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Life At Twenty Four Frames

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Life At Twenty Four Frames

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Report

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Abstract

Life at Twenty Four Frames

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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This report is a chronicle of Allen Ho's work experience serving as cinematographer during his tenure at the University of Texas, Austin's Radio-Television-Film M.F.A. program from January 2010 to May 2012.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It was mid-January 2010 and two days before I was about to begin principal production on my pre-thesis film, “Parachute Kids,” and I remember panicking. It was more than the general ill feeling and anxiety you get before a large production, it went deeper than that...I was beginning to regret and question why I was in school to be a director. Personal issues with the producer, as well a cinematographer who could not always be there (the only two collaborators on the project) only exacerbated these negative feelings. My heart just was not completely in it anymore, at this point I had directed a number of short films and had found that dealing with actors, as well as having to take on the producing hat as most independent projects require from a director were things that I was not particularly fond of. After making my pre-thesis film, I felt that I had made the film that I wanted to make in graduate school and that doing a thesis film would have felt redundant, as I had nothing left to say as a director. The satisfaction of filmmaking for me came from the visual expression of ideas and emotions through images –through lighting, through composition, through color choices and the basic concepts editing and what it means to put a series of images together in succession.

I just came off a successful semester in the Fall of 2009 as one of the designated cinematographers of the UTFI course, a scene workshop class that brought together directors and writers from the Michener program, actors from the graduate acting program, production designers from the School of Architecture as well as graduate and

undergraduate filmmakers from the Radio Television Film department. Over the course of the semester, I was assigned to be the cinematographer on three scenes that were part of larger feature scripts. Each department had a mentor that oversaw the preproduction of the film and provided harsh but eye opening criticism on the completed projects. The feedback I received in this class was at times harsh but eye opening and it gave me confidence that I had potential to pursue this as a career.

Growing up in a more traditional Chinese family, I was taught to listen but to not speak up unless it was necessary. Naturally, I developed an introverted personality that would prove to be a challenge in a field that requires constant communication through collaboration. Perhaps it was this desire to express myself that led me to filmmaking and ultimately my path of cinematography. I found it came natural to me to express an emotion or a mood visually than with words. This aspect is important for the rest of this thesis report, as the body of this essay will be about how I've developed my ability to communicate, not just in working or social interactions with other filmmakers but also how I visually express feelings and ideas through the art of cinematography.

This report is a chronicle of some of the major challenges and successes I have experienced over the range of projects I have shot since making the decision to become a cinematographer.

Chapter 2: “Broken”

The spring semester of 2010 was a trial period for me on whether I was going to make the switch to the cinematography specialization, as I had to declare my intent at the end of the term. In this semester I was asked to shoot two undergrad thesis films and I felt that this was a good place to start and get my feet wet working with other directors. The first of these projects was “Broken,” a super 16mm short film directed by senior undergraduate Melissa Porter.

I had heard about the film through a friend and was intrigued by the story: A son coming to visit his mother who was hospitalized in a near fatal car accident while on a tryst with another man. I approached Melissa about shooting it and was upfront about my plans of exploring cinematography as my area of study and she responded very enthusiastically about having a graduate student on her film.

In our initial pre-production meeting, the first question I asked was what method she preferred when developing the shot list and storyboards...whether she wanted to shot-list herself and I come in to advise and interpret or if she wanted to come up with the visual plan together. I felt it was best to outline our working method ahead of time as to avoid any conflict in responsibility. Determining the working collaboration ahead of time between director and cinematographer I found helped facilitate communication throughout the production, as this would become an area of debate and conflict on future projects with other directors.

She chose to work on the shot list together and our first few shot discussion meetings were very productive. However, it felt at some point she was not giving enough

directorial input and I felt as if I was given too much control and freedom over the shots themselves that it directly affected the direction of the story. This also would become a running theme and concern in future shoots where the director did not have a strong vision for what the film would look like and I would be left guessing with mixed results.

In terms of the visual design of the film, I felt what I experimented with turned out to be a success. She knew she wanted to shoot on film despite my limited experience with the medium at the time but I was excited by the challenge, and saw this as an opportunity to explore options of the photochemical process that I had only read about it in books and magazines. In retrospect, it was this project that made me respect and fully understand the value of celluloid.

After some research and tests, I chose Fujifilm 400T as my choice of film stock to achieve a more de-saturated and almost pastel color palette to reflect the bleak nature and tone of the film. A technique that cinematographer Christopher Doyle, a cinematographer who I greatly admire, inspired my decision on the processing of the film. He used a pull processing method in which he overexposed the film during production and “pulled” it back to the desired exposure. The effect that this had on the film made the color more de-saturated as well as adding a silvery/milky quality to the highlights that I thought enhanced the alienating tone of the film.

The film took place entirely in a hospital and Melissa wanted a very sterile, foreign and alienating feel to the environment as we are suppose to identify with the fear and uneasiness of the son’s character. I made a choice to light the film with sickly fluorescent greens by applying a plus green gel to all the ceiling fixtures and lights to

make the hallways of the hospital appear more uninviting. Even the hospital workers in the background wore green scrubs to accentuate an alien environment. In the scenes where the son is in the room with his mother, I wanted to contrast it with the rest of the hospital environment by using a soft, faint, and warmer glow coming from where the mother rested in a coma.

I was very happy with the outcome of my visual plan in terms of the lighting, the photochemical processing and the overall look of the film. However, I believe the piece missed its full potential, as some of the actors did not deliver a convincing performance and there were some story arc questions that remained unanswered from the film's inception. For me, this first experiment as a cinematographer in graduate school gave me the confidence of shooting on film and gave me an opportunity to explore the different elements and techniques of visual storytelling. There is something about pre-visualizing something and then being able to follow through and execute that is of great satisfaction to me as a cinematographer.

Chapter 3: “Time For A Hero”

The second undergrad thesis film I shot was “Time for A Hero,” directed by undergraduate James Stevens. This was an entirely different experience from “Broken” in every respect, from content to execution. The film is an upbeat musical comedy about a wannabe superhero, Warp, who makes a turn into a supervillain after being ignored by the city he wants to protect. The script had singing, dancing, musical numbers and practical special effects, which were new challenges to me but areas that I wanted to explore.

James was the type of director that valued entertainment in film and he wanted to make something fun and enjoyable to watch and so I tried to reflect that notion in the film’s cinematography. One early decision was to shoot on a fixed zoom lens camera, the Sony EX-3, just based on the number of shots and coverage we needed to get in for the film’s four musical numbers and intermittent dialogue scenes, I did not feel we would have enough time to do lens changes. I felt I had to sacrifice a more cinematic look that you would get with a shallower depth of field in order to get more coverage to make the pacing and the rhythm of the film come alive. We ultimately did not get all the shots we wanted anyway but shooting on the EX-3 definitely gave us a lot more footage to work with in post-production.

In order to reflect the more cheery and comedic nature of the dialogue and characters, I suggested a bright and colorful color palette with an emphasis on primary colors in the lighting and production design. I lit each scene specific to the mood of the scene, keeping in mind the psyche of the characters. Most scenes that are in Warp’s

world have a blue and purple tone in the lighting, as his villain costume is a sharp purple color. I thought those colors also reflected the character's internal struggle of wanting to be a hero but ending up a villain. In the scenes where his character changes at the midpoint as well as the climax, there is a warm tungsten glow to signify the moment of change in the character's psyche.

One of the biggest challenges for me in this film was to use lighting and composition as a way to mask or bring to life the comic book world. I think I did a satisfactory job given the seven production days we had to shoot it. It was difficult without having a full team to execute elements in the production design and lighting but in the end it was well received by the audience. It accomplished what I think James wanted and that was to get laughs and make people feel good when they watched it. One of the things I wished we were able to do more but could not based on limited resources was utilize more camera movement, which is something I feel has been lacking in a lot of my work. Camera movement often takes time, a skilled crew and a higher budget...something not a lot of student productions have but something I definitely want to explore after graduate school.

Chapter 4: Bedside Manners

Towards the end of the semester another undergraduate, Brittany Washington approached me to shoot a “directing exercise” that turned out to be a great short narrative film. The film was called “Bedside Manners” and is about two casual lovers on the verge of break up after a routine sexual encounter. What attracted me to the script was that since it was a directing exercise, it was mostly dialogue instead of action like most short films are. My experience in the UTFI class showed me that dialogue scenes could be a place for a lot of visual creativity since it is the meat of any feature film. I felt that this project was worth mentioning because I regard it as one of the few projects that went very smoothly in terms of collaboration, communication, and execution.

For me, as a cinematographer, I hope for those moments on set when everything is going right and a scene is unfolding during a take and the performances are so realistic that it feels like magic. I attribute this to the careful preplanning that happened before principal production began. The actors were well casted, and well rehearsed and when I had come along, Brittany already had a rough shot list ready and a good idea of how she wanted the scenes to feel.

Brittany wanted this film to feel very realistic and raw and in our first meeting we discussed the kind of camerawork and lighting that would be involved to achieve that realistic feeling. I decided that doing handheld and using mostly practical lights to light everything was the best way to go. The handheld I felt would bring an uneasiness and awkward feeling to the breakup and compliment the instability of the character’s emotions. As for the lighting, we used floor and table lamps for most of it and worked

with the actors on the blocking for turning things on and off. A big challenge was that the characters needed be able to move around in the space so I had to do a general lighting setup with the practical fixtures in the room to give them the freedom to move 360 degrees if they needed to. I took a look at the storyboards and found a way to place the lamps in a way that maintained a very natural looking three point lighting setup that the characters turned on one by one.

One of the trickier scenes to light was the opening shots of the film, which is suppose to take place in darkness right after the female character had climaxed. Brittany was adamant about showing nudity in an artistic and necessary way and so I made the decision to use the direction of the light to help conceal some of the nudity with shadows. It was tricky as this was one of the first few times I've had to light a scene that takes place in the dark. I setup a soft HMI light with a half blue gel in the room and bounced it off the wall behind the actress to give a light blue rim on her back but silhouetting the front of her body. I also had a stronger light outside shooting through the window behind her creating a hard shadow on the wall to give a motivation of where that ambient light was coming from.

I really enjoyed working with Brittany on this film as our collaboration and communication was very intuitive and our strengths compliment each other. Filmmakers always mention the importance of chemistry between the director and cinematographer and with Brittany I shared very similar sensibilities. I will outline how our collaboration evolved in some of the later projects we made together in later chapters but this shoot

demonstrated to me the potential of how great a production can be with the right people, right actors and thought out planning.

Chapter 5: “Mother’s Day”

In the previous section, I mentioned “Bedside Manners” as one of the smoothest productions I’ve worked on and would like to contrast it with the next project I worked on, graduate pre-thesis film “Mother’s Day.” Director Jesse Klein had seen my work on “Bedside Manners” and expressed interest in working with me on his pre-thesis, which would be my first graduate level film I worked on since my first year at UT. He had a very simple story, one of a depressed man who is forced by his sister to visit their despondent mother on Mother’s Day.

Jesse was a very indecisive filmmaker, and was the type of director that knew everything that he did not want but did not necessarily know what he wanted. This was frustrating for the different department heads to establish a look and consistency for the film. The aspects of the production I feel worth talking about is how I learned that the director really sets the tone for the rest of the production and that making strong choices is a lot better than making uncertain ones. A term that constantly came up was the idea of what is “cliché” in film. Lighting choices or framing choices I wanted to make would be shot down and deemed “too obvious” or “too cliché.” After watching the final cut of the film, it felt like the film did not have a strong voice and I believe it is because a film viewer’s comprehension is based on an acquired understanding of film language or genre and if you violate those expectations, you risk alienating the viewer rather than engaging them. This trickled down not just to the cinematography of the film, but also the production design and acting.

An example of how I believe we violated convention in a way that did not work is the use of long takes that we shot but ultimately did not make it into the final cut of the film. We would film sequences that ran more than five minutes long where the camera would be static and characters would move in and out of frame. I would push to shoot close ups or things to cut into but Jesse believed that it would heighten suspense and that cutting into a character's close up would be the "obvious choice." One particular scene was one of those long takes where the character breaks down in the bathroom and destroys it out of a depressive rage...I really wanted to cover it more, getting some close ups before he broke down and breaking the scene down into more of an arc, unfortunately that did not happen and most of this pivotal scene was cut out of the film, and the production design and acting was wasted.

In the end the scenes I was happiest with were the moments where I was allowed to shoot a scene more traditionally, with a wide master and covering it with closer angles. The scene after the bathroom breakdown, there is an intimate moment between the brother and sister characters that has no dialogue but really hits emotionally I think because we jumped into the character's faces. I also lit the scene conventionally with low-key lighting, demonstrating the main character's bi-polar emotions of light and dark. I believe as a viewer, especially in a short film, you need to use conventions to your advantage, because they register more quickly at a subconscious level.

With "Mother's Day" I learned the importance of the director's role in setting the correct tone and morale for the rest of his crew and production. The more confident that people feel, the more likely they are willing to contribute and be creative on set. As a

cinematographer and leader of the camera, grip and lighting department, there is an obligation to take care of the many talented and hard working people that work under you. First and foremost I believe it is about setting a professional and welcoming attitude to those around you as well as being wary of how people are feeling. This awareness of responsibility to support and encourage your crew would become very useful in the shoots that followed this one.

Chapter 6: “Double Rainbow”

“Double Rainbow,” a graduate pre-thesis film, started production very soon after “Mother’s Day” and so I went into the production feeling very underprepared. Director Roshan Murthy was also disorganized going into the shoot and so a lot of decisions had to come on the fly. He had a great script about a middle school kid wanting to ask out a girl out to the school dance but later finds out that she was in a relationship with his sister, forcing him into a situation where he had to pretend he was gay to save his sister’s reputation. It was a very heartfelt script that had great dialogue, but there were a lot of preproduction elements that were not completely thought out that made it just a good film rather than a great one.

Early on I had advised that we shoot on a digital format, due to the nature of the piece that required convincing performances from child actors. Roshan had his heart set on shooting with film and so we ran tests of different stocks. I really wanted to shoot on a color negative stock but Roshan was convinced on shooting reversal film and since he was paying for the film, he won out. I knew shooting reversal was going to be a huge risk, and knowing how there was going to be a level of disorganization involved with the planning of the shoot, there was potential for disaster. Reversal was something I’ve never shot an entire film on, but I read a lot about how difficult it can be to get the exposure right and that if you did not have control of your lighting, it can lead to areas being over or underexposed since the emulsion does not have as much latitude as negative stocks. I regret not pushing harder to shoot on negative, especially now that color correction systems can replicate the reversal look without the danger of actually shooting on it.

This was one of the first sets where it was extremely difficult to find crew just based on schedule conflicts and we ended up with a lot of undergraduate students who were less experienced and had never set up a light stand before. Another challenge was that the film took place mostly with exteriors, and you need experienced grips to adjust to the changing light. This aspect of an unskilled crew coupled with shooting on reversal outdoors made things very difficult to control and maintain a good exposure. I did my best but if you see the final product there were instances where walls would be blown out, or extreme cases where the actor's highlights were overexposed but their fill side would be crushed in shadow.

If all those variables were not stressful enough, there was an incident on set where the film got unspooled in the changing bag. The first assistant camera tried to fix it for awhile before letting me know what happened and by the time I was informed, the film was completely unsalvageable in the changing bag. In order to risk damaging the film any further, we had to take it into a dark room on campus to re-spool the film. Luckily when we got the film back from the processing labs, the scratches and damage on the film was minimal.

The biggest thing I took away from this shoot was how important it is and how it is my responsibility to find a good, competent and hard working crew as naturally things are going to get more and more complex as I advance as a filmmaker. I enjoy being able to teach people on set, but was very overwhelmed by all the different risks involved with this film. A few months later, the film did considerably well and it earned Roshan a Directors Guild of America Narrative Jury Award and so I am happy that all those

problems with the production came together. It was one of those projects I know could have been better and wished I could have had a second chance on it.

Chapter 7: “Magpie”

The film I am most proud of that came out of graduate school is “Magpie,” a film that I not only shot but co-wrote and conceptualized. The film was originally intended to be my thesis film if I were to have stayed on the director’s track for my Masters of Fine Arts degree. At one point I thought I was going to pursue the cinematography track while directing and shooting Magpie but at some point during the Fall of 2010, I felt it was best that I stepped aside from directing and that pursuing cinematography full time was my best option of fulfilling what I wanted to get out of graduate school and the rest of my career. I ended up giving the script to a frequent collaborator of mine, Russell Bush, to direct and help co-write the rest of the film. This was the first time I gave someone else a script I wrote and intended to direct and I must admit, it was very difficult to negotiate and defer ownership and creative control especially since I would also serve as the cinematographer.

The idea for the film came from one image that was stuck in my head, the grotesque image of a man vomiting videocassette tape. The way I write screenplays generally begin this way, from an image that stays with me until I could contextualize its meaning. From there I began writing and had an outline for the scenes and emotions that I wanted the viewer to feel as the story progressed and I crafted a script about a father who finds his daughter’s sex tape, and in a surrealist moment of guilt, he vomits the video tape he just watched. My decision to give the script to Russell was not only because I knew I was going to pursue a career of cinematography, but I felt that he would bring a different perspective to the family relationships in the story.

Russell also had experience as a cinematographer, as he shot my pre-thesis film “Parachute Kids.” Long before our first production day, we already had conflicting ideas on how we were to approach shooting when we had to film the sex tape that the father character watches. Russell had experimental ideas of trying to create a real experience out of it by having the actors film it themselves without anyone but them in the room. I was vehemently opposed to the idea, believing that we were not going to get the shots we needed, and that it would feel contrived if we did not set the shots up ourselves. What I did not take into account was how the actors were feeling, since it was a very sensitive scene to do, but I still felt that leaving it to the actor to decide how it was going to look was going to be disastrous. We went along with his plan and when we took a look at the footage, we got barely enough of what we needed and it looked far different from what I had envisioned. Russell was extremely worried about the feelings of the actors, and we decided to just stick with the footage we had and work around it. In the finished cut of the film, the contents of the tape are much more obscured than what I would have done as a director, but it was still an uncomfortable scene to subject to a viewer as we had hoped it would be.

The preparation for the film was unlike anything I had encountered in graduate school at the time because we knew we wanted to have a full crew and we also wanted to replicate the professionalism that Russell and I had seen on professional sets in the past. After learning from my experience on “Double Rainbow,” we actively pursued strong filmmakers to fill in each crew role and did not have people doing multiple jobs as they usually would on most student productions. The production itself was long and we would

consistently go over twelve hours but the crew behind it worked hard and passionately. I took what I learned from “Mother’s Day” about the necessity of maintaining good crew morale, and would constantly thank and appreciate the people working under me, which I think motivated a lot of people to care about the project and work their hardest. At the end of the shoot after we were packing the equipment truck, I felt a sense that this was the best thing I had shot so far. It also gave me a sense of confidence that my skills were developing and I was ready to take on larger and bigger productions while still producing a high quality and professional product.

This is not to say we did not make a lot of mistakes along the way. We were not as prepared in preproduction going in, which left some scenes ending up not the way we wanted it as we were cutting the film. There was one important observation I realized about cinematography that has stuck with me from the shoot and it was an idea about the repetitive use of a type of shot to convey an emotion. For example, the use of a character in a big wide shot to create a sense of alienation with the large space around them was an idea that we thought if we used repeatedly, it would create an emphatic sense of loneliness. However, after we shot a sequence in the film where the main character wanders about his estranged daughter’s house in mostly wide shots, it felt like we did not get enough coverage. I found when watching that sequence that the viewer begins to comprehend that alienated feeling very early on and that once that sense is achieved, you can move on to another variety of shots to convey other emotions. I underestimated how quickly people digest images and wish we had another opportunity to in that scene to explore other emotions visually.

To reflect the dark tone of the film, I wanted to play a lot with contrast and was not afraid of using a lot of blacks and shadows in the film. This was the first time I shot on the RED camera and also the first time I utilized a widescreen 2.40 aspect ratio to make the film feel a lot more cinematic. I also used a black pro mist 1/8 filter as it helped soften the crispness of the 4.5k resolution RED image which I found helped it look a lot more filmic. For the daytime shots, I wished we had made the interior of the house a lot darker with more contrast from light and dark but it was difficult because of the house's many windows and not a lot of space for lights. One of the composition elements I experimented with was keeping the actors closer to center than off to one side, I felt that this accentuated the intensity of the film especially in the film's dinner table scene where the characters confront each other.

Despite it being difficult to negotiate creative control, I am still very interested in the idea of being a writer and cinematographer. Being a sole cinematographer, you end up only shooting projects that come to you, which can be limiting. I enjoy the idea of being able to write something and to only interpret it visually with another person handling the performances. With "Magpie," I was able to explore visually dark tones; moods and themes that I have always wanted to challenge myself with. It felt very satisfying seeing scenes that you had written in your head months ago coming to life and having that control in the composition, lighting and color-space.

Chapter 8: “Western Ghost House”

I am including a section on my work on the music video for a local Austin band Western Ghost House’s single, “Branded,” because it took everything I’ve learned on a technical level from graduate film school to achieve what we did on this production that was produced outside of school. It featured a crew of the best people I had ever worked with from the Radio-Television-Film department at UT. We basically had to build a working studio in a storage garage with no air conditioning, shoot it all in one night in sweltering hot weather and break down the set immediately after the shoot. These difficult parameters were necessary based on the budget and the timing of the production.

Director Brittany Washington wanted a dream-like quality to the piece as well as simplicity to the visual design and set. The concept featured a woman awakening in front of a mannequin who comes to life as the lead singer while she seductively dances around him. The video turns into more performance-based towards the end and I wanted to have flickering light bulbs that hang from the ceiling to be lighting the band as we moved around them. This is the first project I shot after “Magpie,” and you can see similarities in my approach in terms of lighting and color palette. I used a similar single source lighting method to create a contrast between light and dark that I feel adds a layer of mystery to the female subject and the band members. One of the new techniques Brittany wanted to try was the use of special effects compositing when the mannequin comes to life. This was the first time I tried any type of compositing so it was good for me to get some experience in shooting the layers that the effects person needed to make the composite.

The biggest challenge of this shoot was building the studio space out of a garage. I definitely learned how difficult it is to achieve a shoot like this outside of a school supported environment where we could just shoot in a studio and utilize the school's equipment. Since the budget was under \$3000, most of the costs went to camera and equipment rental. We had to pull a favor with a certified electrician to tie in to a power grid to provide enough power for our lights and then we had to distribute power to the thirty different light fixtures that would come down from the ceiling. The fixtures were also separated into zones so we had control over their flicker on a dimmer board. It took immense preplanning with my gaffer, Carlos Boillat, since we only had one day to shoot everything.

This was a high stress shoot based on the shooting time limitations that really tested the communication between Brittany and I. This was the third project out of four that I've worked with her but we faced communication challenges that we have not faced in the past due to the nature of the shoot. I was extremely focused on managing the camera and lighting departments and since a lot of attention was needed there, I think Brittany felt we were not communicating well. Whenever there was a delay in the lighting, Brittany would not understand why things were taking so long and it was inefficient for me to explain her exactly what we needed to fix given the limited hours we had to shoot everything. I think our problems also came early on because we had a history of working together and so we did not establish the roles between our collaboration on this piece from the beginning. I perceive that she felt that it would be more collaborative while I wanted more of a hierarchy of letting her make the decisions

while I planned the execution and interpretation. I think we both realized that doing a music video, a more visual format, our communication needed to be much different than say that of a narrative film. The problems that arose became basis later for what I wanted to do for my thesis exercises, which was work on the communication between director and cinematographer.

Chapter 9: “The Midwife’s Husband”

“The Midwife’s Husband” was a large-scale 35mm pre-thesis production directed by Deja Bernhardt. While she has made several documentaries, this was Deja’s second narrative film and she really challenged herself with the scale of this production. The film is about a love triangle between a burned out musician, his wife who is a midwife and a ranch hand mistress. In the script there are musical sequences, sex scenes, birth scenes that included an animatronic baby and a lot of production design elements. There was an unusually high budget to work with for a student film, and this actually presented some problems rather than allowing the production to run more efficiently.

I have never shot 35mm motion picture film and so I found that to be very exciting. We used the school’s Panavision Panaflex II camera and rented Primo lenses from Panavision, a set up that has been used for many major studio motion pictures. One of the things I explored and researched intensely was the relationship of the post workflow from production to what you see on the big screen. My big question came from noticing a difference in our film tests compared to what ends up theatrically at your local cinema. Not a lot of people seem to know the answer, but it was determined that the complexity of the machines that are used to transfer the film to digital have a lot to do with it. Despite not having the means to work with those machines, I wanted to make the film look as cinematic as possible. We shot 3-perf with a 2.40 aspect ratio and finished with a 2k transfer to get the closest thing we could to what professionals would do when dealing with 35mm.

One of the biggest challenges on this shoot I think had to do with the discrepancy between the experience level of the above the line crew and the below the line crew. This would be only the second narrative film production for a lot of the crew that was above the line and so I think trying to manage and lead a more experienced camera and lighting team was an area of conflict. For me, I felt caught in the middle of having the mediate that conflict trying to serve the director and the story while taking in consideration the well being of my departments. For example, Deja would have some wild shot ideas that did not serve the story and were very intricate to just toss out in such a tight schedule and it was my duty I felt to protect the crew as days were going far past twelve hours. I believe Deja was overwhelmed with both having to direct and produce such a large-scale production that at times she seemed really relaxed about the visual execution where other times she was very stringent. For example, I was instructed to light a night exterior of the house location and I took a still of it to show her what I was going to do and sent the lighting team off to execute. After spending a good hour and a half lighting it, she changed her mind and wanted something completely different even though we were running behind schedule and the crew was exhausted.

The inexperience of people in certain roles led to a lot of negative consequences on this shoot. For example, we had to completely re-shoot an entire scene because the script supervisor was not supervising the shots and the director was not paying attention to the monitor and no one knew if a certain prop detail was in the frame after we had shot it. Instead of moving forward, the decision had been made to completely reshoot the scene, forcing the grip crew to completely re-light a setup after breaking it down. At one

point, one of the crewmembers on my team broke down and it was because they felt their work was being undermined and unappreciated due to the inexperience and mistakes of other crew roles. What I drew from this entire experience was that I, and the camera/lighting department that I had hired, was starting to outgrow disorganized student productions. To work at this level with so much technical expertise needed to shoot 35mm film, operate hydraulic lift dollies, and power generators for lights, the leaders of the production need to have the experience and understanding to respect the crew, be extremely organized and compensate people for their time and hard work. I tried my best to take care of the crew and boost their morale by thanking them and even suggested for Deja to compensate some of the individuals that were putting in a lot of time and effort into the production.

Another negative incident that I wanted to highlight is a huge mistake made by a camera assistant that led to the entire film being shot at the wrong shutter speed. I take responsibility for not knowing the camera in and out because my approach to this project was that I intentionally did not want to learn everything about the camera as not to be intimidated by the use of 35mm. During one of our first setups, I noticed a knob on the back of the camera that looked incorrect to me, and I questioned the assistant camera if this was in fact the correct setting. They assured me it was and I asked again if they could please check the manual but he reassured me again. There was a level of ego that this assistant camera had which led to small incidents of trust here and there on set. Weeks later when we get the footage back, I found that I was in fact correct and that the knob which dictated the shutter angle was set incorrectly, creating a choppy effect for the

entire film. Luckily the effect is subtle and most people do not notice it, but it was definitely a mistake that could have been avoided. When I had informed Deja, I was glad she was not upset and she recognized that this was suppose to be a learning experience for everyone. On that note, despite all these problems that came from this production, I do believe everyone learned a lot and the leaders who were organizing the film realized what they could do better next time...I know I certainly did.

I believe that when you watch the film, you can see all these problems from the production leaking into the final product on the screen. Although I still think that the film works and has its moments, there are definitely mistakes and inconsistencies that you can spot across all departments. This film was a battle to make, and of all the films I had shot at UT, I definitely learned the most from this one. The film has not yet screened publicly and I have yet to see a final cut so I am unsure how the audience will receive it but I do feel a sense of relief that everyone took something positive away from the shoot despite how difficult it was.

Chapter 10: Thesis Project: Three Exercises

Pursuing the cinematography specialization at UT meant that there was a level of improvisation with what constitutes the education that I received since this is a school focused on directing. After working on these past films over the course of the last two and a half years, I felt I needed one more supplement to round out my education before I deserved to receive my degree. I felt that I needed more experience that was focused on my communication with directors and working to interpret their vision and not mine. It was perhaps a result of me coming from a directing background that I would try to instill my vision on some of the projects I shot, rather than serving the director's vision. This critical mentality that I had comes with good intentions, it comes from a place that passionately wants whatever I am a part of to succeed and therefore I can be heavily opinionated when it comes to collaboration. This aspect about myself is something I wanted to improve upon, to always channel that energy in a positive way and to express myself without being misunderstood as too critical. Therefore, I designed three small exercises that would require limited crew and lighting so that I can focus directly on my communication.

The idea was to work with director Brittany Washington on all three projects: a music video, a short narrative and a speculative commercial. I felt that since we had already worked on a number of projects together, she would be a safe candidate to explore better ways of expression and communication, especially given the difficult time we had communicating on the Western Ghost House video. Brittany also expressed an

active interest in improving her understanding of cinematography in an effort to better convey her ideas to a cinematographer.

In our first project, we planned to do a music video for The Eastern Sea, a band that we had done a music video for in the past. This was meant to be a very stripped down shoot, using two cameras to capture documentary footage of the band performing, hanging out and brewing home made beer (a past time of the band). Brittany wanted to shoot on super 8 but the budget did not allow for it so I came up with the idea to project the digital video on a screen and shoot that video with super 8. We worked together and did some tests with some nice results. We have yet to get the film back but we are hoping our cinematography experiment worked. If not, our alternative was to degrade the digital footage in post to achieve that “lo-fi” quality. Brittany and I both operated two digital cameras, which helped facilitate communication between us and gave her a better understanding of operating and being behind a camera. Since the video was to be shot in a documentary style, the shots would have to be decided quick and fast so I thought it would be a good way to practice our communication. The shoot went by without any problems, and was a good introductory exercise for my thesis plans.

In terms of working on communication, I wanted to move away from a tendency to reject or criticize an idea I did not like and instead work out a solution to achieve what the director wants in a way that suits both parties. While this music video shoot was happening, we were simultaneously planning the concept for our narrative short film project. Brittany wrote a rough script and pitched it to me that I felt was lacking and did not fully understand. I found as soon as I tried to be critical, she would be hesitant about

wanting to do this piece with me. After sensing this, I approached my feedback a little differently and was careful with my words about telling her that this may not be achievable but perhaps we can figure out how to make it work and there was a much better response from her end. I think one of the things I have learned is that while it may not necessarily make complete sense to me, I need to trust that it makes sense to the person who came up with the idea and that it is my job to try and interpret it into film language. This was certainly the case with “Bus Fair,” the short that we did for our second communication exercise.

“Bus Fair” is about a girl who finds a man’s wallet on the bus and is placed in a moral predicament of what to do with the money. It sounds like a simple concept but it featured a lot of challenges, as we had to shoot on a moving city bus with an ensemble cast of characters. I’ll be honest that I was hesitant about the depth and complexity of the script, but I put my trust into Brittany’s vision without being too critical and worked hard to work for what she wanted. It was not until we were actually shooting that I appreciated some of the more subtle complexities that Brittany had written into the script that I could not see from just reading it. This realization was quite satisfying, because I had really embodied a more subservient role as I feel like a cinematographer should and trusted in someone else’s vision.

The shoot also kept us on our feet since we were shooting on a working public bus and would have shoot around people who would board the bus. We had a shot-list but no shot schedule because we knew we would have to constantly adapt what to shoot to our changing surroundings. This forced a constant dialogue between the director, the

producer and I because we had to be on the same page and act quickly as sometimes we would only have a short window to get the shots we needed. It was a hectic shoot, but it was definitely successful and we ended up getting some really strong performances.

There were delays on the narrative short due to actor availability and organization that delayed our planned shooting dates and thus affected our plans for our speculative commercial. It was in our best interest that Brittany and I decided not to pursue the speculative commercial at this time so that she could focus on the postproduction for our previous two productions. Luckily, I was already planning another speculative commercial outside of school with directors Ashley and Leslie Saunders that I would use in place. The same idea for working on communication applied and I had a meeting with them early on to let them know my intentions of specifically focusing on communication throughout the process. They were very open to the idea and we had a constructive dialogue throughout our preproduction phase on feedback and pre-visualization.

The concept was a video look-book that would be produced over the course of a weekend for a local Austin clothing company, “Laced with Romance.” The story took place in the middle of the night, as a fully clothed model would travel through the city shedding pieces of clothing off piece by piece as she ventured outside of the city until she was almost completely nude as the sun rose behind her in nature. I understood as a cinematographer that I would not only need to interpret the vision of the director but also take into account the brand personality. The company has a very urban and vintage attitude about them, so I wanted to portray that visually and had planned to color time the piece with a retro vintage look of washed out but saturated colors almost like old reversal

film. While the concept was locked, we left a level of freedom in the shot selection so that we could be organic with the model on set and feed off of her attitude. It would also allow the directors and I an opportunity to think on our feet like the previous two exercises.

The day before we were scheduled to shoot, we received a call from the model and told us she could not work this weekend because of a medical emergency. This sort of setback happens every so often on a production and I worked it out with the directors that we would reschedule the shoot for the next weekend. We informed the crew and luckily we got most of them to change their schedule for us in such a short period of time and we were set to go for the following weekend. Scheduling was an area that the directors and I had a constant line of communication on because we had such a contrast of daytime and nighttime exteriors and so our lighting would be largely dependent on the movement of the sun as well as finding available light fixtures in the evening. We were planning to shoot around two sunrises and then two sunsets that we would pretend were sunrises in order to get the magic hour quality of soft warm light that we felt would display the clothes in the most visually appealing manner. Our call time was at 5am but we received a call an hour earlier from our model and she basically cancelled on us again, this time with very poor excuses. We were shocked that this happened to us again after accommodating the talent in rescheduling the shoot the previous weekend. We had money invested in the clothing rental, equipment rental, as well as the crew's time that were basically thrown away because of the talent's irresponsibility. We decided it was best to again delay the shoot to another date, and perhaps give us an opportunity to re-

conceptualize and re-cast another model. This definitely strengthened my ability to communicate with the directors and the production in this situation, because being a cinematographer you are required to make judgment calls when handling a problem like this, working to figure out a solution that will benefit the production as well as keeping in mind the work put in by the crew.

While I was only able at this point in time to complete two of the three exercises I set out to do, I definitely have challenged myself in communicating with the directors of each project. I feel as if I have matured a lot in just this one semester focusing on these exercises and as I graduate, will be ready to leave UT with a confidence that I have made most of my academic experience.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

Over the course of the last two a half years that I began this journey to pursue cinematography as a career, I have grown not only as a filmmaker but also as a person. You learn a lot about yourself when you work with so many different people and on so many different projects. While the successes are memorable, you learn so much more from your mistakes. From the first project I worked on as a cinematographer at UT to the last one, I have made a ton of mistakes but I found that as I moved on from one project to the next, I was growing and embodying those lessons learned and as a result, becoming a better storyteller along the way. I have challenged myself with different formats and techniques and experimented with different ways of visual storytelling whether it was through digital or through film. The great thing about cinematography is that there is always something you can learn and that there are infinite ways of expressing yourself through images. I leave graduate school with a better understanding of cinema but I understand that I will always be a student of film. Looking back on all of these experiences has given me insight into myself as well as a confidence to continue down my path as a cinematographer. I look forward to the challenges that have yet to come as I move on into the professional world. I am ready to write the next chapter.

Vita

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