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Zak Adams

Performance and Limitation in Direct Cinema – Film Statement

During my study of direct cinema this past year my approach to each of my three projects revolved in some way around the medium of film. The intention of this experiment is evident in my initial choice to shoot direct cinema inspired documentary projects on film rather than digital cameras, which would allow me the luxury of seemingly endless recording capabilities. In my thesis proposal, I argued that the limitations of shooting on film (both limitations within the frame as well as with the finite nature of the medium) would distinguish the projects from digitally captured films dealing with the same subject matter. The length of a film roll ended up guiding the process of my productions: in *Derby*, I directed a larger crew of camera operators who were each supplied one roll of film; in *More Than You Deserve*, I used the length of one 16mm roll as a meter for a musician's performance, rather than song length; in my final film, the length of one roll also became a guide and frame for my subject's (at times rambling) monologue.

In the two projects I shot during my first semester, I experimented with color and sound in order to make a calculated approach with the production of my final thesis film.

In *Derby*, I used color and black and white to distinguish the relationship between performance and creation. The skaters perform their part – they collide and skate around the ring. The audience consumes the performance. The filmmakers consume both the audience and the performance. I directed eight other camera operators. Each were given specific instructions on what to focus on during

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the shoot, so in the edit, I had variety in the coverage of the event. The audio for the film was recorded in one long take. It's non-synchronous in the edit; it's meant to have a non-direct relationship to the imagery. I chose to use the National Anthem both to mimic the performance dynamic of the film and to introduce a ritualistic element to the project.

In *More Than You Deserve*, I worked with a slightly smaller crew (I ran 16mm and I had two camera operators running super 8). In this film, I introduced another limited system: the Nagra reel-to-reel tape recorder. This, along with the presence of the 16mm camera, helped to provoke performance from my subject – in this case, musician Andrew Wolfson. This was an interesting project to plan, as it involved two separate and, at times, conflicting pursuits. Andrew wanted to have an EP recorded on the Nagra, and I wanted to record his performance of those songs for my documentary project. The hum of my 16mm camera can easily be heard in the background of Andrew's EP, and Lydia (the woman I had run sound for the project) intrudes in the frame of the 16mm shots. In this way, the Nagra becomes the center of two artistic endeavors. Andrew and I met at the center and diverged to use the captured footage for our own products.

For the sequences of black and white super 8 between the songs, I aimed to introduce a second element of conflict between these separate pursuits: the footage of the production of the film becomes a jarring and abrasive counterpoint to the slow, unmoving shots of the recording of the EP. The audio for these sections was recorded on iPhones by both of my camera operators (Hayley and Lydia).

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The result of this format is not necessarily a full-fledged conflict but not a pure collaboration, either. Ultimately, the film exists somewhere slightly outside of the realm of direct cinema. The format of the film was inspired by the cinema vérité idea that recording devices provoke a sort of performance on the part of the subject, but, in the end, I think this element of the film was overshadowed by the film's "experimental" qualities.

More Than You Deserve was a great project for me to work on during the experimentation portion of my thesis work because it gave me my first opportunity to work with an individual subject. During the development and production of the film, I think I could've done a better job of communicating with my subject. Though the product of the film is very much the product I aimed for in development, the process of framing the product for Andrew in a way he was happy with was more difficult. Knowing this helped me greatly in the development stages of my final project: the majority of the time and work for the film was spent meeting weekly with my subject and getting him fully on board with a film we could both be happy with. My experience with *More Than You Deserve* helped me to realize how delicately I have to be with the representation of my subjects. My final film involves my subject putting a great deal of himself out for me, so I made sure that there was no miscommunication along the way.

With my final film, *Ian's on Tuesday*, the bulk of the time in pre-production was spent meeting with my subject, Ian Michel. Initially, it would be just Ian and me meeting and talking over possible ways to make the film. Ian was initially interested in making a film with me because he heard I had been making documentaries in

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16mm, but we connected immediately and the conversations moved on from there. Ian was interested in “telling his story,” which generally meant telling the story of losing custody of his daughter, Lily. During our meetings, though, Ian had a mixed bag of stories from all throughout his life. Many of them I found just as compelling as his custody battle. By the end of these meetings, I was generally accompanied by Tim Butler (the sound recorder on the project and co-director) and Peter Shellenberger, who introduced me to Ian and produced the film. The development process for the film took much longer than I would’ve liked. Ideally, we would have been filming from the very beginning, but Ian was insistent on developing a clear-cut framework for the film before he would allow cameras to roll.

Ian’s awareness of the implications of becoming the subject of a documentary film was both a blessing and a curse. It became a problem for me because when it came down to the moment when we had to start filming, Ian became extremely hesitant, even evasive. He continually delayed the date when we would shoot in his house, claiming that his house was too dirty for us to be able to fit in. After two weeks of this, he briefly disallowed us from filming at his house altogether, which was extremely disheartening. Eventually, Tim, Peter and I met with Ian (without cameras) at his house and talked more specifically about how we would film on the date of production, which seemed to calm Ian down.

His awareness became a blessing once we started filming. My goal with the film, from the very beginning, was to have a collaborative interview format. That is, that the subject of the film would be aware of the process and would be an active part of the film. When we would roll the camera, Ian would turn on his performance.

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His storytelling became much more focused, he seemed more grounded than in the interviews, and he even addressed the camera and crew at times (“Hey gang,” at the beginning of a roll, for example).

During the production, Tim recorded sound on my Nagra IV. Each roll lasts around fifteen minutes, so the audio track (which lasts around 3 hours total) is split into fifteen minute intervals. I set up the lights in the room and operated the 16mm camera. Peter loaded the camera between rolls, each of which would last around 3 minutes. We shot 15 rolls of black and white and 5 rolls of color throughout the night.

Technically speaking, everything that could’ve gone wrong did. The microphone, having withstood all of the testing Tim and I did in preparation, brought through a deep hum. Tim ended up finding a way to apply the right tension onto the connection of the microphone to eliminate the humming, but it involved him holding it in such a way that the microphone is relatively far from Ian’s mouth. As a result, the sound of the 16mm camera is a little more present than we had planned for. Half way through filming, the take up spool in my camera stopped spinning altogether. This resulted in several jams, one of which I included in the film. To remedy this issue, I manually spun the take up spool with one hand throughout the remainder of the shoot.

I was inspired by Shirley Clarke’s 1967 film, *Portrait of Jason*, in approaching this project, at least in terms of the production model. *Portrait of Jason* was filmed over the course of one night and features one “character” telling stories to an unseen camera crew. In *Jason*, Clarke is never shy about the filmmaking apparatus. That is,

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she allows the audio to continue when the film runs out of the camera. This got my mind working about the use of a roll of film as a platform for performance. For *Ian's on Tuesday*, I wanted to mimic the format of *Jason*. I wanted to set up a camera position and give Ian a stage to perform on.

The result is a documentary of a performance that revolves around a trauma in his past. Each roll became a short window for Ian to deliver his testimony as a one man show. In editing, I left in the exposed ends of each roll as a sort of opening and closing of the curtain, so to speak. I didn't want to splice through his performance, only to select and reorder full rolls of film to most strongly represent the arks and movements that I recognized.

In keeping with what I see is the inherently limited nature of film, I decided to film the entirety of *Ian's on Tuesday* in one night. The content of the film and Ian's performance gives viewers pieces of a larger puzzle but never assembles them. It refers to a trauma and brings up the possibility of Ian having been a perpetrator, but never vindicates or incriminates Ian. He is there to perform and the content of his performance begs for further investigation, but the concern of *Ian's on Tuesday* is not to get to the bottom of these things, just to pose the problem of performance and unanswered questions.