Interview: Austin Winner Alex D. Reid – Part II

Part II: Lovecraft and Exposition in Delirium. Alex D. Reid talks about his winning horror script at Austin Film Festival, his Lovecraftian influences and exposition.

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Lovecraft and Exposition in *Delirium*

So, I read your script *Delirium* last night.

I hope you enjoyed it.

There is a horror template that is familiar to me, which is the scary monster who is gonna pick people off one by one, and maybe the protagonist too, but the protagonist needs to have some kind of affirmation of their impact somewhere towards the 3rd Act.

Usually, unless you're Nightmare on Elm Street and then — kill em off half way through.

And then just keep making movies.

[Laughs]

Do you have hopes of it getting made?

I mean — back to good old "no expectations". Would I like it to get made? Sure. Do I expect it to get made? Not really, no. I'm perfectly fine with that. I've heard folks talk about screenplays as being just blueprints and nothing more than blueprints.

I'm not a hundred percent sure I buy that. I feel like they are a story-form in and of themselves that can be enjoyed in and of themselves. I derive pleasure from it that way, not so much in thinking "oh, this will only give me pleasure if it's translated into film". I derive pleasure just from the screenplay format itself.

If you're a good enough writer you can always write something you're passionate about and still be willing to sacrifice some of your children should the opportunity arise.

[Laughs] I am not long in this business — I'm very much a beginner in terms of the business side of this. But as far as I can tell, a lot of this is about building a character around yourself, if that makes sense.

That's interesting. Expand on that?

I pitched a show to the BBC. It was the BBC Writers Room, specifically a program for amateur screenwriters who had had nothing produced. When I didn't get it, I called them up after and asked if they had any feedback to share. The one thing they told me was "you have to stand out somehow. You have to be the only person who can tell this story."

It seems like if someone else — "if you gave the same logline to someone else they couldn't write it the way you could write it" — that's how I interpreted it.

And that advice has borne out to be true. I mean the Northern Irish accent helps with this.

[Laughs]

It helps build a character and I think that's what *Delirium* does. It's a weird fucking script to be honest with you. It's Lovecraftian, which isn't made very much. So that's a whole other kettle of…

Were you just about to say another kettle of fish?

Yeah, is that going to translate?

It's a little on the nose given the topic.

[Laughs]

That should be your tagline: "whole other kettle of fish."

Going back to the thing about getting it made. Even on that topic of Lovecraft, I don't want to dive too deep into it because it's a massive esoteric topic in itself, but the whole thing about Lovecraft. I think I've read everything he's ever written in fiction form. But that guy is….exceedingly problematic.

To say the least.

I've heard people make the arguments that he was just of his time, but I'm pretty sure he was bad even for his time. Which is part of the inspiration behind *Delirium*. Okay, I like where this guy is going, I like his general aesthetic, but I disagree with a lot of his fundamental ideas about life. That was kind of my way in. His whole thing was "life is pointless, we're all going to get wiped out in a second." I was like – eh…that's not a bad thing, necessarily. You know, that could be a good thing. That was kind of my way in.

I just thought, as soon as I put a Lovecraft quote at the start, *I'm gonna be fucked.*

It follows that it was important to you to have a black female as your lead.

A hundred percent. Every single [Lovecraft] story is unfailingly a white man in his 20s-30s who is really erudite, educated and looks down on everyone who isn't from a city. It gets incredibly boring after a while. This whole sub-genre of horror need not be sequestered away to such a small group of people. It is for everyone, I think. And in recent years there have been loads of great writers who have taken it on. Neil Gaiman's done a lot of it. There's a great tabletop RPG called Call of Cthulhu and it takes a really progressive stance towards all these things. I very much wanted to define myself as being part of that.

I feel like when you start citing Lovecraft you have to take a stance on this one way or the other. And I very much wanted to take the stance of "I respect Lovecraft, I love his aesthetic in general, but we can bring it forward, let's not keep in the 1920s, let's bring it kicking and screaming into 2020."

This specific concern often comes up and that is: the one impossible fact of the world that allows the whole story to function. I've heard it referred to it as the "gimme"– and that you get one "gimme".

I think I have a few "gimmes". I'm thinking of *Delirium*, and there's a few things that the readers have got to be on board with. I think it helps to be — well let's start with the backstory stuff, there's this whole virus that's killing everyone but I don't really show that because I didn't want to be like The Walking Dead. I think that helped, having it be in the background, not right in the forefront and people will just accept that. You've also got to deal with this setting of an ocean full of satellites, which does exist, but maybe not quite as visually stunning as that. I might've embellished a bit.

I don't think I ever say in any metatextual text that "this place exists" I think I just go for it and hope for the best. And then there's a space station that crashes down, and there's an alien heart, I don't know. I don't really know if I 100 percent agree with [the one gimme]. Maybe in the setting of a kitchen sink drama, there might be one gimme because that's meant to be realistic, like a Ken Loach movie, or *I, Daniel Blake* is gonna have like *one thing* that sets it in motion, and everything else feels tangibly real. I feel like if you just write it confidently and it seems like something even slightly plausible within genre expectations, you're good to go.

It's more like a good-faith contract.

It is a good-faith contract, you have to keep the reader in mind and don't throw so much at them so they have to raise an eyebrow about whether this could really happen in *this* script, that's probably the most important thing. If you say there's a massive disease in *A Star is Born*, that's going to feel really weird, but in *Delirium* it's fine.

So you set it on a ship. I like the layers of setting, like there's – you have the ocean, you have the ship, then you have the rooms in the ship, and then the freezer. And obviously having it on a ship has helped you in many many ways. What was behind the decision?

I waste a lot of time on YouTube and there's a great channel called The Art Assignment. They just talk about Fine Art. There's one particular episode where they talk about the most isolated forms of art, and they just happen to mention offhand that Point Nemo is the most isolated place on earth and I was like oh, interesting, let me research that, so I research that and oh, apparently that's where a Cthlulu is meant to live in the Lovecraft mythos. Ooh, interesting!

And then I started thinking you could have a horror film set there. Then I started researching more. Then I heard about a satellite graveyard — that's a pretty cool setting. But the only way you could navigate that is on a boat. There weren't too many ways about it. I mean I had the space station in, at one point, but with the exception of that. It's like the old adage of limitation breeds creativity.

So I've got three levels, and a lot of the drama does take place in a lot of the same stuff but I do experiment and I do go in a submersible and in a space station– then there's a dream sequence, trippiness. A lot of it was just because a boat felt like this was the only place this could've happened. You could've done it underwater like that recent Kristen Stewart movie *Underwater*. But I like the idea that these people are super desperate and that they're outcast and starving and hungry and stranded.

I feel like that's how all my ideas germinate. It's like a grab bag: "oh I like the sound of that" and kinda mash them together and think "this looks terrible" or "this could be okay."

This is something that's really expected with the horror genre: it's that you have this combination of you have the antagonist who is quite existential, and that thing that is sort of compelling that kind of haunted house domino effect where one gets picked off right after the other. Then they also start to turn on each other, and become manifestations of that antagonist. Is that something you've used before in horror?

To be honest, every horror script I wrote before *Delirium* wasn't particularly successful. I feel like that was because I went a little bit over the top. I think there's a schlocky B-movie director in me somewhere. I throw all that fucking blood everywhere, I feel like that's somewhere in me —

It's fun.

It very very fun, but I feel like I've got to put a leash on that. My third acts always go bananas. I feel they just go crazy, and *Delirium* is no exception. But also, again, based on this Lovecraftian horror I feel like having a big sea monster show up defeats the entire point. Not that I'm implying that it doesn't exist, I think its existence is the whole existential threat of this entire thing.

I don't want to get too pretentious. I don't want to be a wanker about it, but I feel like, you know, having an existential threat like a Cthulhu-esque monster which is essentially what it is. I'm not saying it but I'm coding it very much in that language. It's very much a metaphor for other things, other existential crises that can occur, I think that's the horror of it.

That's what a lot of Lovecraftian literature is based off. It's like, all of this can end just like that for no good reason, and how do you reckon with that inherent chaos of the world? A lot of people say religion, which is a great way, but you know for me I was like "uh, I don't know".

For me I feel like people when– not to get too dark about this– but when someone close to you dies I feel like everyone has that existential crisis a little bit — let's start thinking about the meaning of all this. And similar things have happened to me. I think Lovecraft's got a really depressing way of looking at things: "life is meaningless, let's just all lie down."

Put paper bags over our heads.

Yeah, exactly, but it's like…"ah, come on dude, fuck off, let's you know, life is meaningless, let's throw a party". That's kind of where I'm at. And I feel like that was my driving message. I felt like a shiver going down my back when I said that. But that was the driving ethos of what I wanted to say with *Delirium*. This could all end tomorrow. That's all the more reason to have some fun today. I think Lovecraft in horror is just another way of talking about that.

I was going to ask you about handling exposition, because you prefer to pose the question and then arrive at the moment of exposition when it's earned as opposed to trying to explain everything out the gate

I had a lot [of exposition]. This has developed since Austin, but in the original script there is essentially one lore-dump fairly near the beginning, when Hawkins talks to Morgan. It's pretty near the beginning, in the wheelhouse.

There's a bit of an exposition dump there. It's almost out of necessity because by that point I'm almost 25 pages in and I haven't given very much. I'm like "okay, you've stuck with me for a while, here's a little something just to tide you over".

> **I think audiences are more tolerant of a short lore dump that's concise and quick and entertaining as opposed to exposition that's drip-fed throughout the entire thing. Because I think that can get annoying after a little while.**

That being said, when *Delirium* has been sent out to particular producers and studios, the one critique that has come back almost universally is that there isn't enough. That they are a little confused, which, again, don't blame them, in the slightest. I think *Delirium* was my attempt to strip back as much exposition as I possibly, possibly could. Until it was like literally straining underneath me.

My first draft was not good, I had to bring it back in a little bit. It's a very thin rope to walk across. I don't know if I can be super scientific about it. It's just

kind of a gut feeling. Which I think just comes *after* writing a lot. If you can frame exposition as a mystery then you're in the money.

> ???? Blog – **How to Write Exposition**

That's always a challenge with post-apocalypse. You at least want to get a sense of how things got to the way that they were.

I think that's related to the "gimme" that you were talking about earlier. It's like, if I say "there is a virus that's eradicated the majority of the world's population", I say "okay!" you're like that's the premise of the story, you're willing to go with it. Exposition, man. It's a whole thing.

Definitely.

I don't pretend to be a master of it. I don't think anyone really is, I think we're always struggling to balance one side of the line or the other. Different people want different things. I'm currently writing a script I was specifically told has one foot in Blumhaus and one foot in A-24. You gotta choose one, because someone who watches an A-24 film is going to be more open to guessing and trying to deduce things, whereas if you're watching a Blumhaus film, I think it's expected to at least have a clearer sense of where this is, what this is, what to expect, how this is all gonna tie up.

It's more conventional, but not in a bad way. It's your genre and who your audience is, I think, that dictates how much exposition you can get away with. Which is always a line we're going to have to worry about forever and ever, and ever.

Alex D. Reid is also an author on Arcs and Beats: all posts from Alex D. Reid.

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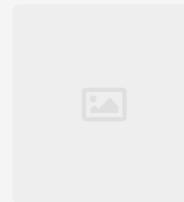🕐 2 MIN READ   📅 APRIL 28, 2021

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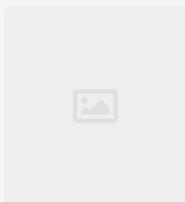🕐 4 MIN READ   📅 MARCH 24, 2021

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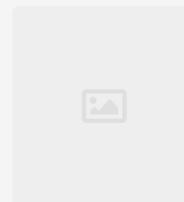**'Tease Those Ideas': Lessons from the Writer of 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom'**
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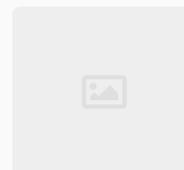🕐 8 MIN READ
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