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-Jeb E. Johnson

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Abstract

The focus of this thesis is to explore the ideas behind Hollywood Cinema and techniques used to craft camera shots of today's cinema. The movie industry is one of the United States' biggest export profits; because of this, American movies stand out above the rest. I will be exploring and demonstrating the researched techniques of American cinema.

Exploring the American Cinema Ideology

While doing my research for my thesis I explored a large variety of movies, some good, and some great. In this time of research, I watched a lot of movies. I tried to keep my primary focus on more recent movies and as I watched I started to notice something. Hollywood cinema is filled with awesome some blockbuster actions, dramatic independents, on edge thrillers, and so much more. When I say awesome, I mean awesome. The stories may have sucked in some, but the production value was astonishing. I was able to get an idea of how I wanted my short to look, but I still needed to write a story that would appeal to my audience. When I started to look at good movies I was noticing some similarities but could not pin point what each one had in common. I thought to myself “Every day, hundreds of thousands of people fill movie theaters to see what Hollywood has come up with next, so there has to be some formula to creating a good story on the fly.” With the film industry being such a large one, and it having the demand to keep movies the most entertaining and easy to watch, Hollywood has been using every trick in the book to make every movie seem like an Academy nominee; but what are those tricks?

For me, making a great movie starts at the base. A movie can have the most interesting, well setup shots, but if the story is bad then it starts to lose the viewers’ attention. Screen writing is something that takes years of practice and creativity to mold a story into a masterpiece. While like many other jobs in the movie industry, I have learned that good screen writers are not too open about sharing their secrets on writing number one hits. However, as my research furthered, I started to build some basic guidelines to setting up good stories that are easy to follow. First let me say that I am nowhere near a perfect story writer or a good one for that matter. But after taking a Film Studies class and doing some of my own research, I realized what all my stories lack; the ideology of the Classic Hollywood Narrative. Some historians claim that the classical approach to Hollywood narrative faded away during the 1970’s, other film scholars, and myself, argue that most American feature films and most movies worldwide share certain qualities from the Classic Hollywood Narrative list. Looking closer at the Classic Hollywood Narrative, or CHN, it is easy to see where most good movies can fall into any of the CHN categories. After going through about three different scripts, I looked at script writing from the Classic Hollywood Narrative approach. Upon closer inspection, a movie following the CHN is primarily in the present and focuses on external action. Viewers can see some point-of-view shots, dreams, fantasies or memories while watching the film. A CHN film usually concentrates on one character or a few characters and the primary characters have a goal or a few goals. In striving to reach their goals, these characters (or protagonists) are forced to face antagonists, obstacles or a number of problems. A CHN film has a strong degree of closure at the end, wherein the characters achieve their goals, thereby providing the famous Hollywood happy ending and leaving the audience satisfied with the final outcome. Usually in a CHN film the cause and effect chain of actions results from psychological causes and is straightforward: what happens and why it happens are very clear and shouldn’t confuse the audience. In the end, the ultimate goal of editing in Classic Cinema is to tell a story as clearly and coherently as possible. Its basic functions are to create a smooth flow from shot to shot and to advance the narrative or character exposition in a smooth and non-confusing way. The greatest goal of this style is invisibility, and, within this style, cinematographers and editors labor to be inconspicuous or unnoticed so that what the viewers see is natural and appealing. After analyzing and breaking down the Classic Hollywood Narrative, it is easy to see where most movies can fit into this ideology and I adopted some of those philosophies in my own film.

A Deeper Look at Cinematography

After I broke down cinematic story and settled on a script idea, it was time to start my focus on the different cinematography techniques used in films. Like I said before, I am not a script writer. Instead, I like to make things look pretty, but unfortunately, story is everything in this industry and has to be just as good as your visual work. So while writing the script, I like to shape different scenes into shot ideas I have previously thought of. Sure it makes it harder and may not be right, but in the end I get to do the shots I want to. So to start, I went back to the movie screen and looked at different cinematic techniques used in a couple famous movies. I started to get an idea of what shots to use to make a story more appealing and easier to follow. One of the most common and simple techniques is the use of thirds. If I were to take a camera screen and break it down into three sections horizontally and three sections vertically, I would have a nice grid with four lines on the screen. If I were shooting a person walking down the street and I frame the person walking on one of the vertical lines while keeping their head on the intersecting horizontal line and the rest of the frame being dead space in the direction they are walking, then I am using the rule of thirds. The rule of thirds is one of the simplest techniques one can use to get clean, professional shots and yet, it is one of the most overlooked techniques. Someone can break down a good Hollywood film and not see a single use of the rule of thirds. It is possible to get a great product without using this rule, but one can get an even better product if they follow this rule. A good example of the use of thirds is in the movie *Nightcrawler*. I recently did a breakdown of this movie and was astonished. Not only did it follow the CHN in its own way, it had amazing camera shots. At first I could not pinpoint why everything seemed flawless, but on the second watch I started to breakdown every freeze frame I could. If one watches *Nightcrawler* they would notice that every shot uses the rule of thirds. I could not find a single shot that didn't. A technique that most cinematographers have to remember to do and they went above and beyond, using it in every shot. For some of my scenes, it was hard to keep the rule of thirds constant but I tried to use it as much as possible.

When breaking down *Nightcrawler* even further it is noted that another great technique used is the use of framing. Framing is the use of placing the center point of attention in-between natural objects found in the scene. For example, in the movie *Nightcrawler* the main character stops his vehicle on the side of the road in between two trees. The camera shows a wide angle, using the trees on the edges of the shot to create a natural frame. By doing this the human eye is naturally drawn into where the subject is. Another example of framing used in many different movies is when characters talk in a hallway and the camera shows a shot down the hallway with the characters being at the end. The camera uses the walls of the hallway as a frame and because the hallway naturally flows into the middle of the scene, the eye easily follows the walls of the hallway onto the main subject.

Cinematography is not just about making a shot look good and drawing the eye to a certain point. While that is a major part of it, cinematography is also about evoking emotion and helping to tell the story. When working in broadcasting, especially sports broadcasting, they say all the time "just telling the story". They choose shots that help the viewer encapsulate the entire sports event while sitting on their couch, and cinematography has to do the exact same thing. Symbolism is a huge tool used by film makers across the globe and one of the more favorited techniques would have to be following two characters talking while they walk down a street, hallway, or anywhere. This small technique has been found not only as a cool long dolly or

Steadicam shot, but by also showing the characters walking, it helps to symbolize the story moving forward. Film makers will often times put big breakthroughs in the story during a walking scene. It is something that is very simple but also helps the viewer to understand the story and where it is going.

The last, less noticeable technique in cinematography is lighting. Lighting may not seem to fit under the cinematography category, but lighting can make or break a shot and to be quite honest, there is not a right or wrong way to do it. When I say that, I mean that there is no handbook that teaches you how to light a scene; it is something that is just picked up over the years, and industry pros will definitely not tell you their secrets. There is the well-known two point, three point, and four point lighting, which is used more in interviews, but lighting in cinema is much harder. I can look at footage when the lighting is bad and tell the lighting is bad. But when looking at a well-lit scene, it just comes across as gorgeous footage. With that being said, there might not be a handbook to follow, but there are some rules to keep in mind. When lighting a scene, one would want both lighting in the foreground and the background. For example, if I was shooting a person in a house with the primary focus on the person, I would light the person, but also use a natural light source, like a lamp, in the background. By doing this, it helps give the picture natural contrast and looks more natural to the eye even if the lighting is unnatural.

Cinematography is an art form that can take a lifetime to master. Trying to determine what works and what doesn't is something that just has to be self-taught. There is no right way or wrong way, just the way that works and the way that works is not always set in stone. For me, the best way to learn what works and what doesn't is to sit down and watch a movie more than once, but instead of actually watching it, I try and breakdown shots to see how and why they work so well.

Project Overview

For my thesis, after researching and exploring different cinematic techniques, I want to apply them in a real world setting. I will be attempting to use what I have learned by producing a short film. The purpose of this thesis is to prove that by using the Classic Hollywood Narrative ideology and traditional cinematography techniques, I can create a compelling, easy to follow, and appealing short film that is three to five minutes long. This thesis is not just about the final project, it is about the process of achieving the final project. A three to five minute short film is weeks to months' worth of work. Not only does the short have to be shot and edited, it also consists of a lot of behind the scenes work like finding talent, location scouting, location booking, color grading, assembling a crew, writing a script, storyboarding shots, gathering equipment, and doing a sound mix.

Proceeding in the Right Direction

When first starting my thesis I knew I wanted to explore cinematic techniques with the end goal of creating a short film. Although, I was not sure of which direction I wanted to follow for my short film, so I started watching other shorts and hammering out a script. On my first script I was headed in the direction of a sad drama. I spent three weeks writing the script and conceptualizing it. The green light was given to proceed into production, but something didn't seem right. After much thought I decided a sad drama didn't reflect my artistic personality, so

script writing session number two started. On the second script I went more in the action short direction. I didn't want to do something sad. I wanted to explore opportunities and ideas I had never done before and I had never attempted to do an action short. I had watched a short film about a Soviet Union Cold War spy that was sent on one last mission in present time to recover a lost piece of Soviet technology. I immediately had an idea come to mind. I started drafting an idea about how the Soviet Union was still in existence and in control of the United States; it was the job of a few spy's left to stop them. I looked back at history and used a spin on historical events to further the script. Essentially I was making one large conspiracy in the form of a script. It was a fun idea, making a conspiracy was much easier than I thought. I was looking for anything I could generalize in history to further my idea. I finished my overview of the idea and went for approval, but was red lighted for the project. Once again it was time to go back to the drawing board. Now my head was shifting towards a comedy and getting off the action train. I had never written a comedy, but I have always thought about it. Comedy can take many different routes and when you write a comedy, not everyone is going to think that it is going to be funny. Still going the spy route, I wrote a script about a comedic duo. It featured a rough around the edges old woman and her grandson. The old woman had done just about everything in her life, while the grandson failed at everything he tried to do. His grandmother always tried to help him. This time he wanted to be a spy, and of course the grandma had been one at some point in her life between working for NASA and creating the small pox vaccine. As the story followed the two, the grandson could not do any of the tasks while the grandma never failed. The script seemed flawless and yet it was vetoed. Once again, it was back to the drafting board. By this time I was well into my Film Studies class and was starting to learn about the Classic Hollywood Narrative. I had the realization that I should not only follow the Classical Hollywood Narrative, but also my story should not be so complex. I had to think of a story that is enough to be a story, but not one that has so much back story that it would be too much to fit in the allotted time span. I also realized that I suck at script writing; I am not an English major, I suck at writing papers, and I always overthink the story. So I needed to write a story where the dialogue is simpler, but I can convey a story with the dialogue I do have.

The Final Idea

After much thought, I had finalized my idea. Following along with the Classic Hollywood Narrative, the story would take place in present time with some flash backs and the setting would be easily distinguished. The story takes place in a twenty four hour period and follows a guy whose father had died a few weeks prior in a plane crash coming back from a charity event. His father was a local legend, entrepreneur, and part owner of Eastman Chemical Company. He had lots of money, success, and only one son. At his will reading, it is announced that he has left behind two things. The first being whoever finds his fortune first could keep it and the second being a note to his son on where the fortune and key to his success could be found. His son has no idea what the clue means, but the people that are after him for the clue do not know that.

Finding a Crew and Actors

Making a production possible can only be achieved through the crew. Trying to film a short, one man band style is an extremely hard task, so I enlisted help from some of my fellow video colleagues. Without their help, this production would not be what it is today. At most, during a

shoot, we would only have one extra person, two at most working on the crew. In one particular instance, during the woods chase scene, we had a total of four people on set. I had two actors, and one extra crew member to record natural sound. One of the actors also doubled as a crew member, recording behind the scene footage and more. That was the first and last time I had two actors in the same place at the same time. All of the other scenes I shot individually with one actor at a time. Luckily for me, when I moved on campus freshman year I was paired with a random roommate and he just so happened to be a theatre major. I have lived with him ever since. So of course he was an excellent choice to be the lead in this short. My other actors also doubled as the crew.

Location Scouting

After I came to the conclusion that I was going to do multiple chase scenes I started watching movie chase scenes. I realized having a good location can really make a chase scene. Having a foreground and background element helps to make the chase seem a lot faster than what it is. So I had to find locations that could give me both. I knew downtown would work perfectly for a night scene with all of the street lights, which would also double as a foreground element. The buildings and stores would also make for a good background. I have always enjoyed movies with a chase in the woods. I have seen many behind the scenes videos of larger productions where the actor will jump and move around branches, but then they have the branches move for the camera as it comes through. I wouldn't be able to do that with such a small crew, so I started looking for open patches of woods. I ended up finding a park where the trees were planted in perfect rows. That made it easy to run with the camera rig in one row, while the talent ran in another. In the entire short film, besides the woods scene, almost every shot was in a different location. Then in editing, I was very selective which gave the short the look as if it was all in the same place.

Overcoming the Obstacles

Running with a camera is a lot easier said than done. During my research, I found that there are two styles of a Hollywood chase. The first style has a very smooth and clean feel, with a steady camera and the second style being shakier to give the scene a more urgent feel. I could have shot my short entirely smooth and added post shake, but it doesn't look the same. I also could not shoot perfectly smooth due to gear limitations and locations. Going with a more shaky style, I would still have to try and be as smooth as possible. If I just ran with the camera, the shake would be so terrible it would have left the audience vomiting. I threw my camera on my DJI Ronin rig and tested it out. The first shoot did not go as well as planned. When I watched the footage on the computer, it was clear that some shots would drift out of focus due to the low aperture on the lens at night and I would had no idea what I was shooting because I didn't have an external monitor. That's when I made my first purchase for this thesis. I bought an external monitor so I could see what I was shooting while on the rig, a remote follow focus so I could control the focus while running, and some gold mount batteries to extend shooting time. All of

the extra gear made a huge difference but also added a bunch of extra weight. I could maybe hold the rig for a minute before needing to put it down. I also noticed that because it was heavier, my arms couldn't act like a natural fourth axis to take out the walking motion. I was left with a smooth shoot that moved up and down as I stepped. Thus, I made my second purchase. To take out the walking shake, I bought a Steadicam arm and vest and an adaptor allowing me to place the rig on the arm of the vest. The vest allowed the weight of the rig, which at this point was getting up to forty eight pounds, to be more evenly dispersed throughout my body with a majority sitting on my back when it was not properly tightened. It also allowed for a never ending dolly when properly calibrated. Instead of holding the rig for a minute, I could now wear it for an hour or two. Once it was on, it was more of a hassle to get it off, so I just continued to wear it.

Besides gear obstacles, which are more easily taken care of, I also had a few injuries. I always take into account for safety while shooting, but when sprinting with a camera it's easy to trip and fall. Luckily no one did trip and fall or break any equipment, but we did twist a few ankles. On one of the first shoots downtown at night, we were taking turns running with the camera while the other person would run along the side pulling focus. On the third or fourth take, I decided to change it up and instead of running straight, we would round a corner. On the first take, as the camera rig rounds the corner, I follow alongside pulling focus. I step out in the street to give the camera more room, and as I do my foot hits the bottom edge of the curb which was not level with the road because it had been torn up for construction. Thus twisting my ankle, I couldn't walk without limping, much less run with the camera. Luckily I had enough crew to finish the last few shots. In a lot of pain, I looked up healing times and learned I should take it easy for the next three to six weeks, but that was not an option. Instead, I learned how to tape an ankle, and just like that I was brand new again. When we went to shoot in the woods, we had our second twisted ankle. My main actor planted his foot funny and twisted his ankle. Once again it was near the end of the running shots in the woods, but we still had running to do that night. I insisted that we postponed, but he opted out and demanded I tape his ankle. So now we had two people on the team walking around with taped ankles. I would write off learning to tape an ankle as a win in my book.

One of the last major obstacles worth noting was a problem with a location. It was one of the last shots I needed. I had planned to go downtown late, when it was virtually empty, to shoot in front of the Allstate billboard. As I rolled onto location, I noticed the billboard lights were off which I had not planned on. As I drove around Johnson City, I noticed that all the billboards were off. I assume they all turn off at a certain time. Eventually I did find one with the lights on and I was able to complete shooting.

Editing in Post

For this short I really wanted to focus on color correction. When I color corrected or color graded in the past I always knew to keep my whites white. But I never even thought about the blacks. I tried to focus on my blacks, mainly making sure they were actually black. I then gave everything else a slight blue tint. Originally, all of the streetlights downtown were orange, giving everything an orange tint. To me, it didn't look good so I corrected it to feel more natural. The end result really turned out nice.

Conclusion

Through my research and trial and error, I have learned a lot along the way. I'm not sure if my final product was successful, I've watched it so many times I'm sick of it. So I'll leave that up to the viewers to decide. This project seemed different than all the others. It seemed easier. I'm sure it has to do with everything being planned out and how far apart our shoot dates were. I set out at the beginning to create a short film that was three to four minutes. Like I anticipated, the final product was around six minutes. This project helped me to learn new shooting techniques. That's one thing about the industry I am embarking into; very little people will tell you how to shoot things. Besides software, everything I have learned I had to learn on my own. Sometimes I just have to watch other peoples work or movies and determine what makes their piece successful then do an adaption on it in my own work.

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