

# *senses of cinema*

## Perception II: *Mindwalk*

👤 Keith Uhlich 🕒 February 2001 📁 Overlooked & Underrated 📖 Issue 12



**(Bernt Capra, 1990)**

The beginning.

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*Most pilgrims who come to  
the Mount  
Enquire much and are quite  
right,  
How the church was founded  
At first, and established (1).*

Politician Jack Edwards (Sam Waterston) and poet Thomas Harriman (John Heard), both long-time friends, arrive at the French monastery of Mont-Saint-Michel. Jack has just lost the United States presidential primary and, faced now with a senate re-election campaign, feels the need to get away. Thomas is on a self-imposed exile in France. “I thought you couldn’t live anywhere but in New York,” says Jack. Essentially Thomas feels that France has the romance and inspiration that the rest of the world currently lacks. Nonetheless, both men do share feelings of stagnancy.

The same might be said of Sonia Hoffman (Liv Ullman), a former physicist and former American citizen who now resides in Mont-Saint-Michel. Her visiting daughter Kit (Ione Skye) is bored with her mother’s behavior. She wants her to get out and meet people instead of remaining always in solitude, reading books and contemplating theories. After yet another mother-daughter disagreement, Sonia decides, like Jack and Thomas, to take a walk.

So begins the trajectory of these three characters on an intersecting path. They come together by chance in one of Mont-Saint-Michel’s church towers before an elaborate clock. Thomas’s offhanded comment to Sonia about the merits of such a machine starts a conversation that will last for most of the movie proper. Covered, among other things in this conversation, are the theories of such philosophers as Rene Descartes and Isaac Newton; the natural state of the earth; mechanistic thinking vs. holistic thinking; and an answer to the question, “What is life?”

That last age-old question receives a verbal answer in the film, but it is more the posing of this and other questions supported by the visual and aural power of its cinematic properties, that attracts me to *Mindwalk*.

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The film and I came to each other at the right time. I was in high school, feeling restless, much like the characters. I longed for intellectually stimulating interaction that most of my peers did not, perhaps could not, provide. It was on the video for *Toto Les Heros* (Jaco van Dormael, 1991) that I saw the trailer for *Mindwalk*. What initially attracted me was the scene where the characters sit conversing on a far-reaching beach, the only sound being their voices mixed with the wind. The post-apocalyptic sense of the image appealed to me, along with the aural desolation. What an intriguing idea to be one of the last three people on earth – all thinkers surviving on that basic tenet of human interaction, the conversation. Would the film live up to my now heightened expectations?

Happily, it did. In fact, it exceeded them. There was more to *Mindwalk* than just that sublime image, though the film did not take place in a literal post-apocalypse. For one thing, the characters were intriguing, thanks in no small part to the actors involved. Through their honest portrayals (which I describe in more detail below) their characters' predicaments spoke to me. This, in spite of the age difference and occasionally misconceived dialogue such as Thomas's "in the middle of my own mid-life crisis" spiel. Through the film, I came to an understanding that questions about life transcend most boundaries and that conversation is a pathway towards understanding those questions. My mind swam with the ideas and possibilities put forth within the film. Where did the film come from? What did it mean?

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Enter the scientist.

*Mindwalk* is based on the book, "The Turning Point" by Fritjof Capra who also co-wrote the film's screenplay with Floyd Byars. The basic tenet of Capra's belief system is holistic thinking (recognizing the interconnectedness of the universe) as opposed to mechanistic thinking (deconstructing the universe into pieces). In the book, Capra convincingly argues his points for holistic thinking, yet it reads, for the most part, like a manifesto. This is not the wrong choice in book form, but for a film the ideas could have quickly become insufferable were it so one-sided and dogmatic. Fortunately, Fritjof enlisted a competent collaborator.

Enter the artist.

Bernt Capra, Fritjof's brother, is the director of *Mindwalk*. Bernt, for the most part, is a production designer more recently working on *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (Lasse Hallstrom, 1993) and Robert Altman's TV series, *Gun* (1997). Prior to *Mindwalk* his main production design work was on television-movies. Bernt is credited with *Mindwalk's* story, and he makes an interesting and challenging choice in filming it as a conversation. The characters could become mere mouthpieces for Fritjof's theories with the scientist coming off as the enlightened soul to the two ignorant travelers. Also, the idea of a movie focused on a sole conversation is risky in itself, especially when conversation comprises the film's action. Excessive dialogue can grind a film to a halt. Perhaps this is why conversation films are so rare save for *My Dinner With Andre* (Louis Malle, 1981) or *Before Sunrise* (Richard Linklater, 1995), among few others.

Nonetheless the brothers Capra transcend the conversation film genre's limitations. Location is key, and the choice of Mont-Saint-Michel helps immeasurably. As Saint Francis of Assisi reflects in the above excerpt from his poem "La Chanson de Roland", Mont-Saint-Michel is a place of enquiry. For the purposes of the film, the Mont reflects a point in time (specifically that of Descartes) that the characters admire, examine, and question. It acts in juxtaposition to the forward thinking characters, by remaining rooted (architecturally, scientifically, etc.) in the past. Jack says at one point, "You can feel the place watching you", and indeed the tarnished, yet massive, stone structures, not to mention that aforementioned clock, breathe life into the conversation that a lesser location would not. In effect, the Mont is a character in itself that helps to temper the ideas expressed, balancing any propagandistic qualities inherent in the material. For all the thoughts expressed, one never feels that one is being preached to.

Visually, the film is impressive. It shows that Bernt Capra has a competent knowledge of film's possibilities. Here he composes his shots triangularly, placing the three characters in varying positions according to their relationship with each other. This emphasizes the shifting nature of power in the conversation. Sometimes it shows how the characters are in agreement, as in the lunch scene where the three discuss the atomic bomb's destruction to Earth and to peoples' mentalities. Other times the blocking shows the restlessness of the characters as when Sonia sits steadily at the triangular head discussing the world's medical crisis, while Jack paces impatiently and Thomas stands at a point outside observing. Science and politics argue while the arts observe.

Yet, as I've intimated, the characters are not mere mouthpieces. Casting is another key in this regard, and all these actors possess great performance ability. Liv Ullman as Sonia has a pleasing naturalness, something often reflected in her work with Ingmar Bergman. Here, her face is particularly world-weary and hints at the underlying distress her character feels in her personal life, outside of her theories. She espouses Fritjof's beliefs, but it never becomes tiresome, because one can sense her own troubles behind it. And even though the mother/daughter subplot is inherently weak (weakened further by the whiny performance of Skye), Ullman manages to find some kernels of truth here too. Sonia's daughter is a representation of all those unseen people that she has abandoned or vice-versa and Ullman explores that theme with subtlety and grace, her eyes, body movement, etc, making each mother/daughter interaction a triumph, on Ullman's part, of understated pain. For all her theoretical and external truths Sonia is at heart a troubled soul and perhaps the character most in need of a new perception.

Conceptually, the weakest of the triptych is Jack. Sonia and Thomas we might interpret, as I've suggested, as reflections of Fritjof and Bernt. Of all the characters Jack initially seems more a stereotype of a politician, rather than a character created from personal experience and research. But any one-dimensionality is undone by Sam Waterston's performance. He has the pleasing voice and demeanor of a superficial politico, but it is contrasted with his character's naiveté. This is an interesting trait that Waterston explores. His character is not unknowingly naïve. On the contrary he seems to have no choice. At heart, he believes in what politics can be and strives for the best. Thomas calls Jack "Candide" at one point and it's not far off. Jack *has* to be optimistic and it is quite unsatisfying. Waterston reveals Jack's pain through his optimism and thus invests a potentially weak character with great strength.

John Heard plays the role of Thomas with aplomb. He's often the comic relief of the proceedings, but he rarely becomes a fool (save for that "mid-life crisis" statement and one or two ill-written jokes). In spite of this, Heard shows us that humor is Thomas' way of dealing with his mystifying life. He has a rambunctious sense that most artists possess, but you can see here too a world-weariness that has played on his ideas and perceptions. He, for the most part, agrees with Sonia's beliefs, but, thankfully, does not become wholly absorbed. He questions that which he observes and, fittingly, has the last word on the proceedings. At the conversation's end, Thomas quotes a poem by Pablo Neruda called *The Enigmas*. The poem's title, and its last stanza, effectively sums up *Mindwalk's* conversational triptych and the movie itself.

*“I lived like you probing  
the interminable star,  
and in my net, at night, I awakened  
naked,  
the only catch, a fish trapped in the  
wind” (2)*

\* \* \*

...and the end?

## Endnotes

1. Henry Adams, “La Chanson de Roland” by Saint Francis of Assisi, *Mont-Saint-Michel & Chartres*, Doubleday Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1959
2. Pablo Neruda, “The Enigmas”, *Canto General*, XCII.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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