



Korea, courtesy of Irish Film Archive of the Irish Film Institute

SDGI Director in Focus

CATHAL BLACK is a director/writer/producer whose credits include *Our Boys, Pigs, Korea, The Invisible World, Love and Rage* and *The Undertaking*.

FOR ME, FILMMAKING is not all about paradigms or plot points or the page on which something dramatic will happen. It's not just about set-up, confrontation and resolution. It's also about tracking the hidden and elusive, those things that are personal to the filmmaker, that have been 'called up' from the spirit of the filmmaker.

When I was asked by SDGI and *Film Ireland* to write about what a director does on set; how he or she might be inspired; where 'the vision' comes from, I found these questions made me too self-conscious. So instead of answering them directly, I would prefer to share an experience I had while trying to edit my low-budget feature *Korea*. It sheds light on where I'm coming from in ways that answering questions could never do.

We were almost done editing *Korea*. Emer Reynolds, my editor, and I had gone up and down the film, turned it on its head and cut it sideways and it seemed there was very little else we could do with it. Yet I had a floating, sickening feeling that all wasn't right with the film. It sagged in the middle.

Lelia Doolin, the CEO of the Irish Film Board at the time, had been wanting to see the cut. The IFB was one of the main investors and I couldn't put her off much longer.

As it happened, Lelia was somewhat complimentary about what she saw (I didn't take much notice of that) but felt that we were 'marking time' in the middle section (I remembered *all* of that). She offered to go over the parts of the film that were problematic, but I already knew what she meant. When Lelia said her goodbyes, Emer and I turned off the machines and went to the pub.

Bitter shadows

I'm a worrier, you see, and I had the thousand-yard stare that night. I didn't know how to save the film.

Emer guessed that, but cautioned me about over-reacting to one negative comment; 'You go into a hole,' she told me. 'As soon as someone says anything bad about the film, you take it too much to heart.' She was right of course, but I told her I would have to live with this piece of work forever. That meant I couldn't let it go until I was satisfied it was as good as it could be. We sat drinking in silence, sometimes offering up rather lame ideas on how to 'save' the film. Eventually Emer kissed me on the cheek, downed her pint and left. I was alone with my thoughts, and they were gloomy. This was my

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film and I felt it was falling short of what I had hoped for. I finished my pint and walked to Temple Bar.

It was a much more interesting place in the early 1990s. So long as you had the price of a pint and enough for a kebab on the way home, you were made. You could always find a fellow traveller who was on the dole; someone you could moan to; someone who would sympathise with you. But there was no one like that around that night.

I did meet Bob Quinn, however, who listened to my difficulties and offered to view my film the next morning and 'tell it to me straight'. I turned down his offer. Bob moved off to talk to someone else. He was like the paternal figure of Irish independent film at the time. To me he was interestingly crazy,

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fearless, full of ideas. I admired him, yet felt somewhat in his shadow. And here I was working on *Korea* – a father/son relationship where the boy must find a way out of the long, bitter shadow his father has cast. I had about a week left to lock the picture, I remembered. Not only time and money were running out, but everyone's patience too.

To those of a nervous disposition, beer-mats are wonderful things. You can tear 'em up, throw 'em around, write garbage on 'em. That night I wrote on one: 'Sometimes/I feel/as if I've lived too long in my father's world/The past goes with me in my dreams.' It was the start of an idea.

Sweet dreams

I remembered I had footage I had never used before. It was of Eamon Doyle (played by Andrew Scott) looking wistfully, nervously, at a map of America. We had an American 'subplot' in the film, which was well aired by now, and I had this footage left over. What if I could fake it, I wondered. What if Eamon looks at *something else* and not the map? It would have to be an image that would intrigue him – tell him something about his father's past. I got my hands on a book of photographs from the civil war in Ireland. Eamon could look at Michael Collins, I thought, lying in state, and at those men in trench coats and caps with guns half-hidden from the camera.

I remembered too, that I had some unused footage of the two young lovers, nervously kissing in the rowing boat as it glides beneath us on the lake. We could hear Eamon in voiceover as he flips the pages of the book. We see the photos and hear: 'Sometimes I feel as if I've lived too long in my father's world.' Then the two lovers kissing: 'The past goes with me in my dreams.' Perhaps I could make a sequence that would kick new life into the centre of the film?

I shot the photos on my kitchen table a few nights later, flicking the pages over as the cameraman panned from photo to photo. There were tears and smiles in the editing room when we felt it might all be working. And the sequence did work. Beautifully. It strengthened the middle section of the film and laid the groundwork for the shifts of emphasis the story needed.

And what, you may ask, is the point of this story? What I'm trying to say is – to tell myself is – that we must always try to go the extra mile. We must endeavour to 'call up' as much magic from our lives as we can, no matter how painful, or scary, or last-minute that might be. We must try always to live in the world of alchemy. To create beauty out of nothing; to be fearless about working in the dark. As I've said before, filmmaking isn't all about plot points and style and the latest lens that can shoot around corners. Film is about invisible things too. It's about two worlds living side by side. ❖