It's just something I want to be by second nature.

There are lots of experiences to be had as a film director.

If you think you're going to enjoy the experience, and the experience is the whole thing, then you'll be miserable, I think, because the experience is very unpleasant. You shouldn't have to be dealing with people in that way. And it's unpleasant, at least [if you do it] the independent way. It makes a nightmare of your life. There are marshals showing up at your door with subpoenas at six thirty in the morning and successions of threatening notices from the Internal Revenue Service. It's hard to lead a civilized life. But the reward is in the picture itself, and it's something you might not feel for years and years. That's what you've got to remember as you go through it, because if you're going through it for the thrill you get from day to day, telling an actor to move over to another mark and say a line a certain way, the way it's often portrayed in pictures—directors really having a good time, getting out there and wailing—then I don't think it's true. It's certainly not true of the directors I've seen working, even though they have said differently to others. They're just always nervous and manic and not having a good time.

How much of the technical aspects are you familiar with? Jerry Lewis claims he knows everything there is to know about cinema.

I don't believe that about him.

How much do you know?

A different amount in different areas. You have your strengths and weaknesses. This picture *Badlands* was, for me, mainly on-the-job training. There were things I didn't know at the end that I should have known at the beginning, and that I'll know next time.

Knowing isn't the problem. It's remembering when you need to remember something. Mistakes are easy to repeat.

A little piece of advice came back to me that's meaningful, at the end of the picture. I remember somebody had told me once that when you get on the set, don't think of a room as a box. Think of it as a rectangle. Or you can finally get to the point where you think of it as a slice of a pie. And stage it as though it was just like that, and had walls that went out just like that, because then your camera angles will fall into line. But if you conceive of it as a box, then you'll tend to stage it in a way you can't quite capture on camera. You'll have to start breaking it up and shooting this person's single, that person's single. But you can't get them all interacting within the same shot. And so that sort of came back to me at the end, and I thought: I really should have thought of that a little more at the beginning.

When it comes to music, the stuff that works best—it's hard to explain why it was chosen?

I think that's true. And the music—it's not just that it had just any old effect, but it had the effect, for me, of making you very alert to the picture and making your senses sort of live. That's all you want from music—not that it be a pleasing accompaniment to the picture, but that it take the [latent] values that are in the scene [and that] without music wouldn't come out [otherwise].

Somehow this music gives you, as a listener, sort of alertness to the picture you wouldn't otherwise have, because you were kind of dead when you came in, or the picture's been boring you.

When you write a screenplay, do you have any starting point in your own mind as to how it's going to be structured?

Well, I haven't really done it enough. I can tell you more [about] what I've observed than what I've done myself, which has been haphazard. There hasn't been a pattern to it. I think that most people who work like that have a certain number of scenes in mind and a rough idea of the story, and try to find a story that will intersect those scenes. Often it can just be great shots that they have in mind that they'd like to interact. I feel [that] Welles probably worked that way very often, and then it was just kind of tidying things up so it looked like that scene was just naturally… he came to that naturally. Along the road he was taking he thought of a brilliant way of staging it, or something like that. I think that probably was true in Welles' case. He's not a good example of that. There was a story and then he visualized this way of telling it—from what I've read about him.

Badlands *is almost torn from the headlines. Was it the characters that first attracted you?*

I thought of it first in terms of how to get the money to do it. I didn't really have any thoughts about it. But what I wanted to get, even before I thought about the story and so on, was a certain mood or tone, and that's what I thought about throughout, and that's what, as a matter of fact, I'm proud about in the picture. I'm not proud of the camerawork or any directorial… I don't know… panache. But just of the mood, and the sense of things.

Is that your strength? Creating mood?

It depends what you mean by "mood" because mood can be the mood of the '30s or something like that. It's hard to be specific about it, but it's like a sense of things, of how the world falls. What the hang of things is. I know what you're driving

at. Some sort of sense of how the world is ordered. I hesitate to say it that way because it just sounds pretentious and grand. But I don't really think it is.

What is your sense of the world as shown in this film?

[*hesitates*] I really feel more comfortable talking about somebody else's picture and what that brings across. But usually you get a certain estimation of the importance of… I thought from the picture, for instance, just from my picture, there would be a sense of just how little you can pin your hopes on, how little consolation you need to live your life, and how little evidence love takes, how much you can deceive yourself. But the problem with saying any of that is that it just comes out sounding like a theory, or it comes out sounding analytical. I don't know how to write it. I was never successful at this.

[*Tape two opens with Malick talking. It seems he is reflecting on the fact that* Badlands *makes some audiences laugh.*]

I thought is this laughter cynical? Is it patronizing? Just what's happening? Because I'd rather not have it. A lot of the narration is ironic, but not anything that would make you laugh. Maybe six or seven places—when she says that he was the most trigger-happy person she'd ever met, or that he faked his signature whenever he used it to keep people from forging important papers with his name. I thought maybe there'll be sort of a puddle of laughter, but when people would laugh at the banality—the seeming banality—of her narration, then I'd get quite upset because we're not all total originals, and imagine what you'd sound like at that age. Don't confuse this with *True Confessions*, because it's more like *Tom Sawyer.*

The whole film is expressed by her telling the story, so if you take that the wrong way, you miss the whole point of the film.

I think you do. And you've particularly got to trust the picture and trust that it's not an effete intellectual snob making the picture but somebody who doesn't feel superior to these people, who can't really distinguish between himself and these

people, which is the way I felt. I grew up in these parts and right through college lived in them. On the one hand I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, but on the other hand I didn't work two years to serve these two people up for the superior delectation of any audience.

How do you feel about those characters?

I love them. I really felt that one of them was evil, but he was evil in a way [like] most of the people I've known who are evil, who gave no tipoff to their character. It's really true—not just with the people I grew up with… I think you really find that in politics, where the best people can have the very worst politics, and you almost look for a secret rotten core to anybody with bad politics, but in fact they can be charming and fetching, [and] they would defend you to the death.

I heard about you from other people—maybe it was Lucas. "Be sure to see Terry Malick's film." And then I went out to the AFI, where somebody made a feature film which apparently got shelved…

D: *Jeremy Kagan?*

No. Stanton Kaye. I was a supporter of Stanton all the way.

They thought you were fantastic out there at the AFI.

Well, I had a couple of enemies there because there came a time when they had their financing cut back by Nancy Hanks, and they cut a lot of different programs, and one of them was the historical research program, or something like that. Everybody got up in arms and there was a sort of attempt to close down the Institute, which I thought was just sort of crazy public relations. The place's existence was so tenuous in the first place. And so I developed some sort of fierce enemies out of that. When you say the AFI, I had both friends and real enemies there, people on the other side of this whole dispute.

Where did you really learn to make films? Was it through shorts or watching films?

I'm not really sure. Have you ever read that Walker Percy novel *The Moviegoer*? You should just get it. It is marvelous.

Will it change my life?

It *will* change your life. It will just define a whole month for you. It is fantastic. I was sort of an avid moviegoer, like the character in this book, but I had no idea who Hitchcock was, or Fellini or Antonioni. I never looked at the credits and didn't know what a producer was or a director, anything like that. I was just trying to make a life for myself as a teacher.

Did you know stars?

Yes, I more or less knew stars. Like anybody else I wasn't that sheltered. I would just go two or three times a week. I wasn't critically interested in the picture, just interested in getting my two dollars' worth out of it—which wasn't hard. I liked nearly everything I saw.

You were uncritical?

Yes, just totally uncritical about it. I would go and just sit in the front row. The studio's ideal of an American audience member. But then I went out to the AFI and learned everything that I learned about pictures. Let's see… I taught until the fall of 1969, and it was in the fall of '69 that I went out there. I couldn't have gotten in now because I didn't have any movie experience. The only reason I feel I got in is that no one knew about the place and so they didn't have many applicants. It was the first year. They were just starting up. And so I got in. They just had fifteen people then. They now have fifty in each class. They now have a cut too, so that if you don't show devotion you can be dropped, and they didn't have that then.

D: *Were there people who didn't show devotion?*

There were people who didn't show devotion, and often it was just periodic. Sometimes they were buried in something else.

Did the place work? It worked for you?

It did. It was a very disorganized place because it was not very curricular. There would be a lecturer—somebody would come up and lecture on cinematography, and then he'd be called off on a job so the course would stop about a third of the way through. Somebody else would come up and talk about lenses and then never follow up on it. It all came in a disorganized way.

These were people who were working in the field?

Yes, exactly. You learn[ed] things out of order. I remember the first course I took that I remember was in sensitometry.

What is that?

It has to do with processing and the gamma of the film, its contrast curve and where your exposure puts you in terms of contrast. So I was just frantically taking all this down. I hadn't learned what the emulsion looked like. I was just over my head. But it was nice. [It was] sink or swim, which takes the heat off of learning it all, and you kind of pick it up the way a child does. You hear words you don't know, and gradually you learn to imitate people. And also you learn almost the way a manual laborer would. The first thing I learned was how to run these different machines—a Moviola. Most people out there knew how to do these things, so I felt I was behind the class, although there were a couple of other people that were…

So far, who else out of the AFI has made a feature film that has been seen?

Stanton made a feature there.

What was that called?

In Pursuit of Treasure.

And did it ever open any place?

It never opened any place, no.

D: *Was it any good?*

I never saw it. I just like Stanton a lot.

But no other student…

There was another student who did it, a fellow named Ken Laurence. His name was Ken Luber. He changed it, I'm not sure why. He made a very good film called *Howzer* that showed at the Whitney. A very good feature. It's about a couple of kids who run away from home. A girl, about thirteen or fourteen.

It didn't get commercial distribution. How do you explain that? It's been four or five years now that the AFI has been turning out graduates.

It's too soon.

Is the system only as good as the people you send through it?

I think that's inevitably true. There were good people I thought going through, and a fellow, for instance, named Tom Rickman, who I just know will be a terrific director if he ever gets a feature together. The place [AFI] hasn't had time to prove itself yet. You just can't jump right into features coming right out of school unless you're lucky. And it's just hard to get a feature on. The traditional route no one wants to take these days, which is to go with Corman and throw away your first couple of pictures, and…

And have a portfolio.

Right. I think I was like most of the other people there in that I didn't want to do that.

At what point did you really know you were a director?

I never really knew that. I can remember the day—it was an epiphany when I was sitting out on the set and I saw they had the Cinemobile over here and the script clerk and the Mitchell camera and all these things. I had the script in front of me, and I can just remember it: "Wait a minute… This doesn't mean that you're making a movie. You can have all this stuff and turn out something that people will go see, and go, 'I don't know what we saw, but it wasn't a movie.'" So when I finally did it and people would say, "I thought your movie was nice," I'd always ignore the adjective and just really take pleasure in that solid noun: "movie." It's a movie, and it's legitimate and people seeing it have an experience that's not unlike the experience of seeing any other picture.

So you're part of a great tradition.

Yeah. And that was nice, because that thought that day on the set—it was electrifying.

There must come a point of self-recognition, which is: I am this, or I am doing this.

Well, you feel like a total imposter, I think, at first, getting out there and saying "Action." And certainly everyone on the crew treated me like a total imposter. And when you have to maintain a lot of conviction, have absolute conviction, and show it, and you're not feeling it inside, then the worm can get in.

Is that when you do acting of a sort yourself?

No, each time the acting was something that happened because the actor fell through.

No, I mean when people are challenging you, then you do an acting job yourself.

Oh yes, totally. I can remember whole scenes that we shot knowing that they were rotten to the core. Two scenes that

happened—and it was just to save face in front of the crew. We went all night. It's ultimately futile, because they knew that the scene was rotten, and I was just making it worse by doing the coverage on this rotten scene.

Does anyone ever get to the point where they really know it cold?

I think you do finally get used to it. I think you can never escape the feeling that you're getting something for nothing in pictures, that there's a way in which the picture is bigger than you. That's not true when you're a writer, of any kind. You're no better than the sentences that you write. But somehow in movies you can draw on people's communal experience. You just need to suggest it. You don't even need to say it.

Have you thought about directing theater?

It's not really the drama or the actors that give me pleasure.

What does?

It's setting a mood. That's what gave me the most pleasure. I hesitate to talk about these things generally because I've just had this one very limited experience, and I don't know what's representative about it at all right now. But yes—it was setting the mood, and I thought, as I went out to make it, I want to avoid drama, because I don't want to just reach out of the screen and shake you by the lapels and carry on, in some sense of that word. But I wanted instead the effect of just this kind of strange breeze, just blowing on the back of your neck, this draft. You weren't quite sure where it was coming from. It's like somebody had opened a window somewhere. And to have this sort of unspecific feeling, the nature of adolescent feelings. And that's what really interested me in the whole story. Everything was the idea of doing a story about an adolescent girl, because I just feel enough like a romantic that I think that there are things that you know then that you forget later, and they don't strike you with the same force. It takes a good piece of writing or a good movie or some good piece of art to make it hit you—

these sort of simple truths that just sort of knocked you over the head when you were an adolescent. For instance, "all in the same boat," something like that. I think they are important truths, but when you say them, they come out sounding banal. And, you see, that's what I thought, by the way, was funny about her voiceover. Not that it was inappropriate, or the little jokes in it, but that here this girl's trying to express her innermost thoughts, and like everybody expressing their innermost thoughts, they just sound commonplace. I do think she has original feelings too, totally original feelings that are distinctive to her, and there's nothing clichéd about them. And I also think that the proportion of her banal feelings to her original feelings is about what that same proportion is in me, or in anybody else.

The banality of the speech in its simplicity and recognizability, in terms of a way of looking at the world in a way that is projected through fan magazines—what if in fact you can polish it until you make something that transcends the banality? I was looking at A Place in the Sun *the other night. I don't know how you feel about it.*

I love that picture.

That picture was the end of the Hollywood movie system, and did it perfectly, flawlessly. And yet you could also say it's banal. But then look at Peyton Place *three years later. That's* really *banal. The dialogue in your film—I almost had to laugh. Kit in* Badlands *is such a foolish braggadocio, and yet he does it so well. He's a James Dean stereotype of the archetype that James Dean was.*

Still, not quite. He thinks he's a sort of rebel without a cause. He thinks of himself that way, I think, and to a certain extent he convinces you of that. You think, well, he is this rebel without a cause, South Dakota's successor to James Dean. But, in fact, unlike Dean, he's quite far from being a rebel. He's a total supporter of the civic order.

It's the tradition of the existential anti-hero who is more interesting than his victims and is attractive on some level. It's a picaresque

kind of adventure. The audience becomes an accomplice because he is made sympathetic enough, even as he's slaughtering people.

I hope it gives you the feeling that it's not enough to be likeable. You've got to have worth. A person can be totally likeable and have no real worth at all, not be a good person. I feel myself that you're almost attracted to the absence of worth. Most people that I know, a lot of people that I really like and are fascinated by…

D: *…are terrible…*

Yes, and untrustworthy. I wouldn't want my children to grow up to be like them.

Heaven is less imaginatively portrayed than Hell. It's hard to imagine what will make you happy forever, whereas Hell has this fascination.

I don't think that's saying that you can wear a banal face, that there's some banality to evil, because that's a pretty banal thought itself. Often it's not banal—it's genuinely attractive, and it doesn't announce itself as evil, as you more or less wish it would.

How do you deal with this as a director, if James Dean was attractive to a lot of people, and if in fact this guy is going to play off of that?

But he just falls pathetically short. He's a garbage man, and he advances from garbage man to a stockyard attendant. I don't feel that about the girl. I feel very different about her. I've had people say to me—and also have seen critics, some liking her for this and some disliking her for this—that she didn't have feelings, that she's cold, and a dangerous person whose mind was just totally full of pop trash. I never felt that way about her at all, and I was surprised by that reaction to her.

Her adolescence is what attracted you?

Yes, and also her character too, her dutifulness. When he kills her father that's really the most complicated part of the movie, because that's where you've got to step through the looking-glass. This isn't a realistic movie. It's more like a fairy tale. It's more like *Treasure Island*. Nothing happens that's totally contradictory, but still you're giving the story the chance to go where it will.

The father kills her dog as punishment, so you know what a mean sonofabitch he is. I thought that might be used somewhat as an excuse for his killing.

That wasn't the purpose of the scene. I almost took it out because it would suggest that purpose. I wanted to show in that scene that death was a mystery to her and she didn't know how to distinguish between the death of a parent and the death of a dog, and even the death of a fish. It just remains something mysterious and fascinating to her, and like Kit she probably didn't have our modern conception of death, that it's just like this darkness in your head. You step onto the other side, you step onto some other terrain. You've got to look back at what you were like. I cut out a piece of voiceover that I had in there where she was coming upstairs and she looks outside at the kids, and she was going to say in there that she had always been interested in the idea of turning her heart off for a second to see what would happen. She's talking about Kit. He wondered how each of us would die and what hour of the day and whether old people forget they're close to death. She just ends on that tone.

What's important about a film is its mood or tone, where its heart lies, and if you've got a movie that's breathing, that has a heart, then you can make all kinds of mistakes and people will never notice, and even you won't notice it after a while. For instance, there's a scene between Martin and Sissy out at the airport, they're leaning against the car. The light was changing and I was only able to shoot it in two angles. I had these National Guardsmen that were going off after a day and could only be shown in proper military formation, so I could only steal shots of them milling around or doing something they didn't think they were doing. They didn't know they

were on camera. And I just considered it disastrous, and I thought, "This movie cannot survive the way this scene was shot." Single, single, single. A ping pong match. And then, when it was finally cut into the picture, and you had the kind of mood and momentum, it's like the day's mistakes were forgotten and the wave just swept on through. Sometimes it didn't, through scenes that I thought were marvelously laid out, but they weren't breathing, and nothing that I could do, in the cutting, would bring them back. Those scenes I cut out, or tried to cut out. If you're with the movie, you won't notice those. I really don't think you'll be bothered by them, because what you're interested in doing with a movie is not sitting back and admiring it, and seeing something perfectly executed, but really, I think, just being taken to the heart of things.

The film is magical. The music is one obvious effect you use.

The Orff, which is the principal music in the film—I had imagined that before I went out and played it to the actors and would play it for myself in the hotel room at night sometimes, just to remind me. It's done on instruments that Orff himself designed. They're like xylophones and alto xylophones, a type of glockenspiel, but they're primitive, all done with different woods. None of them are done with metal or have vibrators or anything like that. They're just all very simple and primitive. They don't have octaves. They aren't in an eight-tone scale, but in more ancient modes—the Phrygian and the Dorian and five-tone. That particular thing we're talking about is a pentatonic, I think. And there are some that are even simpler, that just have five notes to the scale.

It was Irv Kershner, by the way, who put me onto this, the director, a person I really admire. He put me onto this music, and had been thinking about a picture that he was going to direct that had fallen through called *Setting Free the Bears*. This is while I was already working on the picture, so I called up Kershner and asked him if I could use it. Getting it was a whole other problem. But it had, for some reason, because of its simplicity, just a sort of tone of innocence that I didn't really hear in any other music. Some of it is angelic—[but] it's not quite angelic, because I thought that sacred music would put you off there. There's the simple stuff—xylophones,

glockenspiels—*dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum.* It's got echo, but I thought it would just give a nice resonance to the sacred music, to all these profane things we're seeing—the burning down of the house, [and] make it seem clean and light but powerful. So that was where the Orff came from.

Then the Satie comes in when he's releasing the balloon—that's where it first comes in—and then it comes in when she walks out on the lawn of the rich man's house and says, "I thought what a good place the world was, full of things for people to look into and enjoy." On a technical level, I went around and looked for one good thing for her to see that would give you the sense that the world is a good place. So I finally got this driveway. When it was shot the footage was shaky and we couldn't go back and re-shoot it. If you see it on the screen, it bounces around, so it doesn't have that sense of mystery that I wanted it to have—that shot more than any. I shot one of my cats. I have a cat that's bushy and serious looking. I shot him from five different angles—in the ivy, through these trees. It didn't work. I shot a lawn dwarf too. It was being covered by a sprinkler in the shade. That didn't work.

D: *What were some of the surprises along the way, things that didn't turn out as you had thought they would?*

Well, that's a good question because there's a scene—I'm sure it's idiosyncratic, nobody else notices—but it's really my favorite scene in the picture. She's saying on voiceover after looking at all these stereopticon slides, and says at the end of all this, [*puts on Texan accent*] "Sometimes I wished I could fall asleep and be taken off to some magical land, but this never happened." As though you had to know that too. And then, at the same time, Martin, who plays this killer, he's been fishing with this primitive net he's devised for himself. He pulls out his gun and starts to go for the fish, just like this is what you went for whenever things got a little complicated. Or he solved it in a way, or made things simple. That was the only place where my heart went out to him in the whole picture, when he's trying to shoot the fish. I feel like some people are just born to this, to a bad life.

D: *Do you think actors are stupid?*

No. Some of them are, I think, just like some directors, but most of the actors I've met are really smart. Martin was totally smart and on the ball, and totally in the groove of that character. There were things he came up with that were just so characteristic of Kit that I hadn't asked him that were totally improvised. When he shoots Cato, and then Cato's stumbling towards the house and Martin runs over and opens the door for him—that was something that Martin came up with. I was delighted with his performance.

One of the reasons why Kubrick thinks Lolita *failed was that he couldn't show a girl young enough looking, and he couldn't show any eroticism. The girl in* Badlands *says she's fifteen, but she looks twelve or thirteen.*

I thought she would look too old. I was worried because she was actually 21 or 22 when she was shooting the picture.

She has a really scrawny, undernourished look.

Sort of knock-kneed and didn't have her limbs quite in place. I worried that she looked too old, and in closeup she was in danger of looking too old. Often I just heard this old trick, I don't know exactly [if] it's true or not, but often I would shoot closeups on her with a wide-angle lens. I didn't want to use diffusion, ever. You'd see it, and you would then have to shoot Martin's closeups with diffusion. There was a whole other reason why I didn't want to use diffusion. It's not flattering to anybody to shoot a closeup [with a wide-angle lens]. The ears look tiny. But it kept you from seeing the lines in her eyes. I hoped that she looks fifteen.

What prepared you emotionally to make this movie?

I wasn't prepared for it emotionally. It was a nightmarish experience.

I mean without getting too…

…psychological. I think growing up in that part of the country. And I also feel that it's usually just very falsely portrayed in pictures, that the people are not really like they are made to seem. Whenever you have a really violent character in a Hollywood movie, just make him a southerner and it's just an excuse for any kind of violence. There are actors who make it a stock in trade, like Dub Taylor and Clif[ton] James.

Did you set out absolutely to make this particular film as opposed to another film?

I actually had another script. It wasn't a script—it was an idea, which is what I'm going to do next. I actually wanted to do that more but it was too expensive, and I thought this picture had the advantage of having just two characters, so it would be manageable. That turned out to be a terrible mistake. A two-character picture is really tough for reasons that are obvious and didn't occur to me until I got into the editing. You have nothing to cut away to, and no other third character. You can't show Warren Oates out working and cursing his life. It just made it very difficult. It's also difficult because the actors have to pace themselves. I was worried about Martin with this because he'd done mostly character parts. Those are sort of dash men. Martin in this [film] was having to run a long-distance race, and he'd usually done these sprints. And so I was worried but it turned out to be totally unfounded, that worry with him. With two characters you also have to pace them. You can't see anything at the beginning that you can't top towards the end or inevitably you'll get bored with them. They will start seeming repetitious. I'm not saying I avoided all of this, but this is something I [thought about].

How did you come to cast the two of them?

I met Sissy on an interview. An agent had called up and suggested that I see her. Not her, actually, the person she'd come with. I found out she was from Quitman, Texas, and I knew just exactly her story. We had just a very warm conversation. I just really hit it off with her right away. I just thought she was what I'd been looking for, because most of

the girls who'd come in were just as cute as can be. And she didn't have that. She's a different person than [the person] she portrays in the movie. She's very ebullient and outgoing. So that's how I found her.

Then I started to bog down with the casting because I would get into some bizarre relationship with every actor that I talked to and leave him with the impression that he had the part, and sort of reassuring him. It got to be less like casting than transactional analysis. I don't know what it is. But certainly I was inept. I felt I didn't handle it professionally. I got this lady that cast commercials, who therefore knew a lot of people, to read the script and then call in the people she thought were right and videotape them. They came in and sat down and gave a reading. If they were physically wrong I didn't have to worry about it. It was just for this camera and this lady who put them at ease. And I could sit there and if some guy was obviously wrong just fast-forward through him and get onto the next actor. I found Martin that way. Dianne [Crittenden] was casting this in a motel called The Regency in Los Angeles and had people lined up every ten or fifteen minutes. The person who was supposed to come at that particular time wasn't there, so she went over to call her husband and she just noticed Martin Sheen walking down the street. She hadn't run into him before. He was over in that area on other business. And [she] just said, "Would you like to come in and do a reading?" And he yelled back to her, "What's it for?" And she said, "Well, it's for an independent film." "I don't want to hear any more. No!" She said, "C'mon, c'mon. We can talk too." So he sat down and just gave a fabulous reading. I was knocked out by it.

I feel comfortable with [actors] and I like them. I don't think of them as just puppets to execute ideas that I have, or something like that. I really just do get along with them very well. While I had a terrible relationship with my crew, I never had a bad experience with an actor.

Do you subscribe to any particular school of filmmaking or aesthetics?

No. I really don't know anything about the schools and very little about past directors, because while I was an avid moviegoer I was never a fan. I was never really a buff. I've never read André Bazin.

What about influences? Can you trace them?

It's hard to. I think that you can be influenced by a lot of things besides other films.

Are you interested in developing your awareness of such things?

I haven't really thought about things like that. My time is usually spent [on questions like]: how am I going to get the next one on? Who will invest this money? Or *was*, at least, spent with this when I started to get involved. It was always: how do I keep the IRS away from my door? Ninety-nine percent of my time on this picture was spent as a producer, not as a director. It's two or three years, and it makes you more vulnerable to your last picture. It's a scary thing because you can't be already into the next picture by the time the previous one bombs, so I think it tends to cause you a lot of anxiety.

Do you have to be a bit of a hustler to survive in the world of independent cinema?

No.

Do you have to watch out in case someone wants to grab a piece of the action?

No. You don't have that problem on an independent film because the power relationships are very well defined. There is nobody who has any creative power over you. You can fail to do a good job, but—and this is often a pretext—you can always imagine it's because you didn't have the money to do it. That really put me at ease, rather than make me nervous about making this picture. It really put me at ease that I didn't have enough money to really do it, because if it worked out terribly, I felt I could always plead money—to myself. It wouldn't really be any judgment on me. This is when I was playing this game.

What kind of people did you raise the money from?

In-laws. A friend of mine—a Boston lawyer. An L.A. former Xerox executive. A doctor in Fort Lauderdale. In-laws and relatives—they were not principal investors. My mother-in-law put up $13,000. My father somehow got together $7,000. It's the one thing that acts as a restraint on you. I wish I hadn't had the money of friends and parents on this because I was very concerned that it work out for them financially, and I felt bad when we went overbudget. And I didn't approach them again. That's one thing I told them at the beginning, and you really have to tell an independent investor that you won't be back for more, because when you do come back you're really blackmailing them. You're saying, "If you don't give me more then the picture won't be done and the bulk of your investment will be lost." And if they're a sophisticated investor they say, "I don't want to see you again. You make it and don't tell me about your problems."

How did you sell Badlands*? On the script?*

No, I thought it was the script. I thought the script would sell it. And I had saved up everything I had made as a screenwriter over these two years and I used that to finance the pre-production of the picture. I'd saved about $25,000. I used that to scout locations and to do the casting, and roughly develop a whole sales kit. Even the script, then, I tried to make it appear a little different from what it was without misrepresenting it. For instance, I cut out eighty percent of the narration just so I didn't get that simple reaction from somebody reading the script who would say, just because of the way it laid out on the page, "As I understand it, you're supposed to show a story, not tell it." So I prepared this whole sales kit, and nobody ever looked at it. I think they invested, and I think they tend to invest, on things like the confidence that you show and whether you've painted yourself into a corner with this picture. They want to know that if the movie goes down, you'll go down with it, that it will be like a stone around your neck. Because the thing they're worried about is that you'll lose interest in it. And so you take no salary and you put your points up against

completion to show that if it goes overbudget, you'll be the first person hurt.

Did you lose any of your points?

I lost some of them. But most of the overbudget money I made by writing a script. Most of that $40,000 overage. I just sort of dropped out of the editing and stopped editing and sat down and wrote this thing and sold it, courtesy of my agent.

Did Pressman invest because it was clear that other people were interested too?

No. Ed Pressman I approached last, when I already had my $150,000, and I was just running out of steam. I was getting tired of talking to people and having them promise something then have it fall through. It really is frustrating, because you get people who tell you they will give you $20,000 and promise it up and down. Everything's fine—then it falls through.

How long had it taken you to raise that $150,000?

It had taken about eight months. Seven, eight months—something like that. Ed Pressman said yes. I don't think he had the whole three [hundred thousand dollars], and what attracted him to this situation was that he didn't have to put up all the money, and yet I was also offering the "presentation" credit, an executive producing credit. And so had the picture worked out well financially, it would have reflected well on his company at half the price that it should have cost to reflect well on his company. He came through and raised it.

If you did the picture today, would you raise the money again from Ed Pressman or AIP [American International Pictures], something like that?

If I were doing it independently I would probably approach Ed again, for sure.

For someone coming out of AFI having made a couple of shorts, and has a decent script, where would they go for $300,000 to make a film?

To make a pitch? It's really hard to know. That's the hardest thing—to find people who have money who are even interested in such a proposition.

You have to get the initial seed money from some place.

The thing is you have to be free to do that. You can't be working as you do that. You need seed money to have that time off to raise money. It's hard to do while you're holding down another job.

This new script you have—is Warner Bros. going to make it?

No. I haven't written a script for it yet. It's sort of a vague idea for a story. It's a western. I'm going to take a vacation just after *Badlands* is released, and then when I come back I'm going to sit down and write it and then approach investors or a studio about it. But whether I work with a studio or whether I work independently again depends entirely on the terms of the financing. I don't care whose money it is.

Do you have any specific ambitions on how you want to be working over the next few years?

No. It depends totally on just what the hell the contract reads. That's a little naïve because those contracts often aren't respected. There are terrible disadvantages to going with studio money. There are terrible disadvantages to working with independent money, once you have it. You can't really pity yourself for having it because there are people who would die to have the same opportunity, and so you haven't really had it rough at all. Having it rough would be sitting around with no money at all to make a picture, like a lot of people I knew at the AFI who I felt were just enormously talented, and for one reason or another they haven't had that chance.

What was your big break?

The hardest part is the first. Once you go in over the top, then investors sort of figure, unconsciously—you can see it happening—they figure somebody else has sniffed out this deal. They've checked it out. "It's okay. I'm not a fool, the fool who stepped in first."

Did a friend or close relative put up the initial money?

No, it wasn't that. It was actually I put up the first $25,000, and then this friend promised another $35,000, so we were off and running. And then it was the discovery too that there was a minimum basic cost for a feature, because you had to pay for lab and equipment costs, and sound costs. However cheaply you produced it, shooting with a crew of two over three days, you had to pay for the mix, raw stock for the transfers, you had to pay for processing, titles, opticals. You had to pay for rental on your Mitchell, your lights, your dolly. No way of getting around that. I found out that you can, with a little initiative, get what are called deferments from the labs, or as they are called "picture deals." They're hard to get. The first thing that happens when you go in and ask, you get a tour of the lab and they show you all the films that have never been completed, and they say, "We don't make picture deals any more, and our parent corporation has forbidden us." But if you finally lean on them enough, they tend to come through. If you can show that you will complete your film, whatever the cost—because, for instance, at the lab they're running through a certain amount of footage every day, and it doesn't hurt them to tack your dailies onto the end of that and send it through. Beyond that psychology there is a certain amount of generosity on their part. The fellow who ran this lab that I went through had taught this course on sensitometry that I told you about. And he was also a very generous man who did this against the advice of the corporation people that surrounded him. He not only paid for the processing, this tacking the dailies on and running them through with the rest, which didn't really cost them much of anything, but he even went to the point of paying for the raw stock on which the dailies were printed, so that he was

actually having to lay out cash—$7,000 in cash. He did that. The same thing happened with Cinemobile, an outfit that has a bad reputation with some but just behaved in a terrific way.

It doesn't really help you to have a piece of film under your arm, I found. Most people never asked me about that. I was approaching—as you tend to approach with an independent picture—people who had never invested in movies before. A person who knows about movies or thinks he knows about movies won't get near you because it doesn't offer him the sort of control that he wants, either financially or creatively. I approached movie investors and they said, "I like the package, I like the script, but I can't really have fun with it." Ted Mann told me that—he runs the Mann theater chain. I could understand that. I just didn't want him to have fun with it, and he understood that and didn't invest. So all the people that I approached were people who hadn't invested in movies before. Although one who finally did invest, the major investor on my side, the Xerox man, had invested in a couple of movies—*State of Siege* and *Marjoe*.

I thought you were talking about Max [Palevsky]. He's now involved with Peter Bart, which is a strange combination. Bart is a little crazy, but he was the only cool guy at Paramount and one of the few staunch guys behind Coppola. Palevsky is a multi-millionaire who indulges in critical commentary upon society, which is a wonderful paradox.

I think they'll be a good team because Max is bold and daring. He gave me my money. He was not one who said, "The script is nice." He shook my hand and told me I had my last $50,000. He said, "By the way, I don't understand a word of the script. I think it's just crazy." It wasn't out of largesse or anything bad, it was just out of goodness that he did it. It wasn't to be associated with a film or glamour, because he'd done that with more glamorous people. And it wasn't him being sanguine either about the prospects of getting his money back, because he had invested in successful pictures like *Marjoe* and *Gimme Shelter*—and never seen a cent for it.

Because [distributor and New York cinema owner Don] Rugoff spends so much on advertising.

Yeah, well—that's good for the filmmaker.

He does a quality job in promoting the film.

Right. He gets behind it with the advertising. Have you ever talked with him?

I love him.

Yeah, I love him too. I think he's wonderful. I thought you weren't liking him.

Oh, no! He once called me at home and said, "Listen, I read your review of Very Happy Alexander. *I disagree with parts of it, but you really understood exactly what it was about the film that made me want to buy it. That particular quality." He told me how he was going out of business.*

He took a two million loss last year, after taxes. He's not really making that much. He's making ten percent of the gate in New York City. I think it's the best year probably they've had, but he's also really gone out on a limb in production.

What happened with him and Max?

I don't know the reasons for that. They don't seem to be working together, but I've never asked either one of them why. Max, I think, is very skeptical about the movie business, about the way it's run. He finds it all irrational—and he's right to.

I hope for his sake that the pictures he invests in are films the public is interested in. I still haven't seen The Tall Blond Man with One Black Shoe—*but he keeps on plugging that film. He likes it and he's running it forever. I don't think it's making that much money.*

I don't know. It's a nice thing to pick up *The New York Times* from month to month and find that the only picture that's still there is [one of Rugoff's]. If the investors get their money back in a profit, if they do better than they would have in the stock market, and then it doesn't make much more money—that's fine for a picture. Who are you knocking yourself out to please with a blockbuster? I'd rather see the picture play several extra months, the way *Tall Blond Man with One Black Shoe* has in New York, than have three percent of the gross [of a blockbuster].

How do you feel about money? Do you think about it much?

Money? No. I think about it as little as I can. What is there to think about? What I disliked about working independently was how much I had to think about it.

Including the making of it.

Including the making of it, yes.

Francis [Coppola] gets such delight in the money he has made—buying toys and houses. Having an empire that's an extension of all of his interests. In effect money becomes very important because you can buy more of what you want.

I don't feel that way. No. You want to get some dessert?

D: *I've been thinking about cheesecake all evening.*

I say that because I'd like to get a cup of coffee, actually.

[*The tape cuts out and starts up again immediately. Malick is talking about the night before the invasion of Iwo Jima and how someone—unnamed—was shot.*]

He finally got shot. As he fell, he went down not like a stone, not like everybody else, but staggered around. "Jesus, I've been hit." He's been shot just right at the base of the spine. [Bullets] ricocheting off the trees.

[*Some discussion about cheesecake and dinner menus. Malick gets on the phone and orders cheesecake, to be delivered to room 807. Gelmis talks about "constitutional psychopathology" and the morality of the characters of* Badlands*, noting that when Kit shoots Cato and he lies dying, Holly asks Kit, "Is he upset?"]*

I don't think that she has no moral sense at all. I think she does, and it's out of her moral sense that she asks that question. It's a funny question to ask, and it's not the right question to ask about somebody who's just been shot, but it's not wrong because of course he's upset. Maybe he isn't upset in showing it. That's really what she's asking. "How's he taking it? Does it seem like he's going to make a lot of noise about it?" And that, I think, she's asking out of a concern for him. I think she does [have a moral sense]—it's just that it's often misplaced. She just doesn't know what to have her moral feelings about. She has more feelings about this catfish that she threw out and that had bothered her for nights and nights afterwards. And she even tells you about it at the [start] of the movie, just in case this might have been what started off this whole tragic series of events. If you're superstitious, she's saying, or if you're highly moral, then maybe this was it—this was the fatal glass of beer. But it's not that she has none at all, [it's that] she's just an alienated youth.

The question is: what is the value system from which she operates, from which she makes certain statements. She's not a psychopath.

No. I think Kit's kind of like that. He doesn't know whether what he's doing is right or wrong.

Are you ambitious?

[*long pause*] For what?

Anything at all.

Oh, certainly some things I'm ambitious for, and some things I'm not.

Are there certain people you want to please? Are you driven by anything? Spending eight or nine months raising money to make a film… As an outsider, I find that significant. It's like going on a diet for a year.

Well, I don't think I did that quite out of ambition. That's the way you have to go about it if you do this thing. You can't wait for the money to fall on you like rain. It's not going to happen. You've got to go out and raise the money, and if it seems tough, it's really not. There are a lot of things that are tougher. Digging ditches.

Have you tried any other jobs other than journalism and teaching?

I worked a lot when I was in high school. I worked a wheat harvest a couple of summers. I worked on an excavation crew in Midland, Texas. Lumber yards several summers. I've done those things. That's how I made my way through college, working those sorts of jobs, and also making my way through high school. I didn't obviously work during the year, but I had a job every summer from the seventh grade on. So I have worked at other things besides journalism and academics.

Do you dislike self-analysis? You find it difficult to deal with?

Yes, I guess I do. I just get… I find it difficult to deal with.

To talk about yourself?

Yeah, to talk about myself. It's not out of feeling that I'm just a terribly complex creature that just really needs justice done to it. It's Southern manners. I guess it's basically… It's not manners either. I would feel more comfortable talking about those things if there weren't a tape recorder on. When you ask a question like that I remember that a tape recorder is on and I don't know what all this is for.

Are you still married?

Yes, I am.

Are you interested in film as entertainment or as something closer to art?

I don't really know. I think you can't just make any picture that comes into your head. There are some ideas that you have to reject—or if you don't you won't have a very long career as a moviemaker. So you have to censor yourself, but it's not any great internal struggle. You do it almost unconsciously.

Who are your favorite filmmakers?

I love Preston Sturges. And Stevens and Kazan and Arthur Penn. Kazan is, like Stevens, someone who's totally ignored. I think it's all because of the blacklisting. *The Arrangement* is a picture that I love.

It was on television one night and I sat there sobbing, partly because I'm Greek and my father is 85 years old. I had a powerful identification with it. It was all so true.

Oh, I know what you're just going to be… [*pause*]

What I'm going to be?

…overwhelmed by. You haven't seen *America America*?

No. That's the one film of Kazan I haven't seen.

Well, that is certainly one of the best American films ever, *ever* made. It is just overwhelming. I have a similar sort of background. It wasn't Greece that my grandparents came from, it was the other side of Turkey—Azerbaijan, Georgia, the northwestern part of Iran. They came over in a similar way. *America America* is the story of Kazan's grandfather coming from Anatolia. One single objective in mind, and that's to get to America. He finally does get passage on a boat. So thrilling a picture! There were bits from it, cuts from it, in *The Arrangement*. There are reminiscences of Richard Boone in his

mind, and you saw black and white footage of people pressing into the bow of a boat—that's from *America America.* It's this moment when all these immigrants on this ship are wandering around, then spot the shores of America and all rush into the bow of the ship—Uzbek and Kurds and Turks and Greeks. All these different nationalities, and all dressed up too, to look like Americans, those who might have a chance of making it. There are a lot of quick cuts of these different faces, and each one of them—they're all so hopeful and you just know they're going to be ground under. It does that thing… it just brings tears to your eyes. And it doesn't stop there. When they get to Ellis Island there's an incredible moment when they're all wandering around in these different pens. He goes through the line, the hero, the young man, and his name is a little too hard to pronounce.

Somewhere along the line my father changed two letters in his name.

Well, it's not even he who changes [his name in *America America*]—it's the customs man.

That's exactly what happened to my father.

Oh, well—this [film] will be an overpowering experience. This and *The Moviegoer*—you will enjoy both of them. There are scenes back in Turkey where he works for a rug merchant for a while, and it appears he can marry well by Turkish standards. He's in fact engaged, without really wanting to be engaged, by his relatives, to the daughter of the rug merchant. There's a scene between them that's just as powerful as anything I've ever seen on the screen, when he and this girl are finally alone together, for the first time, and she senses that his heart isn't really in this, and you can see Kazan's hand in all of this, but you trust him. And you don't mind being manipulated because you know it's not to make bucks.