

To the attention of Stefan Ruitenbeek

Dear Mr. Ruitenbeek,

It so happens that after my brief stay in Amsterdam, I travelled to Guadeloupe for three weeks to act in a film by Guillaume Nicloux, starring among others Blanche Gardin and myself.

I mention this because Guillaume Nicloux's method, at first glance, could be likened to yours — at least in comparison with other directors with whom I have had the opportunity to work.

On the one hand, he chooses to shoot the scenes in the same order in which they appear in the screenplay, so that he can take into account changes in characters, and especially in character relationships. He doesn't refrain from modifying a scene based on what was shot earlier. It is to be noted, however, that he consults the actors on such changes.

On the other hand, one of his distinctive features is that dialogue is sometimes improvised, or rather "half-improvised" - which is to say that the general theme is fixed but actors are free to pick their own words. This was particularly true for "The Kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq", where the initial script hardly exceeded twenty pages.

There is, however, an essential difference in how you do things.

The first difference, quite simply, is a matter of courtesy. To go back to my stay in Amsterdam, I was annoyed from the very moment I set foot in the train station, when I noticed that a member of your crew had started filming us, my wife and I, without having asked our permission or even spoken to us. My reaction then should have been to grab the camera and throw it in the nearest canal. My nature is rather gentle, and I kept my calm in order to prevent matters from escalating at that early stage. But I became increasingly annoyed as you and your crew kept entering my hotel room, cameras in hand, already rolling. In other moments, especially during meals, you even filmed us without our knowledge. These practices belong more to tabloid journalism than to art-house cinema. During a subsequent argument, given how bad the situation had become, I took it upon myself to reimburse you for the hotel room - which I did (I had also purchased my train tickets, paid for my meals while there, and as for the filming equipment, it was already yours). Matters kept escalating until one evening I insisted that you and your cameras leave my room. We haven't seen each other since.

There is another difference, this one concerning aesthetics. There is a whole ritual to shooting a "normal" film, beginning with costumes and makeup. Then, once the technical crew is ready, the filming of each shot is bound to a specific time period, punctuated by precise orders: "Lights," "Camera," "Action," "Cut." All of this can sound ridiculous or out-of-date to you, but I disagree. For me, this ritual considerably helps the actor attain the level of focus required to enter the character he has chosen to embody. It is in large part thanks to this that cinema - and theater, through other rituals - can be considered an art form.

You might object and claim that your method is quite different, that for you it is about capturing fragments of reality, which you will then organise into a meaningful sequence. My only response is that I must acknowledge that our conceptions of artistic work are polar opposites. After having tried your working method, I am convinced that the result will be mediocre, and as an actor, that I won't be happy with it.

But above all, and aside from my acting credibility, this disagreement has given rise to an even more fundamental one: our radically divergent ideas regarding loyalty, courtesy and respect for others. My mistake was that I didn't react at the time, although I was already feeling this way. I am now paying the price for this

mistake. Your “trailer” is an outburst of violence, and has caused irreparable damage to my private life, to my honor and, worst of all, to my wife, who is devastated by the lies that you are spreading about her. I hereby formally object to the use of shots in which I appear, as well as to the use of shots in which my wife appears or is mentioned, in your films, this one or any others to come.

Michel Houellebecq