

“Don’t Judge me. What would you do?” Dialogue through a youth-made film

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ABSTRACT

This visual essay focuses on the ways in which a 17-year-old First Nations filmmaker engages with complex issues of identity and belonging through his short film. Through a narrative analysis of the film along with the participant’s reflection, we highlight some of the complexities of youth-made media as well as how digital-mediated arts practices can carve out space for youth who feel marginalized in traditional institutional contexts. The educational value of film, as a form of digital media, allows both producers and viewers to engage in dialogue with the perspectives of people from different cultures and social classes.

Key Words: Digital media, film, marginalized youth, identity and belonging

INTRODUCTION

This visual essay focuses on the ways in which a 17-year-old First Nations filmmaker Adam¹ engages with complex issues of identity and belonging through his short film. Through a narrative analysis of the film along with the participant’s reflection, we intend to highlight some of the complexities of youth-made media as well as how digital-mediated arts practices can carve out space for youth who feel marginalized in traditional institutional contexts and are defined as young people facing serious difficulties and whose participation in society is inhibited by various barriers (e.g. unemployment, under-education, poverty, and abuse). Recognizing youth’s potential for using digital media as an expressive medium, we present Adam’s work through which he articulates a story of a young man named Tyler¹ who is faced with systemic barriers and personal challenges. This visual essay is created using the data we collected as embedded researchers in one of many new media programs and special projects offered by the Gulf Islands Television and Film School located in Canada, called First Nation Media Intensive Program.

FILM AS AN ART FORM


Two artistic characteristics of film listed by Nadaner (1981) as useful in teaching students about film are the filmmaker’s thoughtful use of the expressive aspects of film that enables him or her to articulate subtleties of human experience and work against stereotypes, and film’s capacity to represent perception as an ongoing process, expressed through the way the filmmaker selects images and arranges them in a rhythmic pattern over the course of film. Nadaner argues that these arrangements and patterns provide the viewer with insights into the forces that affect him or her. Nadaner’s (1981) focus was not on students as producers, but rather as receivers who would benefit greatly from being exposed to film art that is concerned with the perspectives of people from different cultures and social classes. In this case, we see his arguments are relevant for both youth producers and viewers of traditional and new media film. In the contemporary world that we live in today, film remains a major cultural form, as it was in the 20th century, and exhibits a renewed significance as the technology becomes accessible to non-professionals. Manovich (2001), for example, has argued that in new media, film has found a new life as the toolbox of the computer user. Cinematic means of perception, of connecting space and time, of representing human memory, thinking, and emotion have become a way of work and a way of life for millions in the computer age. Cinema’s aesthetic strategies have become basic organizational principles of computer software. The window into a fictional world of a cinematic narrative has become a window into a datascape. (p. 86)

In this visual essay, we seek to explore the significance of a youth film production as a cultural form. Through the process, youth are enabled to interpret and respond to their lived social spaces with creative agency in constantly evolving media ecologies, to become producers in this increasingly mediated and complex world (Castro & Grauer, 2010; Goodman, 2005, Jenkins, 2009; Kral, 2011).




STORY OF ADAM

The film created by Adam is about 12 minutes long and illustrates thick, complex layers that exceed the notion of youth media production as a form of self-expression. It is not a perfectly executed, highly entertaining blockbuster movie nor is it a documentary that captures the lives of real people; instead, it is a short film with technical flaws and what seems to be an overly dramatized plot made by a young filmmaker. What it provides, however, is a complex snapshot of the daily struggles of a young man, thereby creating a space for much-needed dialogue. As Adam explains in an interview,



I know most of people don't like this type of filmmaking that has violence and drugs, but this type of serious movies is my favorite because it really strikes my emotions. It represents a life of addiction in reality that I hope I discouraged people from this type of terrible lifestyle...

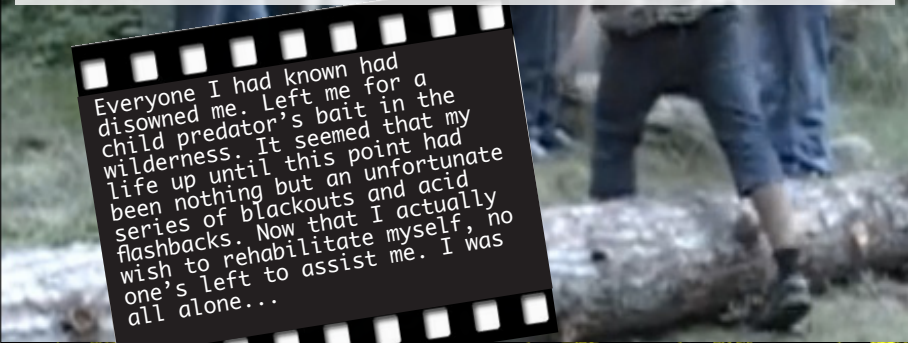


I feel the thing I've written this time. It's really autobiographical in a way. My story is about a Native person - I named him Tyler - who just got out of jail. His parents are deceased. His foster mom kicked him out. His girlfriend left, and all his friends ditched him... I came up with a story in a day and I've got much more into it...


It became personal to me because for a very long time, I struggled with drug and alcohol addictions and in a way, I still am. This story is about a person trying to overcome those addictions but nothing is working out for him. In the end, he just ends up drinking. It's personal to me. It's just about a Native trying to stay sober and trying to fight to stay sober and no one is helping him out. (Adam, personal communication, October 20, 2011)

In the first scene, the main character, Tyler (played by Adam) draws an X on each of his wrists as he narrates the story of how he got to the lowest of all low points in his life. His horrific life story is told in juxtaposition to the backdrop of a beautiful sunset; heavy metal music plays simultaneously and is almost as loud as his voiceover. As viewers fight to hear his words, they may internally debate whether to have condescension or sympathy towards a heavily intoxicated boy telling the viewers how he got to where he is. A surge of questions concerning the lives and culture of marginalized youth arises, such as, where could a struggling young person go within a social system that is structured to benefit those who follow its guidelines while ignoring or punishing those who don't? What are our responsibilities within such a society?

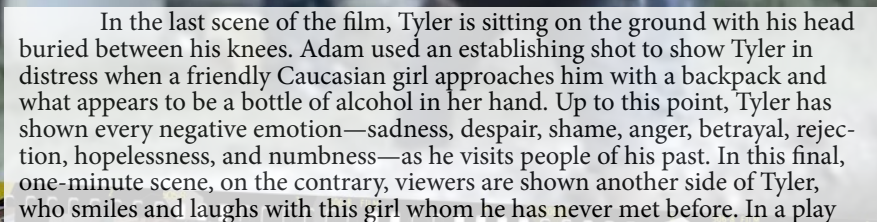
When the film transitions from the second to the third scene, the screen blacks out and we hear narration from Tyler again,



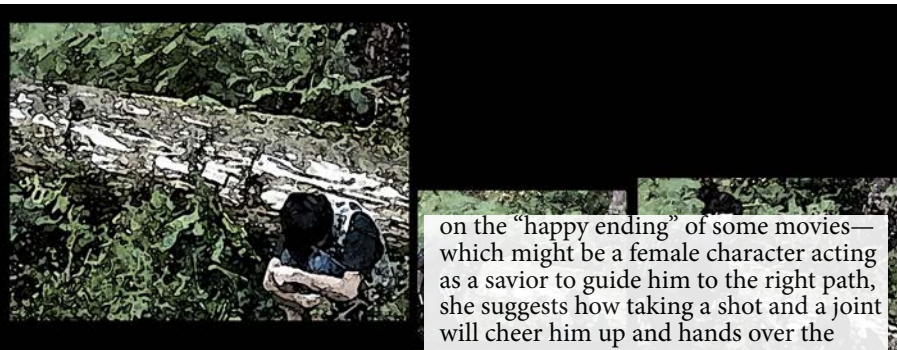
Everyone I had known had disowned me. Left me for a child predator's bait in the wilderness. It seemed that my life up until this point had been nothing but an unfortunate series of blackouts and acid flashbacks. Now that I actually wish to rehabilitate myself, no one's left to assist me. I was all alone...



The words Adam has chosen to use in the script, such as "child predator," are easy to miss when watching this film. Such a description, however, is quite significant in understanding how Adam sees Tyler as more of a vulnerable victim of this society rather than a young homeless alcohol and drug addict with a number of criminal records. Tyler portrays an image of a young man who, like many other youth in our society, has become a social outcast as a result of deviating away from the normal course of a structured society, but nevertheless struggles to fit in somewhere, somehow, like most of us.



In the last scene of the film, Tyler is sitting on the ground with his head buried between his knees. Adam used an establishing shot to show Tyler in distress when a friendly Caucasian girl approaches him with a backpack and what appears to be a bottle of alcohol in her hand. Up to this point, Tyler has shown every negative emotion—sadness, despair, shame, anger, betrayal, rejection, hopelessness, and numbness—as he visits people of his past. In this final, one-minute scene, on the contrary, viewers are shown another side of Tyler, who smiles and laughs with this girl whom he has never met before. In a play



on the “happy ending” of some movies— which might be a female character acting as a savior to guide him to the right path, she suggests how taking a shot and a joint will cheer him up and hands over the

bottle that she has been holding. Despite his earlier effort to rehabilitate himself when his old friend offered him a drink, the enticement from a girl he can laugh with, can find something in common with, and can share his “old comfort” with causes him to instantaneously fall back. After a short contemplation, Tyler grabs the bottle and gulps the drink down. As soon as he takes his mouth off the bottle, he spews out the last mouthful. Just then the screen freezes, and the final narration begins,



Either this ending's happy or sad, quite possibly the beginning of the end whichever you decide... but during this magic moment, I realized I can either fight to stay sober and rehab, commit to a life sentence of useless education and slave away for currency, “whities” or I can remain wasted ‘till death with this beautiful white woman. I tell you this straight edge life is much too boring. Don't judge me. What would you do?

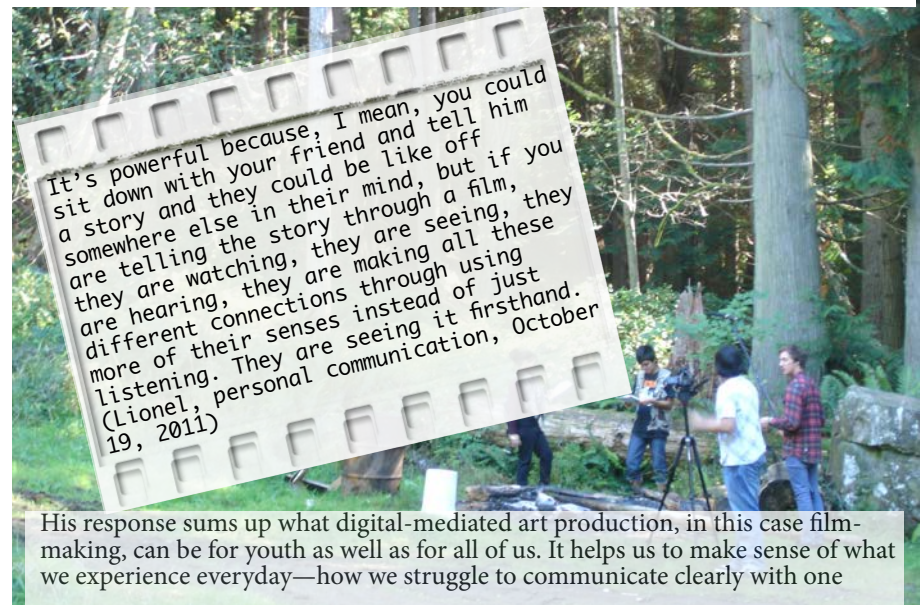
Adam does not create yet another Hollywood-type happy ending to his story. Instead, the film reflects the endless, vicious cycle that an aboriginal youth experiences, one in which he is so tightly entangled. Moreover, he obliquely remarks how white people, the “whities” who left him no choice but to live a wasteful life, have power over Tyler either way he chooses. Adam's film is an example of “how youth filmmakers use the medium of film to address complex issues of identity, particularly the construction of a viable social identity” (Halverson, 2010, p. 2372). In this case his understanding of his racial identity arguably acts as a deciding factor. The last line of the film, “Don't judge me. What would you do?” further complicates the conversation as it invites the viewers to question, to ponder, and to seek after our own interpretation of what we would do if we were Tyler. Moreover, it suggests examination of our social and cultural values as they intersect with those of people whose perspectives and backgrounds are different from ours.

Adam's film goes beyond appreciating his reflective narrative as he intentionally provokes us to confront our own values and cultural assumptions. Youth filmmaking in this way utilizes “the evocative and open-ended features of new media technologies [that] are not rooted in [a] singular space and place, but as de-territorialized forms offer[ing] unique possibilities for informal learning that can be actualized in non-linear ways” (Bazalgette, 2008, p.252). Intended or not, dramatized or not, based on a true story or not, what we may be able to agree upon is that filmmaking provides a unique opportunity for youth to express their ideas in ways that are distinctive for film. It provides limitless possibilities for stories within space and time to be created, paused, re-visited, fast-forwarded, and imagined, “creating encounters for both producers and viewers to experience differing ways of knowing” (Grauer, Castro & Lin, 2012, p.139). Such encounters prompt us to rethink about what it means to learn and teach in the world of today.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Adam's film serves as a good example of how youth are not only capable of producing a complex narrative that is multi-layered and rich, but also a space for dialogue through filmmaking. The process of filmmaking as well offers a source for artistic expression for youth like Adam. For example, script writing and storyboarding encourage youth to draw ideas from what they have experienced, seen on screens, or imagined. As they start to work as a team to produce a film, they are asked to bring their ideas to life by setting up the shooting locations, playing various roles, and participating in post-production process while constantly communicating and overcoming various struggles together, whether these may be technical, environmental, or physical. As a form of art, the process of filmmaking creates opportunities for the youth to negotiate and renegotiate what story to tell, how to tell it, and to whom. Such a process involves the constant tug and pull generated in filmmaking, which encourages youth filmmakers to engage in communication with their inner thoughts as well as with the intended audience.

Lionel¹, who operated the camera for Adam's film, commented on what filmmaking is for him,



It's powerful because, I mean, you could sit down with your friend and tell him a story and they could be like off somewhere else in their mind, but if you are telling the story through a film, they are watching, they are seeing, they are hearing, they are making all these different connections through using more of their senses instead of just listening. They are seeing it firsthand. (Lionel, personal communication, October 19, 2011)

His response sums up what digital-mediated art production, in this case filmmaking, can be for youth as well as for all of us. It helps us to make sense of what we experience everyday—how we struggle to communicate clearly with one

another, how we seek to be heard, and how we have become desensitized and/or over-sensitized to be able to listen.

The penetration of the Internet and mobile technologies has provided youth opportunities to experiment with the explosion of new modes and channels of communication and multimedia production at any time and anywhere as well as to explore complex issues of identity through the participatory aspect of digital media spaces (Halverson, 2010; Jenkins, 2008). For art educators, it signals a need to recognize and value the wide range of film genres, skills, knowledge, tastes, and collective effort that youth bring to media production. As Goldfarb (2002) states, it is important for youth to engage in a media production that “represents an emergent and distinct youth cultural aesthetic embodied by an original vision and style, irony, political savvy, and an immediate sense of young people’s urges to carve out independent spaces for exchanging ideas, images, and information” (p.138). The process of filmmaking as an artistic practice is a space that enables youth to explore the inextricable connections between lived social spaces and identity. It provides an avenue for them to communicate issues of their interest that are scarcely discussed in schools, an outlet through which they may tap into and share their emotional and aesthetic sensibilities. This is what Adam presented through his film. When encouraged with the tools to find voice through film, youth filmmakers will amaze us with what we can learn if we really look and listen.

NOTE

¹ Adam, Tyler, and Lionel are pseudonyms.

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