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OUT OF THE PICTURE: DRAWING THE NARRATION OF FILM

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This article discusses the short film SPARROW (2016). The film's trailer, official selections, awards, stills and preparatory drawings are available at: <http://sparrowfilm.nz/>

Introduction

Imagine for a moment a story that does not have solid form. It is nebulous but resonant. It is an idea. Between this state and a completed cinematic work, there is normally a process of artistic inquiry. Conventionally, creating a narrative for film involves constructing written treatments, drafting scripts and compiling shot lists. However, a small number of filmmakers use drawing as a visual method to create and shape knowledge into communicative form.

Although film is understood as a visual medium, we rarely talk about visual methods used in its early stages of development. Increasingly, visual methods are used in a range of disciplines including sociology, psychology, geography and health care (Barbour, 2014; Pain 2012). However, they are normally applied to data gathering or analysis. Such methods embrace a variety of approaches including photo elicitation (Glaw, Kable, Hazelton & Inder, 2017; Meo, 2010), analysing found data (Prosser & Loxley, 2008), collaborative filmmaking (Parr, 2007) and the use of video diaries (Holliday, 2004).

In cinema we generally associate visual methods with principal photography (filming) and postproduction processing. However, in this article I will discuss an approach to the narrative development of the short film Sparrow, where visual methods were employed from the earliest stages of narrative gestation through to the moments just before the camera began recording.

Beyond the screenplay

Behind films we generally imagine a script. Although a significant body of literature reinforces the assumption that script writing is the basis of a film's narrative development (Landau, 2012; McBride, 2012; McKee, 2010; Turner, 2011), this assumption is increasingly questioned. In 2010, Millard asked if, in a contemporary environment where images and sound play increasingly significant roles, traditional, writing-based methods for film might actually restrict innovation. In the same year Murphy proposed alternative methods for narrative development in cinema, including improvisation, psychodrama and visual storytelling.

Their critique of the screenplay as a dominant method for film ideation and narrative development related to Wells' (2007) call for screen writing to be broadened so it might more effectively engage with alternative narrative structures, concepts, and sound and image potentials. Wells' concerns surfaced in the context of a number of practices where directors were already using visual methods in their ideational and developmental thinking. Historically, Jean-Luc Godard used images for inspiration during the story development phases of his work, and Wong Kar Wai, who created *Fallen Angels* in 1995, employed images, sound, and music in his preproduction and production processes. In a manner similar to that adopted by the Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni, Wong believed that "abstract lines, and forms, and shapes, and colours can give emotional

meaning and expression just as much as narrative lines, dialogue and characters" (Brunette 2005, p. 119). He complained:

You can't write all your images on paper, and there are so many things – the sound, the music, the ambience, and also the actors – when you're writing all these details in the script, the script has no tempo, it's not readable... It's not a good idea (to write out a complete script beforehand) and I just wrote down the scenes, some essential details, and the dialogue. (ibid., p. 126)

My own filmmaking is somewhat aligned to this position. Although I eventually write screenplays for actors and crew; the storyline, its emotional texture, structure and visual ethos is initially established through drawing. I sketch hundreds of pictures. They operate as visual methods for immersing myself in the potential of an idea.

Drawing as a method in other disciplines has well-documented applications, including Guillemin's (2004) study that explored ways in which people understand illness conditions; and Kearney and Hyle's (2004) examination of the emotional impact of change on individuals in an educational institution. However, unlike such research, my use of drawing is not associated with analysis. Instead, I use drawing to produce and progress artistically synthesised knowledge.

Artistic knowledge

McNiff notes that artistic knowledge involves “the systematic use of the artistic process ... as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies” (2008, p. 29). Such knowledge emanates from a epistemological framework of artistic knowing and inquiry where artistic research is the “mode of a process” (Klein, 2010, p. 4).

Rosenberg associates artistically generative research with poetic methods. He notes that, unlike conventional research that normally begins with a question and develops a research strategy (in advance of the process), poetic research is essentially anti-Cartesian. It normally begins in complexity “drawing out from a number of sources simultaneously ... weaving together disparate elements in a complex and evolving structure” that is profiled by non-linear connections, that creatively destabilise, rupture, reform and transform (2000, p. 6).

Origin and story

So, let us turn to a particular example that illustrates how drawing methods were used in the development of a short film.

In 2015 I began making a work about something hidden. It concerned my great uncle who, in the Second World War, was killed saving the lives of allied soldiers in the dugouts of Egypt. In the

small town where I lived, we were very proud of his story.

Every year his nephews marched, wearing his medals, beside the returned war veterans in the memorial parade down the main street.

However, my great uncle’s story was not quite what it appeared. The legend of his heroic sacrifice was shattered when my cousin found a small box of letters hidden in a locked drawer in his father’s workshop. The correspondence had been written in the 1950s and it documented fifteen years of a man explaining something that had happened and asking his son to come and visit him. Few of the envelopes had ever been opened.

The letters revealed that my great uncle had not died in Egypt. Although he was a deeply respected soldier, when his gay lover was shot, he stripped off his uniform and in protest, carried the man’s body out into the enemy gunfire.

As a consequence, he was sent home, charged with desertion and diagnosed with Combat Stress Reaction (CSR). The man had died alone in the small back room of a hospital, less than two hours from where his family lived. They never came to see him. Although his family gave me permission to tell this story, they did not want to be publicly

identified. This is an understandable thing. Following last century’s World Wars, New Zealand constructed very prescriptive parameters around what constituted heroic sacrifice. Wounded soldiers returned to a social climate where respect was displayed for physical wounds but there was deep intolerance and suspicion surrounding psychological injury (Boston 1993; Clarke 1991; Parsons 2013).

Appreciating the delicacy of the situation I agreed not to treat the story as a documentary. Instead I disguised identifying aspects by fusing the narrative with an autobiographical account of my own childhood. This related to a preoccupation I had up until the age of 10, with being able to fly.

The film wove two narratives into a semi-fictional work. The first was the story of a boy whose life is overshadowed by the legend of his grandfather who, he was told died a hero in World War II. However, when he opens some letters he finds in a box hidden in his father’s workshop, he realises that this story is a lie. He discovers that his grandfather was a gay man who deserted in protest when his lover was shot. In unraveling the truth behind what happened, the boy gains the strength to stand up to some bullies in his own world in an unexpected way.

The connecting thread that joins these two stories is a sparrow. In the grandfather's world it is a small, caged mascot that the soldiers cared for. In the boy's world it is a bird that he finds trapped in a room in the abandoned asylum where his grandfather died.

Drawing and visual methods

Although a significant body of material exists that examines drawing as a method in Art and Design research (Calvo, 2017; Garner, 2008, Mäkelä, Heikkinen & Nimkulrat, 2014; Pallasmaa, 2009; Knowles & Cole, 2008), these discussions tend not to expand into the realms of narrative design.

I understand films as 'talking pictures'. In other words, they are narratives that are constructed to reveal themselves primarily through moving imagery. Given this emphasis, I draw my films before I translate the storylines into written form.

This is because my richest and most critical thinking occurs beyond the realm of words. Drawing as a method, enables me to construct and evaluate thinking in ways that are conversant with the mode of address of the final work.

However the visual research methods I use are quite distinct and each is employed for a different purpose. Broadly we might think of them as gestational drawing, empathetic drawing and directorial drawing.

Gestational drawing

This is a method that facilitates story construction. It is an approach that I employ to feel my way around the potential content of a film using very quick sketches. These early forays into narrative construction are quickly rendered ‘thumbnails’ that have few distinguishing character details (because at this point the emotional resonance of the narrative’s population is still undefined).

The drawings are therefore exploratory in nature. They alight on potential plot points and I ‘draw’ content and atmosphere into being, so I can assess both the nature of an idea and its viability. Using this method I explore environments and ask what might have happened here.

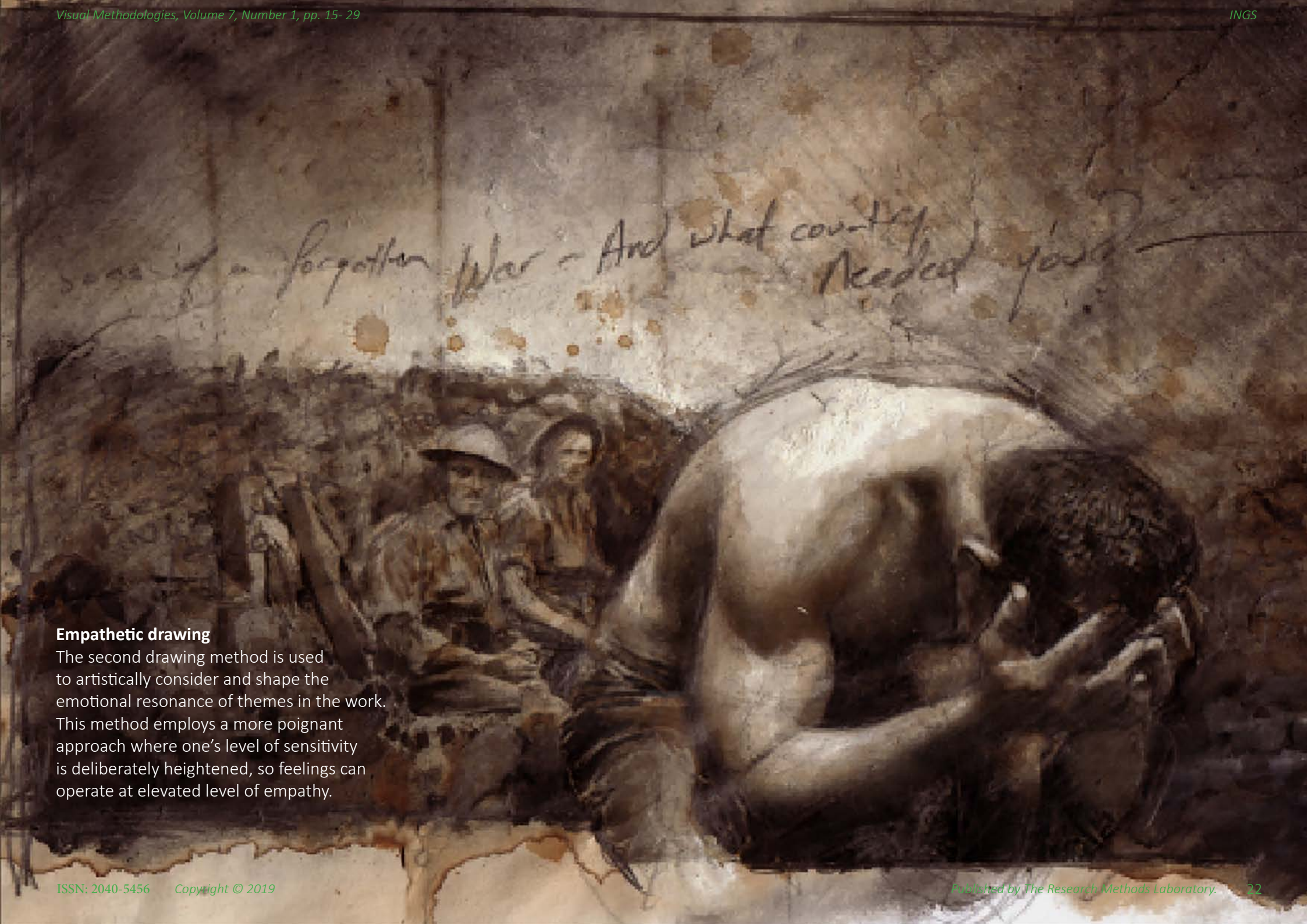
Normally these drawings are roughed out on odd bits of paper using graphite pencils, ink and sometimes a wash of cheap instant coffee. Such sketches can be thought of as a kind of denkraum (subjective thinking space). Sometimes as they develop, I will write notes to myself recording things that I ‘hear’. These annotations are often scrawled across the sketches and are generally flickers of the characters’ internal thinking or impressions about the environment they inhabit.

Gestational drawing begins with the faintest of impressions; a potential moment in the story or a thought about how something might look. Such drawings emanate from whiteness. I am reminded in this regard of the sixteenth century Italian painter Titian, who reportedly “touched the surface of his paper in order to investigate an elusive world just beyond his reach” (Taylor, 2008, p. 11).

It is by producing literally hundreds of such drawings that an image-led overview of the narrative’s concerns, structure and emphases begin to surface. I pin these drawings up on a wall so I can visually construct and arrange key plot points in the narrative.

Using this method I can ‘see’ the architecture of a story at a glance; I can visualise areas that will require narrative underpinning and places where I will need to create emotional accents.



**Empathetic drawing**

The second drawing method is used to artistically consider and shape the emotional resonance of themes in the work. This method employs a more poignant approach where one's level of sensitivity is deliberately heightened, so feelings can operate at elevated level of empathy.



This method provides contemplative environments where one can think and feel for extended periods of time. The process may be likened to “indwelling” (Polyani, 1967) in spaces where I move away from Heidegger’s “calculative thinking” (1966, p. 46), towards a more meditative state where I empathetically “dwell on what lies close” (ibid., p. 47).

Douglass and Moustakas (1985, p. 47) suggest that such a state, thinking can initially be marked by “vague and formless wanderings” but eventually there develops “a growing sense of direction and meaning emerge[s] as the perceptions and understandings of the researcher grow and the parameters of the problem are recognised.”



While this kind of drawing is associated with core themes in the film's story, the method is rarely illustrative of the film's actual content. Instead, inside the process of drawing I can think about ideas that cannot be expressed in words (but are transferrable to film).

When using this method I allow my emotional sensitivities to escalate to a very high level so I can think through things like the texture of loss, the weight of grief, the emotional tension of being bullied, the delicate grace of aloneness, or the sound of shell shock.

Such experiences are important because they directly inform later decisions around the sound design, grade (colour palettes), and editing style of the film. They also enable me to assess the intensity of the film's emotional high points, so I can modulate the tone of narrative episodes leading up to and falling away from them.

Directorial drawing

The third drawing method is used to enhance artistic collaboration. As a director I am expected to communicate the film's artistic and dramatic arcs while working creatively with the technical crew and actors. Although it is the role of a director to create the artistic vision for a film (Piccirillo, 2010), one works with collaborators who bring with them discrete and highly developed skills in lighting, sound, photography and production design. If a film is to be co-created using rich, well attuned suggestions, there has to be a clearly articulated appreciation of both its style and ethos.

Although traditionally in film, there are a number of relatively formal methods, (including storyboards and animatics), that can be used to communicate ideas to other creatives in the production, my method of directorial drawing is less didactic. The drawings I construct tend to be less physically prescriptive than a storyboard and they are not sequential. Essentially, they operate as discussion catalysts to help the creative team surface and evaluate ideas.

On location, these drawings are used to aid discussions about a particular filmic approach or proposed composition. Normally my directorial drawings communicate a trigger concept like, 'the dead soldier is like Christ sacrificed in a Renaissance pietà', or 'the cigarette before death is filmed like the touch of life from God to Adam', or 'the injury comes in a confusion of forward momentum and panic'. These ideas are clumsy in words but when suggested in a sketch, they can be a shortcut to a complex idea. They become especially useful in discussions with other visual thinkers like cinematographers and production designers.

Such drawings are often sketched a day or two in advance of filming. I go to the location and absorb the essence of the environment, thinking through what needs to occur (narratively and emotionally) in the scene. I ask myself what can't be easily communicated by discussion, and I use directorial drawing to journey into the spaces beyond this. In practical terms, these drawings I carry around with the script in an old manila folder. They are nothing elegant and often at the end of a day's shoot, having served their purpose, they are thrown away.





When I was young I
could fly
long barren
the drift of wind
in the world of the
I touched the wind, I
donned over currents and the
graced flight of birds

... in concluding

The Nigerian poet Ben Okri once said:

A great challenge of our age, and future ages, is to do for storytelling what Joyce did for language- to take it to the highest levels of enchantment and magic; to impact into story infinite riches and convergences; to make story flow with serenity, with eternity. (1997, p. 111)

The film Sparrow tells a difficult story in a lyrical way. Its visual process of development resulted in a work that spoke almost entirely in images. Across two years the film accumulated over 70 international selections and 15 independent awards. It screened in festivals in Cannes, Berlin and across the US, Asia and Europe. Yet at the base of all of this, there was just a small box of letters and an unusual methodological approach. This approach elevated the role of visual methods to enable a narrative designer to think and feel inside the language of images.

The first method was gestational. This was employed to design and evaluate the content and structure of an image-led story before it was shaped into a screenplay. The method allowed me to think entirely in the realm of images and to engage quickly with resonances that are difficult to describe in written language. Collectively, the drawings were used to create a composite image of a film's entire story

line. By pinning them on a wall, I could move ideas around and discuss, reconsider or delete material as potential suggested.

The second method was used to create thematic resonance. Here immersive drawing was employed to assess and modulate emotional power in the story. These drawings became dwelling spaces inside which quieter, less didactic questions could be contemplated. The method was used for internal dialogue and clarification.

The final method was used to communicate and elicit ideas. Directorial drawing was used as a way of enhancing focused discussions with collaborators during the film shoot. These drawings were rarely visualisations of a frame (although occasionally this happened), instead they functioned as catalysts for collaborative thought and interpretation.

By using these visual methods, I was able to reach inwards to the essence of ideas. Having located resonance, I then progressed them fluidly inside visual modes that were conversant with the nature of cinematic storytelling; which is essentially, the art of talking pictures.

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