

Research in Practice Essay

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An exploration of the confessional art form and how this has translated to my cinematography in terms of producing emotion and intimacy within a shot.

In this essay I wish to explore the importance of depicting intimacy through cinematography by looking at a series of established cinematographers alongside practitioners such as Nan Goldin a confessional photographer. I wish to explore how taking from these practitioners can result in pieces that are not only insightful but relatable. I wish to address my own pieces as metacognition as a form of reflection is “a dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skilful” (Donald, 1983). I believe that this as an exploration is important to delve into in terms of both my current and future practice as it will create an outline for what I have achieved as a cinematographer currently and acknowledge how other established practitioners work. I wish to focus on confessional art and being able to portray intimacy and emotion effectively as it will allow me to effectively express my stories and visual captivations. I desire to be able to produce meaningful pieces that can hopefully help those around me whom are facing the same struggles as myself as “...intimacy is good for people. Intimate involvement seems to promote human well-being” (Parger, 1995). So, regardless of the form of intimacy people are receiving, it is still relevant in every aspect of life, even in film practice. Therefore, the intentions for this essay are to identify where I am as a practitioner, how I have reached this level of skill and what I wish to achieve by the end of this semester.

Firstly, I would like to inquire into why understanding how intimacy can be portrayed through the lens is important and how it can transcend a mediocre piece into a promising one. An example of this is a short film that I recently came across on ‘Honest and intimate depictions’ an article from the British psychological society (2021, p.92), called *Borderline Coffee*. Which is a piece created by Susanna Stahlmann and led by the Mental Health Foundation for the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival. It is a short piece that delves into borderline personality disorder and intrusive thoughts, a very confessional based topic once you understand that this is a personal experience of the writers. I found this piece to be very inspiring and depicted the struggles of mental health in a surreal yet serious manor. There were a series of promising shots that highlight my take on producing a successful piece with the right use of camera portrayal. One scene that stood out to me the most was where the character is set underwater within a bath, fully dressed, looking completely lifeless. The camera is placed at a mid-close up with mainly the mid proportion of the characters face in frame so that the eye is directed towards the centre of the face where you can evidently pick up on her somewhat numb expression. The camera is static and no movement is involved in the shot other than the bubbles of air and waves of water washing over the individual. I read this to be quite symbolic as although she seems numb, there’s still these ‘waves of emotions’ flooding over her. A very intimate display is captured between the character and her emotions. Being aware that this is a reflection-based essay I wanted to highlight these points that I had picked up on as this very much seems to be a skill I am starting to formulate. I had never previously watched pieces of media and actually taken them in, in terms of the technicality and visual dynamics. So, I am pleased to see that this is something I have naturally started to do. This in a way is also something that I must do in order to be able to produce pieces that aren’t so simple and allows me to understand the complex natures of symbolism and emotion, which can create realistic depictions.

Additionally, in terms of my current work practice, I have many unfinished pieces such as a piece that was based on following a depressive episode. I had every intent to produce this in a way that was doused in intimacy, confessed every ounce of emotion that I was feeling at the time and in a way project all those feelings onto something other than myself, much like

Stahlmann's piece. Which in a way taught me that what I created didn't have to always be so simple, stream-lined and traditional yet I could produce chaotic, non-linear and intense pieces. This was promising in terms of finding a style and approach that I could undertake within my practice and a way as to how I could identify myself within the industry. Unfortunately, I did not fully understand the skill and level of technicality that had to come with these types of concepts in order to take them away from being sloppy and poorly produced. Further research led into finding exactly how to produce scenes that were more on the intimate side with enhanced emotional undertones and symbolism. I found this information by going back to the basics, this being camera angles and movement. On the matter of my previous personal understanding on the use of specific camera angles and movements to create emotion, I had this notion that an extreme close up at eye level creates intensity in a shot and isolates the character to where the scene is focused on them and them alone. This being able to create a sense of extreme emotion whereas the use of something like an open wide shot at eye level gives the option for more neutral emotions to be portrayed. I believe that I obtained this understanding from basic film practice skills and possibly viewing lower budget films that didn't invest in the technicality of the shot too much. I came across 'How film makers manipulate our emotions using camera angles and movement' (wolfcrow, 2019), this article discussed in a variety of ways on how specific uses of angles and movement when combined can portray specific emotions in a more natural tone that isn't too overly manipulated to the viewer. It specified direct movements such as, like how a tracking shot can produce '...a fly on the wall voyeuristic feeling, like we're sort of eavesdropping on the scene.' (Kirume, 2009), this being especially evident when we are presented with both the character/characters and the foreground of the shot. From what I now understand as a cinematographer, this is used to create a scene where the eye is not directly restricted. For example, with an extreme close up, we are forced to only perceive what the director intended but with this tracking view, our eyes are able to drift around the scene and this allows us to take in more information with the relevance of both the location and movement of the character being in frame. Which can most definitely be used in terms of creating an intimate scene, giving knowledge on the state the characters in and the state of their environment, following that idea of nurture over nature possibly. In hindsight, this was something I had been made aware of during my workshops but I had not fully digested. I didn't quite consider how important the technical aspect of filming is, which is obviously vital for someone who wishes to go into the field of cinematography. I now understand, that it is not as simple as finding something that will look 'cool' or 'visually pleasing'. As a cinematographer we also have to take into consideration the psychology of the scene, how it will translate to the audience and whether the angle and movement contribute to the script and aid the story to progress. Cinematographer Ellen Kuras claims that "It's much harder to make a film now than it ever has been." (The talks, 2022), and from what I have previously discussed you can see that this quote has truly stuck with me. It has changed my perspective, that this industry isn't an easy one. Especially for those who wish to be successful in it. Consequently, all these skills and work processes have to be put in place and I have to be well equipped with them in order to develop as a cinematographer and overcome this hardship for making films. As in the current age there is an endless field of skilled individuals and equipment out there that if I do not familiarise myself with, I will fall behind. Furthermore, to correlate back to the main subject of this essay and how the confessional art form has tied into my practice as a cinematographer, I would like to discuss how it has allowed me to better demonstrate my ideals around producing confessional pieces that are carefully orchestrated to illuminate intimate and emotion heavy topics. The confessional art form by definition states that it is 'a form of contemporary art that focuses on an intentional revelation of the private self.' This from my personal understanding means that what comes from this art form, allows the

artist to truly embody the piece and detail private affairs in a way that empowers them. This type of conceptualisation of a narrative, is the exact route I wish to go down and have already begun to do so in my most recent collections of work. An example of this is a piece I had produced for 'The Unexplained' module by which I focused on an 'artist who was struggling with body dysmorphia'. A strength of this project that I deem most important was that it allowed me to create a vulnerable piece. A piece that confessed a side of myself that I had never thought to explore and as a result it began to unravel naturally and convey a series of raw emotions that were quite beautiful. The state of mind these scenes captured were in fact real, experienced feelings which I believe allowed the audience to instantly connect with the piece. Giving them access to understand what the piece was based on without having to verbally communicate the actual topic of the piece as it contained no formal dialogue only ambient music and I believe that this in a way made it more successful. So, in terms of this essay, I wanted to highlight this example as a reference point for self-reflection as it was a piece that I was able to finalise and complete. It incorporates these intimate and confessional moments that I discussed previously, which at the start of this semester I was unable to obtain effectively. Despite that, the issue with this piece was that it was a concept that I came up with and was passionate about at the time and so I went with it with no formal storyboards, ideas of shots or even many test shots before the final cut because I purely wanted to express a personal story with no regards as to whether it would be successful or not. Nevertheless, these are issues that I have highlighted in previous modules as weaknesses and I was still going to do so until a tutor directed me onto an American photographer who delves into the confessional art form, this being Nan Goldin. In brief terms Goldin delves into more 'taboo' topical issues and represents these within her work. After filtering through her most famous pieces and her outlook on the way she creates, she has truly inspired me and allowed me to reflect on my practice in a way that is a lot more positive than I had previously. I understand the importance of self-criticism as from failure we learn to succeed but with my personal work ethic, a continuous focus on the downfalls in what I produce can lead me to feel burnt out and not willing to try new ideas yet stick to what I know will be well received. "I usually work really instinctively and its afterwards that I think about what it means. I don't know consciously that I have these themes that run through my work." (Goldin, 2011), this being a direct quote from Goldin and voices that the way she works is instinctively. This initially took me a step back as I had this preconceived idea that if a piece isn't planned ahead with themes and has a true meaning before even putting it together it will more than likely be of poorer quality than those that have. So, where I had directed my lack of pre-arranged themes and fully planned shots to have always been my downfall, this does not necessarily have to be the case. As I discuss this form of work ethic, I am most definitely not disregarding the negatives this way of working can have. With regards to film practice at academic standards, I am fully aware that one has to understand and become well equipped with starting at point A, being pre-production and finish at point B, being production and completion of a piece. I understand that there has to be a level of development to a story or proposed shots as I have to get used to this narrative of working with a series of practitioners. This ranging from directors to DOP's and editors in order for a production to commence effectively and efficiently with budgets and time restraints in mind. Yet, what I wish to highlight here is that where I am in my practice currently. It is okay to explore different shots and frames without having a solid theme or focused meaning to what I am shooting. I believe it is somewhat a skill to be able to produce shots and then be able to discover the raw themes that naturally come from them much like Goldin's work. However, all this being said, and as I further into my degree with my final year, I most definitely will be taking into account that if I can work both instinctively like Goldin and also take into account aspects from practitioners like Ellen Kuras, an established cinematographer who works

quite differently to Goldin. Kuras' work ethic stands on the scale of "Every single shot has a story to it. Every single time you pan the camera, there's a reason for it. There's a reason why you choose the lenses you do..." (2021), which then I can somewhat combine the two and find myself in a middle ground where I can create instinctive pieces whilst also understanding how to execute them effectively, I will have far greater successful outcomes.

In Conclusion, this essay has informed a series of learning outcomes. It is quite hard to condense such an array of outcomes into a restricted word count but I believe I have been able to demonstrate the key concepts that have influenced my current practice. To a certain degree, I was aware of these ways of working in my previous practice yet I was not able to fully comprehend them until formulating this essay. I can now use these skills in a way that will allow me to produce more promising pieces, ones that I can wholeheartedly say I have put all my efforts in. In a way this allows me to achieve successes that are to the best of my abilities. As far as my future practice, I now understand what is required from me as a cinematographer. I must be able to not only use my storytelling and visual depictions as ways of creating pieces but also organise the technicality of shots in a professional way. Understanding what lenses work best, the way in which I film and the movement that will aid this in order to display clear emotional states of being. To further my practice again and what I intend to do now, is to focus my attention to lighting and colour theory. I believe these are the next steps I must take to become fully adjusted to the practice of cinematography. I wish to be in a place by the end of this semester where I am able to confidently identify myself as a cinematographer and create bodies of work that are unique and recognisable in my own style. With final regards to the focus of this essay, I have been able to digress through a series of examples and practitioners in the industry that has allowed me to convey how the confessional art form and the importance of depicting intimacy and emotion has influenced my journey as a cinematographer so far.

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