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65 Lessons Learned the Hard Way while Making The Hunter's Apprentice

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65 LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY WHILE MAKING
THE HUNTER'S APPRENTICE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduation Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
The Department of Drama and Communication

by

Michael C. Ryan

B.A. William Paterson University, 199

August, 2005

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis describes the lessons that were learned during the process of making a short film, covering the areas of pre-production, production, and post-production. The shooting script is included in the appendix.

Introduction

A professor once told me something after critiquing my 4510 film. I was very disappointed by what I had made and couldn't figure out how, even though I had put everything I had into it, it didn't work. He told me that one of his professors told him that after your sixth or seventh film you'll finally start to figure out how to tell a narrative story visually. I wasn't too happy to hear that because I was on my second film and I didn't want to wait until my sixth or seventh to get it right. I was already a late-starting filmmaker and at age 29 this insight was somewhat disheartening. I knew I had an intense learning experience ahead of me, but I didn't want the film to suffer for it.

I realized that the only way to avoid this on my thesis film was to do the third, fourth, fifth and sixth films at the same time. What I mean by this was if something didn't work I was going to figure out why and do it over. And over and over and over until I not only figured out why it didn't work, but was able to pull it off. This, of course, is very easy to say, but in reality means a lot of honest self-examination, a lot of painful choices and a lot of work.

The genesis for *The Hunter's Apprentice* occurred in the winter of 2004. I decided not make a film for 4530 and chose to instead spend that energy and money on my thesis. The idea I was originally going with was a far too sophisticated story for me to tell with my limitations both as a writer and director. I was essentially setting out to learn the filmmaking process from scratch and I needed a simpler concept. I decided that the best thing for me to do was do a little soul searching and think about what were my favorite kinds of movies and what could I conceivably pull off.

I love B movies, B movies in the best sense, the kind that wear their three star reviews on their DVD cases as a badge of honor, the kind of films that John Carpenter used to make. I particularly like B action and horror movies and I thought the action/horror subgenre was lacking in quality examples. I also knew I wanted to shoot in the woods. This offers instant production value, interesting visuals, and all kinds of creative possibilities. I was drawn to films like *Southern Comfort* and *First Blood* in large part because the filmmakers had exploited the woods and used them as a character. I wanted to do the same.

Then I thought what kind of horror film? What do they rarely get right? I was fascinated by werewolves and rarely impressed with werewolf movies, but I had no money for costumes, so that was out. Then I thought, why not vampires? The vampire subgenre is probably the most wrongly executed of all horror films. They always seem to go with Anne Rice's version, which works great on the page but on film results in pretentious storylines infested with long-haired models. I thought if I wanted to do something fresh in this particular genre I should go back before things went wrong. In this case I went back to Bram Stoker's vampires; vile, stinking, diseased creatures that infect the human race with their disease.

So I was going to make an action/horror movie about vampires. Now I needed a story to tell. There was a feature length vampire film I was writing at the time and it opened with a vampire hunter crawling down a muddy hole to root out a vampire. I decided to steal it from myself and put it in my thesis. This would be how the story begins (or so I thought). I then settled on the classic apprentice goes against his mentor storyline. I've always been obsessed with having a mentor but had to settle for a

conglomeration of professors, drill instructors and Robert McKee (obviously he didn't know about this).

I had been thinking about something my undergrad theater professor said: Fathers train their sons to be better than themselves so for a son to truly honor his father he has to "kill" him. This is the basis of the mentor/apprentice relationship and when taken literally it makes a solid dramatic scenario.

So I had my story: A vampire hunter saves the life of a small boy who's tracked down the vampire who's killed his parents. The hunter is impressed by the boy's natural tracking ability and becomes the boy's surrogate father and trains him in the ways of the vampire slayer. When the boy grows up, his mentor discovers that the vampires have discovered his identity and are moving in. He tries to send his apprentice away and when the apprentice returns on the night that the mentor is to be killed, the mentor fools the apprentice long enough to save his life. The apprentice then sets off to find his mentor and, one way or the other, rescue him. I knew I wanted it to be played out as a psychological mind game as well as a battle of wills.

Now I had to decide what to shoot on. I wasn't using the DVX because I was going to shoot on film goddamnit! Later I learned I probably would have gotten just as good-looking an image if I had shot 24p and converted to black and white and saved myself thousands of dollars, but oh well. A professor talked me into using the Super 16 because of registration issues with the Arri (a debatable issue in hindsight). Black and white was also the obvious choice because it would help sell the vampire makeup, and it was pointed out that since I was trying to reinvent the genre, I should go back to its roots. A nice idea, but I would be happy if I could just pull the movie off at all. More than any

other reason I knew this might be the last opportunity I get to shoot on black and white film.

Now I will give a quick rundown of the people that will be referred to in the following pages. Names will be omitted in certain cases for obvious reasons. Simon Carmody is an undergraduate who served as the director of photography, producer, editor, and played the lead role of “Alex”. Ryan Martin is a graduate student who served as director of photography for a short time, then became the gaffer, camera operator as well as a producer. Chris S’Aulis is a philosophy major who served as script supervisor. Tam Cao is a former undergraduate film student and was the first assistant camera person. Elvis Cork, an undergraduate film student, was the gaffer for the first six weeks and “Machine” (a nickname I’ll use in place of “name omitted”) was the still photographer/videographer for the first two months of the shoot. The vampires were played by Wayne Regis, {name omitted}, Brad Nelson and Steve Nelson. The young Alex was played by Kristian Dehne and Nicholas was played by {name omitted}. Simon’s father, John Carmody, played the guardian.

Before I get into all the things I learned making my thesis I want to point out the watershed moment of the film’s making, the moment where I had to make a very important choice. I knew (or thought at the time) that the toughest thing we had to do as far as locations was to come up with the hole where the vampires reside. We figured the best way to do it was to simply dig a hole. Simon sketched out a plan that consisted of a ten by ten foot hole six feet deep with garbage cans going down into the sides so the vampires could crawl out of them. In theory it sounded great.

So one Wednesday morning Simon, Ryan, Elvis, and a still drunk Machine (He prepared for a day of hole-digging by staying up all night drinking.) loaded into Simon's van and headed up to Ryan's grandparent's house in LaPlace. Ryan claimed the field next to their house was dry enough to dig a six foot deep hole in. I'm from New Jersey, but I knew the water table was high here so I asked if he was sure. He said he did it all the time as a kid. So we get there and not only is the field wet, it's flooded. We aren't digging anything there.

I didn't know what to do and Simon suggested we build the hole. I asked him what he meant and he said he had flats at his father's gym from one of his aborted film projects and we could build a set that looked like a hole. I said this was impossible and it wouldn't look real. He said it would look great.

As I stood there trying to decide how to proceed, I realized I was at a crossroads. I had conceived of a very ambitious film and if it was going to be pulled off I needed to commit to it right at that moment. If having my hole scene meant going to Simon's gym that afternoon and building a hole from scratch, then that's what I needed to do. As I looked around at the faces around me I knew no one wanted to do this except Simon. Everyone wanted to go home and sleep, including me. So I took a deep breath and said, "Let's go build the hole."

We began building the hole out of paper mache, pink insulation, expanding insulation foam, Spanish moss, brown spray paint, spray adhesive and real dirt. The first day we weren't making great progress and I got tired of hearing Elvis say it looked like shit so I didn't have him or Machine come back the next day. Simon, Ryan and I spent the next few weeks whipping the hole into shape. By the time we had to shoot we had a

pretty decent looking dirt chamber and I had learned the first of many lessons – movies don't make themselves.

Before I began my written thesis I had a conversation with Rob Racine, one of my committee members, in which I expressed the opinion that I shouldn't have to do a written thesis. I should be able to present the script, storyboards, budget and schedule along with my film and let it speak for itself. Rob countered that the purpose of a thesis is to state what I learned from making the film, and by simply watching the film my committee would have no idea what these things were. I thought this was a valid point and changed my approach. I decided to approach the written part of my thesis by focusing on these lessons.

Chapter 1: Pre-Production

Script

Lesson # 1: Story, Story, Story.

There is nothing more important than the story. *Everything* defers to it. No cool shot or clever idea can exist in the film if it doesn't move the story forward. And story is complicated. There are hundreds of concepts that have to be grasped in order to tell a compelling one and this is why I think most films don't work. Before you can come up with a compelling way to shoot a story there needs to be a solid foundation. And when designing the storyboards the coolest of cool shots should die a quick death if it does not advance the story.

Lesson # 2: I write awful dialogue.

This was a tough one to swallow because I thought I was good at this. Until actors actually performed the lines and I would cringe. I understood that every time a character says something they're actually trying to accomplish a specific goal. I also understood that if you can show what's being said with an image it's more effective than dialogue. So when writing a script the last thing you should write is the dialogue after you've exhausted all other options.

I thought I was following all these rules, but my dialogue was still awful. The real problem I had was I couldn't get my point across visually and was trying to force it out of the character's mouths. Ideally, this is a story that should be told without any dialogue at all, but I couldn't figure out how to do it. I knew it was possible and it would be the best way to tell the story, but I was in the infancy of constructing scenes visually

and I just couldn't pull it off. Dialogue just seemed to be the most effective way to get certain plot points across.

As we went along with the shoot wherever I could cut dialogue I would and this "technique" continued in the editing room.

Casting

Lesson # 3: When casting non-actors, cast types and hope for the best.

We held casting sessions in April. I had no idea how to run a casting session, particularly when there wasn't much for the actors to say. The vampires came in to try out and I'd have them run around and scream. Then I'd say thank you and they'd leave.

After Simon was cast as the lead, he started bringing in potential vampires from the gym. The first one cast was Wayne Regis, a six foot something black guy who could do creepy things with his eyes. Along with Wayne came Chris RePaal, just as tall but ten times as goofy-looking so he was cast as camera operator/set constructor. Simon recommended his dad for the guardian and when I saw him - sixty-something, skinny, bald-headed - I thought he was perfect. Except now I had two Australian accents to contend with.

I cast a local bar personality, a bodybuilder named George, as Vamp 3. I got {name omitted} to agree to be Vamp 2 and Vamp 4 wasn't cast yet, but I was still working on that scene anyway. I still needed a Nicholas and a Young Alex. Simon had a kid who came to the gym. He said he was thirteen but looked nine or ten. This was only a week or two before shooting and I didn't get to see him until the day we shot his scene. When he showed up I realized he was perfect. If I could have auditioned a hundred kids I think I would have picked this one.

{name omitted} eventually backed out for the role of Vamp 2 and we recast {name omitted} in his place. And then our Vamp 3 stood us up so we cast another character from Simon's gym, Brad Nelson, who also turned out to be a pretty good grip.

Lesson # 4: Audition everyone, especially drinking buddies.

One of the biggest mistakes I made early on was casting my friend {name omitted} as the lead. He was small (so the vampires would look bigger), photogenic and had experience in martial arts. He was also an alcoholic, narcissistic and extremely manipulative. I offered him the role of Alex without hesitation. I thought the shoot would take six weekends (more on this delusion later) and I figured I could get what I wanted out of {name omitted} in this time. I immediately began regretting it. He was enthusiastic about getting the part and even more enthusiastic about making demands for what he wanted in return. He expected me to shoot videos for his band. Not unreasonable, but he wanted me to do them now, not after we finished shooting. When I explained to him this wasn't going to happen he said (and this is a quote) "I'm the fucking star of this thing."

I then began thinking about how I was going to get a degenerate alcoholic up at 6 A.M. every Saturday and Sunday. I had bought myself a certified nightmare. It didn't take long for me to realize this was a colossally foolish move on my part and I came to the conclusion that I had to fire him. But shooting wasn't for several weeks and I wanted to cast his replacement first.

When Simon came in to audition it became very easy to tell {name omitted} he was out. I fired him and gave him the old speech about our friendship being too

important, which was a load of shit. The movie was too important and {name omitted} is a mediocre drinking buddy at best.

Lesson # 5: Cast your Director of Photography as the lead (and if he's willing to co-produce and edit, even better).

Simon Carmody came in to audition. What he really came in to do was feel out what we were up to. His attempt at his own vampire short had blown up in his face because of a lazy and uncommitted crew of film students. I had heard about Simon and was told by one of the faculty that he was going to be a star. This was based on his 2510 project, a beautifully shot six minute Nike Commercial about a boxer doing cocaine. I wanted to get a hold of his script and meet this guy myself, particularly since my first choice as D.P., Ryan Martin, was starting to work out marginally better than my {name omitted} choice.

The problem with Simon was he was already getting a reputation as a prick. Machine said he heard Simon say something that, as far as he was concerned, ruled him out as someone he'd work with. But I thought what Simon said was funny (something along the lines of telling a crew member "You only take orders from me, mate.") and appropriate under the circumstances.

So Simon walks into the audition and tries out for the only role we had open at the time, the guardian. The audition consisted of him looking into the camera and saying one line. Then I had him sit down and found out that he was a professional photographer in Australia for thirteen years and a boxer. He was small in stature and therefore a good replacement for {name omitted} to play Alex (although his thirty-five years and the lines in his face that went along with them was a bit older than I was going for).

Simon also offered to do anything on the film; lug equipment around, make sandwiches, anything. I thought, hell, you can be my shadow D.P. and the fucking star. How's that sound? Shortly thereafter I replaced {name omitted} with Simon, who immediately took to the film as if it were his own. Not only was my lighting going to look professional, but I now had someone to collaborate with.

Lesson # 6: Don't cast strippers in physically demanding roles.

One of the problems we had was filling the role of Vampire #2. My first choice backed out and I kept pushing the shooting of the scene back until we found a new one. I had someone in mind who had the perfect look for the role, but I heard that he was a stripper and I figured he'd be too concerned about marking up his body so I looked for someone else. Then I found out that he was a Marine and had recently gotten back from Iraq. Being a former Marine myself, I knew his training would supercede whatever prissy tendencies he had as an exotic dancer. I couldn't have been more wrong. His role was a very physical one and he couldn't have behaved less like a vampire. And he was allergic to poison ivy. And worried about scratches. I might as well have cast a six year old girl.

Lesson # 7: Don't lose phone numbers.

On another occasion I found the perfect guy in the DRCM building to play Nicholas; Six feet tall, broad shoulders, middle-aged and had very tough-looking. He sounded interested and I thought I had my Nicholas. Except I lost his number. I looked all over the school for him and couldn't find him. Which leads to lesson # 8...

Lesson # 8: Sometimes you get what you get.

The role of the mentor was important, but where the hell do I get a fifty or sixty year old guy who's imposing enough to play both a vampire hunter and the head vampire? Machine had the perfect guy, {name omitted}, a brain surgeon and part-time actor. Well, perfect in the sense that he was 6 foot seven, was the right age, had a great voice and looked intimidating. Not perfect in the sense that he is an atrocious actor who, in combination with my atrocious dialogue, resulted in an absolute mess. He auditioned, I thanked him and that was the end of that. There was no way I could work with this guy. He had all those bad theater acting habits that I had no idea how to get rid of. I also thought I'd be able to find a decent actor version of his physique in the next few weeks.

Machine kept pushing {name omitted} and I kept saying no. Finally, we had a week to go, we had no Nicholas and I decided to have him come back in. Simon asked if he could spend some time alone with him working on their only dialogue scene and see if he could get him warmed up. I told him to be my guest. They disappeared for a while, then I came in and they played the scene, not much better than {name omitted} had before, but it was definitely different. I took this as a sign that he'd at least make adjustments and could probably take direction. Oh yeah, and I was desperate. It turned out that he could make adjustments, but they all amounted to various degrees of bad. But if the shot called for him to stand still looking intense, he could pull that off... barely.

Scheduling

Lesson # 9: If you're going to shoot an action movie where none of the action can occur in direct sunlight, six weekends isn't gonna cut it.

There may be no greater element of naivety in the making of this film than my shooting schedule: Six weekends with two extra weeks for reshoots. The conditions we were shooting under that summer were so extreme and the project was so ambitious that there was no way this schedule could be met. One, we didn't know what we were doing. Two, that didn't stop me from being a perfectionist. Three, Louisiana in August is a miserable place to shoot. Four, most of the cast was in vampire makeup and claws. And, five, we couldn't have direct sunlight, so unless we had overcast days (many less than we had hoped for) we were setting up silks to cover the scene.

What this added up to was almost a year's worth of weekends to get it done (although I didn't figure this out until a few months ago). When my first deadline passed the new one became the end of August before school started. Then Thanksgiving, then winter break, then January until finally I came to my senses and said "Fuck it. We'll finish when we finish."

Chapter 2: Production

Crew Management

Lesson # 10: No First A.D./Makeup Artist/Production Manager is better than a bad one.

On the *Hunter's Apprentice* I learned that you need a first A.D. and a production manager, but you can make a film without them. We went through two first A.D.'s who both "helped" me stay on schedule by tapping their watches and telling me I was taking too long. One was switched over to key grip (the other was simply switched out) and Simon and I ran the set. Whoever was standing around called roll sound and camera. I tried to get a production manager early on, but that fell through so Simon, Ryan and I handled those responsibilities ourselves. It was overwhelming at times, but as with most other inconveniences, we at least learned a lot. Ryan dealt with the difficult, but cheap, transfer house, particularly when they tried to overcharge us and sent our film back cropped incorrectly. He also dealt with our City Park contact, who routinely behaved as if sending a fax to the City Park Police was disrupting her entire day. Simon would design and build the various rigs we used, such as the A frame to swing the log from, the stake trap and the low rig, a hand-held dolly made from three pieces of two by four. And I made the shooting schedule, bought props, designed costumes and organized and the cast and crew.

More important than the above instances, I discovered that even if you're making a film about vampires you don't need a makeup artist. It took me a long time to figure that out. Our first makeup artist was a total nightmare. To begin with she was "chicken intolerant" which apparently means when you sweat you smell like rotting chicken flesh.

Then she'd start telling me how to direct the movie. I'm all for input from the crew, especially when there's only two of us on the set participating creatively, but she just had one awful suggestion after another and would be offended if you rejected it. And if she didn't get her way she'd turn into Klaus Kinski with a vagina, yelling and throwing tantrums.

I was afraid to fire her because we didn't have anyone to replace her and she treated her job as if she was performing brain surgery. And she absolutely *hated* Simon. She hated him so much that one afternoon she "accidentally" dropped his cell phone in a cup of coffee while she was cooling off in his van's air conditioning. Then she refused to replace the phone, blaming Simon for leaving open containers in his car.

She subsequently told me she wouldn't be comfortable coming to the set anymore because Simon wanted her to pay for his phone. I was more than happy to oblige. Except now we needed a makeup artist. Simon had someone in mind, but I should have known better. Simon is so cocksure about everything else that the fact that he was hesitant about bringing her in should have tipped me off. She was an actress named "Azure Dawn" and her attitude lived up to the name. She showed up on set and demanded she have enough time to do a "great" job. I gave her the continuity photos and told her all she had to do was match them. Then she began ridiculing my vision of vampires. She said vampires needed visible blue veins (a vampire movie cliché that I hate) and when I explained to her what my vampires were like she laughed at the concept. She said "Healthy vampires! Hah!" It only got worse from there.

On the second weekend she took her time coming from the air conditioned van to the set to touch up Wayne's makeup so I did it myself. She asked why I did it and I said

if she had taken her time a little faster I wouldn't have had to. She didn't like that and asked how easy it would be to find a replacement makeup artist. I told her it wouldn't be difficult at all (obviously a lie). She said "Then maybe you better." My reaction was something like, no hard feelings, bye. It turned out she was bluffing. I wasn't and I refused her attempts to come back.

So now I was stuck doing the makeup myself. And for all the bullshit those two fed me about how hard it was to do makeup it was just a matter of covering skin with white makeup, blending it in, gluing on fingernails and then covering everything with mud (I let Simon deal with the fangs, which actually were a pain in the ass). No artistic ability required. A short time later Ryan brought a friend of the family on board who turned out not only to be a very easy to get along and competent makeup person but when she wasn't doing makeup she'd show up to grip! More in lesson # 21 why this makeup person didn't work out either.

Lesson # 11: Competence and ability are good, but loyalty is better.

Some of the more talented people we had working on our crew weren't available for much of the shoot, one of their talents being finding reasons not to be there. But other crew members were there for the long haul despite their limitations. When someone is that committed it goes a lot further than ability. There's no such thing as a useless set of hands.

Lesson # 12: Never give your crew a break.

We had gone over schedule by July and it appeared that we would be shooting until at least the end of the summer. Everyone was exhausted, their weekends spent sweating their free time away working like slaves. We even worked the Friday and

Saturday of 4th of July weekend. We decided to give everyone the following weekend off (It was the date of the Steadicam workshop and a few of our crew members were doing that anyway.). Most of the crew never came back. Simon's dad had an interesting insight to this. He explained that a slave is okay with being a slave as long as he doesn't get a taste of freedom. Once he does get that taste he wants to get the hell out of there. Apparently our crew wanted to get the hell out.

With the exception of Ryan, our script supervisor and Tam Cao we had to build the crew from scratch.

Lesson # 13: Stay in control.

One of the difficult things about being a novice director is that you hate the idea of missing out on a great idea, shot or suggestion. Unfortunately, the only one on the shoot who participated in this way was Simon. I gave Simon a lot of leeway, even allowing him to fix things that weren't broke. When his "fixes" interfered with my vision, I'd rein him in.

On {name omitted}'s first day on the shoot he had a scene in the hallway with young Alex and he was flubbing all his lines. He barely read the script and had no idea what the scene was about. I tried to explain the scene to him, but I began to realize that just because you're a brain surgeon doesn't make you a rocket scientist. I realized I was going to have to do this the hard way. I started with helping him to remember his lines and say them in the right order. When he began getting that right, I'd make whatever adjustments that were necessary for his performance. As he went on with the scene he continued to flub lines but I noticed he was warming up and his performance was improving.

As we covered the scene I started with the over-the shoulder of Nicholas, moved to the master, then the two-shot, and then shot the over-the-shoulder of young Alex last. In covering the scene this way I had hoped that by the time we got to {name omitted} he'd have enough time to (almost) memorize his lines and he'd be warmed up to the point where his performance wouldn't be too awful. And this approach was working or working as well as any approach works with him.

Simon's solution to my way of working was to tell {name omitted} what his character should be thinking during the scene. I thought this was too much for him (I learned from Phil Karnell that actors can only hold one thing in their mind at a time. {name omitted} can hold less than that.), but I didn't back Simon off. I just had my D.P. direct an actor's performance and I said nothing. I thought maybe Simon knew what he was doing. So I call action and {name omitted}'s all fucked up. He's confused, his lines are coming out completely wrong and his performance is now way overacted because he's thinking about what Simon told him to think about and he couldn't handle it.

So I called cut, took him outside and told him to forget whatever Simon told him, that he was doing fine and to take a deep breath and we'd go back in and continue. So we do another take and {name omitted}'s back on track and Simon tries to do it again. At this point I tell Simon not to say anything, that I'll direct the actors.

This was difficult because the truth was I was in the process of trying to learn how to direct actors myself. I wasn't one of these people that said "I'm the director" and thought that because I'm me I knew what I was doing. I knew I had to learn it the hard way. Simon didn't see directing this way. He just thought I wasn't doing what was needed so he'd step in and micromanage. So I had to give myself enough of an ego

injection so that I could back Simon off and learn the directing process and get the performances I needed without his interference. Very tough lesson. Fortunately, I learned it early on and Simon learned not to step on my toes.

I also learned that certain scenes can't survive bad writing or bad acting and we ended up cutting {name omitted's} dialogue from the scene anyway.

Lesson # 14: The Flipside – Sometimes being in control means letting go of it.

I'm a control freak, but I also have a tendency to suffer in silence. These two qualities don't go well together until you apply them effectively to directing. It helped me to learn when to open my mouth and when to shut up. Suffering in silence, though unhealthy, helped me develop the patience and humility that you need as a director. I also found that by letting go of control you could get great things from people you work with, particularly when actors want to try something new or if Simon has a new idea for a shot we've completed before we move on to a new setup.

I got a great moment out of Simon's performance at the end of the film simply by letting Simon know he was in control of the moment and to do whatever he felt was right. I knew that if it didn't work we could try something else. Simon nailed it. It was the most difficult moment for any actor in the film and it was one of the handful of shots that we only did one take of. And all I had to do was say nothing.

It also came in handy when editing. Or when Simon had a different idea for a shot when I was already dead set on the one we already had. There are moments where you need to let someone else try something or let a great moment make itself. More than anything else, being in control means being secure enough to give up that control for the benefit of the movie.

Lesson # 15: Never yell at your crew (unless their name is Ryan Martin).

Yelling never gets you anywhere with the crew. One, they're working for free and, two, most of them have no experience so you have to be patient and realize that they're gonna make mistakes. Sometimes your temper gets the better of you and you snap at someone. Whether you mean to or not, if you yell at someone they're going to take it personally. It was a constant effort to make sure this didn't happen (although my script supervisor's endless stream of irrelevant and ridiculous concerns made this difficult).

Ryan, however, made it a point every once in a while to let his whining reach a level at which it would manifest itself in a display of insolence that sent me over the edge. This happened on four occasions during the shoot and each time I went ballistic. The best one was when I had to shoot from up on a ladder and Ryan, knowing that I'm scared of heights, used this opportunity to start giving me lip. On that occasion I actually threatened to kill him. The good thing about Ryan getting me that angry was that the crew saw that I had a temper but chose not to use it with them.

Lesson # 16: Remove toxic personalities from the set immediately.

This goes along with lessons # 10 and 21. As long as the heat wasn't unbearable our shoot was a lot of fun. It was hard work but there were a lot of laughs. But it only takes one person to ruin it.

Our first script supervisor, {name omitted}, spent his first weekend announcing to the crew behind my back what I was doing wrong, telling Simon's dad what a jerk Simon was and blaming continuity errors on the actors. At one point we shot a scene and forgot to have Simon put his jacket on for a shot. When Simon realized he didn't have his

jacket on, no one blamed {name omitted}, but {name omitted} pointed at Simon and said “It’s his fault”. He did a lot of outrageously stupid things like that.

At the end of that same day I asked him to get pictures of the trees surrounding the field we were shooting in, because the trees were different than the ones in New Orleans and I wanted to have the pictures to go off of when we matched it for the pickup day. {name omitted} told me it didn’t matter, they’re trees. I explained to him that I wanted to be sure. He refused to take the pictures. So I took them myself and fired him later that week.

Lesson # 17: Eat lunch with your crew, but...

If you can’t relax for a half hour, stay the hell away from them. I had a bad habit of pacing back and forth after I ate and this made everybody nervous. I wasn’t trying to intimidate anyone. I was just restless and wanted to get back to work. I learned to eat with the crew, but walk off somewhere else and pace back and forth there.

Lesson # 18: Do the grunt work with everyone else.

There is nothing I hate more than watching some lazy fucking student director watching his crew carry C-stands and dollies around while he sits on his ass (see lesson # 17). His crew is working for nothing and he thinks he’s entitled to behave like an elitist because he’s just killing time in film school waiting to be discovered by Hollywood. Your crew is giving up their free time to help you. Making a movie is hard work and when the crew realizes this and still sticks around, that’s pretty amazing.

There may be more important things for me to do at a given moment than setting up silks, but at the end of the day I always made sure I loaded the grip truck with everyone else. It shows the crew you’re not asking them to do something you aren’t

willing to do. It's also a way to lead by example for anyone on the crew who thinks they're job doesn't require them to carry anything (see lessons # 16 and 64).

Lesson # 19: Seek out and exploit the talents of your crew.

Of course this applies more to Simon than anyone else. I had weaknesses that were Simon's strengths, obviously with lighting, but also with coordinating stunts. Ryan could nail every mark you asked him to with the camera. Jake could rig anything. Chris S'Aulis wasn't much of a script supervisor but he could dress the set exactly how I needed it. You can't do everything yourself and even if you could, some people can do some things better.

Lesson # 20: Don't underestimate your crew's commitment.

A few weeks into shooting I came across my new script supervisor's continuity folder. On the cover was a carefully designed graphic that said "*The Hunter's Apprentice* Director: Mike Ryan". I showed it to Simon and said "Look, isn't that sweet." My script supervisor heard me say this and said "You may think it's funny, but I'm proud to be part of this film." I felt like a jerk, but more importantly I realized that not everyone on the crew was regretting their commitment to work on a runaway student film sweating their tits off and being bit by red ants. I actually had crew members who wanted to be there and would stick it out to the end, and that teasing them about this wasn't the best way to express my gratitude.

Lesson # 21: Don't bring your baggage to the set.

What the crew members and cast who enjoyed making the film quickly found out is that on a shooting day you can leave all your problems at home. You can focus on this

world we're creating and the problems that come with that and whatever is going on in your personal life is put on hold.

Unfortunately, we had crew members who weren't able to leave their baggage at home and it created problems. Our third makeup artist was extremely committed to the film in part because she was able to escape the personal problems that she was going through. But as her personal problems got more intense, she started bringing her baggage to the set and poisoning the mood. It got so bad that when it came time to do pickups this Spring we didn't bother asking her back.

Lesson # 22: Don't send convicted felons to buy a shotgun.

On our wasted trip to Mississippi we needed a shotgun for the guardian scene and the people who were supposed to have them couldn't come up with one for the day of the shoot. So I sent two of the crew members to buy one from Walmart (I couldn't purchase one with an out of state license). I get a call and one of them tells me "They won't sell me one. I kind of have a record." I said, "Oh, okay, well, just go to the other Walmart and send {name omitted} in to buy it." "No, that's not going to work either." Turns out he was also a convicted felon. So I end up having to send Ryan to a Walmart in Mississippi to get one while the crew waited to shoot the scene.

Directing the Camera

Lesson # 23: Don't try to reinvent the wheel.

When we got our first batch of footage back I screened it for a professor to get some feedback. He commented that novice filmmakers always begin shooting exactly what the shot is about. The script called for a kid walking down the hall so we shot a kid walking down the hall. We were doing what filmmakers did in film's infancy – shooting

what was literally happening. He suggested showing what was happening by showing something other than what was happening. He said that the biggest benefit of this was that the audience will have to pay closer attention and this draws them into the story.

This was the best advice I received during the film and I tried to apply it to every scene in the movie. Rather than shooting the kid walking down the hall, we could shoot the environment reacting to him walking down the hall. For example, go inside one of the rooms he walks by and show his flashlight beam flash by the crack of the door (Maybe this is a bad example because we never got around to shooting it.).

At the climax instead of showing the log swinging down we shot the palms being blown back by the log passing by. Instead of showing the log drive the stake into Nicholas, we shot the chain bracing from the impact. Instead of showing the vampires flying out of the hole we showed a log shaking as they flew out. The added benefit of this technique is that although it makes it more difficult creatively, it's a lot easier to show something like a log shaking than it is to try to pull off actual flying vampires. And if you can't get a hold of the kid for a reshoot you can always use a flashlight beam as a stand in, which we did in the shot of him entering the engine room.

Lesson # 24: Know the lenses that you're working with and their limitations before you choose your camera.

We chose the CP Super 16 because of the format, but what I didn't consider was the limitations I was going to have with the lens. The CP was a regular 16mm camera that was modified to Super 16. The correct way to make this modification is to cut the aperture on one side to allow for the larger image and then shift the nodal point of the

lens to the right to compensate for this. But UNO isn't AFI so the film housing was shifted over so that regular lenses would work at a savings of several thousand dollars.

The problem with this is that if you go wider than 30mm the image begins to vignette. To compensate for this the front of the lens barrel was filed down to almost flush with the glass so that you could open up to 20mm. That was as wide a shot as we could get on the camera without vignetting unless you wanted to go all the way to 5.9 (the only fixed lens for the CP's).

So the magic focal length I wanted, 12mm, was unavailable to me. The good thing was that this was a limitation that served our learning experience well, because while we couldn't get those dynamic wide angle shots I wanted, we had to find other ways to make the shot dynamic. This meant using movement and composition more creatively. While I would have preferred to just set the lens at 12mm and get on with it, the extra creative effort ended up working to our benefit.

Later I discovered that if the camera doesn't move (especially with the edge of the frame is dark) vignetting isn't very noticeable. It only becomes a huge problem if the camera's moving or if the corners of the frame are bright.

Lesson # 25: You can use a video camera with the video tap.

This was a painful lesson. We lugged the video monitor everywhere so we could use the video tap. For eight weeks. I had asked why it wouldn't work with a video camera and the answer I was given was that nobody did it that way. Everyone just lugged the monitor around. I knew this was true because I had seen it done this way on the previous student films I worked on, so I just accepted it. Eight weeks later I pushed the issue and found that you could tap right into a video camera and record the image at

the same time. I was not happy. The most unfortunate thing about this was we had to use the generator to run the monitor in the woods and the audio became useless. We had unnecessarily lost out on some great location sound.

Lesson # 26: Have an in and an out for every shot.

One of the first practical things I learned on the set. On the first shot of the day Simon asked me what his in was. I didn't know what he meant and he said you should have overlap of the action between one shot to the next. Another obvious thing I wasn't aware of (I got a waiver for the Intro to Cinema Techniques class where I would have learned this.). After our first disastrous weeks in the editing room we made sure we started the shot as far back and as far forward as we could get away with. It would be nice to be able to just shoot what you need and save film, but when you're learning things the hard way you need to give yourself slack wherever you can.

Lesson # 27: Milk your reveals for all they're worth.

Reveals weren't something I paid attention to until *The Hunter's Apprentice*. Ideally everything should be a reveal and this became a real challenge since I understood the concept, but had no idea how to construct one. Nothing should be on screen that doesn't move the story forward one way or the other and therefore everything on screen should be a story beat. And no story beat should be revealed until it works for the story. Sounds simple, but like everything else I had to learn *every* reveal the hard way.

One that comes to mind is the shot of the guardian. There are actually two reveals to be exploited here. The first was that there was a guardian and the second was that the guardian had a shotgun. The guardian is the obvious one. There came a point where we had to have a shot of him. But in the first shot we had of him I also had the shotgun he

was holding in frame. We reshot it later as a “tagging” shot starting with the guardian’s face, panning left to Alex coming up behind him, then tilting down to the shotgun. But even this reveal was premature.

We ended up cutting the end off the tagging shot and saved the reveal until the next shot: A close-up of the bottle dropping and *then* tilting up to the muzzle of the shotgun. One shot doesn’t seem like much, but the audience gets two extra beats during which they can think this is just a harmless old farmer before you show them he’s a bad person. These types of revelations tortured me through the entire making of the film.

Another revelation came when I realized I was missing a huge opportunity with the sequence when the vampires come out of the hole. The head vampire is supposed to be this powerful entity and the way I had written it, he just showed up. So I came up with a shot of his black hat coming out of the hole after all the other vampires fly out and up into the trees.

The first part of the reveal was the head vamp coming out slow (he doesn’t have to move fast for anyone) and the first thing we see of him is his black hat. Simon incorporated a slow dolly in on the hat and it resulted in what I thought was a creepy, powerful shot. Then we continued with just showing the head vamp’s hand carrying a whip, then just his hat tilting up to cue a vampire to attack. This way of covering the scene revealed that a powerful villain existed, but the reveal of his actual identity was a twist intended for later in the story.

The effectiveness of this Nicholas-as-head-vamp-reveal was more luck than anything. After the head vamp captures the fourth vampire, before he kills him, he tilts his head up revealing his face to Alex and the audience. The vampire he was holding

happened to turn his head a split second before the hat tilts up. Simon was operating and incorporated a slight zoom pan just at the right moment. It turned out to be a great shot, although it was almost ruined by another factor (see lesson # 28).

We also came up with a reveal to compensate for the awful scene I wrote between Nicholas and young Alex. They had this conversation in the hallway that we ended up cutting down to the bare bones, eradicating virtually all of the dialogue and saved Nick's reveal until he went into the engine room to kill the vampire. Fortunately this was a shot that we already had.

An example of breaking the reveal rule was when we show the stake trap triggering at the end of the stake prep scene. We gave this away to the audience so they project in their minds what the end of the movie would be, namely Alex delivering the coup de grace with the trap. Except they know he won't pull this off because the opening of the movie shows that Alex is bitten by the vampire. This way when the stake trap doesn't work, the audience (hopefully) will think Alex is finished. I used a premature reveal to kneecap the audience for something better, namely that Alex had worked the stake trap's failure into his plan so he could outwit Nicholas with something else.

Lesson # 28: Vampire makeup causes flare.

The reveal shot of Nicholas as the head vamp was almost ruined by the flare blasting the lens from the reflective white makeup from their faces. Simon was able to color correct it to the point that it didn't hurt the shot. I didn't want to redo it not only because the perfect timing would be difficult to replicate, but because the two actors were the most difficult to get together (both were the show-up-late/coffee shop offenders you'll

meet in lesson # 57). We also discovered that the sun reflecting off chocolate syrup in close-ups also causes lens flare.

Lesson # 29: The difference between good flare and bad flare.

Simon was a commercial photographer, so while he could appreciate the artistic use of flare, he was much more conservative about it than I was. I knew that once the clouds came in and the sun was blocked out, there couldn't be any flare because it would ruin the already controversial concept of vampires being out during the day. So up until that point I wanted to make the flares as blatant as possible to sell the idea that the sun is out (further necessary because although black and white helps sell overcast, it minimizes the effect of sunlight).

So you have point flare (good flare) and the "bad" type of flare that degrades the entire image making it look hazy. We had to reshoot the shot of Alex falling from the sky after being thrown by the first vampire because every take had this kind of flare and we didn't notice it until we got the footage back (not a stunt Simon was happy about redoing). After that we became a lot more paranoid.

In the scene where Alex is face to face with the guardian we had the same problem – most of the shot was blown out with flare. We had cut around the bad flare until I looked at the take in its entirety. When the guardian smiled he moved his head a little bit, blocking the flare and at that moment the blood on his face became noticeably darker. We ended up just using the shot of the guardian during that part of the scene to emphasize this. So the trick with the "bad" flare is to make sure it isn't constant. If you break it up, you can create an interesting effect.

Lesson # 30: Operate camera yourself.

For the first two thirds of the shoot I had Ryan or Simon operate. I hated looking through the eyepiece of the CP because you couldn't see the entire image at once and I could never hit the marks anyway. So instead I was tethered to the camera by the video tap. When the video tap broke (repeatedly) I dreaded it because it meant I had to operate because I wasn't willing to not be in control of the shot. We spent a lot of time jiggling the tap to get it to work.

One day the video tap broke and that was the end of it. I had to operate the entire day myself. I was miserable until I settled in and realized that this gave me more control. I could set up the shot myself and give myself all the options I wanted without having a middle man. It's also a lot more fun this way. If in the middle of a shot I want to make some kind of spontaneous decision, I can go ahead and do it. I also found something calming about the entire world being brought down to that little frame. You can look through it as long as you like and no one bothers you. I knew this isn't standard operating procedure on a set, but until I find someone who can read my mind (or the actors need my undivided attention) I'm going to continue to do it this way.

Lesson # 31: Compose shots in layers.

I understood this in principle, but early on I wasn't applying it to the film. Some of the shots we came up with looked okay, but they were missing something. One day I stuck something very close to the lens in the foreground. Bingo, instant depth. Now I always look for something to have close to the lens and incorporate that in the composition.

This also applies to lighting. When you light the scene in layers, it draws the eye towards the back of the scene, giving it additional depth. Simon used this in Alex's POV shot of the kitchen. He made a big deal out of having a light bulb on the curtain at the back of the laundry room. I wasn't sure why he was doing it, even after he explained it to me, but after I saw the shot I realized it was worth the extra time to get it right.

Lesson # 32: When framing a shot, leave the zoom alone.

Very important. I didn't figure this out into late in the shoot when I read it in Ross Lowell's *Matters of Light and Depth*. Another seemingly obvious rule that simply didn't occur to me. Choose the focal length you want so you can control the depth of field and *then* put the camera where you need to frame the shot.

Lesson # 33: When using the zoom, hide it by moving the camera.

Simon often talked about zoom pans on the set and when he'd shoot a take he'd try to incorporate them. I understood the move in theory, but I didn't know what the big deal was or realize the effectiveness of it until I saw it used in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*. There was this great move in on Tina Turner's eye at a key dramatic moment. I couldn't figure out how they did the shot. I asked Simon, he looked at it and said "Zoom pan, mate." We ended up using one for Alex's reaction to Nicholas' reveal.

Lesson # 34: Compose the background, then bring in the subject.

Another lesson I learned from Simon. We were waiting for someone or something one day and we decided to get some production stills of Simon aiming the arrow at Vamp 2. I kept trying to frame up Simon with the background to get an interesting shot and was having a hard time of it. Simon suggested he step out, I frame up the background, then bring him in and position him how I wanted. Much easier.

Lesson # 35: Move the camera.

There are all kinds of shots in the film that could and should have had more movement to them. Fortunately, Simon often recommended trying a take or two with at least a slow zoom in or out and often those were the takes we ended up using. Even that small movement adds dramatic and/or emotional weight to an image (the hand clawing its way out of the dirt, Nicholas' POV of an injured Alex at the climax). I learned that no shot should go forward until all the possibilities of movement, as well as composition, have been considered.

Lesson # 36: Instruct the camera operator to run the camera a few seconds after you say "cut".

In the moment you say cut most actors will stop acting. In this moment the actors let down their guard and become themselves (something I should have learned when I read Sidney Lumet's *Making Movies*). Most of the time this isn't useful but sometimes you get a great moment you wouldn't have gotten otherwise. When we were editing the climax we realized we didn't have a shot of Alex reacting to Nicholas dodging the stake trap (see lesson # 46). When we went through the old footage we came across the shot of Alex hitting the wire and triggering the stake trap. When I called cut, Simon yanked his hand off the wire and gave one of the crew members a dirty look about something. But on screen it registered as a mixture of anger and disbelief that his trap didn't work. It's the perfect reaction shot and something I never could have designed.

Lesson # 37: Watch the hair.

When it comes to continuity between shots there are a lot of things you can get away with as long as it doesn't pull the audience out of the story. We were shooting the

Vamp 1 fight and halfway through the day we realized Simon wasn't wearing his gloves. You would have thought it was 9/11. These were tough shots and they were ruined! Turns out no one notices that kind of thing.

Unfortunately, hair doesn't fall into this category. Audiences watch the characters' eyes and just above the eyes is the hair, so if this is different from shot to shot it's going to be noticeable. The scene at Nicholas' House was shot over four different weekends over seven months. Simon's hair changes from shot to shot through the entire scene. It was so bad that we actually cut the scene to make the hair as unnoticeable as possible.

Lesson # 38: A dutch angle isn't necessarily a crooked shot.

Going into shooting I was terrified of dutch angles. I had seen them used in films to great effect but I had also seemed them look silly and distracting. I had no idea what the rules for them were so I didn't want to use them. As I developed my eye over the course of the shoot I realized that a good dutch angle doesn't always look crooked. It's just another way of getting a good shot. By using the lines within the frame, the camera could be tilted forty-five degrees and still look straight. An example would be the overhead shot of Alex and the guardian. Alex's head is framed in the top left corner of the frame and the guardian's head is framed in the bottom right corner. Although the shot is technically dutched, diagonal composition is used and therefore it doesn't feel crooked. Of course, making the shot intentionally "crooked" can be effective as well, but you need to be careful. What is going on in the shot should be so intense that the audience isn't consciously aware of the unusual angle being employed. Every time I get

behind the camera I tilt the camera in every direction just to see if that's the best way to capture the scene.

One of the things I hate about watching my film is all the shots that we didn't try to dutch on. There's far too many to reshoot, but to me it's glaringly obvious that I didn't exploit this tool more.

Lesson # 39: Embrace chaos.

I learned that my best friend on the set was organized chaos. This allows those little magic moments that elevate the shots, performances and story above what we were capable of creating. Just set up the basic elements and then let go. Shoot the rehearsals. If someone says they're not quite ready, but you know they have a basic idea of what they're supposed to do, roll camera and call action. We burned a lot of film, but after shooting this way for the last year and seeing the benefits of it, I think it was definitely worth it.

Lesson # 40: If you find yourself in a situation where you have a fifteen minute window to get a complicated jib arm shot with four vampires in a tree, it's a good idea to make sure you have more than fifteen seconds worth of film loaded in the camera.

This was a colossally stupid mistake on my part because we were several months into shooting and I should have known better. This was a shot I was dreading. I had gone to all this trouble to get the only two vampires available that late in the shoot and two stand-ins and put them all in makeup and claws (Ryan even shaved his head to stand-in for Vamp 3).

The sun was out so we had to wait for it to drop behind the trees so we could have simulated overcast. And one of our vamps had to be at work at 5:00. The sun didn't go

down until 4:45. He was also the one who was allergic to poison ivy, which the tree was covered with. And one of the other vampires was scared of heights so he didn't want to be up there.

Right when the sun went down I decided that was the time to check the footage counter. We were screwed. We only got a couple takes, neither of which was very good. The shot also ended up being in silhouette so none of them ended up needing makeup (or shaved heads) and we ended up cutting the shot out of the movie. A total waste of energy because of a moment of carelessness.

Lesson # 41: Design your transitions ahead of time.

One of the most difficult things is coming up with good transitions. Good transitions are tough because they demand the ultimate in creativity, but if done wrong can be corny as hell. There are many different ways to make them work but usually only a few ways that'll work in a particular context. The best one in *The Hunter's Apprentice* is one Simon came up with as we were shooting. I knew I wanted to jump in time from the shot looking up through the hole at Alex to the one where the pack is dropped on the ground.

When it came time to shoot the close-up of the pack I was trying to figure out how to make a transition out of it. Simon placed the flashlight in the frame where the hole was in the previous shot, cut out a hole in a piece of paper to put over the monitor to get it exact and there it was: hole to flashlight bulb. We never came up with a better one, but I realized that this is the kind of thing that should be designed early in the storyboarding process because great creative moments like that rarely happen on the set.

Lesson # 42: The 180 Rule is important to follow, but it's more important to know when to break it for dramatic effect.

Going into *The Hunter's Apprentice* I could give the textbook definition of the 180 degree rule and what all the different applications of it implied. I also knew that jumping the line could indicate a jump in time or could be used to escalate tension. I tried it in the scene where the first vampire tackled Alex. He tackles Alex screen left to right. In the next shot they roll left to right and in the third shot they roll into the shot *right to left* and the vampire throws him. I thought it would make it more dynamic. When we cut it together it looked ridiculous. Fortunately, that mistake was fixed by flopping the image (see lesson # 61).

I found that jumping the 180 line worked best when the audience wasn't aware of it (similar to the dutch angle) and you can use it to inject the scene with a dose of intensity. For example, just before the climax when Alex has lost a lot of blood and approaching the stake trap, we cut between two close-ups of Alex's face. The way we cut it, it looks like he's going in opposite directions, but in its context it represented Alex's confused state of mind (these two shots have since been cut so maybe it wasn't that great an effect).

Lesson # 43: Always shoot a master.

I still have some irrational stubbornness that prevents me from shooting masters. We'd do half-ass masters, shooting maybe a third of the scene in a master and thinking that would be enough. Later we often found ourselves hoping we had the other two thirds to choose from.

Lesson # 44: Stare at the monitor.

This sounds silly, but as good a camera operator as Ryan was, one of his limitations was he refused to give me options for shots (this was partly because of pure spite over being replaced by Simon). This was remedied later when I began operating, but until then I would watch the monitor when Ryan was setting up a shot. Sometimes he'd arbitrarily move the camera a certain way that made a great shot. Or something would happen in front of the camera in between shots that would inspire a new one. One example was the shot of the head vampire's boot stepping in front of the flashlight that Alex drops on the way out of the hole. The camera was resting on the floor with the flashlight in front of it and I just added the head vampire's boot stepping through the smoke.

Lesson # 45: Coverage, Coverage, Coverage.

We got no coverage on *The Hunter's Apprentice* at the beginning. We'd shoot the scene as storyboarded, cut the scene together, it wouldn't work and then we'd have no options because that was all we shot. We thought what we were doing would work (although we didn't have the experience to know that it would) so we didn't bother with a contingency plan. The fact is even if you're fairly certain that what you're going to do is gonna work, you still need coverage because more likely than not you'll be surprised later with what you actually have.

One form of coverage is the cutaway. Cutaways aren't supposed to be just shooting some object in a scene (Look! There's an ashtray full of cigarettes! Get a cutaway of that!). Cutaways should function to help tell the story. Hands performing some kind of activity work well.

Lesson # 46: Get reaction shots.

These serve the same function as cutaways. Cutaways to a character reacting to a story beat become story beats themselves and help to reveal character, sometimes going so far as to endear the character to the audience. I couldn't believe how many times we sat in the editing room and realized we didn't have the most obvious of reaction shots. It got to the point that when we were out shooting I'd get close-ups of Simon's face reacting to all kinds of things just so we could cut them in later. These ended up playing a big part in the climax, where virtually every one of these reaction shots (waiting for the fourth vampire to come into view, looking at Nicholas' vest) were used.

Lesson # 47: One way to get consistently good lighting is to employ three quarter back light.

This is the first lighting lesson I learned. This is something that goes a long way towards a professional-looking shot. Simon explained it to me the first day and I was amazed how something so simple could make a dramatic difference. Whenever we set up a shot outdoors we'd position the subject between the sun and the camera. Then Simon would bring in a little fill, if necessary. Or he would bring negative fill in to bring down the bright side of the subject if there was too much contrast (for simulated overcast a lighting ratio higher than 2:1 was too much) or bring negative fill to the shadow side if the lighting was too flat. If we had to shoot in a different direction than was ideal, we would set up reflectors and bring in negative fill and change the sun's direction.

Lesson # 48: If you're going to shoot an action movie, you're gonna burn a lot of film.

This is self-explanatory, but worth noting because I apparently wasn't aware of this when we began shooting. An action sequence is built up from individual shots, all of which need to be timed perfectly to pull off the desired effect. Often we found that only a very specific movement would pull off the effect we wanted. One way to do this is to (Simon's method) try to "puppeteer" the action, micromanaging every element to get exactly what you want. Another way (my method) is to set up the elements so that you're close to getting what you want and then just burn takes until fate takes over and gives you what you're looking for (and sometimes even better). Both ways work, although I found that by micromanaging the action it takes just as many, if not more, takes as my chaos theory method.

Sometimes what you're going for is so specific there's only so much you can control. Happy accidents rarely come from micromanaging and we needed all the happy accidents we could get.

Lesson # 49: Close-ups make great band-aids..

My most common solution to a scene that didn't work in the editing room was designing a closeup as a bandaid. When used creatively a closeup can be very powerful and they're usually easier to shoot. Often we found that if a scene wasn't working, one carefully designed and placed closeup would make the problem go away. It's great for extending or shortening shots, creating or eliminating beats, focusing the audience's attention, building suspense and avoiding giving away too much information too soon.

Lesson # 50: Every mistake/limitation/obstacle is an opportunity to come up with something better.

After setting up all the elements we needed for a day's shoot sometimes we'd get rained out. So Simon and I would go to the coffee shop and take another look at the storyboards and we always came up with a better way of shooting the scene.

When our ambitious shot of four vampires perched in the vamp tree didn't come out, I went smaller and constructed the scene in close-ups. It turned out to be just as, if not more, powerful than if we had gotten the tree shot we wanted.

My original idea for the vampires coming out of the walls in the hole was a wide shot with them all pushing their way out of the dirt. This is a virtually impossible shot to pull off with the resources we had so we ended up going with flashes of the vampire's faces as they move in for the attack. We got some terrific shots with this low tech method.

Another example is when we went to Ryan's grandparents to dig the hole. The fact that it was flooded kept us from breaking our backs to build something that ultimately would have failed. By building a set from scratch we had an environment that we could control and get better coverage with.

I had a tendency when we began editing to go for the "best" takes, meaning the ones that were the "best" shots out of context. But when you put it into the scene sometimes you find out that it isn't the best take after all and maybe one of the ones that we "fucked up" on were much more effective. Camera operator missed his mark? Great. He might have just made an otherwise boring shot dynamic.

This also applies to acting. In one case Simon had to awkwardly load an arrow in his bow and turn around. He messed it up and went out of character for a moment. But his character also has a wound that makes moving difficult and when we screened the film for the crew they thought he was wincing in pain. A humanizing moment that I should have designed ahead of time manifested itself out of a “mistake”.

My favorite mistake was when we had the camera sitting on apple boxes as we prepared for the shot of Vamp 2 jumping over the log. It was set up with the log framed at a three quarter angle. Somehow the camera got bumped and began running. For a good thirty seconds no one noticed. When we got the footage back we had this mystery shot of the log covered in vines shaking. I saw that and I realized our complicated dirt exploding out of the hole shot was no longer necessary. I didn't pat myself on the back however because I was disturbed that I hadn't designed this shot myself. It's an easy, simple shot that works perfectly for the scene and I should have thought of it before it happened by accident.

When we finished shooting, Simon and I went through all the footage to see if we missed any good takes. What we found was that there were dozens of great shots that we thought were mistakes, but were actually the most effective of the bunch. One in particular was when Vamp 1 tackles Alex. On the first take Ryan followed the tackle, losing control of the shot, which felt less powerful at the time so I had him stay in place and let the vampire tackle Alex off screen. We ended up putting the original shot back in for the Vamp 1 tackle and used the off screen one to replace a weaker tackle in the Vamp 3 sequence. There were at least twenty instances where shots were replaced for this reason.

Lesson # 51: Never deprive yourself of someone else's better idea, but...

Most of the time Simon would suggest an alternate shot to what I came up with and I was able to choose which was the better of the two. But sometimes I just wasn't sure. I didn't have the experience to see what was most effective between two shots that both seemed to work. When this happened I sometimes found myself shooting both shots so we could choose later in the editing room. This is one of those things I won't do again. Not because it isn't an effective way to make sure you don't miss out on something better, because it is effective. But it is also a crutch that inhibits decisiveness, not to mention expensive and time-consuming.

Directing Actors

Lesson # 52: Don't micromanage actors' performances unless their name is (name omitted).

I've found that the worst thing a director can do is step all over an actor and treat him like a puppet. If you let an actor do his job he'll give you stuff you never thought of. If you force him to religiously follow your "vision" then your vision is the best you'll get. If that. And if what they come up with doesn't work, you can always have them do it the original way.

In Simon's case, he understood the script and his character and had designed the shots with me so he could basically show up and get it right. The most direction I had to give Simon was along the lines of, "Don't do that with your mouth." if he was getting too Sylvester Stallone on me. I got so used to Simon knowing what he was doing that when we shot only him for a couple weekends and a new actor showed up I had to remember that sometimes they need help with their performance.

In Nicholas' case, however, micromanagement became not only necessary, but essential when shooting his head vampire scenes. First off, he had no idea what the scenes were about. {name omitted} claimed he read the script, but he must have been lying. When we shot the scene where the log swings down from the tree he asked if this was the part where the bats fly out. I was hoping he was joking but it was obvious to everyone on the set that he wasn't.

When {name omitted}'s out of makeup, he overacts. When he's in makeup he behaves as if he's wearing a suit of armor. (And he refused not to scratch. He scratched his face constantly screwing up the makeup and also scratched his body, smearing makeup on his costume. Once he blamed the white smear on his crotch on the makeup girl). There were times where I actually had my hand on his arm or shoulder guiding him during a shot, not only to get the right action, but to make the movement less robotic.

What I discovered is that there's no "right" way to direct. There are only right ways to direct different actors. Non-actors sometimes just need the forbidden state of being where you just give them the result you want (more angry, more intense). Most of the time you can give them an action to play and you'll get what you need. But it all depends on who you're working with. If you're doing the same thing with everybody you're probably going to end up with weak performances because directing requires flexibility.

Lesson # 53: Never yell at actors, but, if necessary, shame them into whatever they don't want to do.

Yelling at actors never gets a good performance out of them unless you're simply trying to get a cheap reaction. And that's not acting. Acting is a very revealing process

and since they can't see themselves (and can't read the director's mind) communication becomes essential.

But then you have actors like Brad Nelson (Vampire 3) who I found out too late is terrified of heights. For one shot he had to jump off a bridge six feet above the water. He talked tough about pulling the stunt off, but when he got up there he refused to jump and we burned a lot of film waiting for him to do it. So I ridiculed him, called him a wimp and worse and finally we got him to jump. This only worked because it was a stunt, not a shot requiring an actual performance, and also because I'm friends with Brad, who ironically allows me to be a little nastier than I would with someone else.

Lesson # 54: Be prepared to have an answer when an actor wants a justification for his performance.

In the final scene of the movie Nicholas asks Alex how he knew that he was a vampire and therefore was able to defeat him. Alex's answer was that Nicholas left behind his vial of holy water that could have saved him. So the line Alex has is "You didn't need this." as he holds up the Bible. When Simon said the line he kept putting a little too much Charlie Bronson in it and I told him that he came across too aggressive and to take the emphasis off the word "this." Simon said something like, "No, mate, I've defeated him and I need to let him know I defeated him." I tried insisting that Simon take the inflection off but he wouldn't do it. I knew he was wrong, but I couldn't articulate why. It was a complicated shot that ended up taking over twenty takes and I knew I could redub it in post if the only difference was the inflection on the one word. So I just moved ahead with the shot.

Simon had tried to step on my toes before and it was easy to back him off because it simply wasn't his call. But now he was the actor in question and as with any actor, if they refuse to do something there's not much you can do. That is, there's not much you can do if you're not prepared. If I had prepared better for that day's scene I could have articulated to him the reason why I was right about the delivery. Later I figured it out. By inflecting the "this" Alex was rubbing it in that he defeated Nicholas, when he wasn't happy about it at all. His mentor had trained him to defeat him if he ever became a vampire and Alex had done just that. Alex felt guilty about this, as well as the fact that he had just killed the only family he had. He had rescued Nicholas' soul, but this was not a victorious moment for him. He completed his mission, but the moment is still tragic. Tough guy dialogue has no place in a moment like that.

When I explained this to Simon after we got the footage back, Simon said, "Oh, right. You should have explained that to me on the day." And he was right. I should have.

Lesson # 55: Anyone can be a stand-in for any actor.

At least a dozen crew members stood in for the roles of the head vampire, Nicholas and Vamp 4 (coffee shop offenders all). Most of the shots they're in aren't even the actors playing them. And for the most part you can't tell (I even get confused who played who). This way of shooting also helps promote creative shot designs. Someone on the crew has some body part that matches the missing actor and you just have to make the shot work around that. I learned to always have a can of shaving cream and a razor on set so that scruffy crew members could stand in for Nicholas' cheek. The crew loves this because they get to "act" and you can never underestimate the power of

people getting to see themselves on screen (even if it's only their foot). Every actor with the exception of Simon had a stand in for them at one point or another.

Lesson # 56: Actors who want to play vampires have a problem with biting another man's neck.

Everyone thought it was great to play a vampire until it was time to do what vampires do. They'd run around, growl, bare their fangs, show off their claws but when it was time to bite Alex no one wanted to do it. They especially didn't like that they were either lying on or straddling Simon when they had to bite him. The only neck they'd ever bitten before was attached to a girl so this made them very uncomfortable. Wayne didn't even have to bite Simon for his shot. He just had to get close. But for it to look realistic I asked him to bite him anyway and we'd cut away before his fangs touched. Nope. He'd get close but that's all I was getting out of him (we ended up making the shot work by reversing it).

When {name omitted} had to bite Simon he would just press his lips against his neck to avoid biting him. This didn't make any sense to me because kissing a man's neck open mouthed is just as bad as biting it. We ended up having to reshoot that one and this time I insisted that {name omitted} really bite him. He overcame his discomfort by throwing himself into the moment and biting Simon as hard as he could, which Simon was a good sport about.

Lesson # 57: When you aren't paying actors, there's not much you can do when they show up an hour late and then ask where the closest coffee shop is.

This exact incident happened with two different actors on two weekends in a row. You want to grab them and shake the shit out of them when this happens, but once

you've shot an actor's face on film and they're working for free you just have to be patient and let it go, even if what you really want to do is choke them to death.

Locations

Lesson # 58: When shooting on private property, always ask for permission.

I worked on *Ray* for a few days the summer before last and they were shooting Ray's childhood scenes at the Laurel Valley Plantation in Raceland. The woods around the plantation were great and I wanted to shoot my entire thesis there before I came to my senses and took the practical considerations of traveling and the lack of bathroom facilities into account. But I still wanted to shoot the truck driving shots there. One morning in December we loaded up a skeleton crew and headed up to the plantation. I wasn't sure if the road that ran through the farm was private property or not, and when we got out there we got out of the truck and started looking around to see what would make a good shot.

A truck pulled up and this guy said he worked for the farm and wanted to know what we were doing there. I told him we were shooting a student film and he said it was private property. I asked him where the office was and then we went and waited about a half hour for the owner to show up. I told him why we were there and asked if it was okay to shoot. He thanked me for asking permission first and said to shoot whatever we wanted. He also said it was a good thing we asked because if his other employee found us he would have called the cops because he's a real bastard (which we found out in our dealings with him later).

So we happily go about shooting our traveling shots until one where Simon had to drive along a canal into the swamp. As he was backing out he got the truck stuck

hanging over the bayou. It was a real bad spot. Two wheels were literally hanging out over the edge. We tried to push it back up but it just went over further. So we went back and got the owner and he came out with his pick up truck and dragged us out. If we hadn't asked permission we would have been screwed.

Chapter 3: Post-Production

Editing

Lesson # 59: Directors need to be decisive, but whatever bad choices you make are carved in stone.

I don't like pointing this out because most people don't notice (I think) the worst choice I made on the film (besides including dialogue). With all the vampires I used mud on their clothes and face to make it look like they came out of the hole and also to help with the makeup. When it came to the head vampire I decided that I wasn't going to put mud on his face and just a little bit on his clothes. There were two reasons for this. By the time we started shooting the climax I realized we were going to be there over a long period of time getting a few shots at a time. We'd be looking at the head vamp's face in static shots and if we had mud streaks moving around his face it would become noticeable; keeping the continuity of the mud would become a nightmare. So instead I rationalized that he's the head vampire and his face doesn't need to be dirty, justifying it with the water off a duck's back alpha wolf theory. Something like that.

So we were watching the cut the other day and Simon said he thinks that was a bad choice because it's the only point in the movie that the makeup is sketchy and that big white head just looks weird. I realized he was right. Our head vamp looked like a giant mime kicking ass. There wasn't much we could do about it at this point but limit the shots of the head vamp's face, which I could have done if the mud streaks became an issue anyway. Big fuck up.

Lesson # 60: Watching rushes is no fun.

I hate getting film back from the lab. I rarely watched the footage the same day I got it. I'd wait a couple of days until I'm in as good as mood as I can muster. Simon wants to watch them immediately. He gets excited. This is annoying because most of what we get back isn't gonna be good, much less great, so there's nothing to get excited about. Either there's something wrong technically or it's just not as good a shot as I had thought it was going to be on the day. It's an awful and excruciating process.

Lesson # 61: The flop is a great tool in the editing room as well as on the set.

Simon and I learned that one option that worked in the editing room when a shot wasn't working to simply flop it. If there was nothing obvious in the frame that gave it away (something in someone's hand, for example) sometimes flopping helped. We didn't always know why the shot suddenly worked, but for some reason it did. This may have to do with the juxtaposition of the shot with the ones before and after it, but I also think it has to do with the right side of the frame being stronger than the left side.

This also came in handy on the set when the sun was positioned wrong for a shot and a character had to be facing the other direction. No problem. Shoot it in the opposition direction with the better light, position the actor "incorrectly" and flop it later.

One time we wanted to follow Nick's hand holding the whip along a tree branch that only looked good moving in one direction. We had already shot the whip in the opposite hand so all we did was have his stand-in hold it in the other hand and when we flopped it, presto, continuity utopia (except for the inevitable annoying comment by your continuity person who hasn't been paying attention that the whip is in the wrong hand).

Flipping shots also worked out surprising well. If a shot is ambiguous enough you can turn it upside down and it can make a vampire flashing through the bushes seem supernatural.

Lesson # 62: Today's gold is tomorrow's crap.

This is the most frustrating thing I dealt with. I am an extremely moody person and my opinion of *The Hunter's* Apprentice changes from day to day. One day I'm pleased with how a scene's cut together and the next day I absolutely hate it. It's very hard to get a consistent point of view on this. The only solution I came up with was to take a long time editing and get it to the point where when I'm in a bad mood I don't hate it and when I'm in a good mood I really like it.

Lesson # 63: Know when to let go.

Despite my method of reshooting whatever doesn't work, there are plenty of things in the film that I'm not happy with and would like to reshoot but didn't. If the shot works for the scene, then it works, whether I would rather go back and do it better or not. At some point I have to look at the film and say it is what it is and then take what I've learned onto the next film.

Chapter 4: Other Important Lessons

Lesson # 64: You Can't Learn How To Make A Movie From A Book.

I've read scores of filmmaking books. But when it comes down to it I just have to get out there and learn it the hard way. What the books are good for is when you learn something on the set you can say, "Oh yeah, I read that somewhere. Duh."

Lesson # 65: You Can Rely On Instinct, But Only After You've Developed A Foundation For It And Only When You Have To.

This was one of the things that I didn't buy. I read in Mamet's *On Directing* that after you've done the hard work of studying the craft of directing, you can make snap judgments and they'll be rooted in what you've already learned. I thought, sure, if you're David Mamet you can make all the snap judgments you want and turn out gold but for the rest of us non-geniuses we can't do something as reckless as popping off ideas half-cocked.

So I second-guessed everything I did and even when I grasped a particular concept I still forced myself to obsess over every detail. Later on a Spring Film production when there were all kinds of decisions I had to make quickly, although I was terrified as I made them, I found that ninety percent of them turned out to be the correct choice. I realized this was because I had obsessed over the craft of filmmaking for the past year.

Lesson # 66: Collaboration, Collaboration, Collaboration.

The Hunter's Apprentice would probably never have gotten made without Simon's involvement. He was the engine that ran the bus and his work ethic rubbed off on me. Simon was also the only one besides me who would never give up on the project.

No matter how behind schedule we got, no matter how many crew members we lost and no matter how impossible whatever we were trying to pull off seemed, I knew there wouldn't be any throwing in the towel with Simon on board.

He was also a great creative collaborator. We'd sit down, he'd look at the shot I came up with, he'd suggest something better, which would make me think of something better until we finally ended up with exactly how the shot or sequence should be done (although later we often found out we were completely wrong). It was a very rewarding process because I realized I couldn't come up with the shots we ended up with by myself. And on the set we'd adjust the shots together and I found that no matter what I came up with Simon had a way to enhance it.

In the editing room it was the same thing. I'd be focusing on the story and trying to make lemonade out of the lemons we had to work with and Simon would be working on matching action and juxtaposition. And there were things he came up with that I never would have considered. Even if I was certain that whatever Simon was suggesting wouldn't work I'd let him try it anyway. I found that fifty percent of the time I was right and the other fifty percent I'd learn something.

Lesson # 67: Yes, Chocolate Syrup Looks Like Blood On Black And White Film.

I have no idea why I resisted this for so long. It was good enough for Hitchcock, but somehow I felt there was no way it was going to look right. I bought all kinds of different types of fake blood, all of which were too thick or too watery. I even had someone make up a concoction for me that ended up going bad before we could use it. Finally I threw in the towel and used chocolate syrup. It was exactly what I was going for.

Chapter 5: The Two Most Important Lessons

Lesson # 68: Be Hard On Yourself.

The worst thing you can do as a novice filmmaker is get excited by what you create. Chances are your excitement is premature and what you've done is actually garbage. I've constantly been disappointed with myself throughout the entire production and despite criticism that this amounts to defeatism, it always resulted in me finding a way to make it better. An inflated ego is a non-genius filmmaker's worst enemy.

Lesson # 69: Your Only Friend Is Your Film.

I learned this lesson for three reasons (see lesson # 4 for the first). The second is the case of Ryan Martin. Ryan was picked as the D.P. because I had no one else who could do it. Ryan was the "go to" D.P. in the program despite his lack of experience, most of which was in digital video lighting.

When Simon came in to audition I realized he was a great asset and would help Ryan out tremendously. When we began shooting it became clear that he would also be a great replacement for Ryan as D.P. because Ryan was clearly in over his head and, to make matters worse, in denial over this. We sat down at a coffee shop one night and he explained to me the way the shoot should work: He would set up the lights and if he did it wrong *then* Simon could correct him. He said that that was the best way for him to learn the craft of cinematography. He also pointed out that I had said this was supposed to be our real film school.

He was right, except for the fact that this was going to be boot camp, not kindergarten. Every kid wasn't getting a chance at bat. So I told him that from then on Simon calls the shots. When I said this to him every bone in his body seemed to collapse

right in front of me. He was devastated. For the remainder of the shoot Ryan absolutely refused to participate in any creative way. If I complimented him on his camera work he would say “I just hit the marks you told me to hit.” To his credit he stuck around to the end of shooting and later realized he was wrong to refuse to participate creatively because not only did he hurt the movie but he also hurt himself by depriving himself of the learning opportunity he had in working with Simon. When it came to designing the sound in the impossible time span of two weeks, Ryan matched Simon’s commitment and stayed up until dawn on many days to get it finished.

The third example is the case of Mr. Machine. I had First A.D.’d Machine’s short film *364* and had treated his film like my own. So now it was his turn to work on my film. Except there were a few problems. Machine thought he was an undiscovered genius, he was extraordinarily lazy and he detested all forms of physical labor. Add to that the fact that he wanted special treatment on the set because we were friends (he would actually stare at me on the set to get my attention) and I had a real problem.

Machine also has no idea how to communicate with human beings and ended up pissing off and getting pissed off at Simon the first day on the set. He came to me and whined about Simon yelling at him. Granted, Simon could be a little more pleasant on the set, but Machine wanted to be treated like a king. Then he got bent out of shape that Simon played a practical joke on him, which turned out to be an accident. So I gave him the easy and fun job of taking still photographs and shooting documentary footage. Fun and easy is something Machine can handle. Until he started talking about the film I was going to produce for him in the fall. I told him I appreciated his contribution but (since what I really could use was a production manager and that was too much work for him)

he would have to settle for me as his first A.D. Soon thereafter Machine stopped coming to the shoots all together. So I told him I wouldn't be working on his film in any capacity. I did all this as subtly as possible so I would still have someone to drink with. It also turned out that he's a very good actor so he worked on subsequent projects with me in that capacity.

Friends are nice, but when push comes to shove (and when you're making a film push will come to shove) most of them are ultimately selfish, disloyal and/or just drinking buddies. Since accepting this I've found it much easier to relate to my friends. It's very simple. Your friends are the people who help you make your movie.

Chapter 6: The Fallout

The “Silent” Film That Could Have Been

A few weeks ago at a coffee shop I was talking to Simon about how much I regretted not doing the film completely without dialogue. Then I went through each scene that had dialogue and said how we could have done it in the same amount of time with just images. For each scene I was able to now see how to do it without extending the length of the film. When I was finished I realized that this was exactly how it should be done and I wanted to go back and reshoot it that way. But I realized this would be impractical and was one of those lessons I would have to take with me onto the next project. The silver lining is that my visualization skills have evolved to the point where I can better tell the story without gratuitous words. Unfortunately, I’ve also learned that I still can’t write good dialogue.

How These Lessons Have Already Paid Off

My experience on *The Hunter’s Apprentice* came to be a huge benefit on the Spring Film I worked on in 2005. This was a completely new situation because I didn’t have the luxury of taking my time and reshooting and waiting for Simon to get the light perfect. We had a shooting schedule that we had to stick to and when we fell behind we had to tone down complicated shots and sometimes cut them out altogether. Decisions had to be made fast.

And this time out I had actual performances to contend with, not just shots to pull off. A lot of the time I operated camera myself and had to do that while directing actors. When quick decisions had to be made I had to rely on instinct that my time making *The Hunter’s Apprentice* had laid the foundation for. I found myself more than once hoping

that Mamet was right. As it turned out for the most part he was. There were sacrifices I had to make for time, but there are only a few choices I made that I regret and each of those has turned into a new learning experience.

I also found that shooting a film on a schedule is more fun than taking my time getting everything just right. That's something that needs to be covered during preproduction. I found it exhilarating to have to rush through setups, slowing down just long enough to allow the actors time to find their performance, and then rushing on to the next one. More importantly I found that I could stay calm and collected for the crew no matter how much pressure I was under. I was able to lead, which is an ability I wasn't born with, and got what I needed to put together a movie that worked.

I also realized that I had developed a pretty good eye on *The Hunter's Apprentice*. {name omitted}, the D.P., had her hands full with the lights and didn't have any input to offer with the shots themselves. So there wasn't the situation I had on *The Hunter's Apprentice* where Simon and I designed the shots together (and there were definitely a couple cases where I could have used his help). When we got the footage back I was shocked to find myself mostly pleased with what came back. All my experiments with the dutches worked, nothing felt show-offy and I even managed to slip in a motivated zoom-pan (and the D.P. turned out to be a natural when it came to lighting, despite never having done it before).

I even managed to solve the problem of writing bad dialogue. When I rewrote the Spring Film script I did so by casting actors who could improve on the written word. I simply constructed a script that had scenes brimming with conflict and let the actors try different ways to play it. I then wrote down the best stuff they came up with and

organized it into a shooting script (this technique is gonna have to do until I find a writer).

Chapter 7: Conclusion

I gave myself my film school boot camp and made the best of it. I learned a lot of things the hard way but I learned far more than I expected to (mostly because I didn't realize I had so much to learn). I owe this to Simon's commitment and my self-abusive attitude. If you tell yourself you're an idiot and don't know how to tell a story or make a film, you open yourself up to learn. It seems most people to one degree or another are more concerned with telling themselves how much they know about making movies rather than going out and actually learning how to do it. I knew if I was going to overcome my limitations I was gonna have to go through the painful process of self-examination and take a different approach to each obstacle I encountered.

This all leads to the most important thing I learned about the process of filmmaking, which is why I want to do it...

Lesson # 70: Why I Want To Make Movies

Most of us go through lives constantly disappointed with ourselves. Most of us are unaware of this and instead of being honest, we try to make up for it in a variety of ways. I learned to make myself brutally aware of this disappointment. And I also learned to embrace it.

Over the past three years of listening to students (and professors) posture and make claims of greatness, I've realized they all know that they're not what they claim to be. That's why they feel a need to claim it. What they don't realize is that making a film isn't about elevating your self-esteem. Anyone can say, "Roll camera," and call whatever comes out gold.

The truth is there are many ways to transcend the fact that we're not what we'd like ourselves to be. You can have children and raise them into better people than yourself. You can become a doctor and save lives that are worth more than your own. Or you can create something - a building, a novel, a film - that is greater than the hands that made it. That's what this is all about. Life is short, but if I'm able to bring people together and exploit their energy and talents to create something that lasts forever, then my life has purpose. The film won't make me a superior person, but it will make my existence worthwhile because I created something bigger and better than myself.

My only real gift is an obsession with storytelling and how this can give meaning to the human condition. That obsession is all I started with and with the right attitude and good people to work with, these are the only things I need.

Appendix A

The Hunter's Apprentice Shooting Script

EXT. ABANDONED BUILDING/ROOF - DAWN

The shadows of the surrounding buildings creep down the wall as the sun rises. A heavy metal door SLAMS before the sun crosses it. A shadow approaches the door.

INT. ABANDONED BUILDING/HALLWAY - DAWN

The door at the end of a dark hallway opens and the silhouette of ten-year-old ALEX stands out against the blinding sunlight.

He steps inside, closes the door and presses against the corner.

The engine room door at the other end of the hallway closes.

A single TEAR runs down his cheek. He wipes it away.

He clicks on a SMALL FLASHLIGHT and shines it down the hallway towards the engine room.

He steps out of the corner and inches down the hallway. His hand clutches a KITCHEN KNIFE.

He approaches the engine room and reaches for the doorknob. Behind him the door he came in SLAMS shut. He spins, takes a moment to calm himself, then turns and pushes the engine room door open.

INT. ABANDONED BUILDING/ENGINE ROOM - DAY

He moves into the room.

He takes a step over a raised doorjam and as he brings his foot down he hears a RUSTLING beneath him. He freezes in place, then shines his flashlight below his foot at a moving figure under a dirty tarp. He takes a step back, reaches down and lifts up a corner of the tarp revealing a white, clawed hand...

A large hand grabs Alex's wrist and another hand wraps around his mouth. He tries to scream as he's carried out of the room.

INT. ABANDONED BUILDING/HALLWAY - DAY

NICHOLAS, mid-thirties, takes the knife away from Alex and presses him against the wall.

Nicholas considers the boy for a moment.

He pulls a thick wooden stake from his belt.

INT. ABANDONED BUILDING/ENGINE ROOM - DAY

Nicholas re-enters the room and approaches the blanketed figure. He stops. His hand tightens around the stake.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

As hell breaks loose in the engine room, Alex SCREAMS...

CUT TO:

INT. NICHOLAS' HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The small house is sparsely decorated. There are no photographs, only cheap religious candles and a statue of the Virgin Mary. Maps and newspaper clippings hang on the walls.

The door opens and Alex, now 26, with a weathered face, enters. Nicholas storms towards him, enraged.

NICHOLAS

Sit.

Alex backs towards the couch and sits down. He sees the suitcase by the closet door. Nicholas looks out the door, then closes it and heads towards the kitchen.

ALEX

Why didn't you tell me?

NICHOLAS

It doesn't matter. You're not coming with me.

Nicholas opens a cabinet revealing two bibles. He takes one out and sits down at the kitchen table.

Cut into the pages are two slots. One holds a hypodermic needle. The other is empty.

Nicholas takes a small glass vial with water in it and slides it into the empty slot. The vial has a cross etched into the glass.

ALEX

You're taking it with you?

Nicholas closes the bible and stands up. He approaches Alex.

NICHOLAS

I won't need it.

Alex stands up and faces him.

ALEX

If they're after you, you'll need --

NICHOLAS

They don't know you exist and it's gonna stay that way.

ALEX

I'm coming with you.

Nicholas stares at Alex for a moment, then turns his back to him.

NICHOLAS

Go get your things.

Alex hesitates.

NICHOLAS

You've got ten minutes.

Alex stares at him for a moment, then turns and walks out the door.

Nicholas goes to the door and listens to Alex's car drive away. He picks up the suitcase and puts it in the closet. He takes a letter from his pocket, considers it for a moment, then then slips it into the bible and stuffs it between the cushions of the sofa.

He sits at the kitchen table and takes a photograph from his pocket. The nighttime NOISES go silent.

Nicholas stands up and looks towards the front door, then at the cabinet. He stares at it for a few moments, then heads towards it.

INT. NICHOLAS' HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - LATER

The front door swings open. Alex steps in, a seabag over his shoulder. He spots the book in the couch.

He pulls out the letter. He begins reading it, but lowers it before he finishes, revealing two legs from a fallen chair sticking out from the dining room.

He walks through the kitchen and sees the entire chair laying on the floor...

INT. NICHOLAS' HOUSE/DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Broken glass everywhere, the table overturned, chairs thrown helter skelter...

Alex looks down and sees the photograph of Nicholas and a woman. Next to it is a spattering of blood. He crouches down and rubs it with his finger. He turns back to the kitchen and heads for the cabinet. He opens it and looks inside.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Alex drives a beat-up green pickup truck down a country road and fumbles with a map. The truck passes a dead black dog but Alex doesn't notice. The town seems abandoned, boarded up windows, rotting brick walls.

He passes an old oak tree, its branches sheltering its trunk from view. In front of it is an OLD MAN sitting on a crate cradling a shotgun and sipping a bottle of beer. Alex turns down a dirt road and heads into the woods.

The truck stops next to the swamp. Alex goes around to the back of the truck and opens the tailgate.

EXT. SWAMP - DAY

A black machete knocks the twigs off a thick length of branch.

The same machete sharpens the point of a stake.

Two hands in brown leather gloves twist rope around a wooden pole.

A mosquito BUZZES around Alex's neck. He SLAPS it.

A pole with the stake tied to the top enters the frame and drops into a trench in the dirt.

Alex walks into frame and sits down on a mound of dirt. He holds a wooden stake in his hand. He gets comfortable on the mound and takes a few practice swings at a wire next to him, then hits it hard.

The pole catapults up, the stake stopping dead in midair at chest level.

EXT. SWAMP - LATER

Alex runs through the swamp with a leather pack strapped across his back and a bow in his hand.

He slows to a walk and stops at the edge of a clearing. He pushes a branch out of his line of sight.

EXT. CLEARING - DAY

The old man has his back to the swamp.

Alex moves into the clearing and walks towards him...

The old man drops the beer bottle...

He spins around and points the shotgun at Alex...

The old man looks down at the combat boots and fatigues, then back up at Alex's no longer friendly face.

The old man raises the shotgun, pointing it between Alex's eyes. He cocks it.

The old man blinks and Alex grabs the barrel, wrenching it from the old man's hands...

He cracks him across the jaw, sending the old man crashing to the dirt...

The old man presses his face into his hands. Blood gushes through his fingers. He tries to crawl away.

Alex presses his foot into the old man's back, stopping him.

ALEX
How many are down there?

The old man doesn't answer.

ALEX
How many?

The old man's hand trembles as it opens, telling Alex "five".

ALEX
Bullshit.

Alex pulls the old man up by the back of his neck and slams him back into a sitting position on the crate. He puts the knife to his throat.

OLD MAN
(now smiling)
And they've been
starved.

Alex stares at the old man for a moment, then shows him the picture of Nicholas.

ALEX
Is he down there?

The old man smiles.

Alex leans in, WHISPERS something into his ear, then slashes his throat.

Alex stands up and walks through the branches of the tree revealing a hole in the ground big enough for a man to climb through...

Alex drops the bag to the ground and opens it revealing six wooden stakes and seven wooden arrows.

He takes off his jacket and drops it to the ground.

He takes out a stake, CLICKS on his flashlight and begins snaking headfirst down the hole.

INT. HOLE - DAY

The flashlight beam flashes back and forth in front of him as he crawls.

He stops.

INT. CHAMBER - DAY

Ahead of him is a large chamber about four feet high.

He shines his light into it revealing...

A figure lying in the dirt, covered in mud.

He crawls inside. He shines his flashlight towards the head of the body.

He reaches out to touch it, but stops. He takes the stake in his left hand and carefully moves towards the figure.

Behind him white clawed fingers push their way out of the dirt wall.

Alex brushes the mud off its ankles.

The hand behind him lowers to the ground.

The figures ankles are tied with rope.

Nicholas COUGHS.

Something begins pushing out of the walls all around him.

He flashes the light around revealing white arms and faces with gleaming fangs.

HEAD VAMPIRE (O.S.)

Hold.

The vampires pull back.

Alex looks around at them, then at Nicholas.

HEAD VAMPIRE (O.S.)

Leave him.

Alex gives Nicholas a final glance, then heads up the hole.

EXT. CLEARING - DAY

Alex pulls himself up from the hole, covered in mud. He lays back on the dirt. A shadow crosses his face. Thunder RUMBLES in the distance. His eyes flash open

Alex runs out from the tree branches and looks up at the sky. Dark clouds are moving in fast.

He snatches up his weapons and sprints back through the swamp.

The ground begins shaking as four vampires fly out of the hole and land in the tree...

A black fedora slowly raises out of the hole. The HEAD VAMPIRE steps into view and looks up at the storm clouds. His hand tightens around a thick coiled bullwhip. He looks up at one of the vampires.

The VAMPIRE jumps from his branch and takes off in a dead sprint.

A SECOND VAMPIRE hesitates, then jumps down from his branch.

The head vampire uncoils the whip and cracks it. The second vampire stops in his tracks and crouches on the ground at the edge of the tree.

The head vampire turns his attention back to the woods.

EXT. SWAMP - DAY

Alex sprints into a clearing past the edge of the swamp, spins and drops everything but the bow and an arrow. He slides a stake into his belt...

The vampire enters the clearing but makes a sharp turn into the bushes, circling Alex...

Alex pulls the arrow back and spins following the vampire's movement through the leaves.

The vampire launches himself from the bushes...

Alex fires...

The arrow shatters on the vampire's chest as it crashes into him.

They roll over, stopping with Alex on top...

The vampire flips Alex back off of him...

He CRASHES to the ground several yards away, his bones crunching with the impact...

The vampire is on him in an instant...

Alex slams his forearm against the vampire's neck, bracing its teeth away from his throat...

The vampire sinks the claws of his right hand into Alex's side. Blood gushes from the wound...

Alex YELLS out...

The vampire digs deeper and smiles...

It grabs Alex by the neck with its other hand and twists his head, exposing Alex's throat...

It's teeth press closer...

Alex pulls the stake from his belt, hooks his arm around and stabs the vampire in the back, but the stake won't penetrate.

Alex's forearm gives out as the vampire's teeth press towards his throat...

He sticks the stake in the dirt behind him, reversing his grip...

And drives it straight down through the vampire's neck into its heart...

Blood SPLASHES across Alex's face...

The vampire's fangs rest pressed against Alex's throat. He throws it off of him, wipes the blood off his face, then pulls up the vampire's shirt...

It's wearing a bulletproof vest...

He checks the vampire's ribcage and sees that there's nothing protecting its side...

EXT. CLEARING - DAY

XCU on the head vampire's ear. It twitches...

He CRACKS the whip. The second vampire at the edge of the woods sprints towards Alex.

EXT. SWAMP/ALEX - DAY

Alex limps through the woods, his hand pressed to his bloody side. He glances back and drops to the dirt...

The vampire soars over him missing him by less than a foot and crashes to the ground...

Alex pulls back an arrow...

The vampire spins around...

He fires...

The arrow sails straight into the vampire's side, through his ribcage and into his heart.

Alex pulls up the dying vampire's shirt and sees it's also wearing a vest...

EXT. SWAMP/BEHIND - DAY

The third vampire sprinting...

EXT. SWAMP/ALEX - DAY

Alex limps ahead.

EXT. SWAMP/BEHIND - DAY

The vampire flashes past the tree trunks...

EXT. SWAMP/ALEX - DAY

Alex hears the vampire coming, spins, loads an arrow and aims it behind him. Silence. He looks around at the woods...

EXT. CLEARING - DAY

The head vampire cracks the whip sending a rush of air through the swamp. It swishes past Spanish moss, then into a branch above Alex, splinting the wood.

EXT. SWAMP/ALEX - DAY

Alex aims up...

The vampire tackles him from the front, knocking him backwards into the

STREAM

Alex disappears below the water's surface, the vampire on top of him...

The bow splashes into the water next to them...

The vampire pins Alex's head below the water as Alex's hands struggle with the vampire's arms...

The vampire's claws dig into Alex's neck...

Blood blooms to the surface...

Alex's arms struggle a bit longer, then drop below the water...

The vampire smiles and pulls Alex up by the neck...

Alex's hands come out of the water holding wooden stakes aimed at the vampire's sides...

Which he drives into the vampire's armpits...

The vampire's smile fades as Alex pushes it away and drags himself out of the stream...

He stops and checks his neck-wound. He cringes at the damage...

Blood streams down the side of his body and his neck as he crawls across the swamp floor...

EXT. CLEARING - DAY

The head vampire holds the FOURTH VAMPIRE by the collar, its fangs drooling streams of slime, its nails clawing at the dirt.

The head vampire releases it...

The vampire sprints ahead as its master heads up through the trees in the same direction...

SWAMP/ALEX

Alex limps towards the stake-trap which is a few yards away. He turns before he reaches it and drops to his knees.

He stares into the woods where he came from gripping his last stake in his hand.

The fourth vampire thrashes through the undergrowth towards him.

Alex's head drops slightly, his eyes half open. A branch CRACKS and his head comes back up. He sees the undergrowth moving in the distance.

He stares dead ahead as the vampire barrels towards him...

In a large oak tree behind Alex a pair of boots SLAM down onto a branch...

The head vampire sees Alex weakened and bloodied...

The rampaging vampire is almost on him...

Alex drops to his knees.

The head vampire leaps through the air over Alex...

Its boots slam to the mud behind the vampire and spins...

The whip wraps around the vampire's neck and jerks him back to the ground...

The head vampire is there to catch him. He pulls a wooden stake from his belt and looks up at Alex.

Alex sees Nicholas' face staring at him from behind the struggling vampire, his face pale, his eyes black...

Nicholas stakes the vampire through the side and tosses him to the ground.

Alex pulls out his last stake and drags himself past the stake-trap to the mound of dirt.

Nicholas walks after him...

Alex reaches the mound tree and pulls himself back against it.

He breathes heavily, his body covered in blood...

Nicholas lashes the whip, snatches the stake away from Alex and whips it into a tree trunk behind him.

Nicholas steps in front of the stake-trap, but his back and the bulletproof vest are towards the stake. He towers over Alex.

Alex looks at the trip wire, then at Nicholas' vest protruding through his shirt. Nicholas looks down at his chest and, betraying nothing, looks back up.

Nicholas begins coiling the whip...

Alex locks eyes with Nicholas.

Nicholas places his foot on Alex's knee. As he does his body turns, exposing his side.

Nicholas presses down on Alex's knee, crunching it.

Alex reaches over and SLAMS the tripwire with his fist...

The pole catapults up...

Nicholas twists out of the way, his foot grinding into Alex's knee.

The stake stops dead in the air next to him. Nicholas hangs the coiled whip on the stake.

Alex cries out as Nicholas grinds his foot down popping Alex's kneecap...

Alex's face contorts in agony...

Nicholas presses down harder...

ALEX
(through clenched
teeth)
Stop!

Alex looks at Nicholas, his eyes desperate...

Nicholas holds out his hand.

Alex tries to rise, but can't.

Nicholas grabs him by the throat and lifts him into the air...

Alex's head lolls weakly to the side, his eyes half-closed...

Nicholas reaches into Alex's pants pocket and pulls out the bible. He flips it open. Inside is the hypodermic needle and vial.

He crushes the bible like a paper cup, the vial popping inside it. He throws it away.

NICHOLAS
Ready?

Alex wraps his left arm around Nicholas' back...

Nicholas closes his eyes and sinks his teeth into Alex's neck...

Blood pours down Alex's body and onto Nicholas's boots.

Alex's eyes open as he pulls the knife from behind his back...

He slices it up Nicholas' left side...

His hand clenches the bulletproof vest with his left hand and pulls it off Nicholas' back...

He throws the knife into the rotting wood next to him, cutting a second tripwire...

Nicholas' eyes flash open.

On either side of Alex two thick wooden poles catapult up from the dirt, framing him like a doorway.

Nicholas throws Alex to the ground and looks at the wooden poles.

A huge log swings down by two ropes, slamming the stake trap into Nicholas' back.

Nicholas looks down at Alex.

NICHOLAS

How did you know?

Alex pulls his pant leg up and taped to it is the other bible. He rips it off and opens it, revealing another needle and vial.

ALEX

You didn't need this.

Nicholas' face goes slack, a single tear runs down his cheek...

Alex looks at Nicholas for a moment, then stabs the vial's cork and draws the holy water into the needle...

He stabs himself in the neck and squeezes the plunger...

And leans back against the fallen tree...

Lightning flashes...

The sky opens up...

And drenches Alex with a pouring rain.

FADE TO
BLACK.

Vita

Michael Ryan was born in Newton, New Jersey in 1975 and received his B.A. in Communication from William Paterson University.