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Lengthy takes and mile-long trenches:
Making of Mendes' war drama '1917'

Presenting his World War One battlefield movie "1917" as a single shot had pros and cons for Oscar winning director Sam Mendes. Mistakes meant lengthy retakes but "accidents" also gave an authenticity of life in the trenches. From start to finish, fluid camera work follows two young British soldiers tasked with crossing enemy lines to stop another battalion from launching an imminent attack on what appear to be retreating German troops but is really a trap.

Made to look as if it is one continuous shot, the drama, set during a single day in April 1917, aims to tell the story in real time, immersing the audience in the mission of protagonists Blake and Schofield. That meant lengthy rehearsals and super-long takes for the cast, led by Dean-Charles Chapman and George MacKay and including Colin Firth, Andrew Scott and Benedict Cumberbatch.

"When things went wrong we started again and sometimes that was very frus-

trating ... There were a few moments when I thought why have I done this to myself," Mendes told Reuters. "A little bit of accidents is a good thing. You had your weather and light changes all the time ... animals, babies ... mud ... The men kept slipping over. But sometimes you want that in there. You want the reality of the physical exhaustion of what they're going through."

Last month, Mendes told a movie theatre audience in Los Angeles he chose this unusual storytelling technique because he wanted viewers "to feel like they were being pulled forward rather than being presented with information". "We had over a mile of trenches that we dug because we couldn't repeat anything, we could never go back," he said.

Chapman (Blake) and MacKay (Schofield) rehearsed every scene on location for months, he added. "The time we did start filming we unconsciously knew the steps and really the whole filmmaking process was about choreographing almost like a dance between the actors, the camera, the set," Chapman told Reuters in London. "Walking at a crouch trying to hold the tension of the scene emotionally, the focus, and also just slipping all over the place - what we were doing was a drop in the ocean compared to what the men went through," MacKay added. — Reuters



English director/writer/producer Sam Mendes (right) and Irish actor Andrew Scott arrive for the premiere of "1917" at the TCL Chinese theatre in Hollywood on Wednesday. — AFP



In this file photo taken on Sept 21, 2018, US rapper Tekashi 6ix9ine performs during the Philipp Plein fashion show as part of the Women's Spring/Summer 2019 fashion week in Milan. — AFP

Rapper Tekashi69 gets two-year sentence after helping feds

He used the street cred of being in a gang to rocket to rap stardom, but then cooperated with federal prosecutors and testified against his former associates. American rapper Tekashi69, or Tekashi 6ix9ine - real name, Daniel Hernandez - was sentenced Wednesday to two years in federal prison on racketeering, firearms and drug trafficking charges. Hernandez, 23, got a relatively lenient sentence after agreeing to a plea deal that required him to take the stand against other members of the Nine Trey Gangsta Bloods.

It is nevertheless a stark reversal of fortune after he soared to fame following the release of his debut single "Gunmo" in late 2017. In the video, he raps and dances in front of a building in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood with members of the Nine Trey Gangsta Bloods, wearing trademark red bandanas. Ever since West Coast rappers started using gang imagery in their videos in the 1990s, any association with street gangs has often boosted the credibility of a rising artist.

According to his attorney Lance Lazzaro, Hernandez - who was born in Brooklyn, and left school at age 15 - wanted to develop a "gangster persona in an effort to sell more music". "Gunmo" quickly surpassed 100 million views on YouTube, and the single landed in the top 15 on the Billboard Hot 100. Tekashi69 was a bona fide star, and his popularity was fueled by his unique look - long, multicolored hair sometimes in braids, colored grills in his mouth, and hundreds of tattoos, including on his face.

But prosecutors said he did far more than cultivate a gangster image, and Hernandez was convicted on multiple counts of racketeering, weapons violations and drug trafficking. "You were a central figure in a vicious and brutal gang," federal judge Paul Engelmayer said to the rapper during the sentencing hearing. Hernandez used the gang - its name is inspired by its founding in 1993 at New York's infamous Rikers Island prison complex - to attack or rob those he perceived as rivals in the rap world.

But the gang also used him, tapping its new member for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Hernandez was indicted in November 2018 along with other gang members. Feeling he had been manipulated by the Nine Treys, the rapper decided to cooperate with federal prosecutors - a collaboration that helped him avoid what could have been a life sentence.

Having already spent a year in prison, during which his videos have racked up several billion views on YouTube, Hernandez will likely be free sometime in 2020, and then serve out his probation. "He's a target," Lazzaro told the court, expressing concerns that the young rapper could face reprisal attacks from the Nine Treys or another gang. Tekashi69 doesn't seem all that worried - he just signed a new record deal with the music label 10K Projects. — AFP

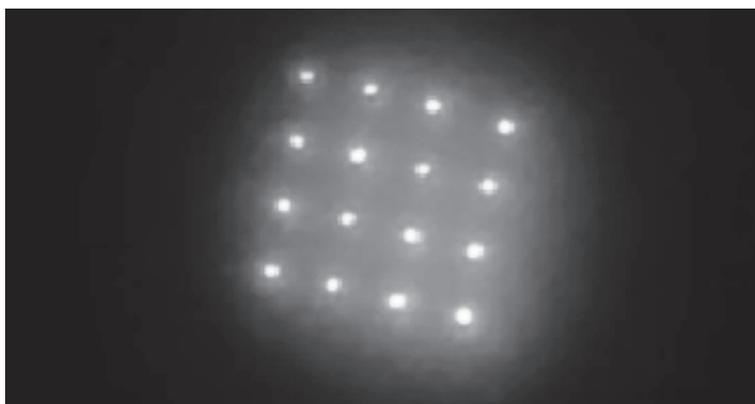
Moscow's snowless December warmest in 133 years

Moscow registered the warmest December weather in over a century on Wednesday, as an unusually snowless month put winter activities on hold and confused plants into blooming. One weather station in northern Moscow registered a temperature of 5.4 degrees Celsius, said the Fobos weather center. "This is a new record of maximum air temperature for 18 December," surpassing a previous record of 5.3 degrees set in 1886, it said.

The Russian capital, normally covered with a blanket of snow by mid-December, thus far has had a snowless and cloudy winter, and the Russian weather service warned Wednesday that it may get even warmer. A botanical garden in Moscow this week announced that its snowdrop flowers, which normally indicate the first signs of spring, were blooming because they "confused winter and spring." "Gardeners are worried that the sakura will start blooming soon," the Apothecary Garden said on its website.

In Sokolniki park, popular with skiers and figure skaters in the winter, even the skiing track using artificial snow closed due to weather conditions. One resident of Siberian city of Omsk even posted a joke online "Snow for Sale" item, offering "natural snow" for R1,000 per cubic metre (\$16). "Moscow residents can use a seven percent discount when ordering more than 15 cubes," the notice on the Avito.ru popular online market said. —AFP

MIT develops dye storing medical records under skin



This undated handout image shows quantum dots after being administered to the skin of rodents. — AFP

MIT engineers have devised a novel way to record a patient's immunization history: Storing the information in a patterned dye that is invisible to the naked eye and delivered under the skin at the same time as the vaccine. It is designed to bridge the gap that exists in medical records, particularly in developing countries, and emits a near-infrared light that can be detected by a specially equipped smartphone.

The new dye consists of nanocrystals called quantum dots and was described in the journal Science Translational Medicine on Wednesday. It has so far been tested only on cadavers and rats but its researchers, who were financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, hope to begin human testing in Africa in the next two years. Ana Jaklenec, a biomedical engineer at MIT and the paper's co-author told AFP. Engineers spent a long time finding components that are safe for the body, stable and capable of lasting for several years. The quantum dots are 3.7 nanometers in diameter, and are encapsulated in microparticles that form spheres 16 microns in diameter (a micron is a millionth of a meter while a nanometer is a billionth of a meter). This is then applied to the skin via a microneedle patch rather than a traditional syringe and needle. — AFP