

Evaluative Report – Alexander Haydn Jones (P139954)

My name is Alexander Haydn Jones and this is the last essay I will ever write as a film student. I started university when I was nineteen years of age and I am finishing just shy of twenty-three. The task of this essay is to identify three separate artists that relate to my prospective film industry role and then, in turn, to explore patterns in those artists' own development from emergent talent into leaders in their field. My three artists are Richard Linklater, Joe Swanberg and Jim Cummings. These filmmakers are from the independent cinema scene and I have chosen them particularly to examine how they made their debut features. They all made their respective films in different time periods, however, the DNA of how these films came to life and how these directors came to the forefront are very similar. I shall now highlight how I, as a filmmaker, can learn from and use the analysis of my chosen directors for my own future career.

In terms of the context for my essay, this is best explained by understanding my ultimate goal, which is to have made a feature film by the time I am thirty years old. I have ideas of what that film may be but I do not yet know if those ideas will come to fruition. I am at the beginning of my career, I still have lots to learn, but this year I met my target of making my second short film, 'The Night We Met' (Jones, The Night We Met , 2019), to push myself as a filmmaker yet further. My prospective film industry role is that of a writer and director – those skills relevant to these roles are what I set out to learn and develop on day one of my degree. Over the course of my university career, I experimented on a variety of projects to test my abilities with varying degrees of success. In truth, being a film student in the safe and secure environment of university is not the same as the harsh reality of making a living

in a cut throat business. Now I am at the end of my university career I have to look further afield if I am to take my future career seriously. A good place to start is to look at other writers and directors who I have grown up watching and research how they made their start in the industry. What was their first move? What did they do to get where they are today? If I am to reach my goal, I need to analyse what my chosen exemplars did so that I can truly evaluate whether this is something that could be useful to me.

The first filmmaker I have chosen is 'Richard Linklater' at the start of the wave of independent cinema in the early 1990s. During this time, the emerging filmmakers changed the way that you could make a film, including Richard Linklater. His first film, 'Slacker', (Linklater, 1991) was released in 1991. The film was about the people of his hometown Austin, Texas. The film had no real narrative and was designed to be made with only the experience and resources Linklater had available to him. Linklater enrolled in a filmmaking course towards the end of university and from there he experimented with super 8 cameras, making various shorts to explore his ideas. Some of those ideas would later inform 'Slacker' (Linklater, 1991). So how did he make it? Linklater raised the \$23,000 it would take to make the film from various sources - a nine to five job, the Austin film society, and ma'd out credit cards, a technique used by fellow filmmaker Kevin Smith with his film 'Clerks' (Smith, 1994). While neither recommend using these fund raising techniques, it was a sign that these two men would do whatever it took to make their films. There was no grand scheme to Linklater's plan, Linklater never saw the possibility of a career or job. As he stated "It was the kind of film I could make at that time with no money," (Moyer, 2011). However, if I do want filmmaking to be my career, what can I learn from Linklater?

Nowadays, the blue print of what Linklater did is not uncommon. In fact, the Linklater early films' 'model' is still what many filmmakers use when making their films today – consider 'Blue Valentine' (Cianfrance, 2010) by Derek Cianfrance and 'Blue Jay' (Lehmann, 2016) by Alexandre Lehmann to name two. What filmmakers also have now that Linklater did not is the world wide web enabling connections and collaborations on productions with people from all around the globe. When Linklater came to be a presence in the filming world, the market was not as over saturated with content as it is today. However, what Linklater did have was the every day networking channels that existed in the then film industry. In particular, Linklater gained attention through word of mouth with his film 'Slacker' (Linklater, 1991) and while networking at film festivals. With my first film, 'Stationary Bike' (Jones, Stationary Bike, 2018) I won an award for best student film, and this allowed me to gain the experience of networking with fellow filmmakers at The Copper Coast International film festival and The Bristol Independent Film Festival. To see the number of people all trying to do the same thing as me was an eye opening experience. That said, the number of film festivals running today compared to Linklater's time has grown exponentially, evidencing the evolution and growth of filmmaking around the world as well as the benefits of the niche film festival still – the question now facing film makers, is which film festival to target and prioritise? So for an up and coming filmmaker, can I follow in Linklater's footsteps? Probably not wholesale, but to emulate Linklater's beginnings are not impossible. Starting with a 'normal' job to help raise money for my projects could be a start. While I have crowd funded twice to different levels of success with my own short films, that means that I can bank on my experience of doing so and as an option for revenue and profile raising. Finally, having experienced both organising and enjoying the success of film exhibitions, I now have contacts within the film exhibition cadre, and I have already started

to grow my own network. However, my biggest learning take away, is that if I am to make a film, I have to make a film that not only showcases my talents but is, realistically, a film that can be physically made. With that in mind, I examine my next artist.

Filmmaker 'Joe Swanberg' released his debut feature 'Kissing on the Mouth' (Swanberg, 2005) in 2005. It was created in a documentary format with interviews with real couples about relationships and sex. He had no money to make a big piece; he had just graduated from his film degree. Unlike Linklater, Swanberg saw that the reality of the industry was that no one was going to help you and you had to do it yourself. He once stated that "If everyone is going to ignore you, then you have to start producing film after film and eventually someone is going to notice what you are doing, even if the films are total crap." (Ferrari, 2018). So that is what he did, he made movie after movie, with his biggest budget being only \$5,000 as that was all he could afford to spare from his freelance work. Swanberg further stated "The only way you're ever going to make any money is if you invest in your own movies." (Ferrari, 2018). Like Linklater, Swanberg used the film festival route with varying degrees of success. Nevertheless, this experience was also a light bulb moment for Swanberg as he realised that Linklater's blueprint of theatrical release was not the only way to make a film. Swanberg saw an opportunity - the untapped potential of online streaming services.

Swanberg realised after his first few films that producing online web content would allow him to jump from three movies in five years to eleven films in one year. With that in mind, my second film has been designed to be released online rather than for film festivals. For me, film festivals are just one way to get your film out there. My first film 'Stationary Bike'

(Jones, *Stationary Bike*, 2018) could only be released to festivals for contractual reasons, but for my new film I want to see what opportunities there are with releasing my film purely online. I am no longer just a film maker, I am my own marketing and distribution team. For the last two years, in particular, I have strived to build an online audience showcasing the content of my films and connecting with people who want to create and watch similar projects. Unlike Linklater, does Swanberg offer a slightly more realistic approach to filmmaking world? I think so. Being a filmmaker is not all about Hollywood and fame. To me, the future of film does not rely upon the studio system; the audience is out there waiting to be found.

The final filmmaker I examine has taken both Linklater's and Swanberg's blueprints and created something of his own. Jim Cummings last year released his debut feature 'Thunder Road' (Road, 2018). Before this, Cummings created and released several short films which gained him a following of thirty-four thousand followers on Vimeo and YouTube over a period of eight years. Then in 2016, he released a short film on which his feature film was based. 'Thunder Road' (Road, 2018) was made for \$200,000. It was funded in part by the creative distribution fellowship grant from Sundance which won Cumming's \$33,333. He further supported the film with his own money and two Kickstarter campaigns. As with both Linklater and Swanberg, Cummings went through the film festival system, and released theatrically through festivals but he also used Swanberg's online game plan to self finance his own distribution. In turn, he retained all rights to the film and used the full power of social media. Cumming's used the promotions offered by Facebook and Instagram to hit his target audience, having studied the statistics gleaned, – that is, age, gender, geolocation, and duration of of those who watched his short film. Being his own marketing and

distribution team, Cummings limited his ads to those 10 – 15 miles from where the film would be played in local cinemas and released his trailer alongside other similar titles at the local theatre. No longer was filmmaking purely about the art and showing people what you had created. It was equally about you as a business mind.

So what is there to learn from Cummings? I believe he offers a real insight and realism to pursuing a career in film. It is true he shares the same groundwork of festivals to network and see what other creators are producing. Both Linklater and Swanberg were fresh out of school when they made their films, however, Cummings took the time to learn, grow and understand his audience. When I release my film this summer, I intend to use Cumming's blue print of self-distribution to the test and start to fully build an audience. There will no doubt be failures, not everything will work, however, like Cummings, I intend to learn from my failures as well as my successes. Like Cummings also I intend to keep examining and learning from my audience as well as the tools with which to connect with my audience and other collaborators in whatever guise they may appear, whether that be backers, actors, or other like-minded and skilled film makers. I believe that I have just hit the tip of the iceberg in what is possible.

In conclusion, my chosen artists as examined above were filmmakers who started out knowing little and with nothing. They made short films after short films. Some were film students, some were drop outs and some were neither. They all made films about what they knew, the people they knew and the way they talked. They were genuine films. They sat back, took a second and thought about what they could physically make with what they had. They invested in themselves as their goal was not about producing gigantic

blockbusters with special effects and explosions. It was about making films which explored who they were as human beings. Some max'd out credit cards; some built an on line following; some crowd funded; and some gained sponsorship. All of them, whether they were making something big or small, made it anyway they could. They showed their films to anyone who would watch; submitted to every festival possible; networked as much as they could; and made no excuses. They just did it. Now I need to forge my own path and I have all these avenues that I could take. I can learn from these filmmakers to help shape my future and one day maybe be an example another film student uses when writing an essay about what sort of filmmaker they want to be....

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