Write, Shoot, Edit, Repeat: Filmmaking as an Act of Currere

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Prologue

Twenty-four years ago, I watched my friend fall to his death. I stood, frozen in place below him, as he lost his balance, flailing his arms in a futile effort to regain control. His final, panicked cry of "Por que" reverberated against the ancient timbers of the barn. The fractured streaks of afternoon sunlight emanating through gaps in the walls and roof were dim but provided light enough to reflect the fear in his eyes as he tumbled from the rafters. The descent took no more than a second; the resounding crash of old wood echoed faintly in the barn at the moment of impact.

"Cut!" I yelled with excitement as I pushed the small red button on the camcorder, forever stamping this image on the reel of black tape and on my heart.

Shouts of youthful energy filled the barn as we helped Peter out of the pile of hay we had amassed shortly before the scene was filmed. He brushed himself off, a huge smile on his face. As we crowded around the 3 inch monitor attached to the camera, we replayed the scene over and over again, noticing little things each time. The low angled shot we had chosen for the camera to hide the hay pile made the fall look twice as long as it was in reality. Sam and Brian's perfectly timed jump on the wooden cart shook the camera enough to mimic the impact of Paul's landing, as well as create the necessary thud to make the impact more authentic. Peter's artificially distressed straw hat, purchased on our way to filming that day, had flown off in the updraft of his descent and remained in the shot for a few frames, creating an eerie, yet somber, effect. While the image in the monitor was in black and white, we could see that the shadows cast by the intermittent light streaks were perfect for the tone. Sam noticed a solitary crow in the back of the barn that took flight as Peter screamed his line. We all determined that it added an extra touch of unintended symbolism as we got out the corn syrup and red food coloring to prepare Peter for the next scene.

Synthetic Aside

The Spanish III assignment was straightforward. Construct a dialogue of no less than fifty lines in Spanish, using a combination of verb tenses, declarative statements, adjectives, etc. that have been since forgotten. We decided to turn our dialogue into a short film. The power and impact of this assignment was not derived from the content area of the project, but from the creativity and ownership the project afforded us. The lessons learned from the process of media production ultimately became far more valuable to me than the conversational Spanish we were generating and vocabulary we were accruing.

In the end, we didn't become fluent in Spanish as a result of the project, and in fact, the grade we received for our film was not great; however, we became fluent in authoring and directing our own stories. Every scene, every cut, every prop, every directorial decision spoke our identities as surely as if we had explicitly narrated them in a director's commentary. We learned how to plan and problem solve using the limited resources (monetary and otherwise) available to us. When Peter said that we should film a scene where he falls from the top of the barn, we didn't scoff at the difficulties his suggestion presented, nor did we rush into it without caution. We

meticulously planned for safety as well as for effect. We saw, first-hand, the value of time management and organization as we lost the sunlight in some of our shots and lost Paul when he had to go to work, so we had to learn to work efficiently. Most importantly, we discovered how to imagine and turn that dream into a visual experience for an audience of our peers.

These lessons were not learned overnight, nor because of a solitary project in our Spanish III classroom. Only now, in my constructed present, can I understand how important these experiences were to my development as a person and as an educator. Growing up, my friends and I spent a great deal of time in front of, or behind, the camera. We didn't aspire to be filmmakers or actors. We simply enjoyed the collaborative, creative process. It was something fun to do with our time. Whether it was filming Guns N' Roses music videos in my living room, creating stop motion animations of action figures battling in a sandbox, or capturing "death-defying" sledding runs at the local park, many of the most indelible moments of my childhood have a camcorder somewhere in the periphery.

Filmmaking as Currere

Reflecting on my relationship with visual media has afforded me the opportunity to see how intrinsically filmmaking and *currere* are woven together. I view film production as a visual gateway for *currere* work There is a mantra I use with my media journalism students to help us stay focused on what is most important regarding the film production process: *write, shoot, edit, repeat* (Connelly, 2018). These four stages of film production, while grossly oversimplified, are a manifestation of the *currere* method in action.

The autobiographical journey undertaken by those engaging in the *currere* method can take a number of significant and impactful forms. In my experience, visual media production provides a multidimensional model for *currere* in practice. These different phases of the filmmaking process (write, shoot, edit, repeat) reflect the four stages of *currere*: regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetic (Pinar, 2012). While the delineations are not always clearly demarcated, the relationship between *currere* and film production is significant.

Within the context of producing a film, whether fictional or nonfictional in nature, the stages of film production are enacted in a continual cycle of reflection, imagination, and analysis. Whether I am scripting during the pre-production phase or color grading footage during post-production, I never stop reflecting on whether or not my footage aligns with my purpose and message, if the camera angle chosen tells the story or conveys the emotion I need it to, or if the sounds I chose capture the essence of the tone. This continual regressive action is essential to the filmmaking process, yet it is deeply intertwined with the progressive stage of *currere* in that I am always focused on what the imagined finished project will look like—even if the present does not resemble anything close to what is in my head or in the script at that moment in time. For example, an actor or object filmed in front of a green screen can be digitally transported to any location I want. Because of this, I must always keep my thoughts and actions divided between the present and what will eventually come of the captured footage.

Film directors must always maintain an analytical approach to their production, as it serves almost as a bridge between the regressive and progressive stages of the *currere* method. Essentially, I must always ask myself, *does the current construction of the present reflect the script and story that I wanted to tell, and does it align with the*

tone and look I want to see in the final product. This process of reflection, imagination, and analysis ultimately leads to a new knowledge and understanding of who I am, as well as being a powerful motivator to continue the quest to see who I can become.

Recording the world through a lens captures the world in a subjective context, allowing for powerful reflective and analytical practices to be enacted. Visual media production may frame the world as it was within a particular context, or it may frame the world as it could be. What is captured by the lens can be the essence of who I am or allow me to imagine who I may become or who I ultimately want to be. "Through the subjective reconstruction of academic knowledge and lived experience—as each informs the other—we enable understanding of the public world as we discern our privately formulated way through it" (Pinar, 2012, p. 45). Filmmaking allows me to reproduce, reconstruct, and reimagine my understanding of the world and my position within it.

Jump Cuts

When I reflect on the lived experiences that my friends and I captured on film, one idea I revisit is: Were these events recorded because they were critical moments, or were they critical moments simply because they were recorded? The answer, I have come to realize over the years, lies somewhere in between.

When I capture a moment through a lens, it gives me a tangible foothold in the past, a two dimensional gateway into that particular moment in time that can be revisited time and again. I can replay and re-watch that moment at my convenience but with the realization that, even though the moment caught on camera may be the same, I may be fundamentally different than the last time I hit the play button, creating a whole new experience for myself. The captured moment bridges the gap between past and present, providing me with a beacon with which to calibrate and inform my present moment in time.

When making a film, there is a messy relationship with the past, present, and future. In essence, when I am authoring/directing a film project, I am situated in a constructed present (the set) that was enacted from the past (the script) in order to produce the most authentic version of the future as possible (the film).

In the present, there is a constant looking back at the script and storyboard in order to make sure everything is set up in such a way that I produce what I intended to at the outset of the project. The key to any successful film project begins with pen and paper, or any other writing apparatus. My films begin with the question: *What story needs to be told?* This is the genesis of every project I have ever undertaken, whether this question stems from an external or internal stimulus is inconsequential. Whether it is a commercial for an after school club or a documentary about life in my hometown, there is a story being authored that will eventually be translated into an entirely different medium. This story is constructed from my perspective and contains a great deal of me within it, regardless of the characters or conflicts that may be depicted on camera. This makes any film production essentially personal and autobiographical. I undergo changes throughout the filmmaking process just as the characters within the constructed story do.

There is a dualism in filmmaking that is both fascinating and frustrating for me as a director and producer. When creating a film, I am positioned in the present moment that exists to produce an imagined future. The lights, actors, props, cords, microphones, etc. exist to create a constructed product that will eventually (and hopefully) become

an authentic reality on screen. There is a continual internal discussion that occurs where I ask myself: *What must I do in the present in order to make the future that I wanted to create at the outset of the film project?* Filmmaking is essentially taking discrete pieces of footage and sound and recombining them into an imagined future.

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When I produce a film, I know that the story is unfinished and that the narrative is in a continuous process of becoming, just as each of us are as individuals (Freire, 1998). My characters, despite their fictional (or biographical in the case of documentary work) construction, live on, not only in the hearts and minds of their creators, but also in the hearts and minds of the audience members who have taken the journey with them. Each world produced by a filmmaker provides an opportunity and genesis for thousands more. Stories do not close doors, but instead reveal gateways that allow us to reflect upon the power of our own narratives.

Throughout the filmmaking process, I am not only reflecting on the world as I see it, but also modifying it to how I want it to be. Throughout the course of any film project I undertake, I must always examine the past, present, and future and understand where I am and who I am. Each film project has a definitive beginning, middle, and end, but none of them are ever finished because they inform and enlighten as to what comes next and what could have been done differently.

The process of filmmaking is an accessible, yet underutilized, way for students and teachers to engage in the *currere* method. There are no limits to what a film production can become in the hands of students given the right opportunity and freedom to create. For some, it may be a chance to reflect, while for others, it may be a cathartic process of healing and closure. For some, it may be a chance to engage in problem solving, while others may find emancipation from institutional marginalization. Regardless of the lived experiences of each student during the filmmaking process, significant reflection, imagination, analysis, and synthesis will occur.

As educators and producers of knowledge, we should provide opportunities for students to engage in visual media production because of the rich subjective and contextual experiences that they will encounter throughout the process. If, as Pinar (2012) suggests, "The curriculum is our key conveyance *into* the world" (p. 2), then a curriculum that is rich in media production is important, because it allows us to see ourselves how we were, how we are, and how we could be.

References

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