

My Mommy Movie(s)

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ABSTRACT

My Mommy Movie(s) is an essay film about the difficulty of capturing a human life and transforming it into a work of cinematic entertainment.

The film utilizes a variety of different forms and filmic styles to attempt to tell a non-traditional story of a relationship between mother and son. This hybrid approach included the use of archival material from my childhood, discarded footage from my own personal archive as a filmmaker, public domain footage and music from the internet, verite-esque documentary footage of the present, as well as the footage from an unreleased fiction film about my mother. The combination of these seemingly disparate sources all work to try and honestly capture the uncapturable, the essence of an individual.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are too many people to thank. I am not using this as an excuse to create an abbreviated list, and therefore apologize to the reader for the length of the following passage.

I extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Manfred Becker. You were a champion of mine from the moment I applied to the program and I will be forever grateful that you decided to go on this ride with me. From the beginning you believed in my vision, despite that vision growing increasingly vague - elusive even - over the course of this journey. Your guidance and way of looking at art is more responsible for this film's final form than you may realize. I would also like to thank the third member of our committee triumvirate, Moussa Djigo. Your ability to kindly challenge me and ask the questions that needed answering throughout the process helped me gain confidence and clarity as an artist. Thank you both.

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Jae Dunphy, for suggesting I watch Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* when I was in high school and for taking me seriously, far before I deserved to be.

Thank you to every single member of the cast and crew, who put their time and energy into transforming a bunch of ink on paper into something tangible that a camera could record. You will forever be loved and appreciated.

Thank you to my mother, Theresa Louch, and my father, Guy Ruscinski. You are miracle workers. To my brother, Maxwell, for being my best friend (and not a half-bad Assistant Director).

Some of those thank yous were purposefully brief, as I have faith their names will return to grace this paper down the line. There are more people to thank, and maybe I'll throw in some additional names randomly throughout this as their faces are illuminated in my mind, but I would like to put an end to this section by thanking Gabby Tomlinson. If you, the reader, have already watched the film - which I highly recommend, it's quite good - you will see that the name "Gabby Tomlinson" features prominently throughout the credits. You will undoubtedly see that she is even credited as the "director", alongside myself. While it might seem odd that a work entitled *My Mommy Movie(s)* has two directors, this was no mistake. Gabby has been my partner for more than 8 years and has helped me significantly with every single film I have made over that period of time. For *My Mommy Movie(s)*, she handled nearly every logistical difficulty in pre-production, production, and post-production, helped cast the film, organized every day of shooting, shot the majority of the work, helped give direction to actors, all while writing the

script alongside me and helping shape what would eventually be the “final” version of this motion picture. While the genesis of the work came from within me, it would be disingenuous to say that this is my film. In an industry where the labour of women has rarely been acknowledged and even more rarely celebrated, I would like to thank, acknowledge, and celebrate Gabby Tomlinson. This is as much yours as it is mine. In this paper, there will be times when the words “I” and “We” are used in tandem, depending on whichever individual situation I am addressing. Gabby Tomlinson is the reason for that.

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Image 1. Photograph of my mom, my brother, and myself (sometimes in the early 2000s)

INTRODUCTION

My Mommy Movie(s) wasn't always *My Mommy Movie(s)*. It was, for the longest time, a film by the name of *The Men Your Single Mother Will Inevitably Meet*. This was an idea that had been occupying a good chunk of the creative side of my brain for a long time. For years it existed as a document on my phone that I would tinker with on my way to and from work, sometimes on lunch breaks if I felt a gust of inspiration. It was my secret little personal project, and I knew if I ever got the chance to make it, it would have to be perfect. Or, more accurately, it would have to be whatever I decided "perfect" meant on any particular day. Over time, the scale of the project continuously grew, and it became a piece of work I felt incredibly driven to make. I wanted to make a film inspired by certain aspects of my childhood, something that could connect to some deep truth about:

- Family Life
- Intergenerational Differences
- Abuse, and How We Respond To It
- The Sad, Suburban, White Existence
- Canada
- All Of The Above

But what I really wanted to do was tell a STORY. I wanted to make a movie with a beginning, middle, and end. I wanted to write a script about a kind boy with a sweet, if not lovably-quirky mother. I wanted to track their relationship over the course of ten years as she falls in and out of love with a wide variety of gentlemen and he develops into a young man. I wanted the two characters to grow apart, and then inevitably come back together in a way that may not be

satisfying, but is *earned*. I wanted the film to be an example that screenwriting professors could show undergraduate students and say: “While this is formally a bit on the daring/experimental side, you can still see the bones of a good STORY.” I wanted to make something that would hopefully be under fifteen minutes and pack as much STORY as I could into a tight package and ship it off to the prestigious festivals of the world, where it would be met with near universal praise. I wanted to make something that would put me on the map, so to say. I wanted to reach as much of an audience as a short film possibly could (ie. I wanted Americans to watch it).

* I worry that sections of the previous paragraph may perhaps sound derogatory to screenwriting teachers. I would like to go on record and say that I mean no offense, and even more importantly, I do not want any trouble. Please re-read the previous paragraph and replace every “STORY” with “story”, it will make the world of a difference.

Based on my previously-stated lofty expectations you may feel quite safe to assume that this was not the movie I made. That assumption would be wrong. The film I described not only existed in my head as a hypothetical, it was made. We worked on a script for months, we received a fifteen thousand dollar grant, we had meetings, we hired cast and crew members who believed in the project and wanted to see it come to life, and we shot the film. From beginning to end. If I wanted to, and had a little bit of time to spare, I can confidently say that I could construct *The Men Your Single Mother Will Inevitably Meet* using the footage I have on a variety of hard drives and computers strewn around my apartment. Over the past year, I have been told by multiple people to do just that, put all this work behind me and look towards the future, but I could not bring myself to go down that route. *The Men...* was made, but it will never be finished.

I decided to make something entirely different. It would be difficult to truly understand *My Mommy Movie(s)* without knowing that “the film I spent \$15,000 on”, aka the third and final chapter of the film, is real. While the film plays with ideas of fiction vs. non-fiction, and I do not think it would be all that interesting to go through a list and differentiate between the two, I believe it is important to know that the entire film shoot happened, sincerely.

The following paper will touch on my personal filmmaking history, the lengthy production processes of both films - including the decision to make a new movie when a perfectly good one was nearly complete - and the ethical dilemmas that come with choosing to make a film about your mother whilst being alive in the 21st century.

BACKGROUND



Image 2. Screenshot from *The Amazing Johnsons!* (2018)

I would like to now provide the readers of this paper with a bit of context regarding my filmography. I believe it will help illuminate the mental and temporal pathways that ultimately led me to *My Mommy Movie(s)*, and I have a variety of amusing anecdotes I feel the need to share.

The Amazing Johnsons! is, in many ways, the most traditional fiction film I have ever made. *Johnsons!* follows Harry, a lonely, middle-aged magician (played by my father) who reluctantly performs at his nieces' birthday party. Consumed by a variety of ambiguous emotions following the death of his longtime magic partner and brother, he takes the first step in reconciling with the family he lost. I made *Johnsons!* in the second year of my undergraduate

degree, and despite the inexperience of myself and the crew, we were proud to say that we were attempting to make a “proper” fiction film. We were walking in the footsteps of Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Cigarettes and Coffee* (1993), Wes Anderson’s *Bottle Rocket* (1994), and Eric Rohmer’s *The Bakery Girl of Monceau* (1962); we were in the process of making the iconic short film that would put us on the map.

Every film production faces a wide variety of challenges, and *Johnsons!* was no exception. Actors dropping out, March snow storms, potentially dangerous/haunted Airbnbs, the faculty of the university I attended going on strike, these should all be expected and planned for. These issues, and many others, were managed with care and finesse by the entire cast and crew. Everyone was insanely kind and professional. Two months after we shot the film, it was finished. Despite encouragement from the people around me, I could not shake the feeling that something was deeply wrong. I was (am) a control freak, and things had not gone exactly the way I envisioned them. I knew after the first day of shooting that I had made a mistake, though I was not capable of articulating exactly what happened. For the next three shoot days I just had to go in and pretend that I could keep this ship from capsizing. Everyone knew they were doing the best with what they were given, but unfortunately, I was in charge. It was my material, and my material alone, that everyone else was forced to cope with. Upon reflection, it is difficult to get in the same headspace as the younger version of myself who felt the intense need to make this specific movie. I can only recall wanting to almost mathematically create something that I thought would be successful. “If I put this hint of backstory here, then in roughly 7 pages I’ll reveal...”. I was obsessed with writing a script that would be greenlit for production by the faculty - with making something that would be liked by others - even if I remained rather

indifferent to the whole affair. I found this experience so uniquely harrowing that I seriously considered quitting filmmaking altogether. I could acknowledge that I was still young, and new to the art form, but it did not make the feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and dissatisfaction any easier to process.



Image 3. Screenshot from *The Amazing Johnsons!* (2018)

Despite all of the dour, self-pitying I just aptly described (or, I fear, downplayed), there was one moment of the production where things clicked. A week after the main shoot wrapped, we had to go back to the location to shoot a flashback sequence. The scene involved no dialogue, just the character of Harry and his currently-alive brother, messing around and performing silly

little tricks. My brother Max and I played the two roles. Everything was done on a smaller-scale. The crew was leaner, as we only realistically needed two actors and a cameraperson (more people were present, but it was viewed as more of a social gathering than a day at work). We shot this segment outdoors on a camcorder, so there was no need for any heavy lights, stands, tripods, etc. I could immediately tell that Mivan Makia, the cinematographer of *Johnsons!*, was enjoying herself. The looser guidelines allowed her to experiment more with camera angles and movement. If she had an idea we could discuss it, walk through it, and shoot it, all in a matter of minutes. It was easier - a welcome change of pace - but more importantly, it was enjoyable. We were happy to be doing the work. The footage we shot that day remains my favourite footage from the entire shoot.

Growing up, I always fantasized about “the struggle”. I watched clips from *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse* on YouTube and read *Apocalypse Now*’s Wikipedia page (I had no means of legally watching the film) and found Coppola’s physical, mental, and logistical battle to make a great piece of art so romantic. Typhoons, 36-year-olds having life-threatening heart attacks, grave robbers...I remember being less worried about the actual circumstances these people found themselves in and more focused on the spectacle of it all. They existed in another world, a world I did not have access to. They put themselves through so much pain and suffering, but what they did was *worth it*. When they died, they would be remembered for something. I became excited to suffer; I thought that bleeding was necessary to make something worth being remembered for. But what if it could be different? What if you could enjoy the

process and the finished product? What if you could challenge yourself as an artist without needing to borrow helicopters from the Filipino military?¹

Directly influenced by how enjoyable the previously-mentioned single afternoon of camcorder shooting was, the next few films we made were done with a budget of roughly fifty to one-hundred dollars each. I tried to be gentler on myself. I no longer yearned to be Coppola in the jungle; I attempted to embody his idea that, once filmmaking equipment was widely accessible to the masses, a “little fat girl in Ohio” may rise from her station and become a real artist.² I took Phil Hoffman’s experimental filmmaking course at York to explore alternative methods of making motion pictures. I was specifically moved by the works of Arthur Lipsett, Jonas Mekas, Peter Greenaway, Michael Robinson, and my professor himself, Phil Hoffman. Instead of obsessing over what an imaginary festival programmer/attendee would view as “well-done”, I made it my personal mission to entertain myself, my girlfriend, and my brother. If we collectively thought something worked, I did not need to hear any other opinion on the subject. The first film we made following this framework was called *The Tale of the Ugly Frenchman* (2018). The film was about a young sea captain who had just volunteered to be eaten by his starving crew, and his final parcel home. He sends his mother and his step-father a beautiful letter, as well as his undergarments, a gun, and a jar containing “a week and a half’s worth of semen.” Visually, the entire film was made up of one single, drawn image. The image is edited, zoomed into, and overlaid on top of itself, but every bit of visual information comes from one drawing. Each character was a stick figure with a large, circular head. The voiceover was recorded by a text-to-voice machine I found online. I added a public domain recording of

¹ *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse*, directed by Bahr, F., Hickenlooper, G., Coppola, E. (1991; Triton Pictures), Web.

² *ibid.*

Arabesque No.1 by Claude Debussy and sound effects of waves hitting against an object, birds cawing. It received rave reviews by classmates of mine and, after quickly hitting 200 views on the website for only the most serious cinema-lovers, Vimeo, I felt like the most micro of micro-celebrities around the film department for a week or so. It was also the first time someone complimented something I made where I not only believed what they were saying, but said compliment was given without an ounce of condescension. It was a silly three-minute film that I made as an assignment for class, but the entire experience was incredibly reassuring. I made something that I liked, and other people seemed to respond positively to it.



Image 4. Screenshot from *The Tale of The Ugly Frenchman* (2018)

The following films were created under the same guiding principles as *The Tale of The Ugly Frenchman*. While I did not experience anything that came close to the earth-shattering

realization of: “make something you might like”, there were still hundreds of little lessons learned along the way that helped me grow as a filmmaker. For brevity’s sake, I have summarized the most memorable bits of my post-*Frenchman* filmography.

A QUEST (2018) - an experimental film about video games and the voice messages people leave on phone-dating services. My partner, Gabby, lovingly refers to this as a “minor work.”

Urban Planning (2019) - a lonely alien is tasked to live with, observe, and artificially inseminate a human being (played by my mother). I pitched this as “Jonas Mekas meets Peter Greenaway meets Me!” and for some strange reason a wide array of people suggested I abandon the project. It went on to win the Future of Film Showcase People’s Choice Award, Best Screenplay, and was available to stream on CBC Gem. This whole situation did wonders for my ego.

HOCKEY (2020) - A two-minute, stream of consciousness-style short about growing up in mid 2000s Canada. While recording the voiceover I was struggling to not sound like a terribly serious, chronically depressed young man, so I played a game with myself: I set a timer and I tried to say everything I had written as fast as I possibly could. The reception made me feel like a “serious” artist in a way that I felt uncomfortable with.

Grocery Store, Circa 2008 (2021) - A diary film about grocery stores and growing up. The idea came to me long before the Covid-19 pandemic, but the film took on a new meaning once our collective relationship with “essential businesses” changed. My ability to sell the film was seriously harmed by my slandering of Walmart and the constant barrage of copyrighted logos.

Premium Pornography (2022) - A Catholic school boy is expelled after he is caught masturbating in class. The film serves as his fictional apology to his local school board. A study of animal sexuality, Catholic neurosis, and condom varieties, this film is probably my most well-liked. This was also picked up by CBC Gem. A few days after it was made publicly available to view, I received a very angry email from a man named Timothy, comparing me to an artist working under Joseph Goebbels.



Image 5. Screenshot from *Premium Pornography* (2021)

After *Premium Pornography*, I felt an intense pressure to take myself more seriously. I was scared of what my future looked like. The idea that I would be able to make a living as a

filmmaker always felt unrealistic, but it was beginning to feel impossible. I wanted to challenge myself, I wanted to find a support system, and I wanted to try my hand at teaching. After discussing options with my film friends, I decided that applying to the Masters program at York would check all three of those boxes.

MAKING THE MOVIE

Writing

When I have the opportunity to spend some time with my brother, one of our favourite “games” we play involves randomly bringing up moments or stories from our past that we are almost counting on the other to have forgotten about. The more obscure or strange the better. We had rather action-packed childhoods, so there is an incredibly deep well to draw from. As this game continued to serve as a constant source of amusement, I began to worry. I feared that as I got older and as my brain required room for new information, I would be forced to forget all of these small, rather insignificant memories. I began to take the whole affair much more seriously, I began to write everything down. I compiled an incredibly long document filled with memories from my childhood that I feared could be lost, both good and bad. As I scanned over it, I realized something. Many of them, or some of the most entertaining ones, involved our mother’s past boyfriends. I quickly decided, for reasons I still cannot quite articulate, that this had to be the basis for my next project.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf states:

when a subject is highly controversial...one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one’s audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact.

(Woolf, 1929)

It is important to note that in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf was writing about sex and fiction, specifically the woman's role in the world of literature. My thoughts on this passage - and the entire essay, for that matter - changed and developed alongside the film we were making, but I initially connected with her separation of "truth" and "fact"; especially when combined with my own "highly controversial" subject, my mother. As I began to work on organizing the real stories that I thought would eventually fill *The Men Your Mother Will Inevitably Meet*, I started to write my own. I imagined new men, I altered real men and made them more exciting, I even chopped one of their arms off. As the shape of the film began to take form, we ordered the men and messed with timelines to create a more emotionally resonant story. We were not erasing the past, we were honouring it through the creation of a new truth.

Gabby and I tinkered with the script everyday for months. The film was going to feature extensive voice-over, like many of our previous films, but it would be combined with more traditional narrative short film elements: sync-sound, characters talking to each other, blocking, etc. In every draft there was one thing that remained consistent - there was always a lot going on. People who read the script warned me that what we were attempting to do was high-risk, high-reward. If one aspect of the film did not work the entire project would likely fall apart like a house of cards; but if we pulled it off, then we may have something special on our hands. I felt prepared to take on that challenge.

Pre-Production

What initially set *The Men Your Mother Will Inevitably Meet* apart so strikingly from the rest of my work, and what excited me, was the amount of help we would need to pull it off. This was not a film that I could go out and make with my partner and my brother. While they both played pivotal roles in the film, it was clear that more help would be necessary to have our vision come to life. At the very least, we knew we needed a cast: a mother, a son, and a wide variety of men. We needed old men, young men, very young men (aka children), happy-go-lucky men, sour men, etc. We needed men who were willing to show up to set for a couple of hours, make a fool of themselves in front of a camcorder, and then - fingers crossed - find their own way home. The amount of cast members we needed was overwhelming. I did not have a breadth of experience of working with actors to draw from, and I had put myself in a situation where I would be working with about ten actors over a three day span. It felt like we were jumping into the deep end with no water wings and a very upset tummy. But, that was the appeal! I knew we could do something similarly to what we had already done, but we wanted to challenge ourselves.

We found casting the film to be incredibly difficult. We posted our initial casting notices on a variety of casting websites months ahead of time. As we live in Toronto and every role was a paid job, we naively thought that we would have to make a plethora of incredibly difficult decisions: the kind of decisions you imagine top Hollywood casting directors have to make. I pictured myself sweating over two almost identical headshots, knowing that one I would make a star, and the other would forever remain in my mind and heart as a “What If?” When it came down to it, we had an incredibly difficult time finding male talent. Based on the casting data I

still have access to from *Mandy.com*, for the five different male roles we posted we had a total of twenty-three applicants; this is in stark contrast to the nearly fifty applications we received for the two female roles we posted on the same website. Some of these applicants immediately disqualified themselves due to a change in availability, which is completely understandable and to be expected. Some made themselves ineligible by virtue of having incredibly heavy accents, which are not necessarily a problem, but you can only ask *so* much of an audience. When you have already written a movie where one actor plays a character from the ages of 8 to 19, it might be slightly too much if he is also the only member of his family born and raised in Hungary. Some (ie. one) actors felt it was necessary to let us know that they were willing to perform nude scenes if the script required it. Then, even when it was made abundantly clear that the role required no nudity whatsoever - not only that, but a minor would be involved in the scene with them - they still felt the need to send some naked pictures our way in case we changed our minds. We quickly began to pull from actors we had previously worked with who we thought matched each specific role. We had both worked with Phil Borg on the film *Lost Dogs* during our undergraduate degrees and thought he would be the perfect Noah. For the lead role of Bobby, I had reached out to Vancouver-based actor Riley Davis, who I had seen and was impressed by in Zachary Lacosse's *Young People Ask* (2019). The dates for the Toronto International Film Festival, our shooting schedule, and the 2023 ACTRA strike all happened to line up, which opened up his availability. The rest of the male cast consisted entirely of my friends, family, and mentors - specifically my thesis supervisor, Manfred Becker. Due to the film's need for a wide variety of male actors, we knew all along that we would be sourcing talent through both traditional and non-traditional methods, but we were still struck by how much we were forced to skew towards the non-traditional side of things. In the end, we learned some invaluable lessons;

for future projects we will be starting the casting process even earlier and we will be prepared to set aside funds for a dedicated casting director.

I feel it must be restated now that, through York University, I received a grant of \$15,000 to make this film. I had never made anything for anywhere even close to that figure. Not only that, it was the first time I had ever *received* money to make something. When you are used to working with nothing, a sudden influx of \$15,000 cannot help but seduce even the greatest economically-efficient artist into thinking that they suddenly can produce a sci-fi epic that could rival the work of Christopher Nolan. We had written the script with a miniscule budget in mind, but once we began reaching out to potential collaborators we realized that compromises would need to be made regardless. We originally planned to shoot the majority of the film on a cinema camera with proper lighting setups, but due to the script's myriad of locations and set-ups, we realized that our current production plan was not realistic. The shoot would either need to be stretched out over a longer period of time or each shooting day would need to be at least twelve hours long, likely longer. We could not afford to add days to our schedule and pay everyone fairly the whole time, and we were unwilling to overwork our crew members. Instead of making any changes to the script, we decided to shoot the majority of the film on a Hi-8 camcorder - the same camera we used to make the majority of our movies with - and simplify our lighting plans. This allowed Gabby to take on the role of cinematographer without the need for an additional dedicated camera team. The camera was also much lighter than even the smallest of cinema cameras, which allowed us to alter angles, add shots, and move around rapidly. There was a slight, self-conscious concern that the grainy image quality of Hi-8 would not be everyone's cup

of tea, and that the film would be viewed as more “amateurish” because of our choice of equipment. Ultimately, we decided that the pros heavily outweighed the cons.

Deep into the pre-production process, I continued to alter the script. Sometimes I would be looking to combine individual segments to be more economical, sometimes I was on the mental hunt for more visually inventive ways of providing the audience with information, but more often than not, these editing sessions revolved around me obsessing over a single line of dialogue for hours at a time. This is an activity/form of torture I do not recommend indulging yourself with. The time I spent staring at a digital screen, waiting for God to bless me with “the line that will tie the whole film together” would have been much better spent doing just about anything else. Despite how boring (uncinematic, even) most of these writing sessions were, there was one specific “writing day” that sticks out as being worthy of discussion. I was struggling with how to end the film. At this point the film was purely fiction, but I couldn't help but wonder if, in its final moments, it could transcend the cute, little, formal box I created for it. I wrote a monologue about how I made this whole movie for her, my mom, and how much I love her, and how difficult it is to say something like that to someone and to *know* that they believe you. I remember being in an almost-manic state - pacing around my small bedroom, sobbing to myself, and occasionally bending over on to my desk to write something sappy down. I called Gabby - because she was on her lunch break at work - and she sounded, rightfully, a little concerned. But I was fine, I was better than fine! I had solved the riddle of the film, I had discovered the reason it had to be made. But, by the time I picked Gabby up from the subway station that evening, everything I had written that day had been purposefully deleted. I did not want to encourage myself to go down that pathway again.

Production

The production of the film ran quite smoothly, or as smoothly as a small, independent short film production can ever run. This is a credit to many people but most specifically to Gabby Tomlinson, who had a Plan A, B, and C for just about every single Murphy's Law scenario we could have potentially found ourselves in, and Max Ruscinski, who was the best Assistant Director I could have asked him to be; especially considering he had no experience whatsoever. Instead of using this space as an excuse to recount each day with a smidge of added pazazz, I think it would be infinitely more interesting to recount what went wrong.

The actor Phil Borg, who plays the role of "Noah" in the film, sent me a message very late the night before we were going to shoot his scene. He mentioned that he had just pulled something or slipped a disc in his back. Of all the "men" in the film, he was inarguably the most important. He had the most scenes and his role was quite physically demanding. Now, he could barely walk. It was too late to rely on anyone else to fill in, and he was willing to come to set the next morning, he was just concerned about his ability to perform the role as it was written. Gabby, Max, and I all stayed up late that evening and rewrote/reworked his scenes until we were confident that he could perform them safely. So, instead of running around like a maniac and doing a strange jumprope routine, he could just sit on a chair, menacingly. For the scenes that did require Phil to move around a little bit more, we adjusted the blocking and shot list to hide him in motion as much as humanly possible. While it was a stressful situation, we were overjoyed with the footage and Phil gave an incredible performance, despite all the pain he was going through.

The following day, we had another actor related mishap. I got a call from a member of the “men in front of the green screen” crew who was suddenly feeling quite ill. We were in another situation where it was too late to bring anyone else up to speed, so Mr. Director himself, Simon Ruscinski, was forced to step up to the plate. As a reminder, at this point the film was still completely fictional, but I still had some serious reservations about appearing on the screen as a representation of one of my mom’s boyfriends. I kept telling myself that a general audience would not know any better...but it was still a little weird. Desperate times call for desperate, slightly incestual measures, I suppose. Thankfully, when the film eventually changed, so did the context; and my silly little cameo evolved into something much more meaningful.

Other than standing in front of the camera and breathing life into a couple of silly lines we wrote, every single male actor was responsible for a very specific but very important task. They all were tasked with learning *It Had to Be You*, a song originally written by Gus Kahn but made famous by Frank Sinatra. We imagined the film ending with a surreal musical number, where every crappy boyfriend overcomes their wide variety of insufficiencies and performs a love song to Deborah. I chose the song, first and foremost, because it happens to be in the Public Domain. This meant that I would not have to pay any record company for rights, and no one could sue me for staging a little performance of it. Secondly, I have always loved the song. The lyrics tell the story of a man who is so hopelessly drawn to a woman that he cannot help but love her wholeheartedly, faults and all. I thought this moment would be a fitting end for the saga of Deborah and Bobby. Unfortunately, many of the cast found the rhythm of the song incredibly difficult to sing along to. The act of singing this song on set took on almost supernatural qualities; individuals who had the opportunity to watch half a dozen other people struggle to sing

the Ol' Blue Eyes classic could not help but also be overtaken by the complicated spell it cast. I was surprised and frustrated by this, but ultimately this was my fault. I should have immediately had more on-set aids, like cue cards or a backing track, prepared and ready to go. I should have been hosting individual Zoom practice sessions so I could help walk any cast members through it before their big day came. It all worked out in the end, and while it provided us all with some funny stories, I wish I could have done more to support our cast.

The next and final “mistake” occurred near the end of the shoot. We were filming a scene outdoors that involved one actor chasing after another. Nothing was scripted, the two actors only had an outline of what was happening - we were only after the visuals, so what they were actually saying was not of the highest importance. The scene was a rather emotional one, and the actors asked me for the context behind what they were performing. The answer I gave was less than satisfying. My response prompted even more questions, most of which I failed to answer concisely, and eventually we just moved on and tried to get something on camera. They were struggling to perform any version of the scene as it was described, I could feel that I was losing them. We tried a few more times and I kept adding to the confusion before we eventually moved on, all collectively unsatisfied with our efforts. I was more disappointed with this moment than any other moment during the entire production. Not because of a lack of effort from the performers or an unwillingness to take direction, but because I was hiding something. There was a real-life situation that the scene was based on that could have given our actors the clarity they desperately needed, but I was too ashamed to share it with them. By this point, everyone knew that Bobby was my cinematic stand-in. Despite all of my efforts to obfuscate it, it was obvious; everyone on the crew was working together under the assumption that we were telling a version

of my story. So, if I were to suddenly give these two actors both an *incredibly* specific motivation, it would have become abundantly clear that I did not just write this moment, I lived it. I was worried about being judged, not because I did something wrong or morally reprehensible, but because I allowed myself to be treated a certain way. Instead of choosing to be vulnerable, I sacrificed the entire segment. None of the footage from this scene made it into any cut of the film.

Post-Production (and Research)

During one of the lower, more self-conscious moments I faced while simultaneously writing this paper and editing this film, I was greeted by an old friend, Terrence Malick. I felt guilty for not finishing this all up sooner. It was as if my whole life had stalled, the world was passing me by while I toiled away on a short film about my mommy. But then, I remembered that Terrence Malick was out there - in a cave, perhaps - editing *The Way of the Wind*, his Jesus movie. He shot the film in 2019, and there has yet to be any concrete news regarding a release date³. He's been working on it for six years, with no true end in sight. Sure, he may be a world-renowned filmmaker who has won a Golden Bear and the Palme d'Or, but it is still reassuring knowing I am not the only one out there struggling to realize my vision in a timely manner.

I never planned on editing the film as soon as we finished the main shoot. There was still more to shoot, and I usually prefer to have all of the footage at my disposal before I start to mess around with a cut. As I have edited the vast majority of my work, the post-production process is not exactly traditional. I usually spend a great deal of time on each individual scene, or moment, and work in a linear fashion - but I am also doing sound design, colouring, and scoring, all at once. It takes me much longer than the average editor to have a few minutes ready to show, but usually those few minutes are almost exactly what ends up in the final version of the film. Aside from a few minor tweaks or alterations, my films are basically finished once I click "export" for

³ Zilko, Christian. "Terrence Malick is 'Very Happy' with 'The Way of the Wind' Progress - but There's Still No Release Timeline." *Indiewire*, 10 August 2023, <https://www.indiewire.com/news/general-news/terrence-malick-happy-with-the-way-of-the-wind-progress-1234894294/>

the first time. On *The Men*... this was not the case. I got roughly halfway through the “assembly cut” of the film and had to take a break and reevaluate what I was doing. Something was not clicking. The footage I was working with was different to what I was used to - more staged, less shaky camcorder - but I knew this would be the case; again, that was part of what drew me to this project. I thought that a short break would allow me to see things from a new perspective - with fresh eyes - but I was wrong. Before admitting it to anyone, even Gabby, I silently came to the conclusion that this was not working *for me*. I stress the “for me” here because I do not think that we shot a bad film. The performances, the visuals, everything is there, and it works. This all made the decision to start over from scratch that much more difficult, but in my opinion, necessary.

There were many contributing factors that led to the transformation of *The Men Your Single Mother Will Inevitably Meet* into *My Mommy Movie(s)*. I will discuss some of the more academic, emotional, and ethical components soon, but for now I would like to focus on one piece of footage. The shot is of my mother’s torso as she sings the old Christian hymn, “Will The Circle Be Unbroken”. My childhood cat, Jack, is sleeping on a side table behind her, but due to the fuzzy nature of Hi-8 video he is almost impossible to see if you are not actively looking for him. As my mother was singing the hymn, she started to get choked up. Despite this, she sings the rest of the song, struggling more and more as it reaches its conclusion. I shot this to use in my film, *Urban Planning*, but it ended up on the cutting room floor. I always wanted to use it, but I never knew how. During my self-imposed break on “No Editing Island”, the idea of using this shot in the film came to me and I could not escape it. The funny thing is, this was not the first time I have faced this type of dilemma. A film I made as part of my masters degree, *Snowy Dog*,

was reverse-engineered around my fascination with a shot of my father recording lizards as a very young me babbles away in the background. But in this case, I already had a ton of footage for a fiction film that this one blurry shot would grab ahold of and commandeer. I had already promised myself one hundred times over that this movie would not become directly about my mom, but in my heart of hearts, I knew there was a better movie to be made; and in that movie, Theresa Louch's voice would play a starring role.

It was at this point of production where the papers I had read on the form of the “essay film” informed the creation of this reinvented movie. For those unfamiliar, Hans Richter explains the essay film as a method of working where the filmmaker, “in an attempt to make the invisible world of imagination, thoughts, and ideas visible, can draw from an incomparably larger reservoir of expressive means than can the pure documentary film”⁴ After struggling to fit within my own self-determined guidelines and trying to make a “weird” fiction film, it was liberating to try and do something completely different. While I was no longer making a fiction, I also knew I was not making a “pure” documentary. I wanted to be somewhere in the middle, in the essayistic zone. I threw the rules I created out the window and started from someplace new, guided by emotion and intuition rather than the script I had written. I gave myself the freedom to use both the footage already shot and film and images from my own archive; whatever worked best in the moment. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan describe the “dramatic tension between audial and visual discourses”⁵ as a defining feature of the essay film, and this was something that did not come so naturally to me. I almost wish there were more battles between the audio and visual elements in the work, but ultimately I did not want to overcomplicate what I feared was already a

⁴ Richter, “The Film Essay: A New Type of Documentary Film (1940),” 91.

⁵ Alter, Nora M., & Corrigan, Timothy. “Introduction,” 3.

fairly complicated film. And, I must admit, the sequence in the film that really best exemplifies this quality - the scene where I sing “It Had To Be You” while Bobby and Deborah hide in their car - came to be almost accidentally. I was working on cutting the runtime of the film when the audio file of me singing happened to fall underneath that specific video clip. I previewed it, thought it was interesting, and it quickly became the definitive moment the rest of the work builds towards.

“I have so much I want to tell you, and nowhere to begin.”

(Salinger, 1963)

Due to the changing nature of the film we had to go back to the rewriting phase, again. My ironic, dual obsession and incompetence with phrasing a sentence were back with a vengeance. I decided to revisit works that had inspired me greatly in the past, and I ended up re-reading a bunch of J.D. Salinger, specifically *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*. The anthology combines two novellas which could be read separately and stand on their own, but their impact is amplified by their presentation together. The first, *Raise High...*, takes place over a single afternoon. Buddy Glass, the protagonist and writer of the story, is in attendance for his brother Seymour’s wedding. Seymour fails to show up, and Buddy is forced to try to navigate the following hours in enemy territory as the groom’s only present family member. *Seymour: An Introduction* is a much more ambitious look at the titular Seymour. Buddy, through the use of stream of consciousness, attempts what he knows is an impossible task: he tries to accurately describe his deceased brother. While the stories are linked by their shared characters and subject matter, what I find most moving about their packaging as an

anthology is the reasoning behind why Buddy Glass, our fictional narrator, feels compelled to write these stories in the first place. They exist, in their imperfection, to help Buddy remember. He lost the most important figure in his life, and this is how he chooses to commune with Seymour's spirit. He gets to live on forever; his life has been documented, dramatized.

After a few months of trial and error, Gabby and I finally settled on a new way to structure the work. This "new" film was broken up into three different parts, unofficially titled: About My Mommy, My Mommy's Wedding, and My Mommy Movie. Together, in Voltron-esque fashion, these three parts combine to create *My Mommy Movie(s)*.

"About My Mommy" serves as a comical - but hopefully informative - gateway into the film. I realized that I was centering a film around someone that only a select few viewers would know, or even recognize. I needed to allow a general audience to quickly get to know my mother as well as they possibly could. Choosing specific stories to highlight was difficult, there were too many I held close to my heart. The two I am most fond of are "The Nun" and "The American: Starring George Clooney". My mom loves to tell the story of a nun she knew during her childhood rejecting any notions she may have of living a religious life. It is very funny to imagine the sweet old nun coming face to face with the bubbly young woman - who would later go on to raise me - and tell her, flat out, that a life devoted to God was not in the cards for her. I also find the story sad, for reasons I am not entirely aware of. The mystery behind why *exactly* the holy sister felt compelled to say what she said has haunted me for the past year or so. The George Clooney story is another one of my favourites, for far less complicated reasons. It does an admirable job capturing how strange it is to watch a sex scene with your parents, and how it

could always be worse. I hoped that creating a connection between the audience and my mother would give the rest of the film a greater chance to flourish.

“My Mommy’s Wedding” follows my very fake attempt to sabotage my mother’s very real wedding for the sake of my own career as a filmmaker. It was inspired by an assignment I completed in Phil Hoffman and Franci Duran’s Process Cinema course. I was battling a fairly nasty flu when editing the assignment, so this seemed like the perfect opportunity to expand and develop the concept more fully. I was taken with the idea of a vindictive young man attempting to selfishly ruin his mom’s incredibly important day, so that became an element of my “character” in the overall film. The Simon Ruscinski that appears in the film clearly has some serious unresolved mommy issues, most of which are exaggerated greatly for comedic and dramatic effect. But the element that really captured my imagination was the process in which one would go about sabotaging a wedding and turning it into a makeshift movie set. Taking advantage of the people who love you more than life itself and transforming something beautiful and real into a shallow, exploitative, morally bankrupt attempt at potentially attaining some small form of notoriety...I could not help myself. Filmmaking can easily be the most expensive form of expression, so it’s no surprise how often the art vs. commerce debate rears its ugly head. How much revenue a film generates is at times viewed directly as a measure of its quality. It was even newsworthy to indicate that *Avengers: Endgame* did not win an Oscar, despite becoming the highest-grossing film of all time. This was the first time in Hollywood’s history that the highest-grossing film of all time had not won an Academy Award⁶. This section of the film is an attempt to interrogate the ongoing battle in my mind between making something that I want to

⁶ Hunt, James. “Avengers: Endgame Has An Oscars Record No One Wants.” *Screen Rant*, 12 February 2020, <https://screenrant.com/avengers-endgame-oscars-record-highest-grossing-movie-no-wins/>

make and the harsh realities of the film business. Will anything I direct ever make any money? If the answer is no, does that mean I am a failure? I begin to obsess over the creation of a fiction film - the type of movie that makes money. This is a relatively sudden shift from the first section, which resembles a more traditional documentary. This obsession over the act of creating fiction reaches its natural conclusion in the third, and final, section of the film.

As soon as the “My Mommy Movie” section begins, it is announced with much aplomb that we actually did it. Seemingly out of nowhere, we made a movie. A fictional movie. Despite a moment resembling clarity that seemed to occur as my mother sang “Will The Circle Be Unbroken”, the “character” of Simon reverts. He has an idea, and he wants to see his idea through to the end. Now there are actors, sets, and new camera angles. But something is wrong, it is moving too fast. We rapidly meet a variety of people, men specifically. So many men. The film points towards something uncomfortable, a topic that the filmmakers seem unable - or unwilling - to fully represent. There is something dark buried beneath the surface, but at the end there is a light. Fictional elements and footage are reconfigured, experimented with. They are liberated from their previously finite form; they can now be combined with “real” footage; the lines are blurred. Images are never left alone, there is always something on top or underneath, now it is only a matter of if we can see it. All of it works together to find some semblance of truth behind layers of obfuscation and artifice. In the end, a boy not only loves his mother; he sees his mother. And for some reason, this is how he chose to tell her.

ETHICS

My Mother

In approaching the subject matter of my childhood, I was not the least bit concerned with how other people would be portrayed. I viewed myself as an unbiased arbiter of truth who would and could dole out judgement fairly and with precision. Throughout the film's various lives and forms, my mother had known that I was creating a piece of work that was - one way or another - about her, and she never expressed to me any form of hesitation. I had caught myself actively reassuring her at times, insisting that she had nothing to worry about and that I was her beautiful baby boy who would never do anything to hurt his beloved mother. She believed that the past was the past, and if she had done something wrong, that it was my right to express those feelings. Through these conversations, and the exercise of editing *The Men...* and the newly-constructed *My Mommy Movie(s)*, I grew less sure of my role and ability to tell our story.

I feel absolutely no hesitation in discussing myself. I would willingly tell a complete stranger just about anything they wanted to know about even the most embarrassing details of my life. I feel remarkably little shame; my mother is - in many ways - similar. For a long time I tried to downplay the role of my mother in the work. I would claim that I was "inspired" by a few moments from my childhood, but that the character of the mother in the film was an entirely new creation. Despite a previous incarnation of myself that insisted this was a film all about me, it was not. It was a film about my relationship with my mom. As I was sitting in front of my computer for days on end, confronted with footage from her spanning over 25 years, I began to realize the severity of my actions. And, despite her best wishes, she is not Bob Dylan, or Karen

Carpenter. She will probably not receive the bio-pic treatment. Unless my brother makes a sudden career shift, this film could very well be the most complete cinematic representation of her that will ever exist. In one-hundred and fifty years, if humanity is still puttering around and the Internet is still accessible, this might be all the people of 2175 ever know of her. This will be her legacy. The longer the work took to complete, the more my newfound responsibility began to intensify. I realized that I was no longer completing a film within an allotted amount of time to graduate with the majority of my cohort. I was mummifying my mother. This meant I had to practice more patience, choose the anecdotes I was immortalizing with care. How one single sentence was phrased would eat away entire days of my life. Out of respect for the future dead, myself included, no part of the creation of this film could be rushed.

I looked to the films that inspired me to create this project in the first place for guidance. For efficiency's sake, I chose to narrow my search down to works where the relationship between the documentarian and their subject played a key role. There were multiple that sprang to mind, including Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1985) and Nathan Fielder's *Nathan for You: Finding Frances* (2017), but the one I was most simultaneously attracted to and mortified by was *Sink or Swim* (1990) by Su Friedrich. *Sink or Swim* is an experimental film about Friedrich's relationship with her father, American anthropologist, educator, and poet Paul Friedrich. I rate the film incredibly highly; the way Friedrich employs the distancing technique of having a young girl perform the voiceover and how our relationship with that voiceover evolves over time is, in my estimation, an incredible feat of storytelling. Aside from my admiration of the work, what drew me to the film was how the relationship between Su and Paul was represented on screen. Paul Friedrich was clearly not involved in the production of *Sink or*

Swim, which made it an optimal comparison point with *My Mommy Movie(s)*. Friedrich's film is based entirely on memory, as is mine (mostly, at least). But, as the title or a cursory Google search may suggest, the film does not make Mr. Friedrich out to be the best father - or person, in general. If you have yet to see the film and want a taste of what I am referring to: Friedrich tells a story about how she was once punished as a child by having her head held under the water of a full bathtub, almost losing consciousness as she tried to shake out of her father's grasp. Ever since first seeing *Sink or Swim*, I have not been able to help but imagine what major holidays were like when the Friedrichs reunited, circa 1991. I worry that may read as an insensitive joke, but I am serious. No matter how generous I am to each side in my imagination, I can not picture any sort of reunion being comfortable for anyone involved. I had no intention of portraying my mother in this light. Not because I simply wanted to avoid quiet ham dinners in the future, but because she did not deserve to be treated in that fashion. I worried this would immediately make my film less "important". I was never drowned, beaten, abandoned, or abused. I had no scandals to investigate, nor secrets to expose to the world. I was just a guy, making a movie about his mother. Why?

The question of "Why?" became so all-encompassing that it eventually became a part of the film. Something - beyond my original intended goal of simply making a "good" movie - was compelling me to do this. Even as the film genre, style, and form changed, we continued to march towards the goal of expressing ourselves; hoping we would find out exactly what we were trying to express along the way. What is the point of the film? What am I trying to say or do? As the film is now complete, the answers to these questions are not entirely up to me. But, from my humble opinion as the creator of the work, I believe this to be a very expensive, roundabout way

of telling someone that you love them. Despite current circumstances, and distance, the memories live on forever. Hopefully new ones, even better ones, will be made in the future.

Everything Else

Something else that has forced me to return to the question of “Why?” over and over again is the Western-backed, ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people. This production was primarily filmed in early September, 2023. The situation in Palestine was not good then - it has not been anywhere even approaching the realm of “good” for 70-odd years - but within a month, it became impossible to ignore what was transpiring. The situation in Gaza and the West Bank made working on this feel secondary, at best. I was allowed to sit at my desk in my comfortable basement apartment with my loving partner and often-loving cat, while arms made in Canada were being sent overseas to destroy hospitals and kill civilians.⁷ Children who will never have the chance to see their first birthday are subjected to war crimes⁸ while I fret over the way my body looks on camera. It felt genuinely immoral to work on something so personal. As an artist, and a human being, I felt like it was my responsibility to do more. I began to read the work of Palestinian writers, watch Palestinian films, attend demonstrations, contact my local political representatives, and talk to the people in my life about Palestine. The thought of editing the script or shooting more footage to somehow include the issue that was at the forefront of my mind was incredibly difficult to ignore; especially as the film itself took on a more fluid form. Ultimately, I chose to not transform this film about my mother into my personal anti-imperialist manifesto. I feared it would come across as disingenuous and betray the original intention of the work. Even now, it feels inappropriate for me to approach this subject. The leap between what I have made and what we have all been forced to bear witness to is too wide to be taken even the slightest bit

⁷ Kulthum, Umm. “A Brief History of Canada’s Role in the Colonization of Palestine.” *Yellowhead Institute*, 2 November 2023, <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2023/candas-role-in-colonization-palestine/>

⁸ “Damning evidence of war crimes as Israeli attacks wipe out entire families in Gaza.” *Amnesty International*, 22 October 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-as-israeli-attacks-wipe-out-entire-families-in-gaza/>

seriously. Yet I feel compelled to mention this all because the entire post-production process of *My Mommy Movie(s)* was directly impacted by not only the constant barrage of evil we have been forced to confront every day, but also by the bravery and resilience of the Palestinian people.

At the end of the film there is a land acknowledgement. I had never put a land acknowledgement in the credits of a film before, but I thought this was a good time to start. During the Great Hunger, my Irish ancestors were pushed out of their homeland because they were starved by the British. They found their way to Canada, where they worked hard to move up the social and economic ladders until they were eventually able to purchase land; land that had been stolen from The First Nations people not long before their arrival. A genocide continues to take place on the land I am privileged enough to call home. As Canadian artists, this is something that must not simply be acknowledged, but actively fought against.

IN CONCLUSION

The Men Your Single Mother Will Inevitably Meet was a failure. *My Mommy Movie(s)* is a failure as well. Elements of the work do not always tie up as neatly as I would have liked them to, it is simultaneously too short and a little longer than I hoped it would be, but above all, I fear I will always feel that my mom deserved a better movie. But I have come to realize that there will always be a better movie. I am satisfied with the one we made. After nearly a decade of working on one subject, I believe I am finally ready to let it go. We finally completed my mommy movie.

I always thought that this process would be an ending for me, of sorts. I naively believed that after the creation of this work, I would be viewed as the next great Canadian Filmmaker™. I believed that any industry door I approached would swing open and that there would be a bidding war for whatever kooky creation I conjured up next. More concretely, I thought that this might be the last time I relied so heavily on my archaic camcorder. But as I type these words, I am already planning a project that relies entirely on the grainy quality of Hi-8 video. After the brave but somehow pre-determined switch to a more essayistic style, I believed that it would be my last hoorah with the form. I would ultimately take one step forward towards my childhood goal of making fiction films; being the next Paul Thomas Anderson. But against all odds, I do not think that I am PTA's worthy successor. I also believed that this would be the last film I make about my family, but I am no longer so sure of myself. There is more to say, and I fear for Canadian audiences all across the provinces and territories that I am not yet finished. So, if this was not an ending - or at the very least a major turning point in my career trajectory - what was

it? If I was so wrong about things - or more accurately, everything - throughout the entire process, what did I learn?

It may sound corny - despite my apparent dazzling wit, I hope to convey I am not scared of coming it up with the best of them - but through the production of this film and my time completing the MFA, I learned the most about myself. This process has forced me in a multitude of different and creative ways to practice self-reflection, and I believe that I am a better filmmaker and person because of it. While there is a confrontational streak within me, I am not as “edgy” as I may have once hoped to be. All of my films moving forward will take a much more measured, considered approach to their subject(s) and the form itself. This can be attributed to the material covered - whether it be films, papers, books, maps, etc. - during all of the classes I took, but above all else, my experience with my cohort of MFA students and our instructors will have the most lasting effect. I grew up playing hockey and wanting to be a professional wrestler, so I have the spirit of competition ingrained deep within me. I secretly believed that the Master's program would operate in a more competitive, cutthroat manner, but my experience was the exact opposite. We created a small, tight-knit community that wanted more than anything else to see each other's projects succeed. Through our classes/therapy groups (one in the same), screenings, and Discord server, this group of people taught me how to be more supportive towards my fellow artists. In a world where the arts are constantly under attack, I believe it is more important than ever to be our own and each other's champions.

Thank you for taking the time to read all of this. There were a million other things you could have been doing, but you chose to do this. Now that it is complete I plan to retire to a small

town in Ontario, by the water, in a modestly-sized house a wealthy patron bestows upon me. I really hope you liked the movie. I have never worked so hard on anything in my entire life. If you happen to think you could fit the role of the previously mentioned “wealthy patron”, please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience.

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