

My name is Ben Wheeler. I'm a twenty-two-year-old cinematographer at the start of my career, a career that will supposedly take tens of years to realise. It doesn't matter how enthusiastic, confident or willing to learn I am, I am reminded that it will take years of experience before I can occupy the role that I want. Maybe I'm stubborn, naïve, or even ignorant to assume otherwise. But I want to live that life right now, to visualise the stories that strike me now – not in my forties. I've worked hard over the last four years of university, going from nothing to framing visions constantly. I've sacrificed time with those I should've valued more than my work. From this I've earned countless opportunities that I am eternally grateful for, and I've seen the reality of the dangers we face every day in servitude of the craft – Mark Milsome. And it's now more than ever that my career path matters, for I'm fighting time here as much as I fight it on set. The clock's ticking, and I'm only getting older.

What's the worst knock back/rejection you've had?

Consistently people mentioning my age, 24, which bugs me.

- Justin Brown

My time at university has always been used to practice my craft wherever and whenever possible. The exploration of technical helped to solidify the knowledge of the theoretical, helping me to go forth onto projects with the security of knowing what almost every action would produce. Combined with my exploration into the visual style of David Fincher during my major project component, there was a fair investigation into what my cinematography was evoking in audiences. Though this wasn't, and still isn't suffice in my opinion. It could be argued that these greater journeys through styles are what form the many years in the run up to one's career pinnacle, and therefore this advancement is totally expected, but it isn't the rate I'm content with. My time on *His Dark Materials* (HDM), providing I'm asked back to reprise the VFX Data Wrangling role on every season, gives me a rough projection of six months on the job and six months off per season. Season two starts shooting soon, throwing me back alongside another set of cinematographers that I can study again thoroughly. Obviously not a single piece of research can ever be presented in my academic studies due to an ongoing NDA. But a quick Google search indicates there are six books in the series, which could all be adapted for TV in various ways. That time off permits me to explore a multitude of styles in depth before I approach an application to the Masters (MA) Cinematography course at the National Film and Television School (NFTS). Though that puts years between my current position and a theoretical job in London doing what I love, it allows for me to build a strong list of industry contacts, experience what's at the high end of TV production, and garner the life experiences that provide undertone to all of the finer aspects of cinematography. And in no way do I intend to pause my practical work in the craft to make way for this plan, if anything it echoes the surgical shooting style of celluloid – demanding that when I do shoot it's precise and exactly what needs to be shot. I think the break is also appropriate because I'm only just starting to experience the true variety of projects out there. For instance, within a few weeks I would've arguably finished a music video with a logistical demand larger than any student short I've put my name to in the four years here. On the contrary though, is of course the argument of whether London is even worth it at that point. Unless this momentum is continued, what is the likelihood of me even being able to work on more narrative pieces between now and my application? Speaking to David Luther on the set of HDM, I put to him whether he felt the course was vital in his career. He may not have walked out of the NFTS into a massive production, but it was a case of him then being there to accept the commercial jobs that kickstarted his career – which would go on to earn him a role in *Sherlock* and

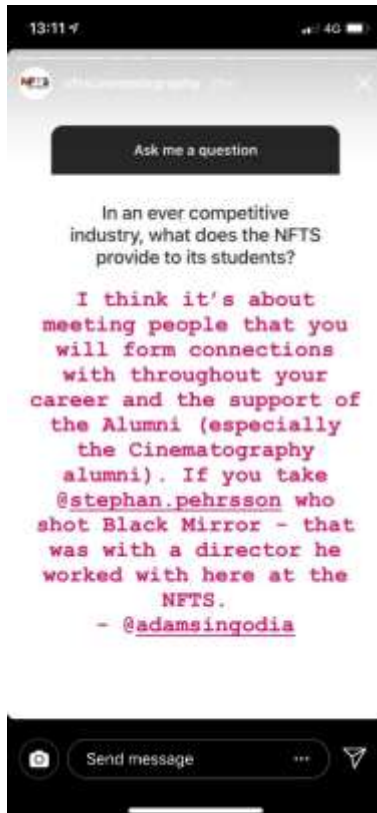


Figure 1

now *His Dark Materials*. In a recent Instagram question and answer session hosted on the NFTS MA Cinematography account, I put to them the question of what the course provided to its students in an ever-competitive industry [Figure 1]. I wanted to gauge their own interpretation of how the investment translated. I suppose I looked for a traditional response in line with Oxford or Cambridge, expecting a level of prestigiousness to shine through. And even though the course page advertises that their graduates are in “demand”, the response fell in line with what other alumni have said – it’s who you meet there. Putting my NFTS aspirations to various HDM crew garnered a variety in responses also. One individual advised taking the enormous course fees and paying off a ‘shit-hot’ first assistant camera to secure me a job on something high-tier. Whereas some of the camera department had discussed how some cinematographers enter the world through the school only to lack the understanding of what the department does. This always results in them bearing a toxic attitude that leaves their department resenting them. So, they subsequently advised me to spend a year or two as a camera trainee before pursuing the school so that I’d have that knowledge of the trials and tribulations.

One of the most well-known graduates of the MA Cinematography programme is of course Roger Deakins ASC, BSC. A loose analysis of his early life reveals the intention to become a painter, enrolling in the Bath Academy of Art. In college he attended Roger Mayne’s photography classes, and subsequently became inspired by him – influenced in his new way of seeing things. Eventually he made his way to the NFTS to study his craft. Now obviously it’s far-fetched to draw career comparisons to such a legend in of the industry, so I’m more focused on what he took with him to the NFTS. As his wife described of their recent NFTS visit, Deakins recollects the course being unstructured in comparison to its current state, though it supported his self-exploration of the craft. Being able to shoot fifteen films over his time there definitely impacted his knowledge moving forward into the wider industry. Though his photographic experience and subsequent documentary filmmaking was what allowed him to capture the human element – something he still adamantly describes as his key motivator in all undertaken projects. I feel as though I need to almost conduct my six months off as artistic periods. Like Picasso, perhaps these periods should be rooted in a distilled study of a movement or style. Maybe even something analysed from my time on set. It almost calls back to my technical studies at the beginning of any sketchbook. A time to engross oneself in the raw technique of portrayal such as a still life. Deakins also shared with his wife details of how he used to camp out in the unused offices of the school, along with other students who hadn’t received grants. Maybe a change of place is required to shake up my understandings?

Charlie Jenkins is a first-year student at the course. Looking back on work points towards a spike in 2014. He graduated from The Arts University Bournemouth, won the Kodak Student Commercial Award for Best Cinematography, won the Oswald Morris Award for Cinematography, and finished as a finalist for Best Cinematography in the Student Etudes Competition at



Figure 2

Cameralmage. This would point to his graduation film being his springboard into the awards and wider recognition. Between then and his intake year (January 2019), his portfolio focuses on much shorter form dramatic pieces, but is inundated with commercial and music video work. Similarly, I've positioned myself to graduate with a commercial aspect in the making – Iris Dive Media – though it remains to be seen whether the current projects I've worked on this year amount to anything external to the course. Further research into Jenkins' online presence does surprisingly point out that he lacks an active website, and that his LinkedIn remains out of sync with his current status. Though it does appear that he's been working for around two years on his own short film as a director and cinematographer. A short film with considerable budget on display in the on-set photographs. With an average of three projects a year (2016 and 2017), he certainly embraced the time between his graduation and application to the NFTS. What Jenkins presents to the discussion is whether the commitment to HDM is ultimately going to get in the way. As much as it is a great opportunity to network, it's also a massive time sink. Though counter arguments include the finance accrument for NFTS and the resources/knowledge obtained from the field. Either way, Jenkins also fits the average age range of students joining the course [Figure 2]. And considering my current age is only twenty-two, is there such rush to arrive on the course right now?

Michael Filocamo was recently praised by the NFTS for him being signed onto an agency as he graduated from the course. The course does advertise that in its second year it aims to teach students about the business side of cinematography, promoting the meeting of agents. Though the repertoire of the agency in question, McKinney Macartney, boasts more than a few high-profile cinematographers working in the UK today. Filocamo looks to have shot around five shorts in his first year at the school. His quality of work does seem to be above the NFTS average in part, somewhat looking to be owed to his work consistently being run past a professional colourist. A small detail I've noticed is that he also harnesses a good relationship with the local rental houses. What really brings Filocamo forward from the others is his attraction to 'Visual Arts'. He totes a creative palette to his work, coupled with a very stylised way of approaching the craft. I'd like to think that perhaps my idea of the artistic periods could run a parallel to some of the work Filocamo totes as his most unique style, albeit not the same but a way of combining the standardised cinematography with a breath of fresh air. Filocamo's work also finds strong roots in the LGBT movement, with some of his pieces forming representations of human identities. One must question whether his signing signified a progressive direction for the agency, something that they could use to their advantage. And with respect to his achievements, his BAFTA acknowledgement likely lends him recognition in the British filmmaking scene. Ultimately I think Filocamo embodies a style of cinematography that the NFTS wouldn't likely attract if they were to say pick from a pool of talent that study the archetypal craftsmen. It begs the question whether one should also arrive at an application with a portfolio that explores more than key figures, more than studied movements of the past – but a post-modern take on humanity and how the camera moves throughout it.

To conclude, I honestly think I need to take the money from HDM and see more of the world. I think I need to lose the filmmaking equipment, and to just take a small camera into more

experiences. The human moments are existing in various ways, all around me, every day. It funnily begs the question whether I even need to be capturing these moments or just living them.

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