Controlled Burn:

18 Amended Lessons from the Edit Suit

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Abstract

Controlled Burn if a short fiction film about Reid, a parolee tangled in the self-destructive behaviors that defined his past and threaten his future. This thesis maps out the journey of turning the page to screen, and dissects the artistic, logistical, and ideological decisions that shaped *Controlled Burn* into my most personal work to date.

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Introduction

Controlled Burn is a 20-minute live-action narrative fiction film which follows Reid as he spends his final day of parole doing all the things that got him there in the first place: drug deals, petty larceny, and connecting with a fling. The fling, named Marty, represents everything Reid is pretending to escape — summarized in a word: addiction. Marty offers Reid an opportunity to return to the old status quo, the good ole days. Sure, maybe those days involved run-ins with the law, the most recent of which landed Reid a year-long parole after taking the fall for Marty. Maybe Reid is still a little bitter about that.

It hardly takes any time, though, for Reid to be pulled right back in. Forget left the building, Marty, and Reid's larger addiction, never even put on their shoes. Nor does it take much time for Reid to put together that Marty had no intention of reconnecting: Marty's true plan is to use Reid as a necessary rocket booster to achieve escape velocity, tossed aside once exhausted. Upon discovery, Reid flips the circumstance on Marty and escapes for himself. While Reid gets the chance to feel like he's got the last laugh, the real last laugh is Reid's addiction, finally free.

Controlled Burn represents the terminal station of an at-times unnecessarily-complex mental metro that took me down many different tunnels of story. But first, how did I end up here? Why do I care about this story? Let's skip to the end.

I wrote *Controlled Burn* because I liked it. That's it. That's the whole reason. What follows after this will be the exploration of hindsight which will always lean towards the linear. Humans are not linear: we are a walking talking kaleidoscope of thoughts and feelings and opinions and ethics and memories and dreams. Imposing any linear logic over the creation of a piece of art is

simply silly. The notion of the self is not isolated. (Brady and Jeffers) And yet here I am. There's something to be learned upon hindsight and I'd dare not miss an opportunity to reflect. I'll draw a few lines on this map and do my best.

If awareness were a colour, I'd be a dog. *Controlled Burn* was the first time I knew the story was in some way biographical going into production. The difference between making a film for reasons you think you know and making a film for reasons that are unshakably true is night and day. I know this because I've made a lot of films for reasons I thought I knew.

Please enjoy.

Act I: Pre-Production

Sc. 01: Punk archivist

My gateway into filmmaking was archiving and editing local punk and metal shows for bands across my hometown of Windsor, Ontario. I would show up to gigs with 8-10 bags of 3-4 mini DV cameras and tripods I rented from my high school media lab, set up each camera as a static angle, and hit record (praying I had enough tapes for the whole set.)

It sounded like crap and looked even worse. It was exhilarating. I was creating something for people that they desperately needed — archive — and creating a small little niche of my own. It was like doing commercials and advertising without losing my soul. I spent maybe a few hundred hours on these shows, all-told, and taught myself the essential editing lessons I know now. The most important: edit the material you have in front of you, not the material you wish you had, or even the material you think you have. It doesn't matter how sweet the angle is if it's completely out of focus – which happened quite a bit. Learn how to watch with fresh eyes.

I credit this experience as one in which I learned how to be a filmmaker by being an editor first. I spent more time thinking about how things would cut together than I spent figuring out how to shoot them. That sojourn into live show recording spurred an interest in fiction filmmaking. I've directed a few short documentaries but a majority of my time post show-archiving has been spent focused on narratives.

While I've found my creative centre has shifted and transformed, one thing that hasn't is my desire for community-focused filmmaking. Growing up in various basements, bars, faith halls,

and run-down venues meant that the walls changed more than the people within them. Every show was attended by the same core group who were also my target audience who were also my assistant camera operators; the audience was my crew was my support. I didn't realize it at the time, but growing up into filmmaking this way was deeply affecting. I've never made films "on my own." I never understood the idea of making film with anything less than a platoon of engaged people. The archive wasn't for anybody but the community I was representing and that same community were constantly offering suggestions as to how I could improve the archive. Creating and showcasing were one in the same. Everything I made was for the public view, and everything I shot was a public event. Why would I make films any differently?

Sc. 02: On writing *Controlled Burn*… as Joe Abercrombie

Writing *Controlled Burn* was a challenge in a number of ways and I spent over half a year relentlessly running on a creative treadmill. In the months leading up to production, somewhere around draft versions 10 and 12, I realized I never really sought short stories, only feature-length. Of course I would struggle with the short scale of storytelling – I had no practice in it. I needed to immerse myself in shorts and truly understand scale of story. In *Controlled Burn*s' terms, I could try to show Reid and Marty's relationship in total (the forest) or a vertical slice of one evening with the both of them (the trees). I find it quite tempting, and dangerous, to include more and more trees. It's hard to figure out the single best viewpoint of a forest to show off. A short film is better off spent on one tree. Exactly the variety and the size of the tree is not my concern. It took me years to come to that absurdly simple conclusion.

> *"Whenever we're in a brain-storming session and we're presenting each other with ideas, we say 'here's a bad idea' before saying it."* (Michael-Key and Peele)

Writing advice is often no different than chewing gum. Works for a few minutes, but after that, it's just mechanical. I found Key and Peele's advice to strike to a real truth in the writing process: nothing is more dangerous than self-censoring. You cannot edit that which doesn't exist, and stuff that exists only in your head *does not exist*, no matter how disassociatively you daydream. I find that admitting out loud that you have a bad idea to share is genius. It immediately does a number of things:

1. You free yourself from the burden of having a "good" idea, whatever that means.

2. Your admission that there are problems acknowledges the issues before it's even said…

3. … but it's worth sharing. The fact it's worth sharing is *the thing* that matters more than the issues it presents.

4. If you're working with someone else, you're providing space for further interpretation of the idea and subsequent 'solutions' to whatever problem they had with it — if they had any.

This advice was a turn-key for me. It helped get over my rampant perfectionism by striking the core of the problem: thinking isn't doing, *doing is doing*. You need to take things out of your head to make space for other things. There exist in this world people that can solve a Rubix cube in their mind. I feel these are the people who can plan an entire draft in their heads. For the rest of us? You can picture the cube, sure, and maybe even manipulate it for a move or two. After that you need it in your hands.

I thank Joe Abercrombie at the front of this for a good reason. While I was busy spinning my tires on endless versions of this story, Joe opened things right up for me. Rather, the version of Joe that lives in my head opened things right up for me. Let me explain myself.

His novel titled *Sharp Ends* is a collection of short stories that take place in a larger narrative world he's concocted over the years. Honestly, I can't pretend the material is particularly game-changing (sorry, Joe) but I'll be damned if it isn't good, pulpy fun. *Stuff happens.* We watch people do things, and others respond to those things. There's always something going on. There's always more to learn about the world, and the larger world has material impact on our characters. People are always taking action. And the stories themselves were quite short.

It's no mystery that this script now looks nothing like it did when it first started. A vast majority of the feedback I was rightfully receiving could be summarized as "what is the story here? I don't get it." I was faced with the stark realization that Peter Howie the Screenwriter couldn't solve this problem. He was the wrong person for the job. I needed a change of mental venue. But what about Peter Howie's version of Joe Abercrombie — what would he write?

Note an important distinction here: I'm not asking what Joe Abercrombie would write, I'm asking what Peter would write if he was Joe Abercrombie. I have no earthly idea what Joe Abercrombie would write, but if I were pretending to be him…?

Easy. He would write some kinda gross and predatory love story that isn't a love story as much as a story of escape. Or something like that. He'd also make sure there's at least one legitimate narrative twist. Or something like that. It would be pulpy with people would be making decisions and taking actions. It would be "fun." Or something like that. He would write *Controlled Burn*. Or something like it.

Wait. Good god — what am I doing? Is this screenwriting? How terrible. It's like Jeff Bezos' "rules for television writing":

1. *A heroic protagonist who experiences growth and change*
2. *A compelling antagonist*
3. *Wish fulfilment (e.g., the protagonist has hidden abilities, such as superpowers or magic)*
4. *Moral choices*
5. *Diverse worldbuilding (different geographic landscapes)*
6. *Urgency to watch next episode (cliffhangers)*
7. *Civilizational high stakes (a global threat to humanity like an alien invasion – or a devastating pandemic)*
8. *Humour*
9. *Betrayal*
10. *Positive emotions (love, joy, hope)*
11. *Negative emotions (loss, sorrow)*
12. *Violence* (Stone)

I cannot imagine what a writer's room would be like when career writers are told to make sure that their stories have both "positive emotions" and "negative emotions," but I digress. None of this is what the story *actually is*… This is just the mathy-quantifiable-structural-nuts-and-bolts that makes us *feel we're writing* but we're not. Writing by spreadsheet, isn't. We're just talking about structure. It's what you do *with* the structure that matters so much more. Trihn T. Minh-Ha says it much better:

> "How is one to cope with a "film theory" that can never theorize "about" film, but only *with* concepts that film raises in relation to concepts of other practices? […] Indeed, some of the questions invariably burned into the public film debates with the filmmaker are: what's the shooting ratio? What's the budget? How long did it take you to complete the film? The higher the bet, the better the product; the larger the amount of money involved, the more valuable the film, the more believable truth it holds out." (Mihn-ha)

Despite this it was also the only way I could find a way into story writing: pretending to be someone else, knowing full well that someone else wouldn't have ever written *Controlled Burn*. There's something immensely freeing about this state of mind. It worked. I completed a very new version of the draft over a fraction of the time of my previous films, which is quite similar to what was shot in the end. It was a worthwhile exercise I will probably find myself repeating in the future.

Sc. 03: On budgeting

At the independent scales of filming, if one were to be truly honest with ones' self about the expense of the work required to crew a film, the most expensive line item will be wages. People are expensive. Skilled people doubly so — you're often vying for their time with people who can, and will, pay double you. I'm tempted to say something like "I'll never be so lucky again," but the reality is that there is a difference in quality when you pay people and *Controlled Burn* was the first set in which I had paid the entire crew close to their typical wages.

I have infinite gratitude and space for people who work for the love of the work. A vast majority of my work has been made this way and 80% of my regularly recurring crew members have worked at least two projects for me for free. The quality of the work of my crew throughout all of my films was, time and time again, overwhelmingly professional and creative. I am indebted to my crews more than they could ever know. I have found that the key to getting great work out of great workers when you cannot meaningfully pay for their time is to provide them the agency and space so they have an opportunity to impress themselves. "Give them something for their demo reel." It's about saying "yes, and" and much as you can, not "yes, but." Or worse, "no." It's about working with them, using their brain, and being reasonable with expectations. Excite

people. Get them feeling like this project is theirs and, before you know it, it kind of will be. That's the point.

I have had a principle role in the budgetary department of all of my films and I aim to meet a professional standard. I also try to be honest with myself, add 25%, and keep a weather eye on the final bill. After all, I'm funding most of it. Up to *Controlled Burn*, my films have historically cost $9,000, all's said and done.

Controlled Burn septupled that. A SSHRC grant provides $17,500, no strings attached. I had saved more or less the same sum over a period of time before the MFA program. Another $10,000 came and went as other expenses added up. *Controlled Burn*'s final budget sits at: $42,000. I can account for every dollar. All told, it was money stretched twice over and then some. This budget afforded everyone's near-normal wage, 2x unit moves per day, ample food, a pleasant working environment, and a 10-hour working day.

Sc. 04: On scheduling

I hate 14-hour days. I hate the grind-set mentality that Hollywood has exacerbated to an Nth degree. I hate the suffering borne of the people who work on the film caused by the people who benefit from it the most. I don't care how much a producer has "skin in the game." Their skin will never be able to recuperate the time spent by other people. Working 80 hour weeks so someone else can get an Oscar (or more realistically a *Vimeo Staff Pick*) is no way to live a life.

I will do everything I can do as a director to keep our working hours humane. This directly implicates how my films are shot.

This film was a challenge to budget and schedule (two departments inexorably intwined) because of the twin problems of "huge film" and a shorter-than-average working day. It essentially boils down to how many pages you can shoot per day – a simple figure with complex downstream impacts. I spent an evening working out my variables:

1. My past films have all capped at 16 pages long.
2. They all had at least 1 major unit move per day, if any.
3. I shot every film within 4 days, and typically within 12 hours – going over 12 only happened once per film.
4. I shot 5 pages per day without breaking our backs or falling asleep from boredom.

Meaning:

1. I shot 1 page every 2.4 hours, or:
2. In 10 hours, I could shoot 4.16 pages, including at least 1 major unit move.

I spent a lot of time obsessively crafting my one-line. I've been the 1AD enough to know what works and what doesn't and I've shot enough of my own films to know how I like to work. I knew that my one-line would form the basis for *Controlled Burn*'s success, failure, or both.

A lot of people looked at me like I had 3 heads when I explained the rationale behind my one-liner. It oddly took more confidence than I anticipated to schedule the film in this way. A lot of people, including myself, were asking very rational questions: would we be doing enough each day? Would "the math" actually hold up?

Yes, and yes. The experiment was successful. Only one day (day 6 of 9) included more shooting than my average speed, and it was because I knew we would be shooting in the same location for the entire day – what we saved in the lack of unit moves, we would spend in

additional shooting time. Every other day, I planned less than our necessary average. The end result? Two days were so easy, crew were almost complaining we weren't doing that much. "This could have been an email," they were saying.

It turns out both of those days resulted in the strongest sequences in the film: Reid and Marty chatting in Marty's car, and Reid and Marty chatting on the bridge. We wrapped at the 10th hour, all of us having felt fulfilled for doing the best we could with the time we had. We never rushed and we were never prematurely pushed out of a location. Only one day brought us to the twelve-hour mark – the last day – and we all knew it would be a long day far in advance. I took having extra time at the end of each day to be an overwhelming success. We didn't have extra time because of things we didn't do – we had extra time because we were fast and scheduled things properly.

Sc. 05: Casting vs. Production

Casting as a department is uniquely impacted by the budgeting department. Working with cast is one conversation, but deciding how many cast members will be in the film altogether is a different conversation entirely, and that conversation needs to include both the screenwriter and the producer. Thankfully, on this shoot, those were all the same person.

I find that casting money is typically visible when crewing money is typically, largely, invisible. Much like locations the audience can tell when you've elected to save a dollar. There's a certain kind of story that only involves 2-3 speaking characters just the same way that there's a certain kind of story that only involves 2-3 locations. There is an implicit demand at the screenwriting stage to reduce and collapse down characters to make things more efficient both narratively and budgetarily. I think this is a missed opportunity.

I have a lot of love for single-serving talent – that is, actors and performers who are only in the film for a single scene. (I hate using the term "background" or "atmosphere"; single-serving feels more holistic.) I felt one of the ways to keep this film leaning forward without pausing to exposit too much was to include as many single-server performers as I could, where reasonable. Single-servers have the wonderful opportunity to remind our audience that life does in fact occur outside of the scene we're watching. I can kind of fake depth in my world this way. The characters themselves can be a source of exposition simply by mere existence.

Reid's parole officer is one such example: they wouldn't be having a conversation if Reid hadn't been involved with the law before. That said, having a swarm of single-server performers doesn't do you any good unless you're utilizing them properly. I don't think *Controlled Burn* is flawlessly executed in this sense. My single-servers could have had more variance from scene to scene. I've got two cashiers, for example, and they largely do the same thing. I only really noticed that while we were shooting. That's a mistake in the writing stage, though I defend the use of them in the story – they were successful in providing my dual leads ample opportunity to act against someone else.

Sc. 05A: Casting *Controlled Burn*

I've been lucky enough to work with Rachel Chaves on two different films in the AD department. When I prompted this project to her, she asked for a different department: casting direction. The easiest 'yes' of my life. I like to believe we had an effective working relationship up to that point and, on a fundamental level, Rachel always seemed to be picking up what I was putting down.

The casting process itself was remarkably fast. It helped that we used the typical systems in place for casting. This is much quicker then trawling Kijiji. Almost everyone I cast was my first

choice, Reid and Marty particularly. From the day the sides went up to the day we sent out emails, maybe two weeks had passed. Casting was far and away the fastest element of pre-production, and I'm grateful. Rachel gave me the confidence to act on instinct. It worked to my favour this time.

Sc. 06: Regarding on-set departments

I think film is at its best when every single department is involved to tell the story. It's about working with each department head and wringing out as much blood from the stone as possible. What options are available? What tools are at our disposal? With each subsequent film, I find myself becoming more and more aware of that which I do not know.

I do everything I can to understand each department as intimately as possible. I've been in most positions on a film crew (mostly indie) for this reason. It enables deeper conversations with department heads, and more realistic planning in the preparation stage. I find, at my budgetary level, there are four departments that provide greatest nearly-guaranteed bang-for-buck:

1. Production Design
2. Locations
3. Sound
4. Craft

These are the departments for which I will gladly open up my wallet more than any other, and often without thinking twice. I find they have the greatest, global impact on the entire film.

Sc. 06A: Regarding production design

I must admit that listing "production design" as no. 1 almost feels like cheating since it is for all intents and purposes really 6 different departments in one big trench coat:

1. Art department
2. Set decoration
3. Props
4. Construction
5. SFX
6. Makeup / Wardrobe

It pays you to have a production designer who is an expert juggler. To that end, Jenn McGouran (my production designer) may as well be scouted by the Cirque.

Production design is one of the rare departments in film for which every dollar is visible. Compared to craft, in which every dollar is invisible, this is notable. People notice when the frame is filled with story. That doesn't mean that every prop has some "backstory" that explains why it's there. It means that there is indication that, in the environment for which we're shooting, life occurs outside of the frame, and outside of the scene. Set decoration, art department — these are things that the audience feels often without the words to say it. And much like ADR, the audience can tell when you're pulling the wool over their eyes. They can tell when a room, or any location, has been built exclusively for the purpose of the film. Is there depth in your production design? What purpose does the room you're shooting in serve — for the scene? For the story? For the world? Good production design can answer all three of those questions using all six sub-departments.

Sc. 06B: Regarding locations

There's something about all those big sequences in *Lawrence of Arabia* that hits you differently than modern blockbusters. About an hour into the film, it's inevitable that someone will sigh or shake their head or just marvel at the fact that *that's an actual mountain they're standing in front of, and those hundred people are actually on camels.* There is almost no amount of pretending that can cover for the lack of a genuine location.

Locations make production design look better which makes the film look better as a whole. It's extremely expensive (in money, time, creativity, or likely all three) to make a location look like a different location. I find, at my budgetary level, you're better off just finding the actual location – or rewriting your film to match the locations you can get. The latter of those two is a real pain. There's an art to challenging yourself in writing for locations.

I spent a lot of time looking through various locations, cold calling businesses, and trying to find a fun locations that would also make our lives easier. On the whole, our locations were excellent, relatively inexpensive, and offered tons of flexibility. Oftentimes they were real-life analogues for what they were representing in film. Our AA meeting room has been used as an AA room in real life and in countless other film productions that have shot in Toronto. This isn't a mistake. This room just looks like it's for AA meetings because it is.

I thought that changing locations almost as much as possible would help sell the world of the film and the relationship depicted. It's an expensive assumption, but I think I was right. The constant changing of scenery helps keep the film, in some ways, fresh and leaning forward. The only location I regret is our gas station location. It's too clinical. The lighting environment was a tough one and we had to spend about 30 minutes making sure logos were obscured. We would have been better off with a mom-and-pop cornerstore-style convenience store. Alas, Circle K was literally around the corner from my apartment, and my laziness won out that day. A shame.

A fair question people will probably leave this film with is *why on earth did you film at that weird location at the end*? My answer will be unsatisfying to you. Because it's weird. It's odd. It's different. There's nowhere else on earth quite like it. Why wouldn't I film it there? A friend of mine heard about the location the summer before we started shooting and a small group of us made the trek to visit the sculptures. Pretty much then and there I decided I wanted to write

a film that would conclude at Screaming Heads. It's just too much fun. There's no reason for the final act of the film to occur in any one particular location other than the shoehorned narrative reason – an easy place to rob, middle of nowhere. That's a weakness in the writing, to be sure, but it gave me the opportunity to film in a fun location.

Sc. 06C: Craft

"… an Army, like a serpent, goes upon its belly." (Carlyle)

Perhaps one of the only truly consistent visual monikers of a first-time filmmaker is opening the XL margherita and wondering why everyone's so upset. A film crew operating on pizza is just another rapidly shrinking ouroboros. Every director learns from this mistake. But what do we actually learn? "No grumbling stomachs. Fill the craft table." That's only half the story. Rice only takes you so far and your dozen mealy-as-sin red delicious apples on the craft table will go uneaten. What you need is high quality food. This costs you in two different ways: time and money.

This is an essential point I want to discuss. A bad set doesn't become a good one when you have good food, but a great set can become a bad one with bad food. With that in mind, will you pick better lenses, or better food? What results in a better film? Food. Every time. Lenses don't tell your story. People do. Is this really so radical? Unfortunately, yes, I think it is. Independent directors, in my limited experience, will balk at this. They'll be creative in every department — turn a bedroom into a board office; turn sunrise into sunset; swap out one actor for another — but when it comes to food, *find a caterer that offers the most for the least and call it quits.* Why? Because there's no conclusive study out there proving that better food makes for a better film – only common sense, and common sense is only appreciated if it fattens a wallet, not shrinks it.

There is no discussing *Controlled Burn*'s considerable and impressive craft table without discussing the singular person who managed it all: Jes Young.

Jes and I had prepped the craft menu for about a month before principle photography, and we spent almost an equal amount of time prepping the menu as I did the shot list with Ryan. We had a handmade dessert every night. Jes spent 15 hours a day on their feet for all 9 days of production. They spent more time on set than some of the other crew.

People notice when you spend money on them, and the less it is expected, the more it is appreciated. On an indie film crew like mine I anticipated expectations were rightfully quite low. A great craft table is something you notice right away, and is just one of those ways you can curry favour.

The difference between "acceptable" and "excellent" often doesn't necessarily cost more money, but time and effort. Which is, admittedly, another way to say money but with a different flavour. I think a lot of film is like this. Film is already astronomically expensive. Just getting in the doorway is more than half the battle; the other half is executing. Given I was able to unleash Jes on this problem, I knew, or had a zealot's amount of faith, that we could elevate "acceptable" to "outstanding." I was right. Jes, a lifetime vegetarian, managed to surprise the crew every single day. Craft was an overwhelming victory. I made note of the following coloured flags:

<u>Green flags:</u>

1. Nobody speaking during lunch
2. Meat-eaters going for the veggie option because it looks good.
3. Leftovers.
4. "What is this? I've never had it before."
5. "I need this recipe."
6. Going out of your way to thank the caterer.

Red flags:

1. Crew members Uber-eats-ing food to set.
2. An empty craft table 5-minutes into lunch.
3. Leftovers.
4. People uncomfortably remarking on the food's quality. "Yeah, it's… great!"
5. Talking about craft tables from other sets.

Jes was so successful at catering, people thought they ran a legitimate catering business. I knew every time we came out of lunch, we were energized with quality food that could keep us going to the 10th hour. It did. Without Jes, the crew wouldn't have been so positive.

Sc. 07: Shot planning

> *"I don't like options, I like commitment to ideas. […] People will decide on how to shoot a scene, and maybe they suggest something fairly radical or different, and then they'll turn around and say 'but then we'll just do another version where she's not in the doorway,' for example. That's not an idea, that's an option. Ideas are hard."* (Willis).

I knew *Controlled Burn's* scale necessitated more visual planning than I ever had before. Meaning I knew I would have to actually plan the visualization at all.

Shot planning always struck me as a bit strange. It always felt like it wasn't my job, or that I was stepping on someone else's shoes. In hindsight, that's an absurd thought. As a director, it's your job to combine images together to create new thoughts. Of course it's your responsibility to decide what those images are and how they are experienced. And yet. I couldn't shake the idea that I'm bringing an abacus to a math exam; that I'm just not visually intellectual enough.

My rule of thumb is to indicate what coverage of the script I want. Exactly how, the minute details, the ones-and-zeroes of it — that is safely left in the hands of my DP and production designer. I only thought of focal lengths in terms of short, medium, or long; I only thought of framing as wide, medium, or close; I only thought of shot length in terms of what action would have to be captured. I did everything I could to avoid editing in my head while still maintaining a strong sense of *what the scene looks like*. This almost felt like doublethink. I got by.

While I'm here, it's my naïve opinion that *wides are just better than closeups.* There's something that feels fabricated about a close up to me. Like I'm cheating. *Quick, look at that person's face — they're emoting!* or *Look at how good they're crying!* or *Pay attention to this prop, we'll bring it back later!* Whereas a wide requires a painter's precision. The eye has to know where to look without ever being explicitly told. And you can just do more, have more, in a wide. Details. People. Action. Stories.

Sc. 07A: On camera movement (I)

> *"Usually when something doesn't work, it's because you're doing too much… I don't get 'motion' confused with 'accomplishment'"* (Willis)

Moving the camera during a take costs infrastructure in four ways: the people to set up the shot, the equipment to set up the shot, the time to set up the shot, and the time to rehearse the shot. Only then can you actually shoot it. No matter what your camera motion is, any amount of movement is a colossal time vortex and, pound for pound, extremely expensive. It's easy to forget how much time is lost just in setting up. I can't afford all of that. Not yet, in any event.

Except when all of that infrastructure actually saves us time because it's *just the right decision to make.* In my practice thus far, I have found this to be exceedingly rare… And it still exists. I

gave myself exactly three moments when I wanted motion. (I almost added a fourth, but Ryan properly dissuaded me.) Here are the three moments:

Sc. 07B: Motion #1 – Marty's introduction

I was married to the idea of Marty discovering his plan had spectacularly failed via a shoulder rig long take, so I thought, fairly mechanically, that his introduction had to be the opposite. This was the result. We know Marty matters, we know that Reid is focusing on him, but because we're behind him, we can't actually connect yet. I thought it was important that Marty's introduction feel "planned." In a way, I wanted the audience to feel that they were in the middle of a con which Marty had orchestrated. This movement doesn't do that on its own, but I thought it was a start.

Sc. 07C: Motion #2 – Reid's approach

I liked the idea of watching Marty as if he's a caged animal and we're trying to get a better view of him. In the world of the story, Reid is actually the one who's being poked and prodded like a science experiment, he just doesn't know that yet. As an unexpected side-effect, I loved this take because Marty's facial responses are obscured behind someone else and we're forced to imagine what he looks like. We see him start to roll his eyes, but not the whole thing. We have to work for it. That mattered to me. I don't know why, but it mattered to me. This only happened once since everyone rightfully tried to plan the opposite – to make sure they only moved before or after Marty delivered a facial reaction. By the time I realized I wanted Marty to be emoting "off screen" I couldn't get the intercontinental shipping boat of production to turn on the dime necessary to facilitate it. It would take too much time to make it happen. I knew, editorially, that I got at least one take of it which might be enough. It was.

Sc. 07D: Motion #3 – Marty's escape

I knew I needed to feel Marty's world collapsing in on him, that the world itself was slipping out from underneath him. I needed the camera, in only that moment and no other, to directly empathise with Marty via motion. "*Things are coming undone."* I elected a shoulder rig. I thought the audience would feel in their bones the weight of this decision, that it would be apparent by how the camera is operating that Marty's story was concluded, even if they couldn't point to exactly why they knew it was the conclusion.

That said, he does literally run out of the frame, so I can't pretend this is so very poetic.

Sc. 08: A quick note on insurance

Controlled Burn was one phone call away from being cancelled entirely, the day before day one. Film insurance is just as much a grift as any insurance and, up to *Controlled Burn*, I had no reason to believe my project would be rejected. Naturally, you know where this is going.

The department of Risk Management at York University is effectively responsible for all official productions by the film department, managing the student productions that are underwritten by about a half-dozen different insurance providers. Among other things, they're one of the ways students are enabled to have "free" insurance.

For every production up to this point, my applications have been effectively rubber-stamped and immediately forgotten about. *Controlled Burn*'s application was summarily rejected. Why? Allegedly for two reasons:

1. The film occurred outside of Toronto, Ontario. As far as Risk Management was concerned, there was no clause in their contract which stipulated that any film had to be shot within the city's limits, however their underwriters were firm.

2. The film, through off-screen implied action lines, detonates a car. Risk Management attempted to remind the underwriters that, *you know, this is a movie, and they aren't actually going to explode a vehicle.* The underwriters stood firm. Unless that action line was removed, we would not receive insurance.

Risk Management are in my acknowledgements for a reason. Erin Schwartz and co. made it their personal mission to make sure my film was approved. Before I knew it, *Controlled Burn* almost became the lynchpin of a decision to change underwriters entirely. I believe litigation was threatened.

In the interim uncertainty, Erin recommended I continue to push forward while acknowledging that there would be a very real chance I would never receive an approval. I followed her advice. This was perhaps the most nerve-wracking event of the entire production and this two-week saga surely aged me two years.

The day before production began, I was in the middle of pick-ups when Erin called me and asked if I was sitting down. I about collapsed when she said the words "you have been approved." Erin, Lisa, and Amanda: thank you. If not for your 9PM calls and 7AM emails, I wouldn't be writing this.

Act II: Active Production

Sc. 09: Regarding On-location sound recording

For the past two films, I've made the mistake of not giving sound the attention it deserves and I've had grievous sound errors that had to be creatively solved in post that got in the way of the film. I wouldn't let that happen this time. The first person to be hired on this film was my sound recordist. Brandon Tang, a university comrade and first-timer for me, was a joy to work with. As per my request, he refused to allow us to move on from a take unless he was convinced sound was close to immaculate. Oftentimes everything worked except sound due to some of life's chaos. No matter. If everything worked but sound, then nothing worked. Good sound makes things look better and so we would work until sound was crystal clear. So far? So good. My audio editor had everything they needed, and were set up for success. Now I'm solving story issues with sound instead of solving sound issues with story.

Sc. 10: On cinematography

Controlled Burn was the first film I worked with a cinematographer for the first time since undergrad. Quite literally every single project I had ever shot up to this point was helmed by Logan Arnold or Robert Murdoch, two men for whom I knew I could trust my life, and two people with whom I had extensive on-set and off-set relationships with.

The truth is that Logan rejected my offer for him to shoot this one. His life was too chaotic at the time. I've not yet found the courage to thank him for that rejection. He would have been the

wrong choice for *Controlled Burn*. I needed someone with an outside perspective on my own work, especially if I was going to be the writer-director-editor.

It took all of five minutes in my first meeting to realize Ryan should have been my only choice. A university comrade I knew through friends, I was aware he has an impressive track record: as of writing this, he has been the 1AC on over 50 projects and been the DP on over 15. I believe he still holds the undergraduate record for being on the most film crews at York. His mental rolodex of films shot vs. films viewed trumps most. I quickly realized you can speak exclusively upper-level-hokey-pokey visual theory or just tell him "remember that one shot in *No Country*? I wanna do that," and he would understand what you're talking about just the same. I value both of these things quite highly. I knew in my gut he wasn't chasing beauty — he was chasing interesting, and interesting has a much longer shelf-life.

His work was remarkably fast. *And I mean fast*. It took me a day to get used to how quickly he got himself set up. I gave Ryan the opportunity to hire anybody he wanted to for the camera and gaffing team, resulting in his hiring people that he'd worked with before countless times. On set, they were practically speaking their own language. While I'd not dare pigeon-hole Ryan, he's been a 1AC for over a decade and that certainly doesn't lend someone to being a slow worker.

His work was also remarkably efficient. There are no superfluous shots, no obviously-for-the-demo-reel moments that stand out. The visual storytelling is simple, effective, and efficient. This is good… because I have never felt confident in my ability to create beautiful filmic images. I just don't know how to do that. I'm not even sure I want to do that. I think an insistence on beauty is what's killing Canadian cinema. Everything looks like a dinner plate made by someone who doesn't let their food touch. Everything is perfectly hair-lit, perfectly separated from one another, perfectly in focus. The Disney-ification, the Apple-ifying of it all. It all looks

like advertising. Sterile. Boring. Depressing. I'm glad to say that Ryan embraced the doom-and-gloom grit that *Controlled Burn* proudly wears on its sleeve. The film is properly moody to its benefit.

Ryan was also one of the first people who validated that our lead actors were, definitely, the right people for the job. Any time I asked him what he thought, he invariably raised his eyebrows and said something like "*yeah, no, these guys are great*." Given Ryan is physically incapable of lying, that was all I needed to hear.

Sc. 11: Regarding the number of takes you shoot

With every film up to *Controlled Burn*, I felt *if you hadn't found it in the first three takes, what are you really looking for?* While I must admit that, as usual, a part of me still feels this way, a part of me realizes just how ignorant that question can be. I took my appreciation for Soderbergh too far.

There's something to be said about losing yourself in a sequence. That is the kind of spontaneity I crave – of suddenly discovering *where the dialogue comes from*, not *what the dialogue is*. It's a very theatre thing I've found exceptionally hard to arrive at – without the benefit of running lines over and over and over again and probably running takes into the 20s. On one hand, having a number of takes is a luxury afforded of a vast quantity of variables that are, on the whole, undoubtedly the product of privilege, particularly financial. On the other hand, it is a matter of scheduling intelligently. A good one-line will give you more quality time with your performers, and more time to run the lines and shoot.

Controlled Burn was the film in which I had the most takes with the fewest notes. Rarely did I move before the 5th take. My previous work commonly involved less than 3 takes and included copious notes — surely a veritable nightmare for any performer. With *Controlled Burn*, my most common note was *'this is fun, you've got the right energy, let's do it again.'* Infinitely more relaxed, and somehow I felt I was more exacting than I'd ever been before.

That said, something important happened during production. I simply stopped asking myself whether or not the performance, any performance, was "good." "Good" and "bad" performances suggest a static goalpost which feels entirely antithetical to filmmaking. Instead I asked myself if performer was doing what they were hired to do. Which was? Their ability to be sincere, authentic. Every time, I was fortunate to say a resounding and definitive *yes, my performers were authentic*. They felt right. That was enough for me.

Sc. 12: On direction and improvisation

"Only the obtuse are unappreciative of paradox" (Robbins).

"Sure, I like spontaneity – when I plan it." I have this said multiple times, to multiple people in, in multiple contexts, without a shred of irony. I believed this paradox so deeply that I saw no paradox in it. Part of me still doesn't. I feel this is perfectly representative of the mirror in front of a mirror position I would put myself in regularly. There's nothing paradoxical about creating times and places for which something unplanned can elevate and support the material. I suppose it's no mistake I never noticed that I never used the unplanned, unexpected, or spontaneous material. As a central editor in every film I've made, I've had ample opportunity to use the numerous accidents and unexpected events that I've collected over the years. I've never, not once.

Here's one example. While shooting the bridge scene in *Controlled Burn*, unexpected events offered us tons of opportunity to improvise what would have probably been a quite compelling sequence. The bridge was an overpass for commercial rail. While shooting, there were 12 combined minutes of trains passing beneath us while we were filming. For 7 of those minutes, two trains were passing each other under the bridge. If I was a different filmmaker, I'd have found some way to use the idea of two people on the same tracks, even next to each other for a brief period, despite travelling in opposing directions. *Hey, look – poetry!* That feels like Rumi Kaur level, but poetry nonetheless, and thus narratively exploitable. What did I do? We just pointed the cameras at the trains and filmed them. Nothing else. Maybe it'll make the credit sequence. I doubt it.

It has taken me years, and the creation of *Controlled Burn*, to return to my central paradox, remove a mirror-wall, be vulnerable with myself, and declare:

"Sure, I like when I plan it."

The form of filmmaking which I am interested in pursuing doesn't allow these sorts of significant changes, even if the individual opportunistic, spontaneous changes appear extremely appealing. If there's a plan, there's a plan for a reason. The plan takes into account that which is before, during, and after this sequence. I cannot sacrifice the integrity of one sequence without fundamentally altering that which happens before or after.

I accept the very real reality in which I am simply not a strong enough filmmaker grab these opportunities with both hands and embrace them. For now I'm content to say I much appreciate having a plan and following it as best I can given the hyper-real constraints of filmmaking in the live-action, 3D world. I like being specific. I like to make decisions. I want those decisions to

mean something, to build on themselves, and become something different. It feels like a different genre of directing, let alone storytelling, to enable a set in which spontaneity is encouraged and enabled. We often talk about the genre of the story being told. Rarely do we talk about the genre of the storyteller.

With regards to directing the actual performances themselves: the truth is I had no idea what else to add to or take away from any performance that I saw. It is no exaggeration to say that every single first take appeared stripped from my brain. It was absurdly humbling. Everyone's first impression of my film was more or less the exact impression I was attempting to communicate. That every major idea was so out, front and centre… I really didn't have much to add. They got it. So what the kinda notes am I supposed to give? *Jeeze, just do another take so I have a chance to think about why what I wanted the first time is a bad idea…*

Act III: Post Production

Sc. 13: Many things done poorly

> *"Martin Scorsese told me that 'you need to realize that the things you do badly are just as much a part of your style as the things you do well'."* (fincherfanatic.com)

What do I do poorly? A lot. Let's start at the end.

Sc. 13A: Marty's Outro

1. I didn't give James and Joe, our henchmen, enough direction. Or, frankly, any. I should have asked James to just stay on the ground or roll around a bit.
2. I didn't give Liam or Aidan enough direction. One of them should have kept chasing after the vehicle Reid drives away with to make it clear that Reid actually drives away in that shot, while the other should be yelling at them for ever having letting the truck go unsupervised. Would have kept the drama of the scene going before we leave it, which would have felt better.
3. The timing of Reid's drive away was a bit wonky. It's just not clear enough that Reid is driving away in that shot.

None of these get in the way so much that the final shot doesn't work, but if we spent over 2.5 hours to get it right, I should have fixed these issues, too.

Sc. 13B: Issues with narrative

This story is just too murky, opaque, and unclear. Here is a non-exhaustive list of subtleties that just don't yell at you enough:

1) I didn't make it obvious enough that the fellas are trashing Marty's apartment to look for cash they think Reid stole.

2) I also didn't make it obvious enough that all three of them work for the same mutual employer, named Jerrod, who thinks Reid stole from him.

3) It's not obvious enough that the only reason Reid goes to AA is because he's hungry. I added a stomach grumbling in post. Does it help? Sure. But if I went out of my way to get this shot, why not get the reverse, aimed inside Reid's fridge? Is there any better sole indicator of your current life circumstances than a fridge full of condiments and a jar of pickles? A missed opportunity.

4) I didn't make it abundantly clear to the audience that Marty is pretending that Reid's AA story is his own to force Reid to accept that Marty deserves the chance to be redeemed. Further, that Marty is in the middle of an elaborate con, re-addicting Reid into Marty's life. At the same time, I don't want to spoil the ending, right? Finding the middle ground here is critical. I'm not sure how to straddle the line here yet, all I know is that I missed the mark.

5) It's not clear that Marty is holding a fat wad of cash at the top of the alleyway sequence, particularly $2,000. There isn't even a closeup of the money in the car.

    a) My on-the-day changing of the photography plan shot myself in the foot. If I gave them both the single shots I planned, the wad of cash would be abundantly obvious.

b) There are textual suggestions that Marty wants to pay Reid back — that Marty owes Reid to begin with — but, as always, it's just not enough.

6) It's not clear that *Marty*, not Reid, actually stole the cash that the fellas think Reid stole, nor that Reid realizes that Marty did it during the beginning of the Screaming Heads sequence. *"Jerrod thinks I stole $2k in petty cash… You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"* I really did think this was enough. It's not.

7) The text message sequence is too quick and it's not clear that Marty intended to leave Reid in the high-and-dry all along.

   a) It's also not clear that the text message thread is with Marty's British Columbian contact, who will provide the room and board to get them out of the country.

   b) The contact ID "BC" isn't highlighted enough to make it obvious.

All of these are mission-critical plot points that are directly associated with motivation and inner world. Without these points being made explicitly clear, the story will feel unsatisfying, and/or incomplete, and/or just too confusing.

I am a believer that an audience can grasp the emotional story even if the plot of the story goes over their heads. I want to believe the emotional story is, somehow despite the above, clear enough. I suspect the average audience member would be able to enunciate the nuances of their relationship, and could speak to the arc of both Reid and Marty. I also suspect that the average audience member would catch onto the above 6 points, but not be able to speak with certainty.

Still on the script itself: on the whole, this script is too long for the story it conveys. It didn't have to take 20 minutes to get from the beginning to the end of this story to hit all of the same

emotional notes. Thanks to hindsight, I bet I could have told this story without missing much of anything in about 2/3rds the time, if not less. This could have been a 12-15 minute story.

Sc. 13C: Issues with visual storytelling

Despite my own best efforts, my films typically have a lot of dialogue. This was no exception and *Controlled Burn* nearly has wall-to-wall dialogue. I've secretly chased the idea of writing a silent film, but that feels much more like a fair-weather dream than a genuine interest. I am not a visual poet. I fear I'm far too literal. I've always experienced slow cinema as something as a three-year-old zoo participant: with wonder, curiosity, and a fundamental lack of understanding. Surely these filmmakers and I cannot share similar DNA.

Sc. 13D: Sound

I'm not skilled at disconnecting what we see from what we hear at a script, or even editorial level. Typically one is exactly the other, or vice versa. This is a cryin' shame. To only hear what we see and see what we hear is to rob yourself of the opportunity to multiply ideas in a way that only cinema can do. I don't need to force myself into a caricature of Terrence Malick so much as changing the audience's relationship to what they hear. When I think of visual poetry, I think that this might be the most accessible version for me.

Sc. 13E: Character study

I don't know how to focus on more than one character. Effectively all of my films put a character's psychology on the stand and trying them for their decisions – and even then, the trial is never particularly pronounced, nor clear. Character studies, in general, are only one genre of

storytelling. I never really knew what exactly I was making and so I didn't engage and play with it. I'd like to change that for the next one.

Sc. 13F: On camera movement (II)

I don't know how to move the camera. I'm worried keeping the camera still is becoming a visual style. I don't want it to be. I need not be Fincher to appreciate the values of all forms of camera movement. The reality is I don't know how to move the camera without incurring deep expenses. I bet I could figure out *how* to elevator-dolly-rack-focus in a slick way that tells the story, and maybe even *when* to do it... But can I afford to? Does the story even need that movement in the first place? Is what you gain from the camera movement additive or subtractive? More often than not, *at my budgetary level*, I find it's the latter, however I have the feeling that this is just due to a lack of creativity on my part. I'm painting myself into a corner and then complaining about the colour of the walls. This is all my choice. I need to find a way around it.

Sc. 13G: Using focus to communicate story

There's a good joke buried here about how my lack of focus results in a lack of intentional film focus, but I'm not skilled enough a writer to find it. The point is I'm not good at indicating to the focus puller what they should be doing. Previous work never enabled much by way of focus options. It was pretty straightforward across the board. *Controlled Burn* had enough going on, and with a wide enough aperture, that focus was an essential storytelling device. I was not prepared enough. Owen, our 1AC, was fabulous and I have only praises about his work ethic. On set, he and Ryan had such a close, effective working relationship that they would often make

decisions on my behalf, for which I had no complaints. Only in the edit room was I able to form an opinion on what I should have asked for. Now I know.

Sc. 13H: Stunt sequences

I was completely and totally unprepared for the stunt sequence. I hate it. I hate it. I hate it! I hate how unprepared I was. I hate that I had an initial idea for how to handle it and completely kowtowed to the crews' opinions: Reid is seen walking in on the space slowly, whereas I wanted Reid to explode into the frame, and for the violence to take us by surprise. Instead we took the comedy route. Wrong! I hate how prepared I *felt* going into it. I hate that I didn't have a good series of ideas for how to handle the dialogue between our two henchmen. I hate that, the very day after principle photography was completed, I, completely coincidentally, saw a 30-second video that explained in no uncertain terms how exactly I should have shot the stunt. I'm not kidding when I say I almost threw up. I felt such an overwhelming amount of shame… For not Googling how to pull off the stunt, for ever feeling like I could "get away with" not hiring a stunt coordinator, for needing the crew to bail me out of that situation as much as they did. For not being vulnerable enough to admit I didn't know something. What a dumb, childish mistake. I hope this is the last time I have to make that error.

Sc. 13I: On breaking the 180

There's something I've only begun to realize great directors do all the time: they acknowledge the importance of a good mid-scene key-change by shifting the 180°. When I tried this in *Controlled Burn*, I fumbled the catch:

1) I failed to use motion to establish a flip in the 180°. I attempted to do it via static shots, but it didn't work because…

2) The sequence slipped by too quickly to enjoy the nuance of being in a different part of the conversation. Ideally, I could showcase that there were two different conversations for which Reid was fielding: one with the AA Leader, and another with Marty. That's totally doable in a static series of images. There's too little dialogue however, and the shift from left to right on the frame feels like a mistake, not intentional.
3) I also failed to show Marty's response reaction shot after I showed Reid's 180° flip which would have solidified Reid's new positioning. This was a conscious decision in the edit suite because it *just didn't feel right* because it wasn't established correctly in the first place.

Sc. 14: On editing *Controlled Burn*

The editing process for *Controlled Burn* was my easiest to date. Not only did we get everything I thought we got, I found things to cut without fundamentally altering the underlying story. And I didn't even have to cut a character! Everyone who auditioned is in the film. This is alone an achievement for me – I've never been in the editing suite without a fundamental flaw in the script that needed adjustments. I wasn't re-rewriting as much as selecting the best moments and assembling. We had a lot to work with. I couldn't be more proud.

I've noticed my screenplays stick fairly closely to the Hollywood standard of a-minute-a-page. Cramming in more script-per-minute (24%) was a good instinct rooted in my previous work. The truth is that never before have my films really and truly justified their runtime. All of my scripts have hovered around 16 pages but in reality were stories that felt more like a 10-minute experiences, I just didn't know that until I was editing. Much like there's a difference between a scene that's got a bunch of jokes in it and a scene that is, itself, funny, there's a difference

between cutting a scene down so it's quick and a quick scene. More often than not I shoot the former and it's no mistake that the former is also far easier.

Hindsight has made it clear to me that *Controlled Burn* didn't need to be a 26-page script. Probably something closer to 20. I should say that for all my love for faux-science numbers, there's nothing substantiating these opinions. I just know *Controlled Burn*'s written pacing is a touch too slow. Exactly how, exactly why, I cannot articulate, I just know I'm right.

That said, *Controlled Burn* is the first film in which the most common note (from those unaware of the project) on my fine cut was that it needed to be longer. *Longer!* It was too compact and it needed more time to breathe. I agreed.

Sc. 15: Sound design

I believe that actor delivered dialogue, sound design, and music, are all different forms of aural dialogue. They just have a very different way of speaking.

I mentioned previously that I am typically not particularly skilled in disconnecting what we see from what we hear, and just how much of a missed opportunity that is. This has become clear to me during the sound design, edit, and mix for *Controlled Burn*. There's fundamentally not much we can do given the film was shot with such strict connection between what we see and what we hear. We can stray from the established norms, sure, but stray too far and you'll lose your audience. It'll become annoying. Sound design needs to be baked into the written script. Only then can you truly separate and distinguish the visuals from the aurals. This is another example of using every department of filmmaking to make your film.

I have a lot to learn.

Until then, when I first met with Riley, I told him any allusions of supposed fidelity to the real world should be violently cast aside. He should feel free to edit and mix this audioscape with absolute freedom, keeping in mind that the original audio track is extremely faithful to the images we see; acknowledge the tight audio-visual binding and push the envelope where appropriate. I think we've made great progress.

Sc. 16: Music

I've been a musician longer than a filmmaker and despite this I've never been good at writing for music. Writer-Director Peter squarely leaves it to Editor Peter and my composer to figure it out. I often come into the composing suite with nothing more than a single instrument or concept to play with and toy. Beyond that I frankly have no clue what I want until I hear the options and say no.

Previously, I was in the suite for *Leftovers* (2015) for two hours before Alex Laurie (my composer) slid a note from one to another on his guitar and I announced "that's it." We based the entire score around that interval. *Killer Confidence*'s (2019) score was rooted in the solitary use of a bassoon, which I figured sounded as lonely as our main character was. These two examples are representative of my general attitude in the music department. I've kept it quite simple in the past and relied on single instrumentations.

I find many short films will attempt to pretend that they have a full orchestral suite at their disposal and frankly they do a poor job of trying to convince you. While there's nothing wrong with dressing for the job you want, making sure the job is attainable is part of the battle. People watching *Controlled Burn* will simply inherently know that we didn't have the opportunity to

record an entire orchestra. What will we do with that in mind? How can we push the envelope without losing our audience?

Daniel Schlombs is the most accomplished musician I've worked with to date and it's obvious. I've never had so many options. Almost too many. More often than not, my note for Daniel was to cut down and reduce. Daniel is an excited fella who has more in his back pocket than some have in a Rolodex. I find myself overwhelmed with options and froze up with analysis paralysis. I had to sit back and ask myself the basic, fundamental questions. What role do I see music fulfilling in the film? What dialogue is it communicating?

I figure music is a wasted opportunity if all it does is sympathise with the dialogue of any given scene, just like sound design. Music isn't typical dialogue – it's a different kind of sonic experience that deserves its own script. What that script says is the challenge. Since *Controlled Burn* is so squarely Reid's story, it's a matter of representing his psyche instrumentally without necessarily giving things away too soon. Reid is guarded and I wanted the music to showcase the same reticent attitude. But what's beyond the guard? What does Reid really want? I think music can provide answers you can feel in your bones without having the words for. Those answers can be the most rewarding and meaningful to answer from the audience's perspective.

I gave Daniel a few references. A majority was based in Max Richter or the late Jóhann Jóhannsson. They write depressing music for depressing subjects – perfect! More practically, they both have an ability to blend classical orchestral instrumentation with modern sonic sensibilities – I particularly pulled on their use of industrial sounds, electronic influences, and spacious recordings.

Daniel introduced the idea of a waltz between Reid and Marty which felt like a natural analogue for their relationship – a real no-brainer – but then there's the matter of the film suddenly

sounding Spanish despite having blatantly North American sensibilities. How to steal without appropriating? I can't answer this, but I think Daniel can and did.

Sc. 17: On festivals and *Controlled Burn*'s future

Controlled Burn's future undoubtedly lives and dies in medium-sized film festivals. I have no intention of submitting this to the biggest film festivals around. Even if I was accepted – which is an astronomically low likelihood – the chance that anybody will actually watch the film is equally low as there are so, so, so many films playing. At that point it merely becomes a bragging right.

On a personal note, the best festival experiences I have had as either a director or spectator have been at the medium-sized scales. There's enough to see that you can draw a large crowd, there's enough of a focus that the films have an opportunity to be screened parallel and adjacent to other films of similar stripe and colour, and the crowd is a bit more engaged in the films themselves as there's a very small likelihood that the films can be found elsewhere. Meanwhile TIFF really just feels like an expensive Cineplex precursor.

The goal is to reach as many medium-sized film festivals that rally around individual concepts or themes. Genre-fests, for example. I think *Controlled Burn* has a decent shot at a life in queer-focused festivals.

Speaking entirely practically, I don't think *Controlled Burn* will be a festival darling. I think film festivals are so popular, with so many submissions, the only way to break away from the peloton is to have something that from the outset separates you from the others. Typically that means having a genre piece. You could say it's almost like a gimmick, but I don't intend to

denigrate the work that gets showcased at the biggest and brightest. I just know you need *something exciting* and it needs to be under 12 minutes. It needs a hook. *The juice.* I'm not sure *Controlled Burn* has that something. Drama doesn't have the same legs as its genre siblings like horror or sci-fi.

I think *Controlled Burn* is well photographed, well performed, and well edited. I think it's decently written. I think it's a competent film and, if anything, its execution will allow it to stand out. It's simply well-made, that much I know.

That's not enough these days. You can't just be good enough, you have to be great. I'm not sure this is a great film. I think it's pretty good.

Sc. 18: Final takeaways

Lest we conflate my anticipation of the critical response to *Controlled Burn* with my own personal feelings on it. Allow me to be abundantly clear:

This film is unquestionably my best work so far. I am immensely proud of the work we've done on all levels, in every department. It's the best performed, the best shot, and the best edited. My crew was undeniably the largest collection of skill I've assembled to date. The gratitude I have for all of the crew is beyond description. I cannot wait to show them the product of their hard work. I am indebted to them all. I learned more from *Controlled Burn* than any other film in my pseudo-career to date. I have never been more clear about what I was making in advance nor have I ever been more aware of my faults. I will be carrying the lessons I've learned from this filmmaking process, and writing this paper, to all of my subsequent films.

Thank you for your time.

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