

Mindscapes and Landscapes: Pixillation and Live-Action in the Making of 'Daze'

by Sarah Bowen

Daze is a 10-minute short film which combines live-action with animation techniques. The film tells the impressionistic story of a woman on a long car journey who drives through a landscape haunted by a traumatic incident. The ghosts pull her back to confront the past. The starting point for the film came from a real life incident. When she was a child, my aunt had a pet lamb that used to graze along the grass verges in our village in South Wales. One evening she found her pet dead in the stream that ran through the centre of the village. Someone had put shears through its eyes! Sixty five years on I wonder why? This incident happened just as the men were leaving the valleys to fight WW2.

The film needed a visual style that portrayed the experience of the woman's interior world projected onto her exterior world. I wanted the film design to reflect the idea that traces of the past are trapped in the present. Conor Connolly, the DoP and myself thought this would best be realised through the technique of pixillation, filmed against projections.

Filming actors a frame at a time, brings an ethereal quality to familiar elements from the world around us. Pixillation also makes the world a jarring and unnerving place. In contrast to both drawn, puppet and computer generated animation, where the performances are created by the animator, in pixillation, performance comes from the actor. The viewer can enjoy the novelty of the animated movement but unlike other forms of animation, the director is able to make use of the nuances of human facial expression. It's therefore an effective technique for addressing more thought-provoking subjects working well for psychological pieces where the viewer experiences the character's POV.

The boundaries between live action and animation have become increasingly blurred as most mainstream so called live-action films, involve frame by frame manipulation at some point in the production or post production process. There are however, fine art filmmakers and animators who have been combining these techniques in their personal films for years. I particularly like the work of the Polish animation director, [Jerzy Kucia](#), who blurs the boundary between the two when he reworks live-action footage a frame at a time and re-films it using lasers and multiple planes to craft lyrical works about landscape, memory and loss. Patrick Bokanowski takes live action and breaks it down, frame by frame, on an optical printer, using hand made lens to form moving images that give compelling expression to an internal world. While the American animator, Jane Aaron, works within landscapes. For example, in 'Travelling Light' (1985), she animates a shaft of sunlight, using pieces of torn paper.

In 'Daze' we shot on 35mm so we could use a slow shutter speed. This meant that the actors' movements within each frame would be blurred, with the degree of the blur relative to the size of the movement. In other words, within each frame there would literally be visual remnants of the past, leaving a ghostly trace.

The decision to use projections with the pixillation was made for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I love the look of projected footage in old films, especially car interiors. Like the scenes of Marion Crane driving in Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho (1960). Wladyslaw Starewicz used this technique with puppet animation in "Le Rat de Ville et le Rat des Champs" (1924). I much prefer these blatant back projections to our heavily composited

contemporary backgrounds that try so hard to hide their construction. Scenes with projected backgrounds have a more resolved quality maybe because the performers and projections are filmed together, so the image is completed in camera. In computer generated backgrounds, the actors and their film environment don't meet until post-production, which must impact on the overall performance.

Back projection is also nostalgic to contemporary viewers suggesting the passing of time, memories, and the influences of the past on a temporal present. There's that beautiful scene in Andrei Tarkovsky's 'Ivan's Childhood' (1962), when Ivan and his young girl friend are riding on top of an applecart along a tree-lined road. The projected background turns into negatives, signifying memories embedded deep in Ivan's unconscious.

The second reason to choose projection was that I wanted to shoot on location. Of course, stop-frame filming exteriors, means the movement within the landscape and sky is also pixillated. With no control over natural elements there's a race against time to avoid sudden changes in light. The resulting footage is of a landscape in constant flux.

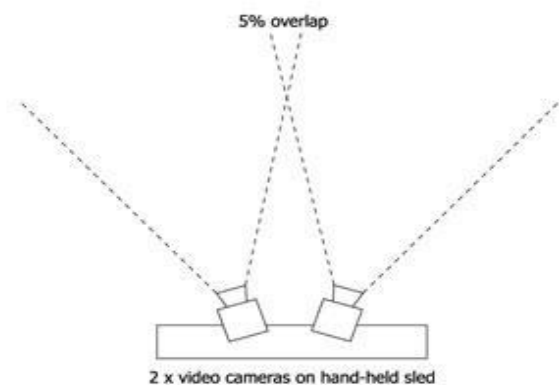
In the Orbital music video, 'The Box' (1996), directed by Jens Benstock, Luke Losey and [Jonathan Charles](#), Tilda Swinton is filmed a frame at a time, moving slowly through a cityscape. The city seems transient and dreamlike, as she moves amongst the trails of tail lights and flickering traffic lights. The viewer experiences her perception of an uncertain and temporal world. In Matt Hulse's 'Hotel Central' (2000), the main character is static within the erratic pixillated landscape. The viewer identifies with the character's hallucinatory POV.

In 'Daze', however, I wanted the landscape in to remain a constant, with the evanescent characters in transit. In other words, for the landscape to be the connecting point between the world of the viewer and the world within the film.

The production was split into three main processes. Our greatest technical challenge was integrating these three areas of expertise into one coherent visual language. We began with a week's shoot in the Brecon Beacons in March where we spent seven days, wrapped up like Arctic explorers and filming between heavy downpours. Here the live action sequences and the backgrounds for projections were filmed. The live action location sequences were shot on 35mm with the interiors and the night scenes lit using only fire and marine flares. We were lucky to have Digby B. Milner, the chief pyrotechnic technician on the last Star Wars film, to orchestrate the special effects lighting.



1) DAZE - CAMERA SET UP FOR LOCATION SHOOT



The video footage for projection was shot using a hand held sled onto which two digital video cameras were fixed, so that their frames overlapped by 5%.

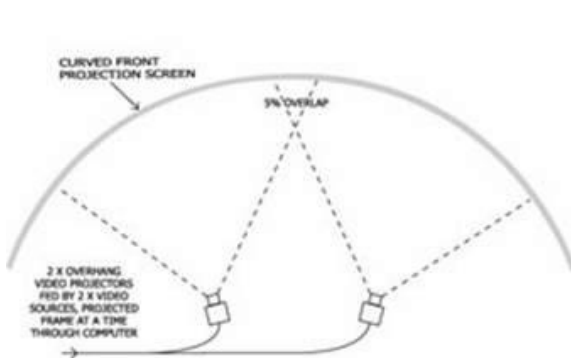
The view from the car windows, for the car interiors, were shot by strapping a digital video camera to the front, back and one side of a car.

The second of the processes began with an edit of the video material. I worked with the editor from the earliest stages, as the footage from the location shoot had to be quite tightly cut before it was art-worked. Pixillation is so labour intensive I could not rely on 'safe' coverage to pull the film together. Each shot had to be a jigsaw piece, perfectly fitting the shot on each side of it to reveal the finished picture. We put the edited video footage through Avid Media Illusion at Ealing Studios, where I spent three weeks art-working and compositing in preparation for the front and back projection. The third and main process was a pixillation shoot. The material was projected, via computer a frame at a time onto a curved screen.

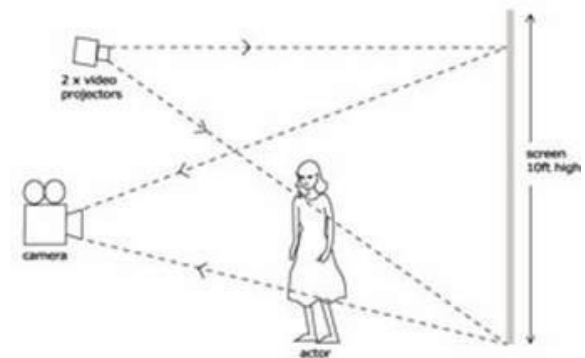


The actors performed in front of the screen and were re-filmed on 35mm, a frame at a time, using the slow shutter speed.

2) DAZE - SET UP FOR REFILMING
a) Plan



2) DAZE - SET UP FOR REFILMING
b) view



For the car interiors, we cut the car up, to make room for the tracking and the camera. As the camera moved in single increments around the actor, we dismantled the car and rebuilt the part in frame. This was only possible by filming a frame at a time. The art worked landscapes were back-projected, also at a frame at a time, onto the car windows.



It was a gruelling experience for the actors requiring stamina and physical discipline. A shot lasting just a few seconds on screen could take over an hour to shoot. Obviously this technique was going to impact on performances which needed to be extremely controlled. But with such concentration comes a strong internal piece. The most poignant pixillated films I have ever seen was [One Year Performance Piece 1980-1981 \(1981\)](#) made by the performance artist Tehching Hsieh, who punched a time clock in his studio, every hour, on the hour, for one year. With a 16mm camera, he shot one frame of himself immediately after he had punched his time card. To help illustrate the time process he began the performance with his head shaved and allowed it to grow back naturally over the year. The intensity of his finished film was, I believe, the result of his unreserved intentionality in each and every 1/24th of a second.

Casting the right kind of people for 'Daze' was extremely important. We needed actors who could tolerate long working hours, moving in increments of 1/12th of a second. The woman in the car, Sarah Allely, is a dancer. The girl, Tabitha Francis, was an exceptionally focused seven year old.



The 'Fire-Boys' included Bob Smith a dancer, previously with the Ballet Rambert, and [Jan Knightley](#) an actor experienced in physical theatre.



There is no synch sound. The snatches of dialogue were recorded separately and layered with the voices of non-actors, suggesting fragments of remembered conversation.

Too often music smothers a film rather than working as an integrated element so I started discussing ideas and musical themes with the composer Mark Scholfield (a Brunel graduate) from the very beginning of the writing process. This was an integral part of the creative process. As atmosphere is so important in my films, working with Mark meant the mood I sought could quickly find expression through his ability to accurately translate ideas into music. This in turn helped me shape the emotional curve of the film. By the time we came to the final edit, the picture could be cut to his score.

© Sarah Bowen 2004