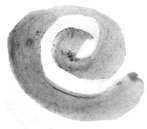
On creating with urgency



Filmmaker Christopher Radcliff discusses setting the flow with others, how to end a project, and the importance of silence.

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As told to Reina Bonta, 2153 words.

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Creatively, are you someone who requires closure in your work or someone who enjoys frequent change?

I get really attached to projects–not just the film, the story, and the characters–but also the team and community that arises from the project. I worked as a freelance editor for a number of years, and when working with a new team on a new film, you have to sort out your workflow and how the project coalesces around the team. In my mind, I always felt like, "Oh, this is my life now. This is it. This is my job now, forever," even though it's very short-term most of the time. It's one reason why I ended up liking documentary, which tends to be a longer process, and can feel endless. I did always feel mentally ill-suited for the freelance aspect of the whole thing. Over the years, I've had to learn how to disengage from a project. And there's always an element of sadness when an era ends. But, creatively speaking, if you can end a project having taken [the film] as far as you could, and don't feel like there's a lot left unsaid, I think that's a really nice feeling if you can get there.

How do you approach silence in your films? Is that something that you design from the outset or does it emerge more so in the edit?

It was actually a really important realization that I had in some of my earlier work that silence is almost equally as valuable as a line of dialogue is. I think when you're first starting out and you're writing the script, you think the dialogue is always saying the important thing that you want to communicate to the audience. I'm thinking specifically of a short film I made called *The Strange Ones*. As I was editing the film, it just wasn't working. There were some scenes that felt way too verbose and overwritten. There was too much dialogue. And as soon as I started pulling out the dialogue and replacing it with just meaningful silences where the character is just reacting or contemplating something, it all of a sudden became so much more realistic and resonant in the ways that I wanted it to be. I do think that editing is very helpful if you are somebody that writes and directs. You start to be able to perceive the entire work as one thing as opposed to disparate elements that build upon each other. Having perspective on how the words will eventually manifest, not even just on screen but in the edit temporally, is really helpful.

When you're writing something new, how much space do you hold for a new script before sharing it with someone else?

I keep it very close to the chest for a very long time. Probably too long, to be honest. I'm very reluctant to reveal something until I feel like it's communicating what I want it to be communicating. And I'm very self-critical about that. So I tend to rework scripts quite a bit before I start to show them to people. It's actually something that I'm trying to be more comfortable with earlier—sharing things. It becomes deleterious to hold onto [a script] for too long because you then rethink things endlessly in a loop, but you need to break out of that with an outside perspective in order to inspire the next form of the film. And film is such a collaborative

medium that someone will see your words sooner or later. I'm often trying to rip the bandaid off a little bit earlier, now.

What creative risks are urgent for you right now that might not have been earlier in your career?

I want to start making things in a way that doesn't take so long. Creating with more of an urgency is something that has always felt inherently risky—to make something and share it before you're altogether comfortable—but I feel much more urgency around doing that now. The more I create, the more I realize that when you're stuck on an idea, it's almost like you're stuck in time. Meanwhile, the world is spinning around you and changing, and by the time you come out of that frozen time period with that idea, you're in a different world and the work has a different relationship with the world. That's always the tricky thing with film because films take so long to make.

So many people starting out in film are advised to "write what you know." Do you feel like you haven't followed that traditional scheme, and are now, after making other work, looking internally for inspiration?

With [my film, *We Were the Scenery*], oftentimes young Asian American audience members and aspiring filmmakers would say that the film made them want to talk to their parents. It was a really gratifying reaction. There was something about [the film] that made them say, "I just want to go home. I want to interview my parents. I want to see what their story is." And I would tell them, "If you are an Asian American person or you are a product of the diaspora, there is an interesting story there no matter what." Then, I started to think about [making more personal work] myself. It's something that I'm circling mentally. But it's very unique to this moment in my career. I don't know if I would've had these thoughts and feelings if I hadn't made this film first. While not at all based on my life, the work that I've done has always been personal or following a feeling or question that I was intensely curious about. I've always been very envious of people that can make compelling work out of the people and places that they know. It's a really admirable and impressive thing to do. Only now am I starting to see it with new eyes and perceive the complex layers that exist in my personal spaces that are potentially quite compelling to not just me, but to an audience. So we'll see. We'll see what comes of it.

Do you believe films should be made for the person making it, or for the audience experiencing it?

You want something that's deeply felt and resonates with the person that made it. And if that's personal and therapeutic, that's a really beautiful result from making a film. But films are, just by their nature, public objects in a sense. I was obsessed with Roger Ebert, the film critic, when I was a kid. It was how I started to love film. He has many famous quotes, but one of the most memorable is, more or less: "cinema is an empathy machine." And that's something that I've been thinking about a lot lately. We can't help but empathize to an extent even when the characters are troubled or doing things that are disturbing in certain ways. You know what I mean? That, to me, is one of the core utilities of film: to see and understand things in a new way. So, in that regard, I think I really value the relationship between the film and the audience. Almost as a filmmaker, I try to put myself secondary to that. Even though you are the engine that's driving the creation of the piece, in a weird way, you have to hold yourself to the standard that it can't just be important to you. It also has to be communicating something to other people as well.

Is specificity of perspective mutually exclusive with being resonant to a wide audience?

In fact, it's the opposite. The more specific you can be about the way you think and feel and see things, the more people will understand that. It's one of the weird tricks of cinema: the more specific it is, the more universal it is. I do believe that. Films can illuminate a perspective in a way that, even if it's a world that is totally different from yours, the visceral emotion of it still speaks to everybody in a really universal, human way. If you're trying to avoid that, or if you are creating work that is general or broad, it feels like you're just skimming the surface of a story. And we're so deeply involved in our own stories that that's what we appreciate. We appreciate the willingness to plunge into those depths in the same way that we live our own stories. If you can give something to a viewer that is culturally specific in a certain way or unique to you in whatever way, but that they still understand on that visceral, emotional level, then that's how empathy for the world beyond ourselves is created.

When you're finishing one film, are you already paving the road for the next one?

No, unfortunately not. We've been so intensely busy with [*We Were the Scenery*], just shepherding its run as a short film. What a blessing to have such a long life for short. But it being really intensely time-consuming alongside making this feature that I was a producer on meant that I hadn't really been able to lay the groundwork for my next film. So after premiering [*Zi*] at Sundance and after the end of the [*We Were the Scenery*] awards campaign, reentry into my normal life was actually really somewhat jarring. I was like, "Oh my god, I have hours. I can actually sit and think about an idea. So, what do I do?" That's something I'm still groping around, trying to find my way into the next thing. But I do feel creatively stockpiled with ideas that I had been developing beforehand.

The public-facing release part of the process is a legit huge chapter that we often don't engage with. As a filmmaker, I never really considered that. I have to be able to switch gears from my dreamy fantasy land version of the process to the public-facing part, and engage with the viewers and with the world again. It's a whole muscle and skill and mindset that you have to nurture at the same time.

If you could trace a throughline across all of your work so far, is there any one question that rises to the surface that you've been trying to answer?

What I try to do in films is almost get into the secret layer of things that exist beneath the public layer of a story. I try to dig into this subterranean layer beneath the surface of what we think we know. That is a little bit of a dynamic that exists in all of my work in a weird way. I'm also now more interested in asking questions than I am in providing answers. And so if I can take this kind of idea of dealing with secrets, but actually be open-minded to the telling of the secret that still creates additional questions, that is interesting to me.

Christopher Radcliff recommends:

IWGP, a live action Japanese tv series from the early 00's about unruly teenagers in Tokyo getting into various adventures in their neighborhood (Ikebukuro). It's on Netflix. Low budget and somehow both dated (in a good way) and ahead of its time, it's extremely fun and playful, and the pace of its storytelling is kind of awe inspiring.

***Mes Confitures* by Christine Ferber**. I started making jam recently kind of as a hobby, and I really love this book's recipes which are pretty simple for the most part but have a very specific, rather time-consuming process that yields something really special. I also like how Ferber, a legend in the jam world, says "a batch of jam is always an act of creation."

Exploring via Google Maps streetview / Geoguessing. I think it's interesting to just explore places via streetview, both far flung locations I've never been and my own neighborhoods. I like how it makes everything feel familiar and otherworldly at the same time. Along with that I recently became aware of *geoguessing*, and how it's an entire e-sport with a world cup and stuff, which is pretty mind-boggling.

***The Notebook, The Proof, The Third Lie,* by Agota Kristof**. Incredibly bleak and harrowing, I first read this three-part novel over fifteen years ago and still think about passages from it regularly. A Hungarian writing in her second language (French), Kristof uses simplicity and omission in a way I really admire.

Writing screenplays by hand. I started doing this recently and I really like how it makes me more aware of the fact that a first draft is just the beginning of a process that will eventually have to lead to many future versions and iterations. And knowing this helps me to be more free.

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Vocation
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