

Graeme Comrie

Critical Analysis of Group Documentary

Obviously, the major problem the group faced was trying to overcome the “talking heads” syndrome. On reflection, I am not entirely sure if we were wholly successful in this regard. It is obviously very difficult to keep a viewer interested for 24 minutes of interviews with three subjects. However, we employed various techniques in an attempt to solve this. We tried to include as much footage of our subjects in action as possible. Thus, Wayne is shown chopping in the kitchen and showing off the fields, and Shane is shown digging and planting. Further, we had them describe their activities to add colour (Shane talks about making a “Christmas fruit” and Wayne stirs his pot of sump and beans). We also included shots of flowers and vegetables in attempt to break the monotony of endless interviews. Despite all this, the piece does tend to drag at times. Fortunately, our interviewees talk about weighty matters that cannot help but grab the attention of the viewer.

Further, we had decided that “talking heads” need not be a problem in itself. From the start, we had decided that we wanted to do something different stylistically. Thus, we chose not to employ voiceovers or titling as a form of storytelling. We wanted our subjects to tell the story themselves, and I think that they do that. For the majority of the piece, I think that our stylistic decision to let Shane and Wayne’s voices drive the story holds together. On reflection though, I just cannot help but feel that 24 minutes feels a tad too long. However, I think the content of the piece required that we did not use voiceovers (I am not sure if any of us felt in tune enough with the content to be able to editorialise about these men’s hardships).

The piece constantly attempts to make visual links and metaphors. The aforementioned shots of flowers and growth are themselves metaphors of the regrowth that the addicts are undergoing. One particular shot lingers in the memory: that of a dandelion with all its seeds fully in tact, alongside a dandelion that has been extinguished. The association with the addicts is clear – they (and their hope) has been extinguished and need replenishment to become whole again. Shane himself compares the drug addict to the plants he tends to. He says that it is no good just watering a plant and the just leaving it to die (as most forms of rehab do for drug addicts). The plant and the drug addict both need constant attention and – as he says –

love. Throughout the piece, I feel that this association of personal growth with biological growth is very strong.

The piece is not without its fair share of technical shortcomings. In our efforts to find cutaways to add colour to the monologues of the two men, we ended up using visuals that – on reflection – we should not have. Sometimes the cutaways were simply poor camerawork that we would ordinarily discard, and sometimes the cutaway just did not match the scenario (one particularly arbitrary shot of potatoes in the kitchen comes to mind). There are also moments when cutaways placed in between when the subjects talking are totally without background noise, and this is jarring to the viewer (when such moments were meant to slow the pace of the piece). Such these were overlooked in the rush to meet the deadline. Also, despite numerous checks during editing, the sound sometimes drops too low or bursts in too loudly during the interviews. It is frustrating because such mistakes can and should be avoided.

There were other technical issues that might have been avoided, but needed inclusion. For instance, the interview with Shane when his bright orange cap completely dominates the shot (although he was still very shy and wary of us at this stage of our relationship). Because of the weightiness of what he says during this interview, we simply could not discard this footage (no matter how off-putting it is to the viewer's eye). We also had to include some extreme close-ups that were perhaps overly extreme – such that when the interviewee moved a touch, he moved out of shot. Once again, the importance of the content outweighed the problems with the shot. Further, I must stress that we have never had much problem in including such shots as they add colour and fit in with our stylistic approach. After all, extreme close-ups belong in heavily emotional pieces such as this. Many of the weaker shots we included were also taken while our subjects were in action on the farm (Wayne in the kitchen, Shane potting) and add to the sense of immediacy and a spontaneous capturing of their daily lives. We also had a debate over whether to use images of crack cocaine while “Prince” talks about the drug. They eventually were included as, while they might not be wholly consistent with the rest of the piece, they do add colour and an edge of reality to the problem.

I would like to think that the story flows effectively. I think that our intro sequence is very innovative and very effective. It establishes the location of the farm on a lonely road, and the location of Wayne instantly in his kitchen. Not starting with

his talking immediately, gives the viewer a sense of being an observer of his daily routine, and the old radio is almost eerily scratchy. We did not want to immediately enter into the heftier issues at play (the breakdown of family relationships, the feelings of despair and the like) and I feel we introduce the story strongly. The still black frames with titles introducing the main characters are highly effective in that they interrupt the subjects and force the viewer to take notice (their silence accentuates this). Thus, the story evolves and gets into more and more serious issues as it proceeds. About halfway through the piece, "Prince" the drug dealer is introduced, giving the piece a new wind (as it is quite a shock to see a drug dealer – the very kind of person who has played a role in ruining these men's lives - happy to talk on camera). The piece concludes with notions of hope and despair for the future, and ends fittingly with Wayne reading his Bible and the poignant sound bite that his future is in his hands every day. There are times at which these themes overlap (at one point Shane mentions his family again, when most of the content about families has been dealt with), but I generally feel that the piece flows well, to a solid conclusion. Perhaps the one thing it does lack is a palpable climax, but – as mentioned – very little climatic has happened in their lives for quite a time.

I think this is a solid piece of work. The content is powerful, and the footage is crisp with regards to both sound and visuals. Both the introduction and conclusion are very powerful. Thus, I think it deserves credit.