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from other peoples' films and put those together and see what we could get." The experience was fascinating and freeing. "I fell in love with the idea of editing and the process," he recalls.

Movies and rock music were the only constants in his wayward youth. Raised in a liberal "feminist" household where his mother worked in commercial banking while his dad tended the home, Hector led a nomadic childhood which saw him move 15 times around southern Ontario before age 19. His "misspent rock-and-roll adolescence" culminated in his leaving home at 16. Film remained an interest, but not a life.

That outlook changed one weekend in 1985. The fog of time blurs the details, but Hector saw three films in one grand sweep: *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, *Final Offer* and *A Married Couple*. These three verité documentaries told real-life stories about a violent miner strike, a battle between workers and management at a car giant and a middle-class family falling apart, respectively. "They grabbed me out of my chair," he recalls now. "I felt I had been transported."

A typical filmgoer in the age of Spielberg, Hector hadn't seen a lot of docs up to then, so he found these films raw and visceral: "I just fell in love with [documentary]. It's writing with film." Further, the documentaries showed that social change was possible to communicate in film. "It was the first time I got really excited about something in my life. It wasn't until that weekend when I saw those films that I realized I could apply my interest in editing." When he walked out of the theatre, he told himself, "That's what I gotta do."

Little did Hector know that one day he would "write" for Sturla Gunnarsson and Allan King, two of those directors. His first editing job was less auspicious. He started in the business as a research assistant for the Toronto TV program *City Lights*. The host was local legend Brian Linehan, who interviewed movie stars one-on-one,

basing his questions on an encyclopedic knowledge of film. "He was a great guy," recalls Hector, whom Linehan appreciated for being a fellow film buff, "but if you rode him the wrong way he would get rid of you immediately." Sure enough, Linehan had a fight with a director one day and showed him the revolving door. "You, you're fired!" Linehan turned to Hector and barked, "You, cut the show!"

That break, where Hector cut live-to-videotape interviews with film excerpts, allowed Hector to pick up editing experience that he applied to freelancing jobs. One was a documentary for CBC. The director and editor were fired, and (again) Hector happened to be in the next room doing versioning work. Hector fulfilled Woody Allen's maxim that 90 per cent of success is showing up and, by his own admission, "not fucking it up."

Freelancing would soon lead to a staff job at CBC's *The Fifth Estate*. At 22, Hector was the youngest editor ever on the show. It was 1986, an era when two key developments in Canadian documentaries coincided: video production and long-form docs with an independent point-of-view. In the late '80s the two forces fed each other. Video provided a cheaper but broadcast-worthy alternative to film, which freed directors to shoot more and explore their subjects in greater depth.

Video was also a lot faster to produce. Hector recalls an early *Fifth Estate* documentary about a bank robber who fled the police without coughing up the loot, but turned himself into the CBC instead. The producers had an exclusive, but only a long weekend to build a half-hour doc around him. And they did it successfully.

As *The Fifth Estate* and the CBC in general started covering more foreign stories, Hector became the "go-to guy for international affairs." Hector branched out into feature documentaries, starting with several films in the late-'80s and early-'90s about the developing world (Africa, Latin American, southern Asia) by directors like Yvan Patry (Gemini-winner *Chronicle of a Genocide Foretold*). The films dealt with social justice, a theme close to

by ALLAN TONG

Nick Hector was excited about the ending of *Dying At Grace* he had just assembled, but his director balked. "You can't distort time like that," insisted Allan King. Hector had intercut sequences of two of the documentary's terminally ill patients to make it appear as if they were happening at the same time. In fact, one story took place over two hours while the other lasted two days. "You've got to make it chronologically true," demanded King, the man who put cinema verité on the Canadian map.

The usually mild-mannered Hector was furious. "What are you talking about? This is a great scene!" King explained, "If you weaken the scene, you're actually going to make the film better."

Hector was astonished. After 14 years of cutting feature documentaries plus another decade editing factual television, he thought he knew his craft inside out. Then again, he thought, he's Allan King.

Eighteen years earlier in 1985, Hector was bouncing around southern Ontario between a girlfriend in the Niagara region, friends in Kitchener-Waterloo, where he was raised, and an apartment in Toronto, where he was born. He lacked direction in life, but was religiously watching several films a week. Movies caught his eye when he joined a film club at his Kitchener high school. An enlightened teacher had donated super-8 equipment so that students could experiment inside their basement bunker. Even while taking a year off school, Hector continued to audit the film course and help cut his friends' films.

He enrolled at Niagara College but playing with scissors, scotch tape and super-8 film in that basement film club taught him more about film. Hector and his buddies made "silly, childish things" that were even more off-the-wall because they didn't have sound equipment. "We'd even go through the garbage bin and take outs

Opposite page,
top to bottom:

Dying At Grace
Allan King
(Canada, 2003)

Air India 182
Sturla Gunnarsson
(Canada, 2008)

Right, top to bottom:
Grinders
Matt Gallagher
(Canada, 2011)

Air India 182
Sturla Gunnarsson
(Canada, 2008)



Hector's heart, and led him in 1992 to move to Eritrea in east Africa to teach editing and join a team of a dozen foreigners to establish a new TV network after that country's civil war.

"I couldn't begin to tell you," says Hector, about that pivotal experience. He had crossed the line between filmmaker and activist, an editor far removed from his suite, living amongst the characters in the films he was editing. He had fallen in love with a woman there and made close friends with Africans. "I learned the generosity of the people, their courage and cleverness," he says before trailing off.

He returned to Toronto to witness a new revolution. Someone invited him to preview a fancy computer editing system called AVID. "It was so primitive they didn't have a showroom," he recalls. "The AVID was in the mail room."

Twenty years is a millennium in the computer age. Back then, recalls Hector, the AVID was slow. "The maximum was 9G of storage," he says, pointing in contrast to the 14,000G (14TB) of hard drives hooked up to the Mac housed inside his home editing suite. "It was all Betacam and you had to capture it in real time." He notes that the shooting ratio of the doc he's cutting now for Jennifer Baichwal is 200:1. Then, there was the cost: "I think two gigs of SCSI drive were \$3,000." Yes, Small Computer System Interface.

The technology improved rapidly enough for Hector to appreciate the convenience of having all the footage at his fingertips instead of scouring strips of film for a particular shot. His early struggles with the software paid off as it placed Hector in greater demand when computer editing overtook linear film editing in the '90s. "I owe a lot of my success [to the fact] that the timing was right."

Though he'd continue to edit for *The Fifth Estate* till the end of the '90s, Hector eventually left to cut feature-length docs full-time. The turning point came with a phone call that would lead to his cutting Allan King's first doc in over a decade, *The Dragon's Egg*. When Hector answered the phone and heard that someone calling himself Allan King was on the line, Hector believed it was a buddy playing a prank. After all, his friends knew that he worshipped King. Hector answered "Fuck off!" and hung up. Moments later, the phone rang again and the same voice repeated, "Hello, it's Allan King."

Hector could've died, not only of embarrassment, but for having to turn down a job offer from his idol because he was already cutting a film. Perhaps it was fate, but King's editor later left the project, which gave Hector a second chance to cut *The Dragon's Egg*, a study of democracy and the Russian presence in Estonia that yielded a Gemini nomination for Hector.

Around the turn of this century, Hector's name was attracting work from directors such as Steven Silver (*Stories from the War Zone*), Ann Shin (*Western Eyes*) and Sun-Kyung Yi (*Divorce What I See*). He was even asked at the eleventh hour to lend a hand on a TV doc, *War Surgeon* (2002). "Nick did a spectacular job on very challenged material," recalls producer David York, whose team failed to shoot the film's very premise, a senior Canadian Red Cross surgeon establishing a hospital in a Somali war zone. Hector was left with "a very interesting character, a couple of great interviews and some weak verité footage" to stitch together. Somehow, he did it. "A mark of a really great editor," says York, "is to make something out of nothing, and that's what they should give awards for."

A different challenge was John Haslett Cuff's *Crimes of the Heart* (2003), a personal exploration into adultery where Cuff laid bare

not only his own sexual history, but his mother's past infidelities. Hector had already edited for Sun-Kyung Yi, Cuff's mate, so they had a comfort level going in, but "he wanted to read these journals and I would cut it together," recalls Hector. "They would be the spine of the film. However, the beauty of the writing would be lost that way."

A noted *Globe & Mail* columnist, Cuff enjoyed writing in a circular structure that gave unity within an individual piece. But he had to learn a different script-writing style for feature-length documentaries. So, Hector proposed an unusual technique by laying down the journal entries across a "paper edit" in quasi-script form, then having Cuff write transitions. "That was a pre-edit on paper. It was a scary, intimidating process to take such beautiful words and start cutting stuff out."

Cuff continues to work with Hector. "It's not just getting the story together," he observes. "It's that ability to intuit other things like character and images."

Hector's expertise also guided rookie directors such as Min Sook Lee. Her 2005 study of Toronto's combative Police Services Board at city hall, *Hogtown: The Politics of Policing*, was done in verité, a style that was second nature to Hector, but not Lee. "I was shooting two films at once, because I wasn't confident that the verité itself would work," she explains, recalling a voice-over and B-roll. However, once she started seeing Hector's cuts, she dropped the conventional essay approach.

Rookie or veteran, all directors begin working with Hector in the same way. Explains *Air India 182* director Sturla Gunnarsson, Hector starts collaborating long before shooting begins with discussions that continue as he offers feedback on the dailies that come in. "That's especially helpful when I'm off on location somewhere and need a trusted set of eyes on the material." As Hector produces a first assembly, he catalogues the material thoroughly, not just technically but by identifying story threads and thematic connections, so that he can shape the narrative. "We spent a lot of time testing our ideas against the material and hammering out a structure before we started editing in earnest," explains Gunnarsson. "His assembly on *Air India* was five or six hours and contained pretty much everything that ended up in the finished film." He and Hector then worked closely to pare the film down to its 97-minute essence.

"Documentary editing is a process where one makes discoveries," says the director of *Experimental Eskimos*, Barry Greenwald, himself a former editor. "Finding a structure and story from the raw rushes is the most challenging part of that process." That was particularly true of *Eskimos*, which began as an hour-long TV commission about three Inuit boys who were separated from their families to study in Ottawa and live with white Canadians as part of a federal social-engineering experiment. When they began watching the rushes, Greenwald and Hector had an "epiphany" when they discovered the irony of the boys growing up to be civil-rights activists campaigning against the very government that groomed them. Comments Hector: "Everybody says that his film can't be told in less than 90 minutes, but it became clear that we couldn't squish [these] three complicated stories into 40." The film went on to win last year's DGC Award for best feature documentary.

Most recently, Hector cut *Wiebo's War*, David York's profile of the Ludwig family battling the Alberta oil industry, which premieres at this spring's Hot Docs. The titular character made an unusual demand by insisted on meeting all the creators of York's film. So Hector not only visited Ludwig's farm but cut some of the footage there. "When you're making a film you're emotionally connected to all the material, especially the stuff that's hardest to get. You rely on an editor's distance to tell you what's good and what's not. In this case, Nick came up for two shoots, spending eight days at the farm," comments York. "We were both worried whether the intimacy he gained with his characters sacrificed the distance he needed to do his job. But it didn't."

It didn't bother Hector to work at the same time on Matt Gallagher's *Grinders*, also premiering at Hot Docs. The film studies those who play poker for a living. "A lot of the editors would groan if you handed them 90 hours of footage, whereas Nick is ferocious," says Gallagher. "It doesn't faze him."

Right now, Hector is sorting through hours of footage that Jennifer Baichwal has shot. *Payback* adapts Margaret Atwood's non-fiction book, which consisted of a series of lectures that Baichwal describes as being "dense and meandering." She called on Hector, because he has "that acuity, the immediate instinct for the thread of the story." In turn, Hector praises Baichwal for "allowing space for ideas" during the post-production process. He says the same of Gunnarsson, who walks into the editing suite knowing exactly what he wants, but is flexible enough to "look upon his own rushes with fresh eyes."

However, no director Hector has worked with compares to Allan King. "Allan believed in giving full authority to people to do their job," he explains. To illustrate, Hector recalls 2003's *Dying At Grace*. King typically left his crew to capture the day's footage, then huddled with Hector to confirm that what he wanted wound up in the can. King's crew was literally his eyes and ears, though King still quarterbacked from a distance. Perhaps this is the ultimate in verité directing, to be as invisible as possible to the action.

Hector learned to respect King's decisions, even when he disagreed, such as the ending he cut that King wanted to be chronologically accurate. Against Hector's own instincts, he cut it King's way and to his surprise it worked better. Hector tells many anecdotes about King, but imparts one lesson that he learned from the director: "Leave room for an audience to interpret. A film doesn't have to have a point. The emotional structure of a film," he stresses, "is more important than the intellectual."

Allan Tong is a Toronto filmmaker and journalist. His latest film, *I Want To Be A Desi*, will air on Bravo later this year.



Right, top to bottom:
Force of Nature: The David Suzuki Movie
Sturla Gunnarsson
(Canada, 2010)

Wiebo's War
David York
(Canada, 2011)

Experimental Eskimos
Barry Greenwald
(Canada, 2009)

