

Self Reflective Essay

I first conceived the idea for "Suspense" late last year whilst visiting Bayview Tattoo parlour in Port Elizabeth. I have always been interested in piercing and alternative body art and tattoo culture. Once I had asked a few questions and received a favourable response from Shawn Lindgoen, the man who performs the suspension in the piece, I knew I had the subject for my individual project for fourth year. As a result, the piece has been in conception mode for six months prior to any real planning, and I would jot down ideas or questions as they came to me over the course of the year.

As a result, the preproduction phase of "Suspense" was a relatively easy process, as there are many tattoo and piercing parlours in South Africa that run body suspension outfits as part of their service. The contact list was easy to construct as a result, and in the end I had more offers for help than I needed from prospective case studies and piercing artists around the country. The shooting schedule was completed; in as far as I had imagined the actual narrative and its related interviews before the end of the first semester.

I chose to shoot over the July holidays to take pressure off my group project the following term, and because it afforded me the opportunity to shoot in both Cape Town and Johannesburg. The final shoots in third term were then confined to Port Elizabeth and Grahamstown.

The shooting process itself was frustrating in many ways, but luckily the interview arrangements had been made weeks before and so logistical issues were never a problem. What was frustrating was shooting with a J3 Panasonic camera throughout the holidays, as the Sennheimer radio mic cannot be properly controlled with the onboard sound software of the J3 camera, and the sound mixer was unavailable both before and after the Grahamstown festival. In addition, on location the hard

drive would occasionally lose sync, resulting in the continual re-asking of questions throughout all of the shoots.

Reflecting on the shooting process over the holidays, I knew that the interviews should contain as much depth as possible. This was made difficult by my decision to shoot all the interviews in natural light. This problem was alleviated for the most part by my obsession with visually attractive and interesting backdrops for the interviews, which also resulted in most interviews containing few close up shots, as I preferred mid or wide shots to capture the background as well. It also helped that I was shooting to edit, as I had an almost exact idea of what I was looking for.

However, once I had placed the footage in Final Cut Pro, I soon realised that I had made a few mistakes along the way. The first was that the sound was not as good as I had hoped, particularly in the John Wayne interview, where the tattoo gun is clearly audible. The tattoo gun had to be shown to the audience early in the piece in order for them to recognise the sound later in the narrative.

More worrying was the realisation that I had vastly undershot cutaway visuals for all of my case studies. With only a "walkie" for Lliezel, and two sequences of Paul playing table football and talking to friends and John Wayne at a computer, I realised there might be a huge problem if the interviews didn't look as good as I thought they did. At the time I realised I had relied too heavily on the promise of the case studies' stills, and had been lazy after shooting the interviews themselves.

At this point I returned to Grahamstown and soon had a basic six-minute narrative on a timeline. It was here that I identified what I thought the themes were, and broke it into a progressive narrative based on the progress of the suspension procedure itself. From this starting point, I then inserted stills over the various case studies at the beginning of the piece, as well as the cutaway footage I had shot after the interviews. Once this was completed, I conceptualised a shot list for

visual metaphors and visually attractive recreations of the case studies' experience.

It was at this point that I was exposed to the music of Lark, a South African band whose music fit perfectly with what I had envisioned in my head. As a result, I never gave any thought to obtaining copyright permission until a few days before the deadline. Luckily, the situation was quickly resolved through a few e-mails, and the music is possibly my favourite part of the piece as a whole.

The breaks then came on once production began on our group project and for the middle weeks of third term, my individual became an evening project that I devoted an hour to every evening, either tightening the narrative up or conceiving potential visual elements that could fit into the piece later should my initial ideas fall by the wayside. Once production finished on the group documentary, I became firmly entrenched in editing mode for the final three weeks of the term, and took two days out of that schedule to shoot the suicide suspension itself, and the accompanying time lapses and visual metaphors, leaving me with no shooting to do ten days before deadline.

Having the length cut to five minutes was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand it allowed me to cut the weakest visual part of the piece, which was a deeper explanation of the practicalities and precautions of suspension piercing. It also allowed me to cut two breaks in the narrative, which required another day of shooting. On the other hand, the piece had a lot less contextual information about suspension piercing over a historical period and how the practice has changed in meaning.

I shot the final suicide suspension two weeks before deadline, after various postponements through the term. For a fee I was finally able to persuade one of the case studies to perform the suspension. I was under a lot pressure because I knew that this was the shoot that would make or break the piece. The stills alone would not

be enough to satisfy the viewer for five minutes. In addition, I was terrified the camera equipment would not work. Fortunately only small portions of my rushes were affected, and it was not important in the larger context of the shoot. I shot the suspension with a full light kit positioned to separate the suspension in a warm light from the surrounding environment (using orange gels). Fortunately for me, I was able to shoot the suspension in the manner I had originally conceptualised. Furthermore, I remembered to film a few set-up shots after my case study had been lowered back down to build better sequences. The shoot was problem free.

The following day, I inserted the footage into the narrative, which by this point had been furnished with the music I wanted. From here I finalised the final metaphors and recreations, and shot them the following day. The final week of term became fine-tuning between group editing sessions during the day.

It was in the final week I was afforded the time to play with Motion in the Final Cut Studio, and used the light templates and light strobe effects to add something to the stills. Having the extra time in the last week allowed me to experiment with other parts of the edit, most notably the text animations in the titling and credits.

The preparation time was the most important factor in the final outcome of the piece, as it allowed me to free up time for the group documentary in the third term which allowed me to relax a little more following second term's disaster. I always felt in control of where the piece was going and what still had to be done throughout the production process.

Cutting the piece to five minutes made it stronger in the end, once I had overcome my initial frustrations. The final consult also helped, as I had been rather overprotective of something I had put all my effort into. "Suspense" is what I had originally conceived for my individual piece over a year ago, and I was fortunate

enough to not have to make any sacrifices on producing something that I am so proud of.