

SMOKE AND ILLUSIONS: AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL AUSTER

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When Paul Auster received the *Príncipe de Asturias Award* in October 2006 in Oviedo (Spain) he spoke about two fundamental needs: his own need to tell stories and “the universal craving for stories” shared by all humankind. In fact, he said, people need stories “as desperately as they need food, and however the stories might be presented –whether on a printed page or on a television screen– it would be impossible to imagine life without them.” In this interview, which took place a few days after this speech, Auster addresses his relationship not with written stories but with another type of stories he has always liked, films. A novelist, poet, critic and editor, Auster’s relationship with cinema comes from his apprenticeship years, when he wrote film reviews and even scripts for silent films, like the ‘written films’ described in his 2002 novel *The Book of Illusions*. His short story “Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story” led to his films with Wayne Wang (*Smoke and Blue in the Face*, 1995), which gave him the experience to direct on his own *Lulu on the Bridge* (1998) and the recent *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* (2007).

Congratulations on your *Príncipe de Asturias Award*. You mentioned in Oviedo that you have been attracted to film-making since your student days. Apparently both Wim Wenders and you tried to join the *Institute des Hautes Études Cinématographiques* in Paris, but neither of you was accepted. Is that true?

No, that’s not true. I got the application, but it was so complicated, there were so many forms to fill out, I just didn’t have the courage to do it. So, I wasn’t rejected, because I never applied. But it’s true that Wim was rejected. He’s about two years older than I am, and it turns out that we were in Paris just around the same time. He was going to movies, I was going to movies ... Very funny.

Why did you finally decide to write novels instead of making films?

First of all, I was extremely shy. And I simply didn’t know how to go about it. It seemed a lot easier to write than to make films. All I needed was a pencil and a piece of paper, whereas film-making was something I had no access to.

But you wrote some silent film scripts. What were they like?

They were more comical than tragic. A bit in the spirit of Buster Keaton –not quite slapstick, but strange, strange stories in the 1920s style.

Were they anything like the ‘written films’ (to use Hal Hartley’s expression) appearing in *The Book of Illusions*?

Actually, those screenplays were much more detailed than what I did in the book. In the book I had to invent a style for communicating what the sensation of looking at a film would be, whereas the screenplays I wrote in Paris were actual blueprints for how to do the film, with every gesture, every little movement noted in exhaustive detail.

Before *Smoke*, you had different offers for film projects that were frustrated in the end. For example, I saw in your manuscripts in The New York Public Library a couple of letters about different projects to adapt *City of Glass* as early as 1988; and I have also read about attempted film versions of *The Locked Room*, by Jon Amiel, and *Mr Vertigo*, by Philip Haas. What happened to those projects?

There were even more, but every one of those projects fell apart –because of money, I suppose, the inability of the directors to raise the money. To tell you the truth, I’m not unhappy about it. I’m not even sure that I like the idea of adapting novels into films. It’s very difficult to do, and it usually doesn’t work. There are exceptions, but generally speaking, one feels disappointed with the result.

Is that the case with *The Music of Chance*?

I think it’s okay. It’s not great, and it’s not bad. It’s somewhere in between.

How about your cameo appearance at the end of that film?

I thought I was terrible and decided never to act again. They asked me to do that little role at the last minute. I was in New York, they were filming in North Carolina, and Philip Haas, the director, called me and said, “We’ve lost the actor who was going to do that part and we all decided it would be a nice idea for you to do it, but you have to decide right now.” And I said, “Mmm ...well ... mmm. Okay, yes”, and I hung up the phone. An instant later, I regretted it. I had to do about ten takes, and then, afterward, they still didn’t like what I had done, and I had to go into

a looping studio and redo the dialogue. I did it over twenty times before they were satisfied. I only had three lines, and I just couldn't do it very well.

What happened to the project to adapt the Flitcraft story [a story from Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* which ended up in *Oracle Night*]? I think you tried to make a movie with Wim Wenders ...

Yes. That was another plan that didn't work out. Again, it was a question of money. There was a company in Europe at the time, *C.B.2000*, and the man who owned it, a big industrialist who made films for a little while, died. The company went out of business.

In the interview with Annette Insdorf about *Smoke* you mentioned two suggestions by Robert Altman. One took place while writing the script. He suggested adding "one more little something" in the middle, and apparently you followed his advice. Do you remember what you added?

Yes, I can remember very well. It seems so basic to the film now, but it wasn't in the original story, which kept evolving. The original idea was radically different from the final film. In the beginning, it was only Auggie and Paul and Rashid. There was no Ruby, the Stockard Channing character. She was added later, and there was much more in the script about the story the William Hurt character was writing, but that eventually got taken out completely. We were going to go into a computer screen, and the letters and words would be transformed into images, but little by little that was taken out and replaced by real characters in the story. So the last element I added, and it seems absurd now, was Rashid's father, the Forest Whitaker character, who was not in the story until the final draft.

Well, it's a very interesting addition. Without it, the 'father-son' theme in the film wouldn't work so well.

Of course, it's unthinkable to have that story without him, but he wasn't there to begin with.

The other suggestion by Robert Altman is mentioned in the "Commentaries" from the DVD version and it has to do with the "epilogue" of the film, the black and white version of the Christmas story. Apparently Altman was the one who suggested not running the credits over that sequence.

That was an extremely interesting business. The way the script was originally written, when Auggie, Harvey Keitel's character, tells the story –the story that he

makes up, of course, it's all invented— about the wallet and Christmas and the grandmother, the camera was going to cut between the images of the story and Harvey speaking. The problem was that Harvey did such a good job telling the story that every time we cut away from him and you saw the action, you would lose three, four, five, or six words of what he was saying, because your concentration would shift, and then you weren't listening to the words anymore. It became more difficult to follow, so we kept reducing the number of cut-aways until we said, "We have to take them all out."

I was very upset, because I loved the black-and-white footage. I remember leaving the editing room, going to the subway to go home to Brooklyn, and it suddenly occurred to me, "Ah!, we could run the black-and-white at the end with the credits." I called him from the subway platform —there used to be telephones in the subway in New York then— and I said, "What about putting the credits over the black-and-white sequence?", and he said, "Okay, Good idea". Later, we had a screening of the film, and Robert Altman was there —sitting right next to me in fact. The film wasn't finished, we hadn't done the credits yet, and Wayne told the audience, "When you see the black and white material at the end, credits are going be running over it." The film ended, and Altman grabbed my arm and said, "You mustn't, you mustn't, you mustn't run the credits over that black-and-white footage, because that's the pay-off for the whole film, everything comes together there."

Are you happy with the results? I really like the paradox of letting silent black-and-white images become the end of a film with so much dialogue and words. It closes the circle of the adaptation: from literature to a film that ends with literature translated into film (the story written by Paul Benjamin told in images). A very interesting metafictional game...

Yes, I like them very much too, and it's funny that here I was, the man of words, fighting for these silent pictures, and Wayne, the film-maker, was willing to cut them out. But we found a way to keep it. Actually, when you see the typewriter, and the title of the story "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story by Paul Benjamin," I was typing, that's me.

Is that a better role than in *The Music of Chance*?

Much better, because you don't see me —not even my fingers, nothing.

Where did Auggie's picture project in *Smoke* come from?

I don't know where it came from. I made it up.

Were you trying to oppose Auggie’s project to Paul’s way of creating fiction? Opposing photography to novels?

Not really, because in the film you don’t know the kind of work he does, it’s not really discussed. We just know he’s writing novels, but we don’t know what they’re like, so I wasn’t really looking for a contrast.

In an interview in 1989 with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory you compared poetry to photography and novels to films. Are you interested in photography as a means of expression?

I’m not actively involved in photography myself. I don’t take many pictures. I appreciate good photography, but I think the great power of photos is more personal –as a record of time passing. I think what I most appreciate are family photographs, seeing things from the past, photos as a record of the past. You take it in the present, and you hold onto the photograph, and then thirty, or fifty, or five hundred years later you look at it again, and it evokes the passage of time.

In that interview you also talked about your poetry as “clenched fists” which started to open up and finally took you to fiction writing. Would you say that this process of “opening up” has taken you to a collective way of creation like film-making?

Maybe, maybe... I think of my adventures in film as happy accidents, because as you know I care about film and always did, but I never thought I would be able to be involved in it. But then, when the door opened and I found I was able to do something, I discovered that I enjoyed it very much. It’s not that I want to be a fulltime filmmaker, it’s not the main focus on my life, but the four films I’ve made now have been great adventures for me, and I think they’ve helped me as a person. It’s good to get out of my room every once in a while, work with other people, to think of different ways of telling stories, so I believe it’s been good medicine for me.

And would you agree that *Blue in the Face* is the best example of that sort of collective creation?

I think of that film as the craziest thing I’ve ever done. We did it out of a kind of excess of enthusiasm, a kind of joy we all felt in working together. It’s a very rocky film. It’s not a beautiful work, but it has energy. I kept calling it in my mind a ‘situationist’ comedy, instead of a situation comedy. It was tremendous fun; it took

six days to shoot it, but then ten months to edit. It was a bit of a nightmare. We didn't know what to do with the material.

Because there was no script to start with...

Well, actually there was. We shot three days in July and then three more days in October. For the July scenes, I gave the actors notes, but for the October scenes I wrote out a script, and mostly the actors followed it, not all the time, but mostly. So, it's a bit of both. There's a lot of improvisations, but also some scripted material.

Why was *Lulu on the Bridge* only distributed in the video/DVD format in the US and UK?

These were tragic business decisions made by the people who financed the film. I don't really understand why they did what they did. It was a company called Capitol Films, which was essentially two British women from London who got excited about the script and put up most of the money for the film. When the film was done, we had offers from several good distributors in the United States for what I thought was a lot of money, and they turned them down. There was an offer for two million dollars, which they turned down. It was terribly frustrating, but I had no say in the matter. And then, unfortunately, at the Cannes Festival, everything was badly timed. We were in a section called "Un certain regard", but since we were the opening film for that section, the press screening took place on the afternoon of the first day of the festival, before the festival had officially opened. So a lot of jet-lagged, tired journalists, climbed off planes and walked straight into the screening to see a very strange film. I think they were expecting to see *Smoke-2*, and what they got was something completely different. Most of the responses were negative, the reviews were bad, and suddenly the film was dead—at least in terms of getting a distributor in the United States.

The 'Lulu' movie-inside-the-movie parts were filmed but left out in the final cut. In the DVD version sold in the US they have been added. I've found those scenes very suggestive ...

There were several reasons for dropping those scenes, but mostly it had to do with a writing mistake on my part. I thought the Lulu material would make the film much richer, but when we screened it, people got confused. It diluted the film rather than make it more interesting. It was a tough decision for me: keep it in or take it out. Those scenes represented at least two or two and a half weeks of work.

Apparently you and your wife [Siri Hustvedt] took part in an early script for Wayne Wang’s film *The Center of the World* (2000), but at a certain point you decided to have nothing to do with the project. What happened?

That’s exactly right. Wayne came to me and he said, “I’m making this little film, I have to do it fast, here’s the story.” As a favor to him, we sat down and wrote a script, very quickly, but I think we did a good job. Then he shot the film, and he only used parts of what we did; he let the actors improvise, much was cut out, and I thought that the result was terrible. I hated the film, I couldn’t stand it, I found it morally repulsive, and so we took our names off of it. That’s it. I hated what he did with the script.

What was your original script like? Did it have anything to do with pornography? Was it connected to your interest in the images of women created by men, as shown in *Lulu*?

Nothing to do with pornography. It concerned a woman who sells herself for a weekend to a wealthy young man. The script we wrote was so much richer, there was so much more going on, and I felt that the characters were more touching and human. The results are very mechanical; I didn’t like them at all. So, we took our names off. The only reason why our names are on as “a story by...” is because the producer of the film – a very good friend of mine, Peter Newman, who produced all the other films I’ve worked on – said to me, “I’ve sold it all over the world because you were writing the film. If you take your name off completely, I’m afraid that they might back out of the deals. I’ll be stuck with all these debts”. So, as a favor to Peter, we compromised and left our names on as “a story by...”, which included two other names as well. [It says “Story by Wayne Wang & Miranda July and Paul Auster & Siri Hustvedt,” “Screenplay by Ellen Benjamin Wong”]. But that was it – only as a personal favor. I wanted to take our names off completely.

The silent ‘written films’ in *The Book of Illusions* are like the other side of the coin of the black-and-white sequence at the end of *Smoke*, a brilliant stylistic ‘tour de force’...

Well, thank you, I worked hard on those passages. It was difficult to find the right approach. The thing about a film is that it never stops, you can’t go back the way you can in a book, you can’t read the same passage five times in a row; it’s just coming at you. I had to create that kind of speed, but at the same time I needed to put in enough detail, so the reader can see the images in his head. I had to walk a tight rope of not too much, not too little, just right.

Do you think that words can replace images like this, or do you think that there's something in images that words will never do?

They're different, and yet the great thing about fiction, novels, is that the reader is always making pictures in his head.

And do you also think that words create reality, as in your novel *Oracle Night*? For example, problems only exist when you give them a name, so in a sense words do create reality...

It can happen, it's possible... it doesn't happen all the time, but it's possible. And whether it's a result of the words or just a coincidence, I don't know, but sometimes people write things and then they happen in the real world. The writer that they discuss toward the end of the book, the one who wrote the poem about the child who drowned and then his own child drowned –that's a true story. I was referring to a real writer, a French writer named Louis-René des Forêts. He stopped writing for thirty years after that. I didn't put his name in because I changed the story slightly, but it's a real story.

Does “The Inner Life of Martin Frost” act as ‘mise en abyme’ of *The Book of Illusions*, a clue to the real nature of the book? Is David Zimmer's trip to “Tierra del Sueño” just an illusion?

David does go there, the things he's talking about really do happen to him, but there is that sense of ‘mise en abyme’, as you say, yes.

Does your film *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* include just the ‘written film’ in *The Book of Illusions* or does it expand it?

No, it's much expanded. The project started back in 1999. I was approached by a German film producer who had done a series of twelve films, half-hour films by twelve different directors, called *Erotic Tales*. They had been shown on TV in Germany and at film festivals. They had been quite successful, and she wanted to do a second series of twelve. She asked me to do one of those films –which turned out to be *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*. The budget for the production was very small, and I was going to be working with my old friends, Peter Newman and all the people I'd collaborated with before. I cast the movie, we made up a budget, and then they said, “We're going to pay you in three stages. We'll give you the first third on signing the contract, the second third when you start filming, and then the third part after the film is finished –and we approve it.” And I said to myself, “What if you don't like it?”, and they said, “Well, we won't give you the money,” and I thought,

“This is impossible.” At that moment, my friend Hal Hartley was working on one of the twelve. He told me that he’d finished it, that they hadn’t liked it and that he had to go back and re-shoot, which caused him considerable financial hardship. He said to me “Paul, don’t do it, don’t sign with them, you’ll regret it, they’re very difficult.” So I backed out of the project.

But I had the script, and I kept thinking, “It should be a full feature-length film, there’s more to tell, this first part is interesting but I think it will get even more interesting if I expand it.” I made a lot of notes about how to continue the story, and then I put them away and started writing *The Book of Illusions*. When I came to the part in which Zimmer sees this film, my original intention in the novel was to do the full version, not the short version. But it was too long, and it would have thrown the balance of the novel out of whack, so I decided to stick to the short version. But in the back of my head I always had the idea of filming the whole thing. That’s what I’ve done now.

Are you happy with the results?

I think so. I mean, it’s a very crazy film, but it’s the film I wanted to make, so... I don’t know what other people are going to think.

Is it completely finished? Do you have an expected release date?

They’re working on the prints at the lab in Lisbon. It’s not quite, quite finished, but the movie is done, it’s a matter of final technical details. Within the next few weeks, we’ll have an interpositive, and then we’ll be making the internegative, so it’s on the brink of being finished.

I also wanted to ask you about your relationship with comics. You’ve written the script for a story illustrated by cartoonist Jacques de Loustal called “The Day I Disappeared”...

Yes, a close friend of mine, Art Spiegelman, and his wife, Françoise Mouly, an editor who works for *The New Yorker*, did a series of books called *Little Lit*. It was literature for children in comics form, and they asked me to do a story. So, I wrote my story, and they were the ones who hired the illustrator. I had nothing to do with him at all, we never talked. *Little Lit 2*, a very nice book.

What was your involvement with the *City of Glass* comics version?

Again, this was Art Spiegelman's idea. They were going to do a series of books adapting novels into comics –graphic novels– and in the end I think they only did that one, *City of Glass*. Art Spiegelman was the person who hired the adaptor and the artist, Paul Karasik and David Mazzuchelli. The only thing I said to them was, “You can take out as much as you want from the book, but don't add any other words,” so all the words in the adaptation come from the novel. One day, the four of us got together and went over their first draft and made comments, but other than that I had no involvement in it.

And are you happy with the results?

Yes, I think it's quite interesting. I thought of it almost as a storyboard for a film. It's very cinematic.

Are you interested in comics at all? Do you ever read ‘graphic novels’?

Only the ones that Art Spiegelman has given me, but I'm not terribly interested in the form.

I would also like to ask you about some other on-going projects I have read about. First, a script with Céline Curiol for director Patrice Leconte.

We wrote it two years ago. Leconte approached me to work on the script, which is an American adaptation of an earlier film he had done, *Monsieur Hire* [1989], adapted from a Georges Simenon novel. We took the thing and turned it completely on its head, transforming it into a political story about the war in Iraq and the Muslim community in New York. It turns out that this film will probably never be made. They've had trouble finding the money, time is dragging on, and I don't think it's going to happen.

It happens with so many film projects ...

Yes, it's hard for a European director or producer to get money here. They came to America for the money, which was a mistake. No one is putting up money for small films in the United States now.

I've also read about another film: *Le Carnet Rouge*, by Mathieu Simonet.

He's a young film-maker from France, and he did a short film, about ten minutes long, based on certain ideas in *The Red Notebook*. I saw it once, it's charming, it's

fine, but it isn't *The Red Notebook*, just the framework. It's about a woman and a man finding a book, but it doesn't deal with the stories in the book.

And Alejandro Chomski, from Argentina, is doing a version of *In the Country of Last Things*.

I don't know what's happening with that. He's still looking for the money, so, it might happen, and then again, it might not. It's impossible to know at this stage, but that's the one book of mine I think would make an interesting film. It's so visual... He wrote a screenplay and then showed it to me. I thought it wasn't bad, but not good enough, so we sat down for a few weeks and rewrote the whole thing together.

That's an adaptation that you would like ...

I would like to see it happen. There are a number of good actors interested in working on it, he has a very good crew, a good production designer, all kinds of interesting people wanting to do it, but he needs to raise more money... We'll see.

In the interview with Annette Insdorf mentioned before you talked about the "problems" you had with "movies in general, the medium itself," because they are two-dimensional, "a simulacrum of reality." Would you agree that in all your films you have been trying to add that third dimension that novels have? Do you think you have succeeded?

I'm trying, I'm trying. I don't know if it's possible –that's the problem. The scale of *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* is very small, but I think I've made a step forward. It feels more accomplished to me than the other films. So we'll see, we'll see...