AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Austin Hodaie for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Liberal Studies presented on November 21, 2017. Title: Writing With Light: An Exploration of Cinematography and Visual Storytelling.

Abstract approved:_____________________________________________________

Jon Lewis

Mastering the art and craft of cinematography is a lifelong endeavor requiring an unflinching amount of passion and commitment to developing creative and technical skills of visual storytelling. Like authors of literature, cinematographers are writers. However, instead of words a cinematographer speaks a visual language using light and camerawork. In addition a cinematographer must bridge the gap between art and technology. In short the DP must have the creative vision and the technical knowhow required to capture the scene as it was visualized in mind’s eye.

During my junior year as a student filmmaker I started a production company (Black Snow Films) with the intention of using its productions for a thesis as well as a career stepping stone. In this thesis I will reflect on five of my productions from a creative and technical perspective. The statements will be broken down into sections that introduce the project, break down the artistic and creative vision for the cinematography, and lastly elaborate on how the cinematography was executed. Spreading out over the course of years, these productions I consider benchmarks in my growth as a filmmaker. These videos range from music videos to award winning short films and documentaries.

Key Words: Cinematography, filmmaking, directing, director of photography, film production, lighting, camerawork, short films, music videos,

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Writing With Light: An Exploration of Cinematography and Visual Storytelling

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

__________________________
Austin Hodaie, Author
**Portfolio Pieces Referenced:**

The videos referenced in this thesis can be found by following the corresponding links listed below and are listed in the order that they appear. More of my work/portfolio can also be found on my website: Blacksnowfilms.com

1. “Retrospect” - Rest, Repose. Music Video
   
   Link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IKpAreA9h8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IKpAreA9h8)

2. *Whistle* - Short film
   
   Link: [https://vimeo.com/148155294](https://vimeo.com/148155294)

   
   Link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIX4upV-xUk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIX4upV-xUk)

   
   Link: [https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B55-XNR7WXhsenlFRHZWb1Nac2M](https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B55-XNR7WXhsenlFRHZWb1Nac2M)

5. “Demogorgon” - Jared Dines. Music Video
   
   Link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AiT9amjG4E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AiT9amjG4E)
Introduction

Before I begin reflecting on my experiences as a cinematographer in this thesis, it’s important to first define cinematography. In purely objective terms, cinematography is a craft that combines the use of lighting design, camerawork (includes camera movement and lenses/perspective) and composition. The cinematographer (also called director of photography or DP) is an expert of storytelling who combines these elements into practice in order to visually tell a story, convey meaning or an idea, or express a mood or emotion that effects the viewers perception of what’s happening on the screen (often without the audience noticing). A DP works in close collaboration with the director in order to establish how to visually approach the film. In addition, the DP works closely with his is camera operators, gaffers, grips, as well as the production and scene designers when preparing for photography. A director of photography’s ability to formulate and clearly communicate a creative roadmap is infinitely important and at the core of what it means to be a filmmaker. (Rabiger 7)

However, if you set aside the textbook and ask a collection of filmmakers to define cinematography or who a DP is the responses won’t be so straightforward. You will receive an array of passionate and multidimensional answers as each brings their own personal variations and additions to the definition. For example, legendary DP Roger Deakins believes that “the cinematographers role is to be the director’s visual ‘right hand’” (Rabiger 293). Other cinematographers will explain it differently saying a cinematographer is “an interpreter” or “an artist and a craftsman and a psychologist and a lover” (Light and Shadow, 00:02:45). In addition, David Boyd ASC (a DP who draws artistic inspiration from design and historical architecture) believes “Cinematography seems to be physical and emotional architecture on the move” (Boyd 92). Clearly, there is a personal nature to how a cinematographer explains his role.

The most comprehensive definition of cinematography that most resonates with me thus far in my career was elegantly worded by Vittorio Storaro (winner of three Oscars in cinematography for Dick Tracey (1991), Reds (1981) and Apocalypse Now (1979)). Storaro believed “Photography means light-writing, cinematography means writing with light in movement. Cinematographers are authors of photography, not directors of photography. We are
not merely using technology to tell someone else's thought, because we are also using our own emotion, our culture, and our inner being” (Bergery 70).

All of these answers are valid and speak to that specific filmmaker’s experience and artistic upbringing. The more I read about the industries To me it shows that cinematography in part has a self defining nature and takes on it’s own meaning for each filmmaker as they spend years building the cinematographer within themselves. This thesis can be seen as my journey to discover what ‘I’ believe the definition of cinematography via reflecting on my experiences.

The following artist statements are from a handful of my productions that I directed and was the director of photography for over the course of what is now 3 years since I began this thesis. All of these films were chosen among my portfolio because they were benchmarks in my development as a cinematographer, not because they were the highest budget or had the most publicity. Furthermore, these are the projects that over the course of years taught me what kind of filmmaker I am and what the meaning of cinematography is to me.

1. “Retrospect” - Rest, Repose:

   **Introduction**

   Directing music videos is all about translating a song into a visual interpretation of what’s being heard. Cinematographer Michael Negrin ASC once said a cinematographer is “an interpreter who uses light and composition to effect an audiences perception of what’s going on in that story” (Lighting and Shadow 00:02:38). Although this was in reference to visually interpreting written word read in a script, the principle is also true in the context of music videos. This notion of being an interpreter I discovered for myself as the result of directing a music video for a song called “Retrospect” for a Seattle based Alternative metal band Rest, Repose in the spring of 2017. This song had a variety of tones and moods ranging from frantic rage to spacey and reverberated moments of reflection. Lyrically the song articulated the feeling of being haunted and dragged down by the past as well as the fear of not being able to move past emotionally traumatic events.

   **Visualization**

   I decided to develop a metaphorical interpretation of the lyrics and series of events to follow the energy of the music and create a conceptual visual progression directly influenced by the
lyrical themes. For example, the coffin itself is the haunting past holding him down in that dark and solitary mental state. He breaks the lid of the coffin as he tries to move on, which matches his opening lyrics “Emerging from the depths of remnants in my dormant mind.” Continuing the first verse says: “I dig the bones and skeletons of demons left behind…creeping up from far behind…as it drags me down and pulls me in as I fight for my conscience.” These past demons “creeping up” I brought to life through the ropes and chains that wrap around him and drag him back down into the coffin as he attempts to escape this feeling. They are the thoughts that don’t let him move on. Finally, his fall through the floor of the coffin matches the vocalist’s climactic scream “I’m falling far behind! I can’t do this anymore!” As he falls into the nothingness he is once again stuck in the past and is once again mentally trapped depending deeper into mental darkness. There is no sense of comfort or conclusion in the lyrics so ending with the act of him falling and never showing him land or any further result was visually necessary in the translated narrative.

Since my first college courses in film history that touched on German expressionism, concepts like mise en scène have always been in my mind when developing scenes around a character’s mental or emotional state. Mise en scène essentially means articulating a space that represents the inner and psychological state of the protagonist through expressive lighting design, set design, composition, movement as well as grayscale (Kolker 18). The camerawork and composition for this video I always visualized being stable and deliberate during all the narrative shots. I wanted to use primarily wide angle profile shots in silhouette to capture the atmosphere. Due to the atmospheric aesthetic of the narrative I wanted grand wide shots that I could treat like paintings when it came time for editing and VFX. Furthermore, filming them in extreme slow motion I believed would
contribute to a surreal effect. The more I developed my storyboards the more I liked the idea of keeping the majority if not the entirety of the narrative shots in profile perspective (perpendicular to the line of action). Combining the mystical content and profile angle I felt made it look illustrative and had a stronger sense of composition.

Throughout the video there is also footage of the band members performing the song on their instruments breaking up the series of events in the narrative. Capturing the performance of a band and their energy I believe can empower the narrative scenes of the video by increasing the energy as well as making the video more entertaining in general when the band members are talented performers. It is however important that both the performance footage and narrative footage feel like they belong together.

**Execution**

As a green screen studio was needed to properly get the footage we needed we filmed in Studio13 in Portland (Oregon). First, I set up an even wash lighting on the green screen for an effective key out on the narrative footage scenes with the coffin. However I flagged off the studio space lights from spreading past the green screen itself. I didn’t want those lights to also hit my talent as it would be very soft and diffused and therefore eliminate the moody shadows and ruin the dramatic atmosphere I wanted. Next a 2K Fresnel was placed with a single layer of diffusion as our backlight but was kept low enough to just light the contour of the vocalist and keep the rest of him in silhouette. I knew the background would be radiant and bright so I wanted to light my talent in a way that would blend well with the anticipated composited background elements. There was no front light on the
subject as I wanted a silhouette on the subject. However, I did strike a 1K fresnel with diffusion when we filmed the performance footage so the details of their performance could be visible.

Edited in grayscale the black and white aesthetic brings with it a lot of storytelling and technical benefits that strengthen the concept of this video. In my opinion when you shoot in grayscale there is a stronger emphasis on lighting design. When an expressive element like color is taken out of the equation, the remaining tools like lighting, textures, shapes and composition have to compensate. However, it is also my opinion that when grayscale footage is filmed a certain way it can look illustrative almost like children’s storybooks. With this in mind, I shot all narrative scenes in complete profile or completely straight on symmetrically. Filmed entirely in front of green screen, I had to light him with it in mind that he was to be silhouetted by the bright foggy atmosphere behind him. Therefore I radiantly lit the scene with strong backlight to give him a slight halo as well as to help separate him and the green screen. Proper green screen work is challenging and luckily because this video was grayscale whatever green hue bled/reflected through was not noticed on the talent.

(Original Storyboard used on set for Retrospect.)
I use cinema standard 23.976 frames per second on a few different angles on each member as well as one handheld shot in constant movement in both standard frame rate and 240fps slow motion. Handheld camerawork in band performances helps me match the fluctuating pace of the song with my camera movements, it also helps me get a variety of angles and perspectives on a single take instead of locking down the camera and trying several different times. One stylistic decision I make that plays into the idea of ‘interpreting’ music visually is capturing slow motion and speeding that footage up to real time mid-shot during impact moments of the music. This time manipulation makes for dynamic and entertaining performances and is especially useful when the speed of the music slows down or speeds up as the video mimics what’s being heard. Using a Black Magic URSA Mini Pro 4.6K I was able to do all these things with ease as the camera is compact allowing for easy handheld work and is capable of 120fps (frames per second) in RAW 4.6K resolution and as well as RAW 240fps in 2K.

2. **Whistle - Short Film**

**Introduction**

In the spring of 2014 our production company made a decision to produce a short film and submit it to miscellaneous film festivals in the summer and fall that year. We all agreed on the idea of making the film a short thriller. While searching for inspiration for a story I stumbled upon a Terry Gilliam interview with TCM. Gilliam stated that he preferred filmmakers that give audiences questions rather than comforting answers in their stories. Directors who always end a film on a happy note comforting their audience he believed were unimaginative, uninteresting, and unrealistic (00:03-01:55). I agreed with Gilliam and wanted to make a story that was unsettling, intense but intriguing enough to keep an audience interested.

**Visualization**

Contrary to what some people may believe, cinematography is not just about making pretty pictures. Often the goal is not to make the shot pretty but rather make the shot look ‘right’. If the cinematographer’s goal was always to make a pretty shot, all he/she would ever film would be sunsets and other gorgeous vistas. At times, a dirty shot can be just as important in the telling of your story. While in preproduction for our short film Whistle, I continuously found myself returning to this photographic principle. Never in the discussion or preparation of our scenes did
we ever say the word ‘pretty’. Rather we used the words sinister, gritty, intense, and aggressive when discussing the lighting and shot composition. As the cinematographer it was my job to translate these words into real lighting technique. Also we wanted the lighting to evolve and become more intense and dark over time but in a realistic way in the context of the location. However, it was important to me that the lighting didn’t look forced. When lighting looks overtly artificial for the sake of a director or cinematographer’s definition of aesthetics it can stick out and ruin a moment like a contrived line of dialogue.

From a camerawork standpoint I initially wanted to take a very Emmanuel Lubezki approach with long handheld letting the story flow and guide the camera. Eventually I would stray from that idea, as it never felt appropriate when visualizing our script in action. Our story needed quick cuts and editing and a more deliberate shot by shot approach. This was partially due to the non-linear timeline being easier to translate with a different editing style. But primarily it was because I was more confident I could translate the script’s tension with a deliberate shot by shot setup and using editing to set the pace of storytelling than I was with creating tension through our direction of actors and camera movement. This taught me that style of cinematography can’t be forced onto a script, the script and story dictate the cinematic style not the other way around.

As the script developed the story became more and more intense and fast paced. In the story our characters are running out of time and tensions rise leading to escalating events but I wanted to be able to show that visually instead of it being spoon fed to the audience through dialogue. Therefore in the middle of every room I wanted a prop clock high on the wall. As the clock ticked it would be framed between the characters dividing them and looming above as their fear built. Right off the bat in the introduction we open to our protagonist Brogan staring at the distorted clock through his water glass as it ticks ominously. Later in the story as tensions rise and Brogan (the protagonist) begins running out of time as his inner struggle continues. Brogan takes a framed childhood picture of him and Conrad off the mantle and smashes it against the clock, shattering both of them into flying shards of glass. I wanted to show Brogan having a moment where he shows how much he hates this situation and how he feels and using this act felt so much more interesting, exciting and climactic than a line of dialogue. Throughout this process I watched myself discover the real process of visual storytelling.
Execution

For our intense and dramatic yet realistic lighting approach I came up with what at the time I called ‘exaggerated realism’. In simple terms, I wanted to figure out a way of lighting every single scene primarily with the available lighting and limiting my use of practicals (any video production lighting that we supply) but blocking my actors and composing my images in a way that made the available lighting look theatrical and expressive. For example, in our living room intro scene the frame is divided in half with the characters in opposition facing each other. I moved the couches and chairs in the scene so the characters would be key lit by ceiling spotlight once meant to light the resident’s family portrait. Also, in this setup I could use the dining room chandelier as a backlight for the characters on camera right while the porch light outside the window could be used to backlight the character on camera left. When we moved in for close-ups I mimicked the design and placement of available lights with my own practicals. My practicals in this case were bi-color temperature (daytime temp 5600K and tungsten 3200K on separate faders) LED panels which were adaptable and manageable in that I could adjust color temperature, brightness, and diffusion to achieve a more balanced exposure than the uncontrollable available lights build into the scene. This method would contrast to the expected approach of turning off all available lights and shooting all practicals and forcing the lighting to fit.

Our method was mostly important I believe in the wide shots in which the audience sees the lighting and where it’s coming from (in our case real sources of light in the context of the
location). That way when the shot moved into a close up, I could replace the available light with a practical in the same position out of frame. It would still look like the lighting makes sense in the context of the scene but I would have more control with the practical light and could diffuse or adjust intensity in ways I can’t with the available fixtures.

I used the same lighting method of manipulating the available light in the garage scenes. The final scene of the film the lighting it was important that the mood was captured. Our garage had a series of light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. I removed all but one that hung right above the talent. In this scene the two characters sit in silence. The chair once used for torture is broken and tossed aside, an American flag hangs limply in the background and a clock rests above them all separating the two characters in the scene. I wanted to nail this all in one wide shot that we could compose carefully.

We decided to record Whistle on a RED ONE, one of the original 4k digital cinema cameras. It was the best we could get our hands on at the time and I often describe as what you get when you combine a bowling ball, an M16 assault rifle and a camera together. It records onto memory cards RED calls RED MAGS (a reference to magazines in assault rifles) and was extremely bulky and physically tiring to operate requiring heavy duty support equipment. Thankfully, our more deliberate shot-by-shot approach minimized the use of cumbersome handheld shots. We would pair it with Zeiss Prime cinema lenses like the 50mm T2.1 Macro which allowed for extremely detailed close-up shots of eyes that would be used throughout the film.

3. “Death Posture” - Into the Flood

Introduction

Contrary to what most people believe, metal and other extreme forms of rock are not all about anger or rebellion. For some artists in the genre, beneath the aggressive soundscape of the song are layers of meaning that often go unnoticed by the listener. In the fall of 2015 I was hired to direct a music video for such a song. Tacoma (WA) based metalcore band Into the Flood brought me on board to direct a music video for the title track off their upcoming EP titled Death Posture. Upon first listen, “Death Posture” is a song overflowing with intensity as waves of anger and aggressive sound structure crash against your eardrums. However the thundering instrumentation disguise the emotionally vulnerable lyrics under layers of throat shredding
vocals and distorted guitar riffs. Discussing the meaning of the lyrics with the vocalist (and songwriter) I learned that the lyrics were a deep and introspective interpretation of his bipolar disorder and how it was destroying his life.

Having learned how much expressive subtext was beneath the surface of the song I wanted the video to reach there as well. Before the concept for the video was born I kept returning to video artists Bill Viola whom I knew both had works where they used video to do just that. I revisited one of Viola’s works titled *Five Angels for the Millennium* where figures were filmed from underwater in slow motion falling beneath the surface. When referencing why he likes using water in his work Viola once said, “There's more than just the surface of life, the real thing is under the surface” (*Cameras Are Soul Keepers*, 02:31). This idea reminded me of “Death Posture” in the sense that the real meaning of the song was behind this wall of intensity and aggression. Like Viola I wanted to break through it visually somehow (potentially using fluid in some way like Viola) so that the true meaning of the song wouldn’t be lost in the noise.

But before I proceeded with ideas I needed to take a step back and establish some goals to aid in fashioning ideas. First, was to peel away the layers of the song and get deep beneath the surface to expose the emotional complexities featured in the expressive lyrics. Second, to capture the intensity of the music through camerawork, quick editing and lighting design creatively and dynamically in a way that also complimented the lyrical themes. As previously mentioned the lyrics themselves deal with bi-polar disorder leading to depression and suicidal thoughts. Therefore, the vocalist feels like he’s posturing himself for death (hence the title “Death Posture”) and in my mind needed to have its own representation in the video as well.

**Visualization**

Lyrically the vocalist looks inside himself and explores how he is emotionally trapped by his condition. I decided to capture this visually through a method used by Peter Campus in his 1973 piece called *Three Transitions*. Campus gradually paints his face with blue paint and chroma keys the color away to create a transparency on his skin. Bit by bit parts of his face become transparent and reveal another face behind his own. This method of using chroma key paint to peel back the layers of one’s own existence and look inside yourself was perfect for this video.

My concept like Campus used paint on the vocalist’s face, however my paint poured from above him. As the paint covered his head it created a transparent frame. Within that frame it showed a tall cage and within that cage was the vocalist himself. Visually the image became a
picture of the vocalist being a prisoner inside his own head. This spoke to the meaning of the song and the themes about be trapped in a mental state like depression. Later at the end of the song the paint reveals his skeleton beneath him, as he is “posturing” himself for death.

The structure of “Death Posture” is broken up by verse and chorus like your typical song, however both vocal and instrumental styles shift during the chorus and becomes much more melodic. Furthermore, the vocals shift from dirty/screamed vocals during the verses to clean/singing vocals during the chorus. I wanted the video to be broken up the same way and reflect that structure. During the choruses we cut to the vocalist within the cage singing and when he sings we cut back to the previous performance setting. It made sense to have the more melodic and emotional section of lyric performed in mental cage itself.

Because bipolar disorder was a major theme in “Death Posture” I wanted to reinterpret the condition somehow through lighting design. Those suffering from bipolar disorder go through cycles of emotions, some days are good some days are bad. It made sense to have the lighting go through a mood cycle as well. In simple terms, I created stages of darkness and brightness that would fade in and out in different variations as the song progressed. At times the lighting is full and bright hitting the white background and subject in front, and later it dims so they are all in shadow except for a backlight making their edges visible.

Execution
I divided my light plan into three light sources, a key light on subject, background wash lighting hung on the ceiling lighting grid and pushed near the studio wall (consisting of four flood lights with even spread), and then a diffused backlight/kick also hung from above and behind the subjects on the ceiling lighting grid. This simple design gave me six different variations of lighting that I could cycle each member through as I faded out one source and turned on another. I planned out my lighting in the studio so that each member would go through the same cycle and all lighting transitions were captured while the camera rolled during instead of cutting between lighting changes. Drawing attention to the change in lighting was a goal and therefore showing the lighting transition fade during the shot instead of cutting before and after the transition I knew would look unnatural which draw attention to itself. These transitions would happen in between lyrical sections of the song. For example, fading between the verse and chorus working with the mood changes used in the song.

The camerawork I wanted to focus on the performance and have the editing and lighting capture the energy. I filmed this on a Sony FS700 and Odyssey 7Q+ recorder which allowed me to record 4k uncompressed RAW up to 120fps and 2k raw up to 240fps. Mounted on the FS700 was a Metabones speed-booster which has the effect of expanding your frame to a 35mm film perspective and increases exposure (helps with slow motion when your shutter is moving in this case five to ten times faster than real time 24fps). We filmed with very smooth movement by
mounting the camera on a dolly track that would track in and out as well as side depending on
the musician.

As a student filmmaker you are often told to save your close-ups for significant moments. The close-up can have a lot of power but if you use them all the time they lose significance. I believe this principle is also true for the ‘wide’ shot in certain situations. One of those situations I believe is in metal music videos where slow melodic moments are rare and it’s important to give those moments a little visual differentiation and breathing room which complimenting the sense of space given by reverb in the sound production. Saving your wide shot can let that moment feel grand and help capture a slower more reflective moment in time as in a wide frame there is more room for composition. There are only handful of wide cuts in the final edit of “Death Posture” and whenever the music video comes up in conversation the viewer always comments on the moments we go wide as stand out and beautiful moments in the video.

4. The Greater Albany School District (GAPS) - Short Documentary

Introduction

In January of 2017 I was hired to direct a short documentary for the Greater Albany Public Schools. The district wanted to share with the public the poor teaching and learning conditions in their outdated facilities in the hopes it would help influence the pass of a coming bond measure. If passed this bond measure would fund the rebuilding and updating these schools for thousands of children and teenagers in the county. Directing documentaries had never crossed my mind as a director who drew inspiration from other genres of film. However, breaking outside of your creative comfort zones and challenging yourself to explore different genres of storytelling I’ve come to realize is imperative for a young filmmaker. New genres lead to new challenges, creative experimentation and growth as an artist.

On our first meeting with our clients we walked the halls of West Albany High School with their principle Susie Orsborn. Susie explained the nature of their problems and key points to hit in the documentary such as overpopulation and disrepair in reference to the outdated nature of the facilities. Built in the 1950s West Albany High School was falling apart. Water leaking from the ceiling causing flooding, over population causing crowded learning environments and teachers being forced to use technology for teaching outdated decades ago. Staff and students alike told us how embarrassed of their school they were, especially when students from other
counties came to visit for events and sports competitions. Linn County is known as a more rural and conservative county and getting a bond measure passed which asks its citizens to pay for something of this nature is near impossible and our clients were not optimistic.

**Visualization**

As a storyteller I knew I had to find the story in this situation if I wanted to persuade anyone to see it from another perspective. There had to be an overarching theme that everything documented would connect back to that was more compelling and influential than simply saying; “these school are old please rebuild them.” I began to look at the story like a thesis statement in an essay, a key phrase that the body of information to follow would reinforce. During a meeting with the staff at West Albany High School a teacher told us exactly what we were looking for. He said, “These students deserve better, if we had real facilities..man the sky is the limit.” This statement made the situation about the students and the fact that voters should feel embarrassed and that they should want better for their children.

The subjects you interview for documentaries are vital to the way the story is told and how the viewer receives it. I knew simply showing the school staff complaining on camera wouldn’t convince anyone, but they might if they see it from the shoes of the students living in these conditions. Therefore, I decided that the bulk of the documentary would be interviews with students who were passionate about the subject. Capturing the human element and making this documentary about the kids and not buildings clearly would make a stronger documentary. I also knew the B-roll and cutaways had to reinforce and ultimately be interpretations of the words spoken by the interviewed students (a standard editing practice in documentaries).

**Execution**

After a multitude of projects I have realized how important preparation and pre visualization are to the process of directing photography. A thorough and developed vision with intent behind
every shot is the best case scenario. However, documentary film can be a little more organic in nature. This is especially true when conducting interviews, you can never be certain what will be said and therefore don’t know what kind of b-roll or cutaways will be needed in the editing room until after they take place. Therefore, unlike all my previous projects I could not completely visualize the documentary and plan all my shots from the start. A little outside my comfort zone as a filmmaker I decided to film all the interviews first and get all the information regarding the problems fleshed out leaving cut away footage to be documented afterwards. This meant that I knew exactly what to capture for the cutaways to match the content of their interview. For example, when the student talked about crowded hallways between classes I came back the following day with a narrow lens flattening out the crowd making the hallway feel congested and claustrophobic. In addition, we captured handheld footage walking through the crowded hallways and classroom in the POV of a student when Curtis says “I see the problems on a daily basis her at West” (0:33).

When filming interviews it’s often easy to make the lighting setup look balanced and acceptable. You’re often filming in a controlled environment and can take a methodical three point light approach if you want. However, I feel that this level of control and sticking to rudimentary lighting tactics can hinder creativity and innovative thinking at times as well as looks unnatural and old fashioned. This can be a problem when you’re visually trying to capture the ‘real-ness’ of your content. I wanted my lighting in the interviews to compliment the personality of the subjects being interviewed and have it look aesthetically pleasing but still realistic in the context of where they were being interviewed. This meant I planned on using a combination of natural and available light with my practical lights that we would setup. For example, when interviewing Susie (principal of the school) we filmed her at her desk in her office and used the natural light from the windows to act as backlight and a second window on camera left to act as a key. However, the window was far to camera left and we had no catchlight in her eyes so I placed an LED panel closer to her and matched the daylight color temperature and helped the light wrap around into her eyes. In retrospect, I wish I had added a fill light on camera right as the key lights add a strong shadow and it all looks a bit intense. But still the combination of practical and available light was effectively used on all interview subjects.

5. “Demogorgon” - Jared Dines The Dark EP
Introduction

As stated previously when making a music video you are visually reinterpreting the music. However, a common misconception about music videos is that they are always on some level an interpretation of the lyrical content of the music. It might surprise people to hear that often a music video has near to nothing to do with the lyrics. Instead the video is mostly an interpretation of the music concept as a whole and the cinematography and editing focus on how the song makes you feel and the atmosphere or mood the song creates. I discovered I could develop music video concepts like this with ease when I was hired to shoot a music video for Jared Dines, metal musician turned extremely successful Youtuber with over 1.5 million subscribers. Jared brought me on board to swiftly produce and direct a music video for “Demogorgon,” which is the opening track on his solo conceptual metalcore EP titled The Dark (performs the vocals as well as all the instruments used in the music). Because of the last minute nature all I had for the production was a living room, a camera and a couple lights and had to make the most of it without much time for preparation. This vastly contrasted from my methodical approaches to cinematography that I had become so accustom to. Initially Jared asked for something very straightforward with him simply performing the music on camera. However, the mise en scène loving cinematographer that I am would change Jared’s mind when I proposed dialing things up and make something more creative, dark and atmospheric with the song.

Visualization

Looking at my short time for preparation, I decided there was no time or reason to build some sort of narrative around this song. Instead I wanted to be as creative and innovative as I could with a simply a vocalist performing in a living room. My greatest weakness was the size of the room and the fact that the room itself was completely empty due to house renovations. I asked myself how I could turn this weakness into an advantage and achieve an effect I couldn’t achieve in a large room or studio. Furthermore, how could I create a sense of mise en scène and visual progression through light and color in such a small space.

Small rooms easily trap fog (from stage fog machines) and if I could make the fog thick enough the small room could look infinitely large especially if I blocked all the ventilation and contained it in one space. A studio likely wouldn’t allow for this setup as fog machines set off fire alarms and a larger space would have made it difficult to get the fog thick enough. As I
thought about my approach I decided to take one little piece of the lyrics and interpret it literally. “Let the ashes rain” is line from the chorus that I knew I could work with visually. Computer generated black ash particles would make the scene look extra surreal and exciting. These particles would come during the different chorus sections when the line “let the ashes rain” was performed and would leave at later moments of energy in the music to give the visuals a sense of progression. Additionally, I decided to use extreme lens flares and VFX lighting effects that would explode with light and color to compliment explosive moments of the music.

As I came up with these VFX additions I kept coming back to a Sydney Pollock quote where he said editing “feels almost like sculpting or a form of continuing the writing process” (IMDB). Making my own addition to Pollack’s statement, I believe editing and VFX are also a form of the continuing the process of cinematography (especially true for effects driven films filmed on green screen). If cinematography is all about camerawork and lighting and now computer generated effects allow adding light and color as well as adding camera shake or stabilization or lens distortion, then aren’t the lines between editing and cinematography being blurred? My belief after this production is that a computer and effects software is now just another tool at the cinematographer’s disposal and in the end it’s all about making the vision a reality.

**Execution**

As an intern at the 2013 National Association of Broadcasters Show in Las Vegas, I had the pleasure of meeting Academy award winning director of photography Claudio Miranda (*Life of Pie* 2012). Upon meeting Claudio I asked him if there was any advice he could give a young cinematographer who was building his career. Claudio told me: “too many young cinematographers try to overcomplicate an image, good lighting is simple lighting.” This idea stuck with me for years and showed itself in my approach to lighting “Demogorgon.” I wanted
to see what I could accomplish by just using one light. The resulting setup was simple and efficient, but still potent. Outside the fogged living room in the yard I would strike one large 2K fresnel blasting at full intensity into the house. With no lights in the house we had the entirety of the space to perform in completely free from seeing or bumping into any lights. All of this resulted in Jared looking like he was wandering and screaming into an eerily foggy void.

The principle photography I really saw as just the beginning and I wanted to capture very ‘naked’ footage that I thought would be ideal for various forms of manipulation in post. I shot this video once again on the Sony FS700 at 4k RAW. I filmed two takes at 24fps handheld (first take with 35mm and then a 50mm). Also based on experience I knew it’s always helpful having one narrow perspective profile angle of just the face (filmed on sticks with a 135mm T2) as well as a static wide shot as a fallback cutaway incase a moment needs to be covered up or simply for the sake of diversity (on sticks with a 24mm).

In addition to the photography captured at 24fps, I filmed two more takes but this time in high speed. One take was filmed at 120fps (5X faster than normal) and 240fps (10X faster). These slow motion takes were used in the swelling and atmospheric bridges before all hell breaks loose in the instrumental breakdowns.

The simulated ash particle effect worked as intended and was extremely effective in creating a visually interesting and sinister atmosphere. However, the lighting effects added more than I originally intended and ended up being used for the entirety of the video. For example, changing the silhouette to different colors at different moments and fluctuating the intensity gave each section of the song its own contrasting atmosphere and made every section of the song look different from the next. Pushing
things even further, at the breakdown the I turned the footage blood red which visually dialed the intensity and aggression to maximum potency. Afterwords, the song turns quiet and melodic I transition to a cold blue and fluctuate the light to the rhythm of the instrumentation. These effects that allow exaggeration of lighting I have now used on most music videos since this production (usually with more subtlety however) as translating the energy I hear in music into color and light continues to be a tool of mine while capturing performances.

**Conclusion**

Much to my surprise, reflecting on the years that have passed and the films I have produced there is a series of conclusions and realizations that I hadn’t quite noticed until writing this thesis. First, I have discovered something about living the life of a cinematographer and pursuing a career in filmmaking. While it is true one can define cinematography as the art and craft of visual storytelling involving camerawork, lighting, movement and color, when you become a cinematographer how you use these tools of storytelling and the meaning of the term itself become intertwined in your personality, experiences, and sense of self. Working as a cinematographer you spend your life in a constant dialogue with your art. You find yourself asking questions like “what if I tried lighting this way?” and your craft responds when you see the shot playing back on the screen. As a DP you know there is a connection between heart and camera, because when you are unhappy with your work you are in fact always unhappy with yourself. Clearly your cinematography is in sense an extension of self just like most other art forms. But unlike many other forms of art, a DP is constantly adapting his art to new circumstances in new places with new people as it changes from every success and failure as he/she experiments with new artistic ideas and technology. As I take a step back and look at my films I can see this conversation happening and real artistry being cultivated as the connection between my sense of self and my art grows with each new experience.

Secondly, I have discovered what I’m made of as a cinematographer and what kind of filmmaker I am. I bridge the gap between visual creativity and resourcefulness. Meaning, I can turn great weaknesses into strengths as I can transform a bad situation into a unique and original artistic vision in ways I can comfortably say a lot filmmakers cannot. Furthermore, aesthetically I have a lot in common with German expressionists in that I prefer expressive lighting and
atmospheric scene design. I gravitate towards this style while trying to capture the psyche of my characters and use film to get within the human mind and pass beneath the surface, visually reinterpreting what’s hidden within.

Lastly, I have realized that this thesis has not truly concluded. While my professional career in filmmaking is accelerating, it’s still in its infancy. It’s an impossibility for this thesis to come to a close in my lifetime as the journey of mastering the craft of the cinematography and learning and building new skills within the art form never truly ends. Each scene I light and every shot I film is another brick laid in the foundation of what’s to come next.

**Works Cited**


