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American Cinematographer

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Short Takes

Senses Work Overtime in *Synaesthesia*

by **Iain Stasukevich**

Top and middle: The short film *Synaesthesia* offers a visual exploration of the eponymous condition, in which one sensory stimulus triggers a different sensory response. For instance, in the scene pictured here, a boy (Jordan Gimkan) listens to his food. **Bottom:** The boy's family, including his mother (Pearl Wong) and father (Larry Kitagawa), move through their sensory stew all but oblivious to one another.



Synaesthesia is the phenomenon that occurs when one sensory stimulus triggers a different kind of sensation — seeing colors when you hear music, or smelling one thing while you taste another. *Synaesthesia* is the latest project from the Bay Area directing team of Ian Kibbey and Corey Creasey. The filmmakers met while attending classes at UC-Berkeley, found that they shared a lot of the same ideas, and began shooting low-budget music videos under the moniker Terri Timely. Since then, they've produced more than 25 music videos, commercials, and short films.

A byproduct of this work is a large backlog of visual ideas — the genesis of *Synaesthesia*. “Cats jumping out of speakers or plugging headphones into food — those ideas had come to us separately,” Creasey explains. “Years later, we learned about synaesthesia, and it clicked.” Adds Kibbey, “It helps to have a concept to work with; otherwise, your film becomes this mishmash of imagery and sound.”

Synaesthesia depicts an evening in the life of a nuclear Asian family, during which each member experiences a different form of the condition. The first scene involves one of two young sons sitting at the dinner table as he plugs a set of headphones into different kinds of food — each of which has its own, distinctive sound. In the kitchen, the mother is chopping up a cookbook and scooping the strips onto a baking pan, while the father drops a sheaf of paper into the toaster. A book pops up, and Dad places the toasted tome on a tray and walks it through the dining room and into the living room. There, another boy is sitting on the rug, sniffing record albums and calling out colors for each one (in Cantonese, with deliberately incorrect



Photos and frame grabs courtesy of Terri Timely.



spent in Vietnam at the outset of their commercial careers. In particular, the film was influenced by the architecture and design on display in Ho Chi Minh City's Reunification Palace. "There's a retro-future vibe in Vietnam," Creasey offers. "They're really into the American '70s there, but it's interpreted through modern Vietnamese culture." Kibbey adds, "When we were in Vietnam, we couldn't tell if it was a Western expression of Eastern aesthetic, or the other way around."

Sell worked closely with production designer Na Young Kim to ensure that his camerawork complemented her boxy, retro set design. Constructed in Terri Timely's studio in Fremont, Calif., the home is configured like a railroad apartment, with one room leading directly into the next. By putting the camera on a dolly, Sell was able to follow the father as he walked from the kitchen through the dining room and into the living room, capturing each environment in a single move. When the actor reached the living room, the camera was aimed straight down the length of the house, presenting the audience with a view of the entire set.

Sell and Kim tried to give each room a distinct look. "We used a lot of saturated colors," says Kim. "Donavan and I talked a lot about the color schemes. The kitchen has a pale, sky-blue color. The dining room has a lot of saturated colors with the food, and the living room has dark, natural tones." Sell notes, "Na Young's production design really dictated the lighting, because I didn't know what I would be doing until I got there."

Kim also attended the Academy of Art University, where she studied painting along with her production-design courses. "It helped me understand light and colors, and how colors can be changed by the light," she says. "Production design isn't just designing a space; it's working with the director of photography and understanding how light affects that space."

Sell's cinematography was inspired by Wong Kar-wai's *2046* and *In the Mood For Love*, both of which were

Above: The boxy, retro set, realized by production designer Na Young Kim, enabled the filmmakers to track from room to room. Below, left to right: Grip Keith Pikus, camera assistant Jeremy Wong, cinematographer Donovan Sell, and directors Ian Kibbey and Corey Creasey fine-tune one of the tracking moves.

subtitles). The mother opens the oven and removes her baking pan, which contains a papier-mâché turkey. Back in the living room, a reel-to-reel player clicks on, running a ribbon of text across the tape head; along with the music that begins to play, all manner of weird objects begin to pop out of the stereo speakers: eggs, grass, smoke, fireworks, cats. The film ends with a bang — literally — when the son in the dining room plugs his headphone jack into his belly button and explodes.

According to the filmmakers, the family analogy works on two levels. "We wanted to see what would happen when all these manifestations existed in one space," Kibbey points out. "Each person's neurological system takes in different sensory information, and they're also a family that isn't communicating. There are few times when they actually acknowledge one

another, and then everything turns into chaos at the end."

The film was shot by cinematographer Donovan Sell, a Bay Area resident who met Creasey while the two were students. (Sell attended classes across the Bay at the Academy of Art University.) Sell was looking for a director with a good story, and Creasey was looking for a cinematographer. They were introduced by mutual friends and eventually collaborated on three projects over the next three years until Creasey met Kibbey, who turned the twosome into a trio. Sell recalls being impressed by the way the young Berkeley students clicked. "Ian's got the energy, and Creasey is very technical," he notes. "Both of them are always coming up with interesting concepts, which are hard to come by."

Synaesthesia was partially inspired by the time Creasey and Kibbey



Creasey (top) prepares for the fireworks display that emanates from the family's stereo speakers at *Synaesthesia's* climax.



shot mostly by Christopher Doyle, HKSC. Singling out particular aspects of those films, he cites Doyle's use of "super-saturated colors [and his tendency to] push them further than they would go normally, [as well as his strategy of] not lighting people with tungsten light or daylight — maybe something that matches the set more, but not practically motivated.

"On *Synaesthesia*, we didn't have to hold to conventions, and it didn't have to be textbook," he adds. "I love *2046*, but I could never get away with creating that kind of look in my regular work."

With few practicals and just one visible window (in the dining room) at his disposal, Sell opted for a less motivated lighting strategy, choosing instead to let the environments speak for themselves. In each space he set a base exposure with overhead 2K space lights, then created fill by placing 5K Fresnels on the camera side and

bouncing them into 12x UltraBounces for fill. Source Four Pars were used as the actors' key lights; the one exception to this approach was the boy at the table, who was lit with a 2K space light. In the dining room, the light coming through the window seems too orange for natural light; to elicit this eerie orange glow, the cinematographer doubled up Rosco Straw filters. Another window, hidden offstage in the kitchen, was skinned with Rosco Teal to match the rest of the room.

"The dining room was a tough set to light because we had to travel past it," Sell remarks. "There's so much going on in the living room. You can see that the walls have swatches of color on them — more Source Fours. We gave the father and the boy special lights: red and white lights that simulate the fireworks going off in the speakers."

In addition to shaking out their creative cobwebs, everyone on the project was determined to shoot with

the Red camera Terri Timely had recently purchased. Prior to *Synaesthesia*, most of their projects had been shot on film. "I liked it, for a digital camera," Sell comments. "You still have to treat the image like a video image and light for the highlights, but I was surprised at its latitude, and the accessories made it feel like a film camera. I can be a little lazy when it comes to lighting video, so I brought my meter, and the camera was spot-on with my readings."

The biggest plus for Sell was the Red's PL mount, which enabled him to use Zeiss Superspeed MKII primes. "The fact that this camera lets me use the lenses I'm used to means a lot to me," he enthuses.

"The piece is meant to be visually stylized," says Creasey. "We tried to adhere to the conventions of traditional cinematic imagery, but it does have a slightly different look than it would if we had shot on 35mm. In the end, our visual choices were really more about the lighting and the art direction than the choice of camera."

Sell dialed in the 1920x1080 HD image on set, using Red Alert software, and exported color reference clips that served as guidelines after they delivered their footage to Spy Post in San Francisco. The final color grade was performed by Carey Burens on a DaVinci 2K, but the majority of postproduction time was dedicated to rendering out r3d (Redcode RAW) files for editorial.

So far, *Synaesthesia* has been a big hit on the Web, and the short has even inspired an interactive installation at Scion Space in Culver City, Calif. Creasey and Kibbey feel both thrilled and vindicated. "The thing we try to do with all of our work is to tap into the strange things people think about every now and again, like 'What does a tomato sound like?'" Creasey says. "Synaesthesia is not uncommon, and our film is just a visual way of presenting this condition that everyone experiences on some level." ■