

The Edinburgh Reporter in Conversation with James Ward Byrkit, the director of Coherence



On a warm night in June at the Edinburgh Film Festival, I sat down, admittedly shattered, to watch a film I hadn't heard much about. I knew it was supposedly science fiction, and I knew that the concept sounded interesting. What I didn't expect was to see one of the most mind-boggling pieces of cinema I had seen in years.

It follows a group of friends who meet one night over dinner. As a comet passes overhead, the power goes out along with every point of connection to the outside world. Eager to discover exactly what's going on, they head across the street to the only house left with their lights on. What's inside and what occurs makes for some truly riveting cinema.

It marks the cinema directorial debut of James Ward Byrkit – the man behind the story for the Oscar winning *Rango*, a film that is altogether bares little resemblance to his latest work. From cowboy reptilians to mystifying doppelgängers, this is one bold cinematic transition that works incredibly well.

We spoke to James ahead of the UK release of *Coherence*, where he discussed the project's fruition, his diverse writing style and the projects he's planning.

When and how did the concept of *Coherence* come to you?

As I was finishing up work on *RANGO*, I really wanted to direct my own project, a microbudget movie of some sort. My writing cohort Alex Manugian and I started brainstorming ideas that we

could make for no money. We realized we had to work with whatever we had. Namely, a camera, some friends who could act... and a living room. So the question was how to make a living room feel like more than just a living room. How to give it cosmic significance? And I pictured reality starting to fracture during a dinner party. The creepiness of getting lost in a night of twists and puzzles. An unraveling sense of identity that comes from things being not quite right. And that was so instantly compelling, we knew we had our starting point.

You worked with Gore Verbinski on the story for the Academy Award winning Rango. How different was that experience compared to Coherence, which feels like a much more independent project? Is it difficult to write a story so multifaceted and keep track of it as you are writing?

Rango was similar in that we unleashed our creativity and worked at top gear the entire time, not unlike *COHERENCE*. The difference is, of course, that in making a microbudget movie, you are working without a net. You gain freedom and lose support in the form of money. I wanted to push the limits of what had ever been attempted before—namely, creating one of the most complicated puzzles ever seen and not giving the actors a script. The improvisational nature of *COHERENCE* is really the big difference. And the most exciting.

It was difficult to keep track of it all, and diagram it all out, and keep the puzzle pieces meaningful, and keep the characters grounded in some kind of truth, but that was also the most enjoyable aspect.

The title of the film, many would argue, contradicts the mindbending aspects of it. Was this intentional?

Yes, certainly. Once we found out about the concept of “decoherence,” the opposite of that seemed like a delicious, almost absurd declaration. It’s the first clue to a lot of deadpan sassiness going on. I love that word, not just because of the layers of meaning it connotes within science, and the

“co-here” aspect of the word itself, but the idea of reality itself being coherent. It was clear that a movie named *COHERENCE* would of course have to at some point build to complete incoherence to deserve the irony. We applied tremendous discipline plotting something with internal logic that on first viewing would be spaghetti, but on repeated viewings might reveal itself to follow its own rules precisely.

It's fairly difficult to place Coherence into a specific 'genre', as it covers so many cinematic bases. Is there a genre you are drawn to as a filmmaker and as a viewer?

I think “mindbender” is the best category for it. I'm drawn to anything that lets us take a ride into the unknown and the farflung unexplored regions of the brain. Life is so much bigger than just our daily routine, and science fiction stories provide a much needed head trip. Humans crave connection to cosmic ideas, and the best stories take us there.

You're working on a comic book entitled Oxygen – what can you tell us about it?

That's another wild ride... only this time there is a really simple concept at the heart of the story where a robot and a human find themselves locked in a Hitchcock-inspired thriller. I'd love this to be my next film, so the comic is just one step to see if a production company is brave enough to join us in bringing it to life.

Coherence has its UK release on February 13th 2015