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The Heart is a Muscle

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Abstract

The Heart is a Muscle is a video shot with a Sony HVR-Z1U and manipulated to create a visual hybrid between an old Super 8mm home movie and the crisp HD picture of the newest technology. I achieved most of this manipulation by layering filters and de-interlacing the video to slightly blur the image and make it appear softer.

Conceptually, the video centers around the idea that a muscle must break down/apart before it can get stronger and grow. It then takes this fact and applies it to the heart (which is also a type of muscle), and explores the idea that the heart must also break in order to get stronger.

Overall, the video took about 5 months to organize, shoot and edit, and an additional month to script and conceptualize. One of the reasons for the slow production process was that there was only one person working and organizing the details (most films or videos have at least two or three people working on these things), and I spent nearly 8 months jumping from idea to idea before settling on this one (which is rather out of character).

Nonetheless, despite the one person production crew and the switching of topics, I think the final product is one many can enjoy and make their own.

INTRODUCTION

Whenever somebody hears you're making a film or video, the next question is immediately, "What it's about?" This seemingly casual question takes on a much greater burden for an artist than most speakers come close to realizing. Because while the speaker is simply interested in the basic storyline and plot, the question brings forth a slew of dilemmas for the artist/creator such as whether the piece has an inherent meaning, whether *you* (as the artist) truly know that meaning, and if you do, whether or not you wish to impose that meaning onto the viewer.

For me, with this project, the question brought forth even greater difficulty, because I didn't even know what it was I was making. Clearly, it was a video, but was it a short story, or an educational piece, or a music video, or maybe an experimental film? Honestly, I wasn't exactly sure. In fact, I still don't have a specific category or genre for it. Rather, I've simply become content with acknowledging its somewhat fluid form (though I do like one friend's description of it as a sort of video poem).

Of course, the very nature of this essay brings forth similar questions as to how much the artist should reveal about his or her work. So, not

wanting to write this reflective piece as if the video can only be read in one way (because that simply isn't the case), I want to begin with this disclaimer: All that follows merely represents my own thought process while making the piece, and by no means should my thoughts, ideas or even intentions control your reading of the video. So with that said, let's start at the beginning.

THE IDEA

I began this project in a very roundabout way (more so than usually for me). I had been juggling around several different short story ideas for about eight months, but for one reason or another, they kept falling through or I simply lost interest in them (which is never a good sign). But finally, fed up with my lack of progress and craving to shoot, I swung open the doors of my closet, pulled out some boxes, and started reading through my old notebooks and journals in hope of finding some brilliant, little thought scribbled on a wrinkled piece of paper.

Brilliant or not, I did find a note that perked my interest. It said, "In order to grow, a muscle must break apart." That's it. That's all it said. But, the note was loaded enough for me that thoughts and images quickly came in response. And as a

result, I finally had a topic for my next project.

THE FORM AND THE GOAL

For me, the structure of the video is where a lot of interesting things take place, because I never made a deliberate or conscious decision to make a video in this form (the sort of hybrid I described above). Rather, all I knew is that I wanted to approach this work in as a free a way as possible. I didn't want to be concerned with story arc and developing characters and making sure emotional responses were on cue. I wanted to just make something, without thinking about these things, and see where it would take me.

THE MUSIC

Probably the biggest influence on the form of the video (as well as its overall emotion) would have to be the music. However, interestingly, for about three-quarters of the production process, I was committed to another song. In fact, I had shot all the scenes and had actually started editing when I kept having an uneasy feeling about the work.

I finally came to the conclusion that the song was too dramatic for the story and images, and as a result, it was making the whole thing seem cheesy and/or overdramatic. So I went back to the drawing

board, and began to rethink and rearrange the clips and scenes I had. I also began a serious search through iTunes for possibilities for new songs, and it was there that I found the piece I finally used called, "Cuckoo Clocks. The Call of the Windmill." by Unwed Sailor. The song had a repetitiveness that I thought fit the piece, while also being neutral enough to allow for different readings (which I thought the original song was restricting). So, I decided to just lay it down and give it a try, and ever since, I couldn't imagine it with any other song.

THE EDITING

I tried to approach editing and post-production with a very open-mind and a willingness to try some new, crazy things. In fact, I purposely began editing not knowing how these four stories were going to be edited together, but just that I wanted them all intercut, the break up scene to be shown in reverse, and for it to end with the chalkboard.

The experience was incredibly liberating, because (as with shooting) I had the freedom to try whatever I wanted. So, I was amazed when I started to edit that my first several sequences were strictly following the very story structure rules I was trying to break away from and that the teacher

speaks of in the video. This got me thinking, and I began wondering if maybe I should use the teacher as the narrative force behind the different scenes, and then use the chalkboard and the final rise of the three other characters to destabilize her structure.

As you can see in the video, I liked this idea and ran with it. Once I had a structure (between both the teacher and the music), the actual piecing together of the video went rather quickly.

Probably the biggest (and most time consuming) job during post-production was color correction. Since the beginning of the project, I had felt strongly that the image had to look soft and like film for several reasons. First, and most obviously, the harsh picture didn't fit the often heartwarming feel of the video. And second, I sort of fantasized that by having this video/film hybrid that I was somehow breaking down the harsher video (which I thought was sort of oddly romantic and in step with the piece).

Ultimately, the color correction took a lot of experimentation and trial and error, and the final result is based on the teamwork of nearly 10 different filters (including one with 135 different settings) for each clip. Overall, however, the picture looks great (especially on a plasma screen or properly calibrated projector or television set),

and I've even fooled two people into thinking it was actually shot on film. So all in all, I think I came very close (if not achieved) the look I had envisioned in the early stages of the film. It really does have a very soft sort of look.

CASTING

One of the hardest things about this project for me was the casting (mainly because I'm a pretty shy person and asking favors is not my biggest strength). In fact, I think it was fairly ambitious of me to write a short script that had one character that was a bodybuilder, another that was an older teacher, and then a couple that would have to break up in freezing temperatures early one Sunday morning. Luckily, however, the people who committed to the project were great, and the footage came out beyond my wildest expectations.

THE TECHNICALITIES OF SHOOTING

Of course, once the people are there, it's time to do the fun stuff and start filming, right? Right. But when you're a one-person production, shoots become a bit tricky, because you simply can't remember to do everything that the shoot requires. There's the lights, camera settings, batteries, wardrobe, mis-en-scene, sound, etc. And as a

result, there are always a couple things that go wrong and call for some creative crisis control.

For example, during the course of this project, I got in a fairly serious car accident that ended up totaling my car and injuring my back for a couple weeks. The day after the accident I had to shoot the schoolteacher scene, and I simply couldn't reschedule because it had taken me several weeks to secure the room and actress. So, barely able to carry the equipment, I hobbled into the classroom and began to set up the lights, props and camera. With that said, most of the shoots I had had up to that point hadn't required me to capture sound, because music would be playing over-the-top anyway. However, this shoot needed sound. In fact, the sound needed to be *really* good. But I didn't have the right mic, and Donna (the actress) was showing up in 15 minutes. So with a little help from some people I knew, I finally got the right mic before Donna arrived.

However, now with the right mic, I still didn't have anyone to actually hold it (because I couldn't be in control of both the camera and sound due to distance between the two). So ultimately, had you walked into that classroom while we were shooting, you would have seen me behind the camera and an elaborate boom mic holder made out of an overhead

projector wheeled just outside the frame. Nonetheless, however, you'd never know it by the footage, and that's all that matters.

STROKES OF LUCK AND LAST MINUTE DECISIONS

The importance of embracing the unexpected and adapting accordingly is also important in post-production, because (for this project especially) I think some of the video's best moments happened by accident. For example, one of my favorite moments in the piece is when the music stops three-quarters into the video and then starts back up again. This whole idea, however, was the result of a poorly made DVD.

Sometime in mid-march, I burnt a copy of my video to DVD to take home and show my sister. But, when I got home and popped in the copy, the music had dropped out at certain places because I had failed to do an audio mix down before burning the project onto the DVD. As I sat there watching the film, I realized how powerful the piece was when the music restarted again. So, when I returned back home to New York, I began reworking my timeline in hope of finding the right moment to drown out the music and restart it again. When I finally found the right place, I realized why dropping out the music worked so well; the music track was breaking

and repairing. Thus, the film's form and soundtrack was beginning to mimic and act out the themes of the piece. The video and its elements were beginning to unify (which is normally a good sign that a work is on to something).

THE RESULT

Overall, I'm very pleased with how the final video turned out, and do think it's "on to something." But, the most exciting thing about the piece for me has been the multiple readings people have taken away from it. I've heard people speak of the importance of repetition in the work (the heart beating, the looping of the music, etc.) as well as the breaking and repairing theme and even the idea that things don't happen at points but in-between them. And as I said in the opening, I'm glad it's about ALL these things, because it doesn't need one reading. There are layers to the piece, and the layers allow people to see different things both in and between them.

Also, personally, I think the video gave me the opportunity to break away from these learned story structures and decide whether or not *I* desired to use them. I learned to embrace the accidents and adapt to the unplanned, to make up my own mind on

things, and push myself to my own creative/open-minded limits. Thus, basically, I grew (both as a filmmaker and a person). I broke away from the things I'd learned (or at least partly broke away) and then returned to them by choice (if *I* wanted to), and I think I'm stronger, a little wiser, and better for it. I guess you could say that I had to break away to get stronger.