Grant Singer on making music videos



April 3, 2017 - Grant Singer is a filmmaker and music video director based in Los Angeles. Over the past five years he's worked with Lorde, Ariel Pink, Sky Ferreira, Taylor Swift, and the Weeknd, among others.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1704 words.

Tags: Film, Music, Inspiration, Process, Beginnings.

In the last couple of years you've directed videos for Taylor Swift, The Weeknd, Ariana Grande, and Lorde. Are you someone who grew up watching a lot of music videos?

My first memories as a human being are specifically watching music videos in my parents' garage. I remember the Warrant "Cherry Pie" video stuck out to me when I was four of five years old, and then Soundgarden's "Black Hole Sun" video and Soul Asylum's "Runaway Train" video. When I was a little bit older I was introduced to Mark Romanek's Nine Inch Nails videos as well as Chris Cunningham's work. Music videos, for sure, influenced me when I was younger, but I never thought I'd grow up and direct music videos. If I had seen a psychic years ago who said, "In 10 years you'll be directing music videos," I wouldn't have believed her. It was never an aspiration that I had.

When I went to college, my first year, I studied music and I wanted to compose music for film. It wasn't until a little later that I realized I wanted to direct the films, not just do the music. From that point on, my focus was directing, but I never thought I'd direct music videos until I was in my 20s. I moved back to L.A. because I realized I wanted to pursue a career in directing.

I started to do visual things for my friends Liza and Matt, who were in a band called Starred. I was inspired by them. Making those first few videos, I didn't think I was directing music videos. I honestly just thought I was filming things as a way to document our lives. It was just a natural progression after that. I did a Black Bananas video for Jennifer Herrema and a few other things. This process of filming my friends, making these little films for my friends who were in bands, slowly turned into a career. You keep doing something and then momentum takes over and it eventually spirals into a job.

How do you approach making a music video for someone?

That process is different every time. I had more of a punk aesthetic at first. I only wanted to make transgressive music videos that didn't have cliché narratives. I wanted to experiment and use the process to get better and practice filmmaking. Music videos have always been a great source of innovation and experimentation within popular culture, but if you're a young filmmaker it's also just a great way to get comfortable directing.

My other motive, at least in the beginning, was to make videos that inhabited aspects of my personality as well as the artist's. I think the perfect culmination of that was the three Ariel Pink videos I did. Those videos involved things I'd been thinking about for years before we shot them. I was obsessed with "masking" culture for many years, so I suggested we explore that for "Picture Me Gone." I told them about the idea I had for using [L.A. glam rock personality] Rick Wilder in a video and he was like, "Oh we should do that for 'Dayzed Inn Daydreams'." He let me do my thing. That's the ideal.

If you're a young director, you do get to experience different aspects of filmmaking by making videos. There's a practical education involved with it.

The thing that I like the most, the thing that I'm most grateful for, is that it has also helped me understand myself better as a person. It's forced me to enter situations and worlds that I would never otherwise be in. With every new project you end up spending a few weeks working with a new set of people and personalities and, quite often, a totally different culture. You almost have to be a chameleon. You have to immerse yourself in that world and be able to communicate and convey ideas. There are multiple ways of approaching music videos, but I like to capture the soul of an artist. I know that sounds ridiculous, but it's not just about aesthetics, but trying to show what they're really all about. Who they are.

I've done all different types of stuff, personal small-scale things to more elaborate to pop things for huge artists. I would never make that "Dayzed Inn Daydreams video" for someone like Ariana Grande, for example. In those situations, my job is to ask *how do I make the right thing for her?* You have to serve the musician more than yourself. It would be doing a disservice—and be selfish of me—to do anything else. I love the opportunities where I can be weird and do things that are more stylistically aligned with my natural instincts, but other times you just have to think of it as serving the artist. You're helping them realize their own vision. It's not always about you.

Can you imagine at some point making feature films?

Absolutely. But for now, as long as I'm inspired and like what I'm doing, I'm going to keep doing it. I'm becoming more selective about who I'll work with, but that has nothing to do with the size of the artist, it has to do with being inspired by the material. When the music speaks to you, that's who you want to work with. I don't give a fuck about how much money something involves or what the budget is. I only want to do something that's going to be fun. I want to do things that affect me on an emotional level.

What advice do you have for young filmmakers who are looking for a place to start?

Well, I did study film in school and… it's not that I don't think school is important, but I'd argue that the more important thing is simply watching films. Then, just get a camera and start doing it. The other crucial thing is living your life and being open to whatever opportunities present themselves. Use whatever is accessible to you and make your own things.

I know people who are great technicians and have a great understanding of all the precise technical aspects of filmmaking but because they haven't lived or experienced loss, pain, grief, heartbreak, euphoria, their work suffers. The human skills that you acquire by living a rich, complex, intense life have been the most valuable tools that I've needed in my career. I don't think that the technical aspects of filmmaking are that important, actually. Everyone has their own way, but I think life experience is key.

Is being able to communicate effectively the most important skill?

I'm glad that you bring that up because if I were to give advice to someone that would probably be at the top of my list. Communication is a very specific skillset for a director, especially if you're directing music videos. If you're directing a movie you might have more autonomy, but when you're directing music videos, there's this fine line between being confident and having a strong vision, but also being malleable and respectful of other people's ideas. It takes a specific personality to be able to handle that gracefully.

I believe one of my strengths has been my ability to collaborate with artists. Especially big artists, who usually have their own ideas and they just want you to execute them. A lot of directors won't do that. They're like, "Fuck you, I'm gonna make *my* video whether you like that or not," but that's not an attitude that's conducive to making anything good. Also, you won't get hired. So if you want to work, you have to be collaborative. You can't necessarily teach that. A lot of directors are awkward or they're egotistical or they're narcissists. That's okay if you're only ever making your own projects, but it doesn't work in music videos.

I say this to people: you have to be cool. Often people's desire to work with you has as much to do with your people skills as it does about your talent. That's what's so hard about giving advice when it comes to this kind of work—there is no direct path for success and it often involves skills that you can't learn in school.

For example, artists are sensitive to a person in the room who's nervous. If you're nervous, you will never do anything. You have to get over that. Five years ago, I wasn't listening to pop music. I've always been interested in industrial music and noise. That was the music I'd been listening to prior to directing music videos. So when I'm working with these big pop artists, I'm often familiar with them but I don't get nervous because I'm not too familiar with them. I come at it from a different perspective. I think artists really want someone who's comfortable and who's also not gonna kiss their ass, that's a *very* important thing. You can't be too kiss-ass, otherwise they'll see through you and find you weak. You have to be receptive to their ideas but also firm enough to assert yourself. It's such a fine line, and not many people seem to have that. To be honest, I'm grateful not many people have it because that's what keeps me working. You can't teach that. You could be the most talented technical filmmaker in the world, but if you can't be cool—if you can't actually *listen*—it's all a waste.

Zodiac (Directed by David Fincher).
My favorite film by my favorite living director.

"Pleasurer" by JK Flesh.
A perfect song by Justin Broadrick. If it were up to me this would be playing in every bar, restaurant, and waiting room.

Mike Kelley.
Because he can never be forgotten. The greatest.

Heaven Knows What (Directed by the Safdie Brothers) God I love this film. Josh and Benny remind me of Cassavetes in that their films cut right through you with their authenticity.

Patrik Sandberg. Wouldn't be here without him. Brilliant writer and a true friend.

Name
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Vocation
Filmmaker

Fact

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