

By Lynda Chan-Wai Earle

Okay, Michael is an intellectual risk taker, no doubt about it. He deliberately defies the format requested for this feature-length film script assignment and writes outside the square. He's a rebellious writer, anarchistic and defiant to the end. So, what's the central question raised by this work? What exactly is the point of his piece? Honestly, I'm not sure if I can answer that within this assessment.

This 'script' reads like a sharply observed, fiercely intelligent, densely layered, yet arguably barely cohesive thesis. The very premise (audacious as it is) on which he bases this piece of writing, is arguable.

It felt like an emotionally charged, philosophical discussion in the extreme, about the crafting of storytelling through film 'script writing' to be precise. It reads like Adam/Mike's bleakly humoured, self-aggrandizing intellectual critique on the foundations and processes of scriptwriting itself.

The piece starts in BLACK (funny that). Michael has written in a richly layered prose-like style, in the present tense, mostly third person, with characters and sporadically, with dialogue. Up until 'Dystopia' I follow these internalised monologues with their basic storylines as I would read prose. Michael's descriptive language is vivid and complex. His novel contains morbidly precise, detailed action with some sequences (the orang-utan and the red monkey get the most action in the first part). His perfectly formatted short film script contained at the end of the whole piece, ironically titled 'Dystopia' is a kind of philosophical argument about why we could never attain Utopia (n- imaginary place with perfect social and political system, Oxford Concise). And Michael gives us Adam Bennett, a central protagonist with whom we struggle to empathise, as well as a host of other characters including, rather humorously, the unfortunate Mr Desmond (Des) Harper, the script writing teacher whom Adam dislikes and has an uneasy and competitive alpha male relationship with. Anti-narrative and non-linear as it is, whether Michael likes it or not (and I suspect it would be deliberate) there's even a sense of three acts to this piece as a whole, or am I unconsciously reading these acts into Michael's writing because I just can't help myself? I have imposed my interpretation of placement for these acts into his piece as follows:

Act one: 2012, the present life of Adam the writer as he struggles to create his novel about writing about film.

This prose-like section was written with the aid of a tongue-in-cheek 'speaker' for Adam; an orang-utan and a red monkey (reminiscent of the cartoon conscience; the angel and devil sitting on the shoulder of the writer). Adam is trapped inside his head, inside his apartment where he lives alone. The monkeys turned up one day when he was "... tired of cleaning. And showering." Adam gets stuck in Act one with some writer's block manifesting itself as repetitious bathroom action. What follows is a kind of dissertation on the genre of horror as a metaphor for Adam's own horror at existence within depression (self-fear and self-loathing): "The truth is that the Horror film is the haunted house. You can't get out and what you see in there will drive you crazy." The turning point into act two happens when Adam finally leaves his apartment.

Act two: 1999, Goes back in time to when Adam was a film student creating his low budget schlock-horror masterpiece and later, 2008, as an older student studying script writing. There we meet Helen Maxwell, Adam's classmate, where she is so inspired by his "obsessive theoretical behaviour" she wants to create a character based on him for a short

film script.

Act three: Dystopia, A short film by Helen Maxwell about Drew Kesher, 43, living at home with his mother, writing a thesis about 'Gummo', a film by Harmony Korine (apparently a masterpiece of a film and a guide to creating the Utopian perfect world). Of course Drew is the fictional character based on the fictional Helen's perceptions of the fictional Adam, written by Michael (it's feeling a little Pythonesque at this point).

Director Spike Jonz and writer Charlie Kaufman come to mind in terms of Mike's treatment of his "script" and the tone of film genre, especially with the clever self-referential elements: (2002) 'Adaptation' and (1999) 'Being John Malkovich'

Character (specifically female):

I get the feeling that Adam has misogynist tendencies. There is a 'Burroughsesque' sense to his regard of women, perhaps homage? William Burroughs was regarded as the literary outlaw of his time. I wonder that these might be Michael's views thinly veiled as his character Adam. Any challenge here can therefore be dismissed as such; it is the character Adam that thinks and says these things, not Michael the writer. Examples can be found throughout the script, with almost every reference to any female character described by her appearance in objectified language. Adam/Michael speaks about women as simplified Madonna/Whores, either desired, reviled or both.

In Act one: 2012; Adam refers to his relationships with women as the mating process: "He's noticed that a dent in his confidence has affected negatively on his sex-life. When he meets a girl that he likes, they usually talk, laugh and play together. It's often something familiar (perhaps the same anxiety in her eye that he goes through daily) that draws him to converse and the mating process evolves from there ... He used to fear that moment before the fuck." The most intelligent female character in the script is Helen Maxwell, Adam's classmate. In Act two, 2008, Helen is described as: "... short and slim. And her breasts were little. Small packages being fairly fashionable for the moment .." The most intelligent thing she does is get inspired by Adam's 'genius.'

In 'Dystopia' the Mother figure is just plain sad, a slave to her over-grown 43 year old child still living at home. The fictional Drew refers to his mother as a "Cunt-ass whore." Drew's captivity is his own self-made demise born of apathy, self-pity and self-loathing.

Mise en scène comes to mind; the feeling of the scene "without", the properties of a set for a theatre piece. Michael's writing style is constantly self-referential, non-linear and antiformalistic. The script is a play within a play, within a play. Overall it's a story about Adam, the depressed writer trying to write a novel about writing, recalling his time as a film student making his schlock-horror homage to (1979) 'Alien' and (1986) 'Aliens' and obsessively observing fellow student Helen, who in turn observes Adam and writes her fictional short film script inspired by his obsessive theoretical mind.

Reading this piece also brought to mind film makers like artistic iconoclasts Fellini and Godard with their revolutionary film making techniques. And that's a compliment. Specifically Fellini's (1954) 'La Strada'. A film with which the director seems to be "exploring the tension between a character's theatrical facade and his or her unexplored messy interior life." And Michael's film school sequence, with Adam as student film maker (titled 1999, onwards) felt reminiscent of Godard's filming process with his "low budget, on-the-fly shooting style" and his anti-hero characters exploring their own "identities as makeshift

masks."(1001 Movies you must see before you die, New Burlington Books, 2004)

Adam Bennett is a character whose fight with clinical depression is possibly closely mirrored on the writer's own life experiences. Possibly? Probably. Many aspects of Adam's interior monologue feel chillingly real. The intense attention to minutia, the compulsive, obsessive behaviour and the sense of entropy and lethargy reflected in the outlook of our central character his/Adam/Mike's story would come from the real life experience of one who has lived through depression, surely? Is Michael's writing justifiably self reflection and not naval gazing? The horror of existence within depression is captured uncomfortably well, however I argue whether this isn't self-indulgent to the extreme at times. "Sometimes he thinks depression is necessary to write well and deeply." Like some sort of intellectual Van Gogh? Is it really necessary to prove ones depth of despair in order to write deeply? Do we really need to cut off our ears in order to paint well?

The work also brought to mind Linklater's (2001) 'Waking Life', the animated drama fantasy where "a man shuffles through a dream meeting various people and discussing the meaning and purpose of life and the universe." (Internet Movie Database, 2010) Except that Adam shuffles through his consciousness discussing the meaning and purpose of scriptwriting. Trawling through Michael's densely layered and often contradictory epiphanies that take you ultimately "nowhere" (because that was the "point" of Adam's "hero's journey") was a pain in the cerebral butt and I truly felt like having a stiff whiskey afterwards.

It's important to point out here, that never-the-less I persevered, because this work contains some moments of brilliant and lucid insight into the writing and film making process: ".. this comes through in the work, Monkey. It's about a film genre, part of the filmmaking process. One cannot make a film without being subject to the politics of the industry, which brings us back to political science. The people who make the 'go' decisions for films believe that they understand what works. It is because of this, and that they are unlikely to understand otherwise, that they refuse to risk their assets with a quality work that breaks their understanding of the rules."I have to agree with the Orang-utan here.

On the one hand Adam/Michael is a very clever, erudite and acerbic writer, using his own life as a template for this philosophical discussion about filmmaking. On the other hand there is a certain smugness that comes with Adam/Michael's voice that tends to alienate the reader, a kind of intellectual snobbery that Michael thinly veils behind his character Adam. And Michael's overall tone is misanthropic. This forces us ask the obvious question; "Why the obscurity? Why alienate your reader/audience to the point of confusion or frustration?" Isn't storytelling ultimately about communication? Isn't it ultimately about passing on concepts and knowledge in some kind of entertaining way? 'No!' Adam/Michael might cry, 'Not at all.' This also brings us back to (arguably) the central question inherent within this story that drives our obsessive central character: Will Adam finally achieve his dream and write his iconoclastic and revolutionary novel about filmmaking? Who knows...?