

Return to Elstree

Walter Murch and the filming of *Return to Oz* at Elstree Studios

Howard Berry, The Elstree Project - University of Hertfordshire

It was almost Christmas in 2013 when I found myself and five film students careering around narrow and windy cliff roads, just to the north of the Golden Gate Bridge, in a rattling taxi being driven at speeds that felt we were maybe making a getaway from Mombi in our own makeshift Gump-like taxi. The sandy beaches I occasionally felt brave enough to look at below us (when not holding on to the door handles) could have easily been the Deadly Desert. Eventually we pulled up at a beautiful old farmhouse and barn, and my feet touched the floor once again. Safety!

I was at Walter Murch's home to film an interview for The Elstree Project - an oral history research project I'd been running since 2009, with the aim of documenting the history of the film and television studios in Elstree and Borehamwood in my home county of Hertfordshire, UK. 2014 was the centenary year of film-making in Borehamwood, with the first studio - Neptune Studios - opening in 1914 as Europe's first dark stage, and I was keen to gain as many exciting interviews in the lead up to this special occasion.

This would be my first meeting with Walter, and I'd been put in touch with him through a friend at Pixar with a colleague who had previously worked as an assistant editor on *The English Patient*. The interview had been arranged for the morning of the 23rd December. The night before, Walter had arrived back home after six months working in Vancouver on a feature film, and I was acutely aware I was intruding upon his Christmas holiday. "You're horribly early! You'll have to go away!" - this was Aggie Murch, Walter's wife, to me when we arrived, and she was right; our mad taxi driver's devotion to speed had meant we were at least an hour early. Walter had only just had breakfast and there I was with five students attempting to invade his house. Thankfully, due to either my weak explanation about our journey or just the frightened look on my face, Aggie instantly contradicted herself with a big smile and invited us in. Shortly after our kit was set up, Walter arrived from upstairs and greeted us. I'd seen him speak at events, and he came into the room just as smartly dressed as I'd seen before, in black - looking incredibly neat and stylish. With no sign of being annoyed by the early arrival, or intrusion into his holiday, Walter sat down. "So, we're going to talk about Elstree!" he said, with a big smile. I instantly knew this was going to be fine.

The location for studios in Borehamwood was chosen because it was surrounded by fields, so there was plenty of space, but it was also close to Elstree railway station with direct links to London. Less than a decade after Neptune opened, British National Pictures (later British

International Pictures, and known as “Elstree Studios”) was built opposite, and was home to the first British “talkie” *Blackmail* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1929) and the first British musical *Elstree Calling* (Alfred Hitchcock and Adrian Brunel, 1930).

Four more studios came and went in the following years - MGM British Studios, British and Dominion’s Imperial Studios, Gate Studios and Danziger’s New Elstree Studios - and during the 1950s the town became known as the “British Hollywood”.

During the early 1970s a major slump in production hit British studios hard. According to a House of Lords publication, “an American investment tax credit scheme, new American tax rules on exports and opportunities for Hollywood companies to invest in television led to a severe reduction in American financing of British films.” (Select Committee on Communications, 2010).

MGM, the most impressive and modern studio, where *2001: A Space Odyssey* had been filmed, and with a backlot of over 125 acres, closed and the site was sold in the early 1970s. After merging for two years with Elstree Studios, MGM pulled out of Europe completely. Elstree Studios, now owned by EMI following a hostile takeover of BIP’s successor ABPC (Associated British Picture Corporation), was facing closure and the studio had few productions being filmed on site. The Times newspaper even reported on the front page about the predicted fate of the studio:

“Elstree Studios, recently threatened with closure when Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer cut its filmmaking, are likely to stay open. The assurance is understood to have been given by Mr Bernard Delfont, chairman of EMI Films and Theatre Corporation” (Devlin, 1973).

This slump turned out to be a benefit to film producer Gary Kurtz and production supervisor Robert Watts, who were scouting for a studio with lots of available stages at a good price. EMI offered Watts the stages at Elstree for £75,000, although EMI didn’t see much value in waiving the hire fees for a profit share of the box office takings of the film instead. Watts later called it “the best deal he ever made” (Watts, 2015), and he’s probably quite right as he not only had a full studio for a minimal fee, but he also saved the production company paying out over \$15m on a 2% box office share. You’ve probably guessed that the film in question was George Lucas’ *Star Wars*.

Star Wars had just been shot I think at the time, so it was the beginning of an uptake, but ’74 there was a big shake-out. A lot of people who were draughtsmen, set designers, all that kind of stuff were just, well “I can’t survive, I can’t raise a family on this uncertainty” so they had left and gone into architectural firms or wherever you go when there is no business. So, it was probably beginning to recover from this period of stagnation. (Murch, 2013).

Lucas returned to Elstree for the sequels, and introduced his friend Steven Spielberg to the studios for their *Indiana Jones* original trilogy of films. Despite missing out on the profit share on

Star Wars, Elstree was back in business. The Times, in 1977, once again reported about the status of the studio:

The future of Elstree Studios, where it looked recently as if the arc lights had gone out for the last time, has been assured. Sir John Reed, chairman of EMI, which owns the studios, said last night that a new financing system and spate of film-making had guaranteed its future "provided the scene does not change drastically". (Godfrey, 1977)

Before I went to San Francisco in 2013, the previous week had been spent in Los Angeles where I interviewed Steven Spielberg for the project.

George Lucas made Star Wars at Elstree, and that was George's home studio in the UK. So there was never a question, I never brought the question up. George wanted to shoot, you know, where he was most comfortable and he wanted me to shoot on his stages where he made the first Star Wars; the second Star Wars as well. And I was fine with that. I'd never made a picture in the UK and I'd actually never shot a film abroad so for me it was just whatever made George happy made me happy. (Spielberg, 2013.)

Spielberg joyously referred to this period in Elstree's history as "Lucas Land", in which Lucas and his production team or collaborators in one form or another produced films for nearly two decades at the studio, with many of the same crew. These include *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981), *The Dark Crystal* (1982), *Labyrinth* (1986), *Willow* (1988), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) and - of course - *Return to Oz* (1985).

Return to Oz wasn't Murch's first visit to Elstree. In 1976 he came to the UK for the first time to work on Fred Zinnemann's *Julia*, which was being shot in Elstree and on location in France. Murch worked in the original cutting rooms, which had been built for editing flammable nitrate film stock, with thick teak doors designed to contain a fire if one broke out. The sound mix was also done in Elstree's well resourced (and more modern) dubbing studios; with Bill Rowe and Ray Merrin performing the mix. Both would later work on *Return*.

Murch recalled the "funky but charming" set up at Elstree at the time:

I think the biggest drawback then in 1976, and it certainly was in Return To Oz, was the electrical system on the stages for the lights. That things were... You had to be very creative about how you drew on the electrical system, otherwise things would pop. (Murch, 2013).

Disney were on the hunt for new directing talent, and in the late 1970s in Los Angeles, Murch met with executives at Disney where he talked enthusiastically about making a new Oz film. Murch was a life-long fan of Baum's books, and had read them all. Unbeknown to Murch, Walt Disney had bought the rights in the 1950s and the company was equally keen to make a film out of Baum's books, before the rights were no longer theirs.

Talking about the nature and charm of the books, Murch found a similar feeling in the work of Jim Henson:

There was something about them, the sensibility of the Muppets. My son was then young, and was watching Sesame Street where there were some of these Muppet characters on and I thought there was a sort of 'Ozian' quality to them... I thought maybe we could fuse Muppet technology and the Oz stories somehow.

Coincidentally in Borehamwood at the same time as Star Wars, in the former Neptune studios opposite - now called ATV Elstree Centre - Jim Henson was beginning to produce the first of five seasons of *The Muppet Show*. Henson, Lucas and Muppeteer and Director Frank Oz would all collaborate together on both *Star Wars* and *Labyrinth* in the coming years, and Gary Kurtz produced *Star Wars*, *The Dark Crystal* - co-directed by Henson and Oz - and *Return to Oz*. It seemed destined that Elstree was going to be the place where a sequel to *The Wizard of Oz* would be made.

Murch knew George Lucas from film school, and Kurtz became producer on *Return to Oz* - bringing the production to Elstree Studios. "I didn't know anything about the studios in England other than my experience on *Julia*, and so I just left it up to him, and he obviously had had a good experience at Elstree on *Star Wars* so that's how we wound up there." (Murch, 2013). The production team also included Elstree veterans Production Designer Norman Reynolds, who had filmed the *Star Wars* films, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) at the studios; Bill Rowe and Ray Merrin from the sound dubbing and mixing department; construction manager Bill Welch; Art Director Raymond Hughes; and veteran cinematographer Freddie Francis - who had been working in the industry since 1937.

Principal photography began in February 1984. Because of the technicality of the film - with its combined use of visual effects, puppetry, chickens, puppet chickens(!), live action, a ten year old girl in nearly every scene, and claymation - storyboards were produced, and the scenes broken down into shots in order to help the filmmakers analyse what they actually needed for each shot. Time also had to be monitored for how long Fairuza Balk (Dorothy) was allowed to work on set each day, due to strict child labour laws in the UK. Within five weeks, the film was behind schedule and Disney were getting nervous.

We fell behind, basically, partly because of my inexperience, partly the complications,. There were very strict rules for working with an eleven year old; you can only shoot with her for so many hours so we had to have duplicates of her, you know, stand-ins for certain shots, but we would very quickly run out of things to do because we would run out of time with her.

So the film basically hit a wall, or the studio felt they had hit a wall and the Head of Disney came over to see what was up, and they fired me. And it was a trauma, as you can imagine, for something that had such a personal meaning to me, you know, I put so much into it and felt very responsible, obviously. There was no contingency plan; they didn't have another Director waiting to take over so the film kept shooting. And I was writing

instructions to the Associate Producer who was a friend of mine, Mike Kitchens, and Mike was working with the camera crew to keep going.

And George Lucas found out about this through the grapevine, I didn't tell him but he found out, and he flew to London and met with Richard Berger, who was the Head of the Studio at Disney at that time. And they came out of the meeting and said "You're hired again!" to me. "OK." So this was actually fired perhaps on a Thursday and by Monday I was directing again so it was all happening very quickly. (Murch, 2013).

Lucas and Murch discussed what had been happening on set to determine the problems slowing down the shoot, and Lucas' advice was to shoot more master shoots - wide shots of everything. This would be easy if it were just a film with actors, but when you have effects and puppeteers who have to hide behind furniture, and parts that are post-production animation, most of these wides would be unusable. However it did help, as production picked up and gave everyone on set an idea of what they were going to be doing that day.

Then all of the departments, the art department, the production department... could say "All right. If that's what we're doing then we can allocate these resources to the next set-up, or the next stage", you know. "We don't need, we won't need painting today, or we'll just have a stand-by painter."

But with storyboards, even though you could look at the storyboards there's a certain opacity to them. With the master it gave the illusion anyway that people knew what was going to happen. But illusion is everything in the motion picture business. So it basically greased the rails, it allowed things to go more smoothly. And we ended up finishing the film on time after all, but it was definitely one of those traumas.

On the stages at Elstree, Norman Reynolds built huge sets including the vast mirrored interior of Mombi's palace. The floors, walls and ceiling were all mirrored, which posed another problem - where to place the camera and how to light it. Cleverly designed as part of the set were pillars - or the illusion of pillars - and so when a camera was placed where it needed to be, and there was a reflection, these panels could be rotated by no more than five degrees and the reflection was gone. But lighting the scene was once more slowing down the production. Director of Photography Freddie Francis, who had also directed TV episodes of *The Saint* and *The Champions* at Elstree, was used to working in a particular way which was not particularly sympathetic to working with a secondary B-Camera. Francis would prefer to set up a shot and then light for that shot, with a single camera. Adding a second camera wouldn't work because the lighting was composed for the single angle on the main camera instead. After three days of unsuccessful shooting, in which the shots looked gloomy rather than glistening, Francis quit the film.

In his place, David Watkin was appointed. Watkin's approach was to light the whole set, regardless of the camera position, which then allowed the crew to put the camera anywhere they wanted - and as many as they wanted. This also allowed him to work on another set once the first lighting setup was complete; saving time for the rest of the shoot.

So he did what you might call "field lighting" which he had pioneered in a sense. More naturalistic lighting and he loved the throne room. He said "I thought I was going to be afraid of this but then I suddenly realised 'This is perfect'"

Because what he would do, he would put a huge single light over in some corner somewhere, far away, and then shine the light into one corner of the room, and then kind of like a billiards table the light would bounce all around the room and create, diffuse perfectly and can adjust the diffusion by shifting the light just a little bit and he would get all these crazy wonderful multiple reflections but the shadows were all cancelled out. So it made lighting the set extremely simple because we didn't have to hide any lights and it produced this beautiful effect. So that was part and parcel of it.

With the shoot back on track, and production hurdles overcome, the shoot progressed well with no more major problems. As mentioned earlier, Jim Henson was also working in Borehamwood, and was in pre-production on *Labyrinth* at the time. Kurtz had produced *The Dark Crystal*, and this gave Murch an introduction to gain access to the Muppet crew and realise his ambition of having them operate the puppets. Brian Henson, Jim Henson's son, was one of two lead puppeteers for Jack (as well as his voice artist) and helped to design the puppet. It was his first speaking performance, at age 19.

Also among the puppeteers was newcomer Michael Sundin, who was cast to operate the body of Tik-Tok. Sundin was a British trampoline champion and had previously worked as an actor and dancer - most notably in *Cats* in the West End. Tik-Tok's design was straight out of Baum's books, with the exception of stick-legs legs, which wouldn't be possible to support the weight of the character's body. With the head and facial movements skilfully operated by remote control, it was Sundin's task to enable the character to walk and move his arms. In order to achieve this, Sundin operated the character by standing in the legs, bent over backwards with his head looking through his legs, his arms crossed to operate the arm controls, and viewing his actions on a tiny monitor inside the costume - which was receiving a radio feed from another camera on set. It was an extraordinary, and physically challenging, achievement which clearly created a lasting impression on Murch.

Michael was upside down and left to right and looking at visually something that was the other point of view. So he was seeing himself in the world from this abstract point of view and then walking backwards as though he were walking forwards. And then operating arms. There was somebody with a stopwatch in Production because his limit was two and a half minutes from the moment that the lid went on, and two and a half minutes was it, just because of the heat build-up being upside down. But he got really good at it which just shows you the plasticity of the human mind. Think trying to process that kind of information. Upside down and backwards. Looking at another point of view. But he could eventually walk upstairs in this, which is in the film, so it's incredible.

Upon completion of the shoot in October 1984, the post-production work continued. The sound mix was completed at Elstree by Bill Rowe and Ray Merrin. Elstree was the first home of Dolby sound, and Ray Dolby had first brought his noise-removal process to the studio where it was used for the very first time on *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971). Rowe and Merrin had also mixed

the soundtrack for *Tommy* (1975) and *Quadrophenia* (1979) in Quintaphonic sound and the DBX Sensui system - which later became the standard 5.1 surround sound mix - and had advised Murch for the sound mix prep on *Apocalypse Now*. For *Return to Oz*, Rowe and Merrin produced a Dolby stereo mix (LRTT four track), but the film was also due to have a special 70mm release with a six track mix. With the time in the dubbing suite at Elstree running out, this second mix was completed at Pinewood Studios.

Looking back at the production, almost 30 years later, I asked Walter what his enduring memory of Elstree was. In the time between his film being made there and our interview, over 16 acres of Elstree Studios - including the main film stage block, the sound dubbing suites, the editing rooms and offices - had been demolished. Over half of the studio had been ripped down and it had closed for a time in the mid-nineties, but was revived by the local council and reopened with new stages (named for George Lucas) which still operate and make a profit today.

In doing research on Return To Oz one of the main focuses of the research was of the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 which was where L. Frank Baum was living at the time. He'd been running a hardware store in, I think, South Dakota, which failed and he and his family moved back to Chicago in 1892.

The Fair was being built, and it was called the White City, and I think the presence of this Fair was a huge influence on the book, which was something he wrote for his kids, based on, I'm guessing, their own experience going to the Fair. And Nikola Tesla was at the Fair, the inventor of many things including alternating current and Baum was fascinated by electricity, as you can tell by his books. And so people like Edison and Tesla were known as "wizards" in those days so it's arguable that Nikola Tesla in a sense who had electrified the World's Fair was the Wizard of Oz. Anyway there are a lot of circumstantial things; the production design of the film was influenced by the architectural design of the Fair and many of the drawings in the Oz books are also influenced by that. So it was a touchstone.

And the Fair itself, after it was over, the buildings just sat there for a while and an economic depression had set in and one day a fire broke out and many of them burnt down. And a journalist who covered the Fair and then its destruction wrote these lines which stuck with me at the time and still are. When you asked me that question about Elstree, he was talking about the Fair and he said "And still they are not gone" meaning the buildings. "While they lived they could perish, but having perished they will live forever."

And so in a sense that's Elstree, and I thought of that even in 1983 when looking at these fantastic sets built for the film, knowing that they were going to be destroyed And they'll be captured on film, but the sets themselves will go, and yet there is this paradox. While they're there, it's wonderful but there is mortality about them. You know they're going to be destroyed but on the other hand, now that they're gone in a weird sense they live forever. That's certainly true of those sets and film, but I think it's true of all the films that were shot at Elstree or basically all studios, but Elstree in particular because in the strange life that it has led there is this strange double aspect to it.

Our interview ended on that poignant note, and after asking Walter to wish Elstree a "happy centenary" to the camera, he took great joy in showing the students and I a bunch of brilliant cinefilm clips of Lucas, Brad Bird and many other editors in the 70s and 80s partaking in the "Droid Olympics" - a sort of sports day for editors and edit assistants doing tasks such as

manually cutting as many feet of film together in the shortest amount of time, and other editing related games - in his garden.

The last time Murch went back to Elstree Studios was in 2015, when I invited him, Ray Merrin, and several other crew members - including assistant editor Dan Farrell - to the preview theatre to rewatch *Return to Oz* once more for its 30th anniversary. It would be the last time Ray and Walter would meet, as Ray died just a few years later. Afterwards Walter and I took a walk along the backlot of the studio, where he pointed out the old cutting room location - now a car park for a supermarket next door. Some of that Elstree magic was still there that evening, and everyone who came had a wonderful chance to reminisce and see old friends. I didn't know at the time of the screening, but Walter later told me later that the Preview Theatre was where he had watched the film with a bunch of Disney execs who were looking to sell merchandising rights to various toy companies. Apparently none of them knew what to make of the film and so they passed up on the opportunity. What a shame - I would have loved a toy Tik-Tok! All of the crew had been given a little Tik-Tok as a gift for working on the film, and thankfully one of the original full size Tik-Tok costumes has just been cleaned up and moved from his home at Skywalker Ranch to live in the new George Lucas museum, where he will be enjoyed by many more people for years to come - and maybe that's how it should be. From that first meeting, Walter and I remain good friends - I named the edit lab where I teach after him in 2015, and I was able to award him an honorary doctorate through my University in 2018. I still ask him questions about *Return to Oz* and he's always happy to answer them.

References

Select Committee on Communications, 2010. *The British film and television industries—decline or opportunity?*, London: House of Lords, p.15.

Murch, W. 2013. TEP43. [Video] Hertfordshire: The Elstree Project.

Devlin, T., 1973. *Elstree Studios May Stay Open*. The Times, p.1.

Godfrey, P., 1977. *Elstree Studios back from brink of closure to new life*. The Times, p.2.

Watts, R., 2015. TEP56. [Video] Hertfordshire: The Elstree Project.

Spielberg, S. 2013. TEP41. [Video] Hertfordshire: The Elstree Project.

About the author

Howard Berry is the Programme Leader for the MA Film and Television Production degree at the University of Hertfordshire. Previously working as a Visual Effects Editor on feature films including *Scott Pilgrim vs The World*, *Kick-Ass* and *Sherlock Holmes*, Howard continues to work in the industry as an independent producer, director and editor, as well as a consultant to the Stanley Kubrick estate and Warner Bros. In 2009, he created The Elstree Project to tell the stories of the studios of Borehamwood and Elstree, filming interviews with studio staff, crew and actors including Sir Roger Moore, Simon Pegg, Christiane Kubrick and Dame Barbara Windsor. In 2023 the work of the project will form a major part of a new exhibition with the National Portrait Gallery.