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Interview With Hasan Oswald

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Interview With Hasan Oswald

Abstract

This is an interview by William Blizek with Hasan Oswald, the director of *Higher Love*.

Author Notes

William Blizek is the Founding Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film, and is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is also the editor of the Continuum Companion to Religion and Film (2009).

An Interview of Hasan Oswald, director of *Higher Love*, by William Blizek, 2020



William Blizek and Hasan Oswald

William Blizek: What got you interested in doing this kind of film?

Hasan Oswald: Like many documentaries, this film became very different than its original intention. At its root, this project looked at where the American Dream failed, and why mid-sized post-industrial cities across the country most often retain the highest levels of poverty, crime, and drug addiction.

Our working title for *Higher Love* was "Below the Brine," after a Walt Whitman poem. Whitman, a Camden, NJ native, wrote about an entire world that lives below the surface of the ocean, right in our midst, but completely out of sight. I've always had a fascination with telling seemingly inane or abstract stories, combined with a dark curiosity I have with forgotten American cities like Camden. Without sit-down interviews or policy wonks, I wanted to show the human

side of the opioid epidemic by using an unpolished and at times clumsy form of vérité film, hoping to present a brief glimpse of what might otherwise remain below the surface.

Blizek: What kind of connection did you have to the subjects of the film before deciding to use these subjects for the film? Or, how did you find people who would let you tell their story, especially because of the kind of story it is?

Oswald: The first time I met Daryl Gannt, the protagonist of *Higher Love*, he was yelling at me over a distorted speaker phone. It was late 2016 and I had spent the last few weeks on the streets of Camden, NJ, filming a group of four friends struggling with addiction. One of these was Daryl's girlfriend: a young, pregnant woman battling a devastating heroin addiction. On the phone, Daryl's voice crackled through the phone, "What are you doing in Camden and what are you gonna do with this footage?" he demanded.

I didn't want to tell Daryl that I had no idea what I was doing there, that I was scared to death, and that I really had no plan at all.

He asked me to meet him in Camden the next morning to talk. In the minutes leading up to meeting him face-to-face, I was more scared than I'd been knocking on stranger's doors just a few weeks before. But when Daryl picked me up, the first words out of his mouth were, "let me tell you my side of the story." That was all the reassurance I needed.

Prior to filming, I had no connection to the subjects that ended up being featured in the film. As a self-funded one-man team, I would go street to street, drug den to drug den, meeting people and learning about the opioid epidemic from those who were living it. What I found over and over again were people who wanted to tell their side of the story, insisting that Camden outsiders and the media portray them unfairly as criminals or worse. Those suffering from

addiction, drug dealers, police, and everyday citizens wanted to speak about what had happened to them or their city but in their own words, and they let me be a fly on the wall throughout the process.

Blizek: Since you had no control over how the story would go, how did this affect your making of the film?

Oswald: One of my main goals was to capture the way drug dependency affects people's lives, by focusing on their closest relationships: their friends and family. So, while I didn't always know exactly how the story would evolve, we had our main characters Daryl and Nani. In many ways, the lack of control allowed us to achieve our other goal which was to let Daryl and Nani tell their own story. Following each of their paths gave us a glimpse of the collateral consequences of drug dependency.

Blizek: What were the most serious difficulties you faced in making the film?

Oswald: Setting out to Camden on my own as a first-time director, my biggest obstacle was coming up with any semblance of a budget. I had to get creative by maxing out no-interest credit cards, exploiting 30-day-return-policies on gear and selling my blood plasma.

The other fun aspects of producing this film were the logistical nightmares of trying to film with people that don't have homes, reliable means of contact or phones at all. There were many days where I just drove the city, quite literally searching and asking people "have you seen this person?"

Due to the sensitivity of the topic and graphic nature of heroin addiction, it was very difficult to avoid the "poverty porn" trope. And as much as I was a fly on the wall and tried to

emphasize a personal relationship with the characters to ensure comfort, I was always wary about changing the environment by pulling out a camera. However, after a while, they pretty much forgot that me OR my camera was there at all, which created a seamless veneer between character and filmmaker.

There was a very strict policy in the editing room to validate and redeem our subjects first and worry about continuity after. The ethics of making an addiction film are complicated and it was important for me to be faithful to our character's lives and personalities. And while accurately portraying the pace and substance of an addiction lifestyle makes that challenging, when those moments of tenderness and hope do shine through, they are deeply effective and gratifying.

Blizek: Do you know how Daryl and Darnez are doing in Omaha? Can you tell us? Do you know how Nani is doing in Camden? Can you tell us?

Oswald: Daryl and Darnez recently relocated to Buffalo, New York and are doing well. Financial hardships continue but they carry on alone. Nani is still in Camden, and although contact has been limited, last we heard she is still using and has yet to enter a program.

Blizek: How did you get from the gritty streets of Camden, New Jersey to your next film about saving Yazidis from the Islamic State of Iraq?

Oswald: In the middle of filming *Higher Love*, I really ran out of money and had to get a day job. Luckily that was as a cameraman for National Geographic on their film, *Hell on Earth: The Fall of Syria and the Rise of Isis*. While filming in the refugee camps around Europe and the Middle East I learned of the Yazidi people and their tragic history and as soon as I finished *Higher Love* I knew that that was the story that needed to be told next. 2,500 Yazidi women and children still in captivity/slavery and nobody talking about it.