

Mutual Pain

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Abstract

Mutual Pain is a 29-minute, nonlinear, experimental psychodrama film about love's pain, social violence, and the effect of anxiety on perception.

On a pitch-black night, John realizes that his wife had an affair with a mutual friend a few years before. There is now a big question mark over their child's parentage. Storming out, he finds himself on an intense one-night mysterious journey. The voyage takes him to various places – the street, party club, bar, gambling room, etc. – where he finds himself in a maze of peculiar human beings and incidents. He experiences intense emotional, intellectual, and physical stimulation. Having lost everything and been beaten brutally by a thief, he falls motionless to the ground. Night becomes day. A beggar takes his shoes. Barefoot, he maniacally runs toward the forest. He is guided to his house where he lies down beside his wife in their bed. 'John, John!' She calls his name while giving him an intimate hug. 'Shall we please be silent?' he answers back.

Scholars, researchers, and fellow filmmakers who wish to view my thesis film [read my screenplay] can contact me at alikey14@gmail.com. Please explain your interest and confirm that it is for personal / private research purposes only, and that you will respect my copyright and not screen my film publicly in any manner.

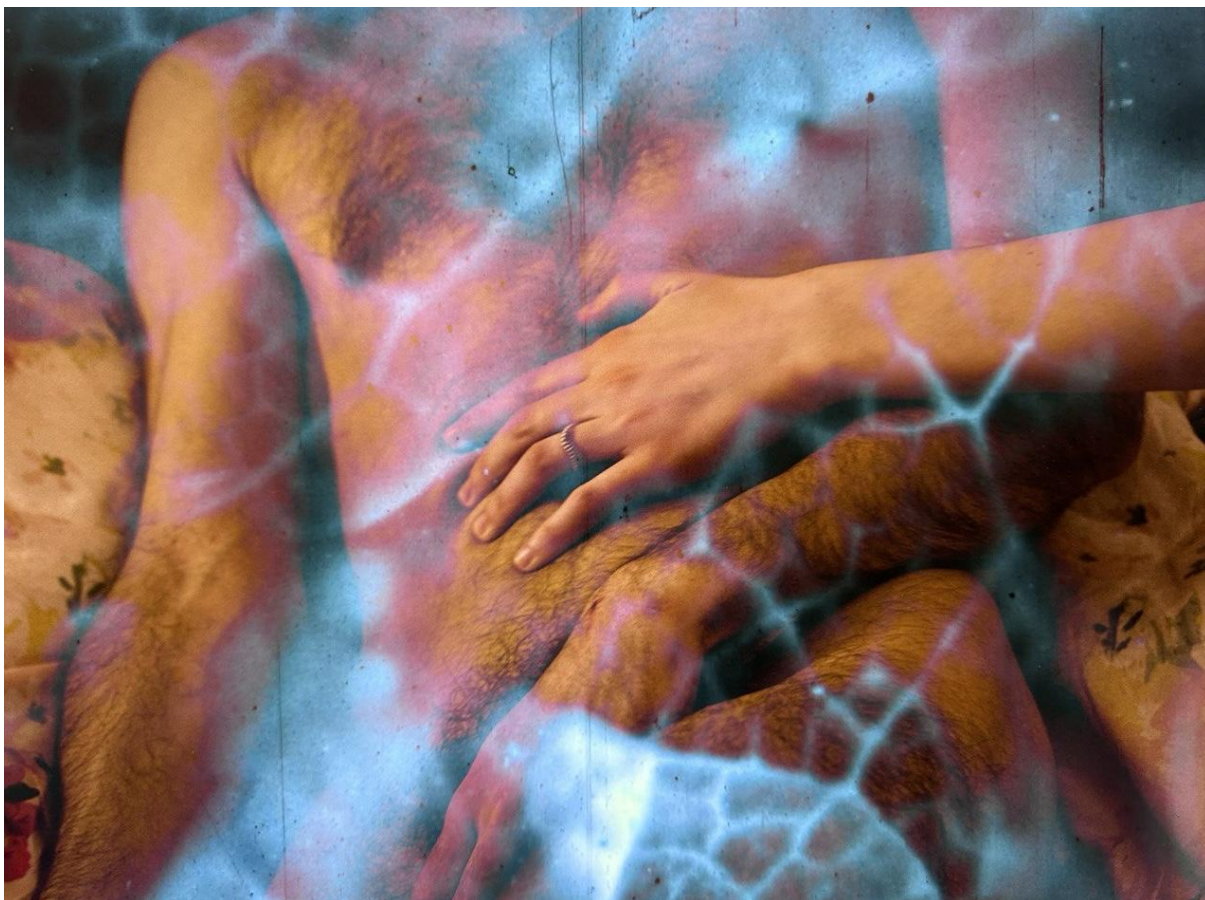


Figure 1: Photo Credit: Mathieu Gauvreau

Acknowledgements

Art, specifically cinema, is a highly collaborative work. The production of a film without the generous assistance of others would only remain a mental dream, especially when it comes to a film such as *Mutual Pain*, with ZERO budget. Therefore, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to all those who helped and supported me in bringing my dream to life, the list of whom is much longer than what I can include here.

I am so honoured and grateful to have studied at York University's MFA in Film Program, where I have been given the chance to immerse myself not only in the film department but also the dance, theatre, and visual arts departments, and thus fulfill my versatile interests in art. In particular, I wish to express my gratitude to Manfred Becker, the director of the film program, who created a peaceful environment in which artists can learn and create without limits imposed on their art. Besides being a caring father for the entire program, he has also been a straightforward reader of my thesis project who, through his questions, helped me to determine my orientation in art and to critically debate without fear of judgment.

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Part 1 The Genesis

“Energy can never be created nor destroyed rather it transforms from one form to the others.”¹

My journey in art started with acting, then I delved into contemporary dance, until I whirled into filmmaking, which is the spot where I have remained until today. Although a significant part of my journey took place in academia, I have never lost my connection with practice, and more importantly, with my internal self. As much as I respect many artists, past and present, what is more significant to me is self-discovery and finding my own voice through art. By self-discovery I do not mean autobiographical art. The process is more of a dialogue between me as an artist and the speculative artwork I intend to create, which may lead me into an unknown realm, far from my own self. In fact, most of the time my creative process begins in the spot I call the border/edge of darkness.

It is exactly in this mysterious spot where I ask myself every time: “Who am I? Why do I have such an intense desire to create this art piece? How can I give shape to this vague idea?”

To find answers to these questions I must leave my comfort zone and venture toward things that might be fearful, dangerous, and both painful and joyful to me. Not only should I confront my past self but gain a deeper understanding of my present self and grow through challenging circumstances, like immigrating to another country, or rejecting the things that I already know and are easy to access, to give birth to art through a process of love and pain. If I

¹ D. Halliday, R. Resnick, and J. Walker, *Fundamentals of Physics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2014).

were a painter, I would have been one of those who stand in front of a blank canvas for a week and in an instant throw paint at it, allowing the painting to reveal itself to me while I erase the extra colours with a cloth dipped in thinner.

In 2010, I received a copy of the book *Magical Passes: The Practical Wisdom of the Shamans of Ancient Mexico*² from a teacher and friend of mine, Masoud Najafi. Back then, I was a passionate actor who used to practice different physical theatre techniques, such as:

- the Jerzy Grotowski method of acting in which the body and psyche of the actor are highly engaged;
- the Gardzienice techniques, known for rigorous investigation of indigenous and ancient musical traditions, and physical and vocal techniques;
- the Jacque Lecoq approach that shifts conventional word-based theatre to a body-centred theatre by exploring the relationship between movement and acting.

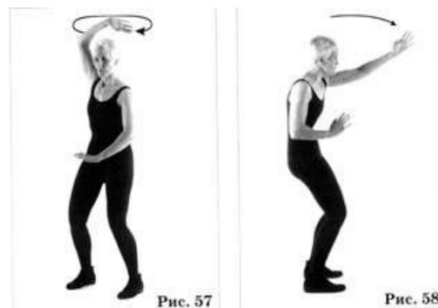
I was also doing pantomime and working on acrobatic techniques, but not introducing myself to my colleagues as a physical theatre actor. I believed, in the words of Masoud Najafi, that “practicing all those highly physical acting trainings could be visibly reduced to a very simple gaze of an actor on the stage,” such as the gaze of one of the most skillful actors of all time, Ryszard Cieślak, in the performance of *Constant Prince* in 1969.

² Carlos Castaneda, *Magical Passes: The Practical Wisdom of the Shamans of Ancient Mexico* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

The aim of *Magical Passes* is to break the barriers of normal perception through performing specific groups of movements. Each of the groups has a special name and is divided into several distinctive movements, also with specific names, as well as a detailed explanation of the way they are to be performed, the internal organs involved, and the reason behind performing them. Below is the explanation of the 25th movement from the second group, “Stirring Up Energy for Intent,” which is related to the movements that involve the upper body of the practitioner.

25. Stirring Energy Above the Head and Cracking It

The left arm moves in a relaxed fashion, making two and a half circles above and around the head (fig. 57). Those circles are then cracked with the outer edge of the forearm and the hand, which comes down forcefully, but very slowly (fig. 58). The impact is absorbed by the stomach muscles, which are tensed at that moment. The muscles of the arm are kept tight, in order to avoid injuries to the tendons which could occur if the muscles of the arm were loose, or if the arm were whipped. Air is exhaled lightly as the arm strikes downward. The same movement is repeated with the right arm.



The energy stirred and cracked in this fashion is allowed to seep downward over the entire body. When practitioners are overtired, and can't afford to go to sleep, executing this magical pass dispels sleepiness and brings forth a sensation of temporary alertness.

Figure 2: “Stirring Energy Above the Head and Cracking It”³

³ Castaneda, *Magical Passes*, 58.

The complexity of the Magical Passes and their special titles made them very mysterious to me. Moreover, as I had already heard that Jersey Grotowski was inspired by Castaneda's philosophy (not the movements), just considering working with it became even more daunting to me. Therefore, I kept the paper copy in a corner of my library, waiting for the day I gathered enough courage to open it. As years passed by, I gained more experience and knowledge about art and life, until in 2018, at age 33, I felt I had enough patience and energy to pick it up and turn the page over. The first quotation that stuck with me was: "Shamans are not spiritual at all. They are very practical beings."⁴

Basically, sorcerers (a similar word for shamans) have special codes of conduct and philosophy that underlie their physical practices and give those practices more depth and meaning. Therefore, from very early on I found myself as interested in sorcerers' philosophy as their physical movements. While exploring Castaneda's *The Power of Silence*, I read: "There is no witchcraft, no evil, no devil. There is only perception."⁵ I then began to dream of a project and started to live within that dream. To me, dreams have so much in common with moving images, and their abstractions resemble dance. It is not coincidental that many filmmakers, like David Lynch, became interested in dreams and their relation to filmmaking. My dream was to create a piece that crosses the boundaries of dance, theatre, cinema, and poetry. I wanted to create a standalone piece for the stage, with a different version for film. Both should have pedagogical value, so others can benefit from them.

⁴ Castaneda, *Magical Passes*, 4.

⁵ Carlos Castaneda, *The Power of Silence* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

Therefore, I began to write down my ideas and to have many virtual discussions with my friend Omid Soltani in Berlin. Omid is an expert in English literature as well as a precise and skillful book editor. I used to send him excerpts of my writings and he gave me his interpretations. He also raised questions which forced me to explain my intent in greater detail. At the time, I noticed that our conversations helped me to better understand my own thoughts, my approach, and what I wished to do. I also realized that in some cases what I had written had a completely different meaning than what I wanted to convey to the reader.

Besides wanting a poetic and critical tone, the human body was central to my work-in-progress. I was determined to not follow so-called community standards and censor myself. But I was living in Iran, a country governed by religious rulers and their closed-minded advocates who couldn't tolerate the kind of art I intended to create. Therefore, I decided to run my project on another piece of land in this tiny world. Then, the world went into turmoil: pandemic, lockdown, many sociopolitical issues, and personal artistic and professional tragedies pushed me in a way to act pragmatically. I went to Vienna to dance, and to Turkey to sit down and put my thoughts on paper, inspired by Carlos Castaneda. Ultimately, I wrote more than fifteen different proposals for the same project in a three-year period. One of them, the *MAX Project*, brought me to York University.

MAX was meant to be an experimental poetic dance film based on the concept of self-confrontation and self-alienation under the influence of Carlos Castaneda's work. I wished to "break down the parameters of ordinary perception"⁶ of my protagonist by taking him on an imaginary journey after a conflict in his relationship forces him to confront his darker side. Based

⁶ Castaneda, *Magical Passes*, 3.

on this concept, I wrote a complete feature-length script. It seemed to be a good project, but it was not feasible. In his amazing *Choreographer's Handbook*, Jonathan Burrows, a contemporary British choreographer, writes:

If you apply for funding, you will have to write a very good description of what you're going to do. This is not the same thing as making a very good piece, though these two things get confused by some people. Before you write this description you most likely don't know what you're going to do, only that you need to do it. Once you've written this description, however, you're in a different position. Now you still don't know what you're going to do, but you have a piece of paper saying that you do. The question is: how do you stop yourself from being tempted into believing what you wrote? Sometimes just writing a description of a piece might be enough, you may not be able to improve upon it. Sometimes, however, your description might help you think about what you do want to make. It's all just work.⁷

In Tereza Barta's Short Narrative course, we were required to create a simple 5-minute short film with a beginning, middle, and end. While dreaming, I remembered a short story by Raymond Carver titled *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*⁸ I asked myself: "Why had that stuck out in my mind?" So I read the story again and noticed that Carver's story, like mine, is a sort of

⁷ Jonathan Burrows, *A Choreographer's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 2010), 52.

⁸ Raymond Carver, *Will You Please be Quiet, Please?* Penguin Vintage Classics, 2010 [1976].

love story, with a protagonist who experiences mental struggle because of a conflict in a relationship. Although Carver's story does not have the element of dance, I recognized the powerful involvement of the human body. I also found it to be a more feasible basis for my project than the screenplay I had written myself. However, I did not know exactly what I wanted to do with it.

"It's all just work," said Burrows. Why did I have to stick to one idea while being directed elsewhere? How about heading down an unknown path? The mind wants safety and stability. It wants a clear direction. However, if I knew exactly what I wanted to do, what would be left to experiment with? I wrote a quick draft that, at first, was more like a clumsy adaptation of Carver's story but turned into a solid script with motivation and consequences. Then I remembered Jim Rohn, who famously said: "When you don't know what to do, do the wrong thing."⁹ I decided to trust my instincts and shoot the movie, rather than rewrite the script over and over again. I needed to act instead of being contemplative.

Isn't it true that a movie is a visualized script? If so, then creating a movie and writing a script are the same thing. Some artists write with a pen, some write with a camera, and some – like me – write with a combination of both.

I asked myself: What does experimental art mean? Reading books by others would not provide with a proper answer, so instead I wrote my own definition:

⁹ Jim Rohn, "How to Take Charge of Your Life," seminar, 1981, YouTube, posted December 12, 2019, by Tips 2 Fix, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPtIYMipSWg>.

Experimental art is the act of placing oneself in an unknown situation, where the individual feels like taking an action on something instinctively rather than rationally, and then attempts to change the malleable raw result rationally according to what that unknown situation has revealed to them, and then repeats the same process until an approximately fixed result is achieved. This can lead to the creation of an experimental art piece.

Therefore, I decided to work through trial and error, chance, and more importantly, listen to my subconscious mind as much as my rational mind.

Part 2 Challenges - Make Mistakes



Figure 3: Moving gear. Photo Credit: Armaan Thaman.

First day: It was late November and the weather was very cold; so cold that the cameraman left the set during the shooting. I was wearing a thin button-down shirt, and since I was also acting in my movie and this was the costume for my character, I could not wear anything on top of it. My hands turned blue. In order not to stop the shooting, I asked Mathieu, who was the sound recordist at the time, to take the camera and shoot. He was confident and positive. Then he quickly taught the boom man how to also record the sound. We began shooting again. It was from this moment that Mathieu became the cinematographer of the movie, and we worked together until the end. I guess the freezing weather was a blessing in disguise for us to bond with each other. In any case, I must check the weather before shooting, especially in Canada.

Second day: Our second shooting day featured an intense external fight scene for which we had practiced several times. At that time, I had still not decided whether I wanted to shoot the entire movie or just create a short scene to present as an assignment for the Short Narrative course. As a result, I decided to shoot a scene halfway through and see how it unfolded. I informed the actor in that sequence that we are just shooting for one day, and I would not shoot the rest of the sequence.

I screened the rushes in the editing room and was surprised by what I saw. The sequence was intriguing, and the energy was flowing smoothly. This convinced me to shoot the entire script. "It's worth the effort," I thought to myself. So, I contacted the actor to ask if we could schedule another shooting day. "I'm afraid not," he frankly replied. "You told me that we are going to have one day of shooting. My schedule is full now. Moreover, I do not look like the character in your film anymore, as I have shaved my beard and hair."

Hanging up the phone, I had no idea what to do next. I thought for several days. I was mad, but not at him. I could not put the blame on him since he was right. I had a deal for one day, not two days. He unknowingly taught me a valuable lesson: to consider all possibilities when I would like to collaborate with someone and bring them up at the table right away. Our movie, even if it had a big budget, was not the only worthwhile project in this world. We must respect each participant's life and their plans by providing them with a clear and exact shooting plan. In addition, most of the time, if something goes wrong during the creation process, it is the director's fault.

I told myself, "You have three options": quitting and moving on to another project was the first and simplest solution. I had two problems with this option, however. First, it did not make sense to me at all. Second, I am not a person who chooses the easiest approach when faced

with hardships. The second option was to re-cast for the role. This also did not make sense. Why would I go through the same process again, take the same shot with another actor, and make the whole crew tired when the first take was quite good? So, I skipped the second option as well.

The third option was to make some changes and modifications to the script. I said to myself, “Hey Ali, this script was written by you. You do not need anyone else’s permission to modify it. So, you are free to make any kind of change that you wish to the script. It is all about dreaming. Let us just follow your dream and see where it goes.” A later chapter of this report elaborates on how the story changed at this time. The significant point here is that after experiencing these initial shooting days and confronting my deficiencies I wrote a clear statement which became my mantra for *Mutual Pain*: “I cannot prevent myself from making mistakes. I will make mistakes while creating this film. In fact, I should have the right to commit mistakes. However, instead of blaming myself for committing them, I will utilize them as guidance.”

Choosing the third option was an excellent decision since it allowed me not to have to be perfect all the time. Anti-perfectionism is not a new idea. In many handmade Persian rugs and carpets with a long history dating back to the Neolithic period around 5000 BCE, you will discover a deliberate mistake. The makers believed only God makes things perfectly, and therefore to weave a perfect rug or carpet would be an offense to God.

With this decision, I turned the piece into my thesis film, since it had now gone way beyond the scope of a course assignment. Then I picked a more unconventional approach to making the movie. Instead of writing a solid script, storyboarding it, going through pre-production, casting, etc., I decided that writing, pre-production, and production would happen altogether, followed by post-production.

Part 3 Writing Process, the Script, and Concept



Figure 4: Script. Photo Credit: Alireza Keymanesh.

The *Mutual Pain* script amalgamates Raymond Carver (writer and poet), Ahmad Shamlou (writer and poet), Rumi (thirteenth-century Persian poet), and me. My whole writing journey was deeply interconnected with shooting, editing, and the many other processes of filmmaking. I will talk about these processes as needed.

For now, the first draft of the script was a twelve-page assignment for the Short Narrative course. Since I wanted to take a dance and physical approach to the story, I did not want to show

the argument between John and Marian in the kitchen at all. Instead, the audience would hear their loud quarrel for a brief time in the dark, followed by a slamming door sound, and immediately the camera would follow the protagonist's legs for several minutes. Then, the rest of the sequences would happen very raw, including the Bar sequence (taken out in editing), the Dance Room sequence (without the monologue of the musician and many other details), and the Gambling sequence (without the extra characters), before the protagonist returned home and went to bed beside his wife.

Feedback from Prof. Tereza Barta and some of my classmates focused on why the protagonist acts mad. "Your character is like a person who is upset and is saying I am upset. I am upset. I am upset. Okay, we got it. Tell us why he is upset?" Prof. Barta described my character in a funny and tangible way.

One of my challenges with materializing the script was that I was dealing with a character who not only did not have much scripted dialogue but also little body movement instructions. My question was, how can I create a character who is active in his passivity? Therefore, to keep the rhythm of the film, I constantly had to come up with ways to make him move, like a car quickly moving towards him while he stands immobile in the middle of a road, or fireworks that wake him to continue walking. My protagonist was in a contradictory state. On one hand, he was immobile; on the other hand, he was also on "the bridge between psyche and soma":

When an organism is subjected to threat, bodily changes occur which prepare the organism for fighting or fleeing from the danger. These changes are effected by way of the autonomic nervous system. Called "autonomic" because it was believed

not to be subject to direct conscious control, this system is the medium by which emotional changes occur in the body. It has been called “the bridge between psyche and soma.” [...] The autonomic system consists of two divisions which work in opposition to or balance with each other. The parasympathetic division stimulates digestive, vegetative, and other “upbuilding” functions of the organism. The affects connected with these activities are of the comfortable, pleasurable, relaxing sort. The other division, the sympathetic, is the medium for accelerating heartbeat, raising blood pressure, releasing adrenaline into the blood, and the other phases of mobilizing the energies of the organism for fighting or fleeing from danger. The affects connected with the “general excitement” of sympathetic stimulation are typically some form of anger, anxiety, or fear.¹

Under threat, the protagonist shows an involuntary fight reaction by slapping his wife's chest and rushing out of his house in order to flee from danger. What was the danger? The danger was nested in the kitchen sequence and the argument between the protagonist and his wife, which had been the cause of all the self-conflict of the protagonist. I had taken it out at first because there was too much dialogue in the sequence, and also because I wanted to focus more on the character's physical actions. As a result, I gravitated toward narrative cinema, and I thought telling the cause of the story directly is better than hiding it and just showing the physical reactions.

¹ Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977 [1950]), 61.

So, I wrote the first sequence (the kitchen), which as everyone expected became a pivotal scene in the movie. After that, I sent the script to Payam Saeedi, my script consultant. He told me that having the protagonist (John) outside the house for the whole night without any connection to his wife might make the movie a bit boring. So, we came up with the idea of John receiving a chain of voice messages from Marian before walking into the Dance Room. It seemed to be reasonable, since, based on our story, Marian did not want John to abandon her. We decided that John would take his phone from his pocket, see the notices of her messages, but instead of listening to them, turn the phone off. In this sense, we could use the phone again later as a reveal. This could be an effective way to keep the audience wondering about the content of her messages. Before the fight scene would be the most appropriate moment for the protagonist to take out his phone for the second time. The cell phone itself thus became a great instrument, and the intention of the thief to steal it and beat John up. John must firmly resist letting go of the phone as he desperately wants to listen to his wife's voice messages.

As I already mentioned in chapter two, when the actor in the Thief sequence could not join us for the rest of the shooting, I decided to add another character to the script, a Mud Beggar.

According to Stanislavski's acting method, an actor should provoke his subconscious through his consciousness, and let his subconscious guide his conscious mind. "Subconscious by means of conscious, conscious by means of subconscious"²

² Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (New York: Routledge, 1989 [1936]).

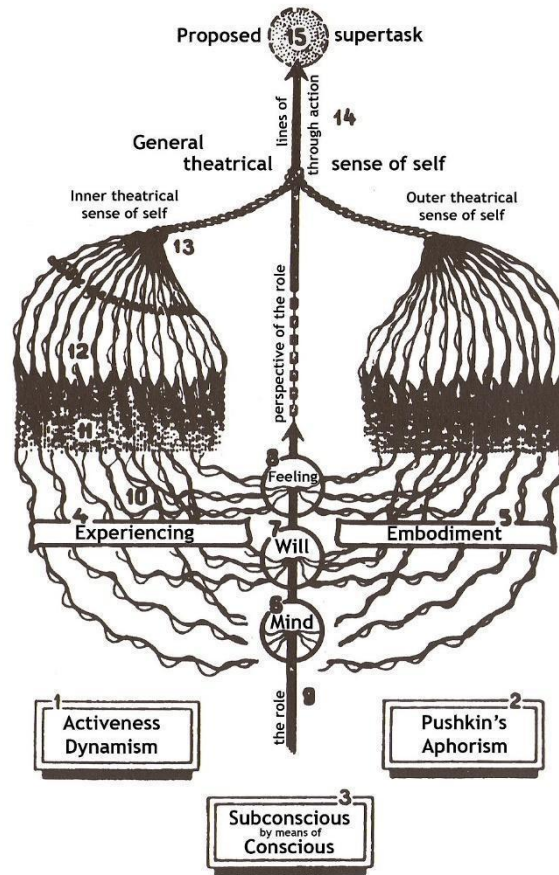


Figure 5: Diagram of Stanislavski's system, based on his "Plan of Experiencing" (1935), showing the inner (left) and outer (right) aspects of a role uniting in the pursuit of a character's overall "supertask" (top) in the drama.³

Like many other artists, through years of disciplined acting practices I have learned how to provoke my subconscious consciously, and then let it guide my conscious actions. Most of the time, I receive my inspirations from dreams. Moreover, to learn more about that realm I was also

³ Wikipedia, "Stanislavski's System," last modified, August 27, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanislavski%27s_system.

reading Castaneda's *The Art of Dreaming*.⁴ The book is about how to dream, how to manipulate your dreams, and related topics. As a result, I was trying to be more aware of my dreams and apply what they suggested to me in my art.

One night, I saw a Mud Beggar coming over John's body, taking his shoes off. This was how the Beggar sequence was added to the script. At first, I did not know the logic behind the presence of this strange character in the film. However, I trusted my intuition and told myself that I would find the reason down the road. Later, the actor playing the Mud Beggar told me the character was like the Hobo in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. I was shocked to hear that. I had seen *Mulholland Drive*⁵ around ten years ago and had forgotten the character. However, as I liked David Lynch and his approach to filmmaking, I was happy to have this link, even if it was unintentional.

My theatre background guided my writing a lot. In theatre, many directors choose an existing script that has already been performed, in many cases, hundreds of times, and then carve their own version out of it. Some directors take a classical approach. They maintain a strict adherence to the script, its words and dialogue. In their interpretation of the text, they will say, for example, that when character A says, "Hello, how are you?" he means, "He hates character B." And to support this interpretation of the text, these directors will give the actors a chain of causes that come from the text. Or, they will relate it to the social status or personal conditions that the author of the play was experiencing when he wrote it. As a result of this approach, they stage the play in a manner as close as possible to what the author intended to convey. In my

⁴ Carlos Castaneda, *The Art of Dreaming* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1993).

⁵ *Mulholland Drive*, directed by David Lynch (Universal Pictures, 2001).

opinion, in most cases such presentations are merely another interpretation of the same text, which has nothing to do with what the author wished to say.

Other directors, however, will try to recreate the play from scratch by changing the scenes and deconstructing the script. They do not pay much attention to what the author intended. What is more significant to them is what they as contemporary directors want to convey to the audience. As a result, their own identity is more present in the play rather than the assumed identity of the author that has been developed through time by different critiques and interpreters. In other words, the lack of faithfulness of these directors to the script causes the play to become a live, malleable material capable of taking on any shape. Even as such performances are happening on stage, these directors might continuously add or remove elements from the text.

This approach is much easier to take in theatre than in cinema. If your suggested change or idea does not work in a live show, at worst you would only lose one performance. In cinema, the whole movie might be destroyed if you choose the wrong idea. Furthermore, I think treating the text in this way is much easier when it is not written by you. Anyhow, as I wanted to take this approach for directing my movie, I needed to find ways to deconstruct my script without destroying the whole film. Impossible is not impossible.

Professor Howie Wiseman recommended *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain*, which opened many doorways to me as a novice writer.

According to Donald Barthelme, “The writer is one who, embarking upon a task, does not know what to do.” Gerald Stern put it this way: “If you start out to write a poem about two dogs fucking, and you write a poem about two dogs

fucking—then you wrote a poem about two dogs fucking.” And we can add to this my mangling of whatever it was that Einstein actually said, which I rendered earlier as: “No worthy problem is ever solved in the plane of its original Conception.”⁶

If I was going to see my movie in the future, it had to be something different from my initial script. To write a screenplay that was closer to me rather than a plain adaptation of Carver's story (“Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”) I had to deconstruct it in my own way of writing. To do that I had to know what the core concepts of my movie are.

1. Self-confrontation, Self-alienation, Shift in Perception, Dream:

The above considerations formed the core concepts of my initial thesis proposal – the *MAX* project – and I wished to keep them in the updated version as well. Using them would allow me to go into the realm of poetry, mystery, and dreams. Ultimately, I could disconnect my protagonist from reality and keep in touch with Castaneda's philosophy, which is mostly about shifting perception. “A high fever could move the assemblage point [perception]. Hunger or fear or love or hate could do it, mysticism too and also unbending intent which is the preferred method of sorcerers.”⁷ Accordingly, my protagonist would undergo an emotional shock that would skew his perception. In that state everything seemed possible to me as a writer. It was

⁶ George Saunders, *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain* (New York: Random House, 2021), 107.

⁷ Castaneda, *The Power of Silence*, 220.

close to the state of “to be or not to be” in which Shakespeare’s Hamlet undergoes a profound internal conflict.

The protagonist used to be an alcoholic and a gambler. Despite not appearing explicitly in the script, this character history is present in subtext, between the lines, and influenced the movie conceptually. My intention was to use this background as a keystone to confront my protagonist with his dark side – through his nightmares and dreams. Although this was achieved mainly in post-production, it was also related in the script. “You were that old Jackson, always drunk,” the protagonist hears his wife say in his dream during the Gambling Room sequence. Then later I used this approach for other dark sides of the protagonist in the Dance Room sequence. John says, “Shall we have a go at it?” to the girl whose face is painted. In this way, I show that the seed of betrayal and vengeance exists in the protagonist's character, just as they exist in Marian, his wife. And there is no way for him to get away from it but to face it.



Figure 6: Confrontation. Photo Credit: Zahra Saleki.

Additionally, to emphasize the concept of self-confrontation aesthetically I used costumes in the same colour and shape as the protagonist's on some of the main characters. The girl whose face was painted in the dance room and the Mud Beggar who took John's shoes both wear a costume very similar to John's.

I tried to implement the idea of self-alienation in the Beggar sequence. It is unclear whether the beggar is talking to him at all, or whether the dialogue is just in the protagonist's mind, which is disoriented and not fully functioning. Through these devices, I alienate John from himself and depict his insanity through his physical actions all the way home.



Figure 7: Insanity. Photo Credit: Mathieu Gauvreau

My supervisor, Ingrid Veninger, asked me questions about Marian's character and her relationship with John very early in the process. When I replied that the movie is not about Marian, Ingrid asked if she was real at all. "I do not know," I answered back. "Maybe this whole story is happening in John's head, and it is just a dream," I continued. That early conversation

motivated me to amplify the idea of the dream during the editing and colour grading. In the very first shot of the movie, after the opening credits, I placed the protagonist's chest lying on the bed beneath some phytograms – a technique that uses the internal chemistry of plants for the creation of images on photographic emulsion. At the end of the movie the protagonist lies on his bed and once Marian touches his belly the same phytogram images appear. In this way I emphasized the idea of dreams and reality.

2. Birth, Death, Rotten life:

The concepts of birth, death, and rotten life gradually permeated the movie and were crucial to the script. During the writing process, I became very obsessed with figuring out what drives my protagonist so mad that he reaches the edge of insanity. His wife sleeping with another person couldn't be enough. In fact, the initial story seemed somehow sentimental to me. Martin Scorsese explained how in *Goodfellas*, and in *Mean Streets* for the character of Johnny played by Robert De Nino, he pushed everything a bit further. Knowing this gave me instant courage.⁸ It was as if I wanted to push things further, but I was afraid of doing so. I had to overcome sentimentalism and drive the protagonist even more insane so that he reaches the brink of death. It was then that I remembered their child. In Carver's story the two children seem superfluous. They could easily be removed from the story and nothing would change. In my script, the child is removed as a physical character, however, its presence in the minds of John and Marian is

⁸ Martin Scorsese, "On Federico Fellini," interview by Charlie Rose, May 11, 1993, <https://charlieroose.com/videos/1396>. Also, *Mean Streets*, directed by Martin Scorsese (Taplin-Perry-Scorsese Productions, 1973); *Goodfellas*. Martin Scorsese, dir. Warner Brothers, 1990.

crucial for propelling the story forward. At the end of the kitchen sequence in the first draft, John asks Marian, “Did he come in you?” She replies, “No, no. I swear. Are you crazy?” However, two days before shooting this scene I changed it. Now, Marian does not answer, instead, John looks at their child's picture hanging on the cabinet and then turns toward Marian and says, “God damn you.” Is John the father or not? Who is the father of the child? No one knows. This change pushes the main motivation for the protagonist beyond a simple betrayal to encompass much broader concepts, such as identity, parentage, and birth.

The next thing that I emphasized in the movie was only indirectly related to John. With all the wars and atrocities happening around the world, every day, our current world feels rotten to me, and I wanted to reflect this in the film. And since my next two film projects will address social issues and broader concepts under the cover of a love story, *Mutual Pain* provided a great chance to test the concept. On the day Wayne Shorter died several weeks before shooting the Dance Room sequence. A dear friend of mine sent me Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter's text, “An Open Letter To The Next Generation Of Artists.”⁹ The letter is about all the atrocities that are happening around the world and how we can shape a more peaceful society. The letter struck a chord in me as the missing element that I needed for the film. So, I added a musician to the script, wrote a text inspired by Hancock and Shorter's text, and asked the actor to recite the letter as the testament of a musician he admired. The letter reads in part: “Although all these dark storms are happening around us every day, we as artists and dreamers of this world are asking

⁹ Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, “An Open Letter To The Next Generation Of Artists,” Herbie Hancock, December 10, 2016, <https://www.herbiehancock.com/2016/12/10/an-open-letter-to-the-next-generation-of-artists/>.

you not to be overwhelmed, and not to close your eyes to these dark sides. And instead to use your art as a powerful tool to create twice as much peace and light as the darkness you are facing.” The whole statement comes across sarcastically in the film, since almost everybody in the dance room is high, drunk, or asleep and no one is listening. Moreover, the musician doesn't seem to believe in the words he is reciting. In the previous scene he appears anxious and in contrast with what he is going to recite. I wished to illustrate the rotten state of our world in a direct and sarcastic way by depicting the ironic situation of a world in which people say one thing and act differently. Although John is high and drunk in this scene, it is the speech of the musician that causes him to puke and not the weed or the vodka.

. . . this stupid world where
Gadgets are gods and we go on talking,
Many about much, but remain alone,
Alive but alone, belonging—where?—
Unattached as tumbleweed.¹⁰

¹⁰ W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety* (New York, 1947), 42.



Figure 8: Loneliness. Photo Credit: Zahra Saleki

How could I depict this concept in the language of images and metaphor? At that time, I was attending an elective course called *Solo Performance*, directed by the amazing professor

Erika Batdorf in the Theatre department. One of the participants in that course was working on a project called *Death and Dining*. I remember in her performance people having dinner at a funeral. The whole process of eating and its indirect relationship with death seemed to me a beautiful metaphor. Meanwhile, my mind was busy thinking about Marian's physical actions in the kitchen sequence; I did not know what I wanted her to be doing while talking to John. After receiving an image of a cart full of fruit from a friend of mine, I immediately imagined Marian busy piling up fruit. However, given the concept of my movie, it would be impossible for the fruit to be fresh. It had to be rotten. Why is she piling up rotten fruit? Because Marian is a teacher, I thought she might be planning a workshop called “Death and Rotten Life” for the following day and piling up rotten fruit in the kitchen for it.



Figure 9: Rotten life. Photo Credit: Defne Yildirim

I also decided to emphasize death more than just in the kitchen scene and considered ambiguously killing off John as the protagonist. At the end of the fight sequence when John falls

on the ground, he closes his eyes and has a vision of Marian's face. In the following scene we see his lifeless body dragged on the ground for a long distance. As the writer, it is still unclear to me whether his encounter with the Mud Beggar is a death encounter, and if he dies or survives. Influenced by artists such as Samuel Beckett, Abbas Kiarostami, and Lars Von Trier, I accepted this ambiguity as a crucial part of art.

Another way of carrying the ideas of birth, death, and rotten life into the film was to introduce them in the opening credits. Halfway through the shoot, I designed the opening credit shot and added each element gradually – a red velvet theatre curtain hangs in the background, a TV with green fabric attached to its screen and extending beyond the glass sits on a sheepskin spread out on the right side of a wooden table. around 10 inches away from the TV, in the upper left corner, two half-peeled bananas tied to each other hang from the ceiling by an invisible thread. Below the bananas on the table is a bronze candlestick sculpture of a bride and a groom, with a half-burned candle inside.



Figure 10: Credit shot. Photo Credit: Alireza Keymanesh

This montage was supposed to be captured in a static time lapse for 14 days until the bananas were rotten. To play with the idea of what is real and what is not real, I wanted the green screen to extend beyond the TV screen. Our DOP, Mathieu, suggested putting the curtain in the background to emphasize theatricality. Moreover, we chose the bride and groom candlestick to emphasize the idea of marriage and love. I added the half-burned candle as a symbol of the conflict in John and Marian's relationship. As a final touch, while editing the footage on the green screen, I added archival footage of the child's birth to link life, death, love, and pain. In my opinion, this was the best shot to explain the whole concept of the movie in metaphor.

3. Anxiety, Social Violence

"From 1945 and the birth of the atom bomb, anxiety shifted from a covert to an overt problem."

11

¹¹ May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, 9.



Figure 11: Dance room. Photo Credit: Zahra Saleki.

This movie is about shifting perception through anxiety, trauma, and dramatic shock. Although social violence is vividly present on the surface of the movie – in the visible actions – the inner conflict of the protagonist provides a deeper layer of meaning. This conflict refers more to the state of anxiety, which can be seen as a potential for propelling energy toward violence. Rollo May argues:

Anxiety involves inner conflict; this is another and important consequence of self-awareness. Anxiety “is afraid,” says Kierkegaard, “yet it maintains a sly intercourse with its object, cannot look away from it, indeed will not.”

(Our author [Kierkegaard] adds, for reasons the reader can well understand, “If to one or another this may appear a difficult saying, I can do nothing about it.” And again, anxiety is a desire for what one dreads, a sympathetic antipathy. Anxiety is an alien power which lays hold of an individual, and yet one cannot tear oneself away, nor has a will to do so; for one fears, but what one fears one desires. Anxiety then makes the individual impotent.¹²

Under the influence of the emotional shock of his wife's infidelity as well as various violent encounters, the protagonist is in a deep state of anxiety. His subconscious desire for violence is sparked and now he is in self-conflict of whether to actualize it. To show this mental struggle and dread, I repeatedly depicted John slapping his wife's chest in his dreams and staring at a knife in the gambling room. I pushed the depiction of violence one step further and turned the slap into a stabbing of Marian's chest. The latter was one of the most challenging and controversial shots for me. I was unsure whether to include it in the film. In the script, the original sequence has John run toward the forest after meeting the beggar, and then return home:

14. INT. JOHN'S HOUSE – DAY

INSERT

He takes his keys out of his pocket and puts one of the keys in the door and opens it.

John closes the door with caution, and tries not to make

¹² May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*. May references S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944), 40.

noises. Marian's coat is thrown over the couch, and in the pale light he can make out a large ashtray full of her cork cigarettes' ends. He opens the door of one of the bed rooms; his wife is lying on their twin-sized bed at the far edge in the fetal position with her back to the camera.

A close up of John while his face has some blood stains.

15. INT. JOHN'S HOUSE – DAY - SAME

In a low angle shot John is on the bed on his knees. He takes his hand up, strikes down briskly, brings it up.

There is a big bloody knife in his hand. He stabs it down again strongly. He struggles to take the knife up again. Apparently it is stuck to something. He pulls it up hard and some blood stains splash on his face.

MARIAN

(Just her voice)

Why did you hit me? How did we ever
get onto this?

Marian is in blood.

CLOSE UP

John leans his head to the threshold of the bedroom's door and abruptly moves his head and opens his half closed eyes sharply. His wife lies on their twin-sized bed at the far edge in the fetal position with her back to the camera.

In this version, the stabbing action takes place only in John's dream. Then he undresses and lays down beside his wife. I decided to place the stabbing shot in that last sequence of the film for two reasons: first to confront the protagonist with his biggest dread, his dark side or his demon, and second, to put John in the position of making a precise decision. Despite his internal conflict and with all the violence he experiences provoking him to create violence himself, he decides not to follow those urges.

During the editing of the movie, I found it very hard to implement the shot in that section of the movie. However, after two weeks of racking my brain, I decided that since it was in the script, it had to be there as it is. It met with two responses. Some viewers misinterpreted the movie's message and brought up ethical questions about depicting gender-based violence on screen. Although I did not and do not believe that a movie should adhere to society's ethical laws, I understand why they interpreted the scene this way. Oscar Wilde said, "There is no such thing as a moral and immoral book. Books are well written or badly written."¹³ A fiction story must follow its own world and rules. I also maintain with Barthes that "the meaning of text is not determined by the author's intentions but by the reader's interpretation."¹⁴ Moreover, Derrida demonstrates that "writing itself inherently disrupts the notion of fixed meaning and authority. There is often a gap between rules or intended meanings and how they are actually performed or

¹³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1890, 5.

¹⁴ Ronald Barthes, "The Death of Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Fontana Press 1977 [1967]).

understood.”¹⁵ Most other viewers of this version of my movie had a different interpretation closer to my intention and did not raise ethical issues. I therefore had no issue in this regard.

My second concern was that the shot was too direct, sharp, and abrupt to be placed in that specific section of the film. My supervisory committee mentioned the same thing: the potential of a violent action could work much better than the depiction of it. The script has John as the protagonist stuck in a sort of hurricane which reaches its peak in the fight scene. After his metaphorical death and his encounter with the Mud Beggar, John has resolved the climax for himself by returning home in search of peace beside his wife. Placing the explicit stabbing shot at that moment was like putting him on a backward journey. After giving it so much thought I decided to move the shot to the sequence in the park. This way, John faces his dread in a nightmare rather than a dream. The significance for me was John’s encounter with his darkest desire (committing a violent action), which is a serious possibility in the film. By not actualizing this possibility, I intended to actualize another possibility for John that mirrored Castaneda's philosophy of the Power of Silence – becoming impotent because of his anxiety. Ultimately, John’s very last invitation to silence, “Shall we please be silent? Please!” opens the possibility for forgiveness, peace, and love.

4. Love, Peace, Unity:

Tears are a mystery

Smiles a mystery

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *Limited Inc*, trans Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

Love a mystery

The tears of that night were the smile of my love¹⁶



Figure 12: Photo Credit: Yaron So.

Love and peace are the profound goals of all the layers of *Mutual Pain*. The movie is about love's pain, which every individual experiences at their very first moment of birth, when their umbilical cord is cut and they are ushered into the world with tears in their eyes. During the editing, I realized that Ahmad Shamlou's poem "Collective Love" embodies the entire concept of the film and makes it personal, since I have lived with his poems for years. Therefore, I included a portion of this poem in the movie and changed the title of the film based on a line of the poem from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* to *Mutual Pain*.

¹⁶ Ahmad Shamlou, Collective Love, <https://www.niloufartalebi.com/ahmad-shamlou-translations-recitations> , 1975.

Love in this film is an intense energy capable of making someone sacrifice themselves for their beloved. Iranian poets like Hafiz or Rumi assert that love incorporates both intense sorrow and pain. Persian Sufism emphasizes that the path of love requires that one be prepared to give everything in their life without expecting anything in return. Following this philosophy, I made the protagonist lose all material goods he gains along his journey. John loses all the money he has won in gambling, his phone, shoes, and eventually – nearly – his life. He returns home barefoot. Many spiritual masters apply the spiritual path of caressing through punishment to teach their disciples some profound wisdom.

The core of masculinity does not derive from being male,
nor friendliness from those who console.

Your old grandmother says,
"Maybe you shouldn't go to school.
You look a little pale."

Run when you hear that.
A father's stern slaps are better.

Your bodily soul wants comforting.
The severe father wants spiritual clarity.
He scolds but eventually
leads you into the open.

Pray for a tough instructor
to hear and act and stay within you.

We have been busy accumulating solace.
Make us afraid of how we were.¹⁷

Now, in return for all his losses, John only receives a pomegranate, a symbol of unity and peace, which guides him back to his house. In the first draft of the script, the pomegranate falls down the stairs and John reclaims it at the bottom. I changed the scene as it seemed a bit sentimental. The red juice pouring out of the cracked fruit represents the pain John experienced on his journey. However, I wanted John to move on from the past and live in the present. The pomegranate was just a reminder and not the goal. The true pomegranate is his wife and love, who has been waiting for him all night. John has no choice but to go forward and find unity with his love, to reach peace and silence.

¹⁷ Jalal-Uddin Rumi, “The Core of Masculinity,” in *Rumi: Poems from the Divan-E Shams*, ed. and trans., Geoffrey Squires (Miami, FL: Miami University Press, 2020).



Figure 13: Pomegranate. Photo Credit: Yuula Benivolski

Part 4 Working with Cast and Crew

We had nine shooting days spread over nine months, plus fourteen days in row for the credit shot. Following the shooting of each sequence, I proceeded with the pre-production for the next one. I would analyze our collective work and learn from mistakes. Things improved significantly during the shooting period. For example, we encountered problems with the catering, and unnecessary gossip after the first shooting day which was resolved quickly. Except Mathieu Gauvreau, the cinematographer, all other crew alternated every other day of shooting. Since everyone donated their time and my plan of shooting was quite disorganized, I could not expect people to be present on the set all the time. Finding a good sound recordist was one of the hardest challenges. My first choice was not available. So, I gave the opportunity to those who were passionate about learning the craft. As a result, we had mostly poor sound quality. I re-recorded most of the dialogue in post-production; something I had initially planned to do anyway. Most indoor locations were offered by friends and colleagues.

Erin Brannigan's *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*²⁷ guided the aesthetic of the film. We applied a mix of telescopic and microscopic approaches, going from close-up to long-shot and vice versa, which allowed us to get inside and outside of the character's mind. Another reason for so many close-ups is because they are common in dance films. The camera had to be lightweight and the visual approach not overly complicated, so we decided to shoot with a handheld camera, the Black Magic 4K. Doing so sped up production and created

²⁷ Erin Brannigan, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

momentum in the images. Since Mathieu had a strong sense for static eyes, we experimented with both approaches.

As a newcomer to Canada, I had essentially no budget, so used a “guerilla style” of shooting to reduce costs and speed up production. Therefore I wrote a sort of manifestation for myself:

- choose the cast and crew from your personal list and preference.
- work with actors you can easily relate to instead of following ACTRA seniority.
- Keep an open mind, eyes and ears when – what you are looking for is usually already present.
- Choose the right moment to communicate and speak up if you wish to collaborate with someone.
- Everyone can say “no” to you. Do not judge their response.
- Always have a Plan B.
- Make sure everyone on set has the opportunity to learn, and trust them.
- Allow others to make mistakes, like you do.
- Anything above \$5 is expensive. Ask what can be achieved without funds?

Nine of the cast were chosen from my cohort; others were friends or suggested by friends. Most of them had no or little acting experience. For extras, we posted on a listserv and social media accounts, and distributed flyers.

After an initial conversation we had two or three studio rehearsals. I take a psychophysical approach to acting which involves role analyses, including the inner motives of

the characters and their circumstances (where, when, why), but more importantly, physical action. I would send the actors some written or visual material I felt could help them get into their character. For example, I sent *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to the actor playing Marian.²⁸

Our first studio session was a Shaking (dynamic Meditation) session, a highly physical exercise that was a vital part of Osho's spiritual practices and later made its way into contemporary dance. The purpose of this guided session was to release the mind and body with shaking, shouting, laughing, and dancing, as well as to become comfortable with the space and with each other. As a result, we were prepared for the creative process. We also worked with the text, how to memorize lines, and mise-en-scène. I also provided general notes about the shooting day.

On the set I usually came up with music for the sequence and played it out loud while everyone got ready. Music is magical. It gives harmony to the whole group without having to talk. My shot-list was logically designed for two or three days, but I had to complete them in one day simply because we only had access to the locations for that long. For instance, we took 45 shots on our day in the gambling room. However, as we had already done exercises with the actors in preparation, we were mostly in sync on the set, which accelerated the shooting process. For example, we took Marian's and the musician's long monologues in just two takes.

My previous experiences with film were limited to dance films. This movie was my first narrative film with dialogue. It has always been my dream to become an artist who writes his own script, directs it, and acts in it. Not only did this come true with this film, but I also edited it.

²⁸ *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* directed by Mike Nichols (Warner Brothers, 1966).

Mutual Pain marks a turning point in my artistic life. As the lead on set, maintaining emotional continuity while guiding the whole group was an intensely informative and rewarding experience. Sometimes I felt as though I was living in a dream, especially in the dance room.

Working with crew members, and specifically a cinematographer, was a completely new experience for me. Of my previous films, one I shot myself and the other had just one day of shooting with precise framing and timing. I always try to take a collaborative approach with other artists and encourage them to be active in the creative process rather than just follow instructions. I was also in dialogue with myself throughout the shoot: how could I convey the shot I wanted to the cinematographer without the help of a storyboard? How could I be decisive while making Mathieu feel like he could share his own ideas?

We did not encounter an ethical issue on the set. However, some challenges were out of my control. When the crew had a very intense day of shooting followed by a night shoot, there was a lack of energy on the set, which called for a day of rest. However, having time-limited access to the location prevented us from doing “the right thing.” Also, without a dedicated Data Management Technician, we lost a portion of the dance room sequence. Except for the extras, I did not sign contracts or agreements with my cast and crew because I was not used to doing so. However, I will definitely do so with everyone for my next project. As an independent artist, I try to multitask so that I can do the work by myself if required. This habit caused me to give some collaborators two or three different responsibilities, which didn’t always work out. I will try to reduce my multitasking from now on as I work on improving my organizational skills on upcoming projects.

Part 5 Edit

In an interview with journalist Charlie Rose in 1993, Martin Scorsese quoted Stanley Kubrick: “The only original contribution to film is editing.”²⁹ I absolutely believe this is true. Many people believe that filmmakers should not edit their own movies, but rather leave it to someone else. In my opinion, this approach is like hiring a nanny for your child instead of spending time with them and raising them yourself. Particularly for a movie like *Mutual Pain*, with a malleable script, it is beneficial for the director to do the editing themselves.

The experience of editing this film has influenced my writing, dance choreography, the way I frame moving images, the way I view daily events alongside each other, the way I bring my philosophy to life, and my approach to art. Through editing my mind’s image became more organized and solid. Moreover, it taught me how to dance with moving images rather than just with my body.

²⁹ Scorsese, interview with Charlie Rose.

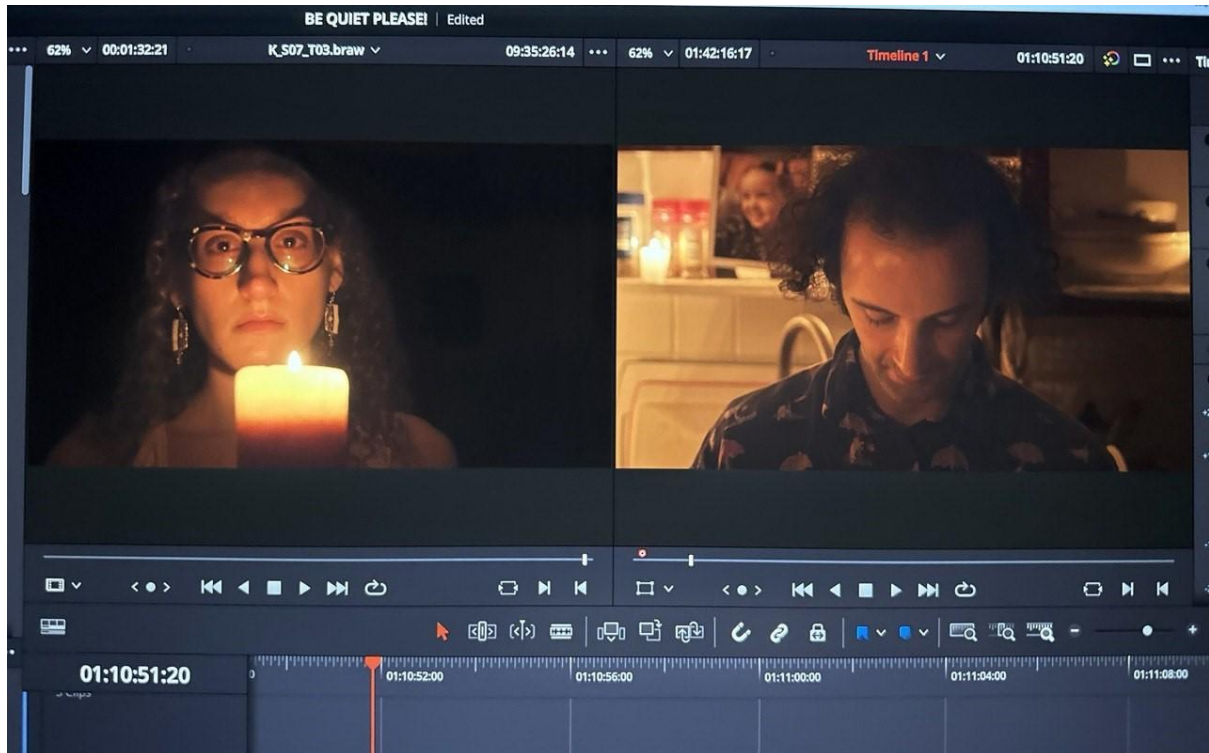


Figure 14: Kitchen Sequence. Photo Credit: Alireza Keymanesh

At the beginning of editing, I knew that following the script would result in a boring movie. It took me some months to gather my courage and face my fear of watching the rushes. Many shots weren't slated, which could complicate the process down the road. I had to learn how to organize my shots. Learning how to organize the files saved me from getting lost in the footage.

Integrating dance, cinema, and theatre together became a challenge. I knew that I did not want *Mutual Pain* to be like a Hollywood musical – just because somebody dances in front of the camera does not make a dance film. Basically, my approach to dance is physio-philosophical. For the somatic dance teachers and choreographers who had a deep impact on me – Eva Karczad, Andre Bernard, Lulu E. Sweigard, Barbara Clark, Steve Paxton, and others who were influenced by them – dance is a philosophy; the whole universe is made of dance.

Let us look at material in a manner in which we think about it on a micro level of its structure. In any material you can go into smaller and smaller units of that material: atoms, molecules, nuclei, electrons, and protons, etc. Let us go down to the molecular level. We know that molecules look like little planets. They have a definitive relationship to each other that is specific to the material that they are made up of. I am drawing a random cluster. I want you to notice that there is space between the molecules, and this is true of all matter. Even in rock there is space between molecules, and furthermore they are moving. There are two points here: nothing is solid and nothing is still. One of the reasons I label this work Physiophilosophical is because if you begin to think this way – there is nothing still, nothing solid – you will be less likely to tighten yourself up. Add this to your philosophical concepts: we are on this planet earth, which is revolving around its axis at a pretty fast speed, and in turn the whole thing is revolving around the sun. The only thing that is preventing you from flying off the earth into space is gravity. So what are you holding on to? There is nothing to hold on to. Give it up!³⁰

Since everything is dance, I refrained from placing the established conventions of dance on the screen. In my view, cinema is dance, and the choreographer of this dance is the editor.

³⁰ André Bernard, Wolfgang Steinmüller, and Ursula Stricker, *Ideokinesis, A Creative Approach to Human Movement and Body Alignment* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2006), 77.

Editing is the manipulation of time and space, just like choreography. I edited my movie with my choreographer's mind.

The whole editing process for *Mutual Pain* took eleven months. Due to exhaustion, I sometimes left the editing room for a few weeks at a time. The marvelous book by Karen Perlman, *Cutting Rhythms*, remained by my side during the entire process.³¹ In the beginning, it was painful to sit alone in the editing room for hours and hours, not having a clue how to proceed. Seeing some simple mistakes made on the set or watching bad acting made me curse myself, because I was working with my theatrical mind and expected the performances to be perfect all the time. I was not considering the fact that I could resort to editing in making a performance work. Later, I also realized that no film can be ruined by a few poor shots. I was starting to develop symptoms of being bipolar. When a section was working well, I was pleased and hopeful; when it didn't, I became depressed and anxious. To manage, I spread my blanket beside my editing table and meditated or I went for a walk. I also came up with some guiding principles. Burrows writes:

A principle is not a rule, it's just a way to take care of some of the decisions, leaving you free to do what you do best, which is to be intuitive. It's hard sometimes to be intuitive when you're overwhelmed by choice. At the same time the idea that you can make what you want is a fantasy. You are you, and you can only make what you can make. 'You're going to make the piece you're

³¹ Karen Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit* (Amsterdam: Elsevier/Focal Press, 2009).

going to make, whichever way you choose to try and make it.’ This was said to me by the choreographer Rosemary Butcher in 1999. The trick is to find out what you can make.

It’s just work.

Do whatever you need to do.³²

Then, on the next page he says: “Work for only one hour at a time and don’t judge it for at least a week.”³³ Instead of setting a strict postproduction schedule, I switched to working with time. I set my timer for forty minutes or one hour. As soon as the alarm sounded, I stopped working, took a twenty-minute rest, and repeated the cycle for four to six hours. Aside from tired eyes, this schedule helped me in editing as well as in writing this support paper.

The fight sequence had already been edited for Tereza Barta’s class. When the kitchen sequence turned out to be satisfying, this work rhythm became a model for my editing style throughout the entire process. Feedback from a ten-minute Work-in-Progress Grad symposium confirmed the success of my working rhythm.

After initially following the script from beginning to end, I wanted to deconstruct the linear approach. After five months, I had a 57-minute long cut. Although sequences worked on their own, the whole cut seemed boring. My friend and editor Shaheen confirmed that the overall

³² Burrows, *A Choreographer’s Handbook*, 2.

³³ Burrows, *A Choreographer’s Handbook*, 3.

concept and mood were clear, but the structure required a fundamental change. I had shot an experimental film and it needed to be edited in a nonlinear and unconventional way. The initial structure looked like this:

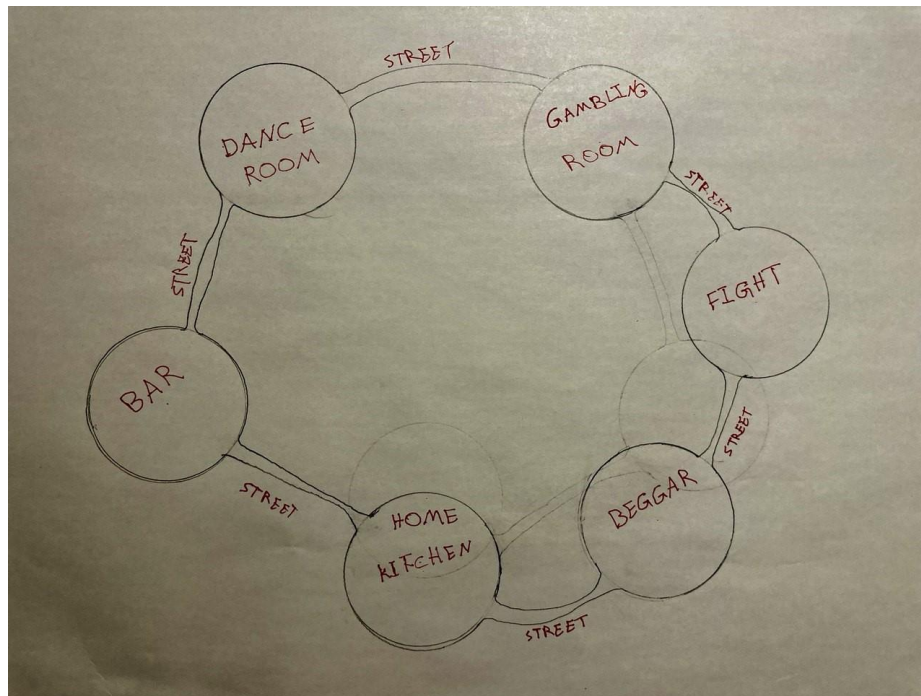


Figure 15: Initial Editing Structure. Photo Credit: Alireza Keymanesh.

I abandoned the first assembly and returned to working on paper. I asked myself what the philosophy and concepts underpinning each sequence were, and how I could melt some of the sequences together. Instead of just observing John from the outside, I needed to take the audience inside his head. I just did not know how to do so. Rewatching *21 Grams* by Alejandro González Iñárritu inspired me to come up with a new structure.³⁴

³⁴ *21 Grams*, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu (Focus Features, 2003).



Figure 16: Revised Structure. Photo Credit: Alireza Keymanesh.

In this visual depiction I followed Castaneda's philosophy of "here and here"³⁵ and erased the separation between here and there. Because the protagonist's assemblage point (perception) was already dislodged through anxiety (chapter 3), the editing could jump through time, from place to place. However, finding those cut points proved to be difficult. In the new structure the narrative was concept-driven rather than following an obvious storyline.

³⁵ Castaneda, *The Power of Silence*, 216.

I edited five different versions of the movie to see which worked best for me. In the first four versions I was bored by the twelfth minute. But in the fifth version something changed for me. Feedback from my supervisory team confirmed some positive developments, but they were still distracted by paying more attention to the side stories than to the main story. In the eighth month of editing, I had a 37-minute version of the film that I believed was the best version I could come up with. But after receiving feedback I realized that it was still too long, which was mostly a matter of timing rather than structure. Finally, I locked a 29-minute version in August.

Part 6 Future

I am always thinking about my next projects and like to discover myself over and over in each one. I will continue to be interested in the connection between the human body, society, and the moving image, and I wish to shape a space where dancers, writers, and filmmakers can work, learn, share, and create together. At this moment in my life I am writing a lot, in order to find my own style. I would like to continue on the same path in my artistic career, gain more experience, and improve with each project. My goal is to combine writing, filmmaking, acting, and choreography into one.

My three projects at York all dealt with serious topics, with intense emotional content. To balance, I want to get back on the stage and create a multidisciplinary comedy show. The whole world needs more laughter! It is my intention to rediscover my inner joker, who has been lost due to hardships and the sad political situation of the whole world, and I believe that the stage with a live audience is the most appropriate form for that.

Studying at York University has been very fruitful and productive for me. Besides the *MAX* project's script, I have also worked on another feature-length film called *Soil and Blood*. It relates to Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 (PS752/AUI752), which was shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). I had written the first draft of its synopsis in 2021 and continued working on it in the grad screenwriting course and on a development plan in the independent production course. Making *Mutual Pain* turned out to be helpful for understanding why and how I want to work. My intention with *Soil and Blood* is to tie social and global issues into a love story. What I need to do now is to master the art of patience.

I would like to close with “The Crunch” by Charles Bukowski, since I find it relates to
Mutual Pain:

“The Crunch”

too much

too little

too fat

too thin

or nobody.

laughter or

Tears

haters

Lovers

strangers with faces like

the backs of

thumb tacks

armies running through

streets of blood

waving winebottles
bayoneting and fucking
virgins.

or an old guy in a cheap room
with a photograph of M. Monroe.

there is a loneliness in this world so great
that you can see it in the slow movement of
the hands of a clock.

people so tired
mutilated
either by love or no love.

people just are not good to each other
one on one.

the rich are not good to the rich
the poor are not good to the poor.
we are afraid.

our educational system tells us
that we can all be

big-ass winners.

it hasn't told us
about the gutters
or the suicides.

or the terror of one person
aching in one place
alone

untouched
unspoken to
watering a plant.

people are not good to each other.
people are not good to each other.
people are not good to each other.

I suppose they never will be.
I don't ask them to be.

but sometimes I think about
it.

the beads will swing
the clouds will cloud
and the killer will behead the child
like taking a bite out of an ice cream cone.

too much

too little

too fat

too thin

or nobody

more haters than lovers.

people are not good to each other.

perhaps if they were

our deaths would not be so sad.

meanwhile I look at young girls

stems

flowers of chance.

there must be a way.

surely there must be a way we have not yet

thought of.

who put this brain inside of me?

it cries
it demands
it says that there is a chance.

it will not say
"no."³⁶

³⁶ Charles Bukowski, *Love is a Dog From Hell* (Ecco Press, 2002).

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