

# Directing Workshop notes:

## Name and Intro – 2 mins

- Name:
  - o Jim Onyemenam
- Directing experience:
  - o Directed the Term 2 Short Film – Kissing Concrete, and a few other shorts before (Quantum Ball, Mask Off, Genesis, etc). Nominated for Best Media Piece at UCL, Best Student Film at Southampton International Film Festival and finalist at the Lift-Off Sessions April 2019.
- Future projects
  - o Currently working on staging a workshop production of an original musical and finding funding for his low-budget feature neo-noir.

## What is directing and general approaches – 7 mins

- Open to the floor.
  - o “What you learn from that first, and I don't call it 'trial by fire,' I call it 'baptism by fire,' is that you are going to have to take all of the responsibility, because basically when it gets right down to it, you are going to get all of the blame, so you might as well have made all of the decisions that led to people either liking it or disliking it. There's nothing worse than hearing somebody say 'Oh, you made that movie? I thought that movie sucked,' and you have to agree with them, you know?” – David Fincher
  - o “The saddest journey in the world is the one that follows a precise itinerary. Then you're not a traveller, you're a fucking tourist.” – Guillermo del Toro
  - o “The director is simply the audience. His job is to preside over accidents” – Orson Welles
  - o “My real interest is point of view. Deciding what's the point of view we're trying to express, who's eyes are we seeing the story through?” – Christopher Nolan
  - o “There is never an excuse not to finish a film.” – Werner Herzog

The first audience and the person ultimately responsible for the film, and therefore has two specific jobs. To make sure the film is finished. And to make sure we feel what we are seeing at the end.

## Fundamentals – 15 mins

- Storytelling and drama is all about one thing. Conflict – External and Internal. What is the obstacle facing our main character? What character trait is stopping him from overcoming it? How do we show these? Basically, the job of a director is to permanently remember these questions and ensure that they drive every decision that is being made on set. And there are numerous tools that could be used. We could talk about dialogue and word choice, shot design, production design... I'm just going to talk about 3 – Pace and Rhythm, Mood and Tone, and

Power Dynamics, giving examples from some great films and how dissecting how they work and are driven by this.

- Pace and Rhythm

- Uncut Gems – That’s the Opal – Safdie Brothers (4m):
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xz8gT5diiU4>
- Get Out – The Sunken Place – Jordan Peele (3m):
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBwVWrBk\\_uo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBwVWrBk_uo)
    - I chose both these clips because the pace and rhythm of them are almost identical right up to the end. I’m not sure if anyone here has seen Uncut Gems but it is perhaps the most chaotic film I have ever seen. Intentionally so. Get Out, on the other hand, is quite introspective. But the most important scene in both films are paced in the same way. Because what they are actually doing here is almost the same – its essentially... hypnosis. And the slower pace sells the idea that we, both the audience and the characters, are moving from an external space to an internal one – from the external conflict of, in Uncut Gems – making a sale and in Get Out – well, meeting your girlfriend’s weird ass parents for the first time, to the first foray into what the internal conflict actually is – in Uncut Gems how the Opal is this mystical object that seems to house the dreams and ambitions of all the characters, in this instance Kevin Garrett, and in Get Out – coming to terms with the impact of the deep seated trauma the main character endured as a child. Both scenes end differently though – Get out maintains that slow pace... he is now trapped within that trauma. Uncut Gems throws us back into the chaos with sharp force. But ultimately, these scenes demonstrate how a subtle control of the pacing of a scene can really help ensure that the specific conflict that the scene of the film is focussing on is in sharp focus.

- Character Dynamics

- Memories of Murder – Chase Scene – Bong Jon Ho (6m):
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1s5u7foDnTY>
    - This is a phenomenal film and I highly recommend it. It is about hunting the first ever South Korean serial killer and here is a chase scene where they identify and apprehend a suspect. And everything is in play here. So you have the primary external conflict – the three detectives trying to catch the suspect. You have the secondary external conflict – the tension between the detectives themselves, despite the fact that they are on the same side. And then you have the internal conflict, primarily in our main detective – who is perpetually trying to make himself seem smarter and more mysterious than he really is. And juggling these tensions is very difficult but allows for great things when done well.

- For instance, consider how it is shot. Up until the final capture, the cops and the target are almost never in the same shot, and with the cops themselves, there is almost as much lateral movement as there is forward. What I mean is – there is almost as much focus on them physically bustling between themselves as there is on them moving forwards towards the suspect. And note how the camera tends to stay further away from them – unconventional for an action scene, and allows their ineptitude to be seen fully. I personally think this gives it the vague undertones of a buddy-cop comedy, something better noticed when seen in the context of the entire film, but that may just be me.
  - But then we hit the quarry and the vague undertones of humour is gone – odds stacked against them. And once the external conflict – our suspect is hidden – is established, the shot design changes. We're now in close-ups. It is an opportunity to dive in, the third conflict comes in. Can our detective deduce something that would make him seem smarter and more mysterious than he really is? Can he be vindicated? Comedy is gone. Tension is ramped up. The stakes are subtly changed. And this changes the character dynamics slightly so consequently changes the shot design completely.
  - Dissecting this film is so much fun. The ensemble staging is a great point. It's a tonal masterpiece. I think it's perhaps even better than Parasite. I highly recommend watching it, and the numerous video essays on it on youtube too.
- Power Dynamics
    - Munich – Anver briefing (3m – note, not the entire video, just from the 1m to 4m mark):
      - <https://youtu.be/aBmigQznC1c?t=65>
        - Blocking and lens options to demonstrate power through screen dominance. Anver is constantly the most powerful person in the scene until that power is taken away by the superior military officer which then in fact make his final lines with the low angle shot feel even more defiant. But prior to this final shot, note how he is constantly the largest figure in the room. Anyone with a sharp eye may even notice that there are lens changes in the scene, sometimes a much wider lens to make him larger (particularly when he is sat down), and for instance in the over-the-shoulder shots, possibly a basic 50mm. However, when the military general comes in, hugs Anver, and then leaves, the shots are different. We are no longer using the over-the-shoulder on Anver. Anver is no longer the largest figure in the room. And the camera is tracking along with the military general AWAY from Anver. Spielberg here is literally using the physical size of the characters to demonstrate the weight and shift of power in the scene.

**Working with a crew – 15 mins**

- What I've described above is just a brief, cursory summary of how directors work and the way they look at and study scenes. And when you are directing, perhaps try to look at the script you're working with the same way. But remember that you are not the only one making this film. Alongside you is a team of people who contribute as well.
  - Cinematographer/DP & Production Design
    - For instance, none of what I described earlier would be possible without close communication with the DP and Production Design teams from the conception of the film. Consider the set design in *Memories of Murder* or the shot design in *Munich*. The lens changes and shot changes were all planned.
  - Editor
    - This is primarily where the rhythm of the film is codified. Note – not where it is created – that is created at the writing stage. Because there is more to rhythm than just the speed of the cuts. It's first created at the writing stage, but then finally codified upon the edit. So it is usually good to have a conversation with the editor in pre-production as that would save having to do reshoots or being locked in to a pacing that you are unhappy with.
  - Producer
    - Your producer brings everything together. They are on top of everything to do with logistics. This does mean that this is the relationship where clashes are most likely to happen, because there is no greater enemy to creative vision than practicality. So remember to stick to your guns. Your vision is valid because it is yours so believe in yourself. And make sure you do your job – you set the standard for commitment and professionalism on the set. But simultaneously, also remember that there is no greater catalyst for creative innovation than restrictions. Try to find a way when it is hard. Be solution oriented rather than stubborn.
- General crew
  - First on set always.
  - Eat with your crew – I think it was Scorsese that said this, and I thought it was weird, but ultimately, what he meant was that it is important to build dependable honest relationships.
  - Be prepared and stay calm. The idea is to do so much work in preproduction that you have little to do when shooting. I'm pretty sure Fincher said this but can't find the quote anywhere. If any of you do, send it to me. If you don't and want to reuse it... I said it first. Credit me. © Jim Onyemenam 2020
  - To this end, also remember, your AD is your best friend. Planning is important.

### **General tips – 5 mins**

- Read voraciously and write incessantly. There is no greater training for a filmmaker than to make films. The second is to write. And the third is to read. Everything.
- Auditions: important thing isn't how the actor fits the character, but how the actor responds to your direction.
- Film theory is overrated. Learn by watching, dissecting, and doing, and most importantly, failing.

### **FilmSoc specific tips – 5 mins**

- Remember you are here to learn and everyone else is too.
- Be professional but claim your space. You have a role – make sure you do it.
- However, ditch all preconceptions of what the role entails. The role is what you make it.
- Honour your commitments.
- Explore other societies – this is absolutely crucial.
  - There are other societies that can contribute to your film so much. Live Music, Stage Crew, Musical Theatre. Cross-society collaboration is the future. Push for it.

## **Any Questions?**

## **Additional Resources**

### **Masterclass:**

- Ron Howard – pragmatic filmmaking guidance, absolutely crucial for first time and low-budget filmmakers.
- Werner Herzog – a philosophical approach to filmmaking, drawing and encouraging a broad basis, wider reading/listening, and how film and filmmaking connects (and connects with) the world at large.
- Martin Scorsese – a good balance between the two, but also on drawing from personal experience and perspectives in crafting that film.

**Stanislavski: An Actor Prepares:** Possibly the most influential book ever on acting and good to read to understand some actor's approaches to acting. It's not exactly method but does stress the primacy of understanding your character's inner psychology and how to situate yourself in there through identifying correlative experiences. It's a good read.

**The Hero's Journey:** I'm not a huge fan but there are tons of books and blog posts about this. It's sold as a framework/structure to write and create. However, I think it is merely a good metric to assess the structural integrity of a very narrow span of stories. So ultimately, a good foundation on film/story structure.

- I'd pair this with one of my favourite articles from one of my favourite writer-actress-producers: Brit Marling, who is quite critical of it and her work is great.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/opinion/sunday/brit-marling-women-movies.html>

**Bang2Write:** Phenomenal blog, and lots of good content for first time writers.

**London Screenwriters' Festival:** All online this year obviously and great workshops, masterclasses, and networking opportunities.

"Always take the initiative. There is nothing wrong with spending a night in a jail cell if it means getting the shot you need. Send out all your dogs and one might return with prey. Never wallow in your troubles; despair must be kept private and brief. Learn to live with your mistakes. Expand your knowledge and understanding of music and literature, old and modern. That roll of unexposed celluloid you have in your hand might be the last in existence, so do something impressive with it. There is never an excuse not to finish a film. Carry bolt cutters everywhere. Thwart institutional cowardice. Ask for forgiveness, not permission. Take your fate into your own hands. Learn to read the inner essence of a landscape. Ignite the fire within and explore unknown territory. Walk straight ahead, never detour. Manoeuvre and mislead, but always deliver. Don't be fearful of rejection. Develop your own voice. Day one is the point of no return. A badge of honour is to fail a film theory class. Chance is the lifeblood of cinema. Guerrilla tactics are best. Take revenge if need be. Get used to the bear behind you."

—Werner Herzog