



Graham Streeter is an American film director from Los Angeles. He is well known for his independent films that have won many international awards. His latest film, “I May Regret”, received Grand Prix at the Vienna Independent Film Festival as well as Best Director Award.

Q: What do the words “independent filmmaker” mean for you? Is it financial independence or an independent opinion? Or both? Is it difficult to maintain individuality?

A: Lets assume the opposite of “independent filmmaker” is a “studio filmmaker”. Studio filmmaker makes films for others. Independent filmmaker makes films for themselves.

In my mind, an independent filmmaker is someone who embarks on the process of creating film content knowing they will not collaborate with a large studio or financial entity as a partner, that can potentially result in mass exposure and distribution. The decision to go “independent” usually means there will be no funding for big stars, fat productions, costly special effects and grand music scores, let alone public theatrical runs, glamorous premiere parties or world-wide campaigns for on-demand release.

Why do it independently? It often means less pressure to deliver, more autonomy to create content that is artistic, instead of “marketable”, more artistry within the film telling medium, greater freedom to tell provocative narratives with potentially greater impact on society and most of all, more ownership in the film in the end.

Those who engage with film finance usually are compelled to attach big stars. They must jump in bed with a studio and distributor to satisfy financial risks. The team is usually comprised of well-seasoned producers, directors, writers who specialize and bring specific expertise based on the film’s genre to the table. Collectively they collaborate and together they will share the rewards or losses. They will work with intense caution because they have everything to lose, and everything to gain. It is high stakes.

Those who willingly decide to do this without the obligation of finance, big star payment burdens, and pre-determined objectives of a sales and distribution agent, will end up wearing multiple hats, exposing themselves to all the facets of filmmaking, working one on one with the actors, producers, writer and director. They are truly independent from any system. They must

create solutions on their own, they will garner practical, sensible, applicable experience in the process. They ultimately owe no one. They enjoy all the rewards of the hard work. The final film is clearly a product of their hard work and creativity. It is rewarding on many levels.

One might say you start out independently, Over time as an independent filmmaker you create more trust in others and greater reputation in yourself. More doors open and more offers are received. As you gain experience and garner reputation you have more opportunity to contribute that expertise to the collaborative high risk “studio table”. But this is where and when you must ask yourself. Do I want to work for a studio, or for myself.

Q: When did you decide to become a film director and why?

A: Film was a very gradual realization. Where some children might play sports with their fathers, my played “art” with mine. My father was an art teacher. I don’t think it was intentional, but looking back, together my father and I explored every possible medium over the years.

As a result I aspired to be an artist. I was fairly sure illustration through mixed medium anchored in watercolor was to be my medium. But over time I realized it was limited. It wasn’t until my 20s that storytelling through art become a clear interest. In fact, story telling was almost more important than art. By watching movies I realized film was the most powerful artistic medium I could imagine that embraced both.

Once I realized that, got involved in anything I could that would potentially result in one step closer to making film. I worked for TV production, explored short films, music videos. I created my own company, did documentary short subjects to keep me alive and self-taught myself everything there was to know about film. I managed to get a degree in business to round out my obsession with art, hoping it would make me a better person in the film “business”.

I officially embarked on my first feature film in 2005 when I wrote and directed *Cages*. It was a learning process. I was in awe of the cinematographer’s contribution, and the power to shape a film in post though editing. Learning what I did, I immediately started to reshape my artistic needs and desires in the filmmaking process which led me to study cinematography and editing, hopefully allow myself even more creative opportunity.

From there life just flew by. In 2000 I started Imperative Pictures to formalize my documentary work under a company banner. In 2012 I did my first documentary feature film in which I was writer, director, cinematographer and editor. I showed myself that if I planned well, I could do it all.

In 2014 I wrote, directed, lensed and edited my first narrative feature film *Blind Malice*. My hand-held documentary style bundled with my love for narrative resulted in a little film, made with just a hand full of trusted people, proved that if I put my mind to it, and paid enough attention to the pre-production I could make award winning films.

After every film I try and refine the process more. Compelled to keep it independent so I can relish in the creative side of storytelling without the pressure to comply to studio expectations, defining a system for a small team to function effectively in, and implementing a process that keeps everyone stimulated while hitting long-term goals, creating a realistic production culture, all based on writing and shooting smart screenplays was starting to pay off.

In 2015 we did *Imperfect Sky*. I finally felt it all come together. The awards we received were affirming we were doing something right. We have since taken our “Imperative Picture” model and like any new film project we refine it more each time. Knowing how difficult it is to operate

and create product in the indie film world but also knowing it's rewards, we continue to push further, we have learned to trust the process.

I always say sometimes it feels like you're rowing a boat all alone in the middle of the sea, with no land in sight no matter which direction you look. If you trust the process you believe if you go far enough in any direction you will hit land. Therefore, pick a direction....any direction and start rowing. And don't stop rowing. Eventually you will hit land.

In 2018 we finished *I May Regret*. Like our other films, it has been received by festivals and audiences with great success. We are proud of the work and attribute the pleasures of making this film due to the lessons we have learned on prior films. It was, by far, been our most challenging film to make yet. But despite the title, there have been no regrets.

Q: Your films are thrilling and make you also think about important subjects. How do you manage to find the perfect balance in making a film both entertaining and profound at the same time?

A: In my mind, the perfect balance comprises of both "subject" and "imperative". Let me back up and say when I embark on a film project, I can expect it to consume three or four years of my life. My personal hope is that in the process of making the film, from conception to distribution, it's going to make me a better person. In other words, in four years I can earn a degree, so, spending that much time on a single project is precious time and I need to make sure I am spending my time wisely, learning as I go.

But that can be a dangerous approach to filmmaking. The audience doesn't want a subject shoved down their throat. They don't want a film that preaches a topic. They mostly want to be entertained. But there is a side to them that also, expects, if they invest 100 minutes with a film, that they too come out of the experience with something constructive. The theater goer also needs to make sure he or she is spending their time wisely, perhaps even learning as they go. Here is where the filmmaker and audience potentially meet.

And that meeting point is a delicate blend of Topic and Subject. The way I see it, the topic needs to be the element that bathes the subject. The subject is always the human condition; the fundamental moral question your main character is being challenged with...like Love, Hope, Faith, Guilt, Regret, Truth, etc. These are the big universal subjects the challenge us all. Although these issues may seem too high-level or general and boring....they are truly universal.

The Topic is the "bathwater" to which the Subject will soak in. This is my imperative. It can be a social issue, dealing with something specific in justice or greed, or a medial issue like disease, or a political issue like democracy or our fundamental human rights. The imperative is something that challenges our society today...and is a topic people are discussing around the world, that impacts us either directly or indirectly either currently or in the near future.

But the story must not be about the "bathwater", but instead about the person soaking in it. In *Blind Malice* it was about a visually impaired girl who is struggling with trauma buried in her past. The core of the story deals with the issue of truth. The "imperative" is visual impairment. For *Imperfect Sky*, the subject is self-esteem, the imperative is heroin. In *I May Regret* the subject is also self-esteem and the imperative is dementia.

Even though these imperatives are powerful and heavy, my goal is always to make the imperative as coincidental as possible. These imperatives are things that are happening all around us. They are not unusual. Yes, they impact our lives tremendously, but all said and done, they are quite common and effect us all. But every one is effected differently and sometimes the imperatives we are challenged with are not visible to others. At the end of the day, the story always comes

back to the human condition; the “subject”; the human being who is just trying to navigate though life the best he or she can, while submerged in the “imperative”.

Q: Who influenced you the most from the filmmakers of the past? Which films have affected you the most?

A: I honestly don’t consciously recall specific influences from filmmakers of the past that have shaped my style of filmmaking. Not having a formal film degree, I admit I am less versed on the classics of film history, and more a passive product of contemporary film influences since growing up. Being an artist who is self-taught from screenplay to edit, I am hyper aware that a motion picture is a collaboration of artists who come together to tell a story. The screenplay, the actor, the director, the cinematographer, the music, the wardrobe, etc. are all powerful components that together bring such a unique cinematic experience, that it is hard in my mind to credit a single filmmaker for the lasting effect of one film.

Sure, I am in total awe of filmmakers who serve multiple creative roles. As one person contributes in more aspects of the filmmaking process you can then only assume you are starting to witness more and more of that person’s contribution. In theory, if the filmmaker is the writer, director, cinematographer, actor, editor, and composer, one could confidently assess the filmmaker’s artistry. But filmmaking like that is rare. And even assuming all that, sometimes just one person’s little contribution or advice can elevate a mediocre film into a masterpiece. So because filmmaking is not made in a vacuum I am inclined to appreciate the fact that all the players somehow contributed equally, it is only when they work together that they make something so powerful.

Films that emotionally touched me as a child are often, in retrospect, are mostly benign today. Films that have rocked my adult life were neither here nor there in my youth which makes me believe a film is as impactful as the timing in which you see it. I often ask others what their favorite films are...and of course like me, they can usually rattle off a few great films immediately. But after an inspiriting discussion based on those films, we begin to think deeper, suddenly the list gets bigger and bigger, some for the sheer sake of recalling nostalgic ancillary memories, others for their genius in the timing of life. My philosophy today is not to try and watch films to be influenced, but instead to experience in the moment. And as a filmmaker, and fellow artist as I watch other filmmakers make art, I must trust that all films potentially affect someone in some way. That is why the world needs films!

Q: Your films deal with a lot of important issues, like, for example drug abuse in *Imperfect Sky*, and they have a darkness to them, in a way. But in real life you often smile, how do you deal with this dark side of life?

A: There’s the old saying “write what you know”. As a result, a lot of people ask me if there was any personal experience that compelled me to deal with the topics I write about. The answer is no. I consider myself to be quite fortunate for the life I’ve had so far. Sure, the imperatives of heroin and elderly abuse and dementia that were addressed in *Imperfect Sky* and *I May Regret* were not total strangers to me but in general I was aware I only knew a little about the topics. The understanding the heroin crisis and dementia epidemic are imperatives I would be a better person knowing more. This drives me to research. This challenges me to dig deeper to write about what I don’t know. That being said, I can’t imagine the courage it must take to write about something so personal or painful that has happened to you in your life. I give writers who contribute to their work by sharing personal experience with the great respect.

As far as dealing with the darkness of life? So far I have found my life to have no dark side. I believe everyone's heart is born in goodness. Our surroundings can sometimes challenge us to make dark choices, and fate through health and happenstance can indeed make life sad and desperate. But I believe if you actively seek the light, one can prevail even the darkest of imperatives. In many ways *Imperfect Sky* was all about that. Finding something good even in the darkest circumstances.

Q: How long did the process of making *I May Regret*? take? The film features a lead character who suffers from dementia. Did you have any real life experiences which led you to write about the topic?

A: Identifying dementia as the imperative I would imply in the film was an easy task. Sadly it's an epidemic. By reading news articles and watching several older family members dwindle away by this horrific disease it was apparent that dementia was my next imperative. Writing for me always starts with the pleasures of months an months of research. I said I don't write what I know. I take that back now. I choose topics that I don't know, I research them until I feel I truly know the topic and then I write what I know. But to truly know the topic can take months if not years.

In the case of *I May Regret* it was a half a year process. It included online research, meeting patients, watching videos, participating in groups and observing family members and close acquaintances who were challenged with dementia. From there, another half a year goes into breaking the screenplay down and attaching actual actors, location and props to the story. At the one year mark, we build a production team from scratch. We break the screenplay down again, this time for production, we rehearse and we discuss the detail nuances and meaning of every line, every scene and every shot.

So, we began rolling camera one and a half years after conception. The shooting process is only 30 days. I tend to take a break and rest the brain after that. Taking a few months to step away from the content makes me a better editor, so that I am not too invested in memory or emotionally attached to the backstory of every scene set up. Then I can exit for the sake of the story, not ego or nostalgia.

The entire process is about two years of hard and continuous work. By then the brain is mush. That's why it's a total pleasure to finally sit in the back of a theater and witness the hard work play back in real time for an audience. You gotta hope it was worth it in the end.

Q: I know that you are planning to shoot your new picture, *The Month of April*, in Europe. Why? Can you tell us a little about this film?

A: My next film deals with the topic of Physics. God is the imperative. The subjects are two brothers who must reconnect after being separated by their views on religion and science.

We think Vienna is a great palette to tell this story. The architecture is beautiful. The people are diverse. The community is multi-lingual. It is educated and international, yet possess a great sense of history. While our latest film *I May Regret* was in competition at the Vienna Independent Film Festival this year, we also took the opportunity to do many days of casting and location scouting. We like what we found. We are excited to take the information back to Los Angeles to see how we can make the puzzle of elements work for this next film.

Q: Your films boast an ensemble of great actors. How do you choose them and can you describe the process of working with them?

A: I am a believer that there are many many great actors that are not known because they simply haven't had the opportunity to shine. We pride ourselves in opening up the casting process to all actors. We are willing to give anyone a chance to show us who they are. That being said, in the end, there is only one person who is undeniably right for the role. They are innately, that character the moment they step into the casting room.

We are also believers in training. A good actor is the one who has trained, studied, is disciplined and approaches the work with strategy, technique and stamina. They are athletes. Luckily I enjoy writing about the human condition which is what most true actors aspire to indulge in. So, choosing the perfect actor is a two way street. They must move the character and story as much as we believe they can tell that story.

When working with actors, it's all about telling the story. If the screenplay is solid it will be the screenplay that keeps us all together. I spend countless hours over coffee and wine discussing the story, the journey of the characters with actors. Together through the process we will laugh and cry as the story touches our hearts I ways that make the story so powerfully personal. And this goes for the entire team. My actors are just as important in telling the story as my lighting guy, audio guy, prop master wardrobe manager or even the person who cooks on set. We, together, collectively, are setting a stage, telling a story; a story that we all believe in with all our heart. We, together, are filmmakers.

Q: What would you like to say to young, independent filmmakers who are just starting out?

A: Do it because you love it. And learn everything about leadership, organization, and project management along the way. Film is a business. The best advise I ever received was from my father who is a true artist. He said "if you really wanna be an artist, go to business school".

Looking back I know what he was saying. Filmmaking is a business. I find myself studying the art my entire life long. I was and continue to and will always be a self-taught student of film because.... I love what I do. That's my POV.