

“You can force your story’s shape but the color will always bloom upstream.”

The above quote is a fairly innocuous line used in promotional materials for Shane Carruth’s second film, *Upstream Color*. At first glance, it appears like a typical vague pseudo-synopsis of a pretentious indie film. Instead, I’d like to argue that it encapsulates what makes Carruth a revolutionary and unparalleled filmmaker.

Carruth has only made two major films, *Primer* in 2004, and *Upstream Color* in 2013, and it is the contrast between these two works that sets Carruth apart. *Primer*’s narrative is technically science fiction, but the “fantasy” elements are so subtle that the viewer doesn’t even realize they’re suspending disbelief about time travel. The logic of the film is meticulous, the narrative is dense, and understanding the plot arguably requires watching it twice with a whiteboard in hand. This is in no way an exaggeration. When I recommend the film to friends, I advise keeping a notebook handy throughout. Herein lies the beauty of the film: it refuses to hold your hand. Carruth’s films wholeheartedly go against the increasingly common trend of movies appealing to the “lowest common denominator” of audiences. There is minimal exposition, trusting his audience to connect the dots as to what isn’t being shown in the film. In doing so, he enables his audience to try and find the answers themselves through creating and discussing theories of their own. This makes the process thoroughly unstandardized, a perfect example of how movies can be a deeply personal art form.¹

¹ Quote from Pauline Kael, found in essay prompt.

Where *Primer* is an enigma of loops and circuits, filled with critical plot details that are only mentioned in passing, *Upstream Color* is a slow, surreal, and contemplative dance. One critic described it as “essentially a silent film, obsessed not just with color but with texture and movement and rhythm.”² *Primer* is about the micro, the details, the math. *Upstream Color* is about the macro, the cycles of life, trauma, and humanity’s apathy regarding its own failing epistemology. Carruth states in a Q&A that in *Upstream Color* “so many of the characters are unaware about what is happening around them.”³ Carruth’s ability to transfer a similar feeling to his audience is what makes *Upstream Color* so brilliant. The movie’s nonconventional cinematography, along with frequent cuts, makes the audience feel as though they are drifting while the events of the movie take place around them. It is a movie that is largely *felt*, not *understood*.

Carruth’s dedication to his craft is exemplary. He is a filmmaker in the fullest sense of the word. For *Primer*, he fulfilled the role of director, writer, actor, soundtrack composer, and editor. His budget was a measly \$7,000. As a result, he and his co-star rehearsed every line of dialogue over and over for weeks in advance, as they only could afford enough film to do about one take of every single shot. It is rather fitting that a movie requiring such attention to detail to understand would require such meticulous planning and preparation to create. The profit the film made was saved for nine years until Carruth came out of the woodwork to create another film.

Shane Carruth’s works have easily been the most influential films I’ve ever watched, not only impacting my endeavors as a fledgling filmmaker myself, but also by helping to rewire the way I view the world. Though cliché, they remind me of a quote from Bill Watterson’s *Calvin & Hobbes*, “there’s treasure everywhere!” There is an indescribable tactility to Carruth’s cinematic style that affirms the beauty of the great and the small, the simple and the complex, the totality of the human experience.

² D'Angelo, Mike (2013). "You're Going To Want To See It More Than Once: UPSTREAM COLOR". Music Box Theatre 2013 Spring Calendar March 1st through May 30th. Music Box Theatre: 30–31.

³ Shane Carruth, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cjq_Lb2F2I

Carruth's films trust you, creating a kind of intimacy one does not expect from this medium. This kind of trust has inspired my filmmaking to be less focused on a story's "shape", and to pay much more attention to how the color will breathe and bloom.⁴ When contemplative and intricate films like Carruth's can be intimately experienced on such a level, it is difficult to adequately quantify the ways in which they have impacted my spiritual and imaginative life.

Word Count: 687

⁴ For The Shot Films, <https://www.youtube.com/user/dbdmedia1>