Future and Presential Dystopia through Adolescent Eyes: Jörg Tittel and Alex Helfrecht on *The White King*

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The feature directorial debut of filmmakers Jörg Tittel and Alex Helfrecht, *The White King* is an adaptation of Hungarian novelist György Dragomán’s 2007 novel of the same name (Fig. 1). The film tells the story of teenage boy Djata (Lorenzo Allchurch), whose life in his totalitarian homeland is disrupted following his father’s arrest in the opening scenes. This becomes a defining moment in the young boy’s life, the catalyst for a chain of events that sees him and his mother (Agyness Deyn) ostracized. Meanwhile, his grandparents (Jonathan Pryce and Fiona Shaw), loyal and respected members of the state, establish Djata’s choice to either rebel or conform.

In 2011, Tittel and Helfrecht set up their own production company, Oiffy, with producer Philip Munger. Helfrecht, who was born in Oxford, U.K., was raised in the Caribbean and France. After reading English at The

Fig. 1: From left to right: Alex Helfrecht, Jörg Tittel, and György Dragomán share a moment on the set of *The White King* (2016).
University of London, she went on to train at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. She directed 2+2+2 with actor Richard E. Grant and 1800 Acres with actress Cathy Tyson; in 2013, she adapted Ernest Hemingway’s Fiesta – The Sun Also Rises for the West End stage. Helfrecht directed the short film Battle for Britain (2011) starring Julian Glover, which nurtured her collaborative relationship with Tittel, who wrote and acted in 2+2+2 and also produced and wrote the script for Battle of Britain. Born in Belgium, Tittel studied at New York University Tisch School of Arts and the Stella Adler Conservatory. Outside of filmmaking and the theatre, he worked as a video game designer and writer, and also wrote the graphic novel Ricky Rouse has a Gun, published in 2014.

The White King is a testament to the resolve of its filmmakers, who were told, “There’s no way you’ll ever get to make this film.” Tittel and Helfrecht are kindred spirits of cinema’s iconic dystopian protagonists, who in their creative resilience recall the adage, “Life imitating art.” Whether it be Anthony Perkins’s Josef K in Orson Welles The Trial (1962), a man seeking clarification to a mysterious charge for which he is to stand trial, Eddie Constantine’s secret agent Lemmy Caution in Jean-Luc Godard’s Alphaville (1965), or Harrison Ford’s Rick Deckard in Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (1982), these characters embody a determination and drive — a response to provocation that propels the narrative and drama forward, defining the story. The character of Djata possesses this same characteristic, challenging his mother and the propaganda of the state in his pursuit of truth.

The White King focuses on a single moment in the rise and fall of a totalitarian regime, its ambitions tempered to intertwine a coming of age story with the idea that the future is shaped in a single moment — here Djata is awakening to the reality of his world. In keeping with his fellow protagonists, the young boy repels the pressures of the adult world to shape his world view. In much the same way, the filmmakers repelled the cynicism of the naysayers with their determination for self-expression. And with Trump ushering in the era of ‘Fake News,’ Djata’s coming of age story conveys a more significant relevance through the organic interdependence of life and art.

One Friday evening in January, Tittel and Helfrecht spoke with Mise-en-Scène via Skype from their home about their interest in film as a cosmopolitan artistic medium, and film as part of the broader cultural whole. The conversation was not restricted to their dystopian adaptation; the filmmakers also discussed how the film fits into contemporary society and celebrated the idealistic ideology of film and art as a bastion behind which cultures can unify and coexist.

**PR:** Why a career in filmmaking? Was there an inspirational or defining moment?

**AH:** The first film I saw as a child was E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial (1982). I was three, so I am kind of giving away my age. Anyway, it blew my mind and I’ve seen the film twelve times, and I’ve always cried. There have been a lot of films that have made a huge impression on me, such as Cabaret (1972). I love to tell stories and I love actors; I love film as much as I love theatre, but for different reasons. I wanted to work as a director in both mediums and I feel passionately that they can coexist. Jörg has discovered virtual reality (VR), which is a new thing altogether. I would love to share a journey into VR with him too, because that presents even more opportunities.

**JT:** For me it was similar, whether it was the early Spielberg films or seeing Star Wars (1977) as a kid. I wanted to be Jabba the Hutt, which is odd, but I thought he was the coolest looking. I loved theatre as well, but for me it was mainly movies and games, which I’ve always wanted to make, and to combine them. So, when I met Alex, we combined movies, theatre, and games.
AH: The other thing I'd say about film, which I find so incredible and that has always attracted me, is that a film can communicate things about other cultures, nationalities, and histories, and it can transport you in a way no other medium really can. It can show you images from a far-off place and you’re there – you’re inside it. For me, film is about cultural exchange and that’s hugely important to me to learn about other cultures, and in a way to inhabit other places. I call Jörg “Eurotrash,” and I’m half American. I was raised in the Caribbean and France, and what the two of us have in common is that we love international stories. When I’ve been to festivals, and when I’ve fallen in love with films, they have often for me been a celebration of other cultures. A recent example of this kind of exchange was when we were with the film at the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival (PÖFF) in Estonia. There was such an atmosphere and celebration there. We watched some wonderful films from all over the world, with people from all over the world. Anyway, that’s a huge draw for me.

JT: What is interesting right now is that film and art festivals, and the arts in general, are the last remaining bastion of people from different nations to coexist and celebrate one another. We are currently looking at a world where a lot of countries are becoming more and more populist and are closing their borders. It's all pretty scary, and so whenever we go to a film festival, it’s such a breath of fresh air to think: Oh my God, we are part of a larger world. We are part of a larger thing, not just hatred and demagoguery. So yes, cinema is a beautiful thing.

PR: Attending festivals, where I have interacted with international filmmakers and critics, has acted as a consistent reminder of the vital importance of art. Whereas politics, economics, and business are liable to suffocate our ability to connect and communicate, art promotes unity and coexistence.

AH: Definitely, and the experience of making it, which is, of course, what every director learns to do – that’s the crux of it. When you are directing, you have all those people and you’re navigating that creativity with a team (Fig. 2). It’s not always straightforward and it’s not always easy. We shot our film in Hungary and neither of us spoke Hungarian. Of course, the Hungarians are used to servicing productions and they have a phenomenal level of English. They are very professional and they work with Hollywood as well as smaller films like ours, and indie films. But the point is that there are cultural differences. There are moments where you can put your foot in your mouth and say something rude without realizing it. So, it is not always straightforward understanding another culture when you are working with different countries, but I do think it’s enriching, even from the point of view of living. One of the great things that filmmaking has to offer is that you have this potential to live a life that opens those doors, and you will see things while you are making...
a film that are incredibly striking. When we were living in Budapest making *The White King*, we were living on Andrássy Avenue with our two very small children at the time. Andrássy Avenue is the huge boulevard the Soviet tanks rolled down during the revolution and where they also hung people – from the trees that were under our window. And the House of Terror that was both the Gestapo and the Soviet prison was only a block away. So those kinds of things strike you. And of course, they were also building a wall to keep the immigrants out.

**JT:** We were a month away from shooting the film when we learned they were building that wall to keep all the Syrians out. We never felt that we were making something so important; that was not the point. We realized this was relevant, and we were making something about what we were feeling right now, and that people are possibly going through again. Very often, you have moments where you go: “Oh my God, why are we doing this for a living?” It takes us back to the question of why film? There are moments where you really doubt it; moments where you can feel: Why don’t I just get a regular job? This is craziness! You are so often banging your head against the wall of many egos and other people, but then you realize: Well, maybe I am saying something that might just touch one or two, or five people that matter out there, but through this film, they will then have a way to communicate something deeply to others. And when you do that, you have already made your job worthwhile.

**AH:** In *Jodorowsky’s Dune* (2013), the fantastic documentary about Alejandro Jodorowsky’s failed attempt to adapt and film Frank Herbert’s science fiction novel, *Dune*, Jodorowsky was saying that if one person or a hundred people, or a hundred thousand people see the film, it doesn’t matter. At the end of the day you are compelled by the story – it’s like a vocation. You are dedicated and you make it, and you can’t worry too much. And also, Susanne Bier, who we saw speaking the other day – a wonderful female director of the television mini-series, *The Night Manager* (2016), and other great films – was...
saying that you can’t go in to please everyone. You have to be true to yourself and your vision, and we really tried to do that with *The White King*. Of course, it is a political film, but the big challenge of the film is that everything is told from the point of view of the twelve-year-old, and so everything happens through his eyes. We had to be brave and bold enough to cut away from Jonathan Pryce, and while the audience would maybe want to know more at times, you can’t betray the idea that it’s all from this boy’s point of view (Fig. 3).

**JT:** We didn’t want the audience to know any more than the boy would know. To put the audience in that situation might be frustrating to some viewers, because things aren’t nicely contextualized, and then explained through expositional dialogue – wrapped up in a neat bow at the end of the film. But for good or for bad, that is for audiences to decide. We wanted the audience to feel as a twelve-year-old would feel when adults and the people he trusts and believes in are taken away from him. Or when the whole world of adults that he should be able to rely on have gone bonkers. That is not a comfortable feeling and it’s one that doesn’t give you a whole lot of answers, but it’s one that will certainly give you some feelings.

**PR:** I recall a story a friend told me about his two young nephews. There was a strange sound coming from the radiators, and he told them it was a ghost in the pipes. Whereas the younger one believed him, the older one dismissed it as silliness. He noted how suddenly his older nephew had grown up, losing that childlike imagination. In *The White King*, Djata has been told stories that have nurtured his impression of the world, and gradually we see him begin to discover the harsh reality contained within the stories. One of the powerful aspects of the film is how you employ fantasy, storytelling, and perception to emphasize the process of growing up.

**AH:** It’s exactly right, and the child in the film was born long after the revolution – thirty years ago. That means he just accepts life – how it is and whatever is presented to him. He just accepts it. He doesn’t see the CCTV cameras because they are part of the furniture. You also feel this very strongly in the novel; the idea that the apparatus of the regime and the history of the regime, and all the baggage that comes with it are pushed to the periphery. They are very much around the edge because what the novel and the film focus on is the emotional journey of this boy, and how he and everyone around him

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**Fig. 3:** The need for courage to choose the point of view that will not “betray the idea” at the film’s heart.
behaves – ordinary people in an ordinary world under this blanket of oppression. And going back to his naivety, the interesting thing about the boy in the book is that he’s almost a combination of your friend’s two boys. Every scene of the film is connected to the profound love that Djata has for his father – that’s the glue between all of the episodes in the film. While he has this naïve belief, the way Lorenzo [Allchurch] plays the scene at the beginning, which I think is quite brilliant, he knows that the guys who turn up and take his father away are bad news – he’s not so naïve. It’s this interesting combination of innocence and understanding, but of course the catalyst is the father being taken away, and then as you said, he begins to see the world for what it really is. He begins to see through not only the propaganda, but to see through everything.

**JT:** I think we are all going through this phase right now because we are suddenly living in a world where the “adults,” the authorities we have been told to trust and have actually trusted over the years, have either gone mad or have been taken away from us. The European Union, Obama, and a lot of liberal governments have suddenly been replaced or dangerously undermined by populists and demagogues. And suddenly it’s hard to know what to believe anymore. Fake news, post truth, this idea of actually not knowing what’s real and where we stand anymore really makes one feel a bit like Djata – confused, lost, and angry, but about to grow and wake up…hopefully.

**AH:** But I think the essential story of the film, and I think you understand it completely, is this idea to look at the boy at the beginning – that innocent face – and then look at him at the end – he’s determined. There is a transformation, and for me, that is the kind of story that interests me. Story is about how a character changes and that may not be everyone’s idea of story. A lot of people that watch a genre film, for example, expect a great deal of plot, and perhaps, people would anticipate that there’s going to be this huge uprising. Well, I think what we’re trying to do is subtler than that. There is a feeling of hope at the end. I would like to think there is, but I do think the boy changes. He goes from the younger child you told me about who is naïve to the older child somehow. It’s the coming of age that’s slow burn.

**JT:** It is, and people will hopefully see that not only does the boy change, but so do his actions. Subtle as they may be, they are also gradually changing the world around him. Just like every child will only
make so much of an impact for his age, he will grow, as will society around him, but the people that he has encountered in the film will have also been changed. And for certain events towards the end of the film, I think we are seeing the roots of hope, and also perhaps the roots of a future uprising, a revolution.

AH: But the demand of the film is that you do have to commit to being with him. You have to jump in with Djata and you have to commit, as the film commits, to seeing it all through his eyes. That’s the challenge of the film.

PR: In conversation with Charlotte Chandler, Billy Wilder expressed uncertainty as to whether Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine's romance would last beyond the end credits of The Apartment (1960). Wilder infers that there is the life before and after the film; the film itself is only a chapter. As opposed to trying to tell an expansive story in The White King, you focus on a moment or a chapter of a country’s life story, which echoes ideas of the life span of a story.

AH: By the way, we love The Apartment.

JT: It’s in my top three films of all time. I don’t think there’s a film that combines comedy and drama, and also oddly enough, it’s also quite sci-fi if you think about it. The way he was portraying the corporate world and foreshadowing future employment in that big open office space was not typical for the time. So Wilder was already doing a social critique and that tower they are working in is, in some ways, actually quite dystopian. Such an amazing film!

AH: I think a lot of people might view our film and say, “Well, you’re setting us up for a franchise. You’re trying to be a franchise movie,” which is not the case. Just as the book does, we would hope that you would ask questions. We were true to the ending of the book, which was so motivating—it moved me and it made me think. But we knew the ending was not going to be everyone’s cup of tea, but there was no other ending that we could have done for this film. It would have been disingenuous to wrap everything up in a neat little box. And as Jörg said a few months ago, there is no Jennifer Lawrence in real life that is going to come and save the day from an evil regime. Life is much more complex than that, and Dragomán’s book is much more complex than that,
and I hope the film is. It’s a risk you take in terms of audience expectations and we are living in a formulaic society in many ways. But it would be wonderful if the audience dreamed of what would happen after the film ended.

JT: I know we are living in, as Alex said, a formulaic society, but I think we live in a very binary society where we are conditioned to either friend or unfriend, like or dislike. You look at the way people rate films online in forums; they will either give it ten or they’ll give it one out of ten, because why should there be any stuff in the middle? But this film doesn’t have a binary structure, and it also doesn’t have a binary resolution. There’s no conflict and then resolution. As we said, it is part of a life and it tells part of a chapter in a life because I believe that if a character is winning all the battles for you in the film, then you will not fight them yourself in life. I believe the films that have moved Alex and I are those films that aren’t truly resolved, because those films then inspire you to want to finish the job for them.

PR: Speaking with Carol Morley for The Falling (2014), she explained: “You take it ninety percent of the way, and it is the audience that finishes it. So the audience by bringing themselves: their experiences, opinions, and everything else to a film is what completes it.” And if the audience are the ones that complete it, does it follow that there is a transfer in ownership?

AH: Well I’ll tell you that process is very difficult for me because the film is so early on its journey. We premiered at Edinburgh and then the international premiere was at Tallinn, and they were very different audiences. It was very interesting to see how the film played in Eastern Europe as well as the U.K. – there were positives and negatives in both. Anyway, the point is, for me, that it’s very difficult because I come from the theatre, where directing a play, it goes into previews, which is effectively your editing suite. You face the audience and you’ll see that what you are doing in a scene is just not working – it’s hitting a

Fig. 6: Creating a vision for a future audience: Alex Helfrechter directs Agyness Deyn and Lorenzo Allchurch.
brick wall. So you do your editing there with the audience in mind because you are trying to put forward a vision, and you need to make sure it’s clear, and it’s coming through (Fig. 6). They are a sounding board and then you get it right, and the press night that follows is when you get the critical reaction. Then the audience are there and you instantly know if it’s working – are the seats in the theatre filling up or not? Of course, I’ve had both experiences, and it’s much clearer, but the weird thing with film, and what I’m particularly struggling with, is that handover. It’s very hard and the process of finishing a film is more convoluted, and then getting it to its audience, especially with a small indie. It takes much longer and I found that to be difficult.

**JT:** I also think the commercial pressures of a film don’t make you think about the story, the emotions, and the philosophy behind the film. I mean that’s always the danger, but you think about what this is going to be sold as and how is it going to be sold, and that feeling can be quite crippling and debilitating. If you think about the commercial result of the film, our next projects will be far more clearly delineated in terms of what the genre will be. *The White King* is not a film that you can easily fit into either one genre or category, or even one target audience.

**AH:** I think every filmmaker should get the chance to make a film like that.

**JT:** We had the first-time filmmaker bonus, where basically everyone assumed we couldn’t make it, so they let us make it [laughs]. Literally everyone said, “There’s no way you’ll ever get to make this film.” So with the second one we’ll see.

I agree with you Alex, but at the same time I think one thing we have also realized, largely through conversation like the one we are having with you, as well as ‘regular audience’ members, is that they made us understand again what we’d made. They confirmed to us what we’d always set out to make and
then forgot in the process of bringing it to the market – talking to sales people, distributors, and marketing. You sort of lose track of what you’ve made. You are not only reminding us of it, you are suddenly reinforcing and also allowing us to better understand what we’ve made. So yes, there’s definitely a dialogue there that is essential.

PR: I spoke with filmmaker Christoph Behl, who remarked: “You are evolving, and after the film you are not the same person as you were before.” Do you perceive there to be a transformative aspect to the creative process?

AH: This has been like a really long marathon. All in all, with this one, it has been five years (Fig. 7). We did other things in between. Jörg did *Ricky Rowe has a Gun*, a very successful graphic novel, and I directed an adaptation of Hemingway in the West End of London. But it has still been five years and that’s a long time. And there were life events that happened in a time span like this, such as the birth of our second child. Our first child was barely two when we got the rights and now she’s much older. So things do transform you and those milestones are tied up with the stages of the film; that makes it even more special. I think, in terms of how it changes, anyone that trains for a marathon will tell you it is not all pleasant. There is relief and euphoria at the end, and there’s gratification when you see it working on an audience. But obviously, there are moments where it’s so hard. It’s not working down in the mine; it’s a different kind of hard, but it’s still hard. I think you have to learn to be tough and that’s difficult because I don’t feel very tough...you do have to toughen up.

JT: The strange thing about this as well, and we touched upon it earlier, does anyone need this? Why am I doing this? I should go to Syria and help people in hospitals. I should help people in the U.K. that are standing in lines trying to get food, increasingly large lines with people that can’t even afford bread.

AH: There are moments when you think: At best, all I am making is entertainment.

JT: And then you have some people saying, “Well you’re the one that decided to be a filmmaker. You could have chosen to do something else.” Everyone chooses to do what they do.

AH: To a degree.

JT: To a degree. But whether someone chooses to become a super successful hedge fund manager, they choose that. They decide to stay in that position. We are doing it because it is all we know what to do, and whether we do it well is for other people to judge.

AH: But you realize that you do one, give it your best shot, and then your goal is to do the next one. And the reason is because you have to do it. You have to try and lay the other stuff aside, but it’s definitely transformative. You have to take a lot of knocks, but of course, it’s a very privileged career to get into. When I see films of other filmmakers that I love, especially unusual films, or films that I wouldn’t see in a commercial capacity, that just fills me with great joy and it’s the same with theatre.

PR: The difficulty for any film or work of art now is that the response will be a product of a reactive society. If society strays too far away from a habit to take the time to contemplate, the arts, including film, will suffer. Or rather, non-commercial film will suffer.

AH: I think the point is that we are living in a culture where, as Jörg says, we are so binary, but it is so opinion based. You’ve got to have an opinion about everything, and everybody thinks that their opinion is valid, but it’s not necessarily. I wouldn’t go and ask people in the street if I needed brain surgery. It’s not that I’m an elitist because I’m not. I just think that we’re in this society where we’ve got Facebook and all of this social media that is willing us to have an opinion. Donald Trump tweets, people
have an opinion. It’s all about opinion sharing rather than experiencing something, and then standing back and going on the journey to understand. Maybe we are all too quick to feel that we need to vocalize an opinion rather than just experience a piece of music, a piece of art, or a film.

JT: And our film refuses to give you that opinion or feed you a message. It just doesn’t say that this is how it is, this is what happened, and this is the solution to the problem. Because there are no easy solutions. Not in a world like this. Certainly not in a world of conflict, dictatorship, and a demography of hatred and fear. There are no easy solutions. We are living in a world like this right now and you tell me one solution that’s going to make Great Britain feel united again, not just within itself, but also with Europe and the world at large. There is none. There is no easy solution. We have gone down a tunnel filled with hatred and lies that we are not going to be able to get out of so easily. But hopefully we can all reconcile, and more importantly, we can all understand that love and family are ultimately the most important centres within a world that is in chaos.

For video extras from this interview, visit Mise-en-scène on YouTube.

Works Cited
