

NENE (LITTLE GIRL)

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ABSTRACT

Nene (The Tagalog term for “little girl”) is a genre-bending narrative short film, blending Filipino family dynamics and 1970s horror cinema aesthetics. This film utilizes both contemporary digital imagery and analogue 16mm film stock to “reanimate” a 1970s low-budget Canadian vampire film through the story of Emily, a young neurodivergent Filipino girl, and her struggling single mother Josie. As the 12-minute narrative unfolds, Emily’s hyperactive imagination triggers surreal paranoia, and the celluloid nightmare begins to bleed into reality through a diasporic lens. This film represents my inward exploration of personal themes, including second-generation diaspora, urban childhood upbringing, and folklore as a lens to explore the liminal dimensions of diaspora.

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To my parents, Stephen and Jean, who, despite their initial anxieties, always encouraged me to follow my passions. Thank you for accepting all those years ago that I was destined to daydream and play make-believe for the rest of my life.

Finally, to that little 8-year-old version of me from so long ago. A fractured soul hiding in the basement watching VHS tapes, wondering if and where he could ever belong. We are speaking to each other from across time, trust me when I say, you will find your way.

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FIRST EXCERPT FROM MEMORY

Growing up, I used to watch “Making Of...” videos on YouTube about various horror films I was fascinated with. The low-quality stream and tinny sound made no difference to me. During one video session, a special effects artist described the process of making fake movie blood, explaining that “Corn syrup” was the primary ingredient. Corn syrup? I knew what corn was, and I knew what syrup was. These were the two integral ingredients to make fake blood? Corn and syrup? How fascinating...



Image 1. Production Image from *Nene*

BACKGROUND

“Fantasy is a great way of deciphering reality...to learn what we fear is to learn who we are”

- Guillermo Del Toro ¹

Growing up, I felt out of place due to the social challenges caused by ADHD, as well as my multi-racial background, which led to a fractured sense of identity. I found myself escaping to libraries and the books they housed, which led to a lifelong fascination with the fantastical. Tales of adventure, mystery, and folklore have shaped my identity, my ambitions, and ultimately my relationship with the world. As Bliss Cua Lim wrote in her book, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*: “...what is most provocative about the fantastic is its capacity to insinuate the *failure* of modern disenchantment to completely supplant nonmodern worlds.” ²

This journey led to a borderline obsession with horror cinema. These films were an introduction into understanding fear, desire, and belonging – just as they are for Emily. *Nene* celebrates a moment in time, my family’s history, and the everyday events of a suburban Canadian-Filipino household in Brampton, Ontario. All of this, accompanied by celluloid frames inspired by the visceral energy of *The Evil Dead* (1981), the saturated colour palettes of *Deep Red* (1975), and the tactile practical makeup and effects of *Rabid* (1977) and *The Werewolf Versus the Vampire Woman* (1971), influenced the story and visuals of *Nene*.

In this support paper, I describe the rigorous yet truly rewarding experience of bringing this film to life, from initial conception to execution and eventual completion. I

¹ Del Toro, Guillermo, *Guillermo Del Toro Cabinet of Curiosities: My Notebooks, Collections, and Other Obsessions*, New York: Harper Design, 2013.

² Cua Lim, Bliss, *Translating Time*. Duke University Press, 2009.

examine the various academic texts, photographic imagery, and filmography that served as inspiration for the project. The overall process of making a film, to me, can best be described as a metaphorical waltz between what you want and what is there. One ends production with an accumulation of material that one cannot fathom ever being put together into a coherent story; however, the phrase “Movie Magic” exists for a reason. I discovered that embracing the unpredictability of the process, instead of fixating on the end result, is what allowed me to discover the essence of the film. The final piece is one that I hope serves as an intimate and entertaining story, told through a third culture lens not often represented on screen, while capturing both childish and adult complexity. *Nene* is a celluloid exploration of culture, escapism, and memory.

WRITING THE SCRIPT

“ The only research I ever needed to do was in here (*gestures to heart*) ”

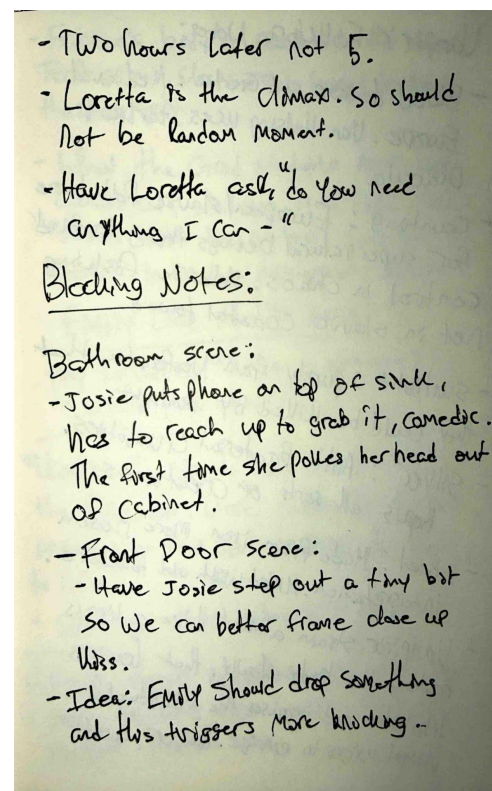
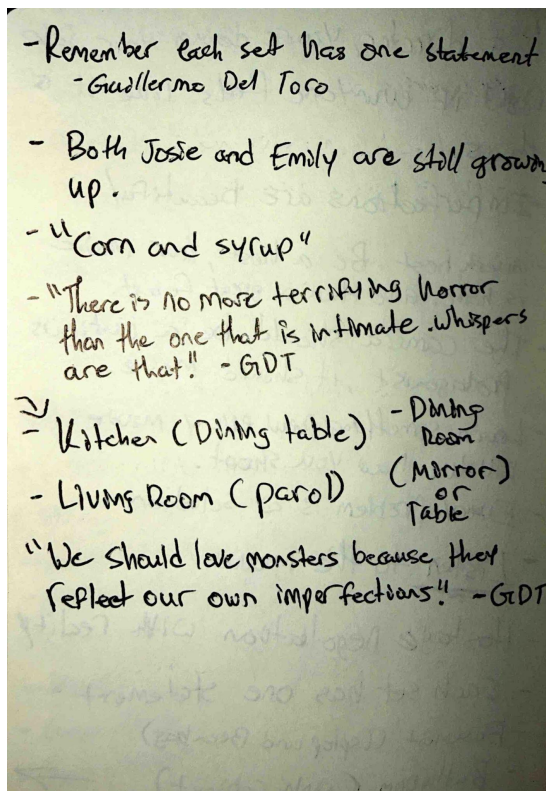
- Guy Maddin ³

Nene originated as a concept for a short narrative film inspired by my grandmother, who was paranoid about a home invasion, so much so that she would wedge a chef's knife in the gap between the front door and its frame to act as a makeshift deadbolt. From this story, an image manifested: A young Filipino girl, wearing an oversized graphic t-shirt, answering the door, staring blankly into the lens, holding said knife. I asked myself who she was, and resolved to figure it out through the writing process. I originally envisioned the project as something I could shoot quickly on my iPhone with the bare minimum of film equipment. Eventually, the project grew in scope and the concept developed into an 11-12 page script that I became eager to pursue as my next short film.

Whenever I write a script, I find that my most successful creative processes involve journaling in notebooks first, with various bullet concepts for scene ideas and character notes. This journaling phase then leads to me developing the beginning and ending; in my personal experience, I must have the first image the audience sees and the last image we leave them with before I can begin outlining the script. Having a clear beginning and ending point provides room for the story to unfold itself to me as I write the various drafts of the screenplay. With *Nene*, I knew from the initial inception that the story would begin with the “blood-stained” kitchen knife, and would end with the reveal of the “blood” being takeout sauce – with our final image being Josie, Loretta, and Emily watching the movie on the latter's laptop. This came about because I was intrigued by

³ TIFF (2015, December 21). *Guy Maddin on My Winnipeg / Higher Learning* (Video). Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ne7Knf6Ko9E>

the notion of starting the short narrative with a foreboding image for the audience, and then subverting that image in the last moments of the story through the playful reveal. One thing that excited me about the narrative was leaving the audience in suspense for a solid 25 seconds after Emily runs out with the knife, screaming, and then revealing Loretta's face in shock. My goal was for the audience to dread the reality that Emily just unintentionally stabbed this woman. When we eventually held various test screenings after I put together a semi-fine cut, I was quite relieved to hear audible gasps from the audience.



Images 2 - 3. Production Images from *Nene*

While developing many of the characters in *Nene*, I continually revisited childhood memories of my own and my cousins, having grown up side by side. These reminiscences proved to be a foundational aspect of fully fleshing out each character,

and informing their decision-making throughout the narrative. This process allowed me to dive deeper into Emily and Josie's mother-daughter relationship, taking direct inspiration from my real-life family members. Emily is truly a manifestation of my own memories from youth, with a hyperactive imagination and ADHD tendencies that led to having one foot out of reality. The film showcases these neurodivergent tendencies through the intercutting editing style, as well as her constant fiddling with bracelets, inability to sit still in a chair, and impulsively taking things she knows belong to her mother, such as her lipstick. In describing the importance of childhood memories, Tarkovsky remarks in his book *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*: "...memory is something so complex that no list of all its attributes could define the totality of the impressions through which it affects us. Memory is a spiritual concept!...if somebody tells us of his impressions of childhood...we shall have enough material in our hands to form a complete picture of that person." ⁴

Josie's demeanour, as well as her relationship with Loretta, is primarily inspired by my cousin and her partner, with additional idiosyncrasies inspired by many of my other cousins. Josie reflects the transition from childhood into adulthood within a Filipino household. As second-generation Filipino-Canadians, my cousins and I share her experience of feeling the weight of the first generation's expectations, which often stem from the shock of a new environment and the pressures of fitting into new definitions of adulthood, family life, and economic insecurity. This exploration of my and my cousin's generational upbringing led to my eventual goal, in making *Nene*, to craft an intimate story while exploring diasporic spaces through an underrepresented diasporic lens.

⁴ Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. Austin, Texas, U.S: University of Texas Press, 1986.

I always envisioned Josie living at her mother's house, Emily's Lola (Tagalog for Grandmother), a character we never see. This was inspired by many of my cousins who lived at home well into their late 30s to save money. While this was initially a personal memory, I found that this situation is shared by many of our mutual friends within the Filipino community in Brampton. This further developed into the conflict we see between Josie and her mother, whose absence is attributed to her frequenting a resort casino. This dynamic mirrors personal familial experiences of my cousins; however, I discovered the struggle with relatives who gamble excessively was a reality many of our Filipino friends unfortunately related to.

Expanding on this notion of struggling with the weight of generational cultural expectations, these experiences my cousins and I share helped further develop Josie's identity as a second-generation Filipino-Canadian. One scene I had envisioned from the beginning was Josie arguing with her mother on the phone – the audience hears her mother shouting in her native Tagalog tongue, and Josie responds in English; even though she cannot speak Tagalog, she understands what her mother is saying. This was inspired by my own mother, who does not speak Tagalog, and yet can habitually understand the language when older relatives are talking to her, something that my cousins also share, as none of us who grew up here in Canada can speak Tagalog. This image stood out to me as a manifestation of how we, as second-generation individuals, feel an innate connection to our culture, but somehow also feel separated. It's as though we exist in a liminal threshold between our traditional Filipino background and Western societal upbringing.

Despite Emily being the primary catalyst for representing my childhood on screen, all of these characters were crafted from memories of my various relatives and childhood endeavours; therefore, it makes sense that I feel as though a piece of myself is in every character, including Josie and Loretta. As much as I can relate to hiding in the basement trying to escape into a visceral horror picture, like Emily, I can also relate to feeling lost, overwhelmed, or angry at my parents, like Josie. I can also relate to being nervous about pursuing a relationship with someone I care about, and having feelings that push me to be bold in my romantic pursuits, like Loretta.

I find that one of the most transcendental experiences emerges during the writing process. After fleshing out the characters through memories, I reach a point where I can quite literally hear the characters speaking to me in real time. For example, when I was writing the scene where Emily sneaks into the kitchen to pour herself a cup of milk and steal back her laptop and DVD player, I envisioned her sneaking back into the basement, of course. Yet, as she was walking past the dining room mirror, a little voice at the back of my head clearly said: “I want the lipstick, take the lipstick.” I then wrote out the action line where Emily sees her mom’s red lipstick and grabs it off the table to take with her. In relation to my earlier sentiment about the narrative unfolding to me, this led to the story beat where Emily watches the characters on screen sharing a kiss, and tries to apply the lipstick herself. This in turn led to the idea of having it smeared on her face like blood near the climax of the film.

Vampiric, the fictional 1970s independent Canadian horror film that I have placed at the center of *Nene*’s narrative, was inspired directly by my experiences growing up obsessed with horror pictures. I was a very nervous child, afraid of everything, yet

horror movies were a cathartic way for me to face my fears in a controlled environment, while also utilizing the medium of film to make sense of myself and my surroundings. Genre filmmaking can make these experiences more salient through the use of familiar archetypes and story beats: a frazzled mother and mischievous daughter in a comedy/drama, here reframed through Josie and Emily's encounter with their fears, both real and imagined. In this way, *Nene* was an exercise in examining how horror cinema, particularly the monster sub-genre, functions as a tool for us to face and come to terms with our fears. Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg describes expressions of the genre as "films of confrontation."⁵ In *Nene*, characters confront fears of burgeoning adulthood, a sense of second-generation destabilization, and first exposure to scary subject matter on screen. In their essay "The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience", Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley discuss this very topic of media impacting our lives.

"we humans spend much time engaged with carefully crafted narrative products such as films, novels, plays, and TV dramas...while engaging with such products we undergo a form of experience not found elsewhere, reacting to represented events as if we were a part of them."⁶

Like Emily, my mother was adamantly against my consuming any form of media involving horror or supernatural imagery. Stories of ghosts, demonic possession, cryptids, monsters, or cursed slasher killers rising up from the lake to terrorize a summer camp, among others. I find this incredibly ironic, considering she was okay with

⁵ Vatnsdal, Caelum, *They Came From Within: A History of Canadian Horror Cinema, Revised and Updated Edition*, Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2014.

⁶ Mar, R. A., & Oatley, K. (2008). The function of fiction is the abstraction and simulation of social experience. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(3), 173–192.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6924.2008.00073.x>

me watching movies like *Goodfellas* (1990) with her. My mother always defends this choice, stating that these films highlight the consequences of greed. She saw them as teaching tools – emphasizing to me that gambling is bad, and to never get involved with criminal activity of any kind.

However, growing up, I shared Emily's defiance of parental figures and still found ways to stealthily watch horror movies. The fact that this content was kept from me is likely what fueled my desire to watch it even more. I was facing not only my own fears, but also finding catharsis in chasing a dream and seeing it through despite obstacles. I'm often reminded of this sentiment from Anthony Bourdain's book *Kitchen Confidential*, when he describes his first courageous attempt at eating an Oyster as a child:

“My parents hesitated. I doubt they'd realized they might actually have to eat one of the raw, slimy things we were currently floating over. My little brother recoiled in horror. But I, in the proudest moment of my young life, stood up smartly, grinning with defiance, and volunteered to be the first... It tasted of seawater...of brine and flesh... and somehow... of the future.”⁷

I always seem to find parallels between Bourdain's life as a cook and my own journey as a filmmaker. Both mediums involve intense craftsmanship – often, blood, sweat, and tears are poured into your work. Yet, in the end, you create an experience for others that you hope they never forget. The taste of a delicious meal, as well as the sight and sound of a film at the cinema, become memories that can stay with an individual forever.

⁷ Bourdain, Anthony, *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000.

Much like Anthony Bourdain's memory of tasting his first oyster, I will never forget my first time seeing *Jaws* (1975) during the summer of 2009. The experience left me simultaneously terrified and enthralled. I became obsessed with figuring out their recipe for fake blood and guts, and unlocking the secrets of Spielberg's decision-making on how to move his camera. Bliss Cua Lim mentions that "The supernatural worlds so often thematized by fantastic cinema are frequently articulated through both media specificity and media convergence."⁸

I was interested in not only the fantastical world on screen, but also the tools and techniques used to bring it to life. Much like Spielberg's mechanical great white shark, the art of filmmaking all but consumed me. I am certain that my future as a filmmaker manifested during that summer, thanks to the fantastic images on screen. I see this in Emily as well – *Vampiric* is her *Jaws*, and her salty oyster of awakening. The last line of the film, "Corn and Syrup," is her showing a fascination with the craftsmanship that built this movie. When envisioning the continuing story of *Nene* past the end credits, I do not doubt that Emily will grow up to become a filmmaker, just as I did.

As a believer in cosmic symbolism, I thank my lucky stars every day that York University ended up accepting me into its MFA program. I recall the first day of Production Class on campus, where we went around the table, each introducing the concepts for our thesis projects. When my turn came, I nervously stated: "It's a story about a Filipino family, vampires, horror movies, knives, lipstick, food, and rock and roll music".

Looking at the end result, I'd say I wasn't too far off.

⁸ Cua Lim, Bliss, *Translating Time*. Duke University Press, 2009.

STITCHING TWO WORLDS a.k.a “HALO-HALO FILMMAKING”

“Halo-Halo Filmmaking” is a concept I coined at York University as a way to describe my artistic voice. The term refers to a cinematic manifestation of the Filipino dessert Halo-Halo, which in Tagalog means “mix-mix”. A perfect bowl of Halo-Halo requires a delicate balance of ingredients, and yet, there is always a delightful chaos to the adventurous mixture. It is this terminology that served as the underlying inspiration for *Nene*. My multilayered filmmaking style combines various genres, emotional tones, and cinematic techniques. This led me to define my work as a cinematic manifestation of Halo-Halo, filmmaking that comes in various forms, such as merging a Filipino coming of age story with a 1970s Low Budget Horror film, digital with celluloid film imagery, or real locations with expressionist soundstage backdrops. Much like the shaved ice and condensed milk-based dessert itself, *Nene* ended up being a combination of all these techniques.

Cinema is for me an intertwining knot of magic and the everyday. Fantasy may serve as an allegory for the struggles one faces in life, as well as being an outsider. This is meaningful to me, having grown up feeling like an outsider due to being mixed race. What does it mean to be caught between two worlds, feeling at home in neither? Looking back at childhood insecurities that stemmed from my fractured sense of self, I began to contemplate the notion of two separate worlds. Both worlds are incredibly different, but could I somehow bring them together as one? Be it my two ethnic backgrounds or two very different cinematic aesthetics – how could I stitch them together through a short-form narrative, and, by extension, stitch myself back together?



Image 4. Screenshot from *Tampopo* (1985), Juzo Itami

There were many films that I looked to for inspiration while in pre-production on *Nene*, one of which was the Juzo Itami film *Tampopo* (1985), one of my favourites. The first time I saw it, I was struck by how Itami was able to seamlessly blend the genre archetypes and narrative tropes of the American Western, slapstick, and criminal noir, with stylized quotidian vignettes following various people and their deep connections to food. Itami was able to craft a true “ramen western”, as Willy Blackmore waxed eloquently in his Criterion essay “*Tampopo*: Ramen for the People”:

“The film is steeped in other tropes of the genre. In its opening, we see the cowboy-hat-wearing Goro and his sidekick, Gun, each with a neckerchief at his throat, ride into town in the cab of a tanker truck and seek out the best bar to sidle up to for . . . a perfect bowl of ramen. In fact, the film itself is a kind of tumbleweed: it is a product of cultural cross-pollination, borrowing from American

moviemaking conventions to explore a uniquely Japanese obsession. Along the way, it crafts a populist, utopian vision, not just of food culture but of society as a whole.”⁹

This “cross-pollination” inspired me in my approach to blending the genre tropes within horror and thriller films, with the story of a Filipino suburban household. One technique was that I incorporated objects and imagery that fit seamlessly into both worlds, such as the kitchen knife. This multilayered object can be seen as a domestic household object, a dangerous object for a young child and, of course, a weapon often utilized in various horror films such as *Psycho* (1960), and *Deep Red*.



Image 5. Screenshot from *Deep Red* (1975), Dario Argento

In my experience, as filmmakers we take reference from the movies that inspire us. This inspiration ingrains images from these films as foundational in our understanding of storytelling through the lens. With *Nene*, I ended up crafting a film where the house was its own character: creaky floorboards, crooked walls and all, as

⁹ Blackmore, Willy (2017, April 27). Tampopo: Ramen for the People. *The Criterion Collection*. https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4523-tampopo-ramen-for-the-people?srltid=AfmBOopM_Q8K35b-b--2HXPkQuB19aBymOkTv9XTPT-9pbmZ1pl8LcT6U

well as having a main character fascinated with the deeper symbolism of lipstick. It should come as no surprise that another primary influence was a film that utilizes both these elements: Nobuhiko Obayashi's *House* (1977).

In the same way, I consulted my own childhood for *Nene*, *House* was inspired by stories conjured up by Obayashi “with the help of his eleven-year-old daughter, Chigumi, who provided many of the story ideas.”¹⁰ I was taken by the film’s stylized energy enhanced through techniques like hand-drawn animation, matte paintings, film tinting, and various sped-up frame rates. The film unabashedly blended avant-garde and pop art sensibilities to create a horrific, dreamlike world. It was this hyperactive energy and unapologetic approach to making a horror film that inspired how *Vampiric* would bleed into the stylized reality of Emily’s world through her hyperactive imagination.



Image 6. Screenshot from *House* (1977), Nobuhiko Obayashi

¹⁰ Stephens, Chuck (2010, October 26). *House: The Housemaids*. *The Criterion Collection*. <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1634-house-the-housemaids>

I was inspired by how household objects and quotidian practices in *House* became haunting agents of chaos: we see a young girl get devoured and chewed to pieces by the very piano she practices on. I'd be lying if I said this hadn't crossed my mind as a child when my mom made me practice for 4 hours non-stop. I see this experience mirrored through Emily, when her dark laundry room lair and a knock at the front door from a stranger become far more sinister in her eyes, as *Vampiric's* narrative turns more macabre.

CREATING *VAMPIRIC*

Originally, I was researching various public domain horror films that would serve as the catalyst for Emily's obsession. I came to the realization that the film I was searching for, which combined specific beats and imagery, did not exist. Therefore, the solution was clear: I should write and shoot scenes from my own fictitious 1970s low-budget Canadian horror film, and shoot it all on 16mm film stock.

The folklore and cinematic interpretations of the vampire always fascinated me growing up; that fascination stemmed from fear. I decided on making Emily's chosen movie a vampire film primarily because vampires scared me the most growing up. Looking back, I attribute my fear being rooted in the vampire's appearance, initially appearing human in form, but hiding something far more sinister.

Expanding on the lore of *Vampiric*, I wanted the film to have Canadian origins – Both to embrace the textures of the rural Ontario farmhouse where we were shooting, while also celebrating Canada's cultural impact within the landscape of the horror genre. I was inspired by what Caelum Vatnsdal wrote in his book *They Came From Within*:

"Horror is perceived as dangerous, both because it travels on the dark side of human experience and because, done well, it tends to reveal things about that experience many might prefer to keep hidden... Canadian horror cinema is a cinema of moments, rich with unlikely imagery...and bizarre narrative twists...the home of defiantly unpredictable confluences."¹¹

I envisioned Iris Bellaveaux, the fictitious filmmaker behind *Vampiric*, as a composite of Kathryn Bigelow and Canadian filmmakers, David Cronenberg and Grace

¹¹ Vatnsdal, Caelum, *They Came From Within: A History of Canadian Horror Cinema, Revised and Updated Edition*, Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2014.

Glowicki. In my eyes, Iris Bellaveaux contained multitudes: a filmmaker and avid fan of folklore horror, biology, and “foreign” cinema. All of this inspired her to write *Vampiric* and make it as an independent, Ontario grant-funded film.

I am very much what is commonly referred to as a “cinophile”. With that in mind, I could very well list the countless horror films I took influences from while planning, shooting, and editing *Nene* – Hammer Horror Pictures, Paul Naschy’s films, Dario Argento’s films, and early David Cronenberg films such as *Rabid* and *The Brood* (1979), the list goes on. However, one film ended up being an immeasurable influence: Sam Raimi’s *The Evil Dead*.

Raimi was roughly 19 years old when he first directed the low budget 16mm horror film, and the journey the cast and crew embarked on to make it was just as terrifying as the film itself. Bill Warren describes the production history of the film in his book *The Evil Dead Companion* as follows: “...with their green crew, their untried cast, a script and \$85,000, they headed for Tennessee... Making the movie was somewhere between running the gauntlet and passing through the freezing fires of hell, but no matter how horrible it was at the time, everyone seems to remember it as a fantastic, memorable experience”. (Warren, 2000)¹²

¹² Warren, Bill, *The Evil Dead Companion*. London: Title Publishing Group, 2000.



Images 7 - 8. Screenshots from *The Evil Dead* (1983), Sam Raimi

According to various cast and crew interviews in Warren's book, the cabin where they shot was run-down, and the weather in Tennessee during their shoot dropped to frigid temperatures, which made the extended shooting schedule, due to complicated practical effects executed with limited funds, extremely difficult to endure. Raimi and his crew were young and working with limited resources; thankfully, they learned to embrace the imperfections. For example, in various exterior night sequences, it's quite clear that the "moonlight" is just a large 2K spotlight with a blue gel on it. Yet, from these imperfections emerges a scrappy independent charm that stands the test of time. The crew learned to experiment and innovate new ways of storytelling with the lens. Here is how Sam Raimi breaks down one of the most famous examples: "I ran with the camera hand-held for the effect of the creature advancing on the house. I could see that a wide lens helped the distortion factor. The closer you could get the object to the edge of the frame in a wide lens, it would wrap as it went out of frame in a very dramatic way.

(Warren, 2000).¹³ The spontaneity that exists within the film, as a result of Raimi and his crew's tenacious approach, was a great influence on how we approached our plans to shoot *Vampiric*. I wasn't interested in making a slick and clean looking vampire film, but rather a time capsule, a low budget 16mm endeavour, from a filmmaker with a miniscule budget that motivated them to creatively cut corners. I wanted to embrace the imperfections rather than shy away from them, as I saw the unabashed creativity that came about from these sets of circumstances. I would lean into the fact that our "moonlight" was actually a bright 2K spotlight in the middle of a field. *The Evil Dead* is a testament to what a passionate filmmaker can achieve despite a lack of resources, and I aimed to bring this energy into *Vampiric*.



Image 9. Production Image from *The Evil Dead* (1981)

¹³ Warren, Bill, *The Evil Dead Companion*. London: Title Publishing Group, 2000.

SECOND EXCERPT FROM MEMORY

During a summer trip to Quebec, my mother insisted we all visit the Basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, even though I was always afraid of churches. While there, my mother pushed us through a large crowd in the candlelit sanctuary. I looked up and was met with a golden altar. My mother told us that the wrist bone of St. Anne was displayed right there under glass. The next memory I have is running and screaming in absolute terror. I turned a corner and realized I was lost. Tears ran down my face; it felt as though the walls were closing in around me as the chanting got louder and the room got darker. Thankfully, a security guard found me and escorted me out of the church to my parents. My mother knows she fucked up.



Image 10. Screenshot from *Nene*

CASTING

We started casting the movie in November of 2024. I was interested in screen testing non-actors before attempting to go through casting sessions from agencies. You never know if you might find the perfect person for a role where you'd least expect it.

For Josie, I put out a call to various friends and family in our Filipino community. Josephine Najera (yes, she shares the same name as Josie) is a good friend of my cousin Jeah and expressed great interest. When I met her, we ended up talking for an hour about how much she loved the script and related to the character on the page. Josephine grew up having to raise her younger siblings herself while also navigating a turbulent relationship with her mother. To me, Josephine wasn't just acting like the character – she truly was the character. She was initially nervous about being on camera for the first time, but I assured her that all she had to do was simply be herself. I even changed lines in the script to words she felt she would realistically say in certain scenarios. I have to emphatically thank Moussa Djigo, yet again, for all the sage advice he gave when I took his *Directing Actors* class. All of which was immeasurably helpful when rehearsing with Josephine for the film.

In our search for Emily, I asked my cousin Demmy to reach out to parents at her Hawaiian dance studio to see if anyone was interested. A few parents answered, and we screen tested 3 young girls to play Emily. Ilysia was the last girl we screen tested. During her meeting, I asked the same question I asked all the girls: "Do you believe in ghosts?" She responded yes, primarily because her pet cat, who passed away a few years back, still comes to visit her at night in ghost form. She also spoke about a laundromat very close to her house that she is convinced is haunted. I then asked:

“What would you want to make if someone asked you to make a scary movie?” She responded with a lengthy synopsis about a mad scientist who creates a horde of zombies, who then turn on their creator because his mad scientist brain is absolutely delectable. This was all I needed to hear. A few days later, I cast her as Emily.

I’ve been friends with Isabella Shibuta for many years now. The fact cannot be overstated that I believe she is one of the most talented actors I’ve had the pleasure of working with. I watched about 30 seconds of her audition tape she was kind enough to put together for me, and knew almost instantly she would be perfect as Loretta. We’ve discussed it since then, and come to the conclusion that every script I write going forward will always have a role for her.

For the two leads in *Vampiric*, I asked my producer Fabiana to find me two actor friends of hers who were fearless. Two girls who loved scary movies, were not afraid of mud or fake blood, and were open to staying up all night running around a farm in rural Ontario. Christa-Marie Waugh and Kalie Tulan both arrived with enthusiasm, grit, and an eagerness to play. Our initial meetings primarily consisted of us gleefully discussing our love for horror movies. Christa-Marie had many questions about the overall larger plot points of *Vampiric*, which I was more than happy to answer. I imagine Iris Belleveaux herself would have been just as relieved as I was to have both these two amazing women to star in her film.

Finally, I needed someone to play the vampire in the film. I initially had Fabiana, my producer as well as an actress, in mind to play one of the two leads in *Vampiric*. However, we both ended up being more enthusiastic about her playing the vampire role; the spider walk sequence in the movie was completely her idea. I cannot overstate how

indispensable collaborators and friends like Fabiana are to the filmmaking process, someone who brings just as much enthusiasm and new ideas to the project as you. I'm certain Fabiana and I would still likely be coming up with vampire scenes to shoot to this very day, had the sun not risen that morning during our last day of shooting at the farm.



Image 11. Production Image from *Nene*



Image 12. Production Image from *Nene*

SHOOTING ON 16MM

The *Vampiric* portions of *Nene* were always intended to be shot on analogue 16mm colour film, embracing the vibrant low-light textures of 500T film stock. I believe the art of filming surreal imagery and practical effects on celluloid further immerses the audience in the tactile craftsmanship of cinematic storytelling. This pursuit is important now more than ever, especially during a time when artificial, digital imagery is prevalent. Utilizing celluloid film is a way to celebrate authentic craftsmanship and artistry through the medium of filmmaking.



Image 13. Production Image from *Nene*

I had various individuals who I trust dearly caution me against shooting on film because of logistics, but, in my eyes, there was no other viable option. A fundamental aspect of the process was to re-create, albeit more safely, the same circumstances that

a young Sam Raimi and crew filmed under during production on *The Evil Dead* in the rural backwoods of Morristown, Tennessee. Of course, in our case, we shot at a farmhouse in rural Orangeville, Ontario. We utilized the same 16mm format, reflecting many low-budget and independent horror pictures made at the time with the same format due to its affordability in comparison to 35mm. I was also able to dive into further research on the various lighting plans and techniques the production team utilized back then to effectively capture the makeup and practical effects within the confines of a small budget.

Kodak's 500T Colour Negative Film stock provided us with a wider latitude for exposure during our night-time shoot. However, this still required an extensive amount of lights to properly expose the delicate film. The result was having to power 5-6 lights at once with three gas-powered generators since the remote barn location did not have a power source. With the hum of five 1200 Watt lights on full power and three gas-powered generators' persistent puttering, recording any audio during these sequences was not an option. Therefore, the entire soundscape for these 16mm sequences would have to be crafted in post-production. Due to the extensive amount of lights we needed, I was informed by the York University Film Department's Equipment Room that I set a new record as having the largest equipment package booked out for an MFA thesis shoot. I see this record as a badge of honour.

PRODUCTION

Principal photography on *Nene* took place over the course of four days in May, and two pickup days in June. For the location of Josie and Emily's house, my Uncle Tony and Auntie Eva were gracious enough to open their home to us for shooting. I have many childhood memories that took place in this very home located in suburban Brampton, Ontario. In fact, my Uncle Tony burned me a DVD copy of Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* (2004) in the very same basement where we're introduced to Emily.

My Auntie Eva was paranoid about making sure the house was clean. She kept asking if we wanted anything moved or taken down. We, of course, told her to leave everything in place. It was her orchid collection, family photos, and countless images of Jesus, both paintings and sculptures, that were all essential elements of a Filipino suburban household. I wanted to showcase their home as authentically as possible, so there was almost no outside production design or set dressing involved. The only things we brought in were my late Lola's Halo-Halo maker, heart weaving, and Parol.



Image 14. Production Image from *Nene*



Image 15. Production Image from *Nene*

Filming at the house was not without its obstacles. We found that our camera rig and equipment ended up being quite a large setup, which made some of the more technical moving shots I had planned difficult to execute. Thanks to my extensive planning through storyboards (my unwavering gratitude to Katie Manzer for drawing these) and a shotlist, I was able to pivot to other setups. For example, the front door hallway was too narrow to dolly and pan the camera from a wide shot to a $\frac{3}{4}$ close-up as I had initially planned. So, I instead opted to shoot coverage from either end of the hallway, with slight dolly movements in and out at various points. I found focusing on static tableau-like frames at various points was more impactful in showcasing the textures of the house as well. One visual element in my Aunt and Uncle's home I adored was the baby blue walls that contrasted so vibrantly with the wood floors and red tablecloth. This saturated colour palette further inspired us to dress Josie in purple and Loretta in yellow. I often drew comparisons between this world and the stylized cinema

of filmmaker Pedro Almodovar, particularly in his use of vivid colour and production design as an expression of Spanish culture, and his unpredictability in combining tones like melodrama and horror, or sadness and humour, within a single scene. I often humorously noted that Josie, Emily, and Loretta could be next-door neighbours to any of the characters from *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988). I was inspired by Mark Allinson's words on Almodovar in *A Spanish Labyrinth*: "far from using the film medium as a mirror to nature, he prefers to turn life into art."¹⁴



Image 16. Screenshot from *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), Pedro Almodovar

This portion of the shoot also came with some joyful surprises. Ilysia, our child actor who played Emily, truly impressed all of us. Working with child actors can seem daunting at first, but having done so three times over three short films, I found the best

¹⁴ Allinson, Mark, *A Spanish Labyrinth: The Films of Pedro Almodovar*. New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2001.

tactic is to treat them the same way you'd treat any other adult collaborators.

Approaching a child actor with kid gloves can often make them feel like you're talking down to them. Whenever I worked with Ilysia on a scene, I broke it down with her the same way I would with Josephine or Isabella. In treating her like an adult, she felt more included as part of the team, which benefited her performance immeasurably.

After completing filming in Brampton, we shifted gears entirely, travelling up to Orangeville to shoot on a farm. Bill and Susan Untch are close family friends I've known my whole life, and they couldn't have been more excited to host us. We shot in their backfield and the farmhouse interior, two long overnights, since cinematic vampire folklore dictates that they cannot survive in sunlight. As it often goes when making a movie, there were speed bumps. We all dressed for the warm weather of May, yet during both night shoots the temperature dropped to a chilly 5 degrees Celsius. I was bewildered by the coincidence of this mirroring the production experience on *The Evil Dead* shoot. Thankfully, Bill and Susan had winter coats for us to borrow, and my adrenaline kept me warm. Unfortunately, Christa-Marie and Fabiana's costumes did not have much insulation. When you see Christa-Marie shivering during her transformation into a vampire on-screen, this was also due to the frigid temperatures. The moment I yelled cut, we would run in with foil blankets to warm her up.



Images 17 - 18. Production Images from *Nene*

Despite the cold weather and long nights, shooting *Vampiric* was one of the most enriching experiences I've had throughout my journey as a filmmaker. I enjoyed every minute of orchestrating camera movements and blocking the actors through the sound of humming lights and noisy generators. I could see from the reactions of everyone on set watching the radio transmitted monitor, that we were making something truly exciting. Although what we were shooting was quite violent, most of our behind-the-scenes footage showcases the actors laughing and having a good time. For example, during the scene where Kalie and Christa shared their kiss, they asked if music could be played in the background to immerse them in the scene. It was Kalie's adamant request that led to us playing "Casual" by Chappell Roan; now, I can't picture this moment without hearing the song playing in the background.



Image 19. Screenshot from *Nene*

Some of my fondest memories exist on that farm back in the summer of 2025. The purring sounds of the Arri SR3, the screams and laughter from my cast and crew, and the warmth of the bonfire we had near basecamp: these are the things I will never forget.



Images 20 - 23. Production Images from *Nene*

Later in June, we shot some pickup days at the York University Motion Media Studio, located at Cinespace Soundstages in Toronto; this was my first time directing a project on a soundstage. We created a black void out of duvetyne to shoot various abstract dream sequences I had envisioned for the film. Fabiana got to showcase her spider-walking abilities, and drooling fake blood in glorious fashion. The atmosphere on

set was very different this day, as we weren't rushed. We had more time and full control over the space to shoot a few small sequences, which led to some creative improvisations on things we didn't initially plan. My cinematographer, Liam Guay, designed a lighting rig to create an optical lens flare that added texture to the dream sequence. Meanwhile, I improvised various hand gestures for Fabiana to do when shooting the close-up of her bloody vampire claw. One of which was her ominously beckoning, and this footage ended up being used during a key moment in the climax of the film. We were all embracing the unpredictable process of filmmaking that day.



Image 24. Production Image from *Nene*

THIRD EXCERPT FROM MEMORY

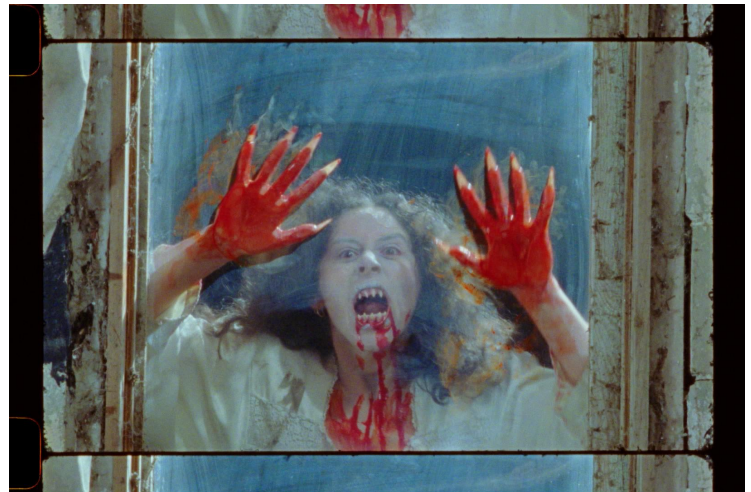
While living overseas in Singapore, at the behest of my mother, my father once took me to a child psychologist. She gave me an exercise involving a Venn Diagram – One circle was labelled “Imagination” and the other “Real Life”. She told me to write down the names of people who made me happy in the “Real Life” circle, and characters I imagined that made me happy in the “Imagination” circle. I was allowed to take it home with me. After a few days, my father became concerned. I wish I had the ability to find that Venn diagram buried in storage somewhere. It would be interesting to relive the fact that I filled the entire “Imagination circle” with the names of all my favourite characters, both made up and from books and movies. Meanwhile, the “Real Life” circle was completely empty. At the time, I could not think of anyone in my life who made me happy, and I knew it was wrong to lie.



Image 25. Screenshot from *Nene*

POST-PRODUCTION

Editing on *Nene* began in June of 2025, after our 16mm film stock was processed and scanned. Receiving the dailies back was quite the experience, since when shooting on film stock, you have no truly accurate indication of how the final image will appear. The radio-transmitted monitor image simply served as a reference for framing and performance, but lighting was solely dependent on the exposure calculation from our director of photography and a small incident light meter. Then I had to mail the film off to the processing lab, located in Boulder, Colorado. As this was my first time sending off exposed film for developing and scanning, I felt it necessary to tape a “DO NOT X-RAY” sign to every single side of my FedEx package and say a brief prayer to the Gods of Cinema before shipping it off. To my great relief, after a few weeks of waiting, the scanned 4K footage came back in glorious condition with no issues at all.



Images 26 - 27. Screenshots of film dailies from *Nene*

The images came out in clear focus and properly exposed. The celluloid colour negative film brought out deep, dramatic shadows, accompanied by vivid saturated colours in the blood, and warm halation from the glowing flashlight in Harriet's hands and the shimmer of her vintage jewelry. Even with just a quick REC 709 overlay on the footage to test the exposure levels, I was absolutely stunned. We truly pulled off the exact aesthetic I had envisioned with the 16mm footage.

Unfortunately, the relief of our stunning 16mm dailies coming out so successful did not last long. I've heard many anecdotes from various fellow directors I admire about seeing their first assembly cut after principal photography and becoming physically ill at the sight of it. I'm proud to say I suffered the same bout of anxiety and illness when I put together my first assembly cut, and realized I had a whopping 22-minute movie, minus end credits. I immediately spiralled, as I knew the project was far too long and lacking an engaging sense of pace and rhythm. The bloated runtime also could have prevented it from being considered a programmable short film for festivals. I chuckle now at how nervous I was, considering this was the first of many cuts to come, though at the time I kept ruminating on the words that Mike Flanagan said to me when we met: "Don't make it longer than 13 minutes, or else nobody's going to watch it". At that moment, I felt completely lost.

It took me longer than usual to show my rough cut to my supervisory committee, partially because I was extra nervous to show them what we had made. I ended up showing them the fifth rough cut, and thankfully, both John and Moussa were incredibly enthusiastic. They, of course, had lots of notes which I was grateful to utilize, but I took

great comfort in Moussa's proclamation that he definitely saw a great film within the clutter of the rough cut – a sentiment shared by John as well.

The formidable challenges throughout editing were as follows: First: The movie had to be shorter, under 13 minutes, as this was my goal from the beginning. Second: The rhythm and pace of the story had to be established and, at the same time, engaging for an audience, so much so that they would commit to watching the entire runtime. And third: I had to find a way to interweave these two very distinct worlds, the real world and the celluloid world of *Vampiric*, together in a coherent manner.

During the early stages of post-production, I struggled with my overzealous intention to have the movie picture locked by the end of September, and send it off to festivals before the winter. As mentioned in my introduction, I was indeed obsessively fixated on the end result. Thankfully, Moussa immediately voiced his concerns, wondering what the rush was. Both he and John reminded me that crafting this movie in these final stages of post-production was a delicate process I should fully embrace. As the classic idiom goes – “It’s a marathon, not a sprint.” I still had not found the movie through the edit, and sprinting to the finish line would absolutely do me no favors. My friend and fellow MFA cohort Luke Gallagher instilled in me this very same sentiment during a visit to the Art Gallery of Ontario, reminding me that my thesis truly had no due date, so I should give myself the breathing room necessary to truly digest the raw material I was working with. Through trial and error, I ended up cutting the short down to its final runtime of just under 13 minutes. I ended up cutting out various action beats and dialogue exchanges I found unnecessary to the picture as I fine tuned the rhythm and pace.

TEST SCREENINGS ARE IMPORTANT

The 16mm vampire footage became a much more integral part of the final film. On the pages of the shooting script, the vampire footage was meant to only play on screen whenever Emily was watching in the basement laundry room. However, the feedback about the 16mm footage we shot was overwhelmingly positive. Many of my close friends/incredibly talented cohort, Christopher Beaulieu, Sonya Mwambu, and others, told me how mesmerized they were with the images of *Vampiric*. I realized that this footage was not just a plot device for *Nene*, but an integral part of the essence of the film. This independent horror film means everything to Emily, to the point where it consumes her. Therefore, I was inspired to try and make it run parallel with Josie and Emily's story, and eventually slowly consume the real world as Emily's wicked imagination finally takes over.

During the annual Graduate symposium in October 2025, a lot of the critical feedback focused on the intercutting between Emily's movie and her reality. Both worlds had their own unique aesthetic and narrative rhythm. Because of this, some of the initial editing choices were quite jarring. A majority of feedback was that while the 16mm visuals were so striking, my intercutting to the world of *Vampiric* felt disjointed at various points. Other feedback was that the movie felt like it was moving too quickly at various points, many of my cohorts insisted that I let the film breathe more. They wanted more time to be introduced to Josie and Emily, and sit with them in moments, rather than bounding from one story beat to the next or cutting back to the vampire world out of nowhere. Like Emily, I found myself escaping into the vampire world, trying to constantly cut back to it when I was afraid of sitting in the real world.

I had to resist looking at both stories as two separate entities; there was no Josie/Emily story and Vampiric story – together they both shaped one story, one film: *Nene*. It was my mission to find the right balance, much like when making Halo-Halo. That being said, I'd be lying if at times during the process of stitching this film together frame-by-frame, it felt less like making Halo-Halo, and more like I was Victor Frankenstein toiling away in his laboratory filled with human body parts.

A BLESSING (THANK YOU SOPHY)

I feel I can state that part of the reason *Nene* is the film that it is today is because I was blessed with the release of Sophy Romvari's semi-autobiographical debut feature *Blue Heron* (2025) in the fall of 2025. I watched the film, as well as her other beautifully crafted short films, over the course of my entire post-production process.



Image 28. Screenshot from *Blue Heron* (2025), Sophy Romvari

Blue Heron emotionally imbued itself in me almost instantly. I began to draw many parallels between her film and my own, which inspired me to shape *Nene* in unique ways I never considered. *Blue Heron* was inspired by Sophy's own childhood memories involving her family, the same way *Nene* was for me.

During a Q&A panel with Sophy that took place on campus at York University where she screened *Blue Heron* for us (this was my second time seeing the film), she

discussed giving room for the actors with the camera, allowing for particular scenes to breathe during a conversation or intercutting sequence. Deeply inspired by her body of work, I found resonance in editing out moments of dialogue in *Nene* and simply letting the characters inhabit the space we crafted for them. An example is the kitchen table sequence with Josie cutting apples for Emily; the scene was initially almost two minutes of dialogue back and forth between them, but I ended up editing out 80% of the dialogue in the scene, instead focusing on still moments such as Emily swinging her feet back and forth, or Josie's face reacting to Emily's snide remarks regarding her fears and insecurities.

Moments like these – highlighting actions rather than words, ended up allowing further access to the characters' emotions. Based on test screenings, it resulted in the audience developing a deeper emotional connection to the characters. This was essential, especially in the first few minutes of the film. Since it is a short film, we are working within a very brief window of time to leave a lasting impression on the audience. The audience's time with them will end after 12 minutes and 45 seconds, but my ambition is to ensure they are able to envision the characters' continuing lives after the credits roll.

THE JOURNEY TO PICTURE LOCK

The post-production process was long and gruelling, but thankfully, I never felt alone. Over the coming winter months, my friends and cohorts provided me with many helpful notes and suggestions that helped shape the film. I have my good friend Christopher Beaulieu to thank for suggesting that I should start the film with the 16mm footage to immediately engage the audience. Then, I could cut to reveal Emily watching the movie in the basement. After all, it's her story; she should be the first real character we meet.

Nene was my first experience working with a professional colourist and sound designer. This exciting new endeavour as a filmmaker also came with an additional anxiety, having to "picture lock" the film, meaning I could no longer adjust the sequence of visuals once we moved to the next stages of post. The idea of not being able to do any last-minute adjustments to the images truly terrified me, and this delayed me from picture-locking the film for months, as I kept doubting myself and the movie.

Over Christmas break, I found myself watching the documentary series *Mr. Scorsese* (2025), following the life and career of Martin Scorsese. I was on episode three, where they began diving into the making of *Gangs of New York* (2002). Scorsese stated in his interview segment that, to this day, he feels as though he truly isn't done editing the film – the studio simply told him it was time to release it. I imagine that he would still be editing the movie now, 23 years later, if nobody spoke up.

Moussa echoed this same sentiment to me when we met one last time before the new year. We screened the film together and discussed it scene by scene, shot by shot, beat by beat. After a flurry of notes and discussions about the movie, I told Moussa

bluntly that I was afraid to picture lock the film. I was doubting myself and my work, questioning if I had done all I could to make the film as perfect as my abilities would enable me to. Thankfully, Moussa had a tradition with his master's students that he extended to me – he would not watch my final cut after this one. He explained that the picture-locked cut would have to be my choice, and I was the only one who had to be satisfied to move on to the next steps. Or I could keep seeking various feedback, continue tinkering with the film for the foreseeable future, potentially never finishing it.

The clock struck midnight, and the new year began. Two days into the new year, on January 3rd, 2026, I took a deep breath and exported the picture locked cut of *Nene*. Thankfully, my anxieties were soothed when I began working with an incredible colourist named Drake Conrad, who brought so much enthusiasm for the project during our colour session. After dealing with anxieties over picture lock, it was extremely validating to hear Drake, a first-time viewer, laughing at various beats and lines. He also noticed Sam Raimi as an influence within the Vampiric footage, and we had fun sharing in our mutual admiration for the entire *Evil Dead* franchise. It was an honour to watch Drake paint every shot; he truly brought the film to life before my eyes. The experience reignited in me the excitement for these final stages of post-production.

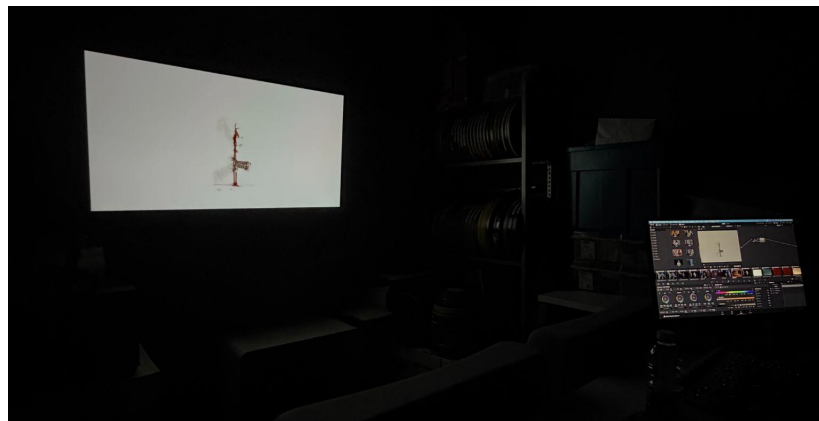


Image 29. Production Image from *Nene*

MUSIC

Initially, I envisioned very little musical score to accompany the main storyline for *Nene*, while I was adamant that there be constant synthesizer music playing over the Vampiric sequences. Ironically enough, the final film has a great deal of score for the main storyline, and less score than initially planned during the *Vampiric* sequences.

Throughout the process of refining the edit, I discovered that the dynamic pacing of the main storyline was enhanced with music. Emily's reality is heightened as a result of her obsession with the film, and this heightened reality is reflected deeper within music. Additionally, the score acts as a metronome to keep the film's tempo moving quickly during the first half, while slowing down when the film lingers on more quiet, heartfelt, and frightening moments in the latter half.

Megan Romano is a musical composer, a frequent collaborator, and my cousin! We worked together on my previous short film, and she was incredibly enthusiastic to continue the collaboration on this next project. The film ended up being an uphill battle for us both, as she struggled with composing two different scores for the dual worlds on screen, and I struggled with the decision of what music worked for the main storyline. I experimented in temp sessions with various Latin Percussion, as well as Italo-Western movie compositions from Ennio Morricone. The latter was a step in the right direction, but still not quite right. One evening in mid-February of 2026, Megan and I had a late-night scoring session. While experimenting with different percussion sounds, she stumbled upon a synth program with various Japanese Taiko Drumming patterns. She hit one key to hear the sound playing over a clip from the movie, and, like a bolt of lightning, inspiration struck.

I immediately thought back to a few nights before this session, when I took a break from staring at my Premiere timeline to watch some movie clips for inspiration. I ended up revisiting some masterfully crafted scenes from *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Throne of Blood* (1957), and *Yojimbo* (1961), all directed by one of my favourite filmmakers, Akira Kurosawa – all these films being a part of his Jidaigeki (Japanese Period Drama) filmography. I realized that this was the heightened musical embodiment of Emily and Josie's relationship.



Image 30. Screenshot from *Yojimbo* (1961), Akira Kurosawa

What transpired was my bombarding Megan with various clips from Kurosawa's Jidaigeki work, yet thankfully, she saw the vision and shared in my enthusiasm. The rhythmic sounds of Taiko drumming, accompanied by Hyoshigi wooden blocks, immediately paints a mental picture of the many motifs associated with the Jidaigeki genre: A black and white rural landscape during the Edo Period, where two samurai face off in a duel, staring at each other with their hands at their sheathed blades, ready to strike. The only difference being that instead of two samurai locked in combat, we

showcase a little girl facing off against her mother. I took it as a positive sign when Megan and I would watch scenes with the accompanying score and start laughing out loud.



Image 31. Screenshot from *Nene*

SOUND DESIGN

One of the many blessings that came my way while making *Nene* was the opportunity to work with Lucas Prokaziuk as my sound designer. Lucas is a genius at his craft. From our initial spotting sessions, he was pointing out unique ways to add sonic layers to each scene within the film, especially during the real-life sequences. Lucas envisioned quotidian sounds as an undertone layer within the house sequences: a noisy AC unit, a laundry machine hum in the basement, and creaky floors whenever Josie and Emily took a step. The house became a character thanks to Lucas' work.

Lucas and I were constantly on the same wavelength while building the soundscape of *Nene*. We both gravitated toward the idea of heightening Emily's reality when it came to the sounds she heard, directly inspired by her overactive imagination from watching the movie. This manifested through moments like a sheen sound every time the kitchen knife was raised, or her wristbands being extra loud whenever she played with them. Because Emily and I share the same overactive imagination and ADHD tics, I found that these stylistic and heightened sound effects felt more reminiscent of my childhood memories as opposed to how they actually sounded. This soundscape allows the audience to become fully immersed in Emily's headspace throughout the film. For the *Vampiric* portion, Lucas referenced *Apocalypse Now* (1979) in our efforts to craft an authentic mid-1970s soundscape. We wanted these scenes to sound like they were recorded on a Nagra sound recorder, which was commonly used on film productions from that time period.

One of my favourite memories throughout the post-production process was a session we held at Lucas' studio, where the actors came in to record ADR. We spent

3-4 hours recording our trio of *Vampiric* cast members screaming, hyperventilating, hissing, and cackling.

After a few days of going through each scene and fine-tuning the various sound design layers, Lucas played the movie in full duration. We both found ourselves laughing at various punchlines and practical effects sequences, all enhanced by sound cues and musical stings. Eventually, Lucas turned to me and asked if I had any other notes. I realized I couldn't think of anything, and shook my head no. Lucas then congratulated me – we had a finished movie. The feeling was bittersweet. I was so proud of what we had accomplished over the course of the last two months, but also sad because I was having so much fun working with Lucas in his studio. However, it was a new experience that many of my mentors told me would be the first of many to come. I spent two years making *Nene*, and now I was about to send it into the world.

I assembled the final output file with Lucas' sound mix and Drake's final graded footage, and uploaded the screener link. In addition to sending the screener off to film festivals for programming consideration, I was also ecstatic to share the final movie with my friends and colleagues. After the journey of bringing a film to life, there is no greater feeling than sharing in your friends' enthusiasm at what you have accomplished for the first time.

KEEP MOVING FORWARD

Looking back on it all, one memory sticks out to me the most. I remember as the sun rose into the sky, and blue night faded away on our last day of shooting on the farm. The crew began to pack up all the gear, and the cast went into wardrobe to take off their makeup and costumes. I found myself alone, standing in the fields, watching the sun rise. I realized that for the first time in two days, I could actually hear the sounds of my environment. The sound of wind blowing through the wheat, insect chirps, and loon calls in the distance. I had been fully immersed in the cacophony of 16mm cameras, lights, radio frequencies from monitors, fake blood splatters, and the sound of my voice yelling “action” and “cut”. All of this was glorious, but for the first time, there was peace and quiet. I realized I was standing between two worlds, one filled with serenity and the natural world around me, and one filled with the magic and artifice of filmmaking. An image I often return to is that of a circus tent in a field. I’ve spent my life longing to be inside the big top, to be part of the show. Now I’m taking a step outside and realizing the fields surrounding it are just as beautiful. Much like with *Nene*, I wondered if I could somehow bring these two worlds together.



Image 32. Production Image from *Nene*

I realized that this was my goal as a storyteller: to bring worlds together, like making Halo-Halo. Even though the initial idea seemed unusual and impossible – combining a Filipino family drama with a 16mm vampire horror picture, all within a hybrid-genre film – I always believed that it would somehow come together. Just as I believe that my new projects currently in development will also come together, as I dive deeper into Halo-Halo filmmaking going forward. *Nene* was my first step towards these new goals as a filmmaker, and I feel I have truly discovered my voice as a storyteller through the lens.

I must share a fact about myself that those who know me personally are all too familiar with: Guillermo Del Toro is my hero. For a young child who spent recess hiding in the library, dreaming of escaping into a fantasy world beyond our own, I never felt more at home in my life than when I was watching *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) or *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008). During an interview with Robert Rodriguez on the television series *The Director's Chair* (2014), whenever I need a motivational boost, I recall his descriptions of his fantastical worlds: "I thought... rather than molding myself to the world... will the world to understand what I want to do...like a stubborn donkey... keep going, and going, and going, and going... until one day you realize it's happening."¹⁵

A lot has transpired since I finished the final cut of *Nene*. I began teaching during my time at York as a TA. This ended up being one of the most inspiring and rewarding experiences of my life, something I did not think I would ever find beyond directing a movie. I'm currently pursuing more opportunities to teach at the university level. I also had the great privilege of getting to take an incredible MFA course called *Process*

¹⁵ Rodriguez, R. (Director). (2014). Guillermo del Toro [TV series episode]. *The Director's Chair*. El Rey Network.

Cinema, under the tutelage of the brilliant Franci Duran and Phil Hoffman. We spent our class time “activating the archive” through found footage, using plant life to make darkroom magic with phytograms and eco-processing, and I got to make three new films that were all steps out of my comfort zone. I never thought I would make a short film involving archival footage, phytograms, or hand-processing E6 slide film myself in a darkroom for 24 hours, non-stop; I entered the darkroom at 5 a.m. and left at 5 a.m. the next morning. Most importantly, Franci and Phil taught me to embrace the beautiful organic process of making art. I watched at various points as film stock was over-exposed, the hyacinth-based developing solution started to bubble up, and yet, Franci never panicked. She saw everything as part of “the process”, which would lead to a more unique work of art in the end. As someone who spent most of his life trying to exercise complete control and being consumed by the final results to the point it caused spikes of anxiety, this was a whole new world for me. I am forever grateful that Franci and Phil invited me to be a part of this special class, and the new projects I am currently developing embrace this credo of “the process”.

I feel a deep sense of nostalgia as I sit here writing this paper, looking back on the three-year journey it took to bring this movie into the world. I’m a different person now than I once was. However, this is part of the journey one takes in making a film, as the experience shapes you. Now, *Nene* exists not only as a form of artistic expression and entertainment, but also as a strangely beautiful mosaic of who I was at 23, when I first wrote the script in a booth at The Lakeview Diner, and who I am now at 26. I’m a filmmaker, about to turn 27, waiting for email responses regarding festival submissions, grant applications, university teaching positions, and writing three more projects.

The anxiety persists, but at least one thing has changed: I truly know where I belong. I belong right here and now, making movies with my friends. So, I leave you with this: to any young aspiring filmmaker who has taken the time to read this paper, feeling lost, wondering if this is all worth it – you are not alone. Trust me when I say, all of this is absolutely worth it, and you will find your way.

I sure did.



Image 33. Production Image from *Nene*

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