

Introduction

Over the last eight months, I have had the pleasure of collaborating on two distinct productions that have both tried and tested a multitude of skills, characteristics, and inner-most ideologies. The first of which, was Alex Jones's *Stationary Bike*. As an adaptation of Stephen King's short story from *Just After Sunset*, the acquisition of this narrative bore a level of importance to all of those involved. And with such a long and established relationship between oneself and the director, it was prime breeding ground for emotional contagion. But as one creative partnership was tested, another blossomed between myself and Miriam Nosworthy on *Category Is*. This ambitious documentary, surrounding drag queens of the local South-Walian scene, paved the way for a reconstruction of one's own understandings – forging new ways of thinking and, ultimately, **a transformed Cinematographer**. Where one had once been obsessed with the technology of filmmaking, the singular words of a greater language (metaphorically speaking), a confidence in the construction of sentences emerged. One had undergone a major evolution, spawning a confident head of department from amongst the jargon.

Establishment

At the heart of it, filmmaking is shooting – but cinematography is more than the mere act of photography. It is the process of taking ideas, words, actions, emotional subtext, tone, and all other forms of non-verbal communication and rendering them in visual terms.

(Brown, 2012).

One could easily simplify the role of a cinematographer down to a person who oversees the imagery for a film. To do so, however, is to disregard the relationship between them and the director. My experience of said relationship had been established through years of collaboration with Alex Jones. Many preceding projects had conceptualised the notion that we both understood one another – a standardised partnership from concept to delivery. What this meant was that Alex could brief me on a list of core elements that we wanted the piece to embody, and that I was trusted to go away and formulate the visuals – albeit most of these formulations were commonly done on the sets of smaller projects that were more in the moment. We worked best through spontaneity. We had the skills to adapt. Reflectively observing upon this behaviour really shone a light on its detrimental attitude to the creative process though,

We are inclined to think of reflection as something quiet and personal. My argument here is that reflection is action-oriented, social and political. Its 'product' is praxis (informed, committed action), the most eloquent and socially significant form of human action.

(Kemmis, 1985).

To contrast and, more importantly, to evolve this environment, signified a change of thought when approaching this director's most ambitious production. Active experimentation gave way to an approach in which I followed more traditional avenues of research and development. Lines of discovery that rooted themselves in numerous testing sessions beforehand and, though a failed venture, detailed shot lists and storyboards.

With regards to *Category Is*, this was my first time collaborating with Miriam. My previous work had provided her with an experience of what to expect from myself, but I can't say that she knew what the vision for her project was going to be from the outset. Interpersonal emotional contagion ran

rampant due to a lack of familiarity, trust and emotional bonding. This greatly affected the organisation of the production. The absence of past collaboration was indicative that I may have carried a certain level of intimidation with me onto the project. Though, to have once critiqued this point was to naively discard the idea that an element of professionalism is often rooted in the first encounter. There would be no understanding of delays, no empathy, no excuses. I was poised to deliver when asked. This led to a project in which I delivered to my best capabilities, often exceeding what I once believed to be metaphorical ceilings.

Core Skills Developed

With regards to core skills, the first and foremost development was with communication during *Category Is*. My concrete experience in operating as an effective head of department (HOD) neither exceeded a very small group, nor had it been challenged to evolve in the workplace. With the increase of the production's scale due to advice Miriam received and reflected upon, I was subsequently permitted to crew up to a level in which I could finally deliver what had otherwise been previously limited. I took it upon myself to sit down with every candidate for all the roles which, from my reflection upon *Stationary Bike*, were not confined to my immediate colleagues alone. What *Stationary Bike* had solidified was that I was prone to picking colleagues of whom I could feel confident around, people who I felt that I could collaborate with without feeling nervous or shy. This turned out to be a mistake as these people were not the best candidates for the job and, as a result, I failed to deliver a level of practice that I routinely hold myself to. So, when it came to crewing *Category Is*, I offered roles to people who were unknowns. Considered an industry risk of the highest regard, but through meetings I began to assemble my team. Bringing on additional camera operators in such a fast-paced environment such as the theatre filming provided issues. These people were selected where I had knowledge of their past work and experience, ensuring that they could at least be trusted to attain footage of a usable standard. One example being Celyn Rees, somebody who I knew was experienced in the acquisition of documentary-style footage as I'd researched her wedding company videos and past University films. Ultimately though, the defined structure for the documentary aligned itself with the theory that what I personally captured could be adequate coverage for that filming day – b-roll to provide anchorage to what would be covered in the subsequent interviews. As demonstrated in the artefact however, it can be seen how the theory was not executed according to plan, but the implementation of these additional operators provided enough coverage for the editor to create a product that could meet Miriam's initial vision. Despite this, I think the epitome of my communication experience was with my Gaffer. This was the first production that I'd ever had somebody dealing with that side of my department, and the selection process was entirely why Aaron was placed in a position that he could benefit the whole production. From the initial discussions over comparative productions, to the lighting plans, our communications skills placed this production onto a whole never for myself. His expertise allowed for our collaboration to travel the entirety of Kolb's learning cycle multiple times. From our individual concrete experiences of lighting for camera, to the reflective observation of how our lighting was impacting the emotional conveying of key subject moments, the cyclical learning experience proved to be on such an intense scale. Our partnership was birthed from an active experiment with giving new students opportunities reserved for more mature students and, upon reflection, my only regret is that I did not have such a mentality in the preparation for *Stationary Bike*.

Secondly were the improvements in problem solving, gained through *Stationary Bike*. As mentioned previously, the planning did not translate as coherently into the production period as I

would have liked. I would say that a large part of the problem was a result of my inexperience with shooting complete coverage as my style usually leans towards shooting for how I see the cut – and efficiency is always the priority with our production bracket. Other issues developed through a lack of time with the location, as contacts did not respond to repeat requests. Additionally, this was second to the ever-present issue of the spaces being either off limits or occupied within the house. Consequently, the translation between testing area and the actual space did not agree. Therefore, compromising the design of key shots such as those developed for Richard upon his bike. And as foreshadowed earlier, our location contacts became difficult to work with, similarly compromising elements such as our scheduling and logistics of working within the house.

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

(Confucius, cited in Hinnett, 2002).

To combat this from my department, shots were engineered on-site. This did not prove to be impossible due to my previous experience and ability to adapt, but I believe that the product was compromised significantly due to these problems. In the end, the editor was able to create a product that Alex was happy with, so I believe that my role was successful and the skills to problem solve under such stressful circumstances were validated.

Research

Stationary Bike was pitched to be a psychological thriller, with elements of horror. With comparable films such as *1922*, *Gerald's Game*, *Misery* and *The Shining*, the film was poised to take on a bleak look. From rigorous research across photo-centric platforms such as Instagram, I assembled a mood board of images that reflected the desired look. This served as my concrete experience moving forward, visually influencing – in conjunction with the aforementioned texts – all work after. The core issue with my approach to this film was that I had never truly knowingly experienced a Stephen King narrative. Therefore, I could never properly reflect upon its construction, and further a well-informed analysis. This lack of information was lessened with the consumption of the comp texts, but it never truly allowed for me to connect with the piece in a way that another cinematographer may have. To contrast this thinking, and to reflect more positively, is to have seen this as an opportunity for me to approach a dated narrative with a fresh perspective – something which all my previous work has been subject to given my non-film background. The following quote seems appropriate,

Professional schools cannot directly teach students to be competent in any and all situations; rather, the essential goal of professional schools must be to form practitioners who are aware of what it takes to become competent in their chosen domain and to equip them with the reflective capacity and motivation to pursue genuine expertise.

(Sullivan et al., 2007).

This motivation drove me further into research for this production in particular. An example being that with the decision to cast an actor of a different ethnicity to a typical King narrative, I took it upon myself to strive for the best representation. With the history behind Kodak's Shirley cards, and how representation of people of colour (POC) fared on-screen, it felt like a duty that I could attempt to meet even at my level of resources. Though the other elements of what I needed were not provided, I was happy that we at least tried – we had actively experimented to try to be the change

that we wanted to see in this industry. And from the formation of concrete experience in this area, future work of mine will be better served.

Alongside the filming of Richard's present-day scenes, we also took great consideration in the production of his past – the homemade Super 8mm movies featuring his late wife. My research into 'imperfect' filmmaking had granted me the confidence to go forth and simply film as if I were an ordinary person who wished to collect memories through a cherished medium. The ability to do so gave the production a unique brand of connection, "A practitioner's reflection can serve as a corrective to over-learning". One would hope that viewers registered with the instigator, responding in such a way that they remembered the days where they may have captured a memory that has bore the brunt of time, but it survives a loved one or a cherished place. We actively experimented further, even providing Richard's actor with the tools to go forth and craft these intimate moments with his colleague. Upon reflective observation, this may not have proved to have been usable footage, but the main thing was that we weren't afraid to conceptualise the idea.

The big development for *Stationary Bike* came in the form of a YouTube video, merely something that popped up in my suggested videos list. For something so small, it rocked my understanding of cinematography to its core. My previous experience of shooting narrative revolved around the idea of static frames, heavily due to my inability to have correctly executed movements, but also because I framed a photograph – letting the action take the eye away from composition. This video evolved my style, generating more involving visuals. The main quote that I took away from the video, was the advice he gave Robin Wright,

Behaviour over time. It's a fraction. So behaviour is the most important thing, of every piece of material that you read, that you perform in, and you direct. Look at the behaviour.

(Wright, 2017).

The assembly of these 'Finchers' as I colloquially named them, were applied in a limited capacity due to the issues highlighted previously, but they ultimately did provide a different dynamic when compared to the other shots generated as a product of my more classic design process. Reflecting upon the scale that these new shots had upon the greater process certainly proved that inspiration can be found anywhere. Joseph A. Raelin put it succinctly,

What is strange or contradictory should produce zeal in the activity of the reflective practitioner because of its potential to disclose new knowledge.

(Raelin, 2007).

And as the 'Finchers' crossed over into my work on *Category Is*, resulting in the fundamental decision to execute a handheld videography approach, the behaviour became my new concrete experience. They would not nearly have been as effective had it not been for the boundary breaking that the production instigated. The appraisal of what it meant to be able to confidently enter the Drag Queens' space had struck hardest, as witnessed in the transition between initial talent filming tests and the final product of filming at the Savoy. Where there had been no familiarity through personal experience of this representation, my reflection upon the necessity to better myself through exposure is what led to a triggered evolution of character. To put it in the words of David Boud (1985: 34): "A new cognitive map may emerge, or a new set of ideas may be identified".

Conclusion

To conclude on the challenges of this year is to close a chapter of real change within my professional life. Where I had once been a preacher of the technology behind filmmaking, the projects undertaken; along with their research, trials and tribulations, have been reflected upon in the forging of a new way of thinking. And as this transitions into experience, I begin the cycle of learning once more. Just as Richard returns to his bike, and the artists of Cardiff don the persona for another night, the cycle continues for,

Reflective practice begins “where practitioners are problematizing their practice and learning afresh about both the knowledge and skills and attitudes that their practice demands” (Jarvis, 1999: 178).

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