

## DIGITAL, The Quiet Revolution in Filmmaking from Script to Screen. A case study called VIOLET CITY

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### Abstract

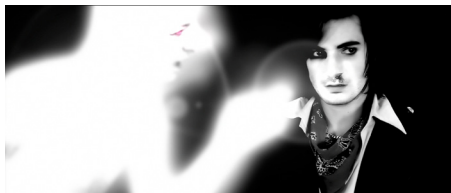
From 2010 to 2014, John Maxwell produced, directed and edited a dark fantasy feature film called Violet City, shot entirely on a 40 metre long green screen constructed in disused canteen in Liverpool.

The first film of its kind to be made in academia and harking back to German Expressionism and Pressburger & Powell, Violet City is a trailblazing project that uses accessible Visual Effects and 3D animation software to create a world of carnivorous plants and inter-dimensional demons.

From the production processes to a forthcoming worldwide release that eschews physical media, distributing through an aggregator via iTunes, GooglePlay and games platforms, this project will find and market to its genre audience directly with a unique viral campaign using long tail marketing.

The paper will chart the making and distribution of Violet City and what it will mean for independent filmmakers and their relationship with their audiences.

**Keywords:** Animation , Fantasy, Gothic, Micro-budget, Lovecraft



### Revelations and Beginnings

Violet City began life as a screenplay and a song, some ten years before I came on board to realize it as a film. The brainchild of Dave Jackson, a tunesmith from the same early '80s Liverpool post-punk scene as Frankie Goes To Hollywood, Echo & The Bunnymen and The Teardrop Explodes, it was written as a treatment inspired by Violet, the colour of the protagonist's eyes and the name lent to a city loosely morphed into a nightmarish, fantasy version of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Liverpool.

Written as a novel in the late noughties, Dave's day job as a screenwriting lecturer brought him into contact with myself, an independent film producer moonlighting as an academic, looking for a project to push the boundaries of technology achievable on a shoestring budget.

I came from a very different place to Dave; as producer of two bitter-sweet comedy feature films, the first of which 'Don't Worry About Me' was directed by noted Liverpoolian actor David Morrissey (State

of Play, The Other Boleyn Girl, The Walking Dead). I'd come off the back of several film festivals, BBC broadcasts and sales/distribution/exhibition for the two pictures that had been made back-to-back, no let-up for a combined budget of £250,000 between 2007 and 2009. Peanuts in terms of independent film budgets but we had some of David's chutzpah to propel the films into a strong critical and commercial place.

We'd raised the money via Enterprise Investment Schemes (EIS) and using the new 20% 'cashback' tax break awarded by the British Government to films demonstrably made in the UK. It felt like the first steps towards bigger budgets and audiences, but then the credit crunch crunched, the UK Film Council – who had also funded my career up to this point – folded and the priority for National Lottery Funding in the UK shifted towards the 2012 Olympic Games.

Instead of going bigger, I had to go smaller or stop making films entirely. Even with tax incentives via EIS and the 20% cashback, no-one was putting up the cash for new, independent projects. Television seemed to be growing whereas film was being hit by the same malaise as music in terms of piracy and a resultant drop in sales of physical media. Film funding was always a tail-chasing game of snakes and ladders, but now even the tiniest cracks in doors were sealed shut.

My day-job as a producer came to an end as the two films entered their distribution cycle. I needed to pay the bills and I had been working as a lecturer at LJMU for several years.

In other disciplines, research drives the pedagogy and vice-versa. Pockets of research funding are available within institutions and I saw a glint of an opportunity. In the summer of 2009, I made a series of comedy sketches using green screen/compositing technology. I was looking for a new project now that represented a departure from bitter-sweet comedies, something that could be shot in a controlled environment rather than expensive locations, with a scalable crew.

LJMU were able to facilitate this at their former screen-school based at Edge Lane, Liverpool. My home faculty was due to move into a new £37million building in 2013, so we had three years to nail it down and as much light, heat and dedicated space as we wanted. I secured £12,000 worth of green screen, cameras, grip, hardware, software and pocket change to feed a cast and crew.

Concurrent to this, I read Dave Jackson's novel, which he had written in order to complete his PhD thesis. Dave adapted the novel back into a 180 page screenplay and this was the start of Violet City the movie as well as the first inking of our great narrative dilemma in the making this film – how to distil a novel and then a 3 hour screenplay with ensemble cast into a tight, independent and sellable product.



### **'Make your first film in a haunted house.'**

I can't recall when I first heard this quote, allegedly from B-Movie filmmaker Roger Corman, or where to attribute it, but it certainly sounds right from the man who 'Made a Hundred Movies and Never Lost a Dime,' according to the title of his autobiography.

Corman was and still is a genre specialist, slaking that thirst for pulp horror and science fiction that has been growing since the Second World War. His influences upon filmmakers such as Spielberg and Coppola are avidly documented, but his films are produced for less than the catering budget of those made by his two famous devotees.

I took my first lesson from Corman with this unattributed bit of wisdom. Not literally, but figuratively the idea of using a contained production base meant that I could punch above my weight. Perversely, by shooting in my 'haunted house', a green screen studio, this meant the canvas of settings could be anywhere I wanted, so Violet City seemed tantalizingly achievable.

The odd thing that has since occurred to me is that no-one else had tried it, at least not on a miniscule budget of £12,000. Robert Rodriguez had a low budget in Hollywood terms when making 'Sin City' (2005, budgeted at \$40million), but ours was almost comically low. Films like 'Iron Sky' (2012, budgeted at \$10million) blazed a trail in terms of crowdfunding indy genre films, but we didn't want to spend two years raising finance when we only had the free, empty studio space for not much more than that period. Iron Sky was a rare success, but I'd seen countless good (and bad) projects evaporate in the tail-chasing process of film-fundraising.

Gifting ourselves the green light to make a genre film seemed liberating at the time and still does, given even the prism of hard work, huge obstacles and creative browbeating that I now look back through in order to write this paper. I am now aware more than ever that we seized upon a climactic window of opportunity to make Violet City that afforded us the resources and goodwill to make it happen. It might have been produced at another time in a different way, but the stars that aligned for us as we began script development in February 2010 still scan to this day as a one-shot opportunity.

### **At the Foot of a Huge Mountain**

After the initial development work done in a group with students and alumni, Dave set to work writing the first draft and the process became simpler from thereon in. He received notes from myself and our

fellow screenwriter/academic Jeff Young, himself cast as the arch tyrant Lord Splaine.

I had enough to go by to start casting the film. This process is a volatile and tricky aspect of preproduction that can determine completely by itself whether or not the film will sink or swim. The narrative is reimagined by the actors as much as the writer and director, but it can also be irreversibly damaged. The film wasn't a vehicle for recognised talent, but we wanted to build the cast around the two prominent young leads of Flynn and Zeb. We needed an instant screen presence, actors who could hit their marks, take direction and offer something to the characters. These roles required experience and flair but I also wanted them to be convincingly youthful, real age around 20 for a playing age of 18.

Myself and Jeff headed down to London to meet a couple of his protégés, Jack Roth (son of Tim Roth) and George Maguire. Both of them were a little bit edgy, in a good way, and had the challenging experience of a long theatre run under their belts, having starred in the stage version of QUADROPHENIA that Jeff put on with Pete Townsend. They had a pre-existing dynamic as friends that could work as on screen chemistry between Zeb and Flynn. Neither had grabbed prominent screen roles yet, which was our major bargaining point because we didn't have money for fees, barely enough for their expenses/per diems. They both had the necessary charisma to work in these roles, which was very exciting. It looked like we'd found our leads without much effort at all. This was going far too well.

Dave had completed a new draft of the script. We locked heads and he got into a rewrite, culling and conflating characters, whittling down parts of the narrative that were important in his novel, but over-egged the screenplay. It still ran at over three hours.

We spent two weeks casting the other characters. Even though it was unpaid and we'd specified Liverpool-only, actors came from far and wide (mainly London) to read for us. I couldn't believe how such a small project was attracting talent on both sides of the camera in spades. Far from being forced into a corner by the lack of funds, I had more choices than I could have ever imagined. A mix of students and alumni along with help from my colleagues from productions past had assembled on the preproduction. Costume and make-up were creating amazing designs for nothing, cutting up curtains to make elegant ball gowns for Lady Escargoza and raiding the wardrobe of the Everyman Theatre which was closing its doors for refurbishment. Our make-up designer Helen Quinn, an ever-present throughout the production of the film, was detailing eye design signatures for each of the four aristocratic houses that rule Violet City.

We brought Jack and George up to Liverpool for a rehearsed reading with the rest of the cast and crew. It was our one and only chance to get everyone together and glean a sense of how the film might work with the actors.

Jack was full of nervous energy and questioned every nuance of Flynn, our young, noble hero. George flew by the seat of his trousers rather more, which suited

the high-octane Zeb. The problem seemed to be how much Zeb owned every scene he was in, how much we needed Jack to become the strong, silent type.

They loved Liverpool and it was a reunion of sorts with their old mate Jeff. Shooting all their scenes within a month was going to be a huge task, even with the range of cheats that green screen production offers. We could only feed and accommodate them for this narrow period - a classic case of quality versus economy that every micro budget filmmaker faces.

I'd had contact with both their agents and everything seemed rosy. Then a fortnight after the rehearsal I began having trouble getting through to Jack. He was doing a short film down south, but up until then he'd been ringing me several times daily with comments and ideas about his character. I was excited about what he could bring to the film, but worried that he'd gone off radar. My producer's instinct for trouble kicked in and I wasn't wrong.

We had a week to go before principal photography and finally Jack called. I needed to speak to his agent, pronto. He said she needed reassuring about the film. Reassuring how? She'd seen the script and knew that it was being made on a tiny budget. After a couple of days playing phone tag, more prep time wasted, I got through to her. She was past the stage of 'being reassured' and didn't want her client anywhere near the project. People who made films without paying the actors made her angry. I ventured that the majority of filmmakers didn't have any money and surely it was down to the potential of the project? And why didn't I hear this several weeks earlier? The agent hung up the phone.

The horse had bolted. It wasn't my first run in with an agent and it won't be my last. We were a week away from the shoot with no lead. I was now paranoid about losing George too, because he wasn't answering his phone either.

We threw out a huge casting call, phone bashed every local agent who knew and trusted me. Every representative in Liverpool and Manchester (where there aren't quite as many sons of Hollywood actors as London) picked up on it. We looked at actors we'd already in other roles and pulled them in for second auditions. We saw around 100 actors in the space of working week. Flattering for a film with a tiny budget, but no one was quite hitting the mark.

Within in the space of an hour on the final day of preproduction it swung back in our favour. Firstly, George called. What time did we need him on Monday? He was still really up for it. I'd called his agent, who had been fine all along. George needed to build a few more screen credits. It wouldn't interfere with his stage work. Take care of his per diems and we were okay.

Then our Flynn showed up, without fanfare. Michael Denny was a marine biology student at The University of Liverpool who ran his drama society. He was quiet in manner, which suited the understated Flynn, and he could bring time and energy to the film.

It was becoming clear as the scheduled formed that we wouldn't be able to shoot this over 6 weeks, let alone the 3 weeks George could stay in Liverpool. Without a budget, we had to work when actors had the

spare time. I'd front loaded all the scenes with Zeb, but had we kept hold of Jack Roth it would have been nearly impossible to get through his scenes without the use of a very convincing body double. I was beginning to think Jack's agent had done us a favour.

The script read as around 3 hours long, which is twice the length of most independent films. But I didn't want to set limits on the narrative, like had been done with every film I'd made. This needed to be right out there, any tightening could be done in the edit.

In hindsight, I've realised that shooting on a green screen is peculiar in terms of working with actors as much as it is a technical challenge. The revelation was that we could shoot actors who were in the same scene at different times, accounting for eyelines and camera movement. Most of the set continuity happens in post, so there is the potential to cut corners off the schedule. Again I grew confident - this might actually come off.

The process of filmmaking is always prone to the unique chemistry of those who work towards a project, an awkward marriage of skills and disciplines. The great advantage of making this film at LJMU was the free use of facilities, equipment and the huge resources of all the skills we needed available across campus. We were filming in a large teaching room in the quietest part of the year and this, like any other academic field, counted as research activity.

There was something safer and more comfortable about working with this level of support behind us. Filming in a studio took away so many of the production issues associated with a location shoot. It was a controlled environment - floor management, costume, make-up, lights and sound could be easily contained there. Especially sound, as it was always lovely and quiet at this time of year.

The first day of production, and it felt like something that had grown out of its skin. Green rooms, runners making tea, the hubbub and buzz of a professional shoot and an electric vibe everywhere.

Twenty minutes into the day and the cheery tone had evaporated. An incessant mechanical digger kicked off directly beneath the studio outside on work that we later discovered would continue for the next 12 months. No one had informed the University, never mind us.

We had to shoot the film with only on camera sound as a guide track for several weeks while the University took the site managers to task. It meant bringing George back to re-record his dialogue and trying to direct the film with a persistent hammering going on thirty feet below us. We did get moved to the other side of the complex a few weeks later, but a film shoot never mixes well with regular business activity and the marketeers next door saw our presence as a disruption. Time to move on again.

Out of this debacle probably came our biggest boon. We were given use of a huge space that had sat unused for ten years, with ample room for a sixty foot green screen, costume, props, make-up, green rooms and post-production. It felt like we'd been given a film studio by default. We'd be there for the next 18 months.

This was no longer a slash and burn operation, where the film is shot and the location wrapped – we were in one place for as long as we needed.

We'd carved through George's schedule in August 2010. It became clear that had we kept Jack Roth and the original space, we would not have got even close to shooting all the scenes for the two main characters. You can plan and prepare all year long, but some things are only discovered by shooting the film. The two toughest unforeseen problems had produced the two greatest unexpected benefits.

All of this affected the way the narrative was rolling out, from script to screen. The majority of scenes in films are shot in a non-linear order for a long list of logistical reasons, but this was carved up even further into parts of scenes; actors acting to an eyeline, with a world and props yet to be photographed or computer generated. It became a theatrical, Brechtian exercise in previsualisation. Blocking with the actors began with storyboards, but I couldn't afford to be so deliberate in the time we had and I soon got into a more intuitive method of shooting the rehearsal and getting them to work through the blocking as we filmed. It adds spontaneity and credibility to a performance - a line is never the same twice. The actors appreciated this freedom - many like George hailed from the stage or musical theatre and they liked the raw discipline of thinking on their feet during a take. I like to talk to actors during takes, give them spontaneous ideas, dialogue, actions. It helps to keep their performance fresh and remove any signs of self-conscious or the tics that sometimes creep in when a script is over rehearsed or over-read.

This was all just as well, since we had precious little time for rehearsals, lighting or much in the way of grip. It wasn't the first time I felt I was learning on the job, but one of the biggest issues that I have with smaller, independent films is that they avoid ambition and court clichés. Attacking a project like Violet City would always involve a certain amount of improvisation and a few lessons on the way.

Becoming clear, but not yet fully formed, was the notion that films with a higher production value and more ambitious genre could be made within the collegiate system, using the range of skills and subject available across a campus of 30,000 students and staff alongside willing volunteers from outside the University. The conclusion is that higher production value micro-budget feature film production within campuses is not only feasible, it is desirable from a pedagogical and industry training perspective.



## Through the Never

By September 2010, we were simultaneously in post-production and still filming key scenes. As our teaching schedule kicked in for another academic year, we rationed the filming over a longer period of time. The studio got colder as the winter of 2010/11 grew savage, and it seemed the tail was wagging the dog in terms of when we would be able to wrap this film. There is a sense of desperation that can creep in during a long project. What if the lead actor puts on weight, shaves their head or has a facelift? Or one of the major characters gets a modelling job and goes from strawberry blonde to brunette? The second thing did happen, and it wasn't our last dance with continuity issues.

Shooting for monochrome saved us again – we could alter the artist's hair in post to match footage shot months earlier. Money doesn't just buy time, it buys priority and sometimes the film just had to go on hold. I'd experienced this with David Morrissey as we picked our way through the post-production process at Pinewood, finishing our first feature together. In the less salubrious surroundings of my office at LJMU, I started to assemble the green screen footage in Final Cut Pro.

Post-production is as much a learning process as knowing the right audio, camera and lighting set-up and every other discipline of filmmaking. I'd built a body of experience with previous films, either by working with editors or becoming the editor myself. With Violet City, it was clear from the outset that either we needed to find someone with enough creative/technical flair who would work for free, or I would have to take control of post-production myself. There are some high-profile examples of filmmakers who edit their own material - the Coen Brothers notable amongst them. The Coens use the pseudonym 'Roderick Jaynes' for their editing, a fictional character who has been Oscar-nominated in the real world. This scans as almost an embarrassment that they should be cutting their own films, but although they may have good aesthetic and practical reasons to choose themselves, my choice was somewhat starker – there was no choice at all.

It was clear that whoever was involved in the post-production of such a multi-layered, complex project in senior roles such as editing and animating, they would need to be in it for the long haul. A talented student who was graduating in Summer 2010 was Mike Lunt – he joined the crew along with the rest of the predominantly young team with a passion to further their experience and add a key notch to their CV. Mike even cut a conceptual trailer for the film which proudly claimed that the film was coming in 2012. In 2015, Mike lives in Columbus, Ohio and works in local television, whereas I took on the editing by December 2010, more than aware that the prediction of a 2012 release was not just bold, it was crazy. We shared this naivety – I'd made films on bigger budgets on a much smaller scale and went along with Mike's assertion. After all, that gave us two years, right? The lesson here was that even an experienced filmmaker can

underestimate the investment in time when shooting outside a comfortable, familiar genre.

We had no executive producers, no team of experienced hands to guide us all the way, to assert that they had been there before and knew what this would take to finish and finish well. There were no deadlines aside from those we imposed upon ourselves and I would argue that this is a disadvantage at this level of production. None of us were procrastinating, Dave and myself were extremely busy in our academic roles and I was just about getting into the enormity of the task, but a seldom mentioned attribute of delivering a film for a broadcaster of studio, aside from a bankroll, it that it must be done on time.

## Authorship of Fools

Directors and writers are greedy for as much control as possible over their films. It's entirely natural, but I've long learned that if you want to pilot a narrative in this way, you need another perspective, as objective and trustworthy as possible, to light the way without blowing up a sense of overconfidence or taking the wind out of one's sails. It is difficult to detach from a project enough to do this job on top of everything else, so this is where Dave Jackson came in again. 'I' became 'We' and 'We' was 'Dave and I'.

Authorship is a grey area of filmmaking, often decided by a concoction of agents, lawyers and producers. They decide upon a chain of title which means who owns the rights to what version/format of the narrative. In television, the director has far less sway than in film, a fact that has permeated even what is now termed 'the Third Golden Age' of filmic TV drama flowing onto our screens, as Brett Martin asserts in his paean to small screen drama, 'Difficult Men'. It is the writer, the showrunner, that takes all the power and makes the key creative decisions.

In film, unless the writer is themselves a director/auteur, this notion is very rare. With *Violet City*, I needed a second wheel to balance everything and push the project forward – this had to come in the form of someone who was as equally committed and invested in the film as I was. That could only be one person, the writer Dave Jackson.

Working with writers on a daily basis at LJMU has taught me that brilliant auteurs who can write and direct are rare and that bespoke, stand-alone writers have an amazing value to a micro-budget film. Trained writers who can dedicate themselves to creating layers of plausible, structured narratives and original characters offer a skill that only a small number of micro-budget filmmakers who are spinning a thousand plates at once can match. One of the few areas small films can compete with bigger films is in ideas, crafting of characters and story – yet the majority that fail are usually helmed by those who want to write and direct and see anything else as an incursion on their vision. So Dave and I collaborated and mucked in, taking shared ownership of the film.

How much of this process is repeated with other films is debateable, but filmmaking is all about collaboration

and on the unique level of *Violet City*, I needed direct help from the only person who knew more about this world than I did. The director reinterprets the narrative through this collaboration and the producer adds their own level of authorship by bringing creative personnel to the project. The difference with *Violet City* was that here was a micro budget film that was in post-production and production at the same time. I was shooting scenes with actors who could already watch the performance of whoever was playing opposite. It was a gamble, but it adhered to one of the key principals of filmmaking on this level; work with what you can access.

If the regular workflow was different, so was the relationship with the writer. Dave would sit in the edit and watch countless, looping sequences, offering quiet enthusiasm or gesticulating frustration, depending upon how well they caught the verisimilitude of his world and characters. We found ourselves referring more to his novel than the script at times, creating 3-D models of weird creatures in Blender or the cityscape of *Violet City* in Photoshop from a library of 20,000 photographs assembled from sources ranging from my honeymoon in New York to photographer friends' trips to Venice and Nepal.

Each layer needed both our approval to get passed, and while this would occasionally lead to conflict the result was always better than what existed previously. The passion of this project by the time we got past the workprint green screen assembly stage in late 2011 was already exhausting. I'd gotten married and bought a house at this point, which didn't seem like great timing but life had to move forward. The main creative, aesthetic and practical challenges of making *Violet City* came long after we'd finished shooting the main unit back in August 2010.

Since then, I used the green screen studio to pick-up the complex layers of performance. We pored over footage to get the right levels. Shooting in this manner was different from the main unit in that I could work with actors in isolation, with a tiny crew. Artists would turn up on set, visit the costume store and dress according to their continuity pictures, go into make-up and then we would be ready to turn over. This offered a new level of proximity to the actor in getting a performance down, with the chance to do multiple takes and find nuance each time.

Again, it gave us more decisions to make in post, but having the writer alongside me really helped this process along, painful as it was at times. Choosing the right writer is as important as choosing the right project to a filmmaker, another key lesson in this process.

## Editing Spaghetti

In reality, the narrative is rewritten from the moment the script is optioned to the delivery of the final cut. In the case of *Violet City*, we had to reimagine the film during every conversation with actors and with costume and make-up artists (ergo the three departments we couldn't cheat in post production). Helen Quinn, our make-up designer and stalwart/fixture of the entire

production from 2010-13, kept a record of all of her designs and allowed us to negotiate a path through the minefield of continuity that came from not only shooting out of sequence, but shooting different characters from the same scenes at different times.

Again, the lesson of not being able to employ actors professionally was that we had to work around their availability and that they were not always free at the same time. The great technical boon that shooting on a green screen gave us was that we could shoot actors at different times and match eyelines, but by 2011 this became a process of editing and compositing the film and rendering off which scenes missed characters, in order to capture their performance and blocking later. I called this editing spaghetti.

In a straightforward scene where two characters would be posing next to each other or having a chat, this was relatively simple. When characters interacted with each other, this was painstakingly tough to manage. A key instance was a choreographed fight sequence towards the end of the second act, when Nolte fights off a number of masked gang members in hand-to-hand combat in order to challenge and defeat their Top Dog. I had bolted on Nolte, played by Mick Colligan, into a shooting schedule that included a large number of his pick-ups. I could have waited for an opportunity to shoot his scenes with the other actors present, but from experience I had seen that it was good to have editing choices and the fact that Mick was dressed and made-up in the correct continuity also appealed to me.

What followed was the most bizarre style of production I had ever attempted. I had Mick swinging motion capture sticks that would later become knives and swords at thin air. He grappled with nothing, breaking a Jackal's neck. He kneeled, gasping in exhaustion, as another Jackal bore down on him, closing for the kill – the Jackal was yet to be filmed.

Looking back at the footage, I thought that it would be used as cutaways for after I'd taken care of the main fight sequence that involved stunt choreography. As it happened, I had secured the services of a highly trained fight coordinator James Roach, who had worked directly with the likes of Samuel L. Jackson and Christian Bale on films with bigger talcum powder budgets than my entire spend. James brought his Kung Fu school down to our green screen in August 2013 with the intention of shooting one of the trickiest sequences left to film.

We had 20 strong team swapping and mixing costumes, wearing masks, beating each other senseless for our cause. It looked great, but there was one problem; no Mick. He had unforeseen commitments that week, the only week James could spare for us. As Mick back out last minute, we improvised with body doubles. In post, I then masked and motion tracked Nolte's head onto the body of his double, layered his long, corkscrew hair into the edge of the shot and cheated the violence with short, fast and tight cuts and lots of close-ups. It worked.

On the list of great escapes/cheats making this film, this one ranks very high. James Roach told me that Ridley Scott had once told him that if in doubt, mask

it with smoke, blood and shadows. I factored such limitations into the style of the film and sought to make them strengths rather than obvious weaknesses. It is a mantra that can be repeated for any film of any genre.



## Are We There Yet?

Keeping our powder dry was difficult. We wanted to share the work, but realised by September 2013 that a 3 hour cut of the film with incomplete audio was not the right stage. Three years seemed a long time, but given that every spare moment I had was spent on this film, I had no recourse to beat myself up about it.

I'd even installed an app on my iPad that allowed remote access to my workhorse editing Mac at LJMU, which meant I could look at the Violet City timeline on the bus, on holiday, at home, even in the middle of the night when I woke up with a potential solution to an editing headache. I felt like Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick. Solitary, relentless, stubborn to the point of self-destruction.

The psychological ride given to a filmmaker must be akin to other roles in other sectors, but it felt at times like I would finish this film or die trying. Why put so much at stake? This is a question I still cannot answer, but a clue would be in the time and effort I had already invested.

By December 2013, I'd at least acquired a deadline of sorts. At LJMU, we were hosting a Visual Effects Christmas Symposium and it seemed like the perfect platform for a preview screening of the film, an opportunity to get essential feedback from VFX experts from other institutions. Richard Jones of the University of Bolton brought his Visual Effects team to do a presentation – it really opened up how much 3D modelling and VFX are having an impact as a new subject in higher education. Richard's course is one of the most highly subscribed in the country and he places his students into employment with the likes of Double Negative and Weta, two of the industry's Visual Effects powerhouses.

From speaking with Richard after screening the film, it became apparent that the same challenges and problems affecting the likes of Christopher Nolan and Ridley Scott, two high-profile clients of the above companies, had affected Violet City. The cut we screened was 2 hours 36 minutes, still far too long. Cutting characters and finding solutions to narrative issues were still an issue, but this film wasn't unique. Running time effects the rhythm and structure of any screen story, small, big, rich, poor. Richard and others present could see the spectacle and ambition of Violet City, but we didn't have the luxury of putting out

extended cuts like these luminary directors. It needed to be much shorter. Back to the timeline.

The first thing Dave and I did was go back to our mutual influences. Violet City looks the way it does because we wanted to create a spectacle, but not even attempt something on the scale of Nolan, Scott, Emmerich or Spielberg. Having visited film festivals and markets across the world, I had seen the good, bad and very ugly side of micro budget film. The ugly usually involved vanity pieces, cynical and cheap facsimiles of movies made by richer and craftier filmmakers. For all the fantastic, cheap cameras, grip and software available, I became aware that to try to play the big-budget high concept movies at their own game with no money would usually fall flat.

A second lesson for micro budget filmmakers from this experience is that style, performances and story matter even more, because they were the areas that could attract an audience. By being different, we could survive. On the other side of making Violet City, I believe this now more than ever. Jimmy McGovern, the celebrated BAFTA winning television writer, once advised me to 'wear my shirt out' in reference to playing football in front of club scouts as a kid. Do it different, do it well.

The romance and vintage spectacle of German Expressionism, in Fritz Lang's *M* and *Metropolis*, in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, FW Murnau's *Sunrise and Nosferatu*, were something we wanted to recreate in Violet City. Technically, it allowed us to stitch together all the photos, video, 3D models and live action in a convincing manner because monochrome, high-contrast crushed blacks removes all issues surrounding colour balancing composites.

Immediate comparisons, particularly on publicly releasing the trailer, were with Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City*. This surface viewpoint was extended by the use of 'City' in the title, but we weren't about to run away from this, as much as we weren't about to embrace it. Violet City is more expressionist than Hollywood Neo-Noir. I still find comparisons flattering, but one of the advantages of making this film independently was that we didn't have to worry about positioning ourselves.

A major breakthrough was in the use of intertitles in delivering key story information – underscoring the layers of story that we had to keep but need to deliver in a slicker, quicker fashion. The cut shown at the VFX symposium contained an omnipotent voiceover, at the third attempt. We realised that it was impossible to parse this with the action and not slow down or confuse the visual narrative, so we returned to the silent era and looked at the effective and stylised use of intertitles. After long months of trying to find our narrative thread, these simple cards made all the difference and offered a level of subtext that was difficult to pin down in previous edits.

The great lesson of the Violet City editing process, after 4 years in production, was that simple changes such as this could bring entirely positive shifts. How much onus we put on the audience to understand the story layers and how much we spoon feed information – or simply remain happily abstract – is

a struggle any filmmaker and artist always takes on with every new project.

We had one final shift remaining – and again this was brought about by screening the film in front of a small audience. Down to just over 2 hours, I took the film to the Creative Animation Knowledge Exchange at Edge Hill University in July 2014. Showing it to an audience of film academics and students opened us up to a range of views, often conflicting, but the central point driving through was that the first act still dragged. We needed to get Flynn to Violet City earlier.

After another moratorium, Dave and I hit upon a flashback montage as Flynn falls asleep stowed away on the airship carrying him to Violet City to find his best friend Zeb. It would deliver the exposition of how he got his violet eyes, why Zeb had to leave their prickly mining village home and why the townsfolk distrust 'witch' eyes. We shuffled the pack again and dropped another eight minutes from the film. 110 minutes now.

In November 2013, an old colleague of mine Derek Murray took Violet City to the American Film Market. He came back with an non-exclusive deal with an Los Angeles distributor, Indie Rights Inc. They liked our film and wanted to put it out worldwide via pay-per-view Video on Demand, including iTunes, Googleplay and games platforms – but only when it was ready.

I sent the 110 minute cut to Linda Nelson at Indie Rights in August 2014. Pending a 5.1 mix, we thought it was pretty much there. She liked it even more, seeing all the potential of a niche 'steampunk' audience, but we had to lose another ten minutes. Films over 100 minutes were a no-no for any independent film distributor – longer narratives in most genres had to be from established filmmakers. It created another headache.

We thought the film had been shaved down to the bone. How could we lose another ten minutes and not screw the story completely? Even scene, every shot, every frame was necessary. No window dressing, no luxury, no fat.

In terms of distribution, I'd always wanted to follow a similar philosophy to making the film – to avoid the mainstream. My experience with my two other feature films was that the filmmaker pulled down very little money. The £50k deal I'd made with the BBC over the David Morrissey film had been exceptional for such a small film, but even this didn't cover even a third of the original budget. The harsh fact was that small, micro-budget films were the bottom feeders of the industry and it was the thin end of the wedge for even the distributors, who would see any money a long time before it filtered back to the producers.

There was also a distinct lack of transparency and a clutter of middlemen in independent film distribution that made me fearful that even a qualified success would not reflect upon us, the makers. Indie Rights offered us an 80-20 split in our favour and they would help us market the film. This was the brave new world of film distribution and it was exciting.

But we had to get it down to 100 minutes.

The last revelation in editing Violet City came as I was watching archive newsreel footage from British Pathe and again it was stylised and simple. I'd started

using Final Cut X to master the film to Bluray and came across a function that speeded up the footage but kept the same pitch. In line with the staggered frame rates of old celluloid film, I thought I'd give it a try, fully expecting it to not work at all. I speeded Violet City, kit and caboodle, up by 10%.

Without telling anyone except Dave, we screened the film to a few select colleagues who had never seen it. The reaction from an audience we knew could be very critical was entirely positive, more like ebullient. Watching it back ourselves, the scenes had a freshness and elan that hadn't been present before. Violet City had finally found it's rhythm.

Showing it to Indie Rights at a still over-long 103 minutes, Linda Nelson agreed to distribute the film. We picture locked.

In late 2014 and early 2015, I took the film to several sound designers with a view to getting a 5.1 surround sound mix, which is a key deliverable for iTunes and other outlets. I'd designed the audio myself, struggling with the layers of dubbing, foley, music as much as I struggled with the layers of picture. It was like wrestling with a bear, but I felt like I had finally arrived at the right place.

Finishing a film for distribution can be the most expensive part of the process. I'd delivered to the BBC before, knowing how stringent the gatekeepers at Quality Control could be. It was one last great hurdle. Working part-time at SAE, a private college that had a foundation in offering Sound Design degrees but had started a film production course, to complement my role at LJMU and bring in some much needed extra income after 4 years working on the film, I met new colleagues who could help with sound design and particularly that tricky 5.1 mix.

This was as serendipitous as getting the green screen studio for 18 months was in terms of what it meant to the film. Paul Pringle, a National Film and Television School graduate and fellow teacher at SAE, took on the film as his pet project. At the time of writing, Paul is completing the 5.1 mix and we anticipate submitting the film to Indie Rights by the end of April 2015.

The road of making an independent film is seldom smooth and every project will have a unique aspect, but I believe that Violet City has significant value to independent filmmakers looking to make commercial films for next to nothing in a world that has significantly changed since we started preproduction in 2010. Audience, cameras, processing power and the distribution mechanism have all shifted, in some cases radically. While Violet City has negotiated its path to completion through all of this, the keys to making a film that can attract an audience of any kind seem to remain constant; story, character, performance and style.



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