

“Leandro”

Introduction

Today I’m going to tell you a story about cinema

...and about suffering

My Background

I had an early interest in film

- And growing up in the 1980s and 90s, home video was a brand new medium that allowed me to record and assemble images almost for free.
- Anyone who has seen the abc program, “The Goldbergs” will have a sense of this VHS-inspired era in home video history.
- My favorite films were the Star Wars trilogy, Conan the Barbarian, and really anything that had a “sword & sorcery” or fantasy appeal.
- When I got to high school, I took a few video production courses and I eventually did a senior thesis project called “Sniper,” about a student who goes on a shooting spree. Imagine trying to do that today without the authorities being put on alert...
- When it came time to look for a college, I wanted one that would nurture my interest in film, so I ended up at William Paterson... William Paterson College back then in 1995.

Leandro’s Background

And for the first couple of years as I was taking my basic courses, I heard rumors about this professor, the head of the film program, “Leandro Katz.” He’d actually won a lot of awards and was relatively famous in academic terms:

- Guggenheim Fellowship
- Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship
- National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship
- Winner of multiple major film festival awards

But there were other interesting stories about him too...

- Family fled Nazi Germany?
- Radical Politics?
- Argentinian ex-patriot? Or in exile from Argentina?
- Spies following him around when he moved to New York?

Background: Our Relationship

Leandro was a sort of mentor to me, but not in the traditional sense.

- Generally, we think of a mentor as a teacher who imparts deep individualized learning over a long period of time.
- Well, Leandro wasn't that at all...
- He was preoccupied with his own work, rarely had time for students, and, if he did get the chance to speak to you, he was often condescending and insulting.
- But if you worked hard, you could learn a lot. And that's what I did.

Event #1

I'll never forget my first encounter with Leandro.

- I had shot this movie over the previous summer on 16mm film, and I didn't have the equipment at home to view what I had shot, so I went to his office.
- His office was a little cave filled with books, tattered film posters, videocassettes and other stuff...
- And he sat in the middle of it like a little gnome. He was a short guy who always wore a scarf around his neck, he was bald except for a thick bushy white main of hair that grew around the perimeter of his head, he had big ears, and he always wore these reading glasses that were perched on the edge of his nose.
- And even though he came from Argentina, he spoke with a pronounced German accent.
- I remember him taking the reel of film and asking "Dies ist your Filme?"
- And then he started to unspool the film right there in his office, all over the desk, on the floor...
- And all the while he's staring at me sort of sadistically, trying to if I'd react and get angry.
- That was Leandro...

Event #2

Many years later as a graduate student, I was working as Leandro's assistant.

One day, we were in the "dubber room" (which was a small room used for post-production) working on the "telecine."

The telecine was a big piece of equipment used for transferring film to video and it was composed of a film projector, video camera, and a prism that was precisely aligned inside of a protective housing.

The telecine was like Leandro's Moby Dick... it was always broken and he was always fixing it or planning to fix it.

One day, as he was working on the telecine, a student came into the dubber room to talk to Leandro about taking some film classes.

He was an older student who had some prior experience in film production, so he wanted see about skipping the introductory film course.

Leandro asked him if he had any examples of his work that he might see, but the man explained that he'd lost all of his work in a fire years ago.

Leandro continued working without looking up and said, "No."

The man became angry. He paced around angrily for a while, yelling at Leandro, before finally storming out and slamming the door so that the whole room shook.

I stood there uncomfortably for a little while before Leandro finally looked up at me (his reading glasses perched crookedly at the end of his nose) and casually asked, "Where did he go?"

He was blissfully unaware that the student had left violently angry.

Transition: Serious Tone

Leandro's Films

Despite all this, Leandro was a great artist, but secretive about his life and work. When I first met him, he was completing what would become his masterpiece...

El Dia Que Me Quieras (1997):

This film was a cinematic investigation into the iconic "death photo" of communist revolutionary and guerilla freedom-fighter Ernesto Che Guevara. Leandro took his film crew on a trip through South America, retracing the major events of Che Guevara's life, culminating with his 1967 execution at the behest of the CIA in Bolivia. The purpose of the film was to provide a context for the interpretation of the famous photo taken by journalist Freddy Alborta.

It occurs to me now, that the mysteries surrounding Che Guevara was similar in some ways to the mysteries surrounding Leandro himself. He too had a past that was shrouded in secrets, was involved with political causes, and had suffered great losses.

Climax

This brings me to the greatest lesson that I learned from Leandro... suffering...

- In the tradition of the cliché model of the young alienated and disaffected art student, I had made this brutal and immature film about rape and murder and premiered it at the annual Student Film Festival.
- After the show, I was anxious to get Leandro's reaction. He told me...
- "You have made a film about suffering... How can you make a film about suffering if you have not suffered?"

Proposition of Value Statement

- What I learned from this is that you have to work from your own experiences
- And that the most valuable of those experiences may not be very pleasant
- Anyone can live through the good times. The good times don't challenge us. It's when things go wrong that we find out who we really are...

So I suffered a bit since I was 20 and I learned some lessons. Maybe not quite so much as Leandro, but that's the subject of another story...

End.