

Indra's Net Learning Journal

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During my university career I have worked on many short films, but none were really carrying a message that was truly personal to me.

Whilst starting to work on my major project I realised that this was my occasion to create something that was really personal, and that - once completed - would make me feel fulfilled as a filmmaker.

I was born and raised in the slopes of Mt. Etna, in Sicily.

Living under an active volcano - in the villages half way between civilization and wild nature - doesn't affect the



life of everyone, but it gives a choice: you either look down towards the city, or up towards everything else.

Since I was a baby I have always looked up: my passions grew to be rock climbing, mountain biking, trekking, skiing, paragliding and anything that - looking up towards Etna - my mind could think of.

I was the different kid in school, the kind that never understood his classmates when they were talking about the latest TV show or the fashion of the moment. Being different made me feel free of these invisible chains that I could see everyone carrying on their shoulders:

they were stuck on the ground, not able to pass that imaginary line that separated their world of artificiality to the one so close - but at the same time so distant - of the wild.

This being my life - looking at society around me from the point of view of an external - when I started to study philosophy in high school I immediately got interested in the study of perception, perspective and reality.

So during the three years of university I had the chance of expanding my knowledge on the argument in many essays and presentations.

After extensive research, I have reached my personal conclusion on the discourse in my dissertation: I realised that it is impossible to represent reality as an objective truth, so a documentary has to reinvent itself from its original definition as a factual report, to become a creative treatment of reality (inspired by Grierson's definition of documentary as "creative treatment of actuality")

But there was never that perfect chance to transfer all this on a screen. Until now.

Pre-production: the narrative structure

It is these elements of inspiration that helped me to define the narrative structure and decisions that I was going to use in my major project.

Learning from the works of Godfrey Reggio, and the film *Into the Mind* I decided the first absolute role: the narrative must be non-verbal.

It was imperative in order to be coherent with my research and inspiration, that the film would offer an experience with which the audience could have explored





the world around them through a different perspective. I didn't want my film to tell something, I wanted it to be an open window through which the viewers could look at things with different eyes. Everyone could then interpret and give their own personal meaning to the film.

Even though the film is created to be interpreted subjectively by the viewers, I still wanted it to tell as story. It would be a story that can be read in many different keys, but it was fundamental that the result wasn't just a collection of beautiful pictures with no meaning. Otherwise it wouldn't have stimulated the audience to research a message inside the film. So I developed a narrative structure based on different elements. First of all I decided to divide the film in three different chapters: Requiem, Call of Nature and Rebirth. This made it possible for me to use three very different styles and choices that would strongly characterize the subjects in the different chapters enhancing the differences and the similarities that are present in these three different settings of the film.

In the first chapter the city is the protagonist. I wanted to show such an everyday environment in a very different way, using timelapse to compress and accelerate time to





exaggerate the frenetic rhythm of the artificial world. The Repetitiveness of the city is enhanced by shots of all the same duration, accompanied by a soundtrack with a fast repeating rhythm.

In this chapter I planned to use no camera movements at all to enhance the stillness of the city chaos: fast moving but going nowhere. This concept is reinforced by the use of many same framings in the night section: the city repeats itself all over, never going to bed.



In the second chapter - Call of Nature - the protagonist is natural environment. In this chapter I wanted to emphasise the differences between the natural and the artificial world. I did so by enforcing the rhythm of the elements, that clearly counterposes to the one delivered in the first chapter.

Using again the technique of the timelapse (this time mixed with regular video footage depending on the subject in question) I was able to extract by compressing time the movements of some natural events that would otherwise pass unnoticed due to the length of time they take to reveal themselves.

Humans are forced to a perspective which is not only visual, but also limited by our way of perceiving the world. Time is one of these

elements that we experience in a way, but film can deliver in a different speed revealing some new interpretations of the elements.

Lastly the third chapter - Rebirth - is the coming together of the two chapters before: the return of humans as part of the natural environment, thanks to technology.

In this last chapter extreme sports are explored as a means for humans to return to be part of nature, using technology to blend in elements that are not necessarily made for us.



Instead of using artificiality to create a cage, we can use it to free ourselves even from our natural limits, conquering the most extreme and wildest nature.



To blend so many different elements together in a story that made some sense I decided to inspire from *Into the Mind* and introduce to the film a fictional character who is the silent narrator. The actual documentary is our

journey inside the reflections and thoughts of an old man, close to the end of his life. The



film becomes his search for a reunion with the circle of life in order to find his peace.

The name of the film: *Indra's Net* comes from an ancient Buddhist concept. It pictures a web of jewels where every single one is reflecting all of them. The interpretation is that in nature everything is linked together and what happens to one element is reflected to all, human beings too.

Production: expeditions and filming on location.

I chose to film this documentary mainly on Etna: the volcano that inspired me throughout my life to become the person I am now. Most of the filming was taken either on or in the area around Etna. The only real exception being another volcanic island: Iceland.

Etna is the highest active volcano in Europe with its 3350 mt. of altitude, it is an extreme environment, specially in winter when temperatures can drop under -20C° and winds can blow at over 180kmh. It is its extremeness that makes it an attraction for all these who seek adventure. But to me it was also something more: the area around etna offers a vast choice of environments



where I could find and film all of the elements of nature that I was looking for in my story. A river, the sea, ice and snow, volcanic and sedimentary rock, the fire of lava erupting from the highest craters and so on. Altogether the perfect place to be in order to film *Indra's Net*.

The choice of Iceland was made before the conception of *Indra's Net*. At the time my inspiration was simply to hunt the northern lights and film them. The footage I collected in the trip was not much, but resulted to be perfect to blend in the story.

I had to choose what kind of equipment use in my expeditions. I knew that the locations I was going to be filming were going to be difficult to reach and overall extreme for many reasons. So the choice was of the most minimalistic and light equipment I could use in order to obtain the perfect balance between professional high quality footage and actually managing to get to the location and film.

The final choice was 2 DSLRs (Canon 5d Mark iii and Canon 70d) with a lens selection that gave me a span from 8mm to 250mm with reasonable zooms, two GoPro cameras that I ended up to use as less as possible, one video tripod and one small photography tripod and a Canon CF305 camcorder that gave me a great electronic zoom and good image stabilization (which I only used to film the sports part chapter).

At this point the greatest difficulty was organising filming dates and coordinating so many different crew members and location guides to help.

I worked with many local guides, some local filmmaker and organizations, only thanks to the power of internet and google calendar I managed to organise many different people in the best possible way, also considering backup dates for possible bad weather.

The first trip was in Iceland, the year before the rest of the filming. The aim: hunting the Northern Lights.



I found out that there is a lot to know in order to have a good chance of spotting the lights: knowing the solar activity, the right period, the cloud coverage and air humidity and so on. Once collected all the useful info I set off to Iceland, where I discovered there was much more than lights in the sky.

Waterfalls and immense icy landscapes communicate a sensation of loneliness and self



reflection, and the Aurora Borealis is there to complete the whole experience with a touch of Magic.

Unfortunately the equipment I was able to

take was only a DSLR with some lenses and a very small tripod. Due to this the amount of footage I collected was not much, and the intervalometer for the timelapses wouldn't work in the extreme temperatures of the Icelandic nights (under -25°C).

The result was a small collection of footage and very short manually taken timelapses of the northern lights.

After the freezing temperatures and remoteness of Iceland, the second expedition - this time directly intended for the production of *Indra's Net* - Was in February 2017, in Sicily. But not

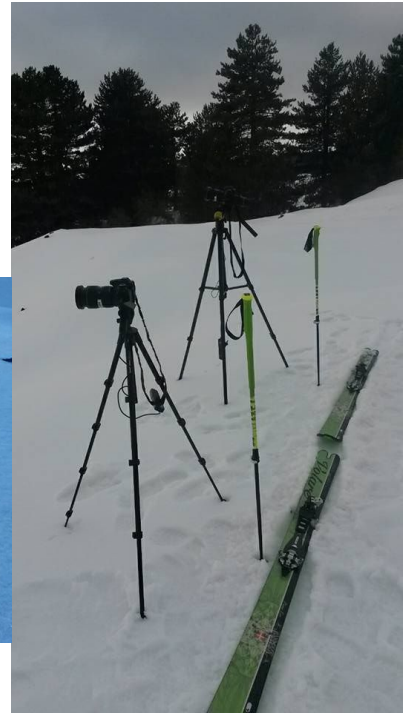


the warm beaches, instead the windy and cold Volcano.

In winter the weather conditions can be extreme, making the expeditions on Etna as if not more challenging as the ones in Iceland.

Using DSLRs and small portable tripods I took hours and hours of timelapse, meaning walking or cross-country skiing many times up Etna for more than 1000mt of altitude reaching even 3000mt asl. Sleeping in tents, or not sleeping at all to clear the lenses from the ice forming on the glass whilst taking night timelapses.

Facing the difficulty of filming in these extreme environments can easily draw your attention away from the technical and artistic elements of filmmaking. Fortunately I had an excellent assistant, always ready to help and remind. The result of the footage taken in this expedition was excellent.

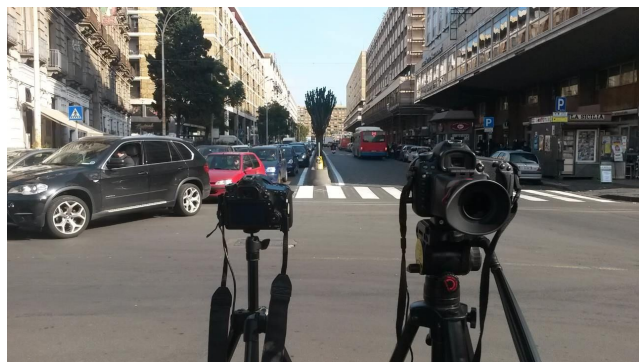


During the same expedition I took all the city timelapse in Catania. A much easier environment temperature-wise, but not easy at all for any other thing.

Calculating the rush hours in a city as crazy

as Catania is like looking for easter eggs in your garden: you never know where they are and when you'll find them.

It was a continuous search of the perfect spot at the perfect time. But with some luck and a good knowledge of the city the result was more than satisfactory.



After the success of the first expeditions, my ambitions for the second one were high: this time I had to film extreme sports and take all of the natural and city material I couldn't get in the first round.

Unfortunately this time the weather wasn't with me. I managed to film a great day in the skiing pistas on Etna with the Snowboard Etna Academy. The forecast seemed negative, but



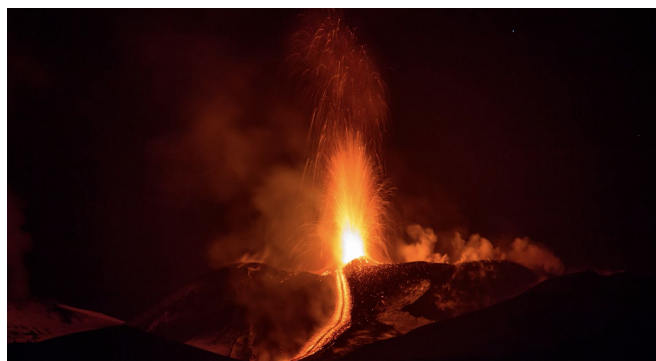
the cloudbase was getting higher and higher, so I thought it was worth to take the opportunity since the rest of the week seemed terrible, and it worked out really well.

I followed the snowboarders on skies with the camera mounted on a tripod that I held

upside down in order to get as close as I could to them with a fisheye lens to reduce shakiness.

After that lucky day I was supposed to film climbing and flying: I had to cancel the climbing filming due to rain and humidity, and could only get a small portion of the footage that I wanted for the paragliding sequence, and was not even satisfied with what I had.

The luck turned over when on the last few days Etna started erupting, letting me take some stunning



footage and timelapse of the lava fountain.



The last chance I had to take what was missing were the easter holidays, but I would only have one week since the other three were occupied by paid work, needed to cover the expenses of the production.

Fortunately this time the conditions for climbing were perfect, and I also had at my disposal a DJI Ronin with remote control to use as a vertical dolly with some ropes and pulleys mounted by a certified alpine guide following my instructions.



The result made it possible for us to take high angle smooth footage at over 40 meters from the ground.

Unfortunately we did not have a remote screen, so we were limited to our intuition on what the camera was framing.

The result was some great material to work with. But I was still missing

the paragliding footage I needed.

At this point I had to get on the final edit, and so I had to compromise the flying sequence to what I had.

Postproduction

The beginning of the editing process was incredibly time consuming: I had to render more than 800gb of raw stills into timelapses. For this process I used a combination of Lightroom for the photo developing and rendering from raw to jpg, then I used After Effects to put the timelapse together, exporting it from the full DSLR raw quality to regular 4K footage to use in Premiere for the final edit.

This process applied to all the material I had (over 1 terabyte) took me close to one month of continuous rendering day and night.

After all the timelapses were rendered and ready to be used in Premiere, I finally started working on the edit.

My vision was very clear, so I knew straight away what I wanted the narrative structure to be, and for the kind of film that was already a big step towards completion. What took the most time on the edit was the choice of the order of every shot: finding a reason for everything to be where it is and not elsewhere.

I decided to go for an associative/dissociative approach, linking elements of nature and creating distinctions between the subjects in question. I also took a simply visual approach in order to match framings for a smooth flow of images, concentrating the eye to the right part of the frame.

A very important aspect that required a considerable amount of time and money was music. Being a film that explored the rhythms of elements, the soundtrack affects drastically the result.

After long research sessions I selected a combination of ten music tracks with many different rhythms matching the need of every chapter. I bought them from a stock music website, and bought the rights for 1M distribution and broadcast for the total price of around 400£.

Conclusion

For the first time I have created and developed a film that is really a part of my internal persona: a very personal message to the world in the only form in which it could have been delivered: a perspective.

I feel that the film has met nearly all my ambitions, sometimes even going beyond my expectations. I feel that the paragliding sequence doesn't meet either my expectations or the quality of the rest of the film, but it was a necessary compromise. But the overall result is of great quality.

Thanks to the help, the feedback and suggestions, and the inspiration of many people around me I feel like I have succeeded in delivering my message: *Indra's Net*.

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