

“A Film is Alive During its Making” – An Interview with Filmmaker Thom Andersen

Interview: Matthias Stork

Transcription: Kelly Lake

Matthias Stork: Your work has a distinctive quality, both documentarian and essayistic. How would you categorize your own films as a filmmaker?

Thom Andersen: I guess I'd think of it as documentary. Just trying to find a difference between documentary and essayistic is a question worth thinking about. Yeah, more interesting newspaper columnists have a reportorial edge in their essays that's lacking in some of the less interesting ones that don't seem to be based on reporting. Just say, George Will or William F. Buckley, particularly in his later days, when he got lazy about writing his columns. Any essay that's going to be interesting has to be researched. I'm sure my films might be regarded as essayistic because there's more research involved in a standard documentary anyway. That's why they call them documentaries. They are based on attempts to find facts [that] aren't always evident before.

MS: I wholeheartedly agree, and I think your approach to filmmaking is very idiosyncratic. In *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, when I first saw it, it's a film designed to look beyond what is actually on screen. You seem to emphasize all these little details and oddities about the city. When you first set out to produce the film, to start the project, was that a conscious decision on your part or did that come about when you worked on the project?

TA: Maybe if you can give me an example of these little details?

MS: What I really liked about the film is that you single out particular locations of the city. You have these tracking shots where you linger on particular buildings or signs, and I found that very intriguing.

TA: Yeah. I guess it's just something that you start to notice after looking at a bunch of movies, these odd connections get made. For example...I'm trying to remaster *Los Angeles Plays Itself*...I mean, it's not going to be different; I'm not going to rewrite anything, but just trying to find better clips to serve the digital version. So last night I was watching *Armored Car Robbery*, which is probably set at Wrigley Field, which is a minor league baseball park in South Los Angeles where the Angels used to play when we had Pacific Coast League Baseball here. And in the background, you hear somebody calling the game, like a public address announcer. And it turns out the words he is using are exactly the same as those that are used in *The Atomic City* baseball park scene. *The Atomic City* was made a couple of years later but with the same baseball commentary. So it made me wonder whether there is a reference for it, maybe stock footage of someone calling a baseball game that they used in both movies. It's obviously not significant but it's interesting.

MS: It points to a potential connection between the films.

TA: And I am not even sure whether that connection is in fact interesting. But, on the other hand, there was something that I heard mentioned about the film in the baseball scene. In the shot that takes place at Gilmore Field there are a lot of interracial people leaving the game and there are more people than they could ever call up as extras. It is something beyond the control of the filmmakers, a bit of reality which forces itself into the film. You see in that crowd of people leaving the stadium a large percentage of black people. It makes you wonder about patterns of segregation and integration. I started wondering whether there was indeed a time when Los Angeles was more integrated and then finally realizing that it was. Not where people lived but in more public spaces, like baseball games, for instance, and different kinds of public events. And that makes you see the history of the city in a different way. First of all, the effect of the police and enforcing public segregation was more important than most people realized. When you are doing research

and you are able to go back to the original sources you discover things that surprise you. I guess in a certain sense, when you talk about movies, that movies are the original sources. Although in Los Angeles you have the opportunity to go back beyond them and look at their production files, screenplay drafts, and other files.

I was thinking about *Crime Wave* and going to USC and doing some research on it with Philippe Garnier, who is regarded as an expert on that film. One of the things we discovered was that André de Toth was an incredibly efficient director who could do things really fast. Some of the most memorable shots in the film are location shots he went off and made with the DP while the rest of the crew was having lunch.

MS: I think it's interesting that during your research, while looking at films, you always discover something new. I read in an interview that you see filmmaking as a process of research and discovery. How do you approach your research? Is there a particular instance of discovery that you recall?

TA: No, not really. It's frustrating when you get something wrong and then you make a whole web of decisions based on wrong information. And then later you have to go back and do everything over again. For the last film, *Get out of the Car*, I wanted to make a shot of the location of El Monte Legion Stadium, although it no longer exists, so there was a book that had an address and I went to that address. I don't know if it quite made sense; I guess it did, so I made this whole plan of shooting that area, and then it occurred to me that the information just might be wrong. I later realized that there actually was an El Monte Historical Museum and I could go there and actually talk to them about it. The woman who runs it explained to me what it really was, which also somehow didn't make sense, but finally I figured out it was right, because of the photographs she showed me in relation to the site. I think normally we look at movies as they come out and you don't notice the relations between them, but if you take movies from one period and look at them altogether, you might notice patterns that you wouldn't notice looking at those movies over, say...well, you can look at a certain genre of movies made over ten years in a week, so you notice something watching all those movies together you wouldn't notice if you watched them over ten years, right? And you can start to notice when things first happen in movies. And then you can maybe start to see how those things develop.

MS: You mentioned *Get out of the Car*. I have not yet seen it, although I'd like to. If I'm not mistaken, you shot that in 16mm?

TA: 16mm

MS: But you've also used video for your previous films. Which of the formats do you prefer, and would you ever consider working with digital video, knowing that film stock may at some point disappear?

TA: I'm not sure about that.

MS: I hope not. But was there a particular reason you chose 16mm for *Get out of the Car*?

TA: Yeah. The movies *Red Hollywood* and *Los Angeles Plays Itself* were only possible to do in that format. And they were analog videos, BETA SP. In fact, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* might have been the last analog video, because when we started it in 1999, at that point, the quality of analog video was better than digital, but by the time we finished, that had changed, so we would have been better advised to start that project in digital. I wanted to make a film in 16mm because, at the time in 2009, I didn't like video so much. I thought the quality of film was better. The movie I'm working on now is digital video, and it's going to have the hyper-real quality that digital video can have, but played up to an extreme. So it won't look real. And I hope it will have the effect of reminding people of the qualities of film. I'll show you an image.

(walks to his computer)

The film is going to be a compilation of animated still pictures.

MS: Does the project have a title yet?

TA: It's called *Reconverso*. It's in Portuguese. The English title is *Reconversion*. (pulls up an image). That's what it will actually look like, believe it or not, when projected on a big movie screen.

MS: Wow.

KL: Wow.

(Thom Andersen shows us a high-res digital image of a cargo port, filled with colorful containers. The image is so sharp that it seems to extend beyond the screen.)

MS: It looks hyper-real, indeed. And that's intentional, because you want to remind people about the quality of film?

TA: Yeah, somewhat.

(He continues to show us an assortment of images, all of them piercingly sharp and bright, displaying apartment buildings, graffiti, and city streets.)

MS: And what equipment did you use?

TA: It's just one of these DSL cameras.

MS: So the video will involve digital video and still images.

TA: No, the digital video is in the form of still images and they will all be subsequently animated. The reason for that is higher quality. The quality will be 10 times higher than when you're shooting video.

MS: Would you like to elaborate on your new project?

TA: It's a film about the architecture of Eduardo Souto de Moura. He is a Portuguese architect who won the *Pritzker Prize* in 2011. It's just a study of his architecture.

MS: Your passion for architecture is evident in *Los Angeles Plays Itself*. The film is still under-seen, I would venture to say, due to its limited distribution, a result of copyright issues. But it is now available on the internet, on *YouTube* to be specific. How do you feel about that?

TA: I think *YouTube* is good for something that's three or four minutes long, but not for something that's three hours long. I don't think it works on *YouTube*. So I'm not pleased.

MS: So it's an entirely different viewing experience, not how you intended it to be seen.

TA: I don't think it is a viewing experience. Someone who's seen it on *YouTube* hasn't seen it.

MS: So even if it exposes the film to a larger audience, it's not the same experience?

TA: That's right.

MS: And this model of taking films and composing a new work of art, do you think that this type of filmmaking, at some point, can become institutionalized, because, unfortunately, due to copyright issues, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* cannot be screened widely. Do you think it will change?

TA: It's not due to copyright issues; it's due to peoples' confusion about the issues. I wouldn't call *Los Angeles Plays Itself* a work of art. It's just a critical essay. And there's as much a right to quote movies in a critical essay on movies as there is a right to quote from novels in a critical essay on novels. So there isn't really a problem. It's kind of a myth that there's a problem. It's the sense that even though some of the copyright holders...well, particularly the large corporations that hold the great majority of the copyrights of the works being quoted, would object to the quotations. It creates a kind of fear among people who might otherwise be interested in showing a film. When someone fears a lawsuit, it's almost as good as a lawsuit. So it works by fear, to discourage people from doing something that might be perfectly legal if they feel threatened in some way. That make sense?

MS: It does. Now what I find very intriguing is that you're a filmmaker. You're also a scholar and a teacher.

TA: I'm not a scholar in a technical way.

MS: But how do you unify these three positions in your work? And to be more precise, do you intend your films to be educational?

TA: Sure, but no more than any other film. Yeah, when I go to see a movie, I expect to learn something, not always factually, but emotionally, I think.

MS: You also once said that films are "tools for conviviality", designed to create a space for friends. I was wondering if you could expand upon that. Are you referring to your audience, your collaborators?

TA: I should say first of all that the phrase comes from Ivan Illich, from one of his books, which is now unfortunately out of print. Well, I would say a film or song or work of art or a book should create a kind of community around it. And I think...well, I'm using that phrase, but one of the things I wanted to emphasize is that it's not about how big a community is. One can't measure the effect of a film by the size of its audience. Something that's fairly obvious when the size of the audience is large. But it applies to a small audience as well. But also, if a film or a video has this particular ability because of its physical nature, to reach people all over the world so that a movie can have a small audience here in Los Angeles but it can also have the same small audience in New York, the same small audience in

London, the same small audience in Paris, and other cities, and then these small audiences make up something like a large audience. And then you come to feel as a filmmaker who befriends people whom you would never know otherwise. And the same applies to viewers seeing the film, you feel like you know somebody else from seeing their film, which is true, I think. It's not an illusion.

MS: Do you like to engage in a discourse with your audience, during a Q&A, for example?

TA: That's actually a little bit of a problem, because when you make the film, that's exactly what you would hope for and like to have, but the truth is, by the time you're finished with it, you're kind of sick of it.

MS: I actually read another interview with you in which you claimed that a film is alive during its making. Afterwards, it is dead. I'm not a filmmaker but I produce video essays and when I work on these essays, I feel invigorated. But as soon as I finish them, I am reluctant to watch them. Is that something you experience as well?

TA: Yeah, I think we're talking about the same thing. Yeah, that's a problem. I mean, sometimes it's okay. I guess it depends on the energy of the audience. I guess there are people who can fake it and pretend to be really excited about a work they've completed, but I think usually it depends on the audience. The other problem is that...just being nervous or afraid of the audience's reaction to the work. So you come to dread the screenings and try to avoid them. Nina Menkes, who I thought always went out of her way to promote her work, told me that she used to drink a bottle of vodka before the discussion, something which I can understand. That's not a bad idea.

MS: Let's briefly move away from your own work and focus on a more general question. You described *Los Angeles Plays Itself* as a critical essay. Are there other visual essays that you've seen? And I am including pieces of contemporary film criticism which quote from films. Do other critical essays inspire and excite you?

TA: I'm not really aware of the film criticism pieces. But, yeah, there are some works that have excited me. One was a work by Mark Rappaport, *Rock Hudson's Home Movies, From the Journals of Jean Seberg*. And another one, which is not so well-known, is a film called *Dry Kisses Only* by Kaucyila Brooke and Jane Kottis. And another one was, not so much...it wasn't film, but it was kind of the tone that interested me. That was the work of Judy Fiskin, and particularly a work called *My Getty*, which was about the opening of the Getty Center here in Los Angeles. So those were the works that inspired me, which I think are also forerunners of *Los Angeles Plays Itself*. And, of course, before that, I made *Red Hollywood*. But with *Red Hollywood* it had more to do with the influence of the *Cinéastes de Notre Temps*, which Noël Burch had worked on when he was in France in the 1950s. Or, sometimes they would create different movies out of movies, or use movie soundtracks with documentary material. Little tricks like that.

MS: You said you're not aware of film criticism and film scholarship that is more film-centric and uses film materials?

TA: No. Well, yeah, I used to do that in filmmaking classes, use films to illustrate filmmaking. But I wouldn't say I was writing essays on the films. I would just present a scene, or a few shots, or a clip, as an example of something [or] other. And I guess in a way, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* was an outgrowth of that, something I started doing when VHS became widely available in the 1980s.

MS: And does the accessibility or user-friendliness of digital technology interest you, now that you can easily transfer films onto your computer hard-drive and then work with them in digital editing programs. Is that something you feel will define documentary filmmaking or critical film essays?

TA: Well, I hope so. To me, new technology isn't any easier than old technology, it's just the same. I mean, you could always do that, but maybe it didn't look as good. You could do it with a VHS machine. But I guess before there were VHS machines, you couldn't do it. You'd have to get a film print.

MS: Your new film *Get Out of the Car* has a very interesting title. Could you explain why you chose it?

TA: It's a film about music, particularly music made in Los Angeles, especially the music of Richard Berry. *Get Out of the Car* is the title of one of his songs. That's the significance of it.

MS: And what prompted you to work on this project?

TA: Well, I was originally interested in deteriorating signs, billboards in particular. And then I became interested in signs, and sign-like objects, in general. So that's what it's about, and then it's about music.

MS: Could you briefly speak to the practical aspect of producing the film? Is it more strenuous to produce the film in 16mm than digital video?

TA: No, I wouldn't say that. Well, why would it seem more strenuous?

MS: Well, using digital video has a few pragmatic benefits. You do not have to load the film, you do not have to be careful with early

exposure. You almost do not have to worry about light. And you do not have to develop the film. Did you develop the film yourself?

TA: No, I used a lab. Fotochem.

MS: You said you chose 16mm specifically because it looked better. But were there more pragmatic considerations as well? You said you wanted to operate the camera, work with an old format.

TA: Yeah, I'm trying to think how it's harder.

MS: I mean, maybe for you it isn't. That's just my impression.

TA: Yeah, I think it's what you're used to, right? I mean, if you're not growing up [with] moving film and moving film cameras it would seem confusing.

MS: I've only used Super 8 cameras.

TA: Well with 8mm, it's not confusing. It's just four times bigger, which makes it bigger, right, because 8mm is kind of small. Yeah, it was partly an experiment, and it was a lot harder to make a 16mm film than it used to be because we tried to edit digitally, which is...it seems to be necessary these days, because there isn't 16mm mag film anymore. And that's a problem. Also because 16mm film is not as common as it used to be, the standard of lab work is not as good as it used to be, so you have more trouble with the labs than you used to.

MS: *Get Out of the Car*...where can people see it? I think you "released" it in 2010.

TA: Shot it in 2009 and it wasn't really done until 2010. And it wasn't shown until August of that year. Yeah, being 16mm film, it doesn't show as much as something in another format might. And I'm rather more hesitant about making it available in some video format because it was not originally conceived as a video.

MS: Do you consider making *Los Angeles Plays Itself* available at some point?

TA: Yeah. And *Red Hollywood*.

MS: That's fantastic.

TA: That's one of my projects which may get done someday. And so I am not as concerned with showing *Get Out of the Car*.

MS: And as someone who's not a filmmaker, this may come across as very naïve, but when you make your films, do you have a script, or is it a more experimental approach? And with *Get out of the Car*, for example, did you have specific locations or signs in mind?

TA: Yeah, well the other films did have scripts, of course, the narration. *Get Out of the Car* was more the way you described it, just driving around and looking for things. And those things suggested other things, and it grew. Sometimes with a camera, other times without. Generally without a camera and going back to places with a camera. The difficulty was...well, not a difficulty, but something that slowed it down was trying to film everything at the right part of day.

MS: For *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, you covered a whole array of films for your research. The research for *Get out of the Car* involved driving through Los Angeles. What is the difference between these two types of research?

TA: I guess driving around, or more particularly, walking around, is more pleasant. I guess looking at old movies...well, some people would find it a trial, and I guess you couldn't make this kind of movie. Because yeah, it did mean...both *Los Angeles Plays Itself* and *Red Hollywood* depended on being able to set aside questions of artistic merit, which...I think when we started work on *Red Hollywood*, that seemed like a more serious issue in film scholarship, that movies weren't worth studying if they didn't have some artistic merit in those days.

MS: Do you think film scholarship should focus more on film criticism through film, or be more text-based?

TA: Oh, you mean written and words alone?

MS: Not the film text, yeah.

TA: Well...there's obviously value in that. Yeah, it doesn't have to be written in images. On the other hand, yes, sometimes images are valuable. I don't know, that's not something I feel passionately about, one way or another.

MS: So it depends on the project someone is working on.

TA: Yeah.

MS: I found the narration in *Los Angeles Plays Itself* to be quite captivating, but why did you not record the voiceover yourself. Was it a deliberate choice?

TA: Well, sure. I think if I had read the words you would have found it less captivating. That's my opinion.

MS: Is that the same for *Get out of the Car*? Was that someone else?

TA: There wasn't any narration. Actually, that's not true. There were a number of conversations that occurred during the course of filming that were recorded or recreated. And in those cases you do hear my voice in that film, but it's not delivering a text, it's just part of a conversation.

MS: You were a student at UCLA. Which other schools did you attend? You went to USC as well.

TA: Yeah, I went to USC as an undergraduate and to UCLA for graduate school.

MS: And your specialization?

TA: Filmmaking.

MS: And did you take any Cinema & Media Studies classes at UCLA?

TA: Oh, you mean the courses that now fall under the rubric of critical studies?

MS: Yeah.

TA: I don't think those courses were offered. I mean, there was a course in film history at USC, but I didn't take that. There was a course in aesthetics at UCLA that was offered by Hugh Gray who was a translator for *What Is Cinema*, but he got sick in the middle of the semester, so that course was never completed. What else might there have been? It was the beginning of people studying that at UCLA. I guess Paul Schrader was involved in that. It was the beginning of the film archive. But I don't think there was really any faculty there at that time. Yeah, film studies had not yet been established.

KL: When were you at UCLA?

TA: 1966 to early '70s.

Kelly Lake: Did you work with the filmmakers of the *LA Rebellion*?

TA: Yes. Well, what happened is, I dropped out, but then I returned. I wasn't really a student, but I was working there. I think around '74. I think Charles Burnett was there earlier. But I was familiar with these filmmakers. And I, of course, knew Billy Woodberry, not then, but I would later get to know him. And I also knew Ben Caldwell, through Cal Arts.

MS: And today you teach filmmaking at Cal Arts?

TA: Yeah. Well, I teach mostly critique classes.

MS: Well, would that be critical studies?

TA: Well, it's critique in terms of looking at work, cuts of a movie. Sort of technical or aesthetic problems.

MS: Is there a particular approach you take to that work? Is there a message you want to convey to your students who are aspiring filmmakers? I mean, it may just be informed by each individual case, but I was wondering if there is a credo that you have.

TA: Yeah, I think you finally reached a question that's impossible to answer in a few words.

Author bio:

Thom Andersen has lived in Los Angeles for most of his life. In the 1960s, he made short films, including *Melting* (1965), *Olivia's Place* (1966), and --- ----- (1967, with Malcolm Brodwick). In 1974 he completed *Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer*, an hour-long documentation of Muybridge's photographic work. In 1995, with Noël Burch, he completed *Red Hollywood*, a videotape about the filmwork created by the victims of the Hollywood Blacklist. Their work on the history of the Blacklist also produced a book, *Les Communistes de Hollywood: Autre chose que des martyrs*, published in 1994. In 2003 he completed *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, a videotape about the representation of Los Angeles in movies. It won the National Film Board of Canada



Award for Best Documentary Feature at the 2003 Vancouver International Film Festival, and it was voted best documentary of 2004 in the Village Voice Film Critics' Poll. He has taught film composition at the California Institute of the Arts since 1987.



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