

1. Introduction to Nightlife

Nightlife is a response to night time restlessness and distractions due to insomnia and the impact it creates during the following day. It is an attempt to exhibit 12 hours of overnight and morning activity and thinking. At night small sounds can wake you up, frustration can keep you trapped in your bed with a pillow on the head, fists clenched and bedclothes twisted. Late night TV and radio can distract you from the anxiety of being awake when you should be sleeping. Radio, in particular provides something of a shared service for sleepless types, party people and shift workers - fellow travellers in the nightlife. Work, the next day becomes a duty, pedalling through mud and an unsatisfying blur. True rest is elusive, but there needs to be a search for it.

SHOW FILM (5min)

Nightlife was made with little preparation; no script, no story, no structure other than animating one scene at a time. It was animated in a technique I am not well-practised in and so I relied on working instinctually and in a relatively uninhibited way, but informed by prior film making experience. With sand animation I found it a good technique for letting go as it is a technique that requires you to add, manipulate and often destroy the previous frame and unwieldily to shape with the precision of a pencil or digital tool. It's difficult to go back. Some way into animating a scene I got to a point of no-return and hoped that something reasonably legible, possibly evocative would appear. Errors in the making are worked with and blended in. Apart from the title shot, nothing in the cut was re-shot.

Why work this way? Why not prepare thoroughly with a script that has gone through multiple drafts for greater impact and clarity? Why not practise the technique over and over, testing and developing each shot before committing to a take? Why not re-shoot, re-edit, re-compose all the elements into a highly polished execution in film making?
(I'll get to it)

In part, this is the result of an investigation in making an animated film without a screenplay and little or no pre production. It was pushed by the idea that the animator can use prior knowledge and experience to guide the spontaneity to get a cohesive result.

How one can rely on previous knowledge to act on a production in an immediate way? What comes out of working from instincts? What comes out of responding to a subject immediately through the animating as the first stage instead of text? What benefit is there in leap frogging the usual steps in the writing and development period to production?

How can jumping straight into production better fit the academic film maker where time available for production practice is fragmented and interrupted? How can I get to start production practice, to get the film done, to execute the response as quickly as possible?

So, what are the usual steps, what are the steps we teach to our students in the lead up to production? And what certainties do they provide?

A completed screenplay, a storyboard- both of which have been through multiple drafts with a variety of sources for feedback. Additionally, there is testing of designs and techniques, researching audio, track reading as required, timing, pre-visualisation, motion studies, making connections for collaboration, and production schedules, and so forth.

All this investment in development and preparation takes time, can be fruitful but is no guarantee that the film will be realised as anticipated. Indeed, often there are u-turns, re-shoots, shots dropped and re-designed; new rationalisations for alterations and actions, moments of panic as the well intended, well planned project has clipped some hurdles in the execution. In the student experience I observed one student offer advice to another in the editing suite regarding a film that didn't come out as expected: "Oh well, maybe you can turn it into a trailer for the film you intended to make."

"Turn it into a music video or an experimental film" Their heart sinks as they battle understanding how the intended structure created in text, plans and diagrams doesn't resolve in the form of the moving pictures they created.

Our curriculum has a reasonably well-mapped out time frame for students to follow, try to emulate a fairly standard production model, and while a few fall away due to whatever else is going on in

their lives, most try to stick to it. These models of production are sourced from the professional production environment where working through the production is most often a continuous uninterrupted process. There are clear stages and there is an end point, a dated delivery.

The conditions of a well-oiled commercial machine will see a sizeable production completed every 12- 36 months to meet commercial exhibition and investment agreements. Short animated films created by small teams, funded by Screen Australia seem to take a similar amount of time. Whilst our curriculum objectives are primarily shaped by working in this model with all its scheduled and ordered components what is the turn around time for a film by an academic? How are the conditions different?

Making a film as an academic, as a teacher, there is more often than not, no commercial imperative, no exhibition agreement drivers, no budget, a small crew if any and a fragmented schedule, if any real schedule at all. A film might be written over summer and animated over a year or two or three, sound mixed and mastered a few months or a year later. A short animated film might be completed every three to five years or more.

Personally it has been a make-it-when-I-can schedule squeezed in somewhere between classes, non-teaching periods, shaped around family commitments, an hour squeezed in between dinner and breakfast. Slept on, chipped away, placed in hibernation and rekindled. These interrupted conditions are a feature of the academic making an animated film, perhaps any film, in a film school.

By trying to always follow this pathway with such interruption and fragmentation the time it takes to get from a refined screenplay to production practice can be considerably drawn out and the time dedicated to production practice may end up being a very limited, thinly distributed experience if only used for completed screenplays.

So, a few years back I decided to expedite the time to get to production.

Paris Lakes, a film I completed in 2011, did not have a screenplay, but it did have a voice over as a structural element and some roughly formed storyboards created during the production from scene to scene. You could say that it is a screenplay in a different form. The animation sometimes was produced in sequence and sometimes according to what measure of time was available at that point. For example, if I only had one hour or so available at that time, then I would only take on a short shot. If I had a whole evening, or rarely a whole day, then I would animate something a little bit larger. There was a goal to have something completed at the end of a session. Leaving it standing made it feel like leaving a cake mix on the kitchen bench unbaked for a few days and so, completing a shot in a sitting became an imperative for maintaining momentum. The film was designed mostly as small somewhat disconnected vignettes which seemed to make it easier to fulfil this goal.

Whilst the making was still interrupted, the ability to get into production more rapidly than I had in the past provided a more immediate vision as to whether to continue, whether or not there was a film in there. They began as tests, that in the end, became a film.

Although I would treasure a continuous time frame to develop and execute a film from start to finish, animating interrupted as practice is not without benefit. Intervals allow for greater time to reflect on the work done to date. An upcoming shot may be envisioned many times during the intervals in the multitasking mind, whilst teaching, driving, doing the dishes, netting floating ideas during other activities. It could be a shot that is next in order or to be cut in elsewhere. It could be an idea for a scene that is unsecured in the sequence, but will find a home in the edit.

In making **Nightlife**, I went a bit further reducing preparation and development to get even more rapidly into production. Pre production was finding a good tub of sand and a brush. It was made in isolated snippets of time over about a year. Each shot took somewhere from 15 minutes to 2 hours to animate. The intervals between each shot was anywhere between a week and a couple of months. One completed scene would inform the next. Ideas would change and generate in the interim between shooting- sometimes they were used, sometimes avoided, sometimes forgotten.

During the making, in the spaces between the making, and eventually in the edit, a structure, a story reveals itself. In the end, the act of writing is in the animating.

It can be argued that there is a cost to not having a clearly defined and developed screenplay and storyboard to work from, but the benefits are that I was able to complete a film that functions as both a draft film and a completed film in a short time frame and production practice was more readily performed. Working with such immediacy, with minimal preparation and with uncertain results does not mean the practitioner is working out of ignorance. With experience in production, confronting uncertain results does not mean the practitioner is unaware of the possibilities.

When Emile Cohl animated the script less 'stream-of-consciousness' *Fantasmagorie* in 1908 in a straight ahead, uncertain way, or the *Hasher's Delerium* in 1910, he animated in a way he may not have been able to plan for, but he searched for possibilities as he made it, one shape informing the next. One film informing the next.

In *Nightlife Paul* (Fletcher) created a sound design with not a great deal of ongoing input from me, so it is largely his own response to the animation and its subject matter, and working this way fits into the overall idea of working with immediacy, trust and instincts.

Making an animated film in this way is one approach to make use of the short fragmented chunks of time that become available. Applying it in an immediate way as was done in *Nightlife* and to a lesser extent in *Paris Lakes* the academic as animation practitioner can chip away in production practice and will accept that the film will shape itself differently compared to being made in a process more familiar to a commercial, professional setting than an academic one.

In the film school we provide small production tests, investigations and exercises for our students as research and as a pre-ambule to a more continuously executed single major project, but our training can also consider the merits of the interrupted production, which will most likely be the conditions of their first film after graduating as they balance making a living with creative and production practice.

As much as we have show reverence for the traditions of how to stage a film in model conditions, I don't think anyone should only toil away for months or years developing their most ambitious screenplay before jumping into production practice.

In the film school I want to encourage students to maintain production practice, create a momentum with production by being able and game enough to use a raw idea generated with some reflexivity rather than put a delay on production until the most refined and developed written screenplay is ready- and the same goes for the teacher.

Loop of pre production samples in background
storyboard, track read, screenplay, animation tests,

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