

What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been: My Life in Film and TV

Mike Trim

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Mike Trim '76, is an Emmy Award-winning cinematographer for television shows such as "Weeds" and "Parks and Recreation"

When I was invited to come speak to you, I was told to just tell you how I got here from wherever I started. So, I'll give you a little background. I grew up in New Jersey—born in 1954 in Newark and raised in East Orange. I lived in a house with a lot of people. My grandparents lived on the top; my parents and I lived on the second floor; my aunt, uncle, and their four kids lived on the first floor; and two uncles lived in the basement. That's maybe where they belonged, in the basement. My family really enjoyed going to the movies and watching them on TV. On Sunday afternoon everyone was glued to the TV and we'd just watch movies. There was the program *Million Dollar Movie* and the TV station would show the same movie all week, three times a day. Every Saturday, my mother would send me to the theater so I would get out of her hair. At the risk of sounding like the old fogey, it only cost something like thirty-five cents to go to the movies on Saturday afternoon. You would get cartoons, a little newsy thing, and then a double feature. When *West Side Story* came out it played every Saturday for three months straight. My mother didn't care, so I think I saw *West Side Story* about twenty times when I was eight years old. That movie really affected me; I always wanted to be Bernardo. So that's when movies began to creep into my life. The other thing that started that far back was reading. There were always books around and I don't ever remember ever reading kids' books. I remember reading books written by authors like Harold Robbins because those were the books my father read. I started to read at a young age and just really liked people to tell me stories, whether it was movies or reading.

As I got close to high school my father had a tremendous idea. How do I put this in a way that doesn't make it seem like a negative thing? He thought it would be great if I went to military school. A lot of kids get sent to military school because they are doing something wrong, but this had nothing to do with anything like that. My father went to a military college and always thought that the military was good for people. Not the violent part, but the part where you put your socks and underwear in a drawer. So he thought it would be a good idea if I tried military school for a year or two. It was a horrible, horrible, horrible experience. The best part of that experience, however, was in seventh grade, where the science teacher taught us photography. That first moment when you're in a dark room and the picture comes up in that tray of liquid, that's a pretty magical moment. It really got me interested in

photography. In my second year there I called my father up and said, “I know where the socks go, so I would like to not go to the military school anymore.” He understood and took me out.

So then I went to high school, right outside of New York City, from 1968-1972. My father had a tremendous love of Manhattan and, from a very early age, instilled that in me. From ninth grade on, anytime I could I would hop on a bus and go to Manhattan. So, you know the only thing a fourteen-year-old is going to do in New York is go to the movies. Not only did I see big movies, but movies in a way they didn’t show them anymore. Movies in seventy millimeter, movies when there were intermissions, when they give out programs. I would see all kinds of movies, because that’s what Manhattan does; it shows you all kinds of movies. I saw independent films, back when they were actually independent, not just an independent studio. One day I saw *A Clockwork Orange* in the morning and *Harold and Maude* in the afternoon. I remember a movie called *Greaser’s Palace* by Robert Downey Sr. (Junior’s father). These were strange, curious films, unlike your normal kinds of movies. So I began to get interested in that sort of thing. I knew that movies weren’t just the ones that you read about in the paper. But this was strictly curiosity; I had no idea you could make a living doing any of these things.

Then it was time to start visiting colleges. My cousin, who was one year ahead of me, was going to Juniata College. I came up here to visit him and this place seemed pretty nice. I liked that it was small and that it was five hours away from where we lived—far away but not too far. I ended up coming to Juniata because (this is hard for me to believe now) I actually enjoyed biology. It was a pretty serious science school. I mean, 1000 kids and they had an electron microscope! I think that was the first year they had the POE program. So they explained all that stuff to us, and two weeks in I decided to be pre-med, probably a horrible idea. The whole POE thing really opened me up; I remember feeling like I could do anything, I didn’t have to commit to anything right away, and I could try to figure it out. I liked that idea. I also realized I didn’t want to be a doctor. I woke up and saw that it was a lot of responsibility, and that I didn’t want to have that much responsibility every day for the rest of my life. So I thought, “What can I do?” For about another month I thought psychology would be it. I should preface this by saying I had no concept of getting a job and earning a living. I thought I could learn everything there is to know about psychology by reading. That’s when it dawned on me that I could actually be here for four years and my job would be to read. The movie part didn’t come into play my freshman year because there weren’t that many movie classes. In my sophomore year I began to realize that I could also watch movies. I could read and watch movies; it was mind-boggling to me. That was all I had to do, except take the occasional other class.

A few things happened when I was here in terms of movies. I guess I got a bit of a reputation for being one of the “movie” people. I wound up getting elected to be in charge of the film club. I got to choose the movies we watched on Saturday nights, and at that time if you wanted to see a movie, you had

to somehow find it. You couldn't go rent it or get it on Netflix or anything like that. So one option was you had to wait for the movie; if you wanted to see a Fellini film, you had to wait for a Fellini retrospective at the museum or for some theatre to be showing a Fellini film. That was rare because movies would come around once and maybe they'd be re-released a few years later. The other option was for me to order the movies I wanted to see. That was a tremendous experience—except when I tried to order *Pink Flamingos*, the John Waters film. I got called upstairs on that one. But otherwise, it was a great experience being able to show whatever movie I wanted.

Because of the rentals I would get catalogs from all these different companies. One was a small company called New Line Cinema, run by this guy Bob Shaye. New Line, along with Warner Brothers, had put together a scholarship and inside one of the catalogs was this paper that said, “Win a Trip to Hollywood.” You had to write an essay on, “What do you want to do in Hollywood and why?” I wrote that I had no idea what I wanted to do in Hollywood because I had no idea what they did in Hollywood. I had never given any thought to the making of movies; I just liked watching them. I'm convinced to this day that only five people sent in an essay because five of us were chosen. When I went out there for this scholarship, I met the woman who was in charge of the observation program at Warner Brothers—keeping us in line, giving us tours, and bringing us around for the eight weeks. I met her assistant and said, “You know, you look really familiar.”

And he said, “Well, you know I was a child actor.”

I asked, “Like where would I know you from?”

“Oh, I did a sitcom,” he replied.

I said, “You were McKeever.”

“Yeah,” he said, “I played McKeever.”

“You son of a . . . You made that seem like so much fun, I can't tell you.”

When my father wanted to send me to military school, I thought, “How bad could it be?” That's because there was a sitcom on in the early sixties called *McKeever and the Colonel*. It made living at a military school look like the most fun you could possibly have. It was like Sergeant Bilko at military school.

Those eight weeks at Warner Brothers were awesome because we didn't have to do a thing. I don't know if you've ever seen a film or TV show getting made, but there's almost nothing to watch. There are a few moments with a lot of energy and a lot of things happening, then everything seems to stand dead still and nothing is happening. Unless you know what to look for, it doesn't seem like anyone is doing anything. It's a really odd thing to observe, especially when I was that young. They brought us around to the camera rental houses, the prop houses, but what I remember most was that we had the run of the place. I could go into Warner Brothers at any time of the day or night and just walk around, wander onto sets. That was pretty incredible. Some of the people in the audience who are close to my age might

remember a famous Dr. Pepper commercial fashioned on *Singing in the Rain*. They were shooting that one night when I bumped into them while I was wandering around. So I got to watch them imitating *Singing in the Rain*. It was during those eight weeks that I began to feel pretty passionate about trying to get a job. I didn't know how to do that, but it just seemed like a great place to work.

When I came back to Juniata I took a few film classes from Bruce Davis, and made up a few independent study film classes too. One independent study was called "Making Movies Without a Camera." I remember being in the basement of Oller Hall with stuff stretched everywhere in the room, walking around with paint and a toothbrush, and just splattering it. Then I sent that through a projector. I wish I could find some of these reels. The other thing that I did while at Juniata was work at the Clifton Theatre. Bruce Davis, who was involved with managing the Clifton, needed someone to actually do the work there. I remember when it was bitter cold and getting on the ladder and changing the letters for the shows that would be coming that week. It was so freaking cold that he would take out a little shot of Wild Turkey. It's not like we drank, but it was fun and I felt like such an adult. That was my first job in the film business because I was in charge of that theatre. I would close the balcony and sit up there. Again, I think I saw *Nashville* twenty-five times in a matter of two weeks because that was the only movie playing. That's where I was at the end of Juniata.

After all those years not worrying about a job, it suddenly dawned on me that now it was time to start worrying about a job. After the obligatory cross-country trip when you are done with college—I hopped in a van with a couple of friends and drove to California and back—I was lucky and my father, who was in the garment business, let me work for him for a little while. He let me know that if I wanted to go to grad school in film then he would help me do that. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, so I tried a summer class at NYU from a guy named Stan Brakhage. He was the king of the weird movies; he made movies that had nothing to do with narrative, just images that he would scratch and throw against the wall and rip apart, paint on. Movies with titles like *Window*; *Water*; *Rain*; or *Moon*. I used to drag my friends from Jersey to see these movies. I took them to *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, a movie he made on autopsies being performed in the Pittsburgh morgue. I thought my friends were going to just vomit. Every one of them left and waited for me to finish watching the movie. So I took this class with Stan Brakhage and there was something that I didn't like about it. I didn't want to talk about the movies. Everyone was talking like "way up here" about these movies and acting really weird. If somebody asked a simple question, people acted really snobby. That really bothered me and I realized I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to do the academic thing with movies. I could sit home and watch movies, talk about it myself and have even more fun.

So I decided the best way to learn about movies would be to work my way up in the film business. It was a weird time to make that decision because there were people going to school for

production and they would come out three or four years later as directors. But I decided I would work my way up. Now the trick was to get a job in Manhattan, where the film business was not tremendously large. It was very insulated, almost strictly with guys in the union. It was almost like an Irish mob; if you weren't related to somebody in that union, you weren't going to get in. That's the way I thought it worked. One day I was reading the *Village Voice* and on the back page it said, "Do you want to get into the film business?" So I called them up, and they told me it was a bike messenger service. This was before fax machines and e-mail. Paperwork had to make its way from the advertising agencies to the film production houses making the commercials, and they sent it by bike messenger. So I became a bike messenger, and at every production house that I brought paperwork to I would drop off a résumé—one that basically said nothing except that I went to college. I told each secretary that I wanted a job. I had an advantage: as a bike messenger I was sober and relatively clean. The other bike messengers were wrecks. Apparently bike-messengering back then was a place where semi-homeless drunks could make a living. So I looked good to some of these secretaries, who were just happy to see someone who didn't stink and could put two words together.

One day I walked in, dropped off some papers, and the secretary said to the guy who was sitting there, "Ron, this is that kid I told you about who wants a job in the film business." This was Ron Jacobs, who had a production company called Jaguar Productions and made commercials. Right there I got my first show business lesson.

He looked at me and said, "So you want to be in the business?"

I said, "I would love to be in the business."

He said, "Well, how much do they pay you at the bike messenger service?"

I was so excited and said, "Oh my god, they pay me \$100 a week."

So he says, "Well shit, I could pay you \$100 a week."

That was my first mistake: never tell them the truth about how much you're making. I'm sure if I had told him \$200, he would have paid me that.

With that \$100 a week I left New Jersey and moved to Manhattan. I got an apartment for \$150 a month in the East Village. I worked for Ron Jacobs for about a year and a half. He was not only the director at the production house, but also the cameraman and the director of photography. A director of photography needs a gaffer, the guy who does the actual lighting. Bernie Bookstein was the gaffer and he took me under his wing and taught me some stuff about lighting and electricity. After a year and a half the \$100 a week was starting to get a little old. One day Ron asked if something was wrong. I said, "Well Ron, I'm making \$100 a week." He said, "Well why didn't you tell me?" I was thinking, "All I got to do is tell you?" Then he says to me, "You want me to lend you some money." That's when I realized I had to get out of there.

At the time there were two unions in New York: the IA [the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees], which was very, very closed, and a smaller union called NABET [the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians], which was open. The NABET was trying to take advantage of how closed the IA was by organizing smaller films the IA wasn't interested in. I passed the test and joined that union as an electrician. You just had to know enough to not kill yourself or anyone else, and know the basic lights, cables, and other equipment. I quit Jaguar Productions, but when it had a job Bernie Bookstein hired me as the electrician. I'll always remember the time when I did a three-day job and went into Jaguar Productions to get my paycheck. Ron Jacobs called me into his office and started screaming. (I might be telling this part because I'm venting about Ron, but you'll all have bosses like this.) With the check in his hand, he said, "You think I'm going to pay you this much money?" It was as if it really offended him that I wasn't making \$100 a week anymore. I think I made \$200 a day as an electrician. I said "Ron, that's what the union says. I didn't come up with this number."

Now this is where connections begin to rear their heads. At Jaguar Productions we used to shoot at a film stage, and one of the guys who ran it was Steve Fierburg. Steve wanted to be a cameraman, so he got a job as a cameraman on a small film that was being shot at Sarah Lawrence College. Steve knew me from working at Jaguar and asked if I wanted to be his gaffer. I was just a basic electrician and had never done anything like that, but he said, "Don't worry about it; we'll figure it out together." So I did this gaffer job, learned a tremendous amount very quickly, and then went back to being an electrician. On that job I met a dolly grip named Arthur Plum, who went on to work on *Q*, a B-movie (back when they called them B-movies) about the Mexican deity Quetzalcoatl and how it would pluck half-naked women off of the rooftops of Manhattan. Arthur called me up and asked if I wanted to work as a production assistant, and I said "Please, I'll be there this afternoon." On that job I met a guy named Stefan Czapsky, who then hired me as an electrician on his crew. Stefan has since gone on to shoot *Edward Scissorhands*, *Batman Returns*, and *Blades of Glory*.

After Stefan worked for one foreign cameraman, then all the foreign cameramen wanted to use him, and a lot of foreign cameramen came through New York. Maybe they would only come for a week, but they always hired Stefan. Michael Ballhaus, who ended up shooting *The Departed*, *Gangs of New York*, *Goodfellas*, and other movies like that, hired Stefan as a gaffer and so we worked on the crew for his earlier movies. All of them were produced by one guy, Bob Colesberry. When Colesberry started to produce *Angel Heart*, Stefan had moved up from being gaffer so Colesberry asked me to interview for the position. We sat and talked for five minutes about nothing that was important, and this guy Peter Bloor said, "Well you've worked on movies before, right?" I said "Yeah," and he goes "Okay." I was the first guy to be interviewed, which was lucky because they only interviewed one person, so I got that job. It

was an all British crew, but they couldn't do that with the union. They had to have an American gaffer, so I was the one chosen.

This is 1988 and now two things happened. First, I decided to get married; my wife Sally was from L.A. but was living in New York. Second, I had been living in the East Village for thirteen years and was getting fed up. Crack had shown up and it really changed the whole vibe of that neighborhood. The East Village used to be filled with junkies you could deal with because they would just nod out. Crack people weren't nodding out, but were beating people up. I started to see some nasty violence that was inspired not by the movies, but by the crack. As a result, not in a million years did I think I would ever say these words, but I asked Sally, "Why don't we move to L.A.?" She was happy and her parents were happy because I was bringing their daughter back to L.A.

In L.A. I got to work on another film with Alan Parker (he directed *Angel Heart*, the film where I was the American gaffer). This was *Come See the Paradise*, about the Japanese internment camps during World War II and it was not a very good movie. Then the Academy Awards came out and *Mississippi Burning*, which Parker directed, won for Best Cinematography, and I was credited as the gaffer. In no way was I responsible for that award but I gladly took whatever credit people threw my way. I then worked on a commercial, and its executive producer was next going to work on a large music video for David Fincher. This was 1989, the beginning of the very large music videos, and it was for Madonna, called *Express Yourself*. The budget had to be \$1.5 million, which for a music video was a lot of money. Fincher did not like or trust his cameraman's gaffer, but the cameraman did not want to use someone else. So the producer says to Fincher, "I just worked with this guy, Mike Trim, on *Mississippi Burning*" and Fincher was a big fan of Alan Parker's films. "Why don't we hire Trim to do all the pre-rigging and the pre-lighting and then you don't have to worry about what the gaffer does because he's going to walk onto a set that's already rigged and he can't mess it up."

So I got that job, met Fincher—a good name to be associated with in Hollywood because that name carries a lot of weight—and began to work with his cameramen. One guy was Mark, who went on to do some of the biggest videos and commercials around, and the other guy was Harris Savides, who later did movies like *Greenburg*, *American Gangster*, and the famous *Nine Inch Nails* video. These guys were some of the best cameramen working in commercials and videos. One day one of the producers said to me, "When do you think you will start shooting?" I thought, "Huh?" It had never occurred to me, and I said, "Oh, I had no idea that was even an option to be able to do that." That was the New Yorker in me, because in New York there wasn't enough room for that many people to move up. Unless you had a lot of ambition and were willing to nudge your way to the front of the line, you weren't going to be a cameraman. It had been a long time and I had kind of given up on moving my way up. I figured I'd just end up being a gaffer and make a decent living, but people began to ask me if I wanted to shoot.

Then two things happened. Some guy who wanted to be a director got some money together to make his own little commercials and asked me if I wanted to shoot. So I shot these three little commercials and did a good job. Then Fincher was doing some “Rock the Vote” spots for MTV—this is around 1992—and he asked me if I wanted to shoot them, for free. I said “Sure!” because again, if you could get your name associated with him, that was a plus. Again I did a decent job, so then Fincher hired me (and paid me) to do a big Nike commercial. After I did that I became a pretty big commercial videographer. I did a bunch of videos, hundreds of commercials, and then everything went away. It was a combination of three things: 9/11 and business just went south; the director I had been working for, doing two or three jobs a month, had a heart attack; and there was an actor strike in commercial work, so a lot of commercials went overseas. I went through a year with almost no work. I was trying to figure out what else I could do, but it’s not like I had a whole lot of other skills. At this point I was starting to freak out since I had two kids, same wife.

Then I got a phone call. I was in the parking lot of my kids’ school and it was my old agent. He said, “Somebody’s looking for you; you should give him a call.” It turned out to be Adam Bernstein, someone I used to do commercials with all the time. He said, “I stopped doing commercials and got into TV. I have a pilot called *Wiener Park* and I want you to do this with me.” Now we’re back to connections again. The producer of the pilot then has lunch with a friend who was about to do a TV show called *Head Cases*, which was about lawyers coming out of the nuthouse. This director, Craig Zisk, was looking for a DP [Director of Photography] who hadn’t done much TV because they wanted somebody “fresh” and who didn’t have a lot of baggage. The producer recommended me and I got hired. The show looked really good, but it got cancelled after two episodes. It wasn’t a good TV show; I mean really, another lawyer show? Now I’m thinking, “Oh my god I’m unemployed again,” but Craig said, “Look, I’ve just been hired to do the second season of this show called *Weeds* and they fired the DP so I want to take you with me.” Three months later I had an interview with Mary-Louise Parker to make sure she was happy. I interviewed with her and got the job. Now this is going to be my sixth season coming up, and we won the Emmy this year.

I’ve done other TV shows along the way. I did *Cavemen*, which was horrible; a show called *Worst Week*; the pilot for *30 Rock* and a few of the episodes. About three years ago Mary-Louise asked me if I wanted to direct *Weeds* and I said “Sure.” So she put my name in and I directed one episode that season, two the following year, three last year, and this year they want me to direct five. So all those things are going well and that basically takes you up to today.

I think the most important thing you can have is not ambition, but passion. I feel really lucky. I don’t feel like I’ve ever worked a day in my life. When I go to work, I don’t even think of it as work. I’m going to be with the people I like and do something different every day, even though were doing the same

thing. It's incredibly rewarding to be able to be passionate about something and to make a living with it. I wish you all the same luck in life.