

# Running in the Rain

## Introduction

“Sonder: n. the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you’ll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk.” - John Koenig, *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*.

*Running in the Rain* consists of a 13 minute video which follows Jeff, the protagonist, as he drifts back and forth between his own consciousness and the consciousness of another person, Angela. Angela’s thought process is modelled after the psyche of a real person that I have a close personal relationship to. The purpose of this work is to use the conventional tactics of narratives in films and television as a means for eliciting empathy from an audience as they are placed within what is effectively an unconventional diary. *Running in the Rain* is a short film that explores the space between the longing to truly understand someone outside oneself, and recognizing that to do so is impossible.

This fictional exploration is a documentary of the human experience as it is perceived and showcased by conventional film and video. *Running in the Rain* documents the thoughts of a real person outside of myself, and then juxtaposes these thoughts with authentic, but intentional, and designed imagery of my own everyday life. Jeff is a fictional character modelled after myself, and played by myself, however he is not entirely me. Jeff was created for the purpose of driving the plot. This piece is meant to explore the gaps that video and sound allow us to bridge when it comes to relative cognition and the subjectivity of human experience. The two largest gaps that exist within this quandary are the effects of time and space. Only I could be where I was when I shot these scenes, just as only Angela can genuinely be there to have her experiences when she has them. The purpose of this film is to further draw out the question of why that is, and how close we can get to removing those barriers.

Video as a mode for communication primarily uses imagery and sound. Visuals and sounds can be used to draw out emotion in people. In asking these questions around subjective experience and relative cognition, I also ask questions about concepts such as empathy and understanding. If we cannot share in one another’s experiences, how can we possibly understand them enough to generate authentic and accurate feelings about each other and our experiences? That is the second question that this project explores.

## Contextual Discussion

In *Distinctly Human Umwelt?* discusses the ways in which organisms, particularly humans, experience their environments, and how those experiences are affected by the fact that we are the species we are, given the senses and abilities that we have (Merrell, 2001). *Running in the Rain* contains a variety of sensory oriented moments which are designed with the purpose of providing a spectrum of experiences from sensory overload to thin, sparse inputs.

There are many ways to affect the subconscious. An essay by Frances M. Adams and Charles E. Osgood called *A Cross-Cultural Study of the Effective Meanings of Color* (1973) reflects the findings of compiled results from 23 different research studies of high school aged

students and their opinions and associations with color. The conclusion was that though the associations with colors vary by region and country, they tend to be relatively predictable within each regional culture. In the United States, we have associations of temperature with colors which tend to modify our understanding of blues and reds, as well as our emotions. (Adams & Osgood 1973, 59) This means controlling the colors present in various parts of my film can control the mood of my audience, as well as their association with what is on screen.

Controlling human perception falls down to a few key factors: controlling their attention and controlling their emotions. Gabriele Wulf and Wolfgang Prinz published a paper in 2001 called *Directing Attention in 360-Degree Video* which concludes the findings of a series of experiments that were conducted in order to test the most effective methods for directing human attention within a virtual reality setting. (6)

The paper concluded that sounds were the dominant single cue when getting the attention of a viewer. A clap or a shout will quickly draw our attention to a specific point. After this, the next most effective method was pointing and gesturing toward objects. Other methods included using general motion as a means for drawing attention to a spot that is already within sight, or using directions to instruct viewers on where to look. In conclusion, perhaps naturally, the most effective methods of directing attention were the ones that included many or all of these things. In *Running in the Rain*, the voice of the narrator is used as an audio cue for shifts in mood, as well as visuals. The visuals of Jeff's dreams are then arranged in a way which focuses on movement tracking, drawing the audience's attention more easily during these visual experiences. Similarly to Jeff, the audience is supposed to be more engrossed in this secondary narrative than Jeff's Narrative.



***Moonlight* — 2016 (Cinematography by James Laxton, Directed by Barry Jenkins)**

*Moonlight* is a movie that follows the life of Chiron (Ashton Sanders), a quiet, gay black boy as he grows to be a man. This movie uses three separate color palettes for most of its scenes, each of which dominates a specific portion of his life. His story is told from a portion of his childhood, to a portion of his adolescence and eventually a portion of his adulthood.

*Running in the Rain* uses the same color change over time but it also uses very different palettes. The color of Jeff's world begins overly saturated with reds and oranges. As he begins to

experience Angela's life, he does not have a clear view of it. The colors and images are distorted and they do not move fluidly. Her world also lacks in saturation and color entirely, feeling more bleak and dreary. As Jeff becomes more immersed in her world he begins to lose some connection to his own life. Subtly, the color and warmth within each scene in his home is lost over time while clarity and fervor arise within scenes of Angela's thoughts.



***Us* — 2019 (Directed by Jordan Peele)**

*Us* is a thriller which follows the character Adelaide Wilson (Lupita Nyong'o) and her family, who are attacked by a group of mysterious doppelgängers. These doppelgängers represent alter egos, and over time it becomes clear that Adelaide may not entirely remember how she got her current life. *Us* uses a series of memory sequence scenes which remind Adelaide of her past. These scenes drove some of the decisions I made in designing my piece. A lot of these sequences are used at high stress points in the film and they sometimes happen abruptly, without any real transition. The audience is immediately taken from the present to a distorted past; the same happens in *Running in the Rain*.

Also, when Jeff moves from his world to Angela's it is every bit as intense as what Angela is actually experiencing. At first, this is disorienting for an audience as well as Jeff. However, as he adjusts, the experiences become easier to comprehend. As *Us* progresses, Adelaide gains a grip on what is happening and begins to piece her past experiences together and learn from them. In *Running in the Rain*, Jeff does the same.



***Self/less* — (Cinematography by Brendan Galvin)**

*Self/less* is a 2015 film directed by Tarsem Singh which follows Damian Hale (played by Ben Kingsley and later Ryan Reynolds) as his consciousness is placed into the body of somebody else. In some instances his thoughts are disrupted by the thoughts of the conscience of the person who originally inhabited the body. These moments of disruption also influenced the way that I crafted my first person visuals when creating scenes with Angela's voiceover. The alternate personality scenes in *Self/less* were often distorted and disorienting to show the implications that they had on Damian, occasionally using overly exposed or overly saturated visuals to show the lack of clarity in the images he was seeing. This piece was probably the most influential in my decision making during the production of these abstract scenes.

**Methodology**

I began by writing a script. Script writing is a process which can take many attempts and many methods of stimulation and contextual problem solving. During my writing process, I focused primarily on developing Jeff's character and establishing the mundanity of his life within the short time span. In order to understand the pacing and production of these storytelling scenes, I created iterations of different life scenarios in the form of video. With each video production, I modified my script and each new script drove my video production further. Once I finalized an arc for the larger structure of the film, I began to break down Angela's narration.

Constructing Angela's character was the defining moment of my piece. Angela is the name of the character who possesses the omnipresent voice that interrupts Jeff's dreams. Angela's spoken word is actually that of Alexis Fioroni, a fellow artist and writer. My goal was

to distill Alexis's personal thoughts and experiences. At first, I experimented with using body cameras to record her thoughts and conversations. Eventually I realized that the thoughts were far more compelling, and that visuals of scenery were enough to help place a viewer within her world, without distracting from her thoughts.

She mentioned trouble with sleep in our prior conversation. In order to document her thoughts, I instructed her to place a body microphone on her person when going to bed. So I asked her to wear the body mic and speak her thoughts out loud for a given period each night. She did so for a series of recordings which provided about 40 minutes of audio for me to work with. The recordings were beautiful. None of it was written, only freely spoken as she thought it. I wanted to use all of it, but I knew that it would not be enough to engross other viewers. There was no structure, and no context for my audience to understand it within. My next objective was to find a way to make her thoughts mean something for an audience.

*Running in the Rain* is centered around a character who is not shown to the audience. Therefore, the piece is about sensations and experiences associated with the subject herself rather than those associated with the object of the piece that her image may have been made to be. Her actual image is not included in the work. Neglecting to show this negates the showcasing of certain aspects of her identity such as race. As a person of the same mixed race as her, I do not have an issue excluding race entirely as I think it serves to be more effective as an artistic consideration rather than a public consideration. Her race should not matter, and therefore is not mentioned. This project is a documentary which illustrates the sensations of emotion. To further emphasize this, I have used the documentation of a real person's thoughts, giving this character agency over itself. She is who she is and she has decided how to present herself. Now I am sharing what I have been provided.

Using mind mapping, I deconstructed all of Alexis's voice recordings and I distilled each of her largest overarching thought themes into separate categories. I then broke down and rearranged them, aiming to construct a narrative within a three act structure out of information that I would choose to provide to the audience. After creating a series of rearrangements, I found one that I felt could fit well within my script, showcasing what appears to be a love story as a familiar scaffolding to present this abstracted concept of separating from one's own reality. I created Angela's narrative as a standalone and then broke down and inserted it into places where it could drive some of Jeff's decisions. At its root, it is still just Alexis's thoughts and experiences, but as applied in the video, her thoughts form a complex narrative which a viewer can become curious about and eventually invested in.

### **Creative work**

Wulf and Prinz's *Directing Attention in 360-Degree Video* (2016) heavily impacted the way that I structured the shooting of my film. The goal was to make my viewers particularly invested and cognisant of specific aspects of my video such as the single red pillow in Jeff and Erin's (Jeff's significant other, as portrayed by Olivia Robinson) bed, and the lackluster involvement that Jeff seems to have with his own experience as his life is visibly dulled. With

special consideration for movement and sound, I opened the film with an image of a hidden figure as a silhouette, symbolizing the distortion of reality that fiction and storytelling present, in everything from the camera angles, pans and cutscenes, to the behaviors of my actors.

Humans tend to think in either words or images. Using standard filmmaking techniques, I can mediate what words and images are present in the minds of my audience at any given time. For instance, if one color palette tends to be associated with a specific character, it can be used as a cue later to make the audience consider that character without them being present. I can also use color to more quickly and easily generate understanding of meaning. If every sad scene has a blue hue, the audience will learn this and their emotions will change simply upon seeing scenes before negative events happen. Every scene containing the main character's significant other has red in it until the last couple scenes when their love is questioned. This theme of color control is also echoed in the way that the film manipulated the senses of reality with shifts in color, temperature, and saturation of images.

I used color as a means for showing the clarity with which my protagonist does or does not perceive the world. As we begin our journey following Jeff, his world has color and contrast; it is overly saturated. When he enters this alternate state, we enter with him to see, at first, black and white, distorted images; it is disorienting and off-putting. As he progresses, the images of his life lose almost all color, and the scenes involving Angela become more clear and colored, eventually entering a space that feels distorted, but has now become associated with these lost in thought moments. Because of this, the final scenes of the film move the audience more, though there are no discernable objects or subjects within the images.

The final scene of *Running in the Rain* uses color and movement as a means for entering an abstracted state of raw emotion as Angela's thoughts hover over the intense sensation of warmth and excitement. The colors which have been removed from Jeff's life are now only present in these dreams he is having. This scene drives home the theme of entering and understanding every aspect of another person's experiences and emotions. Everything from the moments too intense to recall or so intense they feel abstracted, to the most mundane moments in which you receive simple sensory input as you go through your daily thought processes. The viewer experiences each of these parts of reality with Jeff through Angela's internal voice and vision.

The trees and natural visuals are largely used for the lines and shapes that I can follow to create visual stimuli, as well as a means for expressing through video the way that the human eye moves with the human body. These visuals of walking, running, and "looking around" are created for the purpose of showing real life movement and experience.

Understanding another is an impossibility, because their experience and thoughts have been "populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness" as John Koenig so eloquently proposed. I felt it best to include some description or explanation of this realization with the video. The included caption reads:

*Our being knows the sensation of rain.  
The heavy smell, the hollow taste,  
the radiating reverberation of the first drop to grace your shoulder  
And the sweeping flush  
of your shirt against your skin*

*as you barrel through wall after wall of the downpour.*

*Everyone has run in the rain before.  
Just as everyone has walked in the sun.  
Our differences lie at why.*

*Last week I ran away from the torrent.  
My best friend ran toward it.  
Inevitably, he caught the rain,  
Eventually, the rain will catch me.*

*Each of us has our own why, as well as our own how. "Running in the Rain" is a short film that explores the space between the longing to truly understand someone outside oneself, and the recognition that to do so is an impossibility.*

### **In Conclusion**

The greatest challenge within this piece has been the recognition that my end goal is impossible to achieve. I cannot ever truly place anyone into anyone else's shoes. I cannot even truly understand Alexis's thoughts or experiences myself. However, rather than remove the purpose from this piece, that realization provides the purpose for it.

Each of our experiences represents a real story; one worth knowing, documenting, and sharing. Sharing stories is the heart of the human experience. The difference between each of us is what allows us to have a new experience each time we are granted a glimpse into another person's life or imagination. Whether it be my mom telling me what a crazy customer did at work yesterday, the narrative of a best selling New York times novel, or a video project showcasing my mind's fabrications and Alexis's thoughts, we are always sharing and receiving stories, and we all crave every second of it.

As an artist, I have an obsession with understanding others, and as a student cut from contact with family while at school amid a pandemic, all that I can do is imagine the experiences of the people closest to me. The feeling is as though time and distance provide for the difference between knowing them and not knowing them, but the reality is, no matter how small the physical gap between us may be, I can never truly be placed in their shoes. Perhaps, as Alexis would say, "there's something beautiful in that... But also something terrifying."

## References

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