

The Ambiguity Of Shadows

A textual analysis of the form & content
of the video major:



December Duet

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(1993-96)

INTRODUCTION

Preparing this Adobe PDF (Portable Document Format), for internet distribution, has afforded me the opportunity to revisit my Bournemouth University video major 'December Duet' (1996).

Be assured that what follows, aside from reformatting and proofing (which is always best practise), is the essay that I submitted for final examination in 1996. On reflection the quality of writing leaves much to be desired! However, many of the observations, which were made at the time, have been prescient!

Since 1996 digital production has taken centre stage in the majority of films (and television) sourced from Hollywood. None more so than those from the pen of George Lucas!

As a generality, digital media production has sidelined traditional methodologies. With the advent of DV (Digital Video) the entire production process can now leverage the powerful tools associated with DTP (Desktop Publishing) such as Adobe's seminal application Photoshop (and the consumer-variant Elements). Thereby facilitating a non-destructive, non-linear workflow. A seismic shift to a paradigm that embraces vertical integration.

There's a greater transparency in the means of production and distribution when utilising a digital pipeline. For example Apple Computer's trendsetting Final Cut Pro (and Express) offers an unprecedented level of creative control; the director and editor can build a scene in complex layers (importing files from Photoshop with transparent integration) - adding backgrounds, CGI, sound and actors (deriving footage from different takes). In addition to this, colour control, lighting and image resolution are creative options that can be explored and manipulated at will. The finished product can then be outputted to film, DVD, video game or as internet and mobile phone content. And these digital assets can be managed from a global intranet/internet database. All of this can be produced in-house, which is not without its repercussions.

Whilst this may provide a potent palette from within which to work. Due to the technical necessity to shoot 'live action' actors against a blue screen. This has, for the most part, compromised an actor's ability to interact with the environment of the story and, by extension, each other. Watching the 'Star Wars' prequels (1999-2005) the viewer could envisage the following scene:

"What's my motivation in this scene?" - Actor

"Don't worry about that! We'll add it in post production!" - Director

In essence it eloquently surmises Hollywood's 'dismantling' of solid acting and storytelling in favour of 'crowd pleasing' moments - a notion that has haunted mainstream American film for decades. If this sounds dismissive, then it isn't meant to. I have great admiration for the artists and software technicians that labour tirelessly on these projects. 'Star Wars' (1977) ignited an enduring passion for film and the arts.

Stanley Kubrick's long gestating 'A.I.' (2001) was brought to fruition by Steven Spielberg and the magicians at ILM (Industrial Light & Magic). The irresistible mix of consummate direction, cast, and crew culminates in a beguiling, thematically rich and rewarding postmodern retelling of the 'Pinocchio' myth.

The same could be said of director Robert Zemeckis, whose passion for the medium arguably equals that of Spielberg (who discovered him). Zemeckis has produced a solid stream of commercial successes; from the 'Back to the Future' trilogy (1985-1990), through the technically ambitious 'Contact' (1997) to the recent Hitchcockian homage 'What Lies Beneath' (2000) and 'Cast Away' (2001).

The 'cinema of the summer blockbuster' (a genre cemented with the release of 'Jaws' in 1975) is analogous to a roller coaster ride. However, the best the genre has to offer contains characters that rarely become subordinate to the FX and the human drama is augmented by ingenious 'slights of hand'.

Cinema at its best, like any art form, is an immaculate deception. A deception, that we the audience, willingly and enthusiastically embrace whilst on the rides of our lives.

DECEMBER DUET: An Analysis of the short film. From initial conception to the Screen

Historical influences

Inspired by **Orson Welles'** - Citizen Kane (1941); Gone With The Wind; Casablanca (1942); Alice In wonderland; Dracula; Frankenstein; Beauty And The Beast; The Tales of the **Brothers Grimm**; **Ian Fleming's** James Bond; Doctor Who seasons 13 and 14 (1975 and 76 respectively) **John Landis'** - Thriller (1983); **Tim Burton's** - Edward Scissorhands (1990). **Richard Wagner** - The Ring. **Holst** - The Planets. Saturday morning animations. **Michael Jackson's** - Dangerous album. Hours spent viewing the latest adventures of 'D.C Comics' Batman and Superman. Gender Bender episode of the X-files (1993). MTV. **Joe Pytka's** - Pepsi commercial Dreams (1992). American / British and European popular art. Film noir. Fine art. Graphic design. Calligraphy. **Joseph Campbell's** - The Hero of a Thousand Faces. And Faustian mythology...

The creative impetus

"Within the depths of insanity, a castle composed of intricate illusion. Within it's grounds there lived an alien hero, forgotten in the chaos of madness and confusion..."

- Darkville

"December Duet" (formerly refereed to as "Darkville" during initial preproduction) began life, like all works of art, as an idea or concept. In this particular case, the idea was a short piece of pros / poetry. It was a sociological allegory concerning autobiographical themes structured around and underpinned by physical handicap, rejection and alienation. The need to transcend such superficial and tenuous labels. And discover personal identity. In other words it was derived from a need. This need being catharsis through creativity.

In much the same way as American film director **Tim Burton** (Batman 1989). I relate to and am compelled to study/create characters that are outsiders, misunderstood and misperceived, misfits very often encumbered by some degree of duality. They operate on the fringes of their particular society, tenuously tolerated but pretty much left to their own 'deviant' devices.

I then developed that initial idea, with a friend, into a short trailer for A-level 'Media Studies'. "Darkville" (1991). A basic voice-over, reciting the original poem, connected a disjointed montage of images and music. It was always my intention to create a pop-baroque video short, that would be an eclectic mix of disparate artistic diversity. From fine art paintings, exotic computer animation to classical music interwoven into a pop video narrative. An elaborate canvas. Largely inspired by the 1980's videos of **Madonna** (specifically those directed by **David Fincher** whose most recent and acclaimed work is the film Seven (1995)), and most prominently **Michael Jackson's** - Thriller (**John Landis** 1983).

Music would be the central premise from which the drama (conflict) is both introduced and resolved. The story encapsulated elements and resonance's of popular mythologies, that have interested me, such as that of Phantom Of The Opera, Beauty and the Beast and Dracula. The early script was more revealing of the scriptwriter and was in many ways too exclusive for a larger audience. This problem was identified by having the script read by several individuals not involved in the production to ascertain how effective the story was developing. Their reaction revealed the inaccessibility of the story. It had to appeal to a wider audience.

So, I began to make changes, not so much in a thematic sense, but in the visual contexts that the action would take place in. Also the main character's obsession for fine art would replace the original musician role. It must be stressed that we did work this through together. And at no point was there a change made for changes sake, despite my occasional tampering.

After collaborating with **Nick Mackintosh-Smith**, a third year scriptwriter, on my video minor (which was based on the premise of doubt) - "Ventolin Catharsis": this dealt with the central theme of enigma / ambiguity; architectural space; objects and the ways in which individuals interact with their environment. Essentially it was a semiological and thereby post-modern undertaking. We mutually decided to work together again.

Whilst the video minor may have suffered from a lack of camera action or movement within the frame, largely influenced by my own personal artistic preferences and sensibilities - an academic background consisting of fine art, graphic design and B & W photography. I was particularly satisfied with the juxtaposition of illustrations, colour (which served as a means of violently separating the character identities), actor movement and minimalist / bau haus set design. This was in order to facilitate, and to compose, a mise-en-scene of brutally fragmented and conflicting identities.

But I purposely chose to use the minor as an opportunity to rediscover and develop my desired visual style and the means in which to convey that. And to ascertain its strengths and weaknesses. During the previous two years, during group undertakings, with which I have no aversion to, my ideas have been subject to curtailing by others who did not share or sympathise with my perhaps highly individualistic style. This did lead to considerable apathy and disappointment at times. I did, on occasion, wonder whether my decision to depart from fine art / graphic design and specialise in a more collaborative art form was a wise choice. Certainly the omission of illustrative art as part of the course, did depress me. But I was aware of the course content when I joined.

The 'minor' was subsequently entered into the "Cardiff film festival", held in March of this year. I was very enthusiastic about that and the possibilities it might encourage.

I also became, again, more aware of the issue of compromise. I realised that my preference for cinema would, at times, be unsuitable for television. And leave me out of my depth. I prefer the cinematic ratio of 16:9 as opposed to television's, visually restrictive, 4:3. As a stylistic effect, more than a technical one, I always include distinctive black bars, during post production editing. The accuracy of composition is achieved by masking the monitor, during on location recording, with gaffer tape. Artificially creating a cinematic "Landscape". It has been well documented that the human eye has a golden section (viewing ratio) which is more pleasing to the brain than that provided by television. Technical limitations of video such as its sensitivity to light effecting the depth of contrast, excluded the possibility of shooting directly onto B & W stock.

It would have been a great opportunity to have shot this production using a technique called Deep Focus Photography - Citizen Kane's cinematographer **Douglas Trumbull**. Yet I did want too at least imitate the methodology.

Whilst it has been copiously argued that the television frame does afford greater intimacy and, perhaps, more insight into its subject matter by academics and critics alike. Cinema does allow for architectural considerations, the environment that surrounds the individual and their relationship to that. And is always, by the means in which it is mediated, larger than life.

Artistic motivations: The aesthetics of December Duet

Essentially I am fascinated by 'surface' facade. Artifice - contrived reality. Faces; forms; design; colour; architecture and textures. To describe this in more depth I shall draw particular attention to the visual arts. It might also be a useful idea to take an example of the relatively recent (historically speaking) cinema adoption of postmodernism. Postmodernism is a broadly ambiguous and contentious notion that encompasses a diverse range of media and sociological forms and phenomena. A cultural theory that is said to have come after modernism. Ostensibly it is the search for meaning.

If one looks at contemporary cinema examples such as **Disney's Toy Story** (1995) or **Warner's Batman Forever** (1995). There is a, distinctive, stylised, similarity between them. They are neon-chromatic, super reflective, primary dyed visages. And, perhaps, toy-like simplicity. Outre-risque director **Tim Burton** (who started his career as a Disney animator) is the quintessential example of this sub genre. Every frame is exquisitely composed. Backgrounds become seductive paintings and tapestries which are crossed by silhouettes (support actors). And in the foreground the main character/s are portrayed in porcelain perfection. Perhaps, it could be argued, that the issue of telling a story, within particular sub genres, has been surpassed and made subservient by the pursuit of aesthetic beauty.

"A visual language for a visually educated audience "

- Images which unashamedly, albeit with naked vulnerability, excel in their synthetic representations. It is also sociologically revealing of contemporary Western society and culture i.e. what is in "vogue" within popular culture at the time.

Other practitioners of surface brilliance, within mainstream cinema, who have influenced me, invariably, include **David Fincher** Alien 3 (1992), **James Cameron** The Terminator (1984), **David Lynch** Twin Peaks (1989), **Luc Besson** Leon (1994), **Jean Jaques Beineix** Betty Blue (1986), **Jan DeBont** Speed (1994), **Ridley Scott** Blade Runner (1982), **Terry Gilliam** The Fisher King (1991) and **Joel Schumacher** The Lost Boys (1987). It is an interesting anecdote that many of these aforementioned luminaries have fine art backgrounds. In the cases of both Fincher and Scott, commercials featured very prominently in their early careers. Fincher was partly responsible for the founding of 'Propaganda Films' (USA), in the 1980's, and has won innumerable awards. His most acclaimed pop promo material being **Madonna's** Express Yourself (1989); Oh Father (1989) and Vogue (1990) music videos. Essentially these were stylish and inventive pastiches of American and European cinema history, in particular extensive references are made to **Fritz Lang's** Metropolis (1926) and **Orson Welles** Citizen Kane (1941) and the halcyon musicals of **MGM**.

The 1980's phenomena **MTV** (Viacom) also had an influence on me. In particular the culture of the animated links which were very experimental, in terms of the media that was employed and the narrative structures. **MTV Animations** (199) The Maxx and Aeon Flux are of particular interest. These alternative animations dealt with characters of a deviant nature. Maxx a huge, homeless super hero who roams the murky alleyways of NYC and the bizarre terrain of the outback. And Aeon Flux. A leather-clad heroine who charges through a futuristic landscapes full of deceptive appearances They are the antithesis of the mainstream value laden Superheros emerging from the publishing giants such as Marvel and D.C Comics.

The stop-motion productions undertaken by **Henry Selick** who directed **Tim Burton's** The Nightmare Before Christmas (1993). His current work includes **Disney's** James and the Giant Peach (1996).

After completing post production on "Ventolin Catharsis". I decided to attempt to undertake realising my ambitions for "Darkville".

We deliberated at length, as how best to go about this. All I had, as previously mentioned, at that time, was a series of sketches, pieces of poetry and pros. This I had been working on over several years in my spare time, from which to compose a more developed and linear story. **Nick** also had an artistic desire to further develop themes of his own. And we were able to creatively combine these complimentary themes into an entirely new and original piece. Symbiosis between the collaborators.

I had very definite visual and emotive ideas, but no linear narrative in which to frame and convey them to a wider audience. In many ways I am perhaps more predisposed towards silent movie making and mimetics. My admiration for pop videos and commercials also may have been an influencing factor. The limitation of expression caused by the absence of diegetic sound, forces the "silent" director to describe, to depict, to narrate in pictures, enabling the silent film to develop a powerful on screen magic. However, whilst I am not a slave to audience demographics, or seek approval from them. I did not want to entirely alienate the audience by my own artistic shortcomings, a factor that may have, at times, afflicted "Ventolin Catharsis". And thus dilute my very personal message.

During the development of the script I decided to only retain, in it's original form, **Nick's** poignant poem about "Bats", which would, I hoped, be read by one of the austere actors who had officially played "Batman". I refocused the story towards visual arts rather than music. And concentrated on the characters rather than just allegorical themes.

The story's genesis

I have always wanted to write; illustrate and direct a story about the sociological processes that have defined me and, in turn, my own reaction to them.

I wanted to examine that autobiographical theme within the context of a drama. Which would encapsulate the signs that hold meaning for me. This constituted as including icons

from childhood and teenage years. A time regarded by sociologists and psychologists as having the most influence on an individual's socialisation within society.

The lead character would serve as a frame of reference for **Bob Kane's** "Batman". Since childhood I have fondly followed the innumerable incarnations of this enduring pop icon. Although I have rarely read the comic material, with the exception of the "Knightfall" (1992) saga. From the humorous camp of **Adam West's** televisual portrayal through to the, arguably, more semiological, **Michael Keaton** interpretation, in Batman and, its first sequel, Batman Returns. Whilst the iconography of Batman has undergone considerable reinvention, over the decades since its creative inception. It is this very factor that has defined and imbued the character with such longevity and also, as a product of pop culture, been so socially revealing of the times.

Obviously I could not, nor desired to, overtly undertake a direct "Batman rip-off". But I could create a character that existed within a similar social context. In an environment that was neither good or evil. And thus serve as a personal and affectionate homage. Yet at the same time not be so literal, as it would still originate from personal and autobiographical genesis. The character of **Lewis** also draws inspiration from **Bram Stoker's** Dracula (1897).

The story synopsis

It is an unconventional love story which spans two years. 1997 through 1999. There is a duality to the main characters relationship. One of the characters has deliberately shut themselves off in an environmental sense. The other had fastidiously crafted a new identity for themselves. And it is this issue which sets up the conflict. A deeply disturbing, deeply psychological tale, full of pent-up frustrations, and characters replete with serious personality disorders. There is a violent struggle for supremacy in which the female character, who at the beginning of the story is portrayed as a victim, eventually triumphs. And the guy doesn't get the girl.

Casting the actors

In much the same way as I have a distinctive visual sensibility. I wanted that style to be reflected in all the elements of the production. The casting of actors was to be no exception.

The Narrator

I had always envisaged that the narration would be read by a male actor who possessed a classic and mellifluous baritone voice. I have always admired the work of **James Earl Jones** since the Star Wars Trilogy. And had recently listened to the "Batman: Knightfall" radio play (1994), broadcast on BBC Radio 1, in which **Bob Sessions** had portrayed the character of Batman / Bruce Wayne. He has also appeared in **Clive Barker's** film - Nightbreed (1990) in which he portrayed a Sheriff. I was able to contact **Bob**, direct, via a very generous professional contact **Dirk Maggs**. I had previously interviewed **Dirk**, who had directed / produced the Batman: knightfall radio drama for BBC Radio 1 FM, during the second year of the course. This was regarding an audio documentary about "The adaptation of comics into radio drama". **Bob** was extremely generous and kindly donated his time to the piece.

The Lead Actors

The two main protagonists would look and act alike. Essentially be extensions of each other. Their relationship was based, albeit as an analogy, on the precarious and dysfunctional romance between 'Catwoman' and 'Batman' from Batman Returns (1992). And also inspired by the relationship between the young popular American actors **Winona Ryder** of Heathers fame (1989) and **Johnny Depp** whom meticulously portrayed the misunderstood and bewildered Edward Scissorhands (1990) to beguiling effect. Both are, in image and career terms, associated with strong individual roles. That of the alienated outsider. Both actors have been described as being part of the American, media created, phenomena known as "Generation X" (1994). An allegedly apathetic subculture of twenty somethings who grew up, during the 1980's, under Republicanism.

The characters would be linked by visual signs. **Eleanor's** tear drop tattoo and **Lewis'** scar. Although their respective facial markings would be on opposite sides of the face. When they looked at each other the marks would be adjacent thus creating the feeling of a looking glass. And a semiological connection.

In the androgynous reality and geography of their relationship, the mirror looks back. A facsimile or simulacrum. Within the characters of **Lewis** and **Claire / Eleanor** is the embodiment of the post-modern crisis of identity where the self loses coherence becoming a "split, fragmented, schizophrenic" duality.

When I casted the lead actors too play the respective parts. I gave very careful consideration too their appearance and disposition.

Lewis

Robert Miles, who plays the tragic figure of Lewis, possesses quintessential good looks. A square jawed hero. However. This time the hero had fallen from grace. A fallen angel as it were. An amalgam of **Michael Keaton**, **Robert DeNiro** and **Christopher Walken**. **Robert's** background in theatre brought a strong personality to the screen. Such is the nature of theatre that actors must inherently perform larger than life. Such an assuredly melodramatic performance would be vital in conveying **Lewis'** fantastical character. He is, after all, rather tragic and fatalistic. It is as if he has been cursed to a horrible fate ala 'Faust'. Yet. There is a nobility to **lewis**, as he tries to right a wrong from his past. But inevitably it goes awry.

Claire/Eleanor

Played by **Joanna O'Connor**. She brought too the part an innocence and vulnerability. That vulnerability helped to emphasise . Of course it was an inherently problematic undertaking. How too convincingly portray the duality of **Claire/Eleanor** , with the same actress, and still mark the distinction between them. So I took the greatest strength of the medium - the visuals. Invariably **Joanne's** appearance would be the most effective means of delineating the difference. So in the colour drained role of **Claire** she looks repressed, underdeveloped sexuality, almost androgynous. As **Eleanor** there is a dramatic juxtaposition. She is dressed in vibrant, shining, attire. And has the dramatic tattoo. Ultimately her character represents the notion of repressed memories. She is a metaphor for a mask. The character of **Claire/Eleanor** also draws comparisons with the character of Alicia, Batman (1989), played by **Jerry Hall**. That of only existing as a piece of art.

The art serves as a character in its own right. It embellishes and underscores narrative themes, that are denoted, exclusively in a visual representation. Acting as a form of mythology.

A change of main title

After much deliberation both on a personal level and with other contributors involved in the production, most notably the fine artist. "Darkville" was renamed, by me, to "December Duet" (alliteration) - as I felt it was much more specifically related to an evocation of the contents. Obviously December contains inherent cultural significance. Christmas - religion, family, childhood et al. And also December is the final calendar month - implies the pivotal moment of the relationship between the two protagonists. An ending of a chapter in their lives. That their relationship has decayed.

One influence, was that this production had become as much **Nick's**, as it was mine. And that the audience would already have a much clearer idea of what to expect, as it would be clearly expressed within the title. Also another motivation for the change in title was, that "Darkville" was invariably much more about ideas and couldn't be satisfactorily described or evoked as existing as one thing. That representing it in video form would be too narrow a description. It is numerous elements. Perhaps better suited to a production methodology or portfolio. And perhaps, most revealing, is a deeply personal endeavour, like a drawing in which I collaborate with and rely on no one else. But rely, literally, on self. "Darkville" became the location for the story. As though "December Duet" was one of many tales from this dark and enigmatic place.

Unique signatures and emblems: An auteurist approach

Where would **Disney** be without **Mickey Mouse** or **Chaplin** without the cane? Such powerful images have become culturally ubiquitous in popular Western culture.

Just as there is individual handwriting, unique to a person. There are also unique filmic styles derived from ideological preferences. As described earlier, I have very definite and unique visual preferences when engaging in art and want to embellish my video productions with the same motif. Manipulate the frame, however unethical that might seem, within certain circumstances, such as 'Fly on the wall' documentary.

The opening sequence (prologue) is completely computer generated. This was in order to set about establishing the surreal context and overall tone of the piece. The ethos of which is a 3 - Dimensional, primary coloured, graphic novel (a comic book with more substantive themes). Also it was largely inspired by **David Lynch's** use of computer animation in **Michael Jackson's** - Dangerous teaser trailer (1991). The beginning of Citizen Kane. And **PIXAR's** pioneering work on **Disney's Toy Story** (1995).

The story begins with cold neon blue text "Can you forgive the fallen?..". It is a question being posed directly to the audience thereby seeking to actively involve them. It imitates the now famous beginning of each chapter of the **Star wars** trilogy "A long time ago, in a galaxy, far far away..." Then, the title, "December Duet", dramatically rendered in Germanic script, appears. This was in order to evoke a Gothic and decadent sensibility ala **Mary Shelley's** seminal novel Frankenstein . The text is in red to connote the notion of danger. This title opens up like a book / toy box to reveal the "Darkville" location. Fantasy.

The sequence, that then follows, is designed to lavishly illustrate the narrative contents of the story. And the protagonist's material artefacts. It is in the form of a child's pop-up book. Something which has a very intimate and revelatory essence. It draws inspiration from the "Dangerous" (1991) album cover art, by **Mark Ryden** (this was to have been discovered by the appearance of the album cover in the next frame. This shot was later dropped due to copy write reasons. And, in hindsight, it was a little too heavy handed, unnecessary, and encumbered the narrative). And also "Citizen Kane" (1941).

Due to budgetary limitations computer animation negated the need for an exuberant set without compromising my, perhaps, audacious and unwieldily vision. I could actually delineate the symbols of the piece with greater control. I approached **Jeze**, a third year BACVA student about contributing to the production. He has had his work screened on the local ITV franchise Meridian. His animation was shown on their Free Screen slot. And I knew that he was an accomplished animator. If I had possessed the required mathematical skills I may have undertaken the same degree. **Jeze** then interpreted these into the medium without any loss of the original. It also serves as a poignant tribute to set designers **Anton Furst** - The Company Of Wolves (1983) and **Douglas Trumbull** - 2001: A Space Odyssey (1969). Albeit one rendered in cyberspace.

The sequence begins, in the cliché gothic tradition, at a gate. Above which are the words "Darkville". The gates are closed and the number 97 is written on them (later it is revealed that this is the year that **Eleanor** became **Claire** and **Lewis'** fall from grace) This is a reference to **Bram Stoker's** - Dracula (1897); **James Cameron's** - Terminator 2 (1991) (The year 1997 is considered a year of impending doom). And **Michael Jackson's** Dangerous album cover (Numerology - destiny). It also pays homage to Star Wars' 20th anniversary - this was the first film that I saw at the cinema, as a child. And finally. On a very personal level. 1997 marks 20 years since an incident, in my life, that left me with a physical handicap.

The camera moves back to reveal a much larger setting. We see **Lewis'** "Castle of Intricate Illusion", for the first time. A dark Disney-esque design, not unlike the company's logo, but seen through **Alice's** looking glass. A pair of female eyes stair out, enigmatically, from the night sky, intermittently, illuminated by lightning. These eyes are actually digitised from a picture of American actress **Winona Ryder**. This image also includes the tear drop tattoo, which, it is later revealed, belongs to the character of **Eleanor**.

The gates are blown inwards - to imply forced entry. Also fragility. That something is being deliberately hidden and is about to be forcibly revealed. Imbue the piece with enigma and mystery. If the gates had opened outwards it would have encouraged the subconscious notion, within the audience, of a welcoming experience. This wasn't my intention. I wanted to

place the audience into a hostile and alien situation.

During the period in which I undertook to transfer the Beta rushes to VHS, post the shoot, which had the computer animator, **Jez**, present. We discussed the increased symbolic importance of the ring within the narrative. This was the result of improvisation during the shoot itself. Although the ring was originally intended to be the device with which **Lewis** reminds **Claire** of her past. The ring motive was developed to symbolise love and its destructive nature i.e. **Lewis'** scar. Also. I realised that the ring embodied elements of the ring mythology from **J.R.R. Tolkien's** - The Lord Of The Rings , in which there existed one powerful ring with which to rule all. And it also serves as a salute to composer **Richard Wagner**.

I felt that an animated closing title sequence would be an ideal way to book end the story. So the golden ring was to become the link between the end of the live action and the motif for the concluding credits. The snow was reintroduced to recapitulate the theme of the story being a fairy tale. These two elements imply warmth (love) - the ring. And cold (isolation) - the snow. And ultimately the duet.

The end credits also serve as an analogy for the characters relationship. Snow invariably represents **Lewis**. And the ring represents **Eleanor**. The ring leaves the screen to the right mirroring **Eleanor's** exit from the previous scene. A silver spider then falls, engulfed, in a whirlwind of angry snow. The spider represents Lewis' anger, and the emotionless / sterile world that he inhabits due too his disposition. The simplicity of the sequence encapsulates the fairy tale enchantment of childhood innocence. A violent juxtaposition of the brutality of the early narrative.

During this sequence I chose to use a ballad "The Power Of Love" performed by the 80's pop group **Frankie Goes To Hollywood** (a ballad would not detract from the visuals used. Especially as the melody does not change). This was in order to firstly recapitulate the story and **Lewis'** eternal love for **Eleanor**. Secondly it was used to underscore my efforts to make this as filmic, in a hollywood ideological sense, as possible. Not unlike the use of "Kiss From A Rose" performed by pop artist **Seal**, which appeared in Batman Forever (1995).

There are inherent audience expectations regarding the use of pop songs, arguably pioneered by The **James Bond** movies. That this product of Capitalist popular culture brings them closer to the shared experience of a movie. That they can own a part of it, whether in the form of merchandise such as soundtracks through to action figures. And by actively participating in the active consumption of such artefacts, the audience can identify themselves with particular genres, social groups. It also became a great opportunity to gain some practical insight/experience of the mechanics involved in obtaining permission to use a commercial song. Although the contract currently prevents, potential exhibition on broadcast television, of this version of the drama. The practical skills learnt and contacts made, make up for this.

The animator who worked on the piece wanted to collaborate with a video director; mutual benefit - showcase. The sequence already existed on a data base, within the animation department. Once permission was granted to use the basic framework, I set about describing the look of the segment, with detailed reference to the original description contained in the script. It also serves, like the 'ventolin inhaler' seen in "Ventolin Catharsis", as a form of leitmotif or signature. Not unlike the use of snow in **Tim Burton's** films. Only this time it is a much greater extrapolation of the ideas. The end. Portrait of an artist.

December Duet's use of diagetic and non-diagetic sound design

"How much do we see when we hear? How much do we hear when we see?"

- American film composer **John Williams**. From the liner notes of Star Wars - The Empire Strikes Back album.

Why use sound when, surely, pictures, alone, can tell the full story? Obviously television and cinema are, inherently, about visuals. But an important aspect of these mediums is also sound. Often implicitly ignored by audiences. Its' there, but, on an almost subconscious level. Sound masks editing, jump cuts and the passing of time. Without sound, it would be, arguably, impossible for the director to suspend audience disbelief. That what they are watching just isn't real. And as a result the audience will have no means with which to

relate and engage the characters and the story. In essence sound underscores the illusion of reality.

Whereas the means in which pictures are mediated to an audience hasn't technically progressed (apart from a few rare exemptions / attractions such as **IMAX** Cinemas and 'La Geode', in Paris), commercially, for some time, due to the inherently vast development costs. And the unwillingness of theatres to embrace such undertakings, until the costs come down. The way in which sound is exhibited has undergone constant evolution. The advent of **Dolby Stereo**, showcased in *Star Wars* (1977), made such a cultural impact on movie making. And latterly domestically. It created an entire industry devoted to post production sound. This has filtered down to television, in recent years.

Who can forget what a dazzling contribution **John William's** epic compositions for The Star Wars Trilogy (1977 - 83) made to the on screen F/X and action. Would the films have been so highly praised if it had been unaccompanied by music and ground breaking sound design engineered by **Eric Tomlinson** and **Ben Burt**?

I wanted to convey my affection for beautifully recorded soundtracks, both diagetic and none. Essentially create a stereo soundtrack to compliment the visuals. I wanted to apply the knowledge that I had learnt from the previous two years whilst doing audio and video. The culmination of which was last summer's (1995) integrated project. **Simon**, who undertook the role of PPS, sympathised with me. He fastidiously sculpted a rich sound stage which depicted, clearly, the vocals; sound F/X and musical score. We were able to draw a very fine line between complimenting the visuals and sounds. The temptation to over do one element, at the expense of the other, was avoided. It never descended into OTT melodrama. It lent a 3-Dimensionality to the 2-D environment of the screen. And also it adds another important element, that of directing the audiences emotions. I personally believe that you cannot have good visuals without good sound. It seems such a loss of creative potential, and a human sense, to apply effort to the visuals (in video) and give little, or no, consideration to the sound design.

During post production sound, sounds can be repaired and smoothed. Voices, crowds and additional dialogue etc can be added via A.D.R (Automatic Dialogue Replacement). This technique is used extensively in film / television production. A recent example is the movie **Speed** (1994), in which sound design takes the action to a new level of experience and audience participation. Foley adds footsteps, additional sound needs (not normally accessible during location recording).

Non-diagetic

For this production I had always desired and envisaged an emotive classical score. Rendered in the tradition of American film composers such as **Eric Wolfgang Korngold** who pioneered the swashbuckler scores for early Hollywood, up to present day practitioners such as **Danny Elfman** and **Jerry Goldsmith**. Who, themselves, had drawn inspiration from **Tchaichovsky** and other baroque composers of the 19th Century.

Although in the original story, there was to have been a song with which to resolve the drama. The composer decided to renege on his commitment, which, initially had an adverse affect on me. However. Whilst disillusioned, I submitted a script to a local art college for approval. It proved too be very productive. I auditioned two individuals who were very receptive to the story. Their enthusiasm was consolidated when I showed them the opening computer animation.

Whilst they worked, independently, on scenes. The end result was that both the characters of **Lewis** and **Claire/Eleanor** had, their own, individual and highly stylised scores. This further delineated and embellished their respective identities. This musical form is refereed to as Leitmotif. This briefest of signature tunes, which can be orchestrated any which way, was pioneered by the 19th Century virtuoso **Richard Wagner**. **Wagner's** most famous accomplishment was *The Ring* - four full-length operas that depicted dwarfs, wizards, dragons, teachers, philosophy and gold.

And this approach to composition has been used, extensively, by cinematic composers to signify, a character, a prop or an emotion.

Diagetic

This describes sounds that exist within the scene i.e. footfalls, cars passing by etc. I wanted the sounds to be as surreal as possible in order to create the illusionary atmosphere of December Duet. To embellish the atmosphere and delineate new textures and dramatic underscore.

In conclusion: An analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of all the stages of production

The luxury of having more preproduction time certainly enabled me to explore and develop ideas, that may have had no time to germinate if I had shot the major earlier. Certainly the computer animation, which I feel is integral and vitally instrumental in setting up the fairy tale context, would have had to be abandoned. And the piece would have suffered. The recording of **Bob's** narration, in London, would have been impractical and costly if it hadn't been made during the month of May. However, I am not the world's best planner and did leave some of the crucial planning elements up to the last minute. I am not an organiser, in terms of time. And the dissertation did have an adverse affect. I wasn't always able to successfully balance the two ongoing projects.

The short time in which I could post produce this has been quite stressful. Especially as several new Optima errors were discovered during off-line editing. Yes others will benefit for the bugs being identified. But at the expense of an individual's degree? At least the problem was corrected and on-lining eventually took place. Another problem, which occurred during the final dub, was that, inexplicably, time code was missing from a frame of footage. This meant that soundscape could not sync sound. However, **Simon** managed to overcome this problem.

Obviously economic determinants had a considerable affect on how the production would be facilitated and its eventual look. The notion of exotic locations, intricate and massive sets, would be invariably impractical and an impossibility. This was in no way a negative factor. In fact it highlighted the need to be innovative and creative within humble means. After all, the story was essentially about the two protagonists and their relationship between each other. The portrait would become all the more intimate. The audience not so distanced by the architecture.

This has been a very collaborative and highly enjoyable piece. One of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of this production is how very organic it was. It was constantly evolving throughout. The relationships that I made during the months leading up to and including the major's shoot and post production, both on a professional and personal level, have been very valuable. It has highlighted my acute interest in a career as a producer and working with others. I do not see myself, at present, as a director of actors. I don't feel accomplished enough to communicate my visions to actors. I wish that there had been more acting workshops dealing with people rather than how to record them. They are not simply objects.

Although I am very pleased with the piece, visually. I do realise that it sometimes suffers, severely on a story telling level. It isn't perhaps always very engaging. But its 'simplicity', I argue, is ideal for the relative shortness of time available. I wish that I had spent more time on developing the script. Some of the exposition of the characters is lacking. The beginning scene is, perhaps, too ambiguous. Maybe I should have explained the reason why **Claire** was at **Lewis'** house. Yet, artistically, I prefer enigma, and don't always see the need to tell the audience everything. I would rather reveal the narrative through the use of visual and soundtrack montage. Thereby engaging in surrealism. And within the constraints of a 10 minute piece, I don't feel that I possess the skill to tell a complete and concise story. Inherently there just isn't the time to do so, within the manner in which I wish to tell it.

Perhaps, in hindsight, I should have told the story through montage. Keeping to the original idea of conveying moods and themes. Many of the individuals, that I have shown the production to, since its completion, have sighted that the piece works best when it is visually and aurally synchronous. And anti narrative, ala a pop video. Maybe my sensibility lends itself, as previously suggested, to commercials and pop promos. Certainly I wish to develop my writing skills in the future. And work with writers who are more adept at visual story telling. But, firstly, I want to further my interest in visuals and sound and that is the reason that I joined the course in the first place. I have learnt a lot whilst undertaking this degree.

So lastly. There is an undercurrent of violence running throughout the story. However. I argue that the use of violence in no way glorifies it! The fact that **lewis** loses **Eleanor** reaffirms this. And also fairy tales are, by their very nature, extremely violent. If the stories of the **Brothers Grimm** were to be adapted, literally, they would be replete with provocative and disturbing imagery. December Duet is a fable. It is allegorical.