

Moving Pictures

Chris Duczynski

While his earliest creative influences were in photography, producer and director Chris Duczynski has gone on to build a successful career making videos, starting out as an in-house cameraman for Qantas.

INTERVIEW BY BRUCE USHER.



Before I interviewed cameraman Chris Duczynski, all I knew about him was that he told stories with video... and he took stills with a GoPro – mounted on a drone – of the Illawarra region’s fading industrial past, plus the occasional swimming pool.

I didn’t know that he had a lounge room full of photography books – including *Japan Photographs 1854-1905* which he purchased in 1981 – or that he used to enjoy collecting vintage black and white photographs. He has several by Max Dupain, including one from Tarhra that Jill White printed for him... Chris’s family used to holiday at the exact same spot depicted in this image. He also has an original print by Grant Mudford. It’s a name not mentioned that much today, but Chris spotted it decades ago in an exhibition, called *Architecture In Australia*, in North Sydney. This particular print is referenced on Mudford’s Website – as “Old B/W Australia 4” – and it sizzles.

Creative Beginnings

During the April and May of 2010, Chris Duczynski found himself filming in the ‘Golden Triangle’ region of Laos and Cambodia, an emotional and physical challenge. The film crew went to five or six orphanages and refuges. These refuges housed HIV-infected kids and many were involved in smuggling drugs from Burma into Thailand.

“All very young, and some were quite sick,” Chris recalls. “If you’re under a certain age, you can’t be charged with smuggling – I think it’s maybe ten – so the dealers used them to cross borders carrying stuff. Many were sexually abused. But it’s very rewarding to see the incredible work that UNICEF does around the world.”

Television personality H. G. Nelson (a.k.a. Greig Pickhaver) – who is a UNICEF ambassador – was the presenter. However, this wasn’t an SBS *Dateline* program or a Nine’s *60 Minutes* project, it was produced by Qantas and screened on the airline’s flights. More about Chris’s involvement with Qantas later, but let’s go back to his roots in the southern NSW town of Cooma where, he comments, “There was nothing creative at home apart from the old man’s Super 8 camera”.

Chris didn’t achieve the marks at Monaro High School that he needed to get into Architecture at university so he did a fine-arts course at the Riverina CAE (now Charles Sturt University).

“It was a foundation year with an eclectic group of creative students and Arthur Wicks who was a fantastic, ‘out there’ lecturer. A fun free-for-all in the liberal ‘70s... parties, painting, photography and print-making. I loved it and wanted to do it forever.”

Next he moved to the very progressive City Art Institute in Sydney where he studied photography with “...a bike-riding, leather-clad, always-dressed-in-black lecturer called George Schultz. He was cool

personified, and loved us doing anything unconventional”. When Chris got his degree, he was disappointed... “Now I had to work for a living”. However, he didn’t take up the ‘work for a living’ lifestyle for a few more years. Motorbikes got in the way.

On Two Wheels

Chris and a few mates did a couple of outback trips on their motorbikes, photographed themselves, wrote some words and took the results to Bill McKinnon, then editor at *Two Wheels* magazine. It was the first taste of a future in freelancing as McKinnon started to buy their offerings.

Chris shot with either a Nikon or a Pentax 35mm SLR loaded with transparency film and mostly fitted with a wide-angle lens, taking pictures of fixing a tyre by the roadside, or of pubs and people.

Somewhere during this time in the late 1970s, he literally caught the last of the infamous ‘Top Deck Travel’ bus treks into Afghanistan... in the middle of a coup.

“There were bombs and crap going off. We had to register at the embassy and got out a few weeks later.”

Chris also produced a lot of travel stories for *Two Wheels* and had published some great spreads of the Bathurst bikie race riots, including a front-page scoop in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

“Riding around on motorbikes and getting paid for it was a fantastic job,” he says, and it lasted for four years. Then, in 1982 and out-of-left-field, came the Department Of Education. Chris started



producing its resources photography and video (his first foray into video). In 1985 Chris took a sabbatical to photograph and climb Mount Wilhelm which, at 4509 metres, is the highest mountain in Papua New Guinea. Taking a side trip, he left Madang Harbour one evening for Siar Island, about five kilometres off the coast. The fisherman who owned the boat was, to quote Chris, "...off his tits on betel nut and beer" and the boat barely made it out of the harbour. Chris recounts, "Halfway to the island, it pissed down rain, sinking the boat. We swam – with all our gear – towards a tiny light swinging on Siar Island

and reached it about an hour later. It was still raining and there was only a small break in the reef to get ashore. We slugged down some duty-free and washed the cameras – a couple of manual Nikon FM2s – in fresh water, but they were stuffed, as were the passports. My thongs washed up on the beach the next day. We climbed the mountain anyway and I shot with a disposable camera. It rained the whole way up and back down".

Up, Up And Away

Chris started working as a cameraman with Qantas in 1989, part of a small team

of cameramen, editors, producers and an executive producer who all worked out of a little TV studio. This crew travelled the world, filming stories to be shown in-flight, and the job lasted 16 years. Chris's first assignment for Qantas was in Singapore.

"We were flown over in business class. I was used to being a backpacker and we were put up in this magnificent hotel and I remember sitting there in the morning, having breakfast and thinking, I can't believe I have this job."

Normally, they worked as a two-man crew, so Chris not only did the filming and editing, but often also had to produce, direct and sometimes record the sound.

"We'd be sent to film, say, *The Rome Arrival Guide*, and then we'd go off to Tuscany and do a film about local artists."

There were occasionally hiccups with presenters or the weather, but also plenty of really unusual stories in unusual places. In 2000 Chris's three-man crew rolled up to the artist Jeffrey Smart's villa in the Tuscan Hills. They didn't know a lot about art and didn't research Smart all that well so, after the third question, the interviewer ran out of steam.

“ You have these fast f1.4 and f1.8 lenses and, all of a sudden, you have that beautiful cine feel that people were once doing with Panavision cameras on film sets.



"Jeffrey gave us a hard time. However, he told us about his life, gave us dinner. We met his partner and had a great night. The villa was full of his art and he was painting whilst we were there. He took us out to meet his friends and the local community. That was the whole thing with working for Qantas... you got to meet a lot of interesting people like that."

Another of these was photographer, Lewis Morley, who Chris filmed at his inner-city Sydney home.

"Lewis's lounge room was like a gentleman's club with big armchairs and artefacts from all around the world. And, of course, his amazing stories of London in the nineteen-sixties."

One Man Band

After he left Qantas in 2005, Chris started to market himself as a producer, but soon found out that "...basically, if you want to get jobs with small budgets, you can't work as a producer. It's all right if you're doing ads or big TV, but if you want to be a one-



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man band you have to promote yourself as a producer, a cameraman, a sound person, an editor and a director. You have to be able to do a job as well as those three or four people, and put it together yourself. But this is what I really like, cutting what I've shot. You can work it out in your head and put it together when you get back to the editing suite".

Ironically, Chris's first client as a freelancer was Qantas which sent him to China. What he quickly learned from working for Qantas on this basis, was that being successful was all about customer service... specifically, how to deal with people, how to talk to them and how to get on with them.

By now too, there was starting to be a crossover from the broadcast-standard news cameras, like the Sony Betacam, to smaller devices like the Red models and even to D-SLRs. This represented a real shift in the way stories were shot. If you arrived anywhere with a big tripod and a big camera after 9/11, you invariably needed a filming permit. With a D-SLR kit, there was much more freedom.

"But with a D-SLR – at least for the first four or five years – they didn't know you were shooting professionally. It was great... you could get in anywhere."

Chris purchased his first D-SLR about six or seven years ago, but then switched to Panasonic's mirrorless Lumix GH2 (followed by the GH3 and GH4).

"These did everything that the Canon and the other video D-SLRs did at half the price, but the specs were – and still are – fantastic. You can record audio with a little pre-amp fitted so you don't need a separate audio machine like the Zoom to sync up the audio later. You have these fast f1.4 and f1.8 lenses and, all of a sudden, you have that beautiful cine-feel that people were once doing with Panavision cameras on film sets."

Flying Drones

One of Chris Duczynski's first jobs for another client, BlueScope Steel, was to film its manufacturing plant. He had to hire a helicopter from Sydney, fit special camera mounts and use a cameraman.

"It cost a fortune," he says. "But we got beautiful stuff. Now it's the sort of thing you can do with a drone for like \$500 to \$1000



All images by Chris Duczynski, copyright 2015.





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Chris confirms that stills were his first love and that he was influenced by, among others, the work of Diane Arbus, Henri Cartier Bresson, Sebastio Salgado and the colour photography of Stephen Shore.

which is ten percent of the cost of doing it in a helicopter and the footage is probably just as good. Some of the bigger drones are really big machines so you have to know what you're doing. It's a serious business. These are \$20,000 operations that are bigger than a lawnmower and so you have to know how to fly them.

"Normally I have an observer and a flyer when I fly my little drone. My son Jake flies a lot for me while I observe on the

monitor and direct. These kids have all been brought up playing on X Boxes so they really know how to fly these machines a lot better than I do and a lot better than most people do."

Chris currently uses a DJI Phantom 2 drone which is GPS-assisted and locks onto ten satellites so they can virtually fly themselves, "If you take your hands off the controls, it will stay where it is. Sometimes in a video production you need a crane,

rails or tracks. A drone can be all this and more. It can track a foot above the ground or you can use it as a jib and create all these beautiful tracking shots. You don't have to go up in the air and point it down and treat it like a helicopter. Treat it like a tool and be sensible about how you fly them."

The Reef

"One night Steve Pigram played *Nowhere Else But Here*, and I went back to my tent,

PROFILE CHRIS DUCZYNSKI

lay outside, looked at the stars and put *Nowhere Else But Here* on repeat."

Chris is talking about Steve Pigram, the singer-songwriter half of the Pigram Brothers country folk band. His tent is at the Three Mile Camp at Gnarloo Station, around 150 kilometres north of Carnarvon in Western Australia. He's part way through a two-week freelance assignment.

In May 2012, Richard Tognetti, violinist and leader of the Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO) took a crew of surfers, musicians and film-makers to Ningaloo Reef where the desert meets the sea. They spent two unforgettable weeks surfing, making music and filming to create *The Reef*. Qantas was an ACO sponsor and so Chris was making a behind-the-scenes short film about the making of *The Reef*.

Chris used his D-SLR at Three Mile Camp to shoot the "feel good stuff" and also learnt how hard it is to be a surf photographer, "I always had these ideas that you get out and sit amongst the waves and take a few photos," he says.

He went out in the surf with Johnny Frank, the crew's main cinematographer, and photographer Ed Sloane.

"Frank would be out there every day for four or five hours. How do they do it?" Chris exclaims. "It was pretty big and I remember thinking, 'Man, this is such hard work, paddling against the current.'" Swimming back, the wristband holding his GoPro broke when he ducked under a wave. The camera was whisked away in the current and Chris lost an hour's worth of footage.

Qantas got its 15-minute short film – called *The Making Of The Reef* – minus any GoPro footage, but Chris says it was still one of the best projects he has ever worked on.

"Working with all those amazing people – including Richard Tognetti and Derek Hind the surfer – and sitting around the fire in the desert every night with some of the most creative musicians in Australia, playing music and thinking that it doesn't get a whole lot better."

Last Light

Chris explains that he likes to take on a personal project once a year – producing, writing and directing. Doing whatever he wants to do, the way he wants to do it. Money is not a priority.

His latest project was given birth by an article published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* by Nikki Gemmell in which she wrote, "When you have nothing else to worry about in your life and you're only thinking about when you're going to die. What goes through your mind? The positive things and things you want to tell your family. Sometimes the last light is the



■ One of Chris Duczynski's images of the Bathurst bikie race riots of Easter 1985, used on the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

best light and the most beautiful time of the day".

Tentatively called *Last Light*, this project is a real change from any he has done previously. Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney is interested in participating, and he wants to pitch the idea to either the ABC or SBS.

Driving up the Bulli Pass, heading back to Sydney through the Illawarra Escarpment during the last light, I thought about those black and white images I'd seen on Chris Duczynski's lounge room walls and wondered what was his first visual love... video or stills? Photography might have been first, via those expeditions around Australia on motorbikes, but then there was his old man's Super 8 movie camera tucked away in his family home in Cooma.

In a subsequent telephone conversation, Chris actually confirms

stills were indeed his first love and that he was influenced by, among others, the work of photographers such as Diane Arbus, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Sebastião Salgado and the colour photography of Stephen Shore.

But as video became more of a mainstream medium, he wanted to be the director-of-photography on a feature film – something that he actually hasn't managed to do yet – but then you could argue that the small-town country boy who thought the best thing about Cooma was seeing it in the rearview mirror has already achieved more than enough. **CP**

To see more of Chris Duczynski's work visit www.malibumedia.com.au