In chapter 2, we clarified the process by which different components of special edition DVDs are produced. Particular attention was accorded to the commentary track since this is one feature specifically enabled by the format itself. At its best, commentary by directors and screenwriters can afford a glimpse of the care and deliberation behind the production of movies: how details are carefully weighed for significance, how patterns of meaning are built up and maintained, and how the editing process shapes meaning out of conflicting visions. It also shows the limits of intention, that is, the ways in which contingency and chance in shooting a film can become part of meaning. For those unaccustomed to thinking in terms of the deliberate processes of construction, selection, and concentration crucial to art, these commentaries—delivered by authoritative figures such as directors, writers, and set designers—can be a valuable, pragmatic introduction to the study and enjoyment of film. In this chapter, we would like to examine one facet of the DVD’s reorientation of film, the new prominence it gives to questions of intention, both directorial and cinematographical, and to speculate on the curious fitness of this recrudescence for the present moment.1

Intention is as vexed a concept in film studies as it has been in the study of literary texts.2 Nevertheless, in the last 20 to 30 years, both fields have seen a decided retreat from authorial or directorial intention toward analysis of interpretive conventions. According to more recent formulations, meaning is not inherent to a text, but something a community of readers or viewers, acting in loose accord with various interpretive protocols, agrees to infer. More recent scholarly
turns to history, while applying specific historical contexts, have at the same time conceded that these very contexts are multiple, if not endless. Such reflexivity, which brings with it a plurality of meanings, is the hallmark of poststructuralist interpretation. Directorial commentary tracks have a peculiar salience at such a moment. While directors, like authors, are not always the most accurate or reliable commentators on their own work, many directors provide a consistent set of protocols for their films and display a self-consciousness at least as well developed as that of most critics.

Our approach to directorial commentary runs counter to the common critical practice of discounting the agency and intentions of authors, directors, and other artists. In any act of interpretation or reception, there are many suggestive connections that one can make between a given work and an earlier work of art, some external condition, or the circumstances of its production. Only too often we are faced with a superfluity of possible links, whether of influence or context, many of which seem, at least on their face, valid, and the choice among them impossible or at least indefensible. But there are some links that we are unlikely to make unless the author or director makes them for us. Our point is not to privilege directorial commentary, but to situate it. Like all commentary and criticism, it deserves accord only when it is useful, and it is useful only when we understand the circumstances under which it was produced and the functions it carries out in a given circuit of reception. What is useful about audio commentary is that it tends to direct the commentator’s attention to the film itself—to the experience of visual mobility, that is, to the flow of images, the movement of the camera, and to the sequence. Here directors, simply by virtue of their position, have certain advantages, not so much of having access to putative intention, but in their surer grasp of the circumstances of production than any outside commentator.

The question then becomes one of the nature of directorial commentary. We can better understand the particular situation of the director making an audio commentary by comparing this activity to that of giving an interview. As Timothy Corrigan notes, the interview is one of the few, documentable extratextual spaces where the auteur, in addressing cults of fans and critical viewers, engages and disperses his or her own organizing agency as auteur. Here, the standard directorial interview might be described according to the action of promotion and explanation: it is the writing and explaining of a film through the