

Kodachrome

A film by Mark Raso



Final report on the PERSONAL ASSISTANT Grant 2016
Mauro Mueller

Introduction

I was able to accompany director Mark Raso on his second feature film *Kodachrome*, which was shooting for 28 days (well, 27 but more about that later) in Toronto. I had met Mark at Columbia University film school in New York City and formed a company with him. I had the privilege of producing his first film *Copenhagen*, a micro budget film that became hugely successful and had made the rounds in the talent agencies in Hollywood, allowing Mark to quickly establish himself as the new indie director in town.

While his new film was a multi-million dollar production, the crew was all unionized and there was only a tiny budget for an assistant, which barely would have covered my flight and living costs. The FOCAL grant made the difference for me in being able to assist Mark.

Kodachrome is based on a 2010 New York Times article, "For Kodachrome Fans, Road Ends at Photo Lab in Kansas" by A.G. Sulzberger. It tells the story of a record label manager who embarks on a road trip from New York to Kansas in order to fulfill his father's dying wish to have a roll of photographs developed at Kodak's last Kodachrome lab before it closes its doors forever.

The film stars Ed Harris, Jason Sudeikis, Elizabeth Olsen, Dennis Haysbert, Bruce Greenwood, and Wendy Crewson. The script was written by Jonathan Tropper.

Preproduction

I arrived in Toronto in early August, after having just produced another short film in Zurich and spending two days in New York for meetings for my own directorial debut. However, while I had a filed work permit and a letter stating that I was part of the *Kodachrome* film crew, I had to deal with Canadian immigration. Incidentally, the particular officer I dealt with hadn't much experience with work visas for the entertainment industry. Eventually, after two hours of explaining my exact position on the film (no, not AD and not production assistant), and the officer lecturing me on being more careful filing a permit next time (of course it wasn't me but the production office), he accepted my explanation: on a film shoot, there can't always be an exact finishing date for principal photography, and in this case, pre-production barely started and the starting day was still a bit in flux.

The first day I immediately realized the immense production this film was going to be. Every department had its own office, from production design, to graphics and props, AD, cinematographer, wardrobe, transportation, and the producers of course; I shared the office with Mark, the director. After meeting whoever already had been hired, I jumped right into the massive amount of work that needed to get done before principal photography started. Mark's goal was to break down the script scene by scene the way we learned in film school, underlining narrative beats, identifying character wants, a scene's fulcrum and the specific jobs Mark needed to get done for that scene to work. Then, each scene was shot-listed and we made an overhead floorplan with the camera positions. However, many of the locations weren't locked yet and so many scenes had still a bit of an abstract plan of attack.

The following days were filled with meetings with the different departments to review the script meticulously and to discuss the particular needs of each scene (as detailed as which brand of ketchup had to be cleared, even if it was only seen in the background). In addition to location and art department, these meetings included picture car, safety, stunts, and background performer discussions. Interesting to note was that the number of background performers and picture cars got smaller at each meeting. I tried to keep my eye on the directing prep work so that Mark had a good head start, knowing very well that if he had a solid plan, it would allow him to be more flexible on set and able to improvise or adapt to the actors' suggestions.

In these weeks, the vision in Mark's head based on the screenplay got formalized on paper. It was a pleasure to be closely involved in this creative process, often discussing with Mark and the cinematographer Alan Poon (who also lensed *Copenhagen*) the script and visual approach to translate it to the screen. I particularly remember after a very long day of tedious meetings going to have a drink with them and talk shot selections; it was a pure moment of living and breathing film and the core of the filmmaking craft, collaboratively exchanging ideas and what makes the craft into an art.

One of the main ideas was to use reflections in windows and mirrors. Since the film is about developing Kodachrome, and Ed Harris plays a photographer who used a single-lens reflex camera his entire life, which typically uses a mirror and prism system (henceforth "reflex" from the mirror's reflection), Mark wanted to use this element as much as possible and integrate it in the film's

language. On this note, shooting on 35mm was another reason to stay true to the actual film material and paying homage to the physicality of Kodachrome film.

Another idea was to trap Matt (Jason Sudeikis) by placing him in frames wherever possible, whether in a doorframe or between two posts, etc., adding to a feeling of being burdened. Also, naturally, these shots framed him like in a photograph, reinforcing his feeling that he was a victim to his father's passion for photography. The overall theme was reconnecting father and son and therefore shooting them in separation until they bond again; this was definitely one of Mark's targets as well. All of these ideas guided the decisions that were made in pre-production and later on set.

The advantage of knowing Mark meant that I didn't have to win his trust first, and instead, was treated as a partner from the get-go, rather than an assistant. I was able to accompany Mark to every meeting, participate in casting auditions for secondary roles (as the principals weren't auditioned but directly cast), look at acting tapes, join on location scouts, even on our days off, and literally go through the same process Mark did.

I also did a variety of paper work, which included filing for Mark's Directors Guild of Canada membership, writing nudity rider explanations on how he intended the scenes to be shot (i.e. what kind of nudity would be shown in each scene), pre-selecting background performers, etc. I did a lot of research ranging from calling an oncologist to find out about dietary restrictions of cancer patients to finding references for tattoos of rock stars. Since the film was set in 2010, when the last lab developing Kodachrome closed, I also had to do some research on that specific time period, like smoking prohibition laws in Ohio, to know whether in a specific scene there would be smoke in a bar and therefore a haze machine needed. I learned that each character name in a US film needs to get cleared and so the stripper's name was changed from Diamond to Domino; Ed's character Ben Ryder got Asher as a middle name, and his house was moved from New York to New Jersey, so that he would not be confused with one of the two real Ben Ryders living in New York.

And while we were working around the clock, the first shooting day came much faster than we wanted it to. At least we had the first two weeks completely prepared and shot listed (as still not all locations were locked by the time we started to film).

Production

The privilege of closely seeing Ed Harris, Jason Sudeikis and Elizabeth Olsen work in front of the camera was one the enormous treats of being on set, something which I will value the rest of my career. It was equally impressive to see how Mark altered the performances by giving notes to each actors to refine his vision, and not being intimidated by a four-time Academy Award nominee power house like Ed Harris. Witnessing Ed wanting to stay in bed instead of going for lunch in the climatic hospital scene, and then delivering a performance that had the crew in tears was pure movie magic.

On set, I was part of the creative team; my opinion was valued and asked for. I was also Mark's personal time keeper, knowing exactly how much had to be accomplished each day and constantly reminding him of how much time was left. Of course, part of my job was to make sure Mark drank and ate enough, and I drove him every day to and from set. Nonetheless, during production, I was sitting in the video village watching the monitor and being Mark's second pair of eyes. Often, I could sit in Mark's director's chair, as he preferred to be close to the actors. In scenes with lots of background actions, I was making sure the timing and choreography was right. Besides Mark and the DP, I was the one person who knew exactly how each scene was being shot, and so the script supervisor often checked with me about upcoming shots; the line producer frequently inquired about how many shots were left in the scene; and makeup wanted to know whose close up was shot next. A beneficial side effect of being in the video village was to sit next to the producers and financiers. On top of that, since we were shooting during the Toronto Film Festival, it also meant that many of the producers and actor's manager and agents stopped by visiting the set, contacts that surely will be valuable in the future.

There were some clear highlights for me during the shoot and mostly related with some directorial decisions Mark took, like shooting the opening scene in a long one take (not to show off but because dramatically it made sense), as well as articulating some important beats on the character's back instead of shooting them in a close-up frontal. Moments like those are when I as a filmmaker myself get excited and get the energy to put in extra hours of work, for the result will be a film with a clear point of view and voice.

But not everything was smooth and easy. There was an immense pressure on Mark and the cinematographer on a bigger budgeted film. The bond company had already showed up in pre-production, threatening every head of department not to go over budget, and they were also present the first weeks of shooting. A challenge we faced was the many car scenes because of the film being a road movie. The first process trailer day was difficult and we completely underestimated the time it takes to reset the camera positions and rig them. One of my jobs on the following car days was to come up with a meticulous floor plan for a three-camera set up and how to use each set up to most efficiently cover various shots. While we averaged roughly 12-14 set ups a day, we did 22 that day.

After the principal shoot, we had an addition b-roll car day with the picture car, three actors' doubles, and a Russian Arm gyro-stabilized camera system to get some driving shots we needed. We also used that day for a few pick-up shots.

Post-Production

Post-Production included mostly watching various cuts and giving my personal notes on what I felt worked and what didn't. While the editor was working in Toronto, Mark had an identical drive and was able to try out his edits. It was definitely very exciting to see how the film would come together and how numerous decisions in pre-production looked now on the editing time line.

Conclusion

A Film production is a train that is charging full steam ahead. Everyone on the crew is trying hard to keep up with its speed, laying down tracks and clearing it of any obstacles on the way. While nobody really has the power to stop it safely, everyone could make it derail disastrously.

Compared to an indie film, it isn't an amusement park kids train but a fully loaded high-speed train. While the core of filmmaking stays the same and the creative prep you do is equally important, the main differences lie in production design (the possibility to build a set and adjust locations to make it fit your main themes) and the size of crew and its professionalism; this means that on the one hand they are fast setting up, but then again, because of the crew size, company-moves take a colossal amount of time. Flexibility had to suffer and just stealing a shot wasn't possible as there was a clear shooting protocol (also due to the fact we were shooting on 35mm). Moreover, often the best gettable locations have to stand back for the best option close to another shooting set, as paring up locations is crucial to save time and being able to have a realistic chance to make the day.

What I certainly learned from Mark on this shoot is to choose the right battles and when to stand up for your own creative vision. At some point he called out production wanting to simplify his shot list. Mark said they could have hired whomever if they simply wanted to have someone doing coverage, but he wouldn't sacrifice his vision; they chose him because he had a plan of attack.

There isn't any better way to learn about filmmaking than first hand from going through the process, being on set and working closely with a director. Being an assistant on Mark's film was like doing a multi-million dollar film myself. Going through the same motions and we often joked that I was not only shadowing him but almost was making the film as well, just without having the entire pressure -- a luxury experience that surely will be beneficial when I'm directing my own feature within the no-too-distant future. I mention this not to sound conceited but because I would like to conclude by reflecting on what this experience has brought me as a filmmaker. Being on set surely gave me the confidence to see that a good prep is half your battle won, and while there are many ways of approaching filmmaking, an important part needed is a particular point of view and determination. I believe talent comes to play but not necessarily to the extent that most people think. While I believe Mark is a magnificent director, he acquired many of his skills through hard-earned practice, dedication and a deep love for film. Seeing the level of professionalism first hand, I can say with confidence that I'm prepared and ready now. So bring it on 2017!

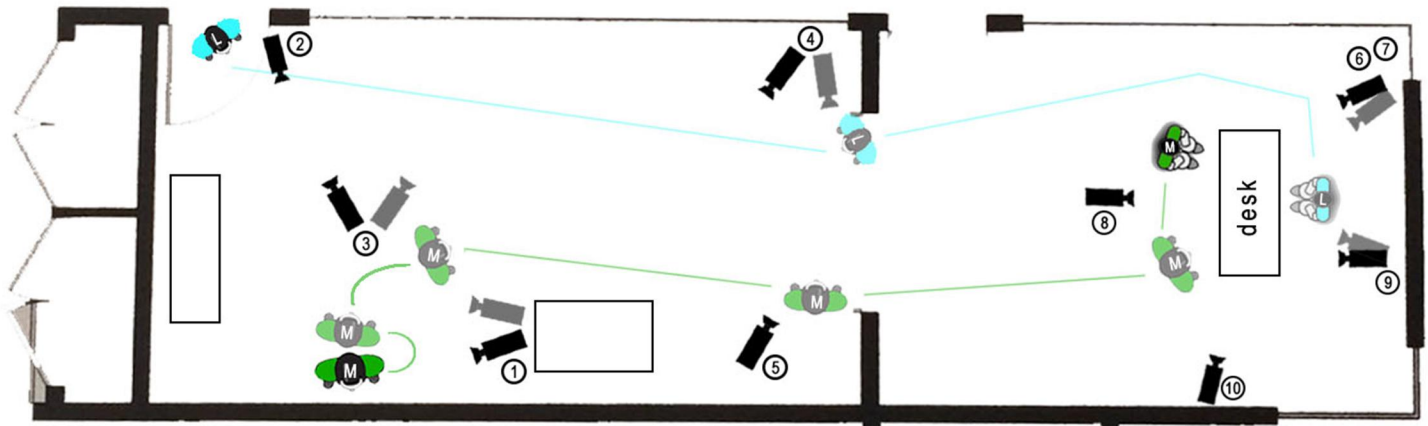
I want to thank again FOCAL for such an amazing and important grant, especially Denis Rabaglia and Pierre Agthe. Lastly, I want to express my deepest thank to Mark for his continuing trust and sharing this incredible ride with him. This was only the start.

Thank you very much!

Mauro Mueller, Los Angeles, Jan. 2017

Scene 8

Matt gets fired from
Spitting Records



Shot	Length	Type	Action	Move	Camera
1	MCU	Single	Shot of plaque with Matt's reflection in it. Matt turns at Knock, we pan to profile single.	Pan	Sticks
2	M	Single	Shot of wall of plaques and Matt	Static	Sticks
3	MCU	reverse	Of Lep, pan with him as we walks. To door frame for "he was our sellout..."	Pan	Sticks
4	MCU	OTS	Of Matt looking at Lepselter. Walks to doorframe into OTS	Pan	Sticks
5	MCU	Reverse	Lepselter at door frame. He walks out at "And I've kept you at a loss..."	Static/Pan	Sticks
6	W - M	2-shot	Lepselter sits down, Matt follows him with "Coldplay, Arcade, D-sevens speech"	Pan	Sticks
7	MCU	OTS	Punch in on Matt if shot 6 doesn't work.	Fluid	Sticks
8	reverse	Single	On Lep - Follow his eyeline as Matt changes seats. (use to flip axis) run to end of scene		
9	MCU	Single	Follow Matt as he walks across desk and sits in chair.	Pan	Sticks
10	W	2 shot	Master for after line flip.	Static	Sticks

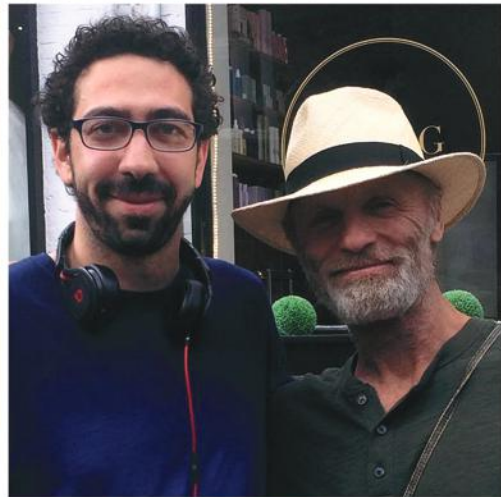
Want:

1. Matt: To sell his importance to the company (keep job)
2. Lepselter: To let Matt go.

Fulcrum: You're fired

Jobs:

1. Intro Lepselter
2. Show history between them (in actions)



Mark Raso (director), Alan Poon (cinematographer), Mauro Mueller (Creative Assistant)