

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH  
CINEMATOGRAPHER  
KRISTIAN ZUNIGA  
March 18, 2020  
Host: Bryan Smith

Bryan Smith (00:00):  
Kristian Zuniga, welcome to the podcast.

Kristian Zuniga (00:02):  
Yeah, thanks for having me.

Bryan Smith (00:03):  
Yeah. So what brings you to Sundance?

Kristian Zuniga (00:06):  
I have my first feature in the festival competing under the next category. It's called Beast Beast.

Bryan Smith (00:13):  
I had the pleasure of seeing Beast Beast.

Kristian Zuniga (00:14):  
Oh rad. What'd you think?

Bryan Smith (00:16):  
Very well done.

Kristian Zuniga (00:17):  
Thanks man.

Bryan Smith (00:17):  
Yeah, that was a lot of fun to see. I got to the venue and did not realize that the entire cast would be there, and the producers, and Alec Baldwin, I didn't realize that he was producing the movie and that was a nice surprise.

Kristian Zuniga (00:32):  
Yeah, I didn't realize so many people were going to make it out too. It was awesome. And it was kind of like a mini reunion, kind of brought back all the feelings of being on set. It was cool.

Bryan Smith (00:40):  
So, how did you get involved in that project?

Kristian Zuniga (00:43):

I kind of have done a few things with the Atlanta film society. And they got hit up by vanishing angle, 'cause they were coming to town, doing a few features there, and they kind of just tossed my name in the ring and went in for an interview. And I guess I said all the right things and got onto the project.

Bryan Smith (00:58):

And did you have your website as your portfolio?

Kristian Zuniga (01:02):

Yeah, definitely. My website was probably, having something that they can see definitely helps for sure. And I would say that helped.

Bryan Smith (01:08):

I highly recommend for the listeners to go to [kristianzuniga.com](http://kristianzuniga.com). It's, I'll spell it out for you: K-R-I-S-T-I-A-N-Z-U-N-I-G-A.com. It's really impressive, the body of work that Kristian has on that website. So, you interview for this job and did you know what the project was about at that point?

Kristian Zuniga (01:33):

Yeah, Danny the director had made kind of a, I'd call it a treatment, but it's like a bit of a pitch deck too. It kind of breaks down what the story is and how it's supposed to feel style-wise. I didn't read the script yet, I just kind of looked over that. I mean, it seemed really exciting and I had looked up to work and I- You can kind of see what kind of director he'd be like to work with, movement-wise, and just... He's an animator by trade and so I felt like he would really, he knows what he wants, 'cause those guys kind of have to think it all out beforehand.

Bryan Smith (02:03):

Right.

Kristian Zuniga (02:03):

So, I was just excited and it was the first feature I had ever been able to do. So I was like, I definitely wanted to do it. I didn't really need a lot of convincing from them. I needed to convince them to let me do it.

Bryan Smith (02:14):

Yeah. Well it sounds like, I mean just looking at the career trajectory of folks in the film industry, it seems like shorts are kind of the way to get your foot into the door.

Kristian Zuniga (02:25):

Yeah, yeah, definitely. I had done one or two outside of school that I was really happy with, but they weren't really out at the time. And I don't think it was... I don't know if they ever actually saw them. I think what they had looked at of my work was a lot of my earlier doc stuff, and music

video work with like... They were looking for someone who could do that kind of style, like doc-style, light quickly, and move the camera around in an interesting way.

Bryan Smith (02:50):

Well, just looking at your commercial work. I mean those are miniature movies.

Kristian Zuniga (02:57):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (02:57):

I mean they're incredible.

Kristian Zuniga (02:59):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (02:59):

Incredibly cinematic too. So, how did you get involved with, and we'll get back to meeting Danny, the director and Beast Beast, but how did you get involved in commercial work and get your foot in the door in that industry?

Kristian Zuniga (03:12):

It actually took a long time. I graduated in maybe 2012 and as soon as I came out of there I kind of went- I did a few small PA jobs on reality TV shows. But what really kicked it off for me was, I started working at a rental house as a prep tech, and then I kinda just got to know all the gear, got to know everybody coming into town renting. And from there, one day some dude just came in and was looking for a DP and he was shooting a Migos video -this was back before they were big- and he just asked me if I wanted to shoot it. I was like, "Okay." And then I shot that video for him and then just kept doing more and more music videos, because of that kind of thing. Through that I was able to work with bigger artists, and then the directors who are directing that they kind of, because they're working with these bigger artists now, they kind of were able to start getting commercial work geared around that. And so I was able to transition from music videos into commercial work through working with different rappers and stuff. Like, I did an anti-smoking campaign targeted towards urban youth, really kinda had like a hip hop vibe to it. And so I kind of hopped in on that kind of stuff and then transitioned more into traditional commercial work from that.

Bryan Smith (04:22):

So, you're working in a rental house, getting to know the equipment, but you graduated in 2012 from where?

Kristian Zuniga (04:29):

I went to Full Sail down in Orlando.

Bryan Smith (04:32):

And what is that? Is that a film school or is that a college?

Kristian Zuniga (04:35):

It's definitely, I would call it a trade school. You kind of go there, it's like two years, and you'll get to learn all the gear and just kind of learn how to work on set and learn the different roles. And it's not a lot of theory, it's definitely very technical.

Bryan Smith (04:47):

Yeah.

Kristian Zuniga (04:47):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (04:47):

And when you went to school there, what was your vision about where you wanted to go professionally?

Kristian Zuniga (04:54):

I thought I wanted to be a director when I first went there. Then I quickly realized I don't like explaining myself to people. I just don't like having to convince a lot of people why I want to do something. It's easier, I'm a lot better one-on-one I think. And so from there we kinda got into lighting after the first couple of months in school and I realized how much I liked doing that. And it's kind of, it's really the DP and the director kind of very bonded. I think it's very similar, as far as what you have to do on set. Like, when it comes to the image I guess.

Bryan Smith (05:23):

Right.

Kristian Zuniga (05:23):

And I've realized that's the part I like about it. I like crafting an image, I like lighting, and I don't like so much dealing with the actors and like trying to get them to get into a certain mood, that wasn't for me. So, I kinda just switched into that and dove into it.

Bryan Smith (05:38):

So, it sounds like you start off wanting to be a director, but you find out pretty quickly where you're most comfortable in that role or in the filmmaking industry.

Kristian Zuniga (05:49):

Yeah, definitely.

Bryan Smith (05:50):

So, let's go back to Beast Beast. When you came on board and you met Danny, and you knew he was an animator and had a lot of foresight and vision, what were his instructions to you in terms of how to shoot this project?

Kristian Zuniga (06:07):

He, so in the beginning he was pretty straight forward about how he wanted to separate the three characters. They all kind of have a different visual style. And that's kinda what helped, really guided me in how to approach it. I don't know if you've noticed but Adam's stuff is either locked off or it's just literally on sticks, pan and tilting on a slider. There's maybe two handheld scenes with him in the whole movie and it's when he's with other characters, but it's like that kind of separates him from the other two. Krista is very much like, low camera's always moving, it's a bit tighter on her. And then Nito, because he's so active and athletic, it's a bit wider, but also low and always moving. And Danny kind of called the skateboard angles, you know?

Bryan Smith (06:48):

Yeah.

Kristian Zuniga (06:49):

Just to kind of separate them all, and have their own energy and use the camera to kind of make you feel how their personality is, I guess. So, he was really upfront about that and that's something we had talked about a lot.

Bryan Smith (07:01):

Yeah. You know, that's what I noticed about Nito's character. And we'll talk about what the movie premise is, some of the listeners may not have seen it by the time this comes out.

Kristian Zuniga (07:12):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (07:12):

But Nito's character was incredibly kinetic. And so, in a lot of those low shots, give you a sense of just being right there in whatever movement he's in. And he's so athletic, and jumping around all the time and skateboarding. I felt like- And then you juxtapose that against Adam, the character Adam, who has this... I dunno, his personality is very rigid, and he has an understanding of exactly what he wants and what he's trying to accomplish. There was also kind of a sadness to the footage of him, I think was the saddest where he's just longing to be seen and be heard. And somehow you captured that. I don't know how you did it, but it was pretty impressive.

Kristian Zuniga (08:04):

That was something Danny was really trying to make sure that you don't hate him. You kind of just feel for him. So, I'm glad you said that. It's a- He felt like it would be really easy to make that character look like a bad person. And he wanted to do his hardest to make sure that you didn't

think that, like you could kind of sympathize with them and feel bad for him. And it's a lot of just how you light it and how you shoot it. Like, for me it would have been so easy to just make his stuff really, way moodier that it was just to kind of force you to feel a certain way about him. But Danny was very, very conscious about that. Like, not making things too moody and not always doing like a Pharcyde key on him. You know, let him have a front light so you can kind of see his whole face. You're not trying to hide him from the audience, you want them to like be able to connect with them.

Bryan Smith (08:51):

Yeah. Another thing I liked about Danny's approach to that character is, I think his parents, like if I were writing the screenplay, I probably would have written his parents as Fox news Patriots, Trump loving people. They weren't like that. They were very caring parents. They loved their son. I think they thought their son was probably too extreme in the direction that he was going. And I think that that type of nuance makes for a much more interesting film.

Kristian Zuniga (09:24):

Yeah, yeah. It makes him, it's like he's a real person. There's not a stereotype of what a gun enthusiast would be. That's what Danny was really trying to show, that these are like real people and they're not all like a Fox News family.

Bryan Smith (09:40):

So, let's talk about the scenes. First of all, before we talk about the scenes of the movie, can you tell us what the movie is about and who these characters are?

Kristian Zuniga (09:50):

I think the easiest way to describe it is that, it's a coming of age story that's set in a perfect snapshot of time in the South. I would say it's very modern, it's very much like right now. And there's a lot of, I guess it's a lot of how social media and the news cycle kind of affects people's lives, and how they kind of navigate through that.

Bryan Smith (10:12):

And the premise of the movie, I wasn't certain in the first act, if there is an act of the film, but the first 30 minutes I really wasn't sure where it was going. But when you start to see the intersections of these lives the tension starts to build, because you know it's leaning toward something.

Kristian Zuniga (10:32):

Yeah, you can feel it's going somewhere.

Bryan Smith (10:34):

Right. Especially with the gun enthusiast.

Kristian Zuniga (10:35):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (10:36):

It's like you don't know where it's going at all.

Kristian Zuniga (10:38):

Yeah. You really don't. I can tell in the audio while watching it, which is cool, was when people started feeling that feeling, or they're like, "Ah!" They can kind of sense that everything is going to mix together in a way that they probably aren't going to like.

Bryan Smith (10:50):

So, the three characters are incredibly different. And when you're shooting the scenes at the party, and I'm not gonna spoil it for anybody who hasn't seen it, but there's this party scene that. Let's just put it this way, things go terribly wrong at this high school party. What was your approach to shooting that scene and how did you embed yourself into what was happening in the scene?

Kristian Zuniga (11:18):

The approach to that, which was approached to like a lot of the scenes we did, was Danny really doesn't like having stuff on the ground like lights. He doesn't like having to relight and pull people out and like move stuff around. He doesn't like wasting time, I guess. So for that, and for a lot of the movie, what we really had to do is light for 360 almost, like you have to light to be able to shoot anywhere. So, in the kitchen we had like something [intelligible] like a big old gem ball, just kind of washing that out with a tungsten light.

Kristian Zuniga (11:50):

And then, all of the lights you see in the frame are actually lighting the scene too. We just got, we rented- Oh no, we actually got a bunch of DJ equipment from somebody at the school that we shot in. And we kind of just set it up practically within the scene, and I just bounced it off the ceiling and kind of controlled all the levels so it looked right. I felt like it looked really good and you can see it in frame, which so, and it's like a practical source that would make sense to be there. So, it kind of just worked out. But there's maybe one source that we would use for closeups and stuff to bring in. But other than that you can kind of just be... I can literally move the camera wherever I want and not see a film line.

Bryan Smith (12:26):

And so, you had a handheld camera, obviously.

Kristian Zuniga (12:29):

Yeah. We kind of built it out to be as small as possible. We made like a backpack rig kind of, everything on the body was stripped away and put into a belt that you could wear. So, the camera itself was maybe... They can't see this, but it's maybe 12 inches long and 6 inches wide. So, it's like really tiny little thing you can move wherever.

Bryan Smith (12:48):

And so you're in this party scene and this fight breaks out. Were you ever hit or bumped into or in danger in any way?

Bryan Smith (12:57):

No, I was okay. I operated a lot of the stuff before it kind of heated up. Danny's himself an operator too and he kind of, he knows what he wants. So he was the one, when it got a little gritty, he was doing all that. I don't know, I think he was fine though. I don't remember.

Bryan Smith (13:15):

I was wondering if the actors would be fine, because there were some pretty heavy duty fight scenes.

Kristian Zuniga (13:20):

Jose did fine, that dude is so good.

Bryan Smith (13:21):

He's- I've never seen anyone, anyone that athletic and limber.

Kristian Zuniga (13:28):

Yeah. So, you were there at the screening, right?

Bryan Smith (13:29):

At the Q&A where he did the handstand.

Kristian Zuniga (13:30):

Yeah!

Bryan Smith (13:30):

Yeah. So, was Alec Baldwin involved in any of the day to day shooting or the consulting work that you saw?

Kristian Zuniga (13:40):

I think him and Danny I know had a lot of conversations about the script and the characters before we started filming. But he sent his partner, Casey Bader, out just to kind of help us stay on track and do whatever production things we would need.

Bryan Smith (13:53):

And so how did Alec Baldwin get involved? And Casey?

Kristian Zuniga (13:57):

I think Casey ended up seeing Krista at South By, and he really liked the short and he brought it to Alec. And they reached out to Danny. And Danny met up with them and it kinda just worked out. They were, Danny told him he already had the feature script for Beast Beast done, and he was actively working on it at the time. And so it all just kind of happened at once.

Bryan Smith (14:18):

And does that mean that Alec had a production company that was backing it at the time?

Kristian Zuniga (14:23):

I'm not quite sure the details of it to be honest. That's probably a Danny question.

Bryan Smith (14:28):

Yeah. Yeah. Well, maybe he'll agree to talk to me after hearing this. So, Beast Beast, was that the title of the script when you read it?

Kristian Zuniga (14:37):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (14:38):

Yeah. And so did he get that from the acting, from Shirley's acting lessons, that he had already cast her and talked to her about that?

Kristian Zuniga (14:45):

Yeah, I think so. Which I kind of find that out at the Q&A too, I didn't really know that. I thought it would, it's just something he- 'Cause his brother's really big into acting as well, and I think they all kind of came up in theater. So, I thought it was just from his own experience too. But it's kinda cool that Shirley had a little hand in it.

Bryan Smith (15:02):

Yeah. 'Cause I was watching, as I was watching the movie and I'm thinking, "Okay, where is the Beast Beast? Are one of these kids, the beast." And then there's another kid that's, I was like-

Kristian Zuniga (15:11):

Oh, you thought it was literal or something?

Bryan Smith (15:13):

Yeah, I was like try- And then I see they're doing these acting theater exercises, beast beast. What is the phrase, beast beast...?

Kristian Zuniga (15:23):

Ready to act.

Bryan Smith (15:24):

Ready to act. Yeah. And, but I tell you, this film was so impactful from the standpoint that you have three- I think one of the important considerations for how a movie feels and how you react to it, or your expectations going in. And when you have three kind of unknown actors, they're child actors basically, or very young actors. It helps with lowering or zeroing out your expectations going in, and that's what I love about Sundance, because I know nothing about this film other than the very brief, ambiguous description that's in the guide, the Sundance guide. And then you have someone like Shirley who is so charismatic on screen and just, you just instantly fall in love with this character, just like Alec was saying during the Q&A. And they're all charismatic in their own ways. But then this narrative unfolds, and I think it was brilliant the way Danny put that together. When you finished the project, were you involved at all in the editing process?

Kristian Zuniga (16:32):

I saw a few cuts here and there, but most of the editing was taking place in LA and I live in Atlanta, so I didn't get to see a lot, but I know they did a lot of test screenings. And so they would have people come in and watch a rough cut and give feedback and stuff. I never really got to sit in on one of those, but I did see quite a few cuts.

Bryan Smith (16:49):

And when you're thinking, when you're shooting, are you thinking about that any process at all? Because I know you've done some editing.

Kristian Zuniga (16:56):

I mean I tried to a bit, but to be honest, the way Danny edits is like something I've never seen before. So, I just let him tell me what to do. I don't... It's so hard to keep track of what's happening in his head, the way he likes to shoot. It's like impossible to see how he's going to piece it together unless you're him, for some of the scenes at least.

Bryan Smith (17:16):

So, you're just trying to get as much usable footage as possible.

Kristian Zuniga (17:18):

Yeah, for sure. So much of the Krista/Nieto stuff was me just lighting a space for Danny and then letting him go in there and operate, and we would do- He would just run a card out, he would keep shooting until the card's dead, and just keep giving them different performance things or moving the camera in a different way. Him trying to like find it, and in his head piece together what he wanted out of it. 'Cause there's a lot of stuff like moving from one character to another, like while they're talking and the camera's just floating around and going between all this stuff. I was like, there's no- I can put that together in my mind how he's going to cut that.

Bryan Smith (17:51):

So you talked about a card running out, so this is all digital?

Kristian Zuniga (17:56):

Yeah, yeah, yeah. We shot on the Alexa Mini.

Bryan Smith (17:58):

So where do you think Beast Beast is heading next? Is it looking for distribution?

Kristian Zuniga (18:03):

Yeah, I think they have somebody attached to it, kind of helping them out with that. I think that's definitely the end goal.

Bryan Smith (18:09):

Yeah. And is that something that you want to be involved with in the future? Is that part of the filmmaking process where, after the shoot you are part of the team that's working on distribution? Or are you looking at making your mark in cinematography and staying in that lane?

Kristian Zuniga (18:27):

I think I definitely want to stay in my lane. They hire a lot of really talented people who specialize in doing that kind of thing. And I don't think I would be any help, that's not what I'm interested in. It's nice to see it get there, but that's not my area of expertise.

Bryan Smith (18:42):

So, where do you see yourself in, say, five years?

Kristian Zuniga (18:46):

Ah, hopefully doing episodics or second unit on some bigger things, and maybe do some more of my own features.

Bryan Smith (18:54):

And what does second unit mean?

Kristian Zuniga (18:56):

Like being a second unit DP on- So, I live in Atlanta and there's a lot of a lot of large Marvel films there. And ideally in the future I could kind of work my way in through second unit and work on some bigger films like that.

Bryan Smith (19:09):

Yeah. Why are so many films shooting in Atlanta, and so much TV?

Kristian Zuniga (19:13):

The tax incentive. They have, I think it's like 40%. So you can, for 40% of your budget that you spend there, you get back. So, it's like it- That's a lot of money and there's a lot of space and land is cheap, I'm assuming, in the South right now. So, Pinewood built like a huge studio out

there and I think they were, they had a contract with Marvel for a few years, I think. And I think they might've just renewed it.

Bryan Smith (19:36):

So you're looking to stay in Atlanta then?

Kristian Zuniga (19:38):

Yeah, I think so. It's like there's a good, there's a high ceiling there. I can still kind of work my way up too, and I think there's not a lot of competition, at least as far as LA goes. I think there's a lot of DPs in LA and Atlanta there's quite a few, but it's not quite as cutthroat.

Bryan Smith (19:54):

I see you've got some other projects and quite a few other projects that are in your IMDb filmography. Are there any that are current or future projects that you're about to work on?

Kristian Zuniga (20:06):

No. What you're probably seeing is, I did a feature rollers last year that's still in post, and then I did another one called Spaghetti Junction over the summer. I'm not sure if that one's up on there. Most of those are all things I need to go back through and edit some of those. Some of those are really old, terrible shorts from school I need to pull out of there.

Bryan Smith (20:25):

So, when you're- Do you consider yourself to be a freelancer at this point?

Kristian Zuniga (20:28):

Yeah, I mean for sure.

Bryan Smith (20:30):

Yeah. So, You have this website with your body of work.

Kristian Zuniga (20:33):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (20:33):

And you've made these connections in the commercial industry and those connections, are they continuing to provide work so you can pay the bills and...?

Kristian Zuniga (20:41):

Yeah, for sure. I have an agent too, but I mean I think all DPs are freelance, unless you work a company, you know?

Bryan Smith (20:48):

Yeah. Have you ever thought about coming to LA?

Kristian Zuniga (20:51):

When I was really young, yeah. I don't think I would do it now. I'm kind of pretty settled in Atlanta.

Bryan Smith (20:56):

Do you have a family there?

Kristian Zuniga (20:57):

I live with my girlfriend and two cats, so yeah, I guess I consider it a family.

Bryan Smith (21:01):

Yeah, that's a family. So, let's talk about the skillset that, if someone wants to get cinematography and they're in high school, say, or junior high. And they're really interested in the visual aspects of filmmaking, what type of skillsets would you recommend that they start working on?

Kristian Zuniga (21:22):

I would definitely say to, I mean, lighting's a huge thing, but a lot of it is really personal skills. I think there's a way you need to know how to talk to other people and talk to directors, and I think it's really easy to try to push what you want style wise. But I think what's more important that I'm finding in narrative is, it's not really about how I think I want to shoot it. It's about the director's vision and how you help him get to that, you know? So, I think being able to be open and collaborate with other people is probably really important.

Bryan Smith (21:53):

It also sounds like you need a degree of humility, and to be humble-

Kristian Zuniga (21:58):

Yeah, definitely.

Bryan Smith (21:58):

-About the process and collaborative as well. So the technical skills, you talked about lighting. But I'm kind of a dummy when it comes to tech. I have a camera that is way too much camera for me. I have a Sony A9 and I still don't know how to use it. How would someone in high school, who wants to get into film, start learning about photography? And I know there's a lot of YouTube videos out there, but- And you went to, it sounds like you went to kind of a film school for cinematography,

Kristian Zuniga (22:33):

Yeah, to learn the cameras and lighting and glass.

Bryan Smith (22:34):

What do you recommend for high school students beyond the interpersonal skills in terms of how to build up that skillset?

Kristian Zuniga (22:43):

I mean, it's a lot of just going out and doing it. You're going to figure out a lot just by going out and shooting things. Even if it's just stills, you don't have to shoot video. You'll figure out a lot about what you like and kind of where you like to put the camera. And then, what helped me out a lot was just watching movies. You watch movies and you find scenes you really like, and you pull stills from that, and you stare at them for a while, and you ask yourself, "Why do I like this? What are they doing that makes me like this?" And you try to break that down and that can kind of help teach you how to recreate it, or find your own style from that. And there's a lot of, anything from the Criterion Collection will have really good behind the scenes. And so, you can go and watch that and see, find that scene that you like and see if you can see kind of how they lit it, and where they're putting the camera, just to help you break down the things you like, you know?

Bryan Smith (23:29):

Yeah. Well, it sounds like you have to be kind of a film buff.

Kristian Zuniga (23:32):

Yeah, for sure.

Bryan Smith (23:33):

Yeah.

Kristian Zuniga (23:33):

Definitely.

Bryan Smith (23:33):

If you want to be successful. Who are your influences?

Kristian Zuniga (23:38):

It's hard to say. I like, weirdly my influences are a lot of younger DPs. It's like DPs that I was their stuff growing up. Just like on Vimeo.

Bryan Smith (23:48):

Yeah.

Kristian Zuniga (23:49):

I don't know. I'm a big fan of people like Chase Irvin, Khalid, who's actually here. He has a film in the festival too, but it's just like guys who kind of were coming up when I was a kid.

Bryan Smith (24:00):

And the movies that were influential for you?

Kristian Zuniga (24:02):

Anything with David Fincher. I love The Game. That's one of my favorite movies, I can watch it like all the time. Cronenberg, I'm a big fan of. His son actually has him film here.

Bryan Smith (24:11):

Oh yeah?

Kristian Zuniga (24:11):

I'm going to try to see tonight, yeah.

Bryan Smith (24:12):

Oh yeah. What is it?

Kristian Zuniga (24:15):

Uh... I forget what it's called to be honest.

Bryan Smith (24:16):

Okay. I'll look it up in the directory.

Kristian Zuniga (24:17):

Yeah, Brandon Cronenberg though, he has a film here.

Bryan Smith (24:20):

Okay.

Kristian Zuniga (24:21):

At least, I want to say his name is Brandon. David Lynch, I was a big fan of for awhile and anything with Paul Thomas Anderson too.

Bryan Smith (24:26):

Yeah. Oh, Paul Thomas Anderson.

Kristian Zuniga (24:28):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (24:29):

That's just next level.

Kristian Zuniga (24:30):

I think I watched Magnolia in high school and I was like, "That's what I want to do."

Bryan Smith (24:34):

Yeah. I watched it, probably three or four times in a year, after it came out on DVD, and it's so distinctive. I love when you watch a movie and you can guess who the director is, or you can guess who the cinematographer is.

Kristian Zuniga (24:48):

Yeah, you can feel their style.

Bryan Smith (24:50):

Yeah. The iconic shot that I think about, from a cinematography standpoint, is in Goodfellas, which is the opening scene where I think it's a single shot. And also I think Birdman has a similar scene where it's one shot, handheld and they're walking through a kitchen and hallways and it's like, how do they transition from room to room without changing cameras, without hitting stop? Have you thought about that type of approach to film with your own work, when you look at other cinematographer's work and other director's work, and how technically to execute those types of shots?

Kristian Zuniga (25:30):

Yeah, for sure. Like doing long oners kind of.

Bryan Smith (25:33):

Yeah.

Kristian Zuniga (25:33):

Yeah, definitely. It's not crazy hard. The hardest part about it is getting the blocking right, and kind of coordinating with all of these people that you have to walk past, and making sure they're hitting things. Other than that you just like light from above, or light practicals and go from there. But yeah, the blocking is the biggest part of why that works, I think.

Bryan Smith (25:53):

And what is blocking?

Kristian Zuniga (25:54):

Blocking is a... I guess the easiest way to say it is like the relationship between people and camera and where you put them, in which direction they're moving to.

Bryan Smith (26:01):

Oh, okay.

Kristian Zuniga (26:02):

Yeah. It's like it's a big part of a camera movement, I'd say. And directing, directing and blocking I think is their biggest job in my mind. Working with the actors and blocking them out, 'cause that's so much of the story.

Bryan Smith (26:14):

So, tell us what it was like when you found out that you were going to Sundance.

Kristian Zuniga (26:20):

I don't remember. I was definitely really excited, but I don't remember what I was doing. I, Danny always calls me at like 2:00 AM, 'cause I live in Atlanta and he lives in LA and I think he's just always up late. And I don't think he ever realizes that it's super late for me. And so, I think he just called me really late and I was like, "Whoa, cool." And then probably went back to sleep. I don't remember. I do remember being really excited though.

Bryan Smith (26:41):

Yeah. And then you were part of the red carpet event?

Kristian Zuniga (26:44):

Yeah, yeah. I was there, I was with the one of the sound designers and both of the editors.

Bryan Smith (26:50):

That's nice that they included everybody like that.

Kristian Zuniga (26:52):

Yeah. It was awesome. So many people poured a lot of their their energy into this and Danny was, has been, really great about giving everybody a bit of shine, you know?

Bryan Smith (27:01):

Yeah. And any other film festivals scheduled this year?

Kristian Zuniga (27:05):

There's two in talks. I don't know if I'm allowed to talk about it though, but yeah, some potentially, some really cool ones.

Bryan Smith (27:12):

Yeah. You'll be on the road again.

Kristian Zuniga (27:13):

Yeah. Well, I don't know if I'm going to go.

Bryan Smith (27:15):

Yeah.

Kristian Zuniga (27:16):

Yeah. It's just expensive to keep going out, you know?

Bryan Smith (27:18):

Yeah, well I mean the hotel and airfare and all of that.

Kristian Zuniga (27:21):

Yeah, yeah exactly.

Bryan Smith (27:23):

Yeah. So, what do you have on the agenda next, for 2020?

Kristian Zuniga (27:27):

Nothing lined up yet. To be honest it's been a bit slow this year. I have a feature doc I'm working on with a buddy, but it's kind of, it's like a passion project thing that me and him have just been developing. But that'll be on the back burner for sure this year. Just kind of slowly chipping away at it.

Bryan Smith (27:40):

Anything you can talk about with your feature doc?

Kristian Zuniga (27:43):

Yeah, I mean it kinda started out, it started out as a really short doc about the relationship between the new Mercedes Benz dome and Vine City, which is neighborhood right across from it, and kind of how they've been affected by it. 'Cause the Georgia dome was already right there and they've kind of went through this process already of like, what does it mean to have a stadium right next to your neighborhood? And then now, they tore that down and have rebuilt another, bigger one. And it's like, what has changed since the first one? What did they learn about the impact of doing that on this neighborhood? Have they changed anything? Have they helped these people? So it's kind of started off exploring that relationship and now it's kind of expanding into gentrification as a whole in Vine City.

Bryan Smith (28:23):

Where do you see documentaries going from here? Because, to me, it seems like documentaries have really taken a prominent position in terms of all of the content that's available out there, and the quality of the content. When I'm looking at my Netflix queue, I would say at least a third of those movies are documentaries.

Kristian Zuniga (28:43):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (28:44):

And 10 years ago, I don't think that there was nearly the number of documentaries that there are today to choose from, which is kind of overwhelming. But it's nice because I think that's- I love learning something and being brought into a real story like that.

Kristian Zuniga (28:59):  
I'm the same way.

Bryan Smith (29:00):  
Yeah. And is that something that you're drawn to just naturally, just that type of storytelling?

Kristian Zuniga (29:05):  
Yeah, I think so. I did a lot of, after I kind of did the whole music video stint and started doing commercial, I did a lot of branded short docs too. And it's always really nice to meet a real person that does something different than you, and you're able to experience a different part of life through hanging out with these people. And it kind of just, I don't know, it keeps you growing as a human I guess. And I guess that's what I like about it.

Bryan Smith (29:30):  
Another thing I appreciate about documentary filmmaking, from what I've learned so far, is that the people who are making these movies, unless they are backed by HBO or Showtime right from the beginning, they are sticking their neck out there financially.

Kristian Zuniga (29:44):  
Oh yeah. And it's usually a long process too. Like, I wouldn't doubt it for most of these, over the course of a few years, just slowly going out every couple of months and catching back up.

Bryan Smith (29:54):  
And really, the only thing that can drive that type of filmmaking is passion.

Kristian Zuniga (29:59):  
Yeah.

Bryan Smith (29:59):  
So, that is going to translate into the end product.

Kristian Zuniga (30:02):  
Yeah. Yeah. For sure.

Bryan Smith (30:04):  
Yeah. And so you're involved in that. That's great.

Kristian Zuniga (30:06):  
Yeah.

Bryan Smith (30:06):  
Well, where can people find you on social media and the internet?

Kristian Zuniga (30:12):

You already said my site. It's just my name, Kristian Zuniga, and then my Instagram is the same thing. It's just my name too.

Bryan Smith (30:19):

Yeah, are you're on there much?

Kristian Zuniga (30:20):

I try to be less these days, but I still kind of get forced back into it. But yeah, I'll post things every couple of months or so.

Bryan Smith (30:26):

Yeah. That's funny. I'm hearing a lot of that these days, is that people are trying to pull themselves away from social media.

Kristian Zuniga (30:33):

It's not good for your mental health, man. It's bad.

Bryan Smith (30:35):

No, I agree with you. And I think the same. I think Facebook is like the worst of it.

Kristian Zuniga (30:41):

Facebook, I totally agree and I feel like it's a generational thing. I think Facebook now is not college kids anymore, it's like the generation above me. Like my parents, my dad is always on Facebook. I'm like, "Dude, what are you-? Get off."

Bryan Smith (30:55):

Well, I think old people need a place to put their rage.

Kristian Zuniga (30:59):

Yeah. I mean, he doesn't do any of that thankfully, but it's just like the, I know he's scrolling through and probably seeing a lot of things that are just fake, or not good for you to see. Just make you feel a certain way about always seeing something depressing. It's like you shouldn't be looking at that all day.

Bryan Smith (31:14):

It's toxic.

Kristian Zuniga (31:14):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (31:15):

Yeah. Instagram's not so toxic in that way, in terms of the rage or-

Kristian Zuniga (31:21):  
Yeah.

Bryan Smith (31:22):  
But I think it makes you feel bad about yourself.

Kristian Zuniga (31:25):  
Yeah, it's in a different way.

Bryan Smith (31:26):  
Right.

Kristian Zuniga (31:26):  
Yeah.

Bryan Smith (31:27):  
You're like, "Why? What? They're traveling to that place. How do they afford? Wow. They look good. I don't look that good." Sorta having those dysfunctional feelings.

Kristian Zuniga (31:37):  
These days, like if I'm seeing things that make me feel like that, I'll literally just unfollow somebody. Not because I don't like them and I don't like their work, but it's like, I don't want to feel that way, so I'm sorry, I'm just going to take you away.

Bryan Smith (31:48):  
Right.

Kristian Zuniga (31:48):  
Yeah. I don't like seeing gear porn, I don't like seeing stuff on set really. I honestly wish I could just post pictures of me hanging out with my cat, but I probably wouldn't get any work if I did that.

Bryan Smith (32:00):  
I forgot to ask you about the Coachella. I mean, you have so many commercials on your website that you've done. The Coachella commercial was really long form.

Kristian Zuniga (32:11):  
That was really a doc in my mind. I mean, it kind of is a, if you think about it, it's like a branded doc that is a large commercial for Coachella, but it's definitely rooted in documentary.

Bryan Smith (32:21):  
And how did you get that gig?

Kristian Zuniga (32:23):

I knew this guy out of Atlanta named John Merizalde, I've worked with a bunch and he moved to LA and joined this company called White Lists, like a production company. And through that I met this guy Pasqual, who's one of the directors on there, and we had worked together a handful of times, and he just called me up for that job and brought me out. It was a lot of fun.

Bryan Smith (32:44):

And in one of my observations about that project, the Coachella film or short doc, is that you were really embedded with the people that were part of Coachella.

Kristian Zuniga (32:55):

Yeah, yeah. That's the whole point. It's kind of experiencing the festival through the people who go there.

Bryan Smith (33:00):

Right.

Kristian Zuniga (33:00):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (33:00):

And so you're not, I mean, I think the old school way of promoting something like that would be to hire supermodels and shoot it from the standpoint of having the most beautiful people...

Kristian Zuniga (33:12):

Yeah, I think you're right, yeah. Make it really sexy.

Bryan Smith (33:16):

Yeah. And here you are, not that the people in there weren't attractive, but you're actually on the ground, boots on the ground interviewing people, not interviewing, but just shooting in their natural environment enjoying the festival. Then you've got these drone shots that kind of gives you the broad perspective, the bird's eye view, very effective storytelling.

Kristian Zuniga (33:37):

Yeah, yeah. So that was all really FOM and Pasqual, there's two directors on that. There's actually a bunch more of, under- There's so many different crews going out and getting stuff, but they're like the two lead directors. And that's kinda just, that was their vision from the start, I think, is to kind of paint this picture of the festival through all these different people and different experiences. And the, I forget what they call it, but that voice that comes over the speakers, called something and that was a big driving force of the doc too. I think they call it the voice of God or something. I dunno that like announcer guy you hear in the piece.

Bryan Smith (34:07):  
Yeah.

Kristian Zuniga (34:07):  
Yeah.

Bryan Smith (34:08):  
Well, thanks for being on the podcast.

Kristian Zuniga (34:10):  
Yeah. Thanks for having me. It was fun.