

Directing Specialism Report

Intro

"The Music of Erich Zann", is a short film adaptation of the story of the same name, by infamous Horror author H.P. Lovecraft. The decision to choose to adapt rather than create an original narrative was to tap into the growing market for Stephen King inspired content that had risen in 2017 as well as to appeal to Lovecraft's growing cult following online. With the short story also amongst Lovecraft's more infamous tales, as director of the project, the initial intention was to create a faithful adaptation that stuck to the narrative of the story with minor changes such as more fleshed out characters and visuals that payed homage to the story's minimalist language and combining it with the manipulative nature of Psychological Horror. Although the film did not turn out as intended, with many choices having to be changed to due various factors and attempting to take on a brunt of the preproduction single handily, the holes within the project allow for lessons to be learnt and taken forward into new projects.

The definition of a 'Director'?

The film director is arguably the most infamous position within film production, often being romanticised to the point where many do not realise the amount of work required to do the job successfully. They are the leading creative force for the project and it is their vision that carries a script from the early stages of preproduction, through to the final moments of postproduction. Described by Rea and Irving, they solidify this definition by mentioning just how crucial the director is to the production: *"The director alone has the "vision" of the whole film in her head, and she alone is obligated to make the sum of all her decisions throughout the process add up to its fulfilment."* (Rea & Irving, 2015). Such decisions that need to be made range from directing talent, all the way to the art direction and postproduction, with every element conforming to their artistic vision. To do this, the director must know their boundaries when it comes to communicating with other elements of production. DeKoven describes it by saying the one thing that a director needs above anything is: *"PATIENCE"* (DeKoven, 2006). By this, they mean that instead of taking on the role of an egotistical dictator, one should instead look to be more of a coach to others, taking a humanitarian approach to developing creativity and productivity. For example, when talking to actors, take time to develop the role with your actors (to be discussed in "Directing Research"), or make sure that a clear shot list has been developed with the DoP, to ensure there is no confusion between the two parties.

Directing Research

With little directing experience, there was an air of nativity surrounding on the position which gave rise to the opportunity to relearn the role of director by looking in detail into what they do and how to construct a story through it. One of the first elements focused on was how to direct actors as previously this proved a challenge due to a lack of experience. Schreibman's approach to directing proved vital throughout the project as it allowed a perspective of the actor, director relationship and how to develop a performance: *"Actors, like children have a major desire to prove themselves and succeeded at what they do. And actors, like children, need a creative environment and energy to nurture their work."* (Schreibman, 2010). While this comment may seem patronising at first, once applied to a practical situation it begins to show that there needs to be collaboration by both the director and the talent to achieve the ideal performance. An example in the film, is the difference in how the protagonist's performance was crafted differently to the others: through meetings and constant contact. During discussions, the aim was to keep a friendly atmosphere throughout and to

be much more collaborative with the construction of the performance, which previously hadn't been considered, in an attempt to honour Schreiber and boost the actor's ego. One area that hadn't been discussed before was the physicality of the protagonist to which the actor had many concepts to work from. Body language is a key way to help to portray a character as it allows the audience to get a better read on their personality through the way they move (e.g. cocky characters appear more confident). Korte explains how this information can be essential for the audience and its potential effect on the narrative:

"For one, the body language of a fictional character can be 'read' as a sign (symbol, index, or icon) in the understanding of classical semiotics. Of equal importance, however, are the cases in which the characters' non-verbal behaviour contributes to the effect of a text in addition to or independently of such symbolic meaning."
(Korte, 1997).

An example of this is the facial juxtaposition during the scene where the protagonist leaves his room to confront Zann. He begins the scene frustrated, signified by his facial expression and the aggressive way he is typing, when he decides to investigate the music, his face clears of emotion and a slight eyebrow raise helps to signify his changing mindset.





(The Writer – Scene 5c)

This emphasis in physicality and behaviour is one of the main keystones of David Fincher's approach to blocking both his actors and camera. In his works, Fincher will often block the camera around important movements or actions, highlighting their significance to the story and immersing the audience in the moment: *"By honing in on physical movements, Fincher wants to reveal the minutiae of how we express behavior. And for Fincher, behavior is everything."* (Stewart, 2018). An example is when the protagonist looks up from Zann's body in the final scene, the camera following him is designed to signify his realisation that he is not in control of the situation and is helpless.



Initially, through test shoots, a shot list that was compiled of shots that were to use the movement of the camera as a storytelling device, keeping with Fincher's ideology of saving movements for key narrative moments. These test shoots allowed us to develop the visual style of the film and allowed us to reflect on the film's transition from page to screen, breaking down what elements of the script may or may not adapt well and then sitting down with the screenwriter and making changes accordingly. Hinnert cites Confucius about the importance of reflective practising as a way to look back on the various elements, both positive and negative, and finding a way to move forward: *"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"* (Hinnert, 2002). However, when blocking scenes, there was little considerations for the size of the locations until further into preproduction meaning that when we built set and made it to location, the list needed adjusting immediately and lead us to abandoning the majority of our planned shots. In addition, this also meant that the way talent had to be blocked needed to be changed so instead of having long detailed sequences, they became much simpler camera movements reserved for key moments of the story.



(Test Shoot - Scene 2)



(Unused Scene – Scene 2)

Despite positive results from Writer's performance, there were issues concerning both the performances of the Receptionist and Zann. With the Receptionist, three actresses dropped out approaching production which left little choice but to proceed with whatever talent would agree for the role. This actress was from a strong theatre background with limited film and television experience and through her mannerisms, it began to show. There is a distinction between acting for the stage and screen as with the nature of theatre, it is a much grander, poetic environment when compared to most films more grounded realism, as described by Bernard: *"Whereas a stage actor is allowed a poetic voice whose words paint the picture, a film actor is actually in the picture, and storytelling becomes superfluous. The stage may consist of fragments and symbols. It is the rare film that does not emulate reality"* (Bernard, 1997). The juxtaposition between her and the rest of the film that eventually lead to cutting the character from the final cut as her over the top performance, in addition to using a different cinematographer at the time which lead to a different visual style, clashed harshly with the rest of the film.



(The Receptionist)

With Zann however, as he was such an important character to the narrative, he could not be cut. Like the Receptionist, his performance was very over the top during early takes, resembling a surreal, Berkoff approach to acting, meaning that much more effort had to be taken on the day to shape his performance. This could be down to the lack of characterisation when compared to the Writer, as Cannon and Gardner explain when discussing how important knowing the character and performance: “When you play a character in theatre, TV or film, you should know your character as well as you know yourself, so you can just exist and live.” (Cannon & Gardner, 2018). This stemmed from the lack of communication before the shoot due to time constraints and actor availability, meaning that either talent didn’t get time to develop their performance. In future productions, the aim will be to cast much earlier in an attempt to both rehearse and characterise with actors and spending more time casting screen actors more appropriate for the role.



(Erich Zann)

My Voice (Emotion Intelligence + Contagion)

As director, there is a responsibility as the leader to set the tone for the rest of the crew both on and around set. 'Emotional Contagion' (as coined by Hatfield et al), is the idea that one's emotions can be transferred amongst individuals through behaviour and social interaction for example, as Hatfield describes: "*a smile elicits a smile*" (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). In addition, as a leader, it is important to combine this with a good understanding of emotional intelligence: the ability to understand, perceive and control your own emotional state while being able to read others around you and act accordingly. Barsade explores this when studying the effects that leadership can positively or negatively have on a groups productivity: "*it is important not only that they leaders be able to impart their emotions to followers but that they be emotionally attuned to and influenced by their followers, so as to truly understand, empower, and lead them.*" (Barsade, 2002). Through the production, there were attempts to keep a high atmosphere to avoid the rest of the crew becoming fatigued or bored when idle. This included having discussions with various members of the team throughout the day, asking their opinions when it came to creative decisions. This included talking to both cinematographers when composing shots and asking them if they were content and allowing the editor to experiment with the footage before sitting down to create the 'final' cut. This approach to motivate others is shown to increase productivity as well as boost organisational commitment as shown through a study by Youssef and Luthans, which looked at how POB (Positive Organisational Behaviour) affected employee's attitudes towards there work life and emotions: "*the results of Study I support significant positive relationships among and unique contributions of hope, optimism, and resilience to job satisfaction and work happiness*". (Youssef & Luthans, 2007).



(Production Stills – Day 1)

Despite these scenarios, there were instances where unforeseen circumstances, led to moments where emotions and stress did influence decisions and lead to moral and productivity falling dramatically. First was the struggle of dealing with the stress of taking on the role as both director and producer. This does not mean both jobs could not be completed to an accepted standard (a short film was both directed and produced) however, having two substantial and differing roles did prove challenging to delegate time accordingly. Bal et al; explains why leaders struggle to cope as well when given too much to do with a limited time frame: *“Compounding the Stress for Leaders is that they are expected to manage a greater number of deliverables while having less time to devote to their people and fewer resources to work with”*. (Bal, Campbell, & McDowell-Larsen, 2011). During

this project, dividing work flow between the producing and the creative components of the film became difficult as shooting grew nearer and both jobs began to demand more attention. This was self-inflicted however as, earlier in production, the option was available to only direct but as most of the preproduction had been started, it felt natural to attempt both positions.

Second to this was the inability to deal with stressful situations towards the end of production which, combined with long production days, brought moral down drastically. Although many quote 'Murphy's Law', when it comes to film production: *"Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong"* (Spark, 2006), it is difficult to be prepared when something doesn't go to plan. On the final day of production, the actor did not arrive and instead of reacting to the situation immediately with action, as suggested in Forbes article about how to deal with stress in a professional environment (Goudreau, 2018), the immediate reaction was to become overwhelmed by emotions to the realisation that the final of shooting was going to be jeopardised and we could not finish as intended. This forced the opening and ending of the film had to be changed to a visual style, shooting the environment and using that to tell the story. Although the scenes were planned to feature a lot of B-Roll, directing in a purely visual style seemed alien when most of the research was focused on interacting with actors. It was this, in addition to an evolving narrative in postproduction, that lead to these scenes being cut from the final film.



(Unused Scene - Scene 1)

For future projects, it has been highlighted that, although these things cannot be foreseen, it is important to plan for as many situations as possible, instead of panicking and putting the project in further jeopardy. This reaction may also have stemmed from physical exhaustion as there was little rest between the first shooting days and the set build because of the limited time frame that was given. These large amounts of work being forced into little time, often working twelve-hour days for almost two weeks and soon led to individuals becoming tired and irritable. As Director, there were incidents where the deadlines and lack of time did start to affect mental health and in turn, more emotional reactions began to bleed through. Boyes explains the extent that overworking can affect one's emotional intelligence and decision making: "Overworking, irritability, and withdrawal can all cause increased arguments. Someone who is absorbed by their own stress may become less emotionally available" (Boyes, 2018). This highlighted the importance for personal breaks within production and in the future, production days will reflect this by allowing for rest between time demanding task and allowing everyone to physically and mentally recover before moving forward.

Conclusion

When reflecting on the time spent as director, the naivety of the role did begin to show as, due to most of the research being focused around interacting with talent, it left situations unprepared for and thusly, lead to large amounts of stress and anger. Despite this, there have also been a majority of lessons to take forward to future projects. For example, the use of characterisation in the Writer's performance when compared to the others, showed how discussing a role with talent and collaboration can lead to a much more complex performance. It is clear that through further experience and preparation, these elements will become second nature and will lead to further development as both a director and a leader as Koskinen and Pihanto explains that, through learning, a leader will keep developing through the process and this will begin to affect others around them: "Sustainability and continuity of learning initiatives seem to be much more prevalent in organisations where where leaders 'lead by learning' and are fully engaged in the process, assuming a leadership role in the transformation." (Koskinen & Pihlanto, 2008).

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