Nothing To See Hear

Adam Kuykendall

University of Maine, adam.kuykendall@maine.edu

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NOTHING TO SEE/HEAR

By

Adam Küykendall

B.A. University of Maine, 2003

A THESIS
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
(in Intermedia)

The Graduate School
The University of Maine

August 2023

Advisory Committee:

Sheridan Kelley Adams, Associate Adjunct Professor of Intermedia

MJ Sedlock, Senior Lecturer in Theatre (Technical Theatre), School of Performing Arts

Amy Roeder, Theatre Instructor, School of Performing Arts

Robert Milazzo, Media Production Instructor & Program Coordinator, Virginia Commonwealth University
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Thesis Advisor: Sheridan Kelley Adams

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts
(in Intermedia)
August 2023

“Nothing is more real than nothing.”
- Samuel Beckett

Nothing to See/Hear is a research experiment into minimalist visual narrative via the short film Not the Boss of Me, in which the criteria for production mandated only the bare essential elements required to construct and convey a plot and its characters be used while filming within a nondescript space - in this case, a mostly empty soundstage. How does one tell a story and
define its characters without direct expository dialogue? What is needed to establish and define locations and/or environments when limited to only one or two items? Can an audience engage their imagination to fill in the absences of content and come away feeling as though they have experienced a fully realized cinematic event? And will they?

The screenplay - not written to be minimalistic by nature, but rather produced through minimalistic techniques - went through a process of rigorous drafts, actor table readings, feedback sessions and further revisions. Said process resulted in a script which streamlined plot points, eliminated extraneous dialogue and converted exposition into actions. By analyzing environments via a process of sensory elimination, a method of reconstructing spaces one sense element at a time, a basis was established for designing a floor plan for any location needed. If you can’t see a location, how do you hear it? Through audio field recordings mixed with soundstage captures, the atmosphere and scope of environments would be established. If you can only see one thing, what will provide context to define everything unseen surrounding it? Light and shadow, along with strategically placed set items, would create a sense of time, location and tone.

Examples: The sound of a lawn mower might elicit a mental picture of a house and neighborhood. Someone wearing a hardhat could conjure the scene of a construction site. Warm yellow side light creates a sense of morning. A cold wash of blue overhead light evokes an isolating night.

It was determined that doors embody the character of the buildings they inhabit and serve as the single best representation of any location structure. The remaining majority of the world-building, not practically visible or aided by sound, would rely on the actor’s physical
engagement - seeing how they put the space into their bodies through behavior - and the audience’s natural tendency to solve the missing visual puzzle.

The finished film, equipped with the bare minimum of visual and narrative elements, presented a layered and detailed character-driven storyline which hinted at a much larger world beyond what was actively seen and heard. This resulted in a cinematic experience that functioned in the audience’s peripheral vision, engaging their minds' eyes to fill in the voids, operating off fragments of sight, sound, gestures and inflection. Based on audience reactions, the project was a resounding success, with feedback affirming that despite the minimalistic approach to the work nothing felt missing, solidifying their investment in the work and leaving them with a desire to see and hear more. In conclusion, less is more.
DEDICATIONS

Owen Smith, who saw something in my nothing, supporting me when no one saw anything there.

My beautiful and patient family, Kae, Lucy & Maeve who through floods, loss and insanity stuck by my side no matter what the rains brought our way. I couldn’t have made it this far without you all.

And Fred Rogers for reminding me I’m special just the way I am and there’s no one else quite like me.

See you all in the land of make believe!
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The Cast & Crew of Not the Boss of Me

MFA Thesis Committee

UMaine Intermedia Program

Owen Smith

Susan Smith

Anna Martin

Intermedia Grant Committee

Bill, Mary & Sam Kuykendall

Mike Cooney & Cathay Grady

Glen, Brigid, Alaina & Ella Brown

Ry Cooney & Clair Meyers

UMaine School of Performing Arts

Philip Edelman

Alexis Foster

UMaine Division of Marketing & Communications

Margaret Nagle

Meredith Whitfield

Ron Lisnet

Brewer Police Department

Jason J. Moffitt

Thomas Tardiff

Bangor Police Department
Elizabeth Ashe
DePaul Theatre Conservatory
Rick Murphy
Don Ilko
Penobscot Theatre Company
Mark Torres
Collene Torres
Paul Rhyand
Bradd Gustafson
Julie Lisnet
Allen Adams
Adam Cousins
Katie Toole
The Schaefers
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INTRODUCTION

"When all you have is nothing, nothing's an awful lot."

The *Not the Boss of Me* thesis project investigates how richly a visual narrative can be conveyed while utilizing the minimum amount of visual and contextual elements, leaning heavily on light and sound to establish setting and environments. Taking a page from the improvisational exercise of "beyond" work whereby actors, without outwardly acknowledging them, filter their behavior and interactions through an external influence (just won the lottery, has a loved one who's dying, thinks they're an alien, etc.), *Not the Boss of Me* is comprised of characters and scenes focused on specific motivations and plot points while never providing direct exposition. Engaging the audience through shadow and intrigue, perceptions are heightened, making the smallest details and gestures speak louder than words; the viewer’s imagination fills in the gaps. Regardless of whether an audience registers the exact narrative the author originally intended, the project's aim is to produce a film through minimalist strategies that accomplishes a cinematic experience that is equally rich and detailed - if not even more so - to that achieved by films with fully physicalized environments and expository elements. In essence, how little do you need to tell a story through motion pictures?
CHAPTER 1

CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

(aka: Where’s Waldo?)

1.1

Story/Writing (absurdity of structure)

I am inspired by the absurdity of real life and how it is influenced by our dream states. We are practical beings trying to live up to impractical expectations and our perception of reality is complicated by the very real dreams we have in our sleep. Our imaginations empower us to give purpose and reason to our daily struggles. The gaps in between what we see and what remains unseen are filled with things like religion and hypothesis. Nature abhors an unsolved mystery and our instinct is to find these answers or fabricate solutions where none are easily found. Like the tune “Shave and a Haircut” we are compulsively driven to answer, “two bits.” To resist is to leave oneself unfulfilled. It’s an endless loop.

“That’s life.”
“What’s Life?”
“It’s a magazine.”
“How much does it cost?”
“Ten cents.”
“I’ve only got five.”
“That’s life.”
“What’s Life?”
“It’s a magazine.”
“How much does it cost?”

When I was a child my first exposure to the realistically absurd in visual narrative media would have been two television series: the American adaptation of Yoshinobu Nishizaki’s Space
Battleship Yamato (Starblazers, US) and Rod Serling’s Twilight Zone. The “realistic” elements that attracted me to these two science fiction narratives - one animated, the other with a horror slant - was the science: the science of the universe, the science of human nature and the nature of science itself through observation, experimentation and evidence-based testing. I was entranced by the laws of nature and how they could be bent by exploring the gulf that exists in that place where Serling would invite us to visit with each installment.

“There is a fifth dimension, beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man’s fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call The Twilight Zone.”

The invitation was intoxicating, this idea that everything wasn’t always as it seemed, that there exists something often ignored and invisible surrounding us both threatening and filled with promise. It was too much not to want to know more. Serling was the master of piquing our interest by pointing out the benign before slowly altering our perceptions into a new potential context, ultimately leaving it unresolved. Like a mystery writer, he poses questions that lead his audience down a bread crumb trail. Whether the trail leads us home or straight into the witch’s oven varies from story to story, but the quality of those crumbs (and where we think we’re going) is the art of illusion, turning nothing - voids, gaps, absence - into something. As Nick Chater and George Loewenstein demonstrate in their article The Under-Appreciated Drive for Sense Making for the Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization (June 2016), when reviewing the images in Fig.1 below, our brains compulsively see things that aren’t there.

“In the left hand stimulus (due to the celebrated Italian psychologist Kanizsa, 1979), postulating an invisible square that covers some of the black blobs ‘makes sense’ of the missing elements. Similarly, the third stimulus can best be made sense of by postulating a 3D white ‘wire frame’ cube which partially occludes the black circles seen as behind it. The integrated nature of this interpretation is made particularly evident in virtue of the ambiguity of the wire-frame cube—it is a so-called Necker cube, much-discussed psychology and neuroscience).”
As with my 2014 readymade piece, *A Good Idea at the Time*, where I presented an art wall pockmarked and stained with everything that had previously been hung there, I left open the possibility for the audience to connect the dots as it were. By pointing out a visual echo, a remnant of what came before given form and contextualized by a title, the work is filled in by the need to have it resolved and make sense. As with the thesis question, how little does one need to convey a visual narrative? To convey environment, atmosphere, scope and tone? What will the audience make sense of that’s only inferred and hinted at? As Chater and Loewenstein point out…

“...the stimuli in Fig.1 may give us (an admittedly modest amount of) pleasure because we can make sense of them successfully; and, in addition, the experience of sense-making is itself pleasurable. We may experience a momentary positive ‘frison’ when we suddenly ‘find’ an elegant interpretation (the white square, the wire-frame cube, the white, spiny, sphere or the ‘faces in the vase’)”

Returning to Serling, in the episode *To Serve Man*, an alien race comes to Earth making promises of peace and an exchange of technological advances. A book is deduced to be titled “To Serve Man” which is interpreted as a pledge of goodwill. It is only later, when it’s too late, that it is understood to be in fact the title of a cookbook. In this instance, Serling takes a page from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s book of crafting a mystery, hiding his biggest clue out in plain sight. Just as we derive pleasure by making sense of a mystery, it can be equally (if not more) satisfying to be outsmarted; the challenge is what drives us oftentimes more than the outcome, so long as the
puzzle has adhered to established laws providing a fair game. M. Night Shyamalan’s film The Sixth Sense, in which a young child terrorized by the ghosts only he can see is aided by a child psychologist to uncover the truth behind his abilities, presents a narrative puzzle whose illusion plays upon an audience’s assumptions, based on their need to make (no pun intended) sense of what they’re seeing. The revelation at the end (SPOILER) that the therapist is also a ghost - is effectively shocking as the audience is reminded the evidence has been in front of them the entire time. Their need to fill in the subtle gaps/questions lead them down a path of their own design, a self-deception that the storyteller revels in revealing to them at the film’s conclusion. The audience has been outsmarted by their own desire to make sense of what was absent from the narrative, but still visually explicit. The disconnect between the two helped fabricate a story that wasn’t taking place. In these examples, omission is the facilitator of absence, voids and nothing.

The thesis project Not the Boss of Me strives to engage the audience with multiple challenges by doling out the narrative - indeed, the world - in fragments; who are these characters, what are their motivations, will they succeed in their objectives in addition to where are they in this void, can I see the space and sense its dynamics? The end result is nothing as sinister or clever as what we get from Serling or Shyamalan, but the principles are just the same, albeit redirected. How engaging can “the lack thereof” be to suspend an audience’s attention and disbelief? This is where the influence of Serling and his work ignited my interest in the effectiveness of what we don’t show versus what we do. Alfred Hitchcock would later demonstrate how tension and suspense can be created when the audience knows something the characters don’t. Here an absence of information is used as a device to create tension. Hitchcock’s model of a couple sitting down to a quiet breakfast when suddenly a bomb goes off illustrates “surprise”. It comes without warning, suddenly, but with no interest. He posits, now taking the same scene with the same couple having a quiet breakfast but intercut it with shots of a ticking bomb beneath their table. Now there is suspense and building tension between the audience and the characters.
Music/Sound (finding a soul)

“Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent.”
- Victor Hugo

I have rarely seen an image, let alone a series of them, that ever inspired within me something new, something unimagined. Images reinforce what we already know or feel; the world is beautiful, people inflict pain, we are alone, accidents happen. Occasionally they provide proof, revealing evidence of something suspected or unknown; the moon isn’t made of cheese, the Titanic is at the bottom of the ocean, flies’ eyes have 3000 lenses. In either case, images have the potential to cause an emotional reaction, but by their very nature they dictate too much to allow creative inspiration or reinterpretation. The one major exception being abstraction, where the image is distorted or restructured and/or the visual messaging is obscured or fragmented and reordered, as with Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase (No.2)* or Pollock’s *No.1 (Lavender Mist)*. In these instances, within the gaps of reason, something is activated and engaged. Our spirit is moved, not necessarily our emotions. From this awakening comes an instinctual reaction of inspiration and invention. It is in this realm that the world of sound and music resides and reigns, where our mind’s eye searches within ourselves and acquires the soul of vision.

Throughout my work, no matter the format through which it channels itself, the impact of sound and music is omnipresent. As a highly visual person, I am addicted to everything I see, constantly filling my view with light and shadow which gives a sense of admiration, a desire to replicate and emulate. Yet it is through my auditory nerves that a divining rod of imagination attracts impulses that craft a vision unseen. Like the AI software Midjourney or DALL-E 2, which construct images based on verbal commands, producing dreamlike visuals that can approximate your imagination, sound is a catalyst for something subjective inside us that can’t be
verbalized - the voice of our soul.

The immaterial elegance of one’s being, their soul, is the sum total of our mental and emotional existence, a wind that blows from the void. Sound and music act like a jetstream or weather front impacting our internal barometric pressures, rising and falling with the gust depending on our individual sensitivities. The drip-drip of a faucet in an otherwise silent apartment may inspire a feeling of loneliness or loss, tension or anticipation. The same effect can be established by a crowded room where no one sound can be discerned over another. And of course - music. Take film innovator Stanley Kubrick, a master of point and counterpoint, and his use of melody and rhythm in his film *2001: A Space Odyssey* to give grace and power to the evolutions of humankind through Richard Strauss’s tone poem, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. See also his use of the lighthearted song *Singin’ in the Rain* by Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown to depict the cruel and heartless rape in *A Clockwork Orange*. These moments alone may very well bring about shock and awe, but when mixed with a kaleidoscope of sound, they elevate our comprehension and experience beyond the literal images and awaken something deep inside us, building a new visual understanding through emotional design.

Years before I was aware of them, sound designers such as Ben Burtt and Walter Murch were already shaping my appreciation of what sound was capable of. Burtt’s work on the 1977 film *Star Wars* was a tour de force of audio design, quadrupling the size and scope of George Lucas’s universe, giving it depth, weight, age and personality. Add in John Williams’ iconic score and one could argue that easily 75% of the movie’s impact is created by its audio components. Without it Star Destroyers would be just plastic models, lasers, flashes of light, androids, rolling garbage cans. The sounds are what bring these inanimate objects to life, even more so than their construction and movements. They are gestures without meaning or relevance until they are endowed with sound. Sound is life. When we’re alone in the dark we listen, we give emptiness life through our ears when no visual is provided. After seeing a TV broadcast of another Lucas
film, *THX1138* (a film a bit advanced for a 7-year-old), Walter Murch’s creative use of sound elements to craft an environment composed primarily of empty and sometimes formless spaces ignited my imagination regardless of whether I fully understood why or how. I was compelled by the invisible engineering at work and propelled through a narrative that otherwise might not have ensnared my attention at such a young age. Harkening back to John Williams, his singular contribution to how we feel an image can’t go unnoticed. His unmistakable themes have left a permanent imprint on our minds of images we’ve never seen. Let me clarify. Williams’ scores weave seamlessly with their visual counterparts - so much so that once established, we instinctively see when we hear them … without actually seeing anything. Take Steven Spielberg’s 1975 thriller/adventure *Jaws*. The shark’s theme is known around the world, synonymous with the movie and the infamous toothy fish. Once Williams and Spielberg establish theme and shark as one and the same, each time we hear those two tones (da-nah) in succession, the tensions rise and anticipation grows moments before each attack. Yet, later, at the height of the hunt for the watery killer we, the audience, hear (da-nah… da-nah) but no shark appears. The audio cue brings the creature into our minds, we expect to see it attack and we shift in our seats waiting … but nothing. This brilliant use of sound and Pavlovian conditioning provides the filmmakers not only an opportunity to signal without results, thereby breaking their established narrative rules, it raises the stakes by confusing expectations, allowing the shark to burst from the water without any sonic cue. The impact from an absence of sound can be just as effective as that from its presence. Had it not been for these unconscious influences of music and sound design, I might not have discovered and explored the world of radio.

"Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!"
- Walter B. Gibson

Shortly before my 9th birthday, I was given a tape recorder and series of cassettes, some blank for recording and others containing a number of radio shows from the 1930s and ‘40s. At first, I used the recorder to do audio tours of my house and daily accounts that I shared with my mother,
who was in the hospital having just given birth to my new baby brother. Later, it would become a method of audio correspondence with my grandmother who lived almost three thousand miles away. But it was the radio serials like Fibber McGee & Molly, The Jack Benny Show and the thriller The Shadow that captured my imagination and inspired me to record my own audio plays. We didn’t have cable TV, nor could we afford to go to the movies as often as I’d like, so reliving my radio cassettes over and over until the magnet tape began to warp and wear thin was my primary source of entertainment. Devoid of any visuals - even the cassette cartridges were text only - I had to rely solely on my imagination to conjure the worlds and characters on my own. I had no idea what Jack Benny looked like, or his butler Rochester, but I could draw you a map to his elaborate underground safe where he hoarded his fortune below. The character of The Shadow was the perfect embodiment of what was possible in an auditory experience, a hero whose greatest strength was the ability to cloud men’s minds so they couldn’t see him. The title character Lamont Cranston, later voiced for a time by Orson Welles, would make the subtle shift of talking through a cone, giving his voice an eerie tone that signified his shift into The Shadow. With no visual depiction hindered by the limitations of cinematic techniques of that era, the effect is seamless and flawless, fueled by the audience’s imagination … and mine. No better example exists to my knowledge than the May 25th, 1943 episode of the radio series Suspense, entitled Sorry, Wrong Number and starring Agnes Moorehead in what is essentially a one-woman show. Despite having originated as a stage play and later adapted into a movie, this story of a bedridden invalid whose only contact with the outside world is through her phone, by its very nature, has no better vehicle than to be told through an auditory experience. An accidental crossing of telephone lines affords the main character the opportunity to overhear two killers plotting a murder of a woman later that same night. As she frantically telephones her husband, the authorities and anyone else willing to listen over the course of the narrative, slowly it begins dawning on her that she is the intended victim. At the story’s climax, as the phone rings the police she can hear the killers coming up the steps to her room, just as the police answer a nearby train screeches past and her screams lost in the chaos. As the train passes and silence returns,
only the voice of the answering officer can be heard asking if anyone’s there. The last voice we hear is that of the killer picking up the line in response, “Sorry, wrong number.” Where better for a story played out entirely on a phone to exist than in the auditory space? To assign a visual to it is a distraction, undercutting the inherent beautiful tension built into the narrative. For someone such as myself who is a junky for images, who devours with his eyes, an experience such as this was truly eye-opening - via my ears.

As my thesis, and work in general, addresses the question of how little is required to tell a visual narrative, or how much can I create with next to nothing, I always knew that sound would be essential in filling in the majority of environments and supporting character development. Using the lessons gleaned from radio, I knew I could build worlds through soundscapes; early morning birds, traffic, pedestrians, etc. Through the addition of squeaky faucets, rattling mufflers and music cues, I could establish a character’s financial status or mental state. All of these elements connect us on a visceral level, sneaking into our consciousness without us knowing and heavily influencing perceptions by steeping the audience in an auditory aura. These things speak to our soul and ground us. Regardless of whether we’re in someone’s backyard or on a distant planet, the sound of wind is familiar and impartial. I’ve selected sounds that embody location while setting an emotional tone. Music has been added to establish themes and/or propel the spirit of the narrative. The audio real estate of the project comprises 75% of what the audience sees. As the aptly named soundstage is near bare and the visuals are minimal, we feel the space and characters through how we hear them. The images in the thesis project Not the Boss of Me are rough, raw and grainy, full of contrast and sometimes out of focus, giving a sense of the world and its characters’ struggles, both internal and external. I wouldn’t be able to get away with that if the sound quality weren’t of a superior level. We must hear what these worlds look like. We must hear what these characters are up against. In doing so, their visual world can fall apart without sacrificing the audience’s ability to engage and follow the story. My family and I took very long cross-country road trips when I was a child. I would record my favorite movies
onto audio cassettes and listen to them while we drove. Only the films that could survive the conversion truly captured my attention. One such film was the Coen brothers’ comedy *Raising Arizona*, a wonderful orchestration of clever and efficient writing married with a musical delivery of dialogue mixed over the backdrop of a whimsical score. When I’d listen to the tape, I could see the movie. Despite my visual acumen, I have attempted to release my grip on the rigidity of the literal image and allow the audio to develop and speak to the soul of the audience and their imagination. If there is an auditory equivalent of the project it is the call-and-response couplet “Shave and a Haircut,” which after the rest leaves the obligatory response “two bits.” That rest creates tension and anticipation. *Not the Boss of Me* is the call, while the gaps that remain are the audience’s invitation to respond.

1.3

**Movement (rhythm/editing)**

*"They may not know what I’m doing, but they know I’m doing something."*

- Bob Fosse

My work is continually working to create a sense of momentum, a feeling of internal weightless exhilaration. Specifically, I seek to cultivate a feeling of deep identification and discovery, a sense that some part of us that’s never been voiced suddenly sings out your favorite song you’ve never heard before. Art is my method of mutual discovery and shared catharsis. Choreographers and composers work in an ephemeral medium of rhythm and melody, movements and stillness, sustained then gone. Their art exists, honestly, in the now. No subterfuge, just the truth of the immediate. The instant gratification of a successful jeté or blowing through a horn to hear it belch a blaring B flat is empowering. You physicalize your ambition and are rewarded instantaneously. From that point, inspiration carries you the rest of the way (so long as your stamina can keep up with your passion). As in music, where notes and rests break up the score
into its phrases and movements, editing in cinema functions much the same way. If done well, the work - dance/music/film - presents a graceful flow that washes the experience over the audience. If done badly, the work is obscured by the mechanics and the effort is clumsy and discordant. I take my inspiration from music and dance when constructing a narrative work. A brief stint as a dance student when I was far too old to begin formal training helped me understand different methods to physicalize sound, expanding my senses to other perceptions of motion.

Motion pictures are a contradiction. A picture is a moment frozen in time: a gesture, a glance, an instance. Motion is propulsion, momentum, speed, inertia. The magic of cinema is the illusion that twenty-four still pictures with a contextual relationship flashed every second creates the sense of motion. An abrupt shift in context, a new angle on the same scene, back and forth, back and forth and suddenly a space is defined. Jump to an entirely different setting, now time and space have been expanded. The cuts between frames, between scenes, between points of view, are seamless and fluid like a ballet dancer twisting, turning and leaping across a stage, always in motion. Motion is direction. It is meaning, it is purpose, it is choice. It’s no coincidence that filmmakers with a background in dance are some of the most fluid masters of the motion picture. They grasp the potential inherent in the illusion of sequential moments, gestures, steps and pauses. The illusion of dance is that a body burdened by gravity defies the laws of physics and is weightless, giving expression and form to the buoyancy of the soul. Cinema is the manifestation of the voids that fill our souls - the drag of depression, the lift of joy, the stall of insecurity. The master choreographer knows how the dance ebbs and flows from the dancer’s body, how their extremities extend and retract in confluence with the music. We, the audience, identify with the dancer and their fight against gravity as that struggle represents our own: a job we can’t stand, a love unfolding, a memory we can’t forget. The rhythm of life is a dance performed on a highwire suspended over a bottomless pit, an image that would drive us mad if we dwelled too long on it. It is our fragmenting of time and space - lights up/lights down, scene to scene - that
helps us cope. We remember things not as one long timeline since birth, but as selected moments here and there. We choose what to remember and string those recollections together to create the illusion of a life lived. We are living motion pictures, whether for an audience of one or one billion.

Bob Fosse, Sally Potter and Sydney Pollack, three directors with varying degrees of history in the dance world; Fosse and Potter more so than Pollack, but all masters of motion and rhythm. Their impact on my understanding and application of visual storytelling with regard to the motion-picture and editing can not be understated. Fosse and his editor Alan Heim on films such as *Lenny* (1974) and *All That Jazz* (1979) truly propel the audience through their narratives like a three-stage (or act) rocket. Something in the choreographer’s sensibilities, an understanding of a graceful pivot or a sudden leap, sees no boundaries to what’s possible in the visual narrative structure. We follow Fosse’s main character Joe Gideon in *All That Jazz* through flashes in his life forward, back, up, down, side to side and everywhere in between. The pulse and rhythm of the story is constant and unrelenting, but also confident and calculated. There is security in the seeming chaos of the character and his life, but we feel the tempo and can anticipate the beats; we become familiar with the melody and can sing along. We feel the movements of the story, the rise and fall of the plot. We empathize with the characters as they twist and turn. The cuts in the film from scene to scene and angle to angle feel like the movement of our head as we gaze from one thing to the next. The camera has become an extension of our neck. Fosse and Heim are choreographing our gaze, tapping into our instinctual desire to be in motion. It’s this sensory possession of the audience that has inspired my editing techniques. Through the actor’s performance, I tap into the rhythm of the scene; that tempo informs where the beats are and when the edits are best timed. I find the dance between the camera (the audience) and the actors, while the story provides the melody and the tempo; thus I choreograph moments based on these elements. Where Fosse establishes a method of camera and editing that elevates the pace of strobing information into one fluid motion, Potter and Pollack use those same tools, applying
them to create a deeper emotional connection with their audience.

Sally Potter and her frequent editor collaborator Hervé Schneid have together choreographed such films as *Orlando* (1992) and *The Tango Lesson* (1997), where the story emerges from movement rather than dialogue or exposition. This isn’t to discount the contributions of her cinematographers and directors of photography, who share equal roles in creating the movement and visual pace of tone in these films, but it is through the editing process that shots transform from shot to shot like one fluid motion like a ballet. Potter’s sensibilities, married with the fact that she works closer to the world of independent film where the trappings of Hollywood aren’t as invasive, permit her to explore her muse more freely and allow her unique visual voice to come through. As in *The Tango Lesson*, where she portrays the main character, she and the film engage in a dance where the camera and editor share the role as her partner. Potter and Schneid have inspired me to recognize vividly how an emotional connection can be established through visual intimacy, embracing what the camera sees, taking that energy to bridge edits between shots erasing any trace of their existence and perpetuating the narrative flow.

Though his resume of dance experience is nowhere near as expansive as Fosse’s or Potter’s, Pollack’s understanding of how dance functions as an instrument of rhythm is unmistakable. I always knew that his 1982 film *Tootsie* was a comic masterpiece, but it was not until I listened to his Criterion Collection audio commentary track did I learn through a brief aside of his dance background and the imprint it left on his filmmaking technique. Like Fosse’s *All That Jazz*, *Tootsie* opens with a montage sequence that introduces the audience to the main character through a series of auditions and daily routines. The syncopation of moments and music mobilizes the main character, his objectives and his obstacles in fewer than six minutes; like an overture, the sequence tells you everything that is to come. In neither film are you keeping a tally of the number of edits, locations, characters and plots flashing by every few seconds, but the sum total that washes over the audience is a calculated estimate of an emotional gain; drama,
comedy, etc. Pollack’s gift and sense for theatrical timing, along with his team of talented editors Fredric and William Steinkamp, orchestrate a series of scenes throughout the movie gathering momentum like a locomotive threatening to fly off the tracks at every turn. The timing and use of edits heighten and develop the narrative, depositing comic lines and beats with absolute precision right up until the film’s climax.

“Making the complicated simple is true creativity.”
- Charles Mingus

If movement in motion pictures is an illusion, Fosse/Heim, Potter/Schneid and Pollack/Steinkamp have elevated the trick via their ability to jiu jitsu the energy and momentum caused by an edit, thereby transferring it into the rhythm of the narrative. Assembling a film has been likened by some to going into battle. Though its principles of structured objective, order and ability to improvise are the same as commanding a strategy for war, I tend to think more in terms of jazz. Charles Mingus, like no other jazz musician I know of, composes and performs in a way that speaks to me profoundly. He plays within the confines of meters and stanzas, but his emotional and conceptual performance far exceeds what’s written in the score. As I am a drummer and Mingus plays double bass, we meet courtesy of the rhythm section vibe. His music explodes with rhythms, popping and exploding around time signatures and cries from the band. It stirs the listeners attention, getting into their bodies. Jazz is a deceptive structure in the hands of a composer such as Mingus. Take his piece Moanin’ from the 1960 album Blues & Roots as an example. The first two minutes of the number is a collision of various melodies and themes fighting for prominence, with the bass and drums binding everything together. Then, like a break in the clouds, a theme comes forward, bringing order to the mischief for a brief moment before transitioning to yet another melody. The musical bars barely contain the chaos that lurks behind them. This is the effect I seek to achieve when I craft a scene or film, where the structure behind the mechanism is invisible and the narrative is seemingly unrestrained - “What will happen next?” I would have loved to see a film collaboration between Fosse and Mingus, a mix of
precision and a loose cannon. It would have been explosive, no doubt.

Another film and filmmaker that I should mention - that doesn’t necessarily stem from any movement or musical background - is the all-in-one-take thriller PVC-1 (2007, Dir. Spiros Stathoulopoulos). Based on a true story, the film follows the drama of a family terrorized by extortionists when their mother is fitted with a bomb around her neck. The 85-minute, one-continuous-shot film reveals how edits can defuse tension and thereby build tension to near intolerable levels when there’s nothing to release your attention. Like the protagonist, we are strapped to that very same bomb and can’t escape. No alternative angle, POV shift, subplot or insert shot can break us from the film’s grip. It holds us like an iron fist, refusing to let us go. The frenetic movement of the camera jerks and drags us through the experience, constantly adding to our agitation while still keeping us fully invested. Stathoulopoulos acts simultaneously as Director, Director of Photography and Editor all at once. As much as the other filmmakers - and Mingus - inspire me to appreciate and utilize the power of movement and editing in my work, Stathoulopoulos demonstrates to me how the lack of editing can also be a powerful choice when engaging your audience; it’s a notion that speaks directly to my thesis work regarding absence and voids. By removing a visual narrative device that audiences have been conditioned to anticipate and possibly even crave, we are able to activate the audience in a way they might not see coming. Like Potter/Schneid, where the edits are clean and our attention uninterrupted, the sustained shot can subtly lock you in before you realize you’ve been trapped. Filmmaker Steven Spielberg often hides long continuous shots within his films, not drawing attention to them but infusing them with essential visual and expository information helping to escalate the stakes of the plot. In his 1975 thriller Jaws, at roughly the midpoint of the film, a fairly inconspicuous scene plays out on a hillside overlooking the ocean. The main protagonists implore the local mayor to reconsider his choice not to close the beaches due to the threat of shark attacks as onlookers drift in the background. The shot, lasting roughly seven minutes, is cleverly choreographed between the actors, camera and location so that it includes
all of the types of shots that an edited scene might include; wide establishing, medium shot, closeup culminating in a surprise reveal at the end, almost like a short film unto itself. The lack of an edit engages our subconscious, building tension that is aided and supported by the plot of the scene. The movement of the camera and actors activate our impulses to feel the energy of mise en scene. The image is jammed packed with information, both literal and symbolic, but the masterful craftsmanship of its illumination served with great care and precision. Alejandro G. Iñárritu’s 2014 drama/comedy Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) is equally impactful and inspiring to my practice despite several visual breaks that blur the line between each of the film’s, still highly limited, sixteen edits. The film maintains a high level of energy and pace, ebbing and flowing like a work of music, rising in visual volume to cascade into a single simple composition.

Editing is creation through movement and pace. These artists who come from the world of dance, theatre and music have a cinematic sensibility that, regardless of genre, culture or style, taps into something instinctual, something physical. Despite the fact that cinema can exist on a recording and be played and replayed, it shares the same ephemeral and immediate quality to dance and music. They exist in the now, a continuous instant evolving in real time. They require energy and momentum; otherwise it’s only a single image, a tangled corpse of brass and bamboo. Without doubt there are countless others who share these artist’s aptitudes that have inspired me with their creations: Raising Arizona (1987, Coen Brothers, Dirs., Michael R. Miller, Editor); Apocalypse Now (1979, Francis Ford Coppola, Dir., Walter Murch, Editor); Raging Bull (1980, Martin Scorsese, Dir., Thelma Schoonmaker, Editor); I wonder where the dreams I don’t remember go (2020, Yoann Bourgeois, Choreographer); West Side Story (1961, Robert Wise, Dir/Editor, Jerome Robbins, Dir/Choreographer); Tenet (2020, Dir. Christopher Nolan, Editor Jennifer Lame); Pulp Fiction (1994, Dir. Quentin Tarantino, Editor, Sally Menke); and Fallen Angels (1995, Dir. Kar-Wai Wong, Editors, William Chang, Ming Lam Wong).
1.4

Visual Media (points of view)

“Mystery is when the spectator knows less than the characters in the movie. Suspense is when the spectator knows more than the characters in the movie.”

- Alfred Hitchcock

At age 7, I was given one of the earliest 35mm autofocus cameras ever to hit the market at that time, a Canon AF35M “Sure Shot.” It had one focal length - 38mm with a maximum aperture of 2.8 - and ISO setting from 400 down. I didn’t have to worry about shutter speed or aperture; all of it was automated by the camera’s sensors and “near-infrared emitting diode,” which helped target its autofocusing feature in ambient lighting. A flash would pop up like a Jack-in-the-Box from the camera’s body when the light was too low to get a proper exposure. To counter this reaction, I could just hold my finger over it to keep it from activating in situations where I wanted a certain effect. My father, a professional photographer, had several more complicated cameras in the house, all of which gave you greater control over the variables for making still images, but he recognized that those buttons and levers were potential distractions and obstacles to a budding photographer. What was more important than simply instructing me in the mechanics or even the science of photography was providing a fluid vehicle for discovering one’s point of view, for learning how to see the world and its moments. The added bonus that came with having such a wide angle lens was that it required one to get close to their subjects. One couldn’t hide behind distance through a telephoto lens that brought the action to you. It required proximity, which requires permission, which requires communication. The beautiful byproduct of photography, regardless of the subject, is that even as you capture the world as you see it, the world in turn is showing how it sees you back. The things you photograph are a testimony to the illusion of their particular point of view. Dorothea Lange’s famous 1936 photograph of a migrant mother is as seen through her eyes; as we look into the eyes of the woman in the picture, we can empathetically feel her perspective. The power of the image is that it operates on three
primary levels of perception: that of the photographer, that of the photographed and that of the viewer or audience - all simultaneously. Despite the rigidity of still images frozen in time, this third variable, the spectator, remains in perpetual motion over time, allowing for revisited meaning through history. This little point-and-shoot camera with a fixed field of view helped me discover just how wide the worldview could be … and what portion of that scope was mine and mine alone.

It helped that my father had a large collection of books on photography, tomes teeming with images taken all over the world by some of the profession’s leading photographers. There were the incredibly beautiful and exotic images from National Geographic, like Steve McCurry’s well-known 1985 cover photograph of an Afghan girl, or Robert Ballard’s underwater discovery of the Titanic that same year. On the other side of the spectrum, I was equally exposed to the horror and cruelty of the world via images such as John Filo’s coverage of the 1970 Kent State shootings, Yasushi Nagao’s image of Inejiro Asanuma’s 1960 assassination or Stanley Forman’s 1976 photo of a nineteen-year-old woman and her two-year-old niece falling from five stories when a fire escape collapsed under them as their building burned. Suitable viewing for a child of seven or nine? Perhaps not, but that ship has sailed. All that said, there was one photo in particular that solidified my recognition of the importance and value of the “point-of-view.” In 1969, my father was sent by National Geographic - along with the then-ornithologist and future Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies author Jared M. Diamond - to do a story on the birds of the remote island of New Guinea. He had wonderful images of the people, flora and fauna they came across all along their expedition, but it was a single photo taken at dusk along the beach that resonated most. An aboriginal woman is walking along the shore, a basket on her head carrying food back to her village, the sun setting and the moon just visible in the coming night sky. The photo is beautiful, but my father’s caption is what captured my imagination through the context it provided. See, at that very moment, while in that remote location with those people in this place so far removed from the modern world, at the same
instance, Neil Armstrong and his crew had just landed on the moon. The stark contrast of those two worlds composed in a single image was breathtaking; from that moment forward I was obsessed with all manner and method of communicating one’s unique perspective on the human experience.

Television and cinema were an inevitable visual love affair with their near-constant rotation of camera angles and positioning, alternating points-of-view. What might be the second-biggest impact on my life (and the greatest influence to drive me toward film) came in 1982, when my parents took me to see Steven Spielberg’s, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*. I recall experiencing the film on a deeply visceral level, empathizing completely and utterly with the main character Elliot. When the movie ended and the credits began to roll, my family always remained to pay our respects to the scrolling list of contributors, but when we finally left and entered the lobby I was overcome by nausea and began puking all over the theater. For the next week or so, I couldn’t sleep alone and was “out of sorts,” as it were. We were living in West Virginia at the time, but my parents heard of a cinema event not too far from home where someone who’d worked on the film would be in attendance. They loaded me up in the car and off we went to get some answers. Once there we were able to find this film technician from *E.T.* and my parents informed him of my recent behavior after seeing the movie. He was intrigued and said that my reaction had been popping up in a few isolated cases, an unanticipated result of how the movie was filmed. Speilberg had decided to film the entire movie from a child’s point of view - specifically, never higher than around three or four feet from the ground. For some children in the audience, we locked into that perspective subconsciously and experienced the film on a physical and psychological level strapped to the emotional ride. When the film ended and the credits rolled, it was effectively like ripping loose the umbilical cord, causing severe disorientation and confusion. When I learned that movies could have that level of impact, that degree of resonance with something deep within you that could cause such a reaction, I knew then and there that films would be my life’s work.
From that moment forward I devoured everything I could get my hands, eyes and ears on. Everything was fair game: films, radio, tv, animation, infomercials, books, pop-up books, magazines, billboards and bubblegum wrappers. I consumed everything I saw and digested everything I heard. My influences were the standards that your average cinephile who grew up in the ‘70s and ‘80s idolized. The aforementioned Speilberg, of course, as well as George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Stanley Kubrick, John Hughes, Martin Scorcese, Ridley Scott and the like. My best friend was the PBS TV series *At the Movies* (before it became *Sneak Previews*), where hosts Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert introduced me to film analysis and criticism, not to mention the occasional foreign film, opening doors to even wider possibilities: iconic artists like Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Fredirico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa and Bernardo Bertolucci.

1.5

**Mental/Emotional (a sense of balance)**

“As human beings, our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has or ever will have something inside that is unique to all time. It’s our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression.”

- Fred Rogers

Since roughly age seven I have struggled with anxiety and depression. As that was something not actively acknowledged or addressed on a societal or cultural level in the ‘70s (or even through the early ‘90s, really), it was incredibly difficult to understand or even articulate what I was experiencing. There was little to identify with or mirror what I was experiencing to give me a sense of mutual perspective. Our family moved on a near-constant basis; I lived in eight different places by the time I was eight years old, moving roughly every four years after that. It gave me a broad sense of the scope of the world around me and all its diversity while giving me
little sense of identity and my place in it. I was from nowhere and everywhere simultaneously. The emotional investment I carried for people I’d known and places I’d been didn’t have the same value or weight to those individuals. I left no mark. The imprint wasn’t deep enough to leave a lasting impression. At most, a footnote of a kid who once lived down the street, whereas for me, that time and those people represented the totality of that experience. Yet without them to corroborate, I had no other witness to those memories. The isolation alone created by the sense of my own unremarkable participation in the lives of others, paired with a psyche already taxed by anxiety and depression, would inevitably lead me to an attempted suicide at age eighteen. It’s little wonder the first film to resonate with me on this level was Hal Ashby’s 1971 dark comedy Harold & Maude. The co-title character Harold Chasen, a young man who feels unseen and unheard crafts a series of fake suicide attempts in an effort to elicit a reaction from his unresponsive mother. A chance encounter with an older woman at a funeral, Maude Chardin, alters his perception and appreciation of what life is and how to experience it freely and fully. To what degree my own suicide attempt was a grab for attention, I’m not entirely certain. What I do know is that it was a cry for help - a cry I was prepared to see left unanswered. By a freak occurrence, I was saved and spared, but the residual impact left me socially stigmatized in my circle of friends. There was fallout. My mood swings and unpredictable behavior had exhausted some close relationships to the point of breaking. This was a trend that followed me through most of my life up into my late twenties. Like those friends who could no longer tolerate the inconsistency of personality, I too was exhausted by a lack of continuous sense of identity. I hid behind cameras and theatrical roles allowing distance to fog my presence. This detached observer and disembodied spirit persona attracted me to the world of creative art and themes and work that dealt in blurred worlds where things are not always what they seem. Ambiguity became a tool to express my own sense of being adrift.

I recall as a teenager touring the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington D.C. and being taken by a small painting by the artist Arshile Gorky, Portrait of Myself and My Imaginary Wife (c.1933-
c.1934). The painting itself wasn’t eye-catching by any means - rather small and drab by comparison to his other works - but it was the title that sparked my interest. The juxtaposition of reality and dream coexisting spoke to me and my own sense of split self, an identity based in the now conflicted by one stuck in the past (depression) and tormented by the future (anxiety).

It would take another twenty years before I would truly begin to reconcile that internal conflict. My work, regardless of format, sought to give definition to this amorphous personality I was wrestling with. Through the camera’s voyeuristic lens, I assumed the identity of my subjects while metaphorically inserting myself into the composition. Like the unassuming and almost totally unrecognized Vivian Maier who was only known to her friends and family as a nanny who just happened to have a camera, I camouflaged myself behind my tool and explored my world invisibly. Maier’s work is an astounding inventory of her visual sphere and life. I am inspired by her seeming lack of professional aspiration or desire for notoriety which, whether conscious or not, freed her of any critical analysis that might have censored or tainted her vision. As I’ve struggled with wanting to “make my mark” and be successful (as that would give me a sense of identity), that ambition has been at odds with my resistance to being defined by others. This internal conflict is reflected by the characters in my thesis project and their own struggles, each one pivoting between how they see themselves and a vision their world wants to impose on them. The project’s title, Not the Boss of Me, is a declaration of self-determination expressed with the insight and innocence of a child, a juvenile exclamation essential to human development, growth and wisdom.

As self-indulgent as mental health can appear (particularly in the way in which some artists like Woody Allen have made their life’s work a practice of bringing the psychiatrist sofa into the cinema), all creative work is biographical and self-reflective. Striking the balance between therapy and creative expression is always an effort to hear a single clear thought triggered by an emotional reaction. But like Woody Allen, part of that emotional stabilization is achieved through a developed sense of humor. Achieving that mental emotional balance, for me, requires
introspective wit. If comedy can be equated to tragedy plus time, then my struggles with anxiety and depression are a constant source of humorous material. Comedy provides the individual with an objectively subjective point of view. By stepping outside of oneself to gain an objective perspective on a subjective experience creates the opportunity for reflection and contextual referencing. A perfect contemporary example is John Mullaney’s 2023 standup performance *Baby J*, where the entire performance is an examination of his own intervention staged by his friends resulting in his immediate admittance to rehab for substance abuse. Mullaney adeptly alternates the point of view on his own tragedy between his own and that of those around him sharing the experiences. At times, he even assumes the perception of the listening audience. Comedy is vulnerability plus context.

Or take an artist like Italian Maurizo Cattelan, whose biting wit cuts through the overcomplication of the world’s more presumptuous corners and trains its sights on them with laser-like precision. There’s the 1999 piece *Perfect Day*, where he duct taped the gallerist Massimo De Carlo to the wall of his own gallery where Cattelan was premiering an exhibition. Or his 2016 piece *America*, an 18-karat gold-plated (and fully-functional) toilet where patrons were invited to use the facility privately, providing one of the most intimate experiences ever shared between an artist’s work and his public. The commentaries are physicalized by their punchlines. American artist Wayne White uses his sense of humor and imagination to create puppets and scenic designs for the surrealist children show *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*. His series of “word paintings” are produced by scavenging flea markets and secondhand shops for old and odd landscape portraits wherein he paints into the perspective of the painting 3D words; *SHIT SHOW* (2020), *FANFUCKINTASTIC* (2020) or *THEY PLUNDERED OUR ART AND THEN WAITED AND WATCHED FROM THE RIDGE AS WE MADE MORE* (2017). The juxtaposition of what was once commercial art now long forgotten revived by an irreverent yet playful vandalization situates the original work as “straight man” to White’s comic role. White’s documentary on himself, his art and one-man live performance show entitled *Beauty is Embarrassing* illustrates
how his unique visual exaggeration of the world around him is an embrace of our flaws. His 2013 installation *Halo Amok* at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art presented an enormous series of Cubist puppets of cowboys, bulls and horses that patrons could interact with. As with Cattelan and White, artists who encourage a level of disregard for the superimposed barrier between “art” and “audience” demonstrate a goal I’m trying to achieve with the near impenetrable nature of film. The ability to break down cinema into its core elements (light, sound and narrative) and allow them to engage the audience in a way that allows for free interpretation is to surrender control of the more dictative aspects of the medium. Comedy facilitates a method for reevaluation of hitherto held assumptions. It is a tool for breaking down routines, habits and standards, an essential coping mechanism for processing mental and emotional pratfalls. To be truly effective, it requires a heightened sense of self-awareness and honesty to lay bare those things that make us all vulnerable, for the audience is as culpable in maintaining the art/audience barrier as the artists themselves. I take strength from my flaws and use them to break through the presentation wall, reaching out to my audience for identification and collaboration. The experience can be jarring, but everything - even a root canal - is more palatable when prefaced with a laugh.

1.6

**In Relation To (context)**

*“The best effort of a fine person is felt after we have left their presence.”*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

My work pulls its strengths from those elements and influences that affect me on an emotional level, but which also engage me just as deeply intellectually. I recognize familiar patterns which have resonated through time and speak to me directly while providing allusions that leave
unanswered questions only I believe I can answer. My voice is a counterpoint to my existence and positions it within the framework of all other creative accomplishments, challenging and affirming the experiences of anyone who engages with it.

Within the realm of cinema, all of my works are creative experiments; nothing is crafted by rote nor certified as conclusive. Nor do I think truly any artistic expression by anyone is as finite as that. Once a piece is released into the public domain, however small or large, a conversation has begun that will debate and reinterpret it, supplanting the original intention with how it was perceived. Yet even still, some particles of that expression will be absorbed by our DNA, becoming some fragment of our subconscious imaginations. Subgenres within the independent film industry like mumblecore - occasionally dialogue-driven narratives light on plot but heavy on relationship dynamics - share a similar spirit of creative agility when it comes to production application. I encourage actor improvisation and often prefer to shoot “on my feet” as with documentary film, but that is where the similarities essentially end. My narratives aim to convey their messages through a visual dialogue as opposed to banter. I favor a *show-don’t-tell* model of storytelling, using language sparingly and heightening its impact and effectiveness when it is used, almost like a silent film. That is not to say that the films of such wordsmiths as Woody Allen, The Coen Brothers, Hal Hartley, Spike Lee, Albert Brooks and Nora Ephron don’t inspire me to craft great dialogue. I choose to make visual experiences that are punctuated by targeted language: titles, captions, dialogue, labels, etc. Like Wayne White’s series of word paintings, I am selective and prize brevity with the highest regard. Charlie Chaplin, Sid Caesar, Buster Keaton, Mary Pickford - all spoke volumes without uttering a single word. “Silent” doesn’t necessarily mean “noncommutative.” As with world-famous mime Marcel Marceau’s first (and only) audible line in any movie, Mel Brook’s comedy film *Silent Movie* - “No.” - an economy of dialogue can bring the house down. At the same time, during an era of films like the Marvel Cinematic Universe, where we gorge ourselves on overabundance of eye candy, my work stands apart. Relying on the imagination of the audience to fill in the blank requires a level of
active engagement from the audience, where nothing is spelled out and illustrated in 3D CGI Technicolor. My work takes a cue from the world of radio - *This American Life*, *StoryCorps*, *The Shadow*, *War of the Worlds* - releasing the hold of imagery just enough to allow sound to paint the picture. This goes equally for non-cinematic work that allows the context of a turn of phrase to ruminate in the mind, bouncing and echoing like the comic stylings of Steven Wright, whose absurdist musings require time to process before landing a laugh. My work makes sense of nonsense … and vice versa. It’s the audience’s choice to decide which way it leans. Similar to Maurizio Cattelan’s piece *Sunday in Rivara* (1992), in which feeling the industry pressures of producing “art on demand” for the gallery Castello di Rivara, Italy, he escaped from the gallery’s four-story window by way of a knotted sheet and left that as his contribution to the exhibition, my piece *A Good Idea At The Time* was inspired by an impulse decision to submit a blank gallery wall as my exhibition selection, a reaction to the fleeting fashion of art. But even from that reactionary impulse, I followed up with research and robust analysis before committing to the piece, rolling the dice hoping it wouldn’t be an empty gesture. I share the same attitude and DIY engagement with sound, and art in general, of the Fluxus movement - a playful nature boarding on mischievous. Composer and music theorist John Cage’s composition *4’33*, ” in which any number of musicians are instructed to sit and *not play* their instruments for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, is as close to an example of what the focus of my work around concepts of *nothing* entails. Cage said of his composition, which premiered in 1952 and is sometimes called the “silent piece,” “There is no such thing as silence,” continuing “You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.” The aim of Cage’s piece is not silence, but for the audience to listen. It runs contrary to expectations and presumed norms, shaking things up, oftentimes to the discomfort of the spectator. I am not afraid to be anti-art in my artistic expressions. Or rather, I’m not afraid of my art not communicating to the lowest common denominator, like theatre and film director Peter Brook, who labeled that aspect of “traditional” theatre, (i.e. Shakespeare performed as
Shakespeare would have staged it) as holy, and therefore rigged, archaic, stagnant or irrelevant. With the utmost seriousness, I want to defy expectations and embrace potential failure, because those are the things that frighten me and threaten me with remaining complacent. My act of defiance is a challenge I give myself to push my fears into the light and confront them. Absences and voids - nothings - are the things that provoke my anxiety and I seek to engage with them rather than take flight. I must be able to laugh at myself before I can take myself seriously, thus the work must have that same level of self-awareness. My work trusts my gut reaction and impulses, but are seasoned with just enough self-doubt to electrify the potential for risk. If I feel I might have bitten off more than I can chew, I know that I’m on the right track. To slightly paraphrase a line from Robert Browning’s *Andrea del Sarto*, I always want my reach to exceed my grasp. Nothing is the alpha and omega of creation. My work exists as an invitation and rejection, incomplete and unresolved until an outside force or audience chooses to engage or disavow it. What is the sound of one hand clapping? If a tree falls in the woods and no one’s there to hear it, does it make a sound? Are the voices in my head bothering you? Which came first, the chicken or the McNugget? Or as someone else said…

“Me, personally, what I want is to allow people to be engaged actively in watching the film. I like to construct films in a way that makes you feel a bit uncomfortable, be able to enjoy them, be intrigued, start to think about the meaning of things - and hopefully by the end of it, you’ll have some strong desire to keep thinking about them.”

- Yorgos Lanthimos
CHAPTER 2

9 Months
    =
9 Days
    =
7 Hrs, 51 Mins, 10 Secs, 7 Frames
    =
31 Mins, 45 Secs
    =
0

(Pre-Production = Production = Post-Production = Final Film = Post Mortem)

2.1

“Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot will be shot.”

By order of the Author, Per G.G. Chief of Ordnance.
This introductory disclaimer that precedes Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* - not to mention the rest of the story that follows as well as the book *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* that came before - embody so much of what served as inspiration for *Not the Boss of Me*. Twain’s wandering vignettes of moments and events that fill the pages of these two books spoke to the spirit of the author and the characters he created: wild, free, comical and harsh. These are the themes that resonate with me, speaking through the characters I coax into existence through my writing and collaborations. The world I see is chaotic and untamed while whimsically tragic. The turbulence of adolescence is something I’ve never outgrown. I still believe in magic and that anything I dream can be made real. Age and experience has taught me that not everyone has your best interests at heart and that monsters can truly live under your bed or just down the hall. The tendency to become jaded is a form of reflective emotional self-defense bringing about disdain and skepticism in spite of all the beauty and wonder that surrounds us. As Tom observes, “Right is right, and wrong is wrong, and a body ain’t got no business doing wrong when he ain’t ignorant and knows better.” The piercing view of youth’s innocence cuts through the clutter of maturity’s rationals and explanations to see the simple truth, direct and to the point, free of the posturing and pseudo-eloquence that age and experience impose. This is the heart of what I am inspired by, what I aspire to preserve. A belief that monsters live under my bed, yes, but also that dreams really do come true.

Despite the fact I’m about to turn 50 this summer, my inner child still feels very close to the surface. My reading list bounces back and forth between things like Carl Jung’s autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Gene Youngblood’s *Expanded Cinema* and Mildred Wurt’s (aka Carolyn Keene) *Nancy Drew* novels and Kevin Eastman & Peter Laird’s *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* comics. The movies I watch range from Dziga Vertov’s 1920s groundbreaking
silent documentaries (*Man With a Movie Camera, Enthusiasm*) and Wong Kar-wai’s 1990s non-linear explorations (*Chungking Express, Fallen Angels*) to Walt Disney’s 1970s family productions (*Escape to Witch Mountain, Pete’s Dragon*) and Hanna Barbera’s 1960s jazz-infused animated adventures (*Jonny Quest, Scooby-Doo*). All of these things, no matter their perceived intellectual depth, are constructed from a central place of playful inquisitive analysis - what if? It is a question packed with the potential to challenge authority, alter perceptions … or just play a game. It is the core of the scientific method and the basis for all childhood amusements. I am in love with the duality and contradictions that life presents - double entendres, mixed metaphors and subtexts alike. While driving home from work one day, I was listening to a friend’s latest song he’d just recorded. I was hearing the song without knowing the title but instantly hooked by the tune’s simplistic, almost childish, opening melody, like someone just learning to play. The lyrics were playful and direct, no poetic muses or innuendo. The line that stuck out to me and, if you’ll pardon the pun, struck a chord with me, turned out to be the song’s title - “You’re not my dad.” My friend, the musician and composer, elected to spell the title “Your Not My Dad,” with the grammatical error included. Between the simplistic melodic hook to the song and this singular lyric, a creative spark ignited in my brain. The defiance of the lyric and point of view that could only come from a child, regardless of age, spoke to me and my inner surface-level child. A backstory quickly unfolded to me of a child, wise beyond their years, forced into adult situations when they should be out playing with friends. In many ways, this child was me. This perfectly exemplifies what I was referring to in Chapter 1.2, where sound and music awakens my mind’s eye and begins constructing visual narratives driven by emotional connections inspired by audio impulses. The spirit of the music touches something new yet familiar inside me, opening up my imagination like a blank canvas. That emptiness, that void begs to be filled. For me, music is a question: what do I see when I listen, and how does it make me feel? I will delve further into my methodology of using soundtracks as a tool to map emotional and visual narratives later on in this section.
“All art is autobiographical. The pearl is the oyster’s autobiography.”

- Federico Fellini

When I was a child myself, living in a remote part of West Virginia at the time, the elementary school I attended stood directly next to an orphanage. A significant portion of my school’s population were orphans, as were quite a few of my friends. After school, I would follow them to their housing just behind our school playground. I remember being so in awe of their independence and self-reliance. For whatever their respective reasons, they all had been dealt a tough hand early on and were forced to grow up very young in many respects. The home I lived in was several miles from my friends, situated on top of a hill far off the beaten path. My nearest neighbor was nowhere in sight, not a single child anywhere to be seen. That is, until one day when, at the far reaches of our property, I happened upon a young boy my age. I was beyond thrilled to see him and immediately waved him over to see if he wanted to play. My isolation was finally over! When we met in the middle of my parents’ field, I discovered that the boy was deaf. There was a brief moment of, I’m ashamed to admit, disappointment. Would we be able to play together? How would we communicate? As the son of a freelance photographer, steeped in imagery from birth, I knew how to speak in visuals. In no time at all, we had established a language, a hodgepodge of his sign language and my basic skills at charades. We spent the next several days having the best time, when just as suddenly as he had appeared, he was gone. Our friendship began in the middle of that field, absent any adults, existing in silence, in a vacuum. It was as if he’d been my imaginary friend. I had next to no proof he ever really existed. I know that he did, because I saw the house he’d lived in. My grandfather said he knew of the family that had lived there temporarily. Just the same, to this day I often think back to that brief moment in time and wonder if it ever truly happened. In these formative years, the relationships I had with the orphans and the deaf boy shaped the way I saw the world, a place where children can be abandoned or fleeting, where self-reliance is an asset and friends can come in all forms if you’re willing to reach out and find them in the abyss.
The context of my childhood was stirred upon hearing the lyric “You’re not my dad.”. That and the rudimentary melody touched a nerve inside me that inspired the Not the Boss of Me narrative and subsequent project. It should also be noted that I am a father of two young girls who could be seen as a pair of Nancy Drews in their own rights, precocious and inquisitive. Even before we had our girls, I gravitated towards stories that followed the adventures of young women rather than boys. I always got along better with girls than I did with boys, with a few exceptions, so it stands to reason that my first impulse when envisioning the Not the Boss of Me central character came in the form of a young pre-teen girl, an orphan to be exact. The first model for my heroine came in the form of my oldest daughter, mixed with a young Jodie Foster (a little more Freaky Friday than Taxi Driver, but a mix of the two). And that was the beginning: a song, a lyric and a character. The story was yet to come.

As much as I’m a visual person and can see narratives, I rely almost entirely on sound to facilitate my visions. Very rarely will I see an image that evokes another image. I’ve certainly seen photographs and films that expand my visual palette of options, or glimpses of life’s scenes that are cataloged in my brain for reference, but it’s in the auditory realm that my mind’s eye opens wide and imagines something new. A tried and true method of narrative development that works incredibly well for me is the creation of a soundtrack playlist. By researching themes and tones through various music and sounds, I can establish the emotional beats, character rhythms and storyline arcs that I want the narrative elements to follow. I see through sound, via a sensibility possibly planted by my experience with the deaf child of my youth. When you see an image, it’s hard to see anything other than what’s in front of you. When you hear a piece of music, it’s difficult to hear anything else. In both instances, you can isolate various elements - pigment, hue, contrast, melody, rhythm, tempo. To attempt to focus your attention either visually or auditorily is to only see or hear one thing at a time, yet it is completely possible to see a photograph of a ballerina and hear Strauss’s Blue Danube waltz, or hear Herbie Hancock’s Rockit and see a collage of people wearing parachute pants and carrying ghetto-blaster boom boxes.
The mind’s dexterity can easily juggle the multi-media focus without any trouble, flipping through the channels of visuals and frequencies of sound. Therefore, my first step in visualizing a story I want to depict is to arrange a musical soundscape that will ground the emotional blueprints to build my narrative around.

“You can’t really divorce women’s struggles in the world from women’s in the cinema. As long as there’s hierarchy it means that women are somehow secondary or second class or less than. That’s going to be reflected in movies because films are the most powerful medium to reflect back society’s view of itself.”

- Sally Potter

Part of my undergraduate degree, primarily in the Performing Arts, was a minor in Women Studies. A course on Feminism in Cinema, the first formal film class I ever took, was an eye-opening experience in which I was first introduced to Laura Mulvey and her 1973 essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema and the concept of the “male gaze.” The class analysis - through dissection of the Alfred Hitchcock film Vertigo - revealed a disturbing pattern of objectification of the female characters through use of color and camera angles. For example, all of the male characters are filmed at an upward empowering angle while the females are positioned down from the camera. The male lead, played by Jimmy Stewart, in moments of weakness is similarly filmed at a downward angle, in essence emasculating him. These insights into how film in particular can be used to subjugate women through their visual and narrative depictions made me reevaluate my white male privilege and the ways in which I might be unwittingly playing into tropes and techniques indoctrinated into me through years of exposure to a largely male-dominated medium. With this new awareness in my writing, as well as any photography/videography, fictional or otherwise, I began to expand my sensitivities beyond the comfort and convenience of my own distinct point of view. Basic questions asked of any character in a story include: “Who are they?” “What do they want?” “What stands in their way?” Now, with a renewed and heightened attention to characters of the opposite sex. I needed to ask a new set of questions, similar to those presented by American Cartoonist Alison Bechdel and her Bechdel-
Wallace Test first addressed in her 1985 comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. The criteria for satisfying this test are as follows:

Does the film…

- have at least two women,
- who talk to each other,
- about something other than a man?

It feels simple, but when applied to a majority of films they fail time and time again. Jan de Bont’s *Speed* (1994) features a female lead who’s used as a plot device between the film’s hero and villain’s objectives. Sydney Pollack’s Academy Award-winning *Out of Africa* (1985) has one female lead whose story is focussed on her relationship with two other men. Or the perennial story *A Star Is Born* (1937, 1954, 1976, 2018), whose single female lead character’s plot is tied to that of her self-destructive male counterpart. It should be noted that in recent years, due in large part to the Me Too movement and others like it bringing social awareness to under-represented and marginalized people, the film/television industry has begun to generate work representing a wider range of diverse voices and faces. That representation of women, ethnicities, races and gender fluidity is a welcome breath of fresh air but requires people like myself, a white male, to recognize and honor these unique individualities in our own work and not rest on our laurels and privilege. So when I first decided that I would craft a story about three women ranging in age and backgrounds, I thought it imperative to construct a creative headspace to put flesh and bone of these characters and their worlds. Therefore, using my model for establishing a narrative soundtrack, I selected music from a collection of largely all-female
bands. By steeping myself in these voices and the themes and emotions they shared, I could sustain an attitude of gender awareness while still maintaining focus on the narrative objectives: emotional beats, plot points, conflicts and resolutions.

The soundtrack was crafted to establish the tone and intention of the project’s original plan and scope, a nine-part series comprised of 10-15 minute episodes. Each piece of music, with the exception of the last episode’s conclusion, served to both usher in each installment while simultaneously concluding the previous one. This model followed the three-act, or eight-point, plot structure.

**ACT I**

1. Status Quo & Inciting Incident
2. Predicament & Lock In

**MUSIC TRACKS**

1. The Doom Song, Plasmatics
2. Troublemaker, Shannon & The Clams

**ACT II**

3. First Obstacle & Raising Stakes
4. First Culmination/Midpoint
5. Subplot & Rising Action
6. Main Culmination/End of Act II

3. I’m Your Negative, River City Tanlines
4. Disaster (Is What We’re After), Death Valley Girls
5. Screws Get Loose, Those Darlins
6. The The Empty, Le Tigre

**ACT III**

7. New Tension & Twist
8. Resolution/End Credits

7. Standing in the Sun, Jessica Lea Mayfield
8. Guided By Angels, Amyl and the Sniffers / Feeling Ok, Best Coast

Each episode spoke to the specific plot point in the narrative, while each piece of music resonated with the tone and pace of that installment. While the thesis project would aim to depict only the events plotted in the second and third installments of the series, for the project to be successful, it was imperative that the surrounding episodic contexts of the remaining six episodes were well-established so that their connection was woven into the DNA of what was filmed. The audience, whether directly or indirectly conscious of the fact, must feel they have dropped into a story already in progress as well as on its way to a specific destination. While I was an acting student at the DePaul Theatre Conservatory in Chicago, we engaged in an exercise involving two
doors. An actor would enter the stage from one door, cross the stage and exit out another. By the way they entered through the first and exited through the second, using only their physicality, we the audience should be able to perceive where they’ve come from and where they’re going. By taking episodes two and three out of sequence we (the audience) should be able to comprehend what preceded the film and where it is going following its conclusion. The gaps in specific exposition are largely irrelevant; only the intention is crucial, to ignite the audience’s imagination which will instinctually fill in the missing details. We need not know what caused the fire, only how the fire affected the character impacted by it. The cause will ruminate within the audience, providing a multitude of possibilities - a multitude that would otherwise be impossible if solely dictated by the exposition. It is as Hitchcock pointed out, the MacGuffin of the plot: the object, device or event whereby the story is put into motion, but largely insignificant to what the story is actually about.

“Grab ‘em by the throat and never let them go.”

- Billy Wilder

Before I decided to film only episodes two and three, combining them into one singular short film, I had envisioned filming the first and second with the rationale that I needed the first installment due to the fast-paced information dump it established right off the bat, providing the audience with a hyperinjection of energy and context. The first obstacle with that plan was the massive amount of casting involved, not to mention one scene in which the main character: ran off the street into a house through the kitchen out the backdoor into the backyard up a slide onto a shed over a fence onto a trampoline while being chased by a police officer. And this doesn’t even address the large black tie fundraiser event and/or church scene. I was excited by the prospect of depicting all of these things within the vacuum of our soundstage, thinking that the nature of the project (telling a story with as little as possible) provided me the immense flexibility and dexterity to create these spaces with less effort than filming on the actual locations. As it
turns out, the first big lesson of simplification is that it takes a lot of preparation and invention to create something that isn’t there.

“I didn’t have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote you a long one.”

- Mark Twain

The process whereby I developed and executed the Not the Boss of Me thesis project film was through a long series of drafts - scripts, sets, lighting plots and camera storyboarding. The scripts were written over the course of the summer of 2022 and went through several revisions before a cast reading was ever scheduled. They were developed and drafted with the full intention of being filmed on location with all the scenic and property elements needed to convey the story. I didn’t want to write a script influenced by the production method. As with some past films of mine, such as Even Break (2014), I approached the production from the technical standpoint first: what kind of film will I make, how will I film it, what resources will be available to me and what story can I craft from all of these elements? It was very much a cart before the horse-type of scenario, where I was concerned more with my skills as a filmmaker than with my ability to tell a good story. The end result was a film that looked good technically, but meandered around its story, confused and lost. Despite failing as a successful story, it succeeded in my original objective. Hamlet 95 (2015) was a similar experiment wherein I took a well-crafted scene from Shakespeare’s play Hamlet and set it in a small-town racetrack, filming it with the RED Scarlet cinema camera. Again, the technology and location were the driving forces behind the project and resulted in much the same outcomes as Even Break: technically proficient, intriguing location … and sluggish storytelling. In the time since, years of working as a documentary media maker has given me the confidence in my ability to visualize and assemble on-my-feet narratives, based on instinct honed from experience. So in 2022, confident in my ability to effectively create a technically proficient film, I was able to relax some of those anxieties and focus on crafting an engaging story with well-rounded characters and objectives, leaving the mechanics of production
to fall into place around those elements, not vice versa. Perhaps as a byproduct of my personal issues with anxiety, my motivations were steered by a desire to answer questions more than pose them. Thus, why I’m prone to solve technical problems first. The act of writing and creating characters is a process of fostering intriguing questions, laying a breadcrumb trail to entice the audience to follow. A counterargument to that could be that I have often approached creative projects from the perspective of: what do I have to work with and how could I potentially use it? From that approach, I have perhaps painted myself into several corners (though it is worth acknowledging that I still got the job done). This time, I was able to suspend the desire to account for the inevitable technical challenges and/or limitations and allow my creative impulse to flow unimpeded. The thesis objective became a protective barrier between my imagination and the practical world where no idea was restricted from being entertained. Once the scripts were in their penultimate drafts, the harsh reality of feasibility began to slowly seep in impacting my creative ambitions. The first casualty? Episode one.

“Kill your darlings.”

- Stephen King

Making the decision to cut the first episode from the project was a heartbreaking edit to make while also being a pivotal choice in setting up the film for a successful production. The script was far too ambitious for the time and resources available to me and had to be axed, but at what cost? The primary concern was that that first episode not only established pace and tone, but set up characters, their backstory and relation to one another. Starting the film with the second episode meant that none of that foundational architecture from episode one would be laid down, and despite the thesis’s objective, the end product might be one long non sequitur that was impossible to interpret. I had no desire to create an “art film” that potentially left audiences scratching their heads, asking the wrong questions like “What the hell was that all about?” The goal was intrigue and speculation, not confusion and frustration. As with the authors such
as Rod Serling mentioned in Chapter 1.1, where they fluidly balance between poignance and absurdity, I find the challenge of weaving a mystery the most exhilarating part of narrative construction. As with the concepts behind Chater and Loewenstein’s *The Under-Appreciated Drive for Sense Making*, I’m intrigued how the removal of narrative elements can actually help to define as opposed to obscure information. Something needn’t necessarily be seen nor heard for an audience to know that it’s there. The challenge in the orchestration of missing information is successfully sustaining the point of view of the first-time viewer, to consciously ignore what I know I know. The perpetual question is always “Will this work?” The answer to my own question - “Will the loss of episode one adversely affect the overall narrative experience?” - wouldn’t be answered until the first rough cut of the film was assembled, and not truly answered until the first audience responded to the final cut. It felt like a roll of the dice at a craps game, only the dice didn’t come to rest for four months. I had felt strongly that the success of the project depended on, at the very least, filming the first and second episode, with the third being a bonus if time allowed. I would later come to appreciate how much more effective the film could be by sacrificing episode one’s setups for episode three’s conclusion. This realization wouldn’t begin to dawn on me until the film was cast and production had begun, though the first glimpses became visible during readthroughs.

With scripts in hand, it was time to put them through their paces via a series of staged readings with friends and actors. My method of production, no matter the medium, is to find the path of least resistance. This isn’t a tendency to take shortcuts, but more a philosophical choice, adopting a pseudo-Taoist mindset to attune my sensibilities to find the natural path a project wants to gravitate towards. Call it fate, call it karma, call it what you will, but I do believe when open to alternatives, life will provide opportunities that can take you places you never imagined. Additionally, I find that when I push or direct too much, the outcomes are less rewarding and surprising. The moment of discovery is the lighting in a bottle every artist and filmmaker is looking for, seeking to capture it in time and suspend it in space. To that end, I like to begin my
creative searches away from the obvious avenues - looking under the proverbial rocks - to find the unexpected. I truly value the time and training that professional actors devote to their craft, bringing a level of professionalism and skill beyond the average person off the street. I myself have committed time, blood, sweat, tears (and plenty of money) to become a professional actor and understand that investment. Yet there are times when the spit and polish of training and professionalism can put too fine a gloss of overconfidence on an actor’s performance. It can take time to wear that off and time wasn’t a luxury I had afforded to me; the camera can be a delicate instrument that picks up the most subtle of details. As I told my actors, both trained and amateur, you can almost just think your performance. Without speaking, gesticulating or any significant movement at all, an actor’s eyes can convey pages of dialogue and intention as seen through the camera’s lens. Therefore, reaching out to friends and acquaintances who I knew had little to no acting experience but naturally embodied some core attribute of a character in the script, felt the obvious choice. For example; a longtime friend and member of Maine’s Army Reserves had a friendly affable personality, but with a slightly regimented and formal manner of speaking. They immediately came to mind for the role of Officer Todd, a local policeman who grew up with one of the main characters Scotty and had to arrest her. His awkwardness in the role added to the discomfort of the situation within the brief scene. Characters whose emotional range and screen time required more commitment and skill were given to my trained actors. The untrained actor whose abilities might be limited but no less adept substitute the precision and refinement of the trained performer with the nuance and flavor they bring to the smaller roles. We call that “production value”. A piece of professional practice advice given to me by a friend and colleague, the actor Mark Torres, who I worked under during his tenure as the Artistic Director of the Penobscot Theatre Company in Bangor, Maine. Mark stipulated his method of hiring artists and crew to work with on his productions:
The 3 A’s of Hiring

*(in order of importance)*

Affable
Available
Able

*Fig. 3 Best hiring practices*

First consideration: Are you good to work with? Second: Can you work when needed? And lastly: Are you capable of doing the work? It may seem counterintuitive to have ability as the last thing on the list, but in the grand scheme of things, finding people who are pleasant to be around and can show up to do the work is oftentimes more valuable than the level of the skillsets they bring to the production. The creative process is an intimate (and sometimes arduous) experience, and surrounding yourself with people whose company you enjoy and feel supported by is an asset never to be underestimated. In my experience, this is reinforced more so in film as opposed to theatre. Theatre typically operates within an intense yet reasonable production structure (9 to 5, 7 days a week) whereas film is plagued with “hurry up and wait” and long production days that can reach fourteen hours and longer. Pleasant dispositions and a good sense of humor should be listed on everyone’s resumes.

Once I’d assembled a cast for the readthrough, the best method of scheduling and gathering everyone was via Zoom. As it was only a reading of the script, having everyone in physical space wasn’t really a need or even a true consideration. Hearing my words read out loud, specifically the dialogue, had its moments of enjoyment, but mostly it made me want to slash a majority of it. There’s a degree of ire I bring to the sound of my dialogue when I hear it. I have such a deep admiration for authors who weave words like fine silk economically and with laser focus accuracy. I envy their ability and strive for their excellence, but it is a painful process I try to avoid whenever possible. Dialogue is a method of last resort when painting the visual narrative has reached its limits. A staged reading of the script is like going to the dentist or a
colonoscopy done without anesthesia: you find out what’s wrong VERY quickly. And it’s VERY uncomfortable. But once the bandaid is ripped off, the healing can truly begin. The reading cast, which for the most part would go on to be the film cast, did an outstanding job bringing all their unique voices and sensibilities to the characters, illuminating aspects I hadn’t considered while confirming attributes I had. From those sessions, I was able to go back and trim the fat where it wasn’t needed and flesh out places where it needed more development. All of this would change again once production began and we were up on our feet.

Preparing to film this project required a different approach to the standard art direction that comes with your average film production. Ordinarily, one might read…

INT. ANTIQUE JUNK SHOP - NIGHT

…and begin searching for locations that satisfy the script’s need for an interior of a building littered with various sundries one might find in a shop devoted to secondhand merchandise. This project aimed to reduce those elements down to their primary signifiers: sounds, objects and/or light that suggest this environment. Upon reflection of what things define a location, after stripping away any and all superfluous items, I discovered that the one singular affectation that establishes the identity and condition of said location are its doors. Part of the project’s self-imposed restrictions required that only items requiring an actor’s direct physical interaction should be provided, all other nonessential attributes of a space would be omitted. Taking a page from previous art projects of mine like A Good Idea at the Time (2013) and Artist Unknown (2013), whereby I labeled the intrinsic attributes of a gallery space as artwork, I examined the elements of any given space, dissecting it piece by piece until all that was left was its identity. Its doors. Doors provide a space its character and its backstory. They are portals between two environments, representing both a gateway and a barrier between worlds. They operate independently outside of all other scenic elements and are imbued with meaning and
functionality. By determining that all locations set in and around a building would be established by strategically characterized doors, almost the entire scenic design for the film was created in an instant. Finding and acquiring the doors - not to mention costumes, props and equipment - would take a little more effort.

No stranger to bargain hunting, dealmaking and the proverbial dumpster diving, I was in my element when it came to creative production acquisition. What I needed were items that came with history and character built into them, nothing brand new. Goodwill, Salvation Army, Facebook Marketplace, second-hand shops, etc. were all in the mix. I was looking for doors that had come fresh off a building, pockmarked and weathered; clothes that were lived in and torn; props that were broken or missing pieces were the gold standard for quality. For doors, I went directly to Facebook Marketplace, an excellent resource for finding local and/or nearby vendors looking to offload their unwanted items … and doors were in abundance. For relatively little money, I was able to find all of the doors I wanted and in a variety of conditions. The furthest I had to travel was roughly a hundred and fifty miles round-trip, the closest was just under ten. Everyone I met was intrigued by my project and curious to see how their unwanted doors would be used. For one scene where a character takes refuge in their bathroom to escape unwanted guests, I required a toilet. Fortunately, a resort hotel off the coast of Bar Harbor was in the process of renovating their facilities and looking to offload twenty toilets for free. I only needed one. The owner of the resort was generous and willing to break up the set, and proceeded to clean up a commode for me. After I picked up my shiny secondhand resort crapper, I brought it to the space where we’d be filming. While unloading it, the porcelain flush box lid slid off the dolly truck and broke off a corner piece. Serendipitously, it went from a lovely resort throne to a low-end apartment shitter. Voila! PRODUCTION VALUE! Returning to themes like the Taoist “way,” the script called for the main character to have a unicorn adorned backpack. As much as I wanted this exact item, I knew better than to die on that hill if I couldn’t readily find just exactly what I was looking for. The ideal backpack needs only to embody a childish quality,
something frivolous and (contrary to her character) precious. Now, I don’t know if the stars were in alignment or my chakra was centered or something else, but whatever the cause, on my first foray into Goodwill, as if pulled by some unobservable force, I walked in the door and straight to a hanger draped with backpacks. There I found a pink backpack covered in happy little unicorns leaping over rainbows. The Gods had heard my prayers and they had delivered. And just for good measure, they also brought me to a Pat Benatar t-shirt that served as the cherry on top for my main character’s wardrobe. (It should be noted that I’m a huge Pat Benatar fan, and the film *The Legend of Billie Jean* (1985) has long been an inspiration to me and subsequently this film project.) The path of least resistance appeared to be greased that day. Similar instances like this occurred throughout the pre-production process, making the effort of assembling the production pieces a smoother endeavor than some where I had pushed, making for an arduous ordeal.

Another key area where fortune favored the foolish came in the form of the filming location, the Hauck Auditorium at the University of Maine School of Performing Arts. I required a large, wide open space with dynamic lighting facilities to accommodate the various locations, both intimate and broad, depicted in the two scripts. My association with the Theatre Department dates back to 1999 when I was enrolled in their undergraduate Performing Arts program, having transferred from the DePaul Theatre Conservatory. From 2009 to 2012 I served as their Marketing Manager for the Music, Dance and Theatre divisions long before the current Theatre Production Manager and Technical Director MJ Sedlock joined my MFA thesis committee in 2022. With the permission of the School of Performing Arts and Ms. Sedlock, we negotiated an arrangement to utilize the Hauck stage over the winter break when faculty and students would be away and the space not in use. As luck would have it, the last performance event on the stage for the semester was the dance showcase which would leave the stage completely empty and a full lighting plot in the air until the beginning of the spring semester. With assistance from the SPA Lighting Technician JP Sedlock, I was brought up to speed on the lighting system and board operation, positioning me to adapt the current plot to fit the needs of my film and scenes. For the
most part, scheduling the production portion of the project during the winter break fit with the cast and crew holiday plans and availability, setting us up for a smooth and successful shooting calendar. Filming a movie, no matter how grand or small, is like waging a battle. It requires meticulous planning, organization and troubleshooting in order that when things go wrong - and they will always go wrong - you can be flexible and adapt to the changes as they come without losing time, focus and momentum. This is an area where the lessons I take from movement and rhythm as explored in Chapter 1.3 come into play, establishing a sense of pacing while remaining adaptable to changes that might otherwise disrupt the organic flow of production. The adage “measure twice, cut once” is truly apt in this situation, with the exception being that you measure approximately 3742 times before you make the final cut.

2.2

Production

(aka: If you want to make God laugh, tell them you have a plan.)

Fig. 4 Iris Drop Off (All photos by Adam Küykendall except where noted)

Long before production began I established a set of preliminary rules which the overall production would adhere to, keeping it reined into the thesis objective with one caveat*;
• **Script** - lean, efficient, energized, non-expository

• **Actors** - facilitate a space where actors follow their impulses, not direction

• **Video** - limited to the functions and lenses available on an iPhone 13

• **Audio** - acquire the highest quality of dialogue sound recordings

• **Props** - limited to items actors have direct interaction with; no “space objects”

• **Lighting** - limited to what is available in the performance space

• **Set** - limited to and defined by characteristic doors and actor engaged items

• **Soundscape** - fill in the missing visual elements and environments via sound, 80% of what we hear is what we see

*If things need to change, they can.*

A subset of these rules pertained to the way in which emptiness, or nothing, would function with regard to each environment. Just because we couldn’t see a wall didn’t necessarily mean we could therefore see through that wall. As each environment, either inside or out, was established through distinct soundscape realities (busy street, interior of a car, etc.), so too would the elemental visual cues need to adhere to a similar set of principles.

Once the cast was determined, composed mostly of everyone involved with the readings minus a few exceptions, a shooting schedule was mapped out. Due to everyone’s daytime responsibilities, including my own, weekends and evenings were the only times we could film. The fact that two of the three leads and one supporting character lived with me - my wife and two daughters - meant that communication about the production schedule was streamlined. My wife, who portrayed Scotty, like her character, worked evenings in the restaurant industry and had limited availability. My children’s school was on vacation break so they had the most flexibility out of any of the cast. Despite having almost a full month worth of time to film on the University stage, the holidays presented a challenge, as all of the cast and crew had a conflict in the middle of it all when no shooting was possible, leaving theoretically three weeks
to film. When everything was taken into account what remained for production were five days to film episode two and only four for episode three, leaving a one-week buffer in the event of any unexpected changes or delays.

The stage became available on Saturday, December 17th, 2022, the day after the campus closed for the holiday and my first opportunity to begin dressing the stage and focussing my lighting plot for the first scenes to be filmed. My plan was to film the episodes and scenes in reverse order, with the idea that if for any reason I ran into trouble completing all of the shoots I could theoretically start the film from almost anywhere in the script so long as I had a definitive ending. This would end up being a strategically valuable decision in alleviating a significant amount of anxiety when things did run into issues and the buffer was used to its fullest, right down to the last day.

Every day of filming was peppered with the standard amount of anticipated production snags and missteps. None were so significant as to derail shooting, but when they add up, they can begin to erode one’s patience and lead to poor decision-making (AKA death by a thousand papercuts). I raise this point for two reasons: 1) to bring attention to the ways in which the tiniest problems can accumulate over time becoming far more damaging to any production than any one large
problem, i.e. a power outage, an actor suddenly has to leave in the middle of a shoot, no crew is available (all of which happened). Big problems typically have few but obvious solutions, which bring an emotional reward when they’re overcome. Small problems often come with quick fixes but with no real deposit in your emotional bank. If anything, they pick away at the production clock, increasing one’s sense of time running out, which leads to making poor decisions that potentially don’t reveal themselves until much later when the quick fix is no longer an option. Consider it a form of the Butterfly Effect: a butterfly flaps its wings and a tornado wipes the camera crew off the face of the map. 2) On a more personal level, I was not even a year out from having suffered a massive mental breakdown that left me incapacitated for several months. A lifelong battle with depression had concealed an equally long struggle with anxiety that caused a series of panic attacks so severe I couldn’t leave my room for almost a month. It took several more months of medication and therapy before I was able to even entertain the idea of returning to work. When facing our anxieties we are put into a fight-or-flight scenario. For me, years of anxiety had hid behind the inescapable weight of depression. Every time I was faced with an anxious situation, my instinct was to charge forward like a bull in a china shop. It never occurred to me that that constituted an issue with anxiety.
I was facing my fears. But was I? Like that bull rampaging through the shelves of porcelain, I was causing significant damage to myself and everything around me with that behavior. I wasn’t dealing with anything. I was hoarding destruction and drowning in fear. The pandemic brought with it a new level of anxiety on a global level and when I contracted it myself, it ignited the fuse of a stockpile of emotional explosives buried in my psyche. Jump forward a year later, still seeing two therapists a week and taking two pills a day, I am undertaking one of the more stressful things an artist can do - mount a film production with multiple moving pieces. Maintaining a certain level of, dare I say, sanity throughout each phase of the film production was essential for everything moving forward pleasantly and successfully. Eating right, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep were all part of my production plan. Any deviation from those core requirements could jeopardize how effectively I was able to work with others and remain true to my creative vision. If anxieties began to overwhelm me, that would lead to snap decisions, which would lead to bad choices, leading to more issues, which would bring about depression, low energy, unenthusiasm, lack of leadership and eventually total creative collapse. So in managing my molehills from becoming mountains, part of my production mantra - like my thesis - was to eliminate any elements that threatened to undermine my emotional stability and/or creative vision. It may seem counterintuitive, but the first direction I gave to myself was, let go. The essence of the thesis, releasing the reigns of a dictated visual narrative, resonated throughout the production practice and aided me in providing a method to facilitate a fluid vision without allowing anxiety to anchor it in a rigid place. By allowing possibility and potential, two catalysts for anxiety, to become tools rather than landmines I was able to reverse my adversities into advantages. A project that could have easily unraveled a year’s worth of recovery suddenly became an opportunity to grow and heal.

The first aspect of production that I “let go” were storyboards. I wanted to spend my time crafting scenes and working with actors, not setting up shots, executing complicated camera movements where actors have to hit exact marks. We had limited time and imposing my
artistic vision was less important than just telling the story as succinctly as possible. An actor’s performance would be just as strong with or without some dynamic sweep of the camera around them. Those movements add flourish and visual subtext, acting like a garnish to the main course, but they don’t sustain and nourish the narrative. Despite this fact, it was an incredibly difficult choice to make, for all the great artists and filmmakers who have influenced me over the years leave vivid and visible fingerprints all over their work: Henri Matisse, Jackson Pollack, David Lynch, Stanley Kubrick, The Coen Brothers, Johann Sebastian Bach, Charles Mingus, etc. But I was reminded, specifically, of those filmmakers whose style is more subdued and subtle. Their signatures are less pronounced: Robert Wise, with *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1957), *West Side Story* (1961), *The Haunting* (1963), *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979); or Billy Wilder, with *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), *Ace in the Hole* (1951), *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *The Apartment* (1960). These filmmakers came from the old-school Hollywood system where a system of apprenticeship was in place and each studio had its own way of making movies. They honed their craft via the assignments they were given and executed them the way the studios wanted them. From the 60’s until fairly recently American Film Director/Producer Roger Corman provided young up and comers like James Cameron, Ron Howard, Jonathan Demme, Peter Bogdanovich, John Sayles and many other filmmakers their first, albeit through low-budget productions, breaks in the film business where they cut their teeth and learned the art of movie making. Over time they gained more control and began choosing the projects they worked on. This isn’t to say that their signature isn’t woven into the fabric of their work, more that the seams are better hidden.

Over the past decade, the vast majority of work I’ve done has been documentary, requiring that I be adept at capturing footage in the moment, creating scenes and compositions on my feet. In documentary work, there are rarely (if ever) opportunities for retakes. Every moment is a one-time event, barring any organic repetition intrinsic to the activity your subjects might be engaged in. Documentary productions also require the ability to sustain and update a continuous feed of
footage inventory in your head, assembling a rough cut on the spot in your mind as you’re filming. You have to know as you’re shooting whether what you’ve shot can be assembled to tell the story of the moment you’re in. This may be the rare instance where a history of anxiety and depression becomes a tool. Anxiety is a fear of the future and depression a lament of the past; preoccupation with these two concepts have made my mind agile enough to use my anxiety to troubleshoot what I have to work with against my depression what I don’t. Feeling confident that my experience in documentary gave me the ability to shoot without the security of storyboards, I let go of that guardrail and took a leap of faith that, as one of the themes in my story professes, everything would work out.

Filming began on Sunday, December 18, 2022, with the three primary characters in their first scene, narratively, together. We would spend the next four days filming in one centralized location. From my days working on film and television sets in New York City, I knew that you should always make the first day of filming something very achievable. By setting yourself up for success on the first day, you ensure that you begin the production on the best note possible. It’s better to find yourself running behind on the second day, than on the first, so as not to make the cast and crew feel like things have started off poorly. Maintaining optimism and enthusiasm...
is central to the success of any group endeavor. I’d often schedule a series of scenes I wanted to accomplish in a single day; knowing it might not be possible to capture all of it in the time we had, I’d list the last scene or two as “bonus.” I’d rather have everyone think we finished everything we expected to, minus the extra stuff, than feel we failed to do it all. Like a parent engaging with their children, the kiddos don’t always need to know the facts. It’s far more important they feel safe and secure so that they can play and grow. One more reason why self-care was so important for me. I never wanted the cast and crew to see me panicked or frustrated. I know there are directors who use negative impulses to prod their actors into the performances they’re trying to capture. I find this level of manipulation disturbing, and no matter how

**Fig. 11 Scotty’s Apartment, through the camera lens**

successful the results are that it might achieve, it’s largely a one-trick pony that undermines trust and erodes self-confidence in those you work with. I have not as of yet found myself in a situation where this method is something I would ever entertain implementing, and in all likelihood never will.
The first obstacle that presented itself came from a place I never expected and thought I had taken care of long before a script was ever written: my camera. For the sake of ease and flexibility (as well as limiting any technical distractions), I had chosen to film the entire project on my iPhone 13 Pro. The last phone I had prior to the 13 was the iPhone 7. Now capable of shooting 4K resolution images that would provide me with some wiggle room - especially if I were to produce my project at 2K resolution. I could therefore shoot loose (wider), and then push in (closer) to the image and the increase in grain and pixels would be less noticeable, giving me some flexibility. As I was long overdue for a phone upgrade, I traded in my 7 for an iPhone 13 Pro, equipped with 1TB of memory. In addition, I invested in a SmallRig phone housing unit that would enable me to attach hand grips for better manipulation of the phone/camera, as well as house a small plugged-in shotgun microphone. I would be recording all of the audio via an independently-run Zoom F8N Pro digital recorder, but having a modest backup feed coming from the shotgun microphone provided me with a safety net should anything go wrong with the Zoom. On previous freelance work where I’d required a third camera, I had used my new iPhone
13 Pro utilizing the Filmic Pro app. The app enabled me greater control over the camera in the phone allowing me access to adjust shutter, aperture and iso functions. The standard camera operations that come with the iPhone are fully automatic, giving almost all of the control to the device. Filmic Pro had worked wonderfully for me in the past, so I had no doubts it would do a great job on this production. Hence, it never occurred to me that there would be any issues once we got to the set that first day of shooting.

As soon as I powered up the app, I noticed immediately that the interface had changed slightly - not so significantly that it gave me concerns, but just enough to make me go, “huh.” As we all know, phone apps are constantly undergoing updates, so little changes here and there crop up from time to time - rarely a complete overhaul, just minor tweaks. Without a second thought, we began filming. A few delays in the morning - caused by getting set up, some idle chit chat and preliminary discussions - put me in the frame of mind we needed to get shooting ASAP. As we began filming the first scene, I noticed that the camera seemed to be making adjustments to the image contrary to what I had set it for. The adjustments weren’t wildly different than what I was after but, again, it gave me pause. Time was burning though, and if it wasn’t something too egregious, I would just have to review it more closely after we were done. And so the first day of filming proceeded. As much as the technical issues were attempting to distract me from the actors and their performances, I managed to feel semi-satisfied with how the camera was functioning while I kept focus on the execution of the scenes. It wasn’t until later that evening, after filming had wrapped for the day, that I made a horrible discovery.

Fig. 13 Scotty's Hits Iris with car
that threatened the entire production in a way I never could have imagined. Filmic Pro had in fact updated their app, increasing some of its functionalities - and inadvertently introducing some new bugs. More importantly, they had instituted a new contingency in which once you began filming in 4K, all of your footage remained locked within your device and only accessible through their paid subscription service. I could view and edit the footage on my phone, but downloading it to my computer or sharing it with anyone (YouTube, Vimeo, Instagram, etc.) would require a paid subscription. Knowing how much footage I would be gathering over the next several weeks, it was completely unrealistic to think I would or could edit the entire project on my phone. Without realizing it, I had essentially committed myself by filming an entire day’s worth of footage in 4K with the app and now it was locked inside my phone where I couldn’t get at it without paying for it. The issues with the camera settings switching back and forth between my adjustments and the apps automatic features were a bug in the system. With a minor amount of fussing, I could overcome the system bug, but the footage locked inside the phone was infuriating. My outrage was more on principle than the expense, which would be modest, but it
would add to the production. I could review the footage on my phone and know it was securely stored on my device, so I made the decision to continue using the app and wait until production was wrapped before paying to download everything to my computer. Needless to say, it kept me constantly anxious that should anything happen to my phone, everything I shot could be in danger of being lost. It added a level of anxiety I didn’t need. Opting to use the phone’s automatic camera settings just wasn’t feasible and overcoming the app’s eccentricities seemed preferable. Without missing a beat, we pushed forward and damned the torpedoes.

With a camera that worked well enough and a top-of-the-line audio recorder that exceeded expectations, all I really needed was a crew to operate them so I could devote more of my attention to the actors and scenes. Months of searching and meetings with potential crew members had resulted in just two individuals whose enthusiasm was priceless (but whose availability was almost nonexistent). All of the camera operators I knew were either unavailable or brought with them unwanted elements that I didn’t want involved with this project. A close friend recommended someone who I’d known years ago, but didn’t realize they were still in the area. As it turned out, they were working at a local news station and were more than eager to talk with me about the project. We quickly determined that a collaboration on the project would work well. They loved the project and I loved them for that. Applying the 3 A’s, they checked off the first and last box. The second, availability, would almost eliminate them from contention if I hadn’t been so desperate for any assistance I could get. Out of the nine-plus days of filming, my camera operator was available for two half-days. The rest of filming would fall to me. Audio was a slightly better story. Realizing early on it would be hard to find someone to run sound, I invested in a sound operator that was always available, rain or shine, 24-7, and could handle every situation so long as the actors never moved: a c-stand equipped with a boom pole. Since I’d made the decision to not film episode one - which contained the bulk of action and movement - the remaining two episodes were composed of relatively stationary scenes. Still, movement was inevitable in a number of instances. As I was unable to find anyone willing or available
to help with operating sound, I resorted to deputizing any actors on set but not on-camera in a particular scene to follow actors with the boom pole. Training was quick and easy: listen and follow the sound (AKA the actor’s mouths). Leaning on the cast to help with recording sound when the c-stand wasn’t an option was a huge lifesaver. I did, however, have the occasional assistance of a student for whom I was a committee member for their thesis project. It worked out well. I got a sound operator for a couple of days and they got experience in a field they were just becoming familiar with. It made for some anxious days and unfortunate mistakes, but when it was all said and done, I had usable footage and sound to work with. The last remaining challenges were my precious doors and occasionally finding myself locked out of the stage.

An unforeseen obstacle to production operating smoothly came in the form of my glorious character doors. I’d gone out of my way to find the real thing, aged to perfection and full of personality, providing my nonexistent spaces with everything they needed to infer the rest of the structures they were supposed to represent. I’d communicated with the University’s Technical Theatre Division about constructing a low-profile door frame from which I could hang my doors and quickly move it to any location I needed. It seemed like everything was working perfectly - until the world of theatre carpentry collided with real-world construction requirements: all of my doors were far too heavy to be supported by a simple stage frame. Unfortunately, by the time we came to this realization, I had no time or resources to invest in anything other than what I had. The door frame was completely adequate for hanging the door and keeping it in place. The downside was that in order to open or close the door, it took anywhere from two to three people to do so - one to two people to steady the frame to keep it from twisting apart and one person to open or close the door. Since the door frame was, as per my request, low-profile, there was nowhere for the keepers of the frame to hide from the camera whenever the door had to be manipulated. I always knew that filming within a vacuum presented a challenge with regard to giving a sense of space and in turn a feeling of movement. If you have nothing to judge distance between objects, it’s difficult to feel relative momentum. I worried that this might potentially
undermine an intrinsic level of energy that comes with any realistic space, filled with objects and dimensions. It wasn’t until we began filming that I came to see that to give an amorphous space depth, the actor and their distance in relation to the camera provided all the context needed. From that discovery, I quickly realized that I could give any stationary object a sense of movement through space by adjusting the position of the camera in relation to it. Two actors seated in a chair could suddenly become a moving car if the camera kept them in frame as it moved around them. Without any other object to anchor the reality of their permanent position, the illusion was near flawless. Using those same principles, I could apply that to my immovable doors by moving the camera instead. Doors would open and close by swinging the camera towards or away from their stationary position. This simple fix to the problem bought us considerable time we could have wasted trying to construct a workable solution. Some doors were far less problematic than others, providing us with a few opportunities to have actors actually open or close them on camera, but all the way in one take. In all other situations where the door was too heavy to move the illusion of it opening or closing was achieved by swinging the camera towards or away from the door. It was a cheat, but one that satisfied our goals. For a time, I felt like I was making a film just about doors opening and closing, due to the amount of time and energy it took to facilitate an actor entering or leaving a room. Eventually we had a system in place and it became routine. After that, the only things that truly threatened production were the multiple times we were locked out of the space.
Due to our production taking place during the holidays, when faculty and staff were rarely on campus - if ever - there were a few times where I arrived before the cast and crew to get set up for the day’s filming to find I was locked out of the space. As luck would have it, all but one time, someone would happen to walk past and see my forlorn looking face outside in the cold, arms filled with filming equipment, and let me in. It had never occurred to me or anyone else that getting into the building would be a problem. As an employee of the University, I had rarely run into a situation where I came across a locked door, outside of an office or utility closet. I was very fortunate to have timed my arrivals when others happened to be in the area. Each time I thought I would be locked out, my brain would feverishly troubleshoot how I could solve the issue, scrambling to think of alternate locations (empty parking lot, basement, any place open and empty), and just when I would begin to formulate an alternative plan, someone would arrive with a key. These brushes with disaster kept my mind active and continually ready to throw everything I’d worked to construct out the window and pivot in a different direction. Never marrying myself to anything other than the thesis objective - how little do I need to tell this story - is what kept me from being overwhelmed by anxiety. So long as I maintained my project goal, there was almost nothing that could derail things. One day, I arrived to find that due to a power outage the day before, the theatre’s fire curtain, a proscenium-sized flame retardant wall, had dropped to the floor, essentially cutting off a quarter of the stage but also half the lighting system. The obstacle that it created meant that if it couldn’t be removed, I would have to adjust all of the lighting from a board on the opposite side of the wall from where I needed to see the

*Fig. 16 Hauck Stage, power outage, “fire curtain” brings filming to a halt*
adjustments. The headache it was about to present, on the second-to-last day of filming, could have meant I wouldn’t be able to film everything I needed before my time on the stage, and with the actors, had run out. Again, I was brainstorming right and left how to amend my plans and conceive another way to get everything done. Oddly, I find big disasters far easier to solve than small ones. Small problems typically have multiple solutions, whereas big ones wipe out your options in one fell swoop. There was no suffering the process of weighing alternatives. The fire curtain provided me with really only one of two choices: figure out how to remove the fire curtain and proceed as planned or toss the lighting plot out the window and bring everything up to full. It was better to film something in enough light that the camera could get a good exposure and fix it in post rather than trying to spend time finessing atmosphere and nuance when I couldn’t even see what I was doing. But just as I was about to commit to this unavoidable choice, help arrived and through some sheer muscle power, two of us were able to remove the fire curtain and filming commenced as planned, having only lost thirty minutes. That thirty minutes would later come back to haunt me when an actor I had for only one day of filming notified me they needed to leave thirty minutes earlier than anticipated. This is where, in addition to being the director, being the screenwriter made it much easier to make an executive decision to rewrite the script right then and there. If there are three words to sum up the essential qualities needed to produce a film, get it done on time and maintain one’s sanity they are: flexibility, flexibility, flexibility.

All of this belies the obstacles that any collaborative production, film or otherwise, can find itself fraught with. The true test is how well you roll with and adapt to those unforeseen challenges. You prepare yourself as best you can for the sole purpose of positioning yourself to not be ready to deal with problems, but to maximize your time and energy to create. One of my greatest joys in working with others to create a communal vision is facilitating an environment where impulse and imagination ignite one another. Actors in particular require operating within a safe space, a working environment where judgment and censorship are virtually prohibited. They should be
allowed to explore their feelings and avoid getting into their heads. We are reactive beings in our day-to-day lives. We may operate with a five-year plan for our lives, but we exist in the now, a highly volatile and vulnerable place. If you over-complicate your direction to an actor with too much, they will retreat into their heads and start calculating their performance. This might work for an evil villain who’s plotting the end of the world, but inevitably, they will be tripped up by the heroine in a moment of impulse. Anything other than an act performed in the moment is exposition - a reflection or projection. Working within a near-empty space was potentially rife with the temptation to put an actor in their head: where am I, how is this space defined, where am I going? When the space and environment isn’t defined and providing something to react to, it must be created through the actor’s imagination. The way to counteract this urge was to keep the actors focused on one another. There’s nothing more reactive than another actor. Scenes were constructed in a way that rarely allowed an actor to be in a space that they needed to imagine. If they were, then those scenes were planted with scenic anchors where they could focus their attention: a cardboard box, a door, a folder. The actors didn’t need to construct environments - that was the job of the audience. The actors needed to build relationships and stakes and to constantly deepen and heighten both. By illuminating the trappings of a real world location, we reduced distractions, avoiding the trap of too many things to imbue with meaning and subtext. Working within a nondescript space, we reduced the ambiguity of clutter. We always knew what an actor was reacting to, where they were getting their impulses. The line of sight was clear and their intentions vivid. Another method of hosting a setting for productivity took a page from children’s games. A good game for children presents clear rules and boundaries while leaving just enough room for chance and improvisation. I made it clear from the beginning that the script was merely a guiderail to keep the play contained but not restricted. Allowing for ad-libbing and/or omission, if only in gesture, freed the actors to allow natural impulses to come out without second-guessing. I found that the invitation was all that was needed to get the performances I was after. On only a few occasions did anyone feel inspired to actually add or drop a line from a scene. When the actors felt the freedom to explore what came comfortably, most times they
found it within the confines of the script. Opening the playing field from the start turned the scripted scenes and dialogue into a starting point, not the end goal. As the character relationships began to take shape, the spaces established form and the story fell into place. I wouldn’t come to see or appreciate that fact until the final edit was made and I sat to watch the first rough cut of the film. In a way, I wasn’t sure it would ever work.

2.3

Post-Production

“A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.”

- Jean-Luc Godard

As I mentioned, one of the first obstacles that threatened the production was the unexpected change to the Filmic Pro app I intended to shoot with; all of my footage was locked on my device and only accessible if I paid a subscription fee (AKA ransom) to enable its download function. Irate that any company would quietly alter a piece of software this way, I refused to pay any more than absolutely necessary. I waited until production was completely finished before paying the fee, then downloaded all of my video then promptly canceled my subscription. I backed up all of my files, but also knowing that everything was still on my phone and in the event of catastrophe, I could always resort to paying a modest fee to get access again. *NTBOM* would be the first and last project I shot with the Filmic Pro app, unless no other alternatives (and all of the bugs fixed) were available.

After production concluded, all work on *NTBOM* had to be temporarily suspended as a hefty freelance job (orchestrating a multi-camera crew live performance shoot and post-production) overwhelmed my scheduling, running longer than expected. By the time everything was
downloaded and imported into an Adobe Premiere timeline and synced with their external audio, my first glimpse at everything I’d captured during production, over a month had passed. My heart sank like a lead weight to the floor. The footage looked far worse than it had appeared in the camera on my phone. Seeing on a large monitor every flaw and mistake were ten times larger now. My scene coverage appeared sparse and rough. All of my eager anticipation about digging into the footage was completely undercut by a sudden splash of cold hard reality. What was worse than anything, aside from contrasty images and poor coverage, was seeing how undeveloped a filmmaker I truly was. All I could see were my missteps and rookie mistakes. My lifelong obsession with film might mean I knew a great deal about movies, their history and production techniques, but my skills were still those of a novice. A flurry of short random films when I was a teenager, put on pause by a garage band drummer/actor sabbatical until I was in my mid-twenties, followed by a paltry scattering of short films until only recently do not necessarily make for a maverick film director. The critical lens through which I was viewing my film (and subsequently, my life) was harsh and unforgiving. I felt as though, professionally, my life had been wasted. Why hadn’t I spent more time working on my craft? Why hadn’t I found the time, energy and resources to produce more? As I’m about to turn fifty, with over twenty years of experience as a storyteller; why am I turning out a film that looks like a graduating film school senior produced it? All of my anxiety and depression flooded back in and I was consumed by the feeling everything had been a complete waste of time and resulted in an utter disaster.

As part of my therapy, it was discovered that I suffered from PTSD. The course I and my therapist plotted was an extensive and arduous process of CBT (Cognitive Behavior Therapy) whereby through a series of daily worksheet exercises, I examined that causality of my emotional/mental triggers, putting them to the test of whether they are based on perceived or factual factors.

By continually analyzing these thoughts and emotions I came to better understand how my
perception was distorting reality. The filter through which I was seeing myself and my world was straining out the positives, leaving only the negative. As I spiraled down a pit of despair, as I reviewed my footage, I was looking at the project on such a micro level I literally couldn’t see the forest for the twigs. The only option truly available to me was to strap myself in, push forward and start the real work of putting the pieces of this mixed-up puzzle together.

Making a film is a crazy Frankenstein process of creation. You start with the body of a story (script) - you can see the film in your mind’s eye. It’s there, it’s tangible. It’s idyllic. Then you dissect it apart into tiny little pieces, examining it one cell at a time, trying to remember what it all looked like before you got it on the operating table (production).

Once that’s done and you’ve gone over all of it, you try to put it all back together again, but you quickly realize that all of the pieces don’t fit perfectly together. Something’s changed in the process. Something about tearing it all apart, bringing in Igor and others to give their two cents worth of input, alters everything so that it’s different. Despite working with the exact same elegant DNA, the creature (the film) you assemble back together appears disfigured and clumsy.
This is the process of post-production, the reanimation of a story that lies dormant on the page. In many ways, post-production is the most invigorating of all the phases of a film’s production. It is the moment of truth and birth. Everything prior to post-production is conception and fetal development. The moment you begin to assemble a film is when you go into labor and the birthing process begins. As I’ve alluded to, this can be a painful process. The soul-searching and creative struggle can be tedious. The film you started with, the one on the page and the one in your head, must now come to terms with the reality of what you actually have in front of you. Here is where that familiar refrain of flexibility, flexibility, flexibility comes into play again. Part of what I was seeing as I looked through the footage was a distorted view brought on by self-doubt and failed aspirations superimposed over every frame I’d shot. I had to surrender what I’d hoped to capture on film and embrace what I had recorded. The more I tried to make it something it wasn’t, the more I ignored what it was. Here again, as laid out in Chapter 1.3, I needed to listen to my dance partner and find the natural rhythms of the scenes and stop stepping on my own toes. By moving away from my insecurities and initial goals, I could begin to see what I had to work with. Going back to those Taoist principles of finding the natural way in
which things want to instinctively flow, I needed to silence those anxious voices inside my head and listen to where the materials wanted to lead me to.

It’s so fitting that the first scene I cut together features the conversation about Socrates and his philosophical statement that true wisdom of knowledge is achieved by knowing you know nothing. I say it’s fitting as though it unexpectedly came up unbeknownst to me, but I did put it there and very purposefully. Not only does it fit with my thesis statement (as well as the body of my MFA career’s work), but it’s there as a reminder to me specifically. The film appropriately starts in part with this observation to remind myself and the audience to leave everything you think you know at the door. It’s hard when cutting a film together to not see how the sausage was made and not be slightly sickened by it. The behind-the-scenes construction is hard to avoid, and yet you must constantly push it out of your mind and see only the magic trick, not the fishing wire suspending the girl in midair. This dual consciousness, a concept introduced to me by author David Krasner and his book *Resistance, Parody and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910*, speaks to the ability to juggle one’s perception between two realities and speaks to what I was talking about in Chapter 1.6 regarding an appreciation for perspective and context. In the era of the late 1800s, when audiences no longer wanted white actors in “blackface” to populate the popular minstrel show casts. an opportunity arose, however untoward it might be, for African-Americans to assume these roles. A popular comedic trope of the minstrels was the infamous “cake walk,” a silly dance white audiences associated with black people. These dances would have white and black audiences rolling in the aisle with laughter. White audiences would see a laughable stereotype being played out, whereas black audiences were laughing at what they knew to be a mocking dance they’d conceived of to imitate how they thought white people danced. Two groups of people, laughing at the same thing for completely different reasons. With this in mind, managing to suspend the vantage point of the first-time-viewer versus that of the been-there-seen-that perspective of the filmmaker is a delicate balancing act where the experienced POV isn’t necessarily the best angle to judge by. One
eye sees it for what it is, the other can’t help but see what it was supposed to be. What’s really at work here is separation anxiety, letting go of the control. So for me, the process of editing was a series of divorces. I’d married myself to a vision that got me as far as development and production, but once image and sound were committed to a digital witness, the honeymoon was over. Like any art form, once the work is put out there for the public to digest, the artist has surrendered control of the messaging and meaning of the work, whether they like it or not. It is a subjective piece of expression dependent on a subjective interpretation to have any relevance; otherwise it’s just background noise, wallpaper, refrigerator buzz.

As I became increasingly adept at letting go of my expectations and accepting what we had achieved, my death spiral slowed to a death … saunter. It was incredibly difficult not to feel I had failed my cast and crew when I sensed a scene didn’t get the proper coverage or a note of direction not given. In most cases, I could chalk up any issues with the film not to anyone else’s error, but to the fact I was overburdened with too many responsibilities: director, camera operator, scenic design, gaffer, craft services, costume designer, etc. At nearly no point in production was I wearing a singular hat. Now, in post-production, I had but one responsibility to the film and all of my issues were directed at one person: me. But with no time to dwell, and nothing to be truly gained by soaking in despair, I plowed ahead. As a wise friend of mine once said, “Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.” The way I was able to shake off my feelings of ennui as I worked through the editing process was through sound. Sound is what inspired me in the first place. Sound was my ground zero. It rooted me in the story, the emotions and the space. As I began to go into the edit and build out the soundscapes and environments, I found that I suddenly had the vantage point of the first-time viewer. The scenes quickly became alive in a new way that invigorated me and engaged me. I was experiencing the scenes in a way I hadn’t experienced them on the set. My behind-the-scenes directorial eye was shaded and all I could see was something new and refreshing. Now, I should say it wasn’t like a sudden bolt out of the blue. This had been the objective all along. I knew this day would come, I just didn’t realize
how significantly I would be affected by it once it came. I leaned heavily on the communal archive of sounds one can access through the website Freesound.org. Recognizing the value of this resource, I donate regularly to the service this organization provides. Sounds from all over the world, of all types and lengths, fill this invaluable library. For the opening scene of the film, I needed sounds evocative of a neighborhood early in the morning. After some searching, I was able to find a collection of sounds that when mixed together painted the environment in bird songs and neighborhood dogs. Where once before actors were engaging in a quiet and lifeless environment, suddenly there was a burst of activity playing around the peripherals of the scene, feeding into the performances and filling out the world they inhabited. This breath of fresh air pumped new life into my appreciation of the film. I was seeing it for the first time. My critical eye, no longer jaded, embraced what was unfolding in front of me. It was not until this moment that I began to feel that same level of hope one feels when one first envisions the potential for something new. Two actors sitting inside an empty space as the camera came closer to them suddenly transformed into the illusion of a moving car approaching a stationary camera and parking alongside a neighborhood street, all through the integration of sound. There is no better example of the suspension of disbelief in action. From here on out, the experience of assembling the film was completely different. Sound injected the film with a vitality that elevated the actors’ performances which grounded the narrative. The distraction of working in an empty space was just enough that it left too many unanswered questions: where are they, what time of day is it,
etc. The lighting could get you in the ballpark of what time of day it might be or some aspects of the specific location, but without the sound to give it context, the overall look and feel of the production remained rather flat. Sound became 80% of what you saw. The musical score elements aided with subtext and inner monologues added to the depth of the characters, speaking to the story’s heart.

The last stage of the process came only after everything was largely finalized and after a few test previews fostered some helpful feedback: the color grade. Once the picture was locked, with no more significant revisions to be made, I began the last phase of going in and color correcting and adjusting the image so that the film looked like how I wanted it to. As I’d mentioned, due to bugs in the camera app, it was incredibly difficult to dial in the exact look I wanted at any given time during production. I was left with images that ranged in contrast, focus and grain structure. As I’d learned throughout this experience, the road to ruin would be to dig into some unattainable vision and shoehorn the picture into it, so instead I leaned into the irregularities of the film’s footage and worked it to my advantage. Where contrast might be unavoidably too high in one essential shot, I would try to establish a look across all of the scenes that worked, meeting the troublesome shot at a happy medium. That way, it didn’t stand out in a way that drew attention to itself and disrupted the flow of the scene; hence, I was able to keep the shot. Troublesome shots like this were only kept if they provided essential content for the story and plot to move forward effectively. Story was always king or queen, to the point it forced me to sacrifice any ego I might have had about the “look” of the film. An attitude of flaws and all liberated me from being blind to what truly mattered within each shot and scene. Also, a subtle application of vignettes on each camera shot helped to coax the audience’s eyes where I wanted them to look, potentially downplaying any aspects of the images and their composition that I wanted them to avoid. As the audio helped fill out the environments, the color grades helped support the tone and atmosphere. As the energy and tone of scenes increased dramatically or narratively, the colors became deeper and richer. Where things begin to dip down the color drains away leaving
things feeling thin and empty. These elements work on a subconscious level, never aiming to hit the audience over the head or draw attention to themselves. It is here, where the subtle manipulation of image and sound to aid in the suspension of film’s illusion to an audience is where the magic happens, when the imagination is engaged whether consciously or not.

“*The most sophisticated people I know - inside they are all children.*”

- Jim Henson

In the first episode of his 1988 short series *Jim Henson Presents the World of Puppetry*, French puppeteer Philippe Genty explained to Henson his fascination with how audiences watching a puppet show dance intellectually between the rational and irrational mind. They recognize the mechanical principles behind what makes the puppet move and perform while simultaneously wishing the animated prop into existence, giving it life. *Not the Boss of Me* takes great inspiration from the world of puppetry and people like Jim Henson. The film makes no pretense that we are not in an empty space, a space where stands keep steering wheels suspended in midair, microphones loom overhead, stage lights stand in the wings and walls are both invisible and not transparent. The puppeteers are front and center, and as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes observed, if you truly want to hide something, put it out in plain view. By creating engaging and sympathetic characters committed to this make-believe world, the audience wills away the stands, lights and other mechanics, hence bringing into existence the environments, locations, cars and walls. Motion pictures are a magic trick, a contradiction. Pictures do not move - it is through the *persistence of vision* that we register a series of still images sharing a frame of reference as motion. Magic might not exist, but through misdirection and sleight-of-hand we are made to believe that it does. As a child, I was introduced to the theatre by my parents who helped form a company of actors that produced a production of the musical *The Fantasticks*. Shortly after the play begins, a small trunk is brought to the edge of the stage from which three actors emerge. The effect was spectacular. Later, when I was taken under
the stage to see how the illusion was achieved (via a trapdoor through which the actors entered),
the magic was no less impressive. If anything, it made it all the more glorious; it became tangible
and accessible. At that moment, I became the sorcerer’s apprentice. Like my experience with
Speilberg’s film *E.T.*, where I was made to vomit through a subtle positioning of the movie’s
camera, I was captivated and impacted by the power and magic of illusion. *Not the Boss of Me*
is the culmination of those childhood inspirations and the first steps towards new aspirations in
visual storytelling.

2.4

**Finished Film**

*“Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”*

- Samuel Beckett

When I first conceived of the script and series for *Not The Boss of Me*, I fell immediately in
love with the characters and story. My enthusiasm was incredibly high and I wanted to begin
filming it as soon as possible. As with any film production, no matter the scope or budget,
the amount of time to develop and prepare to begin filming far surpasses how long it takes to
actually shoot and edit it to completion. It is my only true complaint when it comes to making
a movie. I am jealous of the instant gratification of music, photography, painting, acting …
you name it. Certainly there is plenty of preparation with each of these disciplines, but still,
if you want to make music, all you have to do is blow air through a horn, strum a string or
beat a drum and you’re in. Voila, music! Translating an impulse into the click of the shutter,
the stroke of the brush, an opening of your mouth and speaking and suddenly - instantaneous
art. Film requires gestation and transmogrification before it can become what it is to become:
impulse, story/art, script, performance, photography, sound, montage. Every step of the way,
it requires communication, interpretation, then back to communication again. It is like a larva that grows to a caterpillar, maturing within its chrysalis and emerging as a butterfly. Its makeup and essence are composed of all the same genetic principles it began with, only now restructured and assembled in a completely different order taking on its original intention. From words on a page, by way of the hands of a collection of collaborators adding their distinctive flourishes to the composite artistry, they assemble a work that is far greater than the invention of a single individual. And when it’s done, it exists only in the now, but a now that can transcend time and space. It remains eternal, yet fleeting. Like a musical chorus that changes its meaning after each new verse, the context of the refrain provides new insights. Film is music, photography, painting, acting, writing, magic, therapy, three french hens, two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree. It is the orchestration and synthesis of all the arts into one singular art form actualized by motion and illusion. It may be seen as a cinematic art, but it is intermedia at its core, pulling from all respects of that discipline. *Not the Boss of Me* has been just that to the nth degree. I have taken an impulse activated by sound, interpreted that reaction into words, composed its voice through casting, painted its shape and form through light and shadow, defined its relation in time through photography, imbued it with meaning through montage and left it open to interpretation through absence and voids. *Not the Boss of Me* was never intended to be an end result, but a series of starting points defining a narrative map to a place of possibility. Over the course of the experience, this experiment has made me reflect on my ability to tell engaging
stories that entice the audience, dangling satisfaction just out of reach without bringing about frustration. A piece of artwork can be challenging to comprehend or even digest, but it must, at some base level, resonate with the audience’s soul, like a dream we once had but can’t quite remember. We’ve been here before, we just don’t know when we were - or possibly who we were. That’s a sort of magic, too.

At many points throughout this process, I have doubted whether this concept would be successful, whether I was capable of articulating my vision as I had dreamed it. Even with script in hand, I at times lacked the confidence I could translate its story to the screen. All the way until the completion of the first draft, I doubted it would ever come together successfully. When I finally sat and watched the first rough cut, I was surprised to see that it made sense. But I still couldn’t be certain. I was too close to the project; I knew what was missing in all the gaps in exposition and unanswered questions. I wrote the cheat sheet that decoded the symbols, so how could I be an impartial judge? On far too many projects, I had successfully reached an audience of one - myself - and patted myself on the back. This time, I needed an objective point of view to gauge whether the experiment was a success. I should note here that I view all artwork to be an experiment, an hypothesis of expression and meaning tested through an audience laboratory. No one needs to be an art or film critic to have the authorization to judge an artwork’s ability to impact them, and no one person’s inability to appreciate said artwork has the power to diminish its attempt at trying. In essence, it takes only the artist deeming it art to make it so. And it takes
only one other person to appreciate it to make it mean something more. *Not the Boss of Me* was an invitation to the audience to make it something more than what we said it was. In that regard, it is a success story. In truth, it is a success story in many ways. Most importantly to me is that it is a further step forward in my development as an artist. My greatest fear was that I would create something I’d already done before, that I would repeat myself. I’m someone who hates needless repetition. I never repeat the same joke over and over again. I dislike replaying the same games, unless I can achieve a different outcome. I was worried I would rehash old techniques or fall into old patterns. My greatest terror was that I wouldn’t show any growth or development since my last project. As I’ve stated, for fear of repeating myself and self hatred to ensue, film is a laborious process and takes a great deal of time, so I haven’t been churning out film after film.

If this film turned out like the last one I did over four years ago? What a tragic realization to have to come to grips with. But it didn’t. And I didn’t. I saw growth and development. It was something new and unexpected. One of my greatest joys during production, after having told the cast they could ad-lib if they wanted, was to hear them utter an unexpected line of dialogue, only to discover I was the one who’d written it. And therein lies the beauty of the collaborative process. To quote Gene Roddenberry’s favorite *Star Trek* Vulcan, “Infinite diversity in infinite
combinations.” I can certainly fall in love with my own idea, but to see how and where others are inspired to run with it is far more interesting to me than just hearing my own voice. I’ve made films that came out exactly as I’d planned them with little to no deviation and I never want to see them again. The films where they went to unexpected places are the ones I revisit, because I learn something new each time. Not the Boss of Me sought to present an opportunity to foster a co-authored experience between art and audience, leaving just enough vacancy in the narrative the viewer could fill in the spaces with their own wild imaginations like that same untamed youth that inspired me long ago.

“...if I’d a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn’t a tackled it, and ain’t a-going to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before.”

THE END. YOURS TRULY, HUCK FINN.

Fig. 24 Iris has a plan that can fix everyone’s problems
Post Mortem

*(aka: MFA Student “no wear special” Gallery Exhibition)*

“If I care to listen to every criticism, let alone act on them, then this shop may as well be closed for all other businesses. I have learned to do my best, and if the end result is good then I do not care for any criticism, but if the end result is not good, then even the praise of ten angels would not make the difference.”

- Abraham Lincoln

With the film wrapped and cut together the thesis project itself still had one last stage to complete before it could be truly called *in the can*: a public premiere via the 2023 IMFA Student Exhibition in the UMaine Lord Hall Gallery. Unlike my MFA colleagues who had physical objects to display and interact with within the gallery space, I felt that it would run contrary to my thesis objective to install either a mock theater space where patrons could watch the movie or have it indiscriminately looping on a wall monitor. The gallery real estate to have such a theatrical space installed didn’t exist, nor did I have the desire to have people standing in front...
of a monitor for thirty-plus minutes (or more depending on when the monitor was approached). Certainly there were potential workarounds to this problem, but the main sticking point for me was that none of them satisfied my need for the solution to be both simple and intimate. In line with the thesis objective - how little is required to create and convey a visual narrative - I elected to streamline the presentation to the one evocative element that always captured my attention as a child and has continued as an adult. A movie poster.

Within the layout, I created a Quick Response Code (QRC) which linked to a webpage containing the film. Patrons could scan the code and choose to view the film from anywhere and at any time, untethered and unobstructed by the confines and distraction of the gallery. An art gallery is rarely an intimate space where art and audience share a one-to-one connection. That’s not to say an intimate connection cannot be achieved, but unlike sculptures, paintings or some other art objects where the sum total of the work is suspended in time directly in front of them, a film can only live in the moment. It vanishes in the blink of an eye and is immediately replaced by something new. Any form of art may require multiple, if not lifelong, viewings, listenings, etc. to ferment a layered experience of appreciation and comprehension. Dance, music, film - any of the performative arts - unavoidably require at the very least that you experience the event to its completion before you can say you have been exposed to the art in its entirety. With that in mind, I opted not to present my work in the gallery, but rather to leave an invitation on the wall that patrons could take with them. Using grant funding, I purchased a 27”x40” LED backlit movie frame like those found in movie theaters around the country and installed my movie poster inside.

As people assembled on the gallery’s opening night, they milled about the various exhibits, eventually lighting up my modest marque and met with an intriguing image not dissimilar to your average movie promotional poster (provocative image bookended by title, slugline and credits). The one less common addition was the QRC at the bottom. That night, as I watched
and photographed the event, I saw several people approach the poster and look over its contents; some left perplexed while others scanned the code. Though I was known to be one of the artists presenting work that night, no one approached me about the work, the poster, or anything really. It was as if I wasn’t there. As if the work wasn’t there either … which it was and it wasn’t. I mention this all not from a place of shock or ennui, but from a place of personal surprise that I didn’t mind my anonymity or that I wouldn’t bear witness to an audience experiencing my work. For years as an actor in addition to other creative outlets, I have needed an audience’s affirmation to give me a sense of purpose and worth. The act of artistic expression was never enough to satiate my appetite for approval. So to present something to the public and not immediately follow it with “What’d you think?” was a huge milestone for me personally. Especially for a project that left itself so vulnerable to interpretation that I found myself literally and figuratively standing beside myself. I expected a certain degree of separation anxiety, but by *gifting* the film experience as something to take home and view privately, where the experience was to be yours and yours alone, I reduced the expectations I put on myself and theoretically eliminated the audience’s need to respond in any other way than internally. I have often played with the idea of dabbling in the field of myth and legend, a medium that exists largely in the realm of the spoken word, like a game of telephone where the message evolves as it is passed from one person to another. Take someone like the elusive artist Banksy, whose work appears almost as if by magic; I am curious how the mystique behind their identity impacts the reception of their work. Is a stone obelisk in the middle of a field where it doesn’t belong just as impressive if you know who put it there? Or more so if you don’t? Banksy is a celebrity that doesn’t exist - they are something from nothing, a person created by their art. Now, I’m not boasting any similarities between Banksy and myself. I’m merely postulating that an artist’s anonymity may provide a mutually beneficial arrangement between them and their audience, allowing the art to just be free of entanglements.

In an era where we increasingly know more and more about the personal lives of the art creators
we love and enjoy, that information doesn’t always reflect well on the artist and, subsequently, on their work. We find ourselves continually questioning how culpable we are in consuming good art made by potentially bad people. I’m not advocating for ignorance, nor for allowing shady characters to operate under the radar, but it is true that once a work of art is released to the public, that public assumes co-ownership, a remnant of a capitalist system. My gallery experience was nothing like a Banksy release - my name was on the poster and people do know who I am and where to find me. But the experience, however subtle it might have been, harkened back to some of my earliest work: the series *Unknown Artist*, where I didn’t claim any ownership of the art. A decade later, one of those pieces still hangs inconspicuously on a wall in the IMRC, waiting for people to find it. If I’m only a legend in my own mind, does it make the myth any less real? By presenting my work in a way that separated me from the audience experience, I surrendered ownership of something I never truly owned in the first place. For a brief time it existed (in script form) as an individual’s personal expression, but as soon as I invited in collaborators, it became something so much more than the sum of one person. With each phase of the experience - pre-production, production, post-production and exhibition - the number of hands in the pot increased. It has long since grown beyond one person and will continue to do so with each new viewing. Whether I’m associated with it by name or by some elemental particle, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, the work is the work is the work.

“The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.”

- Keyser Söze
2.6

Conclusion

“There is no real ending. It’s just the place where you stop the story.”

- Frank Herbert

Following the gallery event, I hosted a premiere night of the movie at a local venue for the cast and crew. In contrast to the self-imposed anonymity of the museum exhibition, I was taken aback by the audience reaction to the premiere. Seeing and hearing them respond to the film, the laughs and the silences, was unexpected but incredibly enjoyable. I’d insulated myself so well behind the making of the film that I’d forgotten anyone might see it and have an opinion about it. In doing so, I’d protected myself from judgments and criticism that might have influenced me away from my instincts. I wasn’t looking over my shoulder as I cut the film together. My focus was straight ahead and free of outsider commentary that might make me second-guess and/or question my choices. I was confident in what I was doing while navigating unknown territory. When I did receive feedback from several of my committee members, I found myself open and receptive to their comments. It helps that I had good counsel and I respected their input. But even if the feedback had contradicted what I considered insightful or provided perplexing suggestions, wherein in the past it would have eroded my confidence, this time my anxieties were no longer in control of my emotions. I could listen objectively and therefore more clearly.

With this renewed sense of self confidence and emotional security, I created a survey composed of questions I hoped would establish how effectively I had communicated a complex visual narrative to an unbiased audience. Some questions addressed very specific visual elements:
Where did the story take place?

What kind of house did the foster parents the Palmers live in?

Please describe a type of vehicle used by one of the characters in the film; please be as specific as possible (the character, make of the car, model, year, color, condition, etc.).

I provided multiple choice answers for some and short form responses for others. Multiple choice allowed me to confine but vary the options while also including my own personal answer in the selection. I could then gauge how successfully I’d accomplished my targeted goal in addition to seeing where the audience’s own interpretation had drifted to. Take the first question - Where did the story take place? The options to choose from and the percentage of responses were:

A) A major city (Boston, New York, Chicago, etc.) 9.1%
B) A small city (Portland, ME/OR, Springfield MA, Savannah GA, etc.) 54.5%
C) A town (Bangor, Brewer, Augusta, etc.) 27.3%
D) No idea where 9.1%

My original concept fell under option C) A town, but came in second based on audience polling. The discrepancy between my intention and the audience interpretation may be a direct result of the soundscapes. Scotty’s apartment, which constitutes a significant portion of the film’s scenes, was depicted as a busy location with the most chaotic sound environment. The volume and mix of sounds may have helped to sway the audience more towards seeing a metropolitan setting rather than a smaller sized town. With regard to the type of house the foster parents the Palmer’s lived in: 54.5% responded a fancy upscale house, 27.3% a middle income home and 18.2% a low income home. This was more in line with what I was trying to communicate and believe reflects my visual investment in establishing locations via characteristic doors. That and the actor’s dress and demeanor successfully helped to define the invisible house they inhabited.
But not all of the thesis’ question, how complex a visual narrative can be communicated through minimal elements, revolved around strictly representing visual elements without physical forms. The goal also was to see how detailed a story could be conveyed visually without exposition. I wanted to see not only what you can envision without seeing, but what you can see without hearing. As the film was almost completely devoid of any direct expository comments, the line of survey questions revolve around topics such as:

- Why was Scotty arrested?
- Why is Cloris on the run?
- What’s the story behind all of the boxes in Scotty’s place?
- Was Scotty hitting Iris with her car an accident?

The answers to all of these questions are embodied in the film via the actor’s physicalizations, body language, facial expressions, inflections, etc. Like with the economy of set elements through minimalist practices, this was an exploration of plot through a conservation of words. In response to the question, Why was Scotty arrested?, 45.5% said she attacked a customer, 18.2% she committed a robbery, 18.2% were unsure, 9.1% she skipped a parole from a previous crime and one person thought drunk and disorderly. Almost half of the responses were exactly on target with the actor’s intention - she attacked a customer. The two best examples of successfully communicating plot without any direct exposition were in response to Why is Cloris on the run?, with 100% confirming Cloris is suffering from dementia. The second - What’s the story behind all of the boxes in Scotty’s place? - had 54.6% saying they belong to her recently deceased mother, 18.2% the remains of her failed restaurant, 18.2% result of a divorce/breakup and 9.1% saying she’s a transient. Though not as definitive as the Cloris question responses, with just over half saying the boxes belong to her dead mother, it is still incredibly impressive when you consider that her mother is never mentioned at all. Scotty has a one word reaction to a question about her father and a few protective moments over the boxes; other than that, the mother is created through omission.
A revealing theme that presents itself from the survey responses illustrates how an incredibly small percentage of the audience came away with no idea what they were seeing. Even those who were uncertain about a location, character plot or relationship dynamic still provided a theory of their own if the provided options didn’t agree with their interpretation. Again, Chater and Loewenstein’s *The Under-Appreciated Drive for Sense Making* is seen in action, where the audience sees an incomplete picture and instinctively fills in the gaps in an attempt to make sense of the experience. Under an optional portion of the survey, audiences were asked to share any additional comments regarding their experience, the following represent a summary of the general feedback sentiments.

“I appreciated the ambiguity of the piece starting with “The next day.” It made me understand that the story was in progress and that I needed to hit the ground running to pick up the clues in the narrative. It was a very active viewing experience, as opposed to a passive one where I don’t have to think as much.”

“Trusting in the journey was part of the fun. I didn’t need to know specifics.” “There was much about this that I didn’t get on the first watch. Once I saw the questions, I went back and reviewed it and picked up things I’d missed. I was unclear about Scotty’s crime, the history between Iris and Cloris, the relationship between the girls and Allen. But there was enough character development there that I felt I could make good guesses on the details that I wasn’t sure about.”

“It took a little more work to follow the story and keep track of the characters, but most clues were there and it was an effort I wanted to make. The most challenging point was figuring out the environment right after scene transitions and I may have missed plot points in the dialogue trying to establish a location in those opening seconds.”

Had the overwhelming responses reflected a sense of confusion and/or frustration with the methods and content of the film, it would have felt as though the project had failed to meet its thesis objectives. However, based on the survey results, audiences are picking up on the subtle cues woven within the visuals and performances and filling in the gaps with their imaginations.
Regardless of whether they are taking away exactly what the author intended, it in no way negates the validity of what they’re seeing. Something is successfully being communicated to them and they are, for the most part, feeling fulfilled by the experience. In addition, it should be noted that there is something to be gained by misinterpretation when considering the long game of this particular narrative. As the project is only an excerpt from a larger story, having audience members misjudge narrative clues could help support an overall engaging experience as the longer story unfolds, upending expectations and keeping things fresh. A case in point being some audience members interpreting the relationship dynamics between Cloris and her nephew Shannon. Some felt as though Cloris was evading elder abuse when she was hiding from him in the junk shop. Despite this not being the story of their characters at all, it is useful to know that in the early stages of the reveal of their relationship, some may interpret it that way. This creates useful tension and will help keep the audience on their toes as things evolve. I’m particularly proud of this outcome as it was earned without trying. We played the scene for its honest objective without trying to be clever which produced a delightful but incidental outcome.

Make no doubt about it, nothing is a lot of work. It would have been far easier to go out into the world and film this project in the actual locations where the scenes took place - an apartment, a secondhand store, a parking lot, cars, under a bridge, etc. The amount of time and energy that went into creating something from nothing far exceeded the typical production time involved with filming in actual environments. I liken it to the approaches of Georges Seurat’s pointillist technique in such paintings as *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* and Henri Matisse’s paper-cut works like *Le Bateau*. The former is a massive endeavor of minutiae operating on a microlevel that, if viewed too closely, completely obscures the picture all together, while the latter is so elegantly simple that it might be overlooked for the depth and meaning behind its individual pieces. A film shot on location might be easier to produce, but one still has to cut through the visual clutter to get their point across, whereas minimalistic filmmaking requires a meticulous level of construction where each element you introduce takes on the weight of symbolism. In a location-based film, a bike might be just a bike, but in a minimalist world
it means more. It means freedom. From start to finish, the project was fraught with obstacles both external and internal, and each hurdle was a choice to be made. At times, I felt the project might fall apart at any given moment or be a futile effort altogether. Countless times, I doubted myself and my objective, but what buoyed me throughout the process was my endless faith in the people I was working with and, in turn, their faith in me is what saw us through. So long as I knew the cast and crew believed in the project, no matter how high my anxiety grew, I knew the only option was to press forward and see it through to its conclusion. When the project was completed and I could watch the film and truly see only the film and not the months and days of pre-production, production, how the sausage was made, when I could take in the story at its face value … I became the audience. And as the audience, I could see everything that wasn’t there: the apartment, second hand store, parking lot, cars, under the bridge, everything. It had all worked. If the devil is in the details, the film was a satanic ritual potluck dinner for sinners and I was baptized by fire. I am now left with the dilemma of what will happen next. I know that I want to move forward with telling the continuing story of these characters, but I am faced with the decision of either moving to a location-based production or attempting to continue filming in this minimalist way. Audiences have embraced these characters and their story, responding strongly in favor of the style of storytelling. If we move to location-based filming, will some magic be lost? Or will it survive the translation back to its original intention? Perhaps that’s a question for another thesis.
CHAPTER 3

CREATIVE METHODS
(aka: the how-to of the what-for)

“Ipse se nihil scire id unum sciat.”

- Socrates (maybe)

Whether Plato’s account of what has become known as the Socratic Paradox - the postulation that “I know that I know nothing”- is an accurately attributed quotation by the Greek philosopher is an issue for contemporary discussion, but what is not debatable is the timeless wisdom wrapped within these few words. The quest to understand that which is unknown, to reach beyond our immediate senses and reveal the invisible architecture that surrounds and supports the worlds we exist in is an intrinsic quality baked into our DNA. As human beings we, like nature, abhor a vacuum. There is a need in all of us to find light in the darkness and sound in the silence, to fill the void of our existence with experience. It is here within this metacognitive state that I look into the fabric of space and time and try to understand how creative practice can embody and develop from a state of Nothing. Utilizing a journalistic model to explore an objectively grounded research process, I must first establish a foundation of fact and substantiated theory before a creative interpretation can begin to evolve. Additionally, applying the scientific method in this process solidifies an adherence to a set of ethical standards in which any fabrication/hypothesis is supported by a trial-and-error methodology that rigorously reinforces the core objective of the work. The framework of this objectively scientific practice is orbited by an Eastern philosophical attitude that welcomes random elements to impact and influence the work, as opposed to resistance which can lead to ignorance. This is not to say that limits are not essential, but rather the opposite is true: that boundaries are the alpha of the creative process in which Nothing is an enigma of suspended animation locked like an insect in
amber. Defined as a state of “undifferentiated potential,” what is the emotional impact and range of Nothing on the human experience? And how might this be articulated or represented within creative production? As I explore this question, I will seek to translate into being the concepts and manifestations of our understanding of Nothing. Nothing is a paradox like Schrödinger’s Cat, a concept explored further in my portfolio of work, in which it exists and doesn’t exist at the same time. It is a void, an absence, a silence, a space, a time, an experience. Nothing is everywhere. There’s Nothing to see here.

“...there is no lack of void.”

- Estragon, Waiting for Godot

The pursuit of Nothing as creative impulse is not an effort in minimalistic production or reductive interpretations but more a tool of inflection. We have awkward pauses in conversations that throw social behaviors into silent chaos while our brains desperately search for a purpose to remain talking. We put our faith in luck, religions and people. This faith is a reflection constructed from what we already know, as well as an attempt to superimpose these familiar maps over the random and unexpected occurrences in life to give us hope, meaning and direction. Nothing is a powerful influence on our lives and we are steeped in it every day. Contradicted within our need to fill Nothing with something, we also typically seek solace within the safety of Nothing’s lack of expectation. We need the release of Nothing. In David Shenk’s treatise on the Alzheimer’s epidemic, his research led him to discover that the ability to forget, to create a mental void, was a human necessity to maintain mental health. Without this ability, we are incapable of prioritizing information. Making the distinction between what’s something worth remembering and what’s not is essential to how we relate objects and concepts. Without it, expressions like poetry, among others, become meaningless. Robert Burns’ prose “My love is like a red, red rose, That’s newly sprung in June.” has not nearly the weight or meaning if “love,” “rose” and “June” all mean the same as “colostomy bag.” We need this distinction made possible
by the ability to bring forth substance from Nothing as well as the ability to allow substance to return to Nothing. My work strives to embrace the duality of Nothing, finding inspiration in its simplicity and guidance from its indifference.

"Within zero there is the power to shatter the framework of logic."

- Charles Seife

At the outset of my inquiry I have established three designated disciplines to focus my research around which should create a foundation of basic understandings of Nothing: philosophy, mathematics and physics. These approaches will frame a scientific structure around which to hang my creative practice as I delve into concepts of Nothing. My key concerns address:

What is the mental state of Nothing and how does one achieve and resolve this condition?
Where does Nothing exist and to what degree can it be considered no longer an undifferentiated potential?

How does Nothing reside within the scope of experience and what effect does it produce?

Charles Seife’s book *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* explores the history and impact of the number zero. By giving context to how and when zero was introduced into the world’s mathematical culture, we’re able to feel the great weight of the concept’s significance and ramifications. The material is accessible without feeling overly simplistic. Seife is able to position the number in a way that helps illustrate how this number unifies mathematics while at the same time harboring the ability to completely unhinge it, i.e. using zero to prove that Winston Churchill is a carrot. In the context of my work, the concepts put forth in this book are an essential element to the understanding of Nothing and how it exists in the world and laws of mathematics and science. This work perfectly exemplifies the limitlessness afforded by established boundaries. Working within the laws of mathematics, we discover a loophole in the system that threatens/promises to unravel any construct of logic if properly applied. Therefore,
if the laws of the discipline are understood and the restrictions are established, we can begin to redefine what lies beyond the borders of our knowledge.

Sten Odenwald’s approach in *Patterns in the Void; Why Nothing is Important* comes at the topic of Nothing from the physics end of the science spectrum, focusing a great deal on the effects of gravity as a field. Space and time are the primary elements of discussion, with the push and pull of gravity as the main manipulating force behind them. The material is dense, but still mostly accessible to the layperson trying to decipher the large concepts. In the framework of my research, the concepts explored in this text offer another much needed perspective on the issue of Nothing and the invisible forces at work in our universe. *Patterns in the Void* helps illustrate the gentle grade from the observable to the invisible. From this body of work, I have found inspiration in finding ways to physicalize/visualize the interplay of invisible forces on visible objects. With an eye to audience experience and drawing from my theatrical background, Odenwald’s writings on gravitational fields present a potential device for what Aristotle’s six elements of drama would identify as spectacle. Is there a way to utilize magnetic fields to create visual representations of Nothing at work? From these concepts, I had a vision of a bowling ball-sized metal sphere bouncing on air suspended over a crystal tea set, perpetually coming within a hair’s distance of smashing into the glass with each descent only to launch back into the air, leaving the tea set unharmed; the whole thing behaving almost like a ticking clock. The technical issues alone call the feasibility of the idea into question, but the principles and potential exist. Therefore, as Hamlet stated, “the play’s the thing wherein I will capture the conscience of the King.”

In Andrew Cutrofello’s essay *All for Nothing: Hamlet’s Negativity*, he presents an in-depth analysis of Shakespeare’s tragic character Hamlet. The material digs deeply into the Shakespearean canon, comparing various characters and plotlines to highlight the Hamlet narrative and his “negative faith” - the belief in a futile existence. The subject is rich and the
writing dense, but overall, the work is of great merit and inspiration. Within the context of my work, it gives incredible insights which have immediate applications, the most notable being an exercise in narrative construction whereby I extract a scene from the play Hamlet and produce a cinematic interpretation entitled Hamlet 95 (found in the portfolio chapter). By taking the kingdom of Elsinore and setting it within the world of a small-town stock car racetrack, I reduce the pomp and circumstance of the formally royalist props and pageantry of the familiar and traditional presentation of the play. For me, this interpretation situates these characters and story in a more accessible environment where the language and meaning of the author’s intent is honored and represented. The “boss” is still the “king,” the “mother” still the queen. The semantics remain true to the original intent. Only the context has been altered, which in turn creates an opportunity for metaphor to be baked into the presentation. The racetrack is an endless loop on which Hamlet literally spins his wheels. The “To be or not to be” soliloquy becomes a dog chasing his own tail as he circles the track within his mind, but racing at breakneck speed within this circle, Hamlet makes no progress, gains no ground and quickly spirals in upon himself until nothing remains. This type of approach leaves a wide door for psychological, philosophical and metaphysical discussions. For me personally, it leads to the Taoist practice of finding the natural way of things, a method of directing by flow, attuning to the natural tendencies of the world and influencing through your place within that system.

From the Brink: Experiences of the void from a depth psychology perspective by Paul Ashton explores the psychological cause and effects of the “void state,” a mental fear or anxiety brought about by a sense of emptiness or fading away. The material covers the topic from, but not limited to, trauma-induced memory loss to mid-life crisis. Art, literature, myths and legends are also discussed to reveal a context of global cultures all founded on concepts of the void. The material is accessible and provides an excellent insight into how we as emotional beings process concepts of the void. This work, paired with John Doyle’s On the Borders of Being and Knowing: Late Scholastic Theory of Supertranscendental Being and his analysis of metaphysical discussions,
is invaluable. Beginning with Aristotle and his notes on “being as being,” leading onward to sixteenth-century concepts by Suarez of “impossible objects,” and eventually concluding with the author’s insights into the “supertranscendental being,” the content contained within this material offers an in-depth and thoroughly engaging discussion of “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” knowability, via which philosophy and religion explore the concept of nothing. Within the context of “undifferentiated potential” and the research, this material is vital to illuminating alternative thoughts and approaches to the discussion on Nothing.

Due to the fact that our concept of reality is a process of subjective interpretation, it is therefore my instinct to question anything not witnessed and/or experienced firsthand and, in retrospect, to distill and analyze my own translation of the facts. This process attempts to follow the scientific method as a model in determining the principles in which my creative practice reveals itself. The following will explore the method and methodologies behind my approach to the creative process by way of an analytical format structured around theory/concept, testing/modeling and proof/produce.

In every artistic endeavor, my ambition is to:

1) Explore and enrich the understanding of my own mental and emotional experience of the world around me by way of creative research;

2) Connect these results with an audience whose own interpretation and reaction reveal further alternative perspectives outside of my own limited vantage point; and

3) Expand socially engaged empathy between myself and others.

The resources I use pull from as wide a swathe of tools and materials as I can find and digest. My core intention is always to dig as deeply as possible and from as many disciplines as I can
find with contiguous relevance to the source of my inquiry. Elements found to be tangential and seemingly off topic are never discarded, as they may yield new insight and perspective on the core initiative. It is typically these discoveries that reveal new potential and/or solidify previous assumptions with new context. The toolbox of materials I utilize includes: books, films, paintings, music, photographs, quotes, statistics, interviews, history, science, gestures, interactions, sculptures, news, nature, industry, drafting, maps, blueprints, recipes, etc, etc, etc. With an extensive background in photography, my primary language of communication is translated through visuals. Photographs, paintings, films and maps speak to me in shadow and light. Tonal grades, composition, color contrast and saturation speak in a language that reaches me on a mental level and creates an emotional response. Whereas music and sound evoke a feeling first and are then followed by a cerebral reaction and a visually-based narrative inspiration. In essence, the real meat on the creative bone is to be found through sonic catalysts. External visual stimuli will typically produce a directed emotional reaction - empathy for seeing someone suffering, aspiration from witnessing a success, call to action at the sight of injustice. But it’s a challenge to hold two thoughts in your mind at the same time, especially if they contradict one another. Consider instructing someone “Don’t think of a turtle” - reflexively, it is nearly impossible not to immediately think of a turtle. On the other hand, auditory stimuli can affect an emotional and psychological reaction on multiple levels, juggling numerous images and sounds simultaneously, much like a film. One can hear music and imagine voices speaking over it, or flashes of their childhood, a neighborhood, a house, an argument, each with their own distinct sense memory attached. Through continued exposure to new things - specifically unheard sounds devoid of any previous biases - a wellspring of new associations is produced from which inspiration takes on a gravitational weight, pulling in concepts from unexpected recesses of my mind. It is the most efficient and meaningful method of the creative process. All other elements from my research toolbox support the sights and sounds I produce.

Total circumference is the goal behind working the problem, or research objective. If A and B
represent the shortest distance between two points, then it is fair to say that we have established a base level of understanding for those two points. They are both unique and related by their association. In my approach, then, I must question the inverse of this relationship: what is the longest distance between these two elements? As “A” and “B” are relative concepts, any approach or angle can be explored, and hence the integrity of this relationship is just as equal as any other contextual computation. Only the breadth of our understanding has changed. It is therefore imperative to continually use that initial A to B relationship as a reference point throughout the research process, as it will continue to inform the methodologies course and direction. An example - Kae and Adam are making a trip to a cabin in the woods for the weekend. They have two routes they can take: A) the Super Highway which leads from their front door directly to the turnoff for the cabin and takes about 1.5 hours or B) the Route 1 that winds along the coast through several towns and communities and takes twice the time to get to their destination. One option is the most direct and efficient, while the other wanders and wends its way. Both end in the same result, with one trained on the objective and the other on the context of the objective. Being aware of the variety of options provides insight into the objective and its context. Awareness of the perspective illuminates context, and context provides interpretation and meaning.

Through a process of non-linear data collection, analysis, cross-referencing, prototyping and feedback, my research method snakes its way around and through the initial line of inquiry before settling on what makes the most interesting journey between two points, regardless of whether A and B are immediately adjacent neighbors.

My research method follows as such:

1. Initial conception; triggered by an emotional connection {typically solidified via music*}
2. Brainstorming/Day-Dreaming
3. Data cultivation: texts, interviews; i.e. factual contexts

4. More Brainstorming/Day-Dreaming

5. Training/Education: exploring unfamiliar territory and expanding my skill sets

6. Drafting/Sketching/Prototyping - Experimenting with new skills and information

7. Feedback

8. Revisions/Amendments/Expansions/Redirections

9. Feedback

10. Final Revisions/Separation

*Music is a powerful source of visualization inspiration in which I am able to construct narrative arcs around pitch and melody.*

My work is centered around emotional connections that are grounded in scientific fact. I find inspiration in things that challenge me intellectually, but it is the emotional experience that motivates me to create. Anything vacant of an emotional connection lacks content. Facts and figures can pique your interest, but without some form of relationship that can be established through the data, it remains lifeless. Thus, my methodology typically incorporates music at some point in the process, if not at all stages. I find that music, more so than other art forms, is capable of making instantaneous emotional connections. The resonance of any tone, for me, is able to cut through the cerebral noise of the world and strike at the heart of some unforeseen vision contained within my creative imagination.

These music-induced dreams become the building blocks of my creative process. Be it jazz, classical, punk, polka, new wave, big band, rap, country, rhythm and blues, or whatever, I find a connection to all of it. I am guided by my internal barometer as it rises and falls with each mental permutation I conceive. If I find myself bored with an idea, it is usually due to a lack of emotional investment. This is not to say that ideas lacking any apparent emotional resonance are immediately discarded. Quite the contrary, actually. Concepts that continue to intrigue me are put on the shelf and either used for spare parts somewhere down the road or are revisited when a new
device (technology, information, experience, etc.) comes along that presents the opportunity to revise the initial idea and renew its original trigger of inspiration.

Emotions have been a highly volatile tool in my experience and presented me with a variety of perspectives on my approach to the creative process. I have explored how negative emotions can serve as a catalyst to produce “passionate” work. This approach is the quickest and sometimes seemingly most direct method to achieving deep and meaningful expression, as the world is a continual factory of angst-producing events and experiences. Anger and sadness focus the mind in a razor-like way that contentment and joy oftentimes lack. But with such a razor sharp edge, it can be easy to miss when you’ve cut too deep and missed the point entirely. For me, this means that the darker side of emotions must be executed with a watchful eye, as what appears to be limitless material can quickly become a bottomless pit where no purchase can be made to get a foothold and escape. Joy and happiness can present just as bottomless a pit if lost in the glow of eternal sunshine, but it is here that we find what often eludes the negative potential. Any emotion can blind you, but intense emotions can blind you completely. The trick is not to be consumed by any one feeling or idea, as it will begin to filter and steer your method of self-expression in ways you might not want. Keeping an open mind and heart is the best practice for concise and consistent communication that can be heard by anyone.

I have found that by embracing all spectrums of the emotional scale, I am presented with the other primary element to my methodology: limits. Limits provide constraints. With constraints come parameters. And with parameters come options. Options are the spice of life, and without the contextual reference point of limitations, options can appear limitless/bottomless. Another word I like to use is resistance. Limitations present resistance and resistance is something that can be wrestled with and overcome or outwitted. Resistance provides emotional engagement, which is easily translated into a narrative.

A narrative is the vessel through which I am hotwired to communicate.. Like most people, I
love a good story, but I can find a story in almost anything I look at. Case in point: a sneeze. A sneeze as a beginning, middle and end - a rise of tension, a culmination point and a resolution. Depending on the contextual nature of said sneeze, this narrative could be interpreted as a drama, a comedy or even a tragedy. Every action has a reaction … and therefore a narrative.

In developing my methodology, I have mapped a system outline that continually reviews and reevaluates the progress and direction of my work as it evolves.

Development - *Concept to Proposal*
Substructure - *Research & Analysis*
Re-Fab - *Review & Rethink*
Infrastructure - *Drafting and Modeling*
Construction - *Implementation & Execution*
Feedback - *Input & Evaluate*
Last Looks - *Revise & Commit*

A similar model to my own system from Greene’s *Models of Creativity* would be his Catalog Type: Model 6, the Garbage Can Model. Though my own outline would appear to contradict the somewhat random quality of Greene’s alternately-named “Kitchen Sink” system with a more seemingly rigid architecture, they both follow a divining rod-like process. Greene’s model applies four principle approaches: “subcreations,” in which the large and small minutia of the artists total physical environment are seen as having a deep impact on the creative process. The second principle, which I find the most valuable of this model, involves the sum of the environmental factors and their varied relevance, taking into consideration issues, solutions, successes, failures, etc. These elements are reflected in my own system via review, rethink, evaluate, etc. Evaluation must be based on a continual referencing of the original intention or objective in contextual relation to the new data. The third principle takes into account the artist’s “insights” and their influence on the work. The fourth principle explores “dynamics” and
exemplifies my own infrastructure phase wherein the creative process delves into the meat of the work and roots its way through the objective. This overall approach has a raw quality that opens itself up to a wide range of inputs and outcomes, attempting to stave off as many self-inflicted constraints as possible before winnowing down the cultivated data to its core elements which in turn will become the end product.

My model for creativity follows a leap of faith procedure in which the initial launch of the creative process is motivated by an effort to overcome anxiety through an effort to make sense of “it all.” Beginning from a Self Type of model that develops through a personal exploration and contextual juxtaposition via a pseudo System and Purity Type model, I pursue the “truth” for the purpose of unexpected results. The final stages of my creative process resolve themselves by way of a Mind Type model. Though I demark this as my closing process, this method is an underlying component to everything that has come before. It is only towards the end that this type of model comes to the foreground and all others begin to recede into the landscape of the process.

In summary, my model for creative practice is a personal exploration of my inability to satisfactorily process the world around me and to comprehend the complexity of our society therein. It is my method to “lead with my chin” and immerse myself in the source of my anxiety, following the path of intrigue as it reveals itself through a process of a traditional academic approach to research where resources are collected and cataloged before dovetailing into a stage of trial and error (aka Performance) research and development. As surprises present themselves over the course of the work, I indulge alternative concepts and outcomes that may lead to unforeseen resolutions following a parallel line of thought and/or throwing the initial motivation out the window altogether and returning to square one. If the original inspiration has held up over the course of the research, I turn my attention towards output. It is through this final stage that the true “sense” of the work begins to emerge and a resolution comes into focus. As with the divining rod, I am guided by an inner pull that steers me through the labyrinth of information and experiences leading me to the truth of a single moment of expression.
I am inspired by knowledge and motivated by emotion. My process assumes a similar model to that of the scientific method: I identify the concept I wish to pursue, data is gathered, and experiments are undertaken where the hypothesis is tested before a conclusion is determined and shared. In my film work, this process is best exemplified by the steps I take throughout the production. After establishing the core objective/story, I begin to acquire information that helps articulate what it is I hope to express and how I might express it. I look at who the characters are and where they come from; how does that inform who they are and what they want? The answers inform the content itself as well as the method of producing said content. If they live in a freezing climate, what effect will that have on the tools I tell my story with? All of this requires testing and drafting to sort out what works, what doesn’t, what’s useful and what’s redundant. As these tests generate results, the objective becomes clearer and often more refined. It is in these final stages that the objective/hypothesis should have found its roots and become ready for an audience. The guiding principles of finding the “truth” of the matter is determined by a presupposed and self-imposed set of boundaries. The first tier of “truths” are composed of and reflect my own moral characteristics and values, which in turn determine my objectives and methods of execution. The substrate of these principles is consistently founded in the laws of known scientific fact. Within these margins of “truth,” my work may take any form it chooses, so long as it adheres to the aforementioned principles. In my opinion, this is vital to maintaining the integrity and legitimacy of the work. Without these principles, the message is weightless and has no real context for a meaningful exchange. It is, in essence, an empty promise. This is not to say that the creative impulse is stifled or constrained, but rather, it is released to play within a focused area of concentration. The “unknown” is typically defined by longstanding facts and knowledge, as their contextual basis is the only reference point that we know. My work seeks to explore the “unknown” - if not to reveal a new truth, then to at least draw attention to questions not yet asked.

Moving forward with my work, my aim is to continue taking the concepts and information
generated by my research into the psychological, physical, metaphysical, mathematical, philosophical and previous creative works which explore concepts of Nothing as defined as “undifferentiated potential,” orchestrating them into artistic productions which emotionally engage audiences. Through the construction of artistic models exemplifying elements of unseen forces such as magnetic fields interacting within an unresolved visual narrative, I may depict active sculptures illustrating the suspended arch of Nothing, not unlike choreographer Johann Bourgeois’s use of gravity in his movement pieces. Through such structures, I wish to reveal the event horizon upon which Nothing teeters on the edge of becoming, or not becoming. My performance piece *Yawn*, found in my portfolio, in which I attempted to make a room full of people have an empathetic response to the phenomenon of reactive yawning, as cataloged in wolves to keep the pack alert, embodied the essence of this work: an ephemeral situation awaiting a potential event. A work fully conscious of its title’s double entendre--esque and self-deprecating nature, the piece is a reflection of the void created by this seemingly expressionless performance. It comments on itself at the outset as to preemptively respond to those that would seek to immediately close themselves to the experience, seeing it as being outrageously pretentious. I’m intrigued by the concept of self-aware art, meaning work that functions on both a rational level (the marionette is operated by puppeteer with strings) and the irrational level (the marionette is alive and full of feelings). If you don’t hide the mechanics behind the illusion, will the audience wish them out of existence for you? Whereas if you attempt to hide them, they may search for them if the illusion isn’t flawless. Like the uncanny valley that provokes an emotional response to a human-like robot, I am motivated by the precarious place between fact and faith. It is the “x-factor” component, the random and unpredictable variable, that I seek to recruit as a collaborator in all of my efforts. My work is built around strong visual direction with a deep emotional commitment and objective, but it is not so rigid as to ignore the external impulses generated as byproduct through the efforts I’ve put into action. If I occupy a space in protest of that space being empty, I have set into motion a series of events that, for the most part, I can not foresee. I therefore have the option to either reject or accept what unfolds due to my actions. To
remain closed off to any response is to ensure that the work will stagnate, in my opinion. Only through engagement and revaluation can the work evolve and result in an exchange of thoughts and feelings which transcend the work and the individuals it affects. This desire to interact on this level is a result of years of theatrical improvisational work in which I have trained to become sensitive to my environment and the people who populate it. In improv, no matter what our partners do or say, our objective is to respond via our actions - “Yes, and...” The work I will create along the lines of my thesis inquiry will use physical methods of visual representation, cinematic narratives and performance experiences. This will require that I gain skill sets and knowledge outside my current toolbox as well as an ability to delegate efforts to collaborators whose own skill sets exceed my own. Much like Marizio Cattelan, a great influence on my work who frees his creative potential by dreaming outside his immediate skill set and shares the experience of his creative practice by finding collaborators to execute his visions. As in Taoist philosophy, there is a natural way of things, if one will only allow for them to evolve naturally. In this way, we can find mutual satisfaction and respect by divining a path of least resistance. At my current rate of speed I foresee completion of my projects and degree taking place sometime in the next year and a half, culminating with the centerpiece of my studies: a segmented realization and interpretation of William Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* in a cinematic presentation.

In closing, I would like to share a poem that was introduced to me by Ric Murphy, my first improvisational teacher at the DePaul Theatre Conservatory in Chicago back in 1994. Having recognized in me my appreciation of limitless possibilities and infinite perspectives, he wrote this piece down for me to remember and draw strength from. I have strived to apply its meaning to every day of my life.

**Birdle Burble by Alan Watts (for James Broughton)**

I went out of mind and then came to my senses

By meeting a magpie who mixed up his tenses,
Who muddled distinctions of nouns and of verbs,
And insisted that logic is bad for the birds.

With a poo-wee cluck and a chit, chit-chit;
The grammar and meaning don’t matter a bit.

The stars in their courses have no destination;
The train of events will arrive at no station;
The inmost and ultimate Self of us all
Is dancing on nothing and having a ball.

So with a chat for chit and with tat for tit,
This will be that, and that will be It!

Through my experiences and struggles with mental illness, I have quite literally gone “out of my mind and come to my senses.” My up has been down and my down has been sideways and by viewing the world through that fractured prism, I have come to appreciate an absurdist’s normal. Life is predictably unpredictable and nothing ever changes. A contradiction is just another form of affirmation, giving context to an identity. You can’t have something unless you’ve had nothing.
CHAPTER 4

PORTFOLIO

(aka: Look what I made!)

“Art is never finished, only abandoned.”

- Leonardo da Vinci

**SCHRÖDINGER’S ART**

*(quantum art)*

At the outset of my IMFA program, I came in already fascinated by concepts of “nothing” or what can exist within a perceived vacuum. Issues of climate change, non-sustainable resources and the excesses of the modern world inspired me to explore methods of producing work with little to no materials or resources. Where does the value of a “good idea” transition from worthless to priceless? And is there a real difference between the two?

Take a page from the art industry’s playbook, with its gatekeepers monitoring and authorizing that which is to be considered as art and the rest kitsch, I was intrigued by the experiments of Austrian-Irish scientist Erwin Schrödinger - specifically his most well-known Schrödinger’s Cat thought experiment. Using this model, I proposed a piece of perplexing art that could simultaneously exist and not exist by merely invoking its creation and positing that theory to some of the world’s leading art curators.

Schrödinger’s Cat, in simple terms, states that if you put a cat and something lethal like a
radioactive atom inside a box together, you wouldn’t know whether the cat was alive or dead until you opened the box. Until the box is opened, the cat exists as both alive and dead. The exercise is a demonstration of the process behind scientific theory - any theory is right or wrong until it is tested and proved.

Schrödinger’s Art was accomplished by creating a piece of artwork and sealing it into a box and photographing it digitally. An email account and password were created to facilitate the sending of an email, along with the digital photo and explanation behind the art project, to the curators of the world’s leading art galleries: Museum of Modern Art (NYC), State Hermitage Museum (St. Petersburg), Musée d’Orsay (Paris), and Tokyo National Museum (Tokyo), to name a few. In the email, I asked each curator to determine whether my artwork/proposal would, in their informed “gatekeeper” opinion, be judged and accepted as a piece of artwork, sending their response to the created email account.

After sending out the email, which utilized both a highly forgettable and complex address and password, I destroyed all information and/or record that would enable me to log on and see what, if any, responses my email request had fostered. Therefore, the work I created exists both as an accepted piece of “art” with the stamp of approval from the world of art and as a piece of meaningless digital code clogging someone’s email junk folder. Either way, the carbon footprint on the planet by this work is near infinitesimal, requiring no room or space to occupy other than the corner of someone’s mind. And in that state, it is no less material than any work of art, place or person you’ve never seen but only heard about.
After a semester of studying the playful and oftentimes controversial work of Italian artist Maurizo Cattelan, I was inspired by his method of creation through provocative-yet-whimsical expression. His hyperrealistic piece *La Nona Ora (The Ninth Hour)* (1999) depicts a wax sculpture of Pope John Paul II dying on the ground after having been hit by a meteor, a reaction to the sexual abuse scandals of the Catholic Church. The work has been attacked and protested by members of the Church with various failed attempts to destroy the sculpture.

Known as the “joker” and “prankster” of the art world, Cattelan’s work, no matter how seemingly juvenile, is always born from a mature ember of honesty and heartfelt social commentary. His piece *America* (2016), an 18-karat gold toilet, was a functioning interactive installation piece at the Guggenheim where people could use the practical facility. A commentary on the Trump-era world with its increasing income inequality, the work was a biting and humorous depiction of this social dilemma. Over a hundred thousand people took advantage of this opportunity to sit upon this throne and make a deposit.

It was his piece *Another Fucking Readymade* (1996), wherein during a panicked state to produce an exhibition piece in time for a gallery opening deadline, Cattelan happened upon a museum loading dock filled with boxes waiting to be loaded in. Stealing the boxes of artwork, Cattelan placed them unopened as he found them in the gallery of his own exhibition under the
aforementioned title. The work made a poignant comment about the pretentious and predictable nature of the ready-made formula while bringing a fresh new approach to the very thing it was critiquing. As I, my classmates and faculty members approached yet another semester’s end of assigned papers and treatises on our studies, I adapted Cattelan’s concept to aid my own deadline panic and frustration with the mechanics of systematic academic regurgitation. Reaching out to my classmates, I asked that each student donate any random page from their own semester essays to create my submission. Taking the sum total of three months of intensive research, notes and documents, I proceeded to put everything through a shredder and/or balling them up into a crumpled heap, then placing them all into a see-through wastebasket, entitling the piece *Not Another Fucking Term paper*. The work was a commentary on the seemingly futile and wasteful nature and posturing of academic writing within the arts and beyond, filling landfills with knowledge no more than a handful of people will ever glean.

![Fig. 27 NAFTP, direct application](image)

Ironically (and in many ways, most appropriately), while on display, an unwitting janitor happened upon the wastebasket and emptied the contents. In the end, I was thrilled with the evolution of this artwork and its subsequent demise. To this day, it is one of my proudest accomplishments in its clarity of vision, fruition and demolition being the perfect embodiment of my artistic mission statement. Anecdotally, I sent a writeup and photo of the project to Cattelan in an effort to be accepted into his personal Facebook group and was invited to join.
THE LAST LIGHTHOUSE
(screenplay)

*The Last Lighthouse* was an exploration of taking the primary action of a short film and leaving it outside the peripheral of the scenes within the script. My interest was in examining the potential of taking a large budget high-concept project and confining it to an extremely low-budget limited-scope approach. The question being, if you remove all of the breathtaking action-packed scenes out of a cinematic experience and leave only the aftermath, can you achieve the same level of engagement and excitement?

The story revolves around a planet-level disaster where a series of plate tectonic shifts causes a chain reaction of events setting off multiple catastrophic volcanic eruptions around the globe, sending massive amounts of ash into the atmosphere, thus causing another ice age. I met with professors at the Climate Change Institute here at UMaine to discuss the scientific viability of my story proposal, and with their assistance, honed a narrative based in the realm of possibility. Equipped with an exciting and plausible catalyst for my story, I outlined a plot set with the backdrop of a polar icecap encompassing the North Pole as far south as Massachusetts.

The main characters were a trio of meteorologists turned “lighthouse keepers” stationed within the new polar region, recording severe weather patterns where satellites are unable to penetrate the dense atmosphere. Our initial and subsequently final view into this world is that of a classroom of elementary school students during a video conference call with one of the lighthouse stations. Transitioning to the site of the lighthouse deep in the eye of the storm where one of the meteorologists has gone missing while out collecting data, we are in the dark as much as the characters are. In each scene, we arrive just after a major event or just prior. Characters are continually missing one another in their fruitless search to find each other, continually amping up the tension without ever actually seeing anything.
The inspiration for the script came in large part from the 1979 horror film *Alien*. For its total runtime of one hour fifty-seven minutes, the amount of screentime devoted to actually seeing anything that might be categorized as either action or horror is in the ballpark of a couple of minutes in total. The lion’s share of the film is completely devoted to benign moments of routine and waiting. The anticipation of action is the key to the film’s effectiveness. Director Ridley Scott breaks the tension with jump scares that last a mere fraction of a second, but leave the audience with a residual anxiety that fills the seemingly empty vacuum of action through the rest of the film. Legendary filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock illustrated the concept of tension within a series of film shots: a man and woman sit at a table eating breakfast across from one another, a tea kettle is coming to a boil on the kitchen stove, we see that a bomb ticks down to explosion beneath the man’s chair at the breakfast table, the man butters his toast. This might be a slight paraphrasing of Hitchcock’s example but the concept is clear: audience tension is established by knowing something the main characters don’t.

In *The Last Lighthouse*, the audience is aware of the mutual confusion between characters unable to find one another as the storm increases in intensity. The window into this world via the helpless students watching exacerbates the tension, as they are unable to do anything about it. The exercise of writing this script was beneficial in an academic regard, as the process furthered my skills as a writer.

**A GOOD IDEA AT THE TIME**

*(readymade)*

Continuing with my train of thought where creation need not necessarily mean anything be physically manifested to produce substance. Where a photograph and/or painting might frame a captured moment and thereby direct the audience’s attention to view and reflect upon that instant within the context of their lives, I was inspired to remove the mechanics and trappings of the
artform from the equation and find moments existing within real space and labeling them as art. A shirt is just like any other shirt until it is labeled and branded. Once labeled and defined by brand, suddenly its attributes are cause for comparison and in turn assigned a value based on its design, thread count, material, place of origin, etc. It was with this idea in mind that I found myself looking at the wall and the floor.

We are surrounded by walls and floors everywhere we go. We take for granted that they are there. We only notice walls when they are painted or something hangs off them or a window is inserted into them so we can look through them. Without thinking, we travel over floors with little thought until obstacles obstruct our path and we must circumvent them. But upon closer inspection, we will find that floors are a canvas of history that, dare I say, catalogs the march of time. Walls equally chart the ages of trend and passing fancy, pock-marked and stained by their temporary purchase. Exploring the world this way, I entered my second Graduate Exhibition with my Good Idea at the Time series.

I was issued a portion of gallery wall by the annual Grad Exhibition staff, assuming I would utilize the space to showcase my work, not realizing that the wall would be the work. Gazing at my wall, I could see the myriad number of pinholes strafing its surface from all of the various things that had hung there over just a few of its handful of years. As my eyes adjusted to staring at its largely white face, I could begin to determine the faint dimensions of the size and shape of what had hung there. After only a few moments, you could begin to see the history of the wall. The history of what someone had once thought was a good idea to express and share, using this wall to present it to the gallery pedestrians. Once I could see the art that wasn’t there but was
still there, I knew I had my first piece for the Exhibition. I proceeded to create a gallery label out of foamcore in which I printed the title *A Good Idea at the Time*, the dimensions of the wall, materials the wall was made from, and listed myself as “Artist Unknown.” Then, I adhered it to the wall.

**ARTIST UNKNOWN**

*(readymade series)*

It should also be noted that when I conceived of *A Good Idea at the Time*, I knew that there might be some who might reject this approach, to which my defense would be … “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” My greatest fear would be that the work would elicit no reaction whatsoever and that no reflection would take place. I’m pleased to say that I received responses at both ends of the spectrum. The work had those who appreciated the Zen-like moment it provided them to stop and notice something often ignored, while there were others who scolded me that it was a ridiculous and empty gesture. Based on the range of reactions, I can’t help but feel it is a work, like any other, that you get out of it what you put into it, and that any reaction aside from indifference is a validation of the pieces as works of art.

In that vein, I created a series of works similar in spirit to the piece *A Good Idea At The Time* where I brought attention to environmental elements largely unseen as part of the general landscape, giving them new prominence by assigning them a gallery label: *Men’s Room Door*
and Frame, Outlet P21G-52, Step #2, Light, Crack #1, Intersection, Corner Ant Trap, A Series of Alarms and Door Jamb. The last one which held my interest as much as the wall piece was a work called Light Shadows, which still remains to this day hanging just a few inches from the floor outside the IMRC Library. In this small alcove within the IMRC, just outside the late IMRC Director Owen Smith’s Room 128 office, across from the library room and down from what at the time was a textile room, I found a delightfully ever-changing sequence of light and shadow playing across the floor. Depending on the time of day, which lights were on in each room and which doors were open and how far, a pattern of light and shadows would be constantly evolving across the floor, 24 hours a day. The alcove functioned as a frame for the lighting, making a focal point - much like the wall - where one can stand back and reflect on the piece.

I would catalog this work as a readymade, a genre that should be used very sparingly and with precise intention. To this day, this piece stands as one of my favorite and most authentic works, balancing my sensibilities towards a deep and committed attention to self-exploration and expression while floating on a gust of irreverent frivolity.

YAWN
(performance)

Yawn was a 2015 performance art piece at the Innovative Media Research and Commercialization Center in which I sat in front of an audience of students and faculty attempting to yawn in the effort to create an uncontrollable empathetic reaction from the crowd wherein they would yawn. After researching the science and reactionary behavior of yawning, I was inspired to stage a demonstration/performance, with a tongue-in-cheek nod to the borderline - and sometimes bordercrossingly - pretentious nature of performance art. Influences - for better
or worse - include Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic, John Cage and Yoko Ono. This was yet another experiment in concepts of nothing, being that seemingly nothing was performed and there was nothing to react to. The piece’s title was withheld as it would be a major spoiler if it was shared. The experience pushed my comfort level in exploring the boundaries between audience and performer, while facilitating an opportunity to investigate alternative performance material.

**EVEN BREAK**

*(short film)*

![Fig. 30 Even Break Scene, The Mechanic’s Interrogation](image)

This short film project was conceived as a vehicle, no pun intended, to explore my skills as a cinematographer, utilizing the genre of film noir for its use of light and shadow to evoke mood and subtext. Fearing I was incapable of telling a visual narrative effectively with the technology at my disposal, I sought to create a script in which I could challenge myself to produce a dynamic cinematic experience with limited resources and budget. As part of my growing exploration of concepts of nothing, in this instance, nothing was the starting point and goal to see how far I could get with seemingly nothing to work with.
The story banked on the idea of a zero sum outcome, a common thread in most film noir stories where the protagonist rarely wins and the antagonists go unpunished. *Even Break* tells the story of a crippled small-time mechanic and his failing business. After taking pity on a struggling race car driver, he gives him a job only to have his kindness backfire when the driver steals the mechanic’s life savings. In a twist of ironic fate, the driver is killed in a car accident and the totaled car returned to the mechanic’s salvage yard. While taking out his rage out on the wreckage, the mechanic finds his money plus a whole lot more stashed inside the car. Shortly afterward, a local thug and his entourage come around the mechanic’s garage asking questions about the driver’s last moments, retracing his steps in search of the cash the driver was bringing him. Determined to keep the money for himself, the mechanic endures all methods of torture never divulging where he’s hidden the cash. Unable to get anything out of the Mechanic, the Thug and his crony trip over themselves coming up with possible solutions, believing that someone else might have the money. Before they can leave, the Mechanic has sabotaged the brake line in their car, ensuring that they will never return to threaten him again. Thinking he’s succeeded and will get away clean with the money, the Mechanic, who has had the money on him the entire time, hidden in his prosthetic leg, prepares to flee forever to start a new life. But as he starts to go, he’s met by the Thug’s Girlfriend, who has witnessed everything and now knows the truth. The Mechanic is faced with a dilemma, whether to further his murderous intentions to keep the money for himself or share the money and decrease his chance of ever
escaping his dismal life. The film ends leaning towards a dark choice that can only get worse.

I took a great deal of inspiration from the films *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, *Sweet Smell of Success* and the works of Jean Luc Goddard and Mike Leigh. The pace is steady and the story is told out of sequence, helping to foster the anxiety of the characters and confuse the audience. I wanted people to feel the manic urgency of the Mechanic as he continues to make a series of bad choices that set him on a collision course for the inevitable ending. The cinematic framing continually boxed in the main character, keeping him constantly confined and restricted by space and light.

Cars, locations, actors and equipment were all completely donated and/or loaned to the production. The only money spent went towards a few hard-to-find or create items, in addition to craft services for the actors and crew who gave of their talents and time. Coffee and donuts go a long way to keep everyone engaged and motivated when being asked to weather long hours and cold environments. I was continually amazed at the generosity of the people I approached and their interest in the project. With each new acquisition, I was increasingly empowered to push the boundaries of what I was willing to ask for. The first, and most significant loan, was the garage location, supplied by Mike’s Car Services in Old Town, Maine. When asked for the use of their garage, they were more than willing to work with me, granting me access to use the garage anytime after hours for as long as I needed, free of charge. In addition to the garage, I also required several cars, specifically two “muscle cars.” Near my place of work, I saw a used 2009 Mustang parked at a used car dealership. Again, when asked if I could have access to the car, I was told, anytime after hours, free of charge. All I had to do was fill it with gas and they were fine with it. [SIDENOTE: While filming a scene one night where the Mustang peels out from the Mechanic’s garage, my actor was pulled over by local police when they thought the car had been stolen. No arrests were made.] While driving back from a work shoot, I saw a distinct-looking car tricked out with skull-and-crossbone hubcaps and a shiny steel skull hood
ornament parked alongside the road. As the car was parked outside a head shop selling various marijuana paraphernalia, I took an educated guess the owner might be inside. The car’s owner was a man by the name of Captain Joint - yes, really - who also owned the shop and was more than happy to loan me his car for the film. Instances like these continued to fuel my ambition and daring to see what could be obtained by just asking. Thus the film’s budget, which if made someplace like New York City would have run into the thousands, was made for under five hundred dollars. Needless to say, beyond my modest charm, the real influence that inspired such generosity from all of these vendors was largely due to the novelty of the request. This part of the country is not steeped in the film and television industry and therefore, there is no real perceived monetary gain to be made from such a request. Seizing on these opportunities might not be a common thing in the near future, and certainly not in a post-pandemic world. I was thrilled and immensely grateful for the contributions each of these individuals assisted with, which elevated the production value of the film far beyond what my own resources could have provided should they have charged me.

*Even Break* was a huge success with regard to its production costs, value and experience. Personally, my confidence as a technical film producer was solidified. I came away knowing I could pound the pavement and make a film happen, finding locations, set pieces, props,
actors, etc. Visually, I created a film that looked and sounded like a movie through effective lighting, staging and composition. The only area where the production fell short was in the script and time spent working with the actors. I knew going in that my primary objectives were the aforementioned producing and visual narrative devices, but by having those elements solely in my crosshairs, the story and performances weren’t given the time they needed and deserved. Thus, the story successfully creates a sense of anxiety through its editing, but the plot is obscured in the confusion and therefore difficult to follow and enjoy. Actors weren’t as prepared as they could have been. When there should have been time to rehearse and refine character arcs and portrayals, I used that time to adjust and craft shots instead. This constitutes my biggest regret.

Despite those reservations, I feel the experience was a great success and achieved my goals. My insecurities

![Fig. 34 Even Break Scene, Glen's ominous arrival](image1)

![Fig. 35 Even Break Scene, Glen and Mechanic face-to-face](image2)

![Fig. 36 Even Break Scene, The Mechanic under pressure](image3)

![Fig. 37 Even Break Scene, The Mechanic hits the jackpot](image4)
about whether I could mount and shoot a short film were calmed, allowing me to more freely explore future projects with considerably less anxiety. In essence, I knew that with hard work, I could produce the materials to handcraft a beautiful wooden boat. What I needed to prove to myself next was whether I could build one that could float.

Fig. 38  Even Break Scene, The Mechanic fixes everything

CAPTAIN EGO
(screenplay)

A series of scripts inspired by a newspaper photo and story found through an extensive foraging expedition through eBay. The photo, taken in 1974, featured a young man dressed in motorcycle helmet, sunglasses, rock-star pants and bare chested. Around his arms he had duct taped bath towels and strapped a sheet of metal to his chest with medical tape. He heroically stands with a defensive stance in front of a particle board wall peppered with deadly ice-picks jutting out from it. On the back of the photo was the accompanying news article telling the tragically comical story of a bold death-defying stunt gone wrong when “Captain Ego” failed to effectively dodge his friend’s air-gun darts fired at him in rapid succession before a modest crowd attending the poorly advertised event.
The photo and story intrigued me with the inspiring realization that no matter the venue and audience size, ten thousand people or just ten, in the daredevil business the stakes are always the same. It was from this point I sought to explore how to tell the story of a daredevil’s final moments leading up to their big stunt. How would each and every little event or exchange eat away at their confidence? I wanted to see how the rising tension could build and build as “go time” approached and the audience waited. Growing up in the era of Evel Knievel, I was hooked on the idea.

I dug into various research exploring big and small time daredevils, those who buried themselves alive for a local grocery store opening and lived to tell the tale and those who rode a rocket into the sky to prove the earth is flat only to end up the flattest thing on the planet. After all of the documentaries, newspaper features and related stories of daredevils, I felt like I was ready to write a short film about this character I’d become obsessed with. Through multiple screenplay draftings, each approaching the character and story from vastly different angles, I was able to explore the circumference of the narrative elements and characters.

Through the experience, I honed my skills as a writer and began to develop a healthy sense of detachment from my work, in the regard that I could write with passion and edit with an
objective eye - effectively “killing my darlings,” as Stephen King would say. Whereas before I would write as though every word was chiseled into granite and carried the weight of the world on each line, now I could write more freely and with less effort, welcoming the revision process with almost joyful anticipation. I haven’t given up on “Captain Ego,” as he embodies the qualities I cherish most in all great characters - an unwavering and somewhat blind faith in their dreams no matter the odds. Captain Ego will rise again!

HAMLET 95

(adaptation/short film)

For many years, I struggled with Shakespeare’s work. I recognized and appreciated its impact on theatre, as well as its broader thematic influence in the narrative expressions of film, television,
songs and various other artforms. The struggle for me was finding a personal inroad to the stories and characters that resonated more personally, as the trials and tribulations of monarchs and the like felt inaccessible. Despite the core messages resonating with me, I was distracted by the decorations and affectations of the settings and characters, until I recognized the similarities of these worlds with that of (for lack of a better expression) “white trash.” As subjective as that expression might be, I personally mean it with the utmost respect.

Coming from a background that includes elements of this culture, I recognized within my own family history the same tragedies and themes that play out in Shakespeare’s plays. Looking through the lens of that world I began to see Shakespeare more clearly and a new appreciation and vision of his plays began to grow. With a refreshed point of view, I sought to redress Hamlet to my own sensibilities while retaining the same language and intention of the original work. The kingdom of Denmark became a small town racetrack (Speedway 95, Bangor) where the King (owner of the racetrack) killed his brother/partner to gain control of the business. Hamlet, his nephew (and racecar driver), tormented by the visitation of his dead father, plots to reveal the crimes of his uncle while constantly debating his own sanity. Polonius, father to Ophelia and Laertes, is the racetrack’s mechanic and head of Hamlet’s pit crew. Subsequent characters are assigned similar roles that fit within the context of this new environment. The band of traveling actors comes in the form of a traveling carnival, while the play’s climax arrives in the form of a high-speed race between Hamlet and Laertes culminating in the death of the primary characters.

Unable to afford either the time or the money to mount a full-fledged production of the entire play in this way, I opted to film a single scene. Again, using my production theme of “nothing” as a goal and methodology, wherein obstacles like a lack of budget and resources are removed as obstacles, allowing for a near Taoist approach to finding the “natural way” of things, I cast my idea out into the void to see what might form. As poetic as that sounds, the reality is I just asked people for what I wanted or needed without any pretense of a “production” and its trappings.
to influence their participation. In the end, what I was able to assemble was far beyond what I could have bought or built on my own. Quite literally, “the play was the thing.”

Fig. 43  Hamlet 95 Scene, To Be or Not To Be

Act 3, Scene 1 begins with Hamlet’s famous “To be, or not to be…” soliloquy. Ophelia arrives shortly after having had enough of his erratic behavior and has found him to return his love letters to which Hamlet challenges her own actions, questioning her integrity and thus spiraling them both further into chaos and their inevitable demise. A week after having decided to film this scene, I found two actors to play the parts and was loaned the use of the Speedway 95 racetrack and supplied a race car and driver, all free of charge. With two evenings of rehearsals and a few test shots we were ready to film, using equipment loaned to me by the IMRC. A friend and drone pilot offered to assist with aerial shots as well. The one restriction we had: access to the track and car were limited to just four hours, so the entire scene and cover shots had to be captured within that time frame and no more.

The time restrictions kept my creative impulses in check, keeping me, forgive the pun, on track and moving forward at all times. Having been largely influenced by the films like John Frankeheimer’s *Grand Prix* and George Miller’s *The Road Warrior*, I knew how the metaphor of the car and speed played into the tension of the scene’s narrative, beginning with the “To be,
or not to be..” soliloquy opening with Hamlet visually and figuratively circling the track, chasing his own tail. Other adaptations of Hamlet, by filmmakers such as Franco Zeffirelli and Kenneth Branagh, helped illustrate how the stage play could translate to film, while films like Gil Junger’s 10 Things I Hate About You and Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo & Juliet showed how the position of Shakespeare’s work could be adapted and interpreted.

The end result helped to prove that my concept could work and that access to materials,
resources and talent need not be stalled by a lack of money. The rushed nature of the production both helped and hindered how well the final product came out. The timeliness kept things moving quickly and efficiently, but the expedited process limited our ability to truly mine the text’s deeper elements to foster more robust performances. With that all said, I was extremely happy with the outcome and felt a deep sense of satisfaction and confidence in what can be accomplished with a good idea and effective communication. I have always resented the notion that filmmaking is an expensive proposition as compared to most other art forms. Part of my mission of “nothing” is to find ways to reduce that stigma of media production so that nothing stands in the way of producing great media.

![Hamlet 95 Scene, Hamlet runs in circles](Fig. 46)

**WORLD VIEW**

*(art film)*

Stepping away from the linear narrative for a moment and taking inspiration from such film auteurs as Peter Rose, Stan Brakhage and David Lynch, I wanted to explore the abstract short film. Through my “day job” working for the University of Maine Marketing Division, I produce
30 second television commercials on a regular basis. The format of a TV spot seemed ripe for a
disruptive abstract mind dump.

With skeletal output in hand, I began to analyze and deconstruct the format and how an
unwitting audience might respond by exposure to an obtuse video buried in amongst the drone
of advertisements interrupting their feature presentation - essentially an interruption within
their interruptions. Recognizing my own tendency to “tune out” once the commercials start up,
I began to ponder what could break the hypnotic 30-second tick-tick-tick of ads the audience
were watching. This led me to think about the ways in which social media and its algorithms
were monitoring and processing everything we viewed and interacted with on the internet so that
something we glanced at for more than two seconds suddenly appeared through advertisements
in our emails and online media threads. The invasive presence of the media watching us as much
as we were watching it became my inspiration.

Using a DSLR camera on a tripod equipped with a 105mm macro lens, plus a tripod for my head
for stabilization, I positioned my eye so that it would fill the camera’s field of view. I recorded multiple takes until I managed to get a 30-second clip where my eye remained in focus and staring at the lens. I then proceeded to mine the internet for material to craft a soundscape to mix with the video. Utilizing Freesound.org and its wealth of user-contributed sound files, I searched for audio files that spoke to the ideas of power dynamics, personal invasion and camouflage. With regard to power, I was immediately reminded of the two most powerful sounds I could imagine that also reflected a wide dynamic range - a train and jet engine. A train’s engine, with its incredible bass thrum, pounds your chest when you’re near it; you can hear its massive weight and awesome strength. At the far end of its auditory spectrum is the faint hint of a high end whine, much like that of a jet engine. The whirl of a jet engine cuts through the air with a high-pitched tone that can slice through your ear. I mixed these two sounds together so that they would begin almost inaudible, then increase in volume until almost peaking the levels by the end of the 30-second video. From there, I added multiple audio files taken from recordings of public areas, people mingling and conversing about to establish that sense of anonymity and to entice the audience to lean in and listen for pieces of conversations. I wanted the audience to become the algorithm, picking up tidbits. As the engines rise in volume, it becomes increasingly difficult to make out the conversations, forcing the audience to listen harder, all while a naked eye stares unflinchingly back at them.

*World View* was originally shot in color, but after reviewing the clip with the audio mix, I found that the hazel nature of my eye was too alluring to explore and in a way alienated from other eyes. I found that converting the image to black and white served several purposes. First, a black-and-white image would tend to stand out from the average color TV promo and could potentially catch the viewer’s eye off guard more quickly. Second, by removing the color and reducing visual dynamics of the image, it helped shift the audience’s focus more towards the audio component. A metaphorical byproduct of this choice spoke to the issue of media as good or bad, participant or spectator. This aspect serves more the edification of the artist’s sense
of purpose more than any audience would enjoy or recognize. I include it here merely as a personal footnote and appreciate the futility of its inclusion in this contextualization. I mention it to establish a conscious effort to always keep in mind the various levels by which any artistic production may reach its audience.

*World View* was always intended to air on broadcast television, but due to a conflict of interest at the time that came about due to my direct association with my job and my employers, I was asked to delay my plans. Since that time, the issue of exhibition has been stalled only by lack of funds and other projects taking priority. It has been seen out of context as part of several live events, but has as of yet to be nested into its intended media landscape. Stay tuned.

**SOMEDAY MAN**

*(feature screenplay)*

*Proof-of-concept imagery generated through MidJourney AI*

Feature length screenplay: Set in a not-too-distant future New York City, a one-armed con-man and his sentient prosthetic find themselves saddled with two orphans. Teaming up, they begin a series of cons that could turn the city upside down.

*Someday Man’s* inception followed a peculiar train of thought, leapfrogging from one springboard to the next and was my first attempt at allowing a Joycean stream-of-consciousness to unfold and lead the way. I can now trace the creative narrative back as far as a period of my youth while living in West Virginia and attending an elementary school situated directly next to
an orphanage. The kernels of this concept, or sensibilities, had taken root decades before my MFA program had begun, when these seeds of an idea finally sprouted and developed.

My second- and third-grade years were spent at Burlington Elementary, located just west of the Eastern Panhandle of the state nestled deep in the Appalachian Hills, populated by some of the poorest communities. Directly next to the school was the Methodist Children’s Home, originally The Star of Hope Children Refuge and currently the Burlington United Methodist Family Services. The children who were residents of the home made up a large portion of my school’s attendees, leaving me one of the few kids with parents. Every day after class, I would follow my friends back to the orphanage to play. I marveled at how independent and self-sufficient they all were and coveted their seemingly free lives. I recall sitting on our cafeteria floor with zip-lock bags of popcorn and all my classmates watching the Disney film *Escape to Witch Mountain*, about two stranded outer space orphans searching for their people while fleeing power-hungry adults chasing after their amazing alien powers. Again, I was captivated by the characters’ resourcefulness, independence and the parent-free world they inhabited. Similarly in my own life, I felt alien and adrift; the life of the orphan had great appeal. It almost goes without saying that as a boy who always associated better with girls than my own sex, the story/musical of *Annie* resonated with me as well.

Side note: my first major crush was on the orphan, Pepper, from Ms. Hannigan’s Hudson Street Orphanage in the film adaptation of *Annie*. A few years later I was introduced to the film *Paper Moon*, directed by Peter Bogdanovich starring Ryan O’Neal, Tatum O’Neal and Madeline Kahn (another later crush) about a con man unexpectedly stuck
with his (possibly) daughter and embarking on a series of grifts with her. The impact of that film on me was profound. Shot in black and white and exquisitely written, performed and directed, it would become one of a few films I saw as a child that formulated my passion for cinema. It was through these early experiences and exposures that fostered within me a deep and abiding respect and sympathy for the orphaned child. Immediately following the conclusion of the third grade, my family left the deeply rural hillsides of West Virginia and moved to the sprawling metropolis of Seattle, Washington. Leaving behind the world of orphans, I arrived in the land of fractured families broken apart by divorce. It was there that I became a “latchkey kid” in a community of unsupervised free-range children where the world - or at least neighborhoods - were our oyster. It was as close to the life of an orphan as I would ever get in my pre-teen years. It was heaven … until it became hell.

With little adult guidance or monitoring, the evils of the world have little to keep them at bay from the innocence of childhood. I quickly began to realize that the world of the orphan is fraught with unforeseeable dangers. As they say, it ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. My mother once told me, not everyone wishes you well. But that and a granola bar in your pocket will only get you so far before things can get dicey. The veneer of the Disney orphan quickly became tarnished, but not defaced by any means. I still held them in the highest esteem, but now the dangers they faced became far more graphic. Real-world villains rarely reveal themselves by trademark greased mustache twirling sneers; their intentions are more often than not darker and more twisted. My Disney glasses needed their prescription refilled with new lenses as my world view required a deeper perception. I cite all of this to give context to a host of experiences that would be baked into my subconscious DNA, not recognizing their full imprint until much later in life, specifically when I began crafting the script for Someday Man. It is from this subconscious that I seek to allow access to an invisible garden of ideas and inspirations, staring into the void to find a map of imagination staring back at you.
Jump forward to May 2016, Orono, Maine, Foster Center for Innovation where I was enrolled in the Writer’s Workshop hosted by the UMO IMFA program and under the guidance of renowned author and screenwriter Nina Shengold, who had been invited to teach. After several years of failed self-motivated attempts at starting and completing a feature-length screenplay, I was determined to do so with the hopes that a structured workshop would hold me accountable and produce a finished product. Not only did it succeed in doing so, it helped me to hone a method by which I now approach all writing projects, wherein I first draft out thorough character biographies and personal narrative arcs, followed by a storyline treatment and outline long before I ever begin my first draft of the screenplay itself. Prior to the workshop, I had taken a correspondence course in screenwriting through Rob Milazzo at the Modern School of Film, where I struggled through an original script that sought to create a freeform narrative that buckled under the weight of its own ambition. Through Millazzo’s insights into crafting scripts, he helped me understand the value of rigorous pre-writing character development before embarking on the first draft of any screenplay. With hindsight, it seems obvious, but as Millazzo explained, by having your characters thoroughly fleshed out, as opposed to attempting to discover them through the writing process, the writer knows far better how each character would react to any given situation. I had wasted time on previous scripts laboring through multiple rewrites trying to sort my characters out the page instead of going in knowing who they were ahead of time. This alone constituted the majority of my failures in failing to complete earlier projects as I would exhaust my creative reserves on chasing my own tale (not a typo).
Equipped with a methodical approach to my writing project, I came into the workshop ready to dive in. In the weeks leading up to the course, I had begun my free-association stream-of-consciousness development of what I would write. The title *Ruby Tuesday* had been kicking around in my head for years after having heard the Rolling Stones song. The line “who could hang a name on you” resonated with me. Something about the idea of someone who can’t be pinned down, categorized or accounted for stuck in my mind. The cadence and tone of the tune felt like it was a song for a child. At the time, I’d been listening to Paul McCartney’s first solo album *Ram* and the dissonant and chaotic song “Monkberry Moon Delight” stood out from all the other tracks. It was guttural and abstract, meandering while driven like a broken man’s wild rant. The spirit of the song gripped me like a heartbeat. Music, more than any other element, engages my mind’s eye. I hear a tone and a rhythm and my imagination starts a visual narrative assembly-line. I hear images. Around this time, I’d read something about advances in prosthetics. Amputations and limb loss has always been a great fear of mine and I was intrigued by current methods of giving people back the ability to walk and touch. I was fascinated by how the mind and body could control these devices. I began to ruminate on the idea of what would happen if you couldn’t control it. What if it had a mind of its own? Years prior, I had struggled with substance abuse and I began to see correlations between the “broken man” I heard in the spirit of “Monkberry Moon Delight” and how, had I not been more fortunate, I could have easily mutilated and/or killed myself in the process. In addition, I started thinking about the many jobs and relationships I’d conned my way in and out of over the years, using a kind of blind confidence to charm my way through life. From here, I started to formulate what would become one of the central characters of my
screenplay, an antihero scarred by his own hubris unwittingly searching for redemption. I took away his arm and replaced it with a sentient prosthetic that served as his partner-in-crime as well as his conscience, a sort of futuristic Jiminy Cricket. Once that analogy clicked into my head, I was reminded of the orphans of my youth, of *Annie* and the Hudson Street Orphanage, Disney’s Tony and Tia from *Escape to Witch Mountain* and the Lost Boys of *Peter Pan*. Suddenly, a kind of fairy tale began to emerge from these elements and a breadcrumb trail revealed itself to me leading me home.

It was as if I were working with a divining rod and it was directing me towards a water spring. The story and characters began flooding into my head. Everything that I’d ever struggled to work into a story came organically now. Where in the past I’d pushed and imposed concepts or sentiments, I found them naturally embedded within the structure and composition of the characters. As I dove deeper into their backstories, the narrative increasingly became obvious. Two years prior, I’d become a father for the second time and now had two young beautiful girls. Like Ryan O’Neal’s con man in *Paper Moon* saddled with a young girl, I stuck my main character with two orphan girls, or more accurately, I stuck them with him. Due to my main character’s artificially intelligent arm, my story needed to be set in the future. With climate change being a very real concern, I envisioned a world that had to adapt to sea levels rising and thus became a New York City elevated on the ashes of its past, built on its ruins over a flooded metropolis. In this setting, I could see the already evident stratification of the social classes exacerbated further with a world beneath the city and another above, with everyone else trapped in the middle. In this futuristic world, I saw my orphans as the bioproduct of a “baby boom” explosion from artificial womb franchises, where births became cheap and effortless. It was my time working in photo finishing labs where people would often drop off rolls of film to be processed and never return to pick them up. These photos often depicted family events and other seemingly precious moments, cast off as an afterthought when it no longer was convenient to keep or pay for them. This level of emotional detachment reminded me of the lessons I
learned in Seattle, in that divorced culture where families crumbled into relatives-by-association. Cruelty began to seep into the world I was creating, but with a hope for something better. My villain emerged from yet another Disney story - Cruella De Vil from *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*. Like her desire to weave a coat made from the skins of those dogs, my criminal mastermind was seizing on the overpopulation of unwanted children and harvesting their organs for sale on the black market. Now that the mold for my antagonist was cast, I needed to give them a lair. As with all great criminals - in history and in fiction - they often position themselves out in the open, plain to see. Thus, I built their crime den under the guise of an orphanage estate in Central Park. The stage was now set, my characters fleshed out with a story to tell.

The twists and tangents that began the process by which I crafted this story revealed themselves once I allowed myself to get out of the way. Whereas in the past I had pushed and toiled to force stories onto the page, stumbling over my own ideas and doubling back to course correct along the way, I was now guided by (dare I say it… I dare) the Force. I did as Obi Wan said and “stretched out [my] feelings”. I let the Force penetrate and bind my universe together, and I’ll be damned - it worked! I created well-rounded characters that, when I set down to write scenes, spilled out onto the pages effortlessly with little to no massive rewrites required. Certainly none that required complete character revisions, at any rate. Sentiments regarding how the world works, how we hope it would work, what we all relate to and try to avoid were baked into the body and spirit of the story. I found myself enjoying writing like I never had before. I began to see and believe in the potential of this method of creative construction; it was possible to find my way through the process if I approached it with the right mindset and tools to assemble it.

To this day, every project I endeavor to produce - be it fictional, documentary, what have you - is initiated by instinct and developed through character before establishing what the narrative might be. The urge to impose a predetermined ideal on any creative impulse is often very strong. A leap of faith is an act of vulnerability and in turn an act of bravery. By taking that leap and
allowing oneself to be vulnerable, I find that the work can only then be truly honest. Despite the results and the eventual “natural flow,” it isn’t necessarily the path of least resistance. It requires constant vigilance to the details and discipline to the process in order for the method to run its course smoothly and effectively. I believe in the power of the whim if it’s guided by experience.

Ruby Tuesday, as it was originally titled, went to multiple screenplay festivals and advanced in several, making it into the quarter finals for WeScreenplay and Screencraft as well as the top 10 of Big Break competitions. Oftentimes people would ask me about the title Ruby Tuesday and what it meant, and for the longest time I didn’t have a satisfactory answer. It had served as a catalyst for the story, but like a chrysalis it felt as though it no longer served any purpose. I had always been a fan of The Muppet Movie from when I was a child and the songs written by Paul Williams. I went back to explore his work more deeply when I came upon this song and album, Someday Man. The lyrics and title spoke to everything Ruby Tuesday was about, and like a missing piece of the puzzle everything had fallen into place. This was the final lesson of this experience: patience, to have faith in the process no matter how long it takes. It takes as long as it’s going to take.
THE FOCUS GROUP

(improv)

An essential component of my creative process and elemental to my work based on concepts of “nothing” is the act of improvisation. In 2009, I and five other performers founded the improv troupe The Focus Group, which performs short and longform improvisation games in front of a live audience based on random suggestions solicited from the crowd. The name “Focus Group” came from my experiences while living in New York City trying to make a living any way I could; at one point, I was being paid to be part of a law firm’s focus group to test various points of litigation. I found the experience fascinating and not unlike the orientation of our improv staging - a row of subjects all sitting in uncomfortable chairs being called upon to react to an assortment of unexpected situations. Not to mention the theatrical discipline that is intrinsic to all actors’ inner monologues: what does my character want, what is their focus? It felt like an obvious correlation and my groupmates seemed to agree.

The format of our performance is assembled from a variety of what are called “short form” games such as Four Square and La Ronde. In Four Square, not unlike the children’s game with a ball, four actors assume the four points of a square. Each side/pair of actors are given a word suggestion from the audience then rotated to the left or right so that each pair is given the opportunity to be the downstage (closest to the audience) presenters where they will perform their scene. A member of the “backline” (a performer not engaged directly in the scene playing out) controls the duration of each performance by calling out “turn to the right” or “left” whenever they feel the moment has played out or hit its peak, thus putting the next
pairing in the hot seat, as it were. The fast-paced rotation requires an agile mind and quick wit to establish and propel characters and narrative for two different scenes. This style of artist creation is based on impulse using the “yes and…” reaction, where your response is to affirm anything your partner throws at you and build upon it. It’s essential that one does not go into one’s head and overthink this process. If too much time is spent analyzing, the scene loses its momentum and becomes “directed,” killing its spontaneity and rhythm. This is a brilliant exercise in trust, both in your partner and in yourself. Every moment is a bungee jump of exhilaration, never quite knowing when the line will become taut and jerking up into a new direction. Oftentimes, we use this game as a warmup in practices, but have also integrated it into our performances to kick things off at the start and revisit it later to help revitalize the show both creatively and in overall energy.

Fig. 55 Focus Group Live (Photo by Bill Kuykendall)

The second component of our performances are “longform” improv games such as the Harold and Deconstruction. The Harold format follows multiple scenes established and developed over a three-part act structure broken up by two free-ranging and unrelated improvs. Also based on random suggestions, this style of improvisation requires the same level of mental agility and open mindedness while still managing to chart a narrative arc in the process. Finding “the game” is the first stage of the Harold - essentially, what the scene about; i.e. A priest with no inner monologue hears confessions from his parishioners. In the first scene, we establish the priest can’t help but express everything he really thinks about the people confessing their sins to him. Each subsequent scene must up the stakes, culminating in the third and final beat, potentially, ending with them facing God at the pearly gates where his real opinion of the Almighty prevents him from gaining access. Gut laughs ensue.
Both the short and longform games/exercises keep the performer in a perpetual state of creation, never allowing them to land for too long on any one idea. Each thought must be conceived, grown (developed and heightened) and then abandoned before it has the chance to become old and die. It is an endless planting, a slash-and-burn cyclical process with little time to think, bridging the gap between conscious and subconscious thought, thriving on impulse and decaying on analysis. This tool of creative development often produces absurd concepts which inspire comedic outcomes, two areas in which I find the most satisfaction and - in many ways - the most realism. The world is a chaotic and impulsive place, and to apply too much structure to it is to be disingenuous and false. What some view as realism is the true absurdity. To present life and the people in it as overly thought-out and methodical is to illustrate our deepest desires and not the truth of our untethered existence. To my mind, improv is the truest embodiment of the human experience. It is what we do every day as we’re met with any number of random acts that impact our choices and actions. Life is a “yes and…” game. To choose otherwise is to die. A shark must continue to swim to stay alive. If it decides to stop it will die, a terminal “yes and…” Yet every day, billions of people wake up and begin “yes anding…” their way through the day. Audiences recognize (whether...
consciously or not) the relatable nature of improvisation. They identify with the chaos of choices and celebrate the performers’ tightwire act, even if they might fall. It’s the recognition of themselves in the absurd freefall of improvisation that they enjoy.

An offshoot of my work with the group has been the development and production of the logo and concept art to help promote the troupe. I have applied those same tools of improvisation to my approach to finding themes for our photos and posters taking a word suggestion to inspire me.

In all of my work, I strive to find the improvisation, the absurd acrobat at work. I want to reach into my subconscious and allow it to parade about naked and unedited to see what ideas it shakes loose. I’m looking for that honest and sincere moment where I can find a shared truth with myself and my audience. What hallowed insights does that uncensored priest have to express before a vengeful God before damning them to eternal damnation that can’t help but make any man, woman or child giggle with sin because they’ve thought the same thing too? Only when we release ourselves from the temptations of conscious thought can we access impulse and balance on the edge of creation through improvisation … and focus on the group.

Fig. 59 Focus Group Promo Poster #4
“Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic. Authenticity is invaluable; originality is non-existent. And don’t bother concealing your thievery - celebrate it if you feel like it. In any case, always remember what Jean-Luc Godard said: “It’s not where you take things from - it’s where you take them to.”

- Jim Jarmusch


Twain, M. (1876) *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Coppell, TX: Enhanced Media

Twain, M. (1884) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Coppell, TX: Enhanced Media


I don’t know if Tuesday the 13th is as ominous or as infamous as a Friday of the same date but I’m going to start my journals on this day just the same.

Four days away from my first time being able to get onto the Hauck stage and begin setting the stage for the first day of shooting on Sunday the 18th.

So far, all the roles for episode 3 “In the Negative” have been cast and scheduled. I’m thrilled with the actors who’ve signed onto the project but I’m anxious about accomplishing everything I’m trying to achieve both in regards to filming twenty pages in four days, only two of which are eight hour days, the remaining days only four hours total. In addition I don’t know that I’ll be able to achieve my personal goal of working more in depth with the actors. My portfolio of productions have always favored “getting the shot” over “capturing a performance”. I’ve had a shot quota to meet and sacrificed quality for quantity. Technically this is no different, with the exception that I hope to invert my objective; sacrifice the shot for performance. That’s not to say I throw my visual vocabulary out the window but rather I attempt to see the story through performance as opposed to composing one through the camera.

My worry is that that approach can take time and patience, two luxuries I rarely can afford. Or are they? If time is relative, then perhaps my perception of time can be altered to see patience taking less or equal time as seen through the prism of borderline panic, where time is constantly slipping away. I’ve avoided taking my time because I feared I’d run out of it. Maybe by slowing
down I’ll think more clearly, find solutions more rapidly, and establish a more efficient method of
general practice that’s eluded me in my previously hurried state.

This will mark the first time in a very long time that I will allow the camera to be operated by
another person. I don’t have them all the time and will have to film some things myself, but the
majority will be handled by Wing Wong, a UMaine alumna who worked with my department
years ago shooting photographs for us. I thought I would be more nervous but I find I’m
increasingly energized by the idea of not filming the project myself. I feel a sense of freedom,
like an umbilical has been severed. I’m eager to see how it goes. As a friend of mine from South
Africa used to say for good luck, I’m holding thumbs.

Saturday I’ll be on the Hauck Stage adjusting the current lighting plot to set the mood and time
of day for the scenes in Scotty’s Apartment when we start shooting on Sunday. I’ll also be
placing all of the set elements, as few as there are.

SNAG - MJ informed me that all but one of the doors I found were far too heavy to be supported
by the door frame and that opening and closing them is problematic at best. At their base level
and central role the doors are scenic signifiers, hinting at the larger structure that surrounds it. I
have to either devise a way to open and close the doors in a way that’s natural and easy enough
for the actors to handle and still look professional, or devise a way to create the illusion of the
doors opening and closing. Until I get down to the stage and see the door and frame in action I
won’t know what I’m up against. At the very least though I’ve thought of several ways to avoid
ever showing a door truly open or close through a combination of possible camera movements
and audio effects. As our set is hosted within a black void objects in space can be manipulated
by the camera in a way that suspends the audience’s ability to discern which object is moving,
the door or the camera. This will most certainly require some experimentation to see if it’s a
viable solution.
Right now I’m just trying to keep track of everything on my to-do list and making sure I’m not letting anything slide. There’s a potential snow storm headed this way on late Friday into Saturday which could delay my work getting everything set up on campus. I’m not going to worry about it. It will do no good. As I have it now I’ve built into the month-long production schedule a week’s worth of padding in the event there are delays, reshoots or just allowing things to go a little longer to get the best results. So I can take a few hits before things start getting desperate. For now I just need to focus on what I can control and keep thinking about the story we’re trying to tell. I’m eager to start working with the actors and see what they bring to the table. For the first time I feel like I’ll be directing through listening. We’ll see.

121522

I’ve been thinking about the first days of production working with actors who have little to no experience performing on camera. As I’ve heard it said, when acting on camera you can practically think your performance and the lens will capture it. Subtly is the key to great performance on camera, whereas larger than life is what’s needed to carry it to the back row of the audience when on the stage. The bulk of my actor’s experiences, if any, is theatrical. I need them to have the confidence that less is more, that we will see what they’re thinking without emotion through gesture and volume.

I’m playing with the idea, if only as an exercise, after a scene is up on its feet perhaps trying several different passes in which we limit the variables. In one scenario we could run the scene silent, no dialogue, literally think the entire performance. Another run could stipulate that each line of dialogue must be reduced to only one to two words, just the intention; eat, sleep, come, leave, why, etc.
I hate writing dialogue but I love it when it’s done well. I feel I write too much dialogue. My hope is that once we have the actors and start seeing the scenes come to life we’ll begin to recognize where we can trim the fat, elevating the narrative while enriching the performances. I want to see the story, not so much tell it. I want the spoken word to reveal what’s unseen as opposed to echo what’s right in front of us. I want to hide clues within the scenery and interactions that allow the audience to decipher as much as direct their attention.

When I write I typically begin with a crystal clear vision of how the story starts and ends. We start with a treasure map and we end with a treasure, what happens in between is the quest. Once I know where the story takes its first step and where it’s heading I outline the plot points, or narrative mile markers. I need to know where each landmark is along the dotted path. I don’t have enough faith in my grasp of the narrative plot structure to go commando, as it were. But I worry that I become too dependent on these plot points and hurry my characters from place to place like an impatient tour guide never allowing things to soak up the ambiance of the moments. I know that the first two episodes are extremely plot driven, establishing all of the characters and their conflicts. That’s why I’m excited to begin filming with episode three, where everything comes to a near total and complete stop by comparison to the previous episodes. My hope is that this will help establish a method and pace to the production that elicits the best results. If we were to jump into either episode one or two first the need to maintain an agile and productive shooting schedule we would need to hustle and potentially sacrifice nuance and detail for quantity.

A part of this project’s goal is to explore and embrace spontaneity, to see how it fosters creative impulses. I don’t want the script to become the bible or rigid blueprint but more a guide and allow for exploration and experimentation. We know where we’re going, we should explore the backroads and see what’s there before we pass it by without another thought. The major hurdle for me will be having the faith and confidence to allow it to happen, not letting my insecurities
and anxieties get in the way. I could very easily see myself becoming impatient or worried and want to lock things down, define them, dictate and execute a vision. I will need to lean on my documentary photography and videography experience and allow myself to be lead by the characters to show me what the story is in each moment.

My one regret right now is that I don’t have a full crew in line to help. I have a camera operator for some days of production and the rest I’ll have to shoot myself. And when I’m not running the camera I’ll be operating the mic-boom. I need to try harder to see if I can find someone to help me with these crew positions as I need to free myself from the tech side as much as possible to be able to truly devote myself to nursing the story into existence. When I’m tethered to the camera or the microphone it’s hard to divide my attention between the task at hand and keeping the larger picture in my head when I’m watching the film reveal itself. I have some ideas of potential crew members, I just need to act and reach out to them. I think I just convinced myself to do that now.

121722

Tomorrow is the first day of filming. I spent part of the day down on the Hauck stage setting up the scenic elements and setting up the lighting plot. I had to tweak the schematic of my set pieces to adjust to the reality of empty space. Though my original plan adhered very accurately to the standard shape and size of the stereotypical “Economy Lodge” room, when you remove all the walls along with most of the other physical objects it loses all of its claustrophobia. Thus I moved the set closer together.

A major issue, but not an insurmountable one, are the doors. The cornerstone piece of architecture for all of my locations, the doors that I painstakingly hunted down and traveled all over Maine to collect are too heavy for the door frame and thus almost impossible to open and
close without straining. I also only have one door knob for three doors. I’m not too worried about it.

I’m trying to keep my focus on working with the actors and telling the story. I need to keep the scenics in perspective and not let them usurp more time and energy than absolutely necessary. There’s light on the stage and a set waiting for actors.

At the moment I’m exhausted. It’s been a very long, busy semester and things are only starting to ramp up. I have faith in my cast that we’ll capture something wonderful. I’m eager to see what everyone brings to the table and where we can take it to the next level.

121822

The first day of filming was a success, despite several adversities, most notably my camera operator calling out sick. They’d given me a heads up that might happen the night before but as I arrived at the theater their text message made me quickly question what the first day of production was going to be capable of producing. As it turns out, essentially everything I’d intended to film.

As I’d postulated in a previous journal entry I was curious if whether a change in attitude and approach to film production, one that was calm and patient versus intense and working against a deadline, would make any difference in what one could produce in a set amount of time. I wanted to know if I stopped and listened more, could I produce better work, have more fun and “allow things to happen”, and I believe it did. Despite losing 100% of my crew on the first day of shooting I was able to accomplish everything I set out to do. Technically I failed to film one scene I’d planned on filming, but I did manage to film another scene that was slated only if time allowed.
I had limited time with one of my main actors and that time had run out. Honestly, I didn’t even feel like I’d run out of time. We’d maintained a steady pace of filming, despite having to run the camera and sound simultaneously by myself. The key to our success were the actors and their performances. Fortunately they were already well acquainted and able to immediately jump into the scenes. I found I only needed to give the occasional direction, mostly adjustments. This went a long way to keep us moving forward.

With each new scene I started with a master shot including everyone in the scene in one composition. We ran the scene until it started to feel right but not necessarily rock solid. My hope was that by the time I got to each person’s close up their performance would peak when I focused on them. All of the potential acting exercises I thought I might need to employ were completely unnecessary. There were only one or two moments where an actor’s performance utilized theatrical stage techniques had to be pointed out, but after that everyone eased into the parameters of cinematic storytelling. I think the preparation was well worth it, if only to be something I recognized as not needing.

I am happy with the state of the lighting, but it is a far, far cry from my original intention. I had hoped to achieve a certain level of realism but circumstances dictated that I run with what I had. I’ve since made peace with the “look” I achieved. I wanted something that seemed organic to the space. There were certain theatrical elements I couldn’t avoid, or at least didn’t have the time to address with any real success, and so I determined it better to lean into them and incorporate them. Stage lighting, exit signs and the stage wings are visible. In some cases it might be possible to fix or at least play them down a bit so they’re not distracting. Regardless, they are there and it felt right to acknowledge that they are part of the space and let them be, rather than fight them and waste time.
Though I am incredibly tired and worn out I am thrilled that the production is off and running and with such a promising start. I have found a wonderful cast and we have established a very comfortable and enjoyable working relationship. I’m greatly encouraged by my state of mind. I feel the pressure of the production and being responsible for giving the project direction but it’s not stressing me out. Emotionally I feel calm. There still just enough anxiety to keep things electric and motivated but it feels far more fun than dire. Like playing hooky and the fear of getting caught having such a wonderful time.

121922

Today was rough. The lack of crew saddled with a lack of food prior to a late afternoon start time didn’t set things up for success. I was greatly fatigued and having to juggle the camera, sound and multiple set pieces I was in over my head with no fuel to keep the creative juices flowing. I had no energy to bring to the table and I set a bad tone for the actors by being so tired. The cast were doing their best but they too were low energy. Had I been able to bring some enthusiasm to the proceedings I’m sure we all could have done much better, but as it was it felt like a bit of a step backward after the success of the first day of filming.

With that said we still managed to accomplish everything we set out to film. The verdict is still out however whether we produced good work. We keep pushing forward and I keep in my back pocket, if time allows, the possibility of revisiting these scenes once everything else is filmed. If we stick to the schedule I should have at least one week more where I can address any reshoots I need to consider.

Ironically, in an effort to work with nothing, it’s incredibly hard work emptying out a space. Everywhere I look there are elements sneaking into the frame I’d rather not see. I had to spend about 10-15 minutes removing set pieces from the stage just so I could have an empty space to
shoot. I never wanted it to appear as though we could see through walls but that’s become far more difficult than I had anticipated. From past projects I’ve always known that working with less means more work. Every scene we shoot I’m trying to suspend the soundscape that will be later mixed in inside my head as I film. I can only hope I’m getting enough coverage and not cutting off my nose in spite of my face.

I’m hopeful that a good night’s sleep and a better eating habit tomorrow will put me in a better frame of mind for tomorrow’s shoot before we all take off for the holiday and don’t resume filming until the 31st. At that time I should have more crew members on board which will hopefully free up my mental faculties and energy resources to truly focus on the work. As it is now, I’m wearing so many hats I’m no longer sure where my head is at.

122022

Today was much better. Despite my night being riddled with nightmares and sleeplessness, waking up more exhausted than I was the day before, I pushed through and made sure to eat regularly and get some exercise. That went a long way to position me both physically and mentally to be ready to engage with the project and work with my cast. I’ve learned from my work with my therapist and group that getting enough rest, physical activity and eating regularly is essential to my emotional stability and ability to be constructively creative.

Working with the actors today was much more fun and it helped that I had a new member on the crew running sound. One less job to do helped me have the time to listen and watch the actors as they ran the scene. I could see where things were naturally gravitating towards and assist in nudging them in the right direction. We had time to explore options and develop them; some worked while others we later abandoned. Either way everyone was able to contribute their ideas and see if they worked or not. I never felt like there was a wrong answer, or that time was
being wasted running things that I didn’t immediately agree with. Having the right mindset to be open to the creative dialogue fostered a fun atmosphere and took us places we might not have discovered had I been a more directing director.

With each scene I would let the actors rehearse the scene amongst themselves before asking to see what they’d prepared. After watching the scene play out I would offer suggestions of where blocking might inform a character’s motivations, or insecurities. Where lines of dialogue no longer rang true we’d cut them. When a pregnant pause fell dead we found lines that felt appropriate. I encouraged actors to follow their impulses. If something doesn’t feel right don’t do it just because it’s written on the page. If something felt like it was missing we allowed the impulse to inspire them to fill in the gap. I saw the script as an approximation of what the story was inside my head, if I were to play all the parts. Once the actors took over the characters and words it had to fit who they were moved to bring to life. My job was to make sure everyone remained true to life, as it were. The actors brought these characters to life and therefore they must be honest and sincere embodiments. If something sounds or looks false the character is being blocked off by apprehension or imposition. Self doubt is the parent of posturing and over reflection. When the actor is truly engaged and stops feeding their performance a beautiful transformation transpires where the actor and character inhabit a symbiotic dynamic where both are sustained by the moment and the act becomes impulsive.

The one overriding woe I’m continually being vexed by is the blasted iPhone app, Filmic Pro. An app I was no stranger to prior to filming beginning but one that I was unaware of having been recently “updated”. I unfortunately only became aware of this well into the first day of filming when it had become too late to turn back. This new version of the app I was familiar with produced 4K video, which was a plus, but simultaneously had redefined several parameters of operation that I thought was user error before I determined it was an interface flaw. Not to mention that all of the footage I’d shot was now being held captive on my device unless I
subscribed to the apps’ new policy whereby access to your footage is only accessible once you pay the weekly or annual fee to unlock the ability to download it. The fee isn’t exorbitant but it enrages me no less. The app is riddled with bugs that make filming incredibly difficult and near impossible to shoot with any consistency regarding any settings. I would continually set and lock the ISO and shutter speed to where I wanted them only to have, in mid-scene, the camera suddenly made automatic changes to adjust to what it thought was a preferred exposure.

My issue is that I’ve now shot everything at a certain resolution and to go back and use the previous version of the app would mean to downgrade the footage significantly. But if I can’t control the camera settings what good does the resolution do for me? I keep hoping I’ll solve the issue with this new version but I need to make a decision soon. Production goes dark for the next week or so due to the holidays during which time I hope to devote more time to the problem. We resume filming on December 31st, at which time I’ll have made up my mind one way or the other.

With the conclusion of today’s filming we have effectively shot three quarters of episode three. We’re making great progress and I’ve overcome some personal and technical issues relatively well. I feel that the experience is teaching me a great deal and I’ll be able to build upon these lessons with each new day as well as future projects.

122922

Yesterday afternoon we had our fourth day of shooting. We managed to shoot 75% of everything I’d hoped to accomplish but the combination of a sinus headache I’d been fighting for days and a twelve year old actress who’s attention span was waning I thought it more productive to cut the shoot day short. We came away with good work so I decided to quit while I was ahead.
I’m still not hitting the target for what I want this production to accomplish. For a day or two there I had a stride I was happy with where production schedules and creative discovery were working hand in hand. Then my personal schedule took several hits which restructured the production schedule and left me with a very tight timeline to get everything done. Despite this time crunch I’ve still managed to keep an open mind and a willingness to allow things to happen as opposed to tightening my grip and becoming demanding. I’m still managing to maintain an open and free atmosphere which continues to produce great moments. My biggest fear is that I’ve sacrificed coverage for moments. Which shouldn’t be a big deal if all of my moments cut together successfully. I must trust that they will.

I read an article today from the May 2, 2018, No Film School piece on director Alexander Payne and his 2018 Tribeca Film Festival conversation with Dick Cavett. I’m not an overly big fan of Payne’s films, but I respect him as an artist and storyteller. During his Tribeca appearance he shared several useful nuggets of knowledge that reinstalled my faith in the process of filmmaking.

“Making a film is like cooking eggs. You wanna make a perfect omelet, but sometimes you have to say ‘fuck it’ and make scrambled eggs.”

- Alexander Payne

Every film project I’ve worked on has felt like I ended up with scrambled eggs and I felt like a failure. Payne’s comment reminds me that even if I feel like I failed to produce what I envisioned I still produced what it truly was. Each effort is a stride in a race that never ends. I need to stop thinking of projects as either accomplishments or failures. I’ve often recognized that each previous film has been a successful lesson but I’ve categorized them solely as mistakes to learn from. A colleague of mine often says that no project is ever finished, just abandoned. I agree, but perhaps I should attempt thinking of them as being released rather than deserted. Perfection is an unrealistic goal and a particularly boring one at that. I appreciate the
imperfections of others as beauty marks. It’s time I recognize the same in my own.

“You are your voice. You don’t look for it, you don’t find it, You ARE it.”

- Alexander Payne

I’ve tried to stay out of my way on this production, meaning, I haven’t tried to impose a visual stamp on it. Watching the actors play the scene I’ve sought to capture the performance from the angles that best support the story and characters. I’m not in my head over thinking, I’m reacting. So where I feel I may be failing to help actors discover their impulses I may be following my own, which in turn is helping them to follow theirs. I’m not over direct, but I do feel sometimes what comments I do make could be better stated than I feel I have time for. For example, if an actor isn’t reacting honestly to their partner or is over acting I tend to say more than is needed. Where just “a little less” would speak volumes I say a little too much which can make the actor insecure, discouraged or even embarrassed. I need to be able to take the time to choose my words wisely and say or ask questions that put the actor on the trail of discovery rather than just repeat what I’m asking for. I know the more I do that the better I’ll get. I’m taking a leap of faith that all of this will work out, that I’m filming a story that can be followed and enjoyed. I see the moments and what they all build up to, I’m just not sure anyone else can.

Fingers crossed.

010823

After an unexpected extended break due to illnesses in the family and actor availability we resumed shooting today. We were able to get a great deal done in the time that we had and came away with solid performances. The collection of actors spanned experienced stage performers versed in scripted and improvisation disciplines as well as one musician who had never acted
before but worked extensively with actors.

I had a delightful moment of surprise when while filming a scene, a line I thought had been expertly improvised turned out to be actually something I’d written. I hate writing dialogue and struggle with how to help actors find their voice within the scope of what I’ve written so that it sounds as natural as it does in my head. Everyone in the cast has done an excellent job at taking my words and making them their own and I’ve encouraged ad libbing when they’ve found a more comfortable alternative that works for them. In this instance the actor took the line I’d written and infused it with an unexpected energy I hadn’t anticipated, so much so, that I didn’t even recognize it as my own. In essence, they’d done exactly what I’d hoped that they would do; made it their own. This had happened earlier on one of the first days of filming where a line was delivered unexpectedly and I experienced it like a first time audience who had no prior knowledge of the script. These two moments are exactly what I’m trying to accomplish both as a filmmaker and director; facilitating eureka moments for the actors and audience.

I have tried to separate myself as screenwriter from my work as a director to allow myself to open up to discovery. I want to be the leader of an expedition into unknown territory more than a tour guide of established landmarks. My process has been to give the actors a situational awareness of where their character and scenes exist within the narrative arc but allow them the time and space to navigate them via their impulses to what’s happening in the moment. As a case in point, during a scene today a backpack’s contents are emptied onto the floor after our hero is accused of stealing from another character. I specifically kept the contents a secret from the accusing character so that when everything spilled onto the floor they would react and respond to their impulses upon seeing what was inside. Familiar with the actor’s sense of humor I had an idea of how they might react and how they could respond. As it turned out I was spot on and they said almost verbatim what I anticipated. The key difference was that when they did react to the contents everything they did and said had that impulsive energy and with a sense
of real ownership. Had I written out their reaction or even rehearsed them with knowledge of the contents it would have lost something in the process. I wouldn’t necessarily call this manipulation as much as I would identify it as positioning. By strategically placing the actors in situations where moments of discovery can occur, I increase the likelihood of authentic reactions to be captured by the camera. In a theatrical rehearsal process this would be a method of discovery for crafting a repeatable performance, establishing muscle memory, not unlike for film. The primary difference being that the subtle nuances that a camera can capture is akin to trapping lightning in a bottle, and depending on the skill of the actor working on such a micro level can be quite challenging.

On the thought of subtly I should also discuss today’s exploration of straying from that a bit. For the most part I have kept everyone’s performances well within the realm of believability, or at least as natural as possible regardless of the ludicrous situations I’ve placed them in. Within today’s scene I attempted to see how far outside those lines I could allow a performance to go. At this point what’s done is done and I won’t know for certain if the choices I made today were misplaced. In the scene where our hero Iris has been placed in a temporary foster home with an eccentric couple she’s accused of robbing them though no proof can be found. The actors I cast in the roles of the couple come from a comedy improv background and I knew that their choices would inevitably be bold and potentially unexpected. As it turned out I was absolutely correct on both counts. For better or worse I allowed myself to be entertained by everything they were bringing to the table, making only slight adjustments to the volume of their performance. I have no doubts that what they gave me was very entertaining and that audiences would enjoy watching them. My only concerns are whether I allowed it to go too far within the context of everything else I filmed. Would this sudden pitch change in the narrative be out of place, or would it serve as the comic relief I’d intended. I went with my gut that what I was watching worked and proceeded with the rest of the shoot accordingly. I won’t know until I sit down in the editing room whether I jumped the rails with this choice and ran myself smack into an
oncoming train.

Alternatively, I was very pleased and confident with the outcome of a scene between Iris and her social worker, Steven that played out inside his car just prior to the entrance of the eccentric couple scene. This was a moment I’d been eagerly anticipating where two actors sat in awkward silence. Thematically and visually I loved the concept of two people sitting close together but both emotionally distant from one another. I found myself continually asking them to take more time with the scene, not rushing the dialogue, allowing the awkward silence to become deafening. I think we could have pursued this even further but the time constraints of the production day wouldn’t allow us to explore it much further. Regardless I think we were able to achieve a great deal in the time we had and a very touching scene played out before the camera. This, however, was one instance where I couldn’t tell if the lack of scenery helped or hindered the moment. Though the physical environment was devoid of any real substance other than the chairs and steering wheel that made up the “car”, I feared we lost the sense of confinement and limitations that these two characters were experiencing. I had hoped to implement a negative lighting technique to shadow the actors more accurately, as they would be inside a car, but again time was compromised by a lack of crew and materials to pull it off. Too many hats and not enough heads to wear them. My hope is that when I begin editing the scene together the actor’s performance will carry the emotional tone of the scene and the void surrounding them supports their efforts.

010923

This evening’s shoot was a great success working with two new actors who had never acted before. It’s interesting how people who’ve never acted before seem to do better performing on camera than some theatrically trained actors. It makes sense that someone who’s been conditioned to emote to the back row of an auditorium might struggle toning their performance
down so that the camera can capture subtle nuance, whereas the non-actor doesn’t bring that baggage with them.

We got a late start but were able to capture a great deal once we got up and running. I had one crew member for part of the shoot but they had to leave before we were finished. I’ve increasingly begun to appreciate how important it is to have people to delegate responsibilities to. Through this experience it’s plain to see how much compromising I’ve had to do in order to keep things moving smoothly. If the lighting isn’t just right but I’ve got to get the sound equipment setup, or the camera ready or work with actors on the scene then the lighting doesn’t get fine tuned and reciprocally none of the other things get done to their full potential either. With that said, I still feel that no one thing has suffered enough to be detrimental to the outcome of the project. It might not be reaching the mark of my highest hopes but it hasn’t fallen short of my expectations. We’re still working as a team and having a good time, fostering an environment that is creative, energized and fun. That has been my highest priority, second only to effectively telling a story, which essentially works hand in hand.

011023

Another successful shoot with three great actors who came to play. The big takeaway from this evening’s work were “beautiful mistakes”. What I’m talking about are line flubs, missed marks and the like. These are the unexpected moments when suddenly everything becomes hyper-real. The actor is truly in the moment and not “performing” but reacting. The trick is getting the actor to learn to embrace and incorporate the mistake. Several times in the last few days an actor has jumped a line or missed and then broken character or doubled back to recite the line more accurately. By doing so they preempt the possibility of being genuine and honest and letting that begin to permeate throughout the scene. These are some of the impulses I’ve been trying to sew the seeds of being present.
I’ve encouraged actors to see the script and dialogue as a starting point, not the goal. As an actor I know how challenging it can be to get the lines and blocking into your bones and to have them come as second nature. This can take time and patience. I’ve learned to have patience but I rarely can afford the time. But when mistakes happen they provide a shortcut to expedite the process by jerking the performer out of the “scene” and into the moment where the real scene should take place. Improvisers are the masters of identifying a moment as a “yes and” opportunity. You affirm the moment by building onto it as opposed to negating it by becoming rigid.

I want to continue to work on establishing an atmosphere of my sets where an elastic attitude by the ensemble of cast and crew can bounce back from imperfections and react through creative responses. Another way of thinking of it as reflexive problem solving, a heightened sense of performance. Part of the process by which I could help facilitate this environment is through the posing of questions instead of answers. To be sure there are times where direct answers are more appropriate to get the job done, but there are answers that can act like questions to engage the imagination and alert impulses to be at the ready. This is an area that only recently I’ve begun to have the self confidence to allow myself to explore.

My struggles with depression and anxiety have hindered my ability to truly open myself up to options and possibilities. The sheer nature of my mental and emotional challenges have demanded that I lock things down, anchor myself to resolution and choices, ellimate the variables down to concrete solutions. Anything less is to set sail through a tidal wave of unknowns and wind up adrift in a sea of uncertainty and lost. As I continue to develop my coping skills and lean into rather than avoid my anxieties I grow my ability to let go. When working with my actors, instead of trying to help them find the character’s I’ve written, I’m listening to what they’re bringing to the role and aiding their development of their natural tendencies. In this
regard I’ve begun to see a growth in my skills as a director and discovered a more productive process and quality in the ensemble’s work.

Tonight, the third to last film shoot, I was finally able to implement some real lighting design. I’ve struggled throughout this production to successfully bring a lighting plot to full fruition. That’s not to say I did so this evening but I came the closest I’ve come yet to creating a truly envisioned lighting effect. During a scene that takes place both inside and outside a car I used negative fill to create the ambient light and shadows that appear inside a car. By using a music stand I created a shadow across the actor’s face mimicking sunlight streaming in at forty five degree angle where the edge of the car dome and windshield meet. The effect was subtle yet fantastic. It immediately brought the car environment to life, like magic. It suddenly had depth of space and enclosure. As much as it thrilled me with this successful recreation I immediately lamented everything we’d shot up until this point, realizing with some extra hands and effort we could have accomplished some truly wonderfully specific environments mostly by lighting plot alone. I anticipate that the sound design will help fill in a majority of the missing location details but the lighting has suffered. Which is incredibly unfortunate since it was one of the major elements I had high expectations for. There’s nothing lost in a mistake you’ve learned from.

011423

Today’s shoot saw a very successful lighting plot come into focus. From the moment I envisioned adapting NTBOM from a location based project to a stage void experiment the scene that takes place within Cloris’s Closet was one of the first settings I knew how I wanted to light. The setting is inside a dark and crowded junk shop, early in the morning. Sunlight streaming in through the door window streaking across the floor and cutting across objects and faces was the picture I had in my head. I wanted a space that evokes an atmosphere of cluttered emptiness. Cloris is beginning to suffer from early onset Alzheimers and her business is a
metaphor for her collection of forgetables. In the scene she has sought refuge in her business hiding from the police and Department of Human Services, but it is the sight of her nephew Shannon coming to find her that threatens her independence and brings her shame ducking out of sight in the shadows of her junk pile. Shannon stands in the light of the window calling her name, his shadow looming over the room. The light cuts across Cloris’s face as she debates answering him, for the first time in her life, unsure about what she should do. In that moment of uncertainty when she’s just about to announce herself to Shannon she’s distracted by the surprise appearance of Iris hiding from behind an old steamer trunk. The same shaft of light from the door illuminating half of Cloris’s face reveals Irises eyes peering back at her. Suddenly Cloris is caught between two worlds, one that is familiar and complicated and another that is simply unknown. Cloris’s path is one of avoidance; avoiding her pain, avoiding those who care for her, avoiding herself. This scene embodies everything Cloris is and is dealing with, her dilemma and her choices. In classic narrative fashion she chooses the path of least resistance and in reality the worst option. The ability to have the set and lighting come together as I’d originally intended enabled me to see how much detail I could bring to a largely empty space and how that absence of environment helped to create impulses in the actors that supported the themes of the narrative.

Working within an empty stage with limited set pieces that can be quickly removed or added at will I believe helped to keep the actor’s engaged and reactive. With little time to acclimate and become familiar with a space that is well defined kept actors and crew alike on their toes. The light-weight nature of the set and props facilitated a spry approach to the production keeping everyone in a constant state of discovery. Once a set was ready actors began walking out the scene, getting it up on its feet just enough to begin anticipating that moment when uncertainty meets familiarity. It is in this gulf between the two, like the moment between shifting gears when there is no resistance and the vehicle is gliding on momentum, that discovery ignites. This is the moment I’m trying to capture, the event horizon before the actor succumbs to the gravity of performance. Threading the needle of helping actors to make strong choices while
simultaneously not committing to a performance whereby not inadvertently shooting yourself in the continuity foot is a challenge to say the least. Working within a visual void doesn’t provide one with a variety of cut-aways to help you during the editing process, or so I hope not to learn as production wraps up and I head in to post.

011523

LAST DAY OF FILMING!!

When this production began filming we started with some of the last scenes of episode three and shot the two episodes out of sequence the remainder of the production. I didn’t realize until now that by some dumb luck the final two scenes we filmed today were the last scenes of both episode two and three. Ending on those scenes felt like a beginning. Obviously a beginning to the next phase of the project but also a beginning to the story itself. With these final missing pieces captured a story could start to take shape. A severely fractured story but a story nonetheless. By skipping episode one vital information about the characters and plot are missing, but even had we filmed the first installment there would be questions left unanswered as this is an episodic narrative. There would be no resolution or clear line of sight had we filmed episode one, two, three, four, five and so on until we got to the final installment. Some of the greatest and longstanding stories begin in the middle of the narrative;

“Marley was dead.” - Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol

“Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.” - Gabriel García Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude

“This is my favorite book in all the world, though I have never read it.” - William Goldman, The Princess Bride
“We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold.” - Hunter S. Thompson, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

“It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.” - George Orwell, 1984

“Episode IV” - George Lucas, Star Wars

It is for these examples I feel confident that no matter where an audience comes into a story they have established a “beginning” and therefore revised the experience. Every news story is the first chapter of a narrative already in progress, it’s the level and context of the details that engage us and carry us through, to an assumed conclusion. But therein lies the rub as Hamlet might ponder. The devil is in the details. If the breadcrumb trail of the narrative doesn’t immediately lead to something of value and interest there will be little desire to continue forward and the “end” will come much sooner than the author intended. In this way every story is a tale of mystery, only tales of crime and murder are so verbose to say so outright. So if one can pose interesting questions by presenting fascinating clues an audience can be hooked by an intriguing non sequitur. The trick is not falling into the trap like that of the TV series Lost whereby the cornerstone of that story was told through intoxicating clues that unfortunately lead to lackluster answers. If your audience’s imagination is piqued beyond anything you could possibly bring to fruition the experience will be of disappointment. You should always keep the best clue for last so you end on revelation as opposed to meeting expectations. It is my hope that NTBOM, regardless of the audience’s entry point into the story, entices the audience through unresolved details that coax them deeper into the narrative. I know that my actors provided nuanced performances that entertained and intrigued me as I filmed them. I can only hope that the plot I’ve constructed and my editing will support the gifts they shared and tell a story that leaves an audience wanting more.
POST PRODUCTION JOURNAL

032323

After a prolonged hiatus due to an over-extended freelance job and the passing of my father-in-law which took a considerable emotional toll on my family and I, I am now into the fourth day of editing, three weeks behind schedule.

The process thus far has been productive yet incredibly arduous due in large part to the harsh realization that I am not as far advanced in my craft as I would like to think I am. As I approach my fifty birthday in four months I feel like a twenty-five year old film student who’s awoken from a dream to find he’s twice as old with the same lack of experience. I realize that my life-long struggles with anxiety and depression have had an adverse impact on my personal life and career, taking me years of crashing into myself time and time again blind to how to fix the wreck of my existence. Not until age 48 when I hit a historically low point after a debilitating case of panic attacks left me a broken man was I able to find the help I needed, and more importantly allow myself to be helped, was I capable of working my way back better than before equipped with new tools and understanding. I see how with a clarity I’ve never had before free from my greatest challenge and obstacle, me. I’ve always known that anything is possible, and I’ve achieved great things through this childlike faith only to inadvertently scuttle my progress by mental and emotional calamity. All that’s changed. Truly, anything is possible. What I face now is the cold splash of reality that is my inexperience.

I realized today that I fear the process of attaining experience, as the pursuit infers naivety and struggle. I want instantaneous knowledge and insight to match my imagination and aspirations. I’m like a student who has picked up the cello for the first time and expect of myself the ability to play Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto flawlessly immediately. I like the patience to endure the
time it takes to become a master. More importantly I like the humility to see myself as a student.

I grew up surrounded by older people for most of my life. There weren’t a lot of children in my family and my family’s friends didn’t have many children, certainly not my age. Conversations often required punching above my weight. I was fortunate that I had an obsession with all things media from all eras such as classic television, old movies and vintage radio shows. I’m sure I was the only student in my fourth grade class who couldn’t wait to get home after school and listen to his parents Smothers Brothers albums or Wendy Carolos’s synthesizer album of Switched on Bach. My tastes have always been eclectic and my mind a tad eccentric which greatly appeals to the older set, almost like a circus act or sideshow freak, amusing. This got me very far for a very long time. But this tightwire act is tired and the line has become slack. As I look at my footage, hear my words performed, see scenes come together I recognize that the quality of the work equals the sum of a limited resume and that there should be no shame in that. But there is. The work is by no means a trainwreck. It is a respectable experiment and resplendent with lessons every twenty four frames a second. I’m trying not to swallow each lesson as bitter pills of mistake but more as a magic elixir of growth and development. The first three days were without a doubt sour mouthfuls, but by facing some hard truths today about myself I think I’m starting to change my perception and acknowledge this learning experience.

I’m afraid of not knowing. Not knowing what it is I’m doing, how to do it well, to do it better than anyone else. I’m afraid of being seen as ignorant, unaware, a novice. I’m afraid of falling behind, being dismissed, forgotten. These fears have caused me to avoid challenges. Not all challenges, just those that matter most to me. I didn’t necessarily want to be a professional photographer but that was something that came easy to me and people quickly paid me for doing it. A fear of failure kept me from truly pushing myself to write scripts, make movies, physicalize my dreams. The only area of my life where I truly put myself out there, laid everything on the line, allowed myself to be vulnerable was in the pursuit of love, a family. As I approach my
fifty birthday I can say that my family is everything I hoped it would be and I’ve put in the time and patience to make it work, while still being humble enough to know I don’t know it all. I’ve been unable to show the same level of devotion and compassion with myself when it comes to my career. But I can see in myself now, over this last year of rehabilitation, I’m learning to use muscles that haven’t quite atrophied from a lack of use. They’ve been in use, just not in the exact same way. Years of documentary photography and video productions have kept my narrative skills active and in good shape. It’s my fictional storytelling abilities that are in a slight state of arrested development. The time elapsed between projects over the years have been an unfortunate result of the aforementioned personal struggles and just the realities of raising a family. Time is a valuable commodity and my personal clock is in a state of inflation. I’m resetting the clock.

Another relative died today, one of a precious few on my side of the family. The loss of my father-in-law and my cousin today are a reminder of what’s most valuable and most fleeting. I will see myself and my work with kinder patient eyes and embrace the lessons I’ve learned this week and will continue to learn through the remainder of this project and beyond. As my favorite philosopher Socrates says, “The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing…. Wait a minute, I drank what?”

032423

Despite my revised outlook and perspective on the project, this is a very painful process. I see why they call it growing pains. I’m learning a great deal, first and foremost I HATE my dialogue with a fiery passion of a thousand suns. There’s too much and it’s not right. It hits the mark from time to time but for the most part it sounds too chatty. I can’t tell if it’s the performances or the writing but it sounds like theatre most of the time. I can’t fault the actors as I wasn’t able to give them the time they needed to sort through the scenes. Too little time and crew required
that I take what we could get and move on. I know these are valuable lessons but I’m having to suffer through my inexperience like a papercut across my eyeball.

060923

As I can see from my last entry I was in a very dark place. The problem with trying to see clearly in the dark is you’re never able to take in the full picture until someone turns on the light. As I worked through the editing process, assembling more and more scenes together I stopped seeing everything on such a microscopic level. When you’re viewing your creation so closely it’s hard not to see it for just the flaws. Not until I could begin to stand back and get the long view of the picture could I begin to appreciate the beautiful flaws. I don’t use the word “flaws” in this instance negatively, rather they’re beauty marks, flourishes, eccentricities, and production value. Once I stopped trying to force the film I’d made into the film I had envisioned I found there wasn’t that much difference between the two. I just needed to get out of my own way and listen to what I’d captured with the camera and sound recorder. The moment I finished the first rough cut, a little over a month ago, and watched the film all the way through it was a total and wonderful surprise, IT WORKED! I no longer saw it as my film, my grubby little fingerprints smeared all over it, but as our film, our success. Under the microscope it was hard not to see the choices I’d made, the missed opportunities, the oversights. If hindsight is 20/20, I had X-Ray vision reviewing my footage. But when I could finally see the ensemble accomplishment running at 23.98 frames per second for 30 some odd minutes it was like watching someone else’s movie, and in many ways it was. It was a glorious moment. I was overcome by pride at our achievement. I felt a level of satisfaction I have rarely experienced before. I was eager to share it with the cast and crew, as well as others, but not in an effort to receive affirmation, validation or congratulations. I just wanted people to enjoy it, and this is a big first for me, I didn’t feel the need to know whether they liked it or not because I already knew it was good, and that was good enough for me.
Not the Boss of Me was a project conceived of, developed and executed over one year of my life that included great personal loss, a crippling breakdown caused by a lifetime of suffering and struggle, and an arduous road to recovery that in many ways rebuilt me from the ground up. Like Humpty Dumpty or the Six Million Dollar Man I was put back together, stronger and better than before. The experience of working on this project and this degree, the culmination of which spans over ten years from start to finish, has been a baptism by fire that instead of leaving me charred and burned, left me with a warm and glowing tan. With just a little pealing.

061423

Cast and crew movie premiere night at Queen City Cinema Club in Bangor! Rented out the club’s large theater to show the movie to the cast and crew. First round of drinks were on me!

061923

Some reflections on the movie premiere night last Wednesday. I went into the evening with the objective of sharing the film with the cast and crew, to have them see where all their hard work, effort and talents went and to be proud of their accomplishments. My participation, or rather “my film” wasn’t really even a consideration. I didn’t go into with the idea of, here’s the film I made. I want you to tell me how much you like the work I did. Which would normally be the attitude I would have. But that always came from an anxious place. I need you to validate my work by giving me your approval. I need that stamp of certification so that I can feel I have worth, have value. But this time, I’d already given myself that FDA classified Grade A stamp of approval. It had come immediately following the first full rough cut of the film, when I was able to see it for the first time in its entirety. In that moment I knew it worked, that there was a film in all those takes and edits. All that was left was some refinement and smoothing out, but in spite of
those little improvements, I knew that it was a success no matter what. I didn’t need anyone to
tell me that. I didn’t need anyone’s approval. I didn’t need any external validation. I was happy
with what we’d accomplished and that was enough for me. I’d always thought I was greedy,
attention hungry, a ham. But over the last year I’ve come to better understand my anxiety, my
depression and how they fed each other like a dog chasing its tail, never ending and pointless.
Having come to grips with those issues and having worked every single day for the last year and
a half to analyze, process and address those things, to lean into them, I have gained a level of self
control and confidence that has freed me from being bound to them like Ahab and his whale and
subsequently drowned by them. The change came subtly, very unpronounced. I didn’t realize
how significant it was until I found myself sitting in the theater with the cast and crew watching
the movie, five seconds into the film when the first audience reaction exploded in applause when
the title “An Adam Küykendall Film” came up on the screen. It suddenly occurred to me, oh
wait, people might react to this film. They might find things funny, sad, frustrating as well as just
plain interesting. Only a few moments after that another audience reaction came, then another
and another. It was amazing.

Almost as an afterthought, it had barely registered with me that anyone might engage with
the work as I’d hoped all along. At some point in the process, probably shortly after I began
cutting the film together, I had divorced myself from the expectation of success. My objective
was stripped of any ambition beyond just telling the story. I wasn’t preoccupied by thoughts of
who might see the film, what would they think, if it was successful could I use the film to raise
money to finish the project, if I’m able to make the fully realized series would that lead to more
opportunities, would those in turn lead to more and more and would one day I be able to support
myself and my family financially by doing the very thing I love, if that lead to a sizeable income
would that change the way my family related to others, would success breed contempt, would
my children become entitled brats, and so on and so on and so on. This is the thought process
of an anxious mind that can’t remain focussed on the task at hand. An escalation of forethought
that eventually collapses under the weight of its own ambition and self doubt. This level of calculation can be useful when it comes to strategic production planning but a hindrance when it comes to finding satisfaction in one’s day to day life. So to find myself sitting with the audience for the first time and only then to appreciate how they might react to the film was a magical experience, and a true gift. I wasn’t expecting it, so it came without any qualifiers. I wasn’t gauging whether it was as much a reaction as I’d hoped or when I’d hoped the reactions would come. It was effortless and selfless. It was a high point as well as a genuine high. The project was a collaborative effort and I was thrilled to see everyone’s performance and work being recognized but through their success I found my own as opposed to vice versa, which is how my anxious mind would have processed it in the past.

After the film’s conclusion, and a supplementary bonus feature of deleted scene and gag reel, we all adjourned to the bar for more drinks, food and laughter. We celebrated and toasted everyone’s success. They were proud of their work and participation with the project, which brought me the greatest satisfaction. But as the evening progressed I found myself craving more approval, more accolades. I needed another fix to keep the high going. But I stood fast. I didn’t ask probing questions or hint at lingering concerns, attempting to elicit more praise and confirmations. More importantly I didn’t ask for critiques, or observations. I wasn’t pumping the crowd for information about how the film affected them, where it worked where it didn’t. This was a type of self control I had failed at achieving for almost my entire life. That need for validation was always all consuming, needing a resounding shakedown of me and the work so that I felt as though I’d truly be seen and heard. I needed to be recognized in order to be me. If there was nothing to react to, then I was in turn nothing. Justification for existence was the name of the game. Like the proverbial tree that falls in the woods when no one’s there to hear it fall; If I express myself and no one understands me, have I done anything at all? Do I have value? Having found contentment long before the premiere made the event all the more successful and rewarding by illuminating the insatiable appetite for justification. Even with the slight
craving for more praise that arose over the course of the evening I was able to recognize and control that craving without it dictating the rest of the night. The anonymity that the Lord Hall Gallery event had provided me by not having the film on display and therefore something for the patrons to react to had helped to postpone what the premiere night reactions enlightened me to, personal satisfaction. By not witnessing any audience reaction for such an extended period of time after the film’s completion it allowed me the chance to be at peace with the work, to steep in its accomplishments before anyone else could comment or distort my perception of it. I was standing on solid footing, and nothing could knock me down.

My hope is that I’ve gained a confidence in myself that recognizes and appreciates the person who I am now, at this moment in time, and doesn’t measure that person by who I once was or who I or others expect me to become. I have often approximated my success or failure within the framework of what I’ve done before and where I want to go, rarely seeing where I am and what I’m doing at the moment. When you size yourself up based on the context of the past and future you position yourself, at least in my case, between depression and anxiety. I was either lamenting my choices or worried about what choices I would make. You can’t judge today by yesterday or tomorrow. A train runs simultaneously over the track it’s just passed and the one it’s about to pass, but it does so by remaining in motion, in the now. I have always felt as though I’m the one laying down the tracks as the train barrels down on me, perpetually worried I can’t keep up. I believe I’m entering a new era of my life, both personally and creatively (if there’s any difference between the two), where the will tracks tend to themselves and I’m the engineer of my destination.
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Adam Küykendall is an Photographer/Videographer and Intermedia Researcher working in Maine. Taking inspiration from concepts of absence and voids Küykendall examines the relationship dynamics between people, environments and objects where “something’s missing”, producing visual narratives through photography, videography and improvised performances reflecting the human experience. Based in a transient upbringing and influenced by struggles with anxiety and depression Küykendall’s work approaches from the point of view of the detached outsider, exploring themes and elements that embody identity, connection and impact.

Born in Columbia, Missouri in 1973, Küykendall is the son of a News Photographer/Professor father and Copy Editor/Actress mother who exposed their son to the world of journalism and the arts at an early age. Living a near nomadic lifestyle since birth Küykendall developed a deep appreciation for the cross section of people and places that make up the United States. With no one regional distinction to claim as his own he describes himself as an “American Mutt”.

Through his disjointed sense of cultural and geographical identity Küykendall focuses his attention toward the impact of absence upon himself and others, exploring how we fill the voids in our lives; a lost loved one, an empty house, a blank wall. If “nature abhors a vacuum” Küykendall’s work seeks to examine where and when voids come into existence and why and how they impact us.

His artwork, UNKNOWN ARTIST, directed attention to an intersection of hallway floors where various light sources alternate their patterns across its surface throughout the day revealing a “light show” under our feet. NOT ANOTHER FUCKING TERM PAPER, a sculpture made from a semester’s worth of research and essays shredded and stuffed into a wastebasket depicted the ephemeral and seemingly futile nature of academic exercises. Summarily the piece was
unwittingly emptied by a custodian bringing it to its only appropriate conclusion. His entry at the 2014 IMFA Graduate Exhibition, a readymade entitled, A GOOD IDEA AT THE TIME, presented an empty section of gallery wall pock marked and stained pointing out the visual echo of everything previously displayed there.

Küykendall’s cinematic work includes the short film EVEN BREAK, a noir crime story that explores the narrative of a zero sum gain premiered in 2015 and was produced entirely by donation. That same year his feature length sci-fi comedy screenplay SOMEDAY MAN, about a one armed conman and his sentient prosthetic arm saddled with two unwanted orphans, placed in the Top Ten of Big Break screenplay competition, making the quarter finals at ScreenCraft and WeScreenplay.

Theatrically, Küykendall continues performing with Maine’s premier long-form comedy improvisational theatre troupe, The Focus Group, an organization he helped co-found in 2009 and is currently hosted by the Bangor Arts Exchange. Their annual Improv ME Festival has showcased Maine based improvisation groups since 2014 building a community of performers throughout the state.

Küykendall is currently producing a nine part short video series entitled NOT THE BOSS OF ME, an expanded narrative based on his 2023 Without Borders “No Wear Special” cinema exhibit of the same name, set to premiere in 2024.

Adam is a candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Intermedia from the University of Maine in August of 2023.