

Cherub

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Abstract

Cherub is a 73 minute narrative film centred around a fat, single man named Harvey who comes across a gay magazine for “big men and their admirers” and decides to create an erotic pinup photo to be their “Cherub of the Month”. The film is almost entirely free of dialogue, and is made up predominantly of long, locked off shots that work to create a quiet but detailed tableau of this man’s life. Through both the narrative, the form, as well as the production of the film itself, I seek to explore the ways that image making can be a space of agency, desire and tension for fat, queer men.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction & Background

Much of my queer life has been shaped by an exchange of images. Through these images, whether they have been telegraphed to me by mainstream culture or through private networks of fellow queers online, I have contextualised my relationship to both queerness, but in a broader way, to my fat body. During one of the spaces between the many stops and starts in production of my feature narrative film *Cherub*, I found myself in Montreal at the St. Michel flea market. On the second floor there is a booth that sells little postcard prints of old Hollywood starlets, vintage film posters, but primarily, homoerotic pinups. I shuffled through the stacks and found almost exclusively white, muscle-bound young men straight from Tom of Finland's fantasies. Then art from Tom Himself, all strange bulges jutting out from his beloved Bikers, Soldiers and Cops. I don't mean to disparage these images, they are essential parts of the Gay cultural canon after all, but I felt a familiar frustration building in me as I tried to look for a small piece of art to put on my wall that felt as though it sprung from the ecosystems of desire of which I actually participated. Those worlds prioritised softness over hardness, and were spaces where I discovered that I could make images that positioned me as a subject of desire. The tension between these world's was where *Cherub* was conceived, exploring the aesthetics and economies of desire both within the world of fat, queer spaces but also mainstream culture more broadly. It is a film that is concerned with images themselves, and if they can act as a site of transformative agency.

Cherub is a character study of a fat, lonely man named Harvey, who lives by himself and works as a lab technician at a faceless university. Early in the film he goes about his day silently watching the world move around him, but no other person returns his gaze. His perception of

himself is radically altered though, when he comes across a copy of “Cherub”, a gay magazine that is dedicated to “big men and their admirers”. In an attempt to uncover a new purpose in life, he decides to submit nude photos to the magazine's “Cherub of the Month” feature. In the wake of that decision comes waves of horror and humiliation, but also connection and finally transcendence.

I arrived to this project on the heels of my most ambitious project yet, a short film called *Grown in Darkness*. Its ambitions were not only in the material scale of that production (we had a sizable budget and crew, my first experience with either) but also in exploring a subject matter that was much more personal to me. While some of my previous work had engaged in some tangential queer themes, *Grown in Darkness* was the first to explicitly address it. I wanted to take the resources available to me in that production to make something lush and romantic, but with older bodies that aren't as often featured in films of a similar style.

Coming off of that film, I had a number of ideas and experiences off of which I had hoped to build my next project. Perhaps the greatest experience of that film was working with two incredible actors in Andy Jones and Lawrence Barry. I knew that the next project I made was going to be performance and character lead, as opposed to much of my earlier work that would stem from a space or setting initially. I also wanted to continue my trajectory in making personal work and dig into worlds that in the past I may have found too embarrassing to express in a narrative film. Practically, I wanted to produce something small again, with a closer focus on a lively creative collaboration with an intimate group of people. Finally, *Grown in Darkness* had a lot of dialogue, and I wanted to make something quiet. In fact, I wanted to make something with no dialogue at all, that focused on movement and expression and offered a story world through

those signals alone. As my relationship with my own body has been a source of strain my entire life, it felt like a potential lens to explore these formal parameters, even if I had major hesitations. I had shared images of my body with networks of fellow fat queers before, and in a way that began to feel like a separate practice in and of itself. Though I had not dared to share these images beyond the very small collection of trusted friends I had maintained, I began to think about the ways that the more clandestine form of image making and my broader practice as a filmmaker overlapped.

Historical Context & The Fat Angel Times

The initial inspiration for the project came from a real magazine out of Belgium in the 90's and 2000's, *The Fat Angel Times*. I was immediately drawn not only to the images, which were often your bog-standard nudes and pornographic images of fat men, but also to the title itself, and its invocation of these figures as divine, celestial beings. Seeing bodies like my own elevated to such seraphic heights was a romantic notion that was especially appealing to me beyond any erotic quality they might have. Finding archives of the magazine online (only really available through porn website Bulk Male) shows not only the aforementioned photographic practice but also a rich world of personal ads where various chubs and chasers seek out companionship and intimacy. As someone who is too young to have experienced this style of communication, I found this creation of community through snail mail to possess an alluring nostalgia.

However, talking to Steve Natrix, the sole editor and publisher of *The Fat Angel Times* dispelled some of this celestial romanticism. Contemporaneously, Gay men have a tendency to create categories, sub-categories and sub-sub-categories of different body types, and that was certainly no different in the 90s. To gain further understanding of this historical context, I reached out to Natrix during the writing of the film for a web video chat. Even then, he explained, the emerging “bear” aesthetic category was reserved for men with muscle and hair. Fat men were not necessarily welcome in that space, so he started the magazine to cater to those specific audiences looking for a place of belonging. In his book *Fat Gay Men*, Jason Whitesel outlines the historical precedent of these modern subcultures through the Girth and Mirth clubs that popped up across North America in the 1970's as “a national social movement in response to weight

discrimination in the gay community, with activities designed to transform big gay men's experiences with shame." (Whitesel 2014, 9) Steve, similarly, saw a void for this kind of community building within Belgium and began the magazine to create a space for the community to play and organise. Quickly, he explained, the publication's reach grew across Europe and into North America, as it served as one of the main platforms for networking and archiving in the broader community. Somewhat disappointingly, though, Steve also told me the inspiration for the title of his magazine was not really out of divine reverence for these bodies, but instead a pun based off what was then the most read newspaper in the world, The Financial Times. Nevertheless, the image of the "Fat Angel" persisted in my mind, as it implied a celestial creature that lived both in and outside of gender and sexuality.

As I considered *Cherub* further, I became fixated on the idea of a man, in that time period, who was ostensibly straight and had never before considered his body as a subject of desire. Contemporaneously there is an awareness in mainstream culture of the bear community, as evidenced by straight, fat celebrities like Nick Frost (English star of films like *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz*) acknowledging their status as subjects of desire in that community, even posing for magazines like *All-American Bear* (O'Brien 2013, 0:49). However in the era of *The Fat Angel Times*, as Steve explained it to me, these were still emergent communities. Queer classifications and sub-groups, while frustrating at times in their limits and segregation, did offer me a way to contextualise my own body in queerness as a younger person and craft a kind of shared aesthetic with other members of the same group. In *Fat Gay Men*, Whitesel suggests that these queer subcultures offer "normalizing activities and commensality rituals wherein they can receive friendship in a normal way; it also allows them opportunities to resist stigmatization by

playing up their sexual identity through campy behavior and carnival.” (Whitesel 2014, 3)

Without an awareness of these worlds where fatness and queerness commingle it is hard for me to imagine how my relationship to my sexuality would have unfolded across the arc of my life thus far. It was in the consideration of that possible void that the details of the film and character began to germinate. I wanted to focus on a character that I saw as straight (or at least thinks of himself as straight at the beginning of the film) to both separate the film from being some kind of auto-fiction, but also to explore the broad ways in which people with non-normative bodies must form their own communities of mutual desirability. Having made a number of films about alienation and loneliness, my hope with this project was to find a new angle, one where isolation becomes a generative space to explore new possibilities and positions. As such I also knew I wanted the character to be almost cosmically alone, rendered entirely invisible by the world around him, seeking to expand his world through performance and image-making.

Taking Nudes and Being Naked

Visibility as an emergent idea also was on my mind early in the conceptualization of the film. A fat person in public is simultaneously both highly visible in the sense of actual space we occupy with our bodies, while also being invisible as a marginalised group. Thinking about how Harvey navigates these public spaces within that central contradiction guided much of the early writing of the piece. In discussing the perceived monstrosity of “spectacularly shaped bodies” in her book *Staring: How we look* Rosemarie Garland Thomas explains “staring at figures with extraordinary scales and forms, we become strange to ourselves. In stories, these creatures seem wholly imaginary, exaggerated to the point of being impossible. All are a breed apart from the familiarly human, like us enough to engage us yet different enough to unsettle us”. (Garland-Thomson, 2009 166) The ways in which “shape and story” intersect and what it means to be seen as something not quite human was of great interest to me. In many ways, to be seen is also to invite disgust, revulsion and rejection by more dominant groups, especially in the case of non-normative bodies. While the “corporate feminism” of popular body positivity movements like the Dove “real beauty campaign” * sought to “promote a more democratic vision of beauty” (Johnston and Taylor 2008, 941), I can see rich possibilities in the realms of the inhuman. To invite the gaze of others means some will see you as a monster, but some might see you as another non-human thing: an angel. While visibility can be a fraught political concept in this way, I wanted to explore how it can be used to form connections in small, intimate communities, specifically when applied to image making and the nude.

The nude is an old tradition in art, one that has multiple meanings across histories and cultures. Contemporaneously, the word has been adopted to mean a photo of a subject in a state of undress, and often taken by the subject themselves. This, in the writing of Robert Graves, is distinct from “nakedness” as:

To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word "nude," on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body reformed. (Clark 1956, 3)

This dichotomy rings true to me to this day. Whereas there have been moments of empowerment in sharing images of my body with a willing partner, I have had, my entire life, a fear of the naked. In my youth, I would have recurring nightmares of suddenly being without clothes in the middle of a strange city or uncomfortable moments in locker rooms. This was becoming a significant source of anxiety for me in relation to the film; where would the line be between displaying a “confident body” in the nude as opposed to the potential shame of visibility inherent in nakedness?

In one of my earliest exercises within the York MFA program, I was tasked with creating a proof-of-concept for the film. At that point all I had really produced was a semi-detailed outline of the story, which was by design very simple and no cast or crew had yet to join. I thought I would take the opportunity to turn these ideas of visibility and showing in on myself before bringing it to a larger group and an actor. I created a 10-minute piece that I knew would mimic the centerpiece of the actual film, where Harvey struggles to take the actual photos of himself. I performed the central role, performed technical positions in the cinematography and sound, and

directed myself, as much as one could. Through this test, I learned a lot about what the visual language of the film would ultimately become, as well as developed thinking about the physicality of the role. Photographing oneself requires a certain amount of contortion to transform your body for the camera, and thinking of the ways the diegetic camera and the cinema camera in the scene relate to this was eye-opening. The piece was also immensely personal, as literally baring my body and sharing it with my cohort was a nerve wracking experience. As Fat scholar and artist Jennifer Lee put it, “When fat people reveal themselves and their bodies, and become vulnerable by doing so, it takes courage. It means putting aside the instincts of self-protection, to reveal aspects of the self so that others either see themselves reflected, and take strength and courage from that, or are exposed to a representation of a fat body they wouldn’t normally be exposed to” (Lee 2023, 541). Through this vulnerability, my cohort were characteristically very supportive to the point that they actually encouraged me to continue the piece with myself as the central performer. While I appreciated that support and could see merits in their assessment, I was still cautious of the film veering too far into direct auto-fiction, as I wanted to de-center my personal relationship to this practice to hopefully uncover new things. I had hoped to see this character develop not simply through being an avatar of myself but through a collaboration with another performer.

Casting & Performance

I approached the casting of the film from a few different angles. My first attempt at casting came through a short film exercise I directed for my supervisor John Greyson's Hybrid Fiction seminar entitled *I Am Something God Made*. The narrative of the film was simple - a strange public access TV spiritual guru delivered a sermon that is observed by three different fat men, tacitly connecting them. It was an opportunity to operate a kind of screen test for three different performers for the larger project. While all three actors produced good results, it was working with my friend Ben Turnbull that piqued my interest the most. I had known Ben for about a year at that point and we had an easy rapport that made our shooting day relaxed and pleasurable. Though he did not have any significant acting experience, he always responded to my direction well and delivered an interesting performance. Before deciding on him, though, I enlisted the support of my fellow MFA cohort Yeimy Daza who was at that time also working as a casting agent to help put out a proper call out for actors for the film. The response that returned was minimal, and after chatting with several agents, Yeimy confirmed our suspicions that most of the appropriate actors were not comfortable with even the semi-nudity that was an essential part of the story. In his PhD dissertation on the experiences of fat male actors, John Bryans describes an experience where he was auditioning for a nude scene for an HBO production:

I felt embarrassed and vulnerable at the thought of having to display my body so brazenly. At the time, I was overly preoccupied with my body, going to the gym four to five times a week and keeping very active because as an actor (and, not immaterially, a gay man) I knew I had to look my best and keep my body in good functional shape. Rationalizing that this audition was the very thing for which I had been preparing myself, I consented to do the audition. This culminated with me onstage in a studio theatre,

joined by the tv director and his assistant (who was operating the camera) as I performed my scene and then dropped my pants. This was not what I had anticipated my career would entail while at theatre school and it was certainly eye opening for me about what I was actually bringing to the table as a performer – selling my body in addition to my craft as an actor. Ultimately, I did not get the part. (Bryans 2018, 6)

This account not only affirmed my thinking on the shame fatness brings in it's contradictory invisibility and hyper-visibility, but also uncovers a myriad of hurdles that fat actors face in their profession. These hurdles can perhaps be best understood through looking at the depictions of fat men in film. In her book *Fat on Film* Barbara Plotz explores the myriad of ways that the fat body is used as a vehicle for ridicule. Specifically looking at mainstream Hollywood films, usually big budget comedies, she speaks on the ways that the fat male form in particular is regularly de-masculinized, infantilized or lacking self-control, which in turn facilitates the physical comedy in films like *The Hangover* or *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*. I can see how a project that revolves around the naked fat male body might invite scepticism from actors who want to avoid being depicted as the kinds of buffoonish characters that often employ them. However, as much as I don't necessarily respond to the actual comedy of many of these films, I do have a certain appreciation for the gender ambiguity at the heart of these depictions. Using the ways depictions of male fatness “interferes with normative gender identities, rendering men weak and feminine” (Plotz 2020, 58) was of note to me, as my own experience with fatness throughout my own life often called into question my relationship with gender, in ways that I do think are at once comically rich, but also serious and profound. I appreciated the physicality of straight Hollywood performers like Fatty Arbuckle, Chris Farley or John Goodman who all possess a masterful control of their physicality and an easy on-screen charm.

Characterizations of fat *queer* men are an even rarer occurrence, and are usually seen as sites of immense trauma. As I developed the film, the spectre of Darren Aranofsky's just-released *The Whale* hung over me as a sort of inverted blueprint of story beats to avoid. While lauded by some as an rare sympathetic portrayal of a fat, gay man, it was hard for me not to see it as exploitative misery-porn that invited viewers to gawk at the (artificial) bodily monstrosity of its central figure. Charlie, the film's central character, is depicted as someone who has gained a lethal amount of weight as a trauma response to the death of his lover and loss of his family. The histrionics on display in that film about a man losing his life to his body was the complete inverse of the life-affirming bodily relationship I wanted Harvey to develop throughout my film. *Strangers by the Lake* from director Alain Guiraudie has some depictions of older queer men with what could be considered non-normative bodies, but that film is more interested in the violence inherent in mainstream ecosystems of gay desire. *The Hanging Garden* is the debut film from fellow Eastern-Canadian Director Thom Fitzgerald about a gay man reminiscing on his fat, closeted youth and strikes a more tender tone. However, that film is also largely concerned with the trauma of growing up with these intersecting identities, with fatness closely associated with the pains of childhood and something to be outgrown. None of these works speak to the campy playfulness that can also be present in fat queerness that are found in a few instances across cinema, though they range in explicitness. In the more covert, there is Oliver Hardy who frequently shares a bed with his on screen comedy counterpart, Stan Laurel. Slightly more direct was the Glenn Shadix' evil fat interior designer Otto in *Beetlejuice*. Of course there is the iconic Divine, star of many John Waters films including *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, and *Hairspray* whose size and queerness are central to her notoriety as a performer. My past work,

Grown in Darkness in particular, looked at alienation in ways that were at times rather dour, and my hope was that this film could bring some levity to the same thematic explorations, to find humour in the contradictions inherent in my body and sexuality.

For many actors, the vulnerability asked of them just to audition would likely not be worth the mental turmoil for what was a small production with potentially minimal professional reward. As the Director, casting a professional actor with whom I had no previous relationship would mean carving out time for both of us to build trust with one another. Ultimately, I found myself increasingly drawn towards the kind of collaboration I had with Ben, and when he enthusiastically responded to the idea of the project, it felt like the best course of action was to continue with him as our principal performer as we had already built that rapport over the course of preceding several months.

In terms of performance, what I was looking for was heavily influenced by the films of Tsai Ming-Liang, who has made an entire career off of the gestures of lonely, queer characters. I had Ben watch his film *Vive L'Amour*, as well as a number of others, including Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* and Barbara Loden's *Wanda* as they all feature powerful, bodily performances with minimal dialogue. It became clear to me that the film was going to need to offer the kind of pace that films like Ming-Liang's or Chantal Ackerman's provided their respective characters, what Deleuze would classify as the "time-image" and its relation to "the attitudes of the body, its postures". Deleuze writes: "We do not even know what a body can do: in its sleep, in its drunkenness, in its efforts and resistances. To think is to learn what a non-thinking body is capable of, its capacity, its postures. It is through the body (and no longer through the intermediary of the body) that cinema forms its alliance with the spirit, with thought." (Deleuze

2013, 189) This relationship between body and time that Deleuze identifies spoke to the concerns of the film, as did Elizabeth Freeman's "queer temporalities" that use "filmic temporality to expand bodily possibilities, and of using the body's rhythms to reimagine what film can say and do" (Freeman 2010, 1).

Pre-Production

Ben was an interesting fit for the project in many ways, because though we have similar overlaps in experience as fat men, we had several other significant differences in perspective that I had wanted to help enrich the character further. In fact, few of my key collaborators knew much of the kind of worlds I was engaging in in the script. Casting Ben also opened up the writing process as I now had an actual figure onto which I could project the character. I started to think about the film as a series of gestures, and I began jotting down ideas for scenes that were usually some combination of space and action which would reveal the character slowly over the course of the film.

My crew had built out to include predominantly friends and collaborators from my years as an undergraduate student; Cinematographer Nick Tiringer, producer Mithila Majithia, composer Anastasia Westcott and sound mixer Alex Hennessey are all close associates who I have worked with already extensively and agreed early on to assist in bringing the film together. Later, Rebeca Ortiz came on as assistant director, and production Designer Annette Wanjiku came on to the project as well. Beyond these key roles however I knew I wanted the crew to be small so that we could nimbly move between spaces and to allow for the moments of intimacy that the film required. All of these folks were nothing but supportive and understanding of the project despite their lack of engagement in the fat gay communities I was referencing in the process of the film.

Those connections, though, did come in other forms, especially around the formation of the actual Cherub magazine that would be featured in the film. For that, I engaged directly in communities I had been a part of online for a number of years now. Using social media, I put out

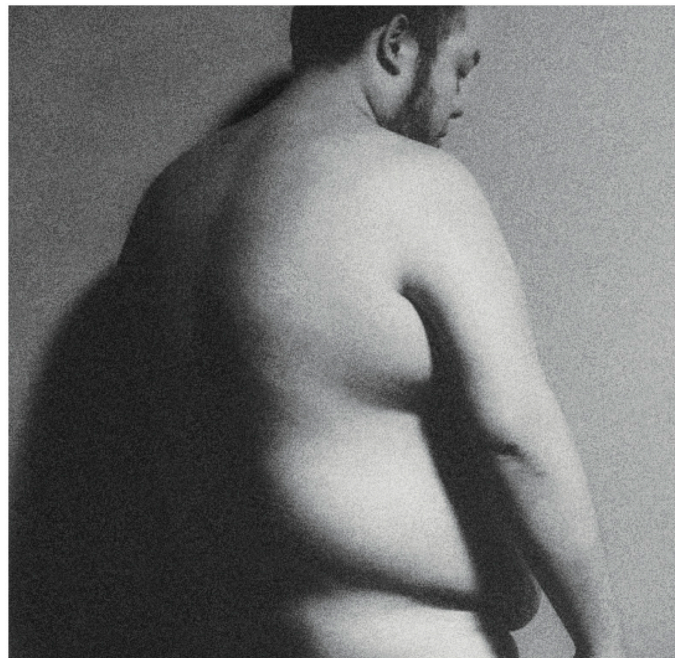
a call for pinup style photos to be featured in the magazine and then subsequently, the film. I received a number of submissions that way, and to fill them out I also approached photographer

Spencer Pablo whose work consists largely of photographs of large men, and he agreed (with the permission of the models) to have some of his

photographs included in the collection. I also went to artist

Brandon Hoax whose work often features angelic fat and muscular masculine figures to design a mascot figure that would appear through the magazine. Finally I collaborated with graphic designer Ben Sifel, another online *mutual* with an understanding

of this kind of aesthetic world, to create the cover and layout of the final magazine. The bear/chub community is really only present in the film through this one, small window. It was almost surreal to bring these images to the physical world and present them to my collaborators, who are entirely made up of my close friends. The crew, upon seeing the magazine, would often ask me if I knew most of the models that appeared in the final copy, and that always felt like a complicated question for which to respond. In many ways those people exist in a sort of pocket dimension for me, where I know them mostly through the aesthetics of their self-created images and online



OUR BEST MODELS

GIRTH & MIRTH USA

personas, as too they know me. Nevertheless these connections persist. Thinking on that question shaped the narrative arc in the film, especially the final moments where Harvey is connected to this world not through an in-person encounter necessarily, but instead through the aesthetic image of himself taken in and churned out back towards him.

Much of my past work has been occupied or originated in consideration of spaces, such as the rhubarb cellar in *Grown in Darkness*. While this was definitely a character piece first and foremost, after the script was finished, the pre-production of location scouting became its own kind of writing as well. Navigating public and private spaces as a fat person was a guiding experience in the inspiration of the film, and so thinking about the kinds of spaces that Harvey would occupy became among the principal guiding processes of sketching out the film. One of the earliest spaces I wanted to feature was public transit, as the economy of space on those vehicles can feel contentious when you take up more volume than others. Another was an adult video store for its outward confrontation of sexuality, as well as its now nostalgic relationship to physical media and traditional proliferation of images. Then, the University as a public square, and the flow of movement of many different kinds of bodies. Offering a variety of spaces to animate Harvey was forming the main structural concept of the project, which would shift and expand as different locations became available and unavailable. My experiences being fat in public are not dissimilar from the ways a film crew operates in public, bringing attention to itself through its scale alone. So even though we were a small crew, it often took a good amount of negotiation to get into the kinds of locations we needed for the film. York University played our generic academic institution and this was amongst the easiest to navigate, as the system to

receive permission to shoot around the grounds is as straightforward a process as can be expected. The university offers a great variety of set pieces in its cold brutalist buildings that communicate an overbearing world for our main character. Finding a lab was a little more challenging, but we eventually found the university's biology department to be receptive. Likewise, shooting on a decommissioned streetcar was relatively straightforward, though it did require peeling back many layers of bureaucratic process. The adult video store posed our biggest challenge, as the few remaining around the city were understandably reluctant to let us shoot in their stores due to the discretion they provide to their customers. Most of them seemed to think we wanted to shoot actual pornography. Somehow, though, we found a shop that allowed us to shoot while they were open with almost no issue (the clerk explained to me that he himself was once an MFA student and understood our struggles). Finally, for Harvey's home, I had originally envisioned a kind of suburban home from the 70s. However, it quickly became apparent that finding a suitable home to shoot in was not in our budget, so I opted instead to use my own apartment as it had some of the aesthetic qualities that I had been hunting for and our money would be better spent in purchasing the appropriate dressing.

With many elements falling into place, we scheduled a 5 day shoot in mid-July of 2023. We increased that from 4, as though it was only a 7 page script, we knew many of the scenes had a durational element to them as well as many location changes. We also agreed that shorter 8-10 hour days would keep our spirits and energy high considering we would be a small crew of anywhere between 4 - 7 people depending on the day. My assistant director, Rebeca Ortiz, did a fabulous job at breaking down the script and a detailed shot list was created between myself and Nick Tiringer, the cinematographer who quickly understood the pacing and coverage that I

envisioned for the story. That shot list became, again, another kind of script, as thinking about the film in blocks of images also made me expand my thinking on the blocking, as the presence and placement of the camera could turn a simple idea into something potentially more complex. As this was a film about seeing and being seen, the role of the camera was crucial in the development. As Deleuze states “it is essential that the camera sees the character himself: it is one and the same character who sometimes sees and sometimes is seen. But it is also the same camera which gives us the character seen and what the character sees. We may, then, consider the story as the development of two kinds of images, objective and subjective.” (Deleuze 2013, 147) This shifting relationship of objective and subjective heavily influenced this fourth iteration of writing the film through the shot list.

Increasingly, with these elements all in place, I was beginning to understand the total shape of the film as these different forms of pre-production writing stacked on top of one another. However, this was a small crew and other questions continued to go unanswered. We had logistics like transportation, critical background performers and craft still to be determined, and between myself and producer Mithila, time was running thin. We considered pushing the shoot, though I was initially reticent until finally my body had something it needed to say.

I was deeply hesitant to delve too deeply into the issue of health and physical wellness in this film for a bevy of reasons. I myself for years would push against the narrative that fatness necessarily correlated to chronic health issues, citing groups such as the Health at Every Size movement and my own anecdotal experience as a mobile person who took pride in how much I used my body to the same degree a straight-bodied person might. Hence, in the film I wanted to avoid those issues pulling away as a distraction from the other core ideas and images I intended

to explore. While there are ultimately some allusions to Harvey's health in the film, I wanted to create something that was about all the other ways our bodies can move through this world. However, the last few years in my personal life have certainly challenged the notion of the separation of my size and wellness as my early 30's have revealed a number of chronic health conditions. At the start of pre-production, all of these conditions were more or less under control, but just before we were set to head into our first block of production, I encountered (almost by accident) another new problem with my body that set off a simultaneous medical and mental crisis. So we postponed. On top of the anxiety I was experiencing over my well-being, this crisis became a sort of crisis over the film as well. Did I need to change the story now? Was I creating something too romantic or sentimental, that ignored the kinds of realities I was experiencing? In this time I felt a deep resentment for my body, one that I hadn't felt in years, and was repelled at the idea of making images around it. When I was young and fat I felt this divide between myself and my body, that my identity and personality was at odds with this machine it found itself in, one that refused to conform to its notions of what it was supposed to look like and how it was meant to perform. In this time of reflection though, I also considered what moved me towards a potential autonomous unification of these two parts, which was this tenuous community I was in of fat queers and the images we made for each other. The health issues, though still always there lurking, finally waned and I was ready to return to work. I was entering production already a little worn down, but nevertheless with a resolve to tell this of a weird, fat man with love and warmth.

Production Diary I

Day Zero - August 13th, 2023

With production now properly ready to begin - the first major action was to spend a day building Harvey's apartment, his own world. Anette spent several days sourcing vintage furniture through online reseller markets and we did a day driving with a rental van picking them up to take them back to my apartment. This was in truth the most exhausting day of the entire production, simply for the massive amounts of physical labour required, especially as I was still recovering from my health scare from earlier that summer. However, as I stated earlier, I am often led and inspired by space so taking the time to build out Harvey's personal space before beginning shooting was an excellent primer to begin our ascent into his world. Annette, with the help of Liam Owens (a fellow Newfoundlander, which is always appreciated), then made quick work of dressing the apartment, further immersing me in Harvey's world as it took over my own.

Day One - August 17th, 2023

Our first day of actual shooting was, out of the gate, an interesting experience as we would be filming Adult Videos on Lakeshore. Ahead of the shooting days we had already scouted the location, so we had an idea of what we would be dealing with and how we wanted to shoot the scene. The major complication for this first day is that Andrew, our contact at the shop, wanted us to be there when he was working and, as such, when the shop was open to patrons. While Andrew seemed relaxed about us sharing space with his customers, I was more tense about the situation. The entire concept of the scene was about navigating the public and private dichotomies of a space like an adult video store, and I knew that most of the people occupying

that space were there not necessarily to simply purchase pornography but also to engage in sexual activities in the store's basement booths. I was anxious that our presence would threaten the safety of the space for the largely marginalised patrons.

In practice, shooting was fraught in some ways but largely harmonious. We of course agreed to never film while someone was browsing the aisles, and as such most customers upon entering would hesitate for a moment but then continue on with whatever they had planned, which was usually grabbing a DVD and descending down the stairs into the basement, ignoring us completely. One major exception was a middle-aged man who was very curious about what we were doing - not uncommon for a film shoot but the context of this specific day made for an interesting dynamic. He was very open and explicit about his experience cruising that day and insisted that someone should make a film centred around it. Given that most of the other people shooting that day were straight, it was a fascinating way to begin our production, directly playing with some of these lines of public and private, queer and straight, seen and unseen all in the 4 hours of production for that day.

The shoot itself went well. It was such an amazing space to have access to and does so much heavy lifting on its own in the colours and textures of the environment. Every production is a process in learning how to make that exact film, so perhaps some scenes that have less narrative consequence may have been a more appropriate star, especially considering Ben was not only new to the character but new to acting. Having said that, the day felt by and large successful and a good omen of the days to come.

Day 2 - August 18th, 2023

The following day was one of our most ambitious and complex shoots of our production; the scenes on the street car. As the film is supposed to be a period piece from the turn of our current century, having the appropriate now-discontinued CLRV TTC streetcars was an important priority to me. Thankfully, I found the TTC amenable to our production and though there was a good deal of red tape to navigate, we were able to secure a streetcar at the Hillcrest TTC yard.

Another challenge for that particular shoot was gathering the background required to make the streetcar feel adequately full. For this I enlisted the help not only of my current cohort, but friends from my time in my undergraduate to come and stand in as the crowd. Despite the brisk pace of this shoot, as we only had 3 hours to get everything we needed, the coming together of these different communities I had been a part of felt very nourishing. As all of the background had experience in film themselves, there was a shared understanding of the work being done which not only helped the efficiency of the work but created a sense of camaraderie.

This was also the time we were doing what I intended to be the final shot of the film - a slow zoom in on Harvey as he emanates an ethereal glow, all while the people around him rest their head on his body. As much of what we had shot to that point had a very grounded perspective, jumping into this expressive mode was personally very exciting for me and I had a childlike giddy energy at the scene. Watching it had the right balance of ridiculousness but also loving tenderness that I had hoped to find at the end of the film, and it was a real moment of beginning to see the totality of the film begin to take shape.

Following our shoot on the street car, a skeleton crew of only myself, Ben, Nick and Alex retreated to my apartment to begin work on the most intimate portion of the film, Harvey's photoshoot. Early on we decided to forgo an intimacy coordinator for the scene - my first conversations with Ben centred around what degree of comfortability he would have with shooting this particular scene and as such had an agreed upon level of clothing he would be wearing. Likewise our crew was so small that it would be easy to stop and start at his level of comfort, and he displayed such enthusiasm with the project, of which this scene lies at its heart. From my test shoot I knew I wanted to play it out in a single shot from the same perspective, shooting into the mirror he uses to experiment with poses, keeping a healthy distance. This was an opportunity to bring a subtle level of slapstick physicality into his performance, which is largely muted otherwise. Ben really does a fantastic job of activating his body in this particular scene, awkwardly contorting himself to try and estimate what a *Cherub* reader might want to see from him, but never quite sure of himself. Finally, we shot a scene where the third-person cinema camera becomes the diegetic camera Harvey is using to take his self-portraits. While most of the film is shot locked off and at a distance, this was a moment where we used the camera as a more expressive and subjective tool, dragging the lens around the details of his body as time stands still.

Day 3 - August 19th 2023

Our next day brought us on to our most comfortable working space - the grounds of York University. I had written a number of scenes where Harvey walks through the halls of the campus, though eventually landed on shooting all of them on the Ross Podium behind Vari Hall.

That area perfectly encapsulates a certain style of design that fit these scenes in it's plain, unpainted concrete and harsh lines. It also gave us an opportunity to play as we did not have a specific set of shots we needed and instead were able to experiment with a number of different orientations of space in relation to the small collection of actors we had on hand for that day. As it was still summer time, and a weekend, the entire area had an eerie emptiness to it that made it very amenable to filming.

We shot just below the landing in the courtyard for a pair of scenes where Harvey finds himself drawn to a young woman who is sitting across from him while they both eat lunch. At this point in the development of the project, Harvey's actual sexuality was still somewhat ambiguous, and this scene was critical in conveying a sense of desire within him. Ben struck a delicate balance of a gaze that at once was filled with a strong a subtle yearning while not spilling over into a lecherous leer. For the young woman I asked my friend Erin Mick, an actor and herself a PhD candidate in Cinema Studies at University of Toronto, continuing my trend of casting filmmakers and cinephiles for different roles. Together they shared what is likely the most action packed scene of the film, one where Harvey fantasises about saving Erin's character from asphyxiation by choking. Again, as the film plays in mostly muted tones of Harvey standing back and watching the world go by, shooting this dynamic, dramatic scene offered an interesting change of pace that I hoped would offer some variety of textures.

Day 4 - August 20th, 2023

Our fourth day, despite it all taking place in my own home, became our most exhausting. I think our energy had crested on the proverbial hump day of our shoot and we were all

beginning to crash. It didn't help that we were shooting some of the material I was the least sure of, which was the opening of the film. It is a delicate balance opening a film, introducing at once the character, pace and ideas of the film in a way that hopefully interests an audience. We tried a number of different ways of shooting the opening action - Harvey checking his blood pressure, which I hoped would give a quiet moment at the beginning of this man being present in his own body for moment before the film really gets underway - but it was an idea Nick had of a simple tilt and pan from his arm to his body that offered the most elegance and is what ultimately became our first shot. The relaxed simplicity of Harvey in his own home perhaps also contributed to the lack of energy on my part for this section of filming, perhaps the languid pace was too well internalised on my behalf. Ultimately we arrived at a set of images that I have come to appreciate, though it took a bit of workshopping and later a small reshoot.

As the day went on and the light began to fade we shot more scenes, including a scene where Harvey has a good look at *Cherub* for the first time after stealing it from the adult video store. As discussed earlier, many of the images that make up the magazine are of contact I have had through online queer communities for a number of years, and their presence in this moment reinforced this sense of broader community through the exchange of images, and a proper tribute.

We finished the day with Harvey on the couch listening to the words of intuitive healer Caroline Myss from her workshop *Entering the Castle*. I felt much like Harvey in that moment, in a kind of half present dream state, and Myss' clear and concise voice shaking the foundations of what constitutes an identity was just as sobering for me as it was for him. Her voice was, in a virtual sense, an excellent scene partner for Ben after a collection of scenes that had him

responding more to the gentle ambiance of the world; Caroline arrived as a Prophet with a Message. It was also refreshing following take after take of silence to hear a human voice, beckoning Harvey to action in his otherwise passive life.

Day 5 - August 21st, 2023

Our final day of production returned to York, only this time most of the day was spent in a lovely laboratory in the biology department. Again, we took advantage of the off-season to gain access to a space that might otherwise not be open to us shooting. For me there is a warm familiarity in a lab as both of my parents worked in laboratory science back in Newfoundland. I would spend many hours alone in these spaces while they would be off doing other work throughout the facility. This was also one of the only spaces we had the need and opportunity to dress a little as it is, similar to his apartment, a private space for Harvey and we wanted to make it his own. Despite my parents being scientists however, I was initially unsure of how Harvey would activate the space through action, and as Ben has no experience in these spaces either it was up to me to figure that out. As with other parts of the shoot though, the space lead us in the right direction, as the lab we shot in had a central column that Harvey could circle around as he prepared for his work day, giving us some depth and movement and avoiding it all feeling too sterile. This new space, filled with lovely natural light, energised us all on our final day. We finished off this first block of shooting back at the Cinema and Media Arts building, which felt like a small acknowledgement of the new communities and connections formed in the process of this pieces' creation.

Post-Production I

Though I would describe the project as a *short film* throughout pre-production, I had my suspicions that the ultimate running time would disqualify the film from such classification.

Though the script was only 8 pages, between my own impulses and the test scene I had shot, I suspected the final film would be about 30 minutes. Especially considering some of the scenes that took up a limited amount of text real estate implied much more in terms of action on screen, thus rendering the traditional rule of 1-page to 1-minute of on screen time a poor indicator of final runtime. For example, this scene below:

INT. HARVEY'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Harvey closes all the blinds and sets up a mirror in his living room. In front of it he places a tripod with a floppy disc digital camera.

He removes his clothes and struggles to put on a pair of cheap looking Halloween angel wings and halo.

He gets up, sets the automatic timer on the camera, stands in front, and a photo is taken.

He does the same again.

He sits down, thinking for a moment.

Though it only takes up about a third of a page of the script, this scene represents a 3.5 minute single shot that cannot, by design, be edited around. Knowing these things, I was not surprised when the runtime of my first cut was just over 36 minutes. While some of this could be cut down, it would be at the cost of totally obliterating the pace and style that I had deliberately sought out for the film.

Having said that, the response to this first cut was largely positive. I had had some concerns on set that a film I was hoping to have a lightness to it was becoming too sombre or

morose. However, pieced together, Ben's performance does have a quiet simplicity that is at times serene, awkward, heartbreaking and humorous. I chose not to butcher the film to get it down to some more easily programmable sub-20 minute short, but to instead continue to push the story and character to fill out a proper mid-length feature. While this might have felt overwhelming in other circumstances, our previous 5 day shoot had revealed a style of work that was flexible, efficient and well tuned to exactly what the film needed at any given moment. Since I had some pickups planned that were necessary to complete the actual story, why not continue exploring this world and character?

For instance, in the material currently produced, I had skirted around Harvey's sexuality. I perceived him as straight, or at least ostensibly straight at the start of the film, but beyond his presence at the adult video store and his quiet desire for the woman in the courtyard, there was perhaps more that could be uncovered in terms of the contours of his desires. While I had a personal rule that Harvey was never to have a direct interaction with another person where he saw himself acknowledged, to heighten that sense of public and private alienation, was there a way to suggest a broader world of personal connections? Finally, I also wanted to see him move through the world more, to activate his body in ways that the film hadn't yet allowed.

With these ideas in mind some new scenarios began to emerge. Keeping in the realm of thinking of images and image making, I devised two new scenes. In the first, Harvey discreetly takes photos of a straight couple as they share a moment of passion. In the second, a scene of Harvey overtaken by the images of a sex scene in a movie theatre. If the film's length was to expand, I needed to fill out his life in other ways as well, beyond just his sexuality. To offer a hint at some kind of familiar relation, while keeping his alienation at the forefront, I wrote a

recurring scene of Harvey visiting a comatose relative in the hospital, unsure of how to be of use. To really activate the corporeal form, I wanted a beautiful ice skating sequence. We also had some logic and story questions to answer for. A scene of Harvey destroying his own image in his lab felt thematically relevant but was not functioning as a plausible reality, as the chemical process I believed would work failed us on the day. Finally, the shame he experiences upon seeing his own images published had to be more thoroughly felt and conveyed. At this point in production, it became clear that the film worked when it shifted from the observational objective mode into a more surreal, subjective mode, and we could use that to push Harvey's humiliation into the territory of nightmare.

I had also received a key piece of art for the film, a sculpture of Harvey's winged torso that is sent to him in the finale of the film. I had initially imagined this moment to be a painting or drawing from his photo, as the film had really taken form for me as a film about images. Ultimately, I instead decided to move from a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional space with something sculptural. After some research I came across the work of Elisabeth Walden, whose sculptural work directly engages with fat bodies. Her work has so much life to it, and I knew that this piece would be able to express visually the experience of seeing yourself through the eyes of another, the ultimate climax of the film for Harvey. It was with all these ideas in mind we waited through the autumn for winter to fall so we could begin another round of production.

Production Diary II

Day 6 - January 25, 2024

Our first day back required us to travel between several different locations. The first scene of the day was our only true reshoot that we would be attempting in our different production blocks, as I had initially shot an early scene of Harvey working on a puzzle in his apartment that, as the world and story developed over production, felt increasingly derivative as a visual piece. Instead, we remount the shot so that it would begin with him directly interacting with the angel statuettes that called to mind the ideas of embodiment and spirituality that I believed the film best gestured towards.

Following that, however, we had what I think was one of our most challenging scenes - Harvey receiving the statue likeness of his body in the mail. While not the final shot, this sequence acts as the emotional culmination of the film, and a final articulation of the messy depths that constituted Harvey's desires - a real connection with another person. Thus, it was the most emotionally demanding moment for Ben to perform, and we were both unsure how the scene would manifest. Ben reminded me that in the script I had written "Harvey cries" which surprised me. At that moment in production I knew the shape of the scenes so well that I had stopped consulting with my original script entirely, and had forgotten suggesting that performance note. Ben told me he did not think he would be able to bring himself to that height of emotion, but after building the character together over the course of production, I am not sure the tears would have been necessary. It is moving enough, in my estimation, to see Harvey holding himself, as made through the eyes of another, to feel the weight of his aesthetic analogue

against himself, and experience the feelings of delight, heartache, and love that I believe Ben performed in that particular moment.

We next head to the campus of another major Toronto university, using one of their lecture halls as a makeshift cinema. With the film, to me, becoming more and more about the production and consumption of images, it only made sense to fold back in the medium itself onto the narrative. In advance, I looked around for erotic scenes from films that could hypnotise Harvey into a lustful fugue state, and it was Ben who suggested the films of Tinto Brass. After digging through the filmography of the Italian filmmaker, perhaps best known for 1979's *Caligula*, I landed on a scene that comes late in his 1994 film *L'uomo che guarda*, known in English as *The Voyeur*. The scene not only offered the kind of lurid audio that our film was searching for, but the way both Brass' and our film concerned itself with the act of looking felt like an appropriate fit. For our scene, I wanted just the colours of shapes of the film to be reflected in Harvey's glasses, so I edited the scene from *L'uomo che guarda* with a heavy gaussian blur, and the warm entangled flesh tones, rendered unrecognisable, made for an interesting piece in and of itself. We made quick work of that location so that we could make a swift exit and continue to our final shooting location of the day.

We finished out this first day of pick-ups with another scene in public, this one of Harvey ice skating on an outdoor rink. Nick and I both agreed we wanted to see Harvey move in a novel way after many scenes of more sedentary action. Arriving at the rink, the young person managing that evening was surprised by our presence, and warned us it might be dangerous for Ben to skate amongst the many skaters on the ice casually playing Hockey. However, luck smiled on us, and the Zamboni came out to smooth the rink and clear out the players. By the time

it was finished, Ben was laced up, and we did one single take of him repeatedly skating in a circle while the Hockey players returned to the ice to warm up. Despite the shambling process of shooting this scene, when reviewing the footage later that evening, I found it deeply moving. If the film was about the humiliation of living in public, watching this beautiful, strange creature we created move with awkward grace around the chaos of athletics, felt like a bittersweet kind of catharsis.

Day 7 - January 25, 2024

Our second day of pickups brought us back to the cold comforts of the York University campus. In the morning we shot the winter versions of our summer campus scenes, what I began casually referring to as Harvey's Nightmare. Conversations in-between the first round of production and the second revealed that Harvey's descent into humiliation following the publication of his pictures needed to be more felt, so I decided to fully lean into the surreality of the premise and have everyone on campus inexplicably reading a copy of *Cherub* bearing Harvey's Naked body. The resulting scenes not only helped to illustrate his mental state but gave Ben an opportunity to really lean into the physicality of the moment, and in a film full of subtle and understated gestures, really his facial expressions and movement.

Still on campus, we moved over to the school of nursing w to use their facilities as a hospital room. A I returned to an early idea of the film to have Harvey quietly sit with a comatose person in the hospital, implying a sense of loss or bereavement that might shape how some of the characters actions are contextualised. I enlisted the help of Manfred Becker, our program's director, to play the part of Harvey's ailing relative. When he arrived we discovered we only had

about one hour to shoot three scenes, so we took advantage of our small team to very quickly determine three simple setups that we could repeat with practical shifts in lighting to give different moods for each scene. We finished handily in time, which felt like a testament to the dynamic we had developed as we continued to shoot.

Day 8 - January 26, 2024

Our final day of this second round brought us all the way out to Etobicoke's Centennial Park Conservatory for yet another instance of shooting in and around the public. The scene was added initially to contribute to the growing motif of Harvey's gaze, and reinforcing an ongoing appreciation he has for the natural world. It also introduces his interest in photography and image making. As the concept developed further, though, I wanted to add another slightly lascivious element to the sequence in the hopes of providing yet more texture to the character, so I had him stumble upon a couple in the throes of romantic passion. To cast the couple, I went to a similarly salacious source: craigslist. Craigslist for many years acted as one of the primary online spaces to facilitate connections and hook-ups amongst queer people, and so using it as a production tool felt like yet another instance of theme and method coalescing with one another. The responses I received ranged from overtly sexual to totally unhelpful, but I was eventually able to secure an enthusiastic real life couple to come and play our lovers. Once again, shooting in public felt like we were hyper visible to the passing world around us, and on this day the conservatory was filled with families so we had to be as discreet as possible with our setups.

Our final scene for this block was back at my apartment, in the only other instance of a reshoot. For Harvey's destruction of his own image, the initial attempts at using the chemistry of his lab were simply not reading well, and we knew we had to replace them. We opted for a

simple sequence of him using a paper shredder in his apartment and it was immediately clear how much better the sequence was working. The new scene slows down the pace of the film once more, and gives Harvey a moment to properly reckon with his own image, and the tiny paper shredder he is forced to use to destroy them offers a nice moment of levity at a place where it was needed.

It was also on this day of shooting Ben offered an idea for consideration. In a couple of months there was to be a solar eclipse visible across most of North America, with the path of totality including Niagara Falls. His employment at a major hotel chain meant he could snag a room for this once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, and he pitched we should shoot some material during the celestial event. While of course excited by the idea, my initial response was more hesitation. For one, I was unsure at first how to meaningfully incorporate such a moment into the narrative, and as far as I was concerned, we had finished the film minus just a small handful of shots we would get in the spring. Ultimately, I parked the idea and went to edit our new material.

Post-Production II

With the skeleton of the narrative already mostly complete, this second round of editing was oriented towards determining the order of sequences to reveal the facets of Harvey's character. I wanted to strike a balance that created some texture to what had otherwise been the rather soft edges of his personality, without him descending into full-blown leering hedonism. In the theatre scene, for example, his gestures implied that he began masturbating in the empty theatre. While I did want to offer more moments of vulnerability in relation to his sexuality, it felt dishonest in the context of a character who had such a deep fear of the world around him. Ultimately I cut around those particular suggestions, making the scene work for the rest of the film. I was happy to discover that the scenes we reworked were playing much better now, especially the destruction of his own image, which now had a funny poignancy that fit in better with the pace of the rest of the film.

During this round of post-production is also when I began working with Anastasia Westcott for the film's score. As an almost-silent film, I knew music would work overtime to create emotional moments or fill out the spaces. Anastasia and I have been working together for almost ten years now, first collaborating on my film *The Inn of Olde*, and she has subsequently provided some kind of sonic contribution to each of my films since. For this film we continued a process that we established with our last collaboration, *Grown in Darkness*, where I give her a central instrument to build her work around, and what better instrument for *Cherub* than the harp? Not only does it offer the celestial connection implied in the film, but it also has a delicate, vulnerable musical quality that I believed would lend well to the character. I also asked for a variety of emotional states to work around, like peace, fear or shame. What she returned to me

was so beautiful, utilising both synthesised harp instrumentation but also by sampling a real zither.

With the new and reworked scenes, the film just barely crossed over the sixty minute mark. I recall finishing the new cut, setting up the software to render a copy, and sitting on my couch where after about fifteen minutes the emotions struck me that I had just casually completed a childhood dream to create a feature film. At the time of this cut though, I believed myself to have exhausted what the camera could capture of Harvey in this particular moment of his life, that I had said all that could be said with the formal confines I had given myself in making this film. So I was surprised, and frankly a little overwhelmed, when John suggested that I should push the film a little further. The justification was two-fold: one, the further I could take it into a more conventional feature running time would help it's chances of finding an audience, but more pertinently, that there was still yet avenues to explore of the character, questions about his own sexuality and desires that were still submerged to deeply in the murk of Harvey's character. Reluctantly, I told him about Ben's proposal for the Niagara trip with the eclipse and he very emphatically insisted we must go shoot.

With that I went to work to figure out how this segment could fit into the film. At that time, my biggest concern with the pacing was that the film had almost no breathing room between Harvey's self-portraiture and his horror at their publication, which was out of step with the languid pace of the rest of the film. I thought about what that time in-between those moments would be like for him. I had always imagined Harvey's endeavour to almost transcend sexuality in a way - that he was using the visual language of sexuality to instead express a spiritual need to connect to others, to be of use. However, thinking more on this new sequence I opened up to the

possibility of some carnality in this interim period of his life. I thought about the middle-aged man at Adult Videos Unlimited enthusiastically insisting that someone should make a film about cruising, and how it too plays around with taboo public transgressions, not dissimilar to our production. So much of our film was made in public and navigating the perils of that hyper visibility, so it was fitting to bring our shoot to Niagara Falls on a day that they were expecting record-level crowds. There was also the appeal of the inherent romance of Niagara Falls, as it has been mythologized in the history of cinema itself.

I devised a second character, himself a fat queer man, acting as a photographer for Harvey in lieu of him taking the photos himself. My thinking was that Harvey could notice, for the first time in the film, someone's gaze resting upon him, and while initially finding discomfort in the attention, leaning into it when the stranger reveals he wants to take his photograph. Harvey, thinking the man wants to cruise him, then follows him into a bathroom where a missed encounter takes place. However, I once again had the challenge of casting ahead of me. Logistics were especially challenging for this shoot, considering the historic event taking place in a city not our own, with only room in Ben's hotel for three people including cast and crew. I briefly perused Growlr and Scruff in Niagara for potential casting options, but felt that might be too wild a card to play. So to play the role of the mystery photographer myself. The more I thought about it the more it made sense - logistically it would be simpler, for one, but it also had interesting narrative and meta-narrative implications. My photograph already appears as the "Cherub of the Month" earlier in the film that first inspired Harvey to create his submission, and of course my role as director made for an interesting connection to this character that too seeks to create images of Harvey. Furthermore, In the days leading up to our shoot, our cinematographer

had to drop out due to other work, so I decided that on top of acting and directing in the scene, I would too be its principle cinematographer. The layers of image-making between the narrative and extra-narrative were beginning to collapse even further!

Production Diary III

Day 9 - April 9, 2024

Ben, Myself and Alireza Keymanesh (a good friend from my cohort who I enlisted as an extra pair of hands) set out via Go Train from Union station in Toronto towards Niagara Falls on the day of eclipse. Immediately we were faced with massive crowds, though we were lucky to be able to snag a few chairs on the train to accommodate ourselves and our gear. Upon arrival, we walked down towards the falls and found a spot that offered a hint of the waterfalls in the background. I had decided that, without the proper gear to safely film the eclipse, I would simply concern myself with filming Harvey watching the event. We set up with a couple of hours to spare, and waited. As our cinema camera had a certain physical presence we had a number of people walk up to us and say some variation of “Well, it looks like you know what you’re doing”! The horrors of visibility rearing its head once again. Though it was a cloudy overcast day, thus rendering much of the eclipse totality difficult to see, the sudden onset of a cosmic night was nevertheless a thrilling experience, even as I balanced it against making sure I was successfully shooting the scene.

We then went about a mix of getting our bearings in terms of accommodations and shooting more material for the scene, the two often overlapping over one another. In sharp contrast to the precise control we tried to maintain over the image for the rest of the production, for these scenes I kept the camera close to me and allowed the gaudy environments of Niagara Falls to lead the way. We shot at an arcade, at The Rainforest Cafe, and in front of the ferris wheel. There were moments where I would have to turn the camera around and have Alireza or Ben (in a fun inversion of the process for him) film my character watching from a distance.

Our shooting culminated in the scene where my mystery character takes his photograph of Ben against the backdrop of the waterfalls at night. Once again the perils of public shooting became an issue, there were so many people out along the boardwalk that it was very challenging to find a place for good, clean coverage of the encounter. Exhausted, and still figuring out how to shoot the scene, what seemed like a miracle occurred in front of us - a fireworks show. We leapt into action, and swiftly covered the scene with the massive display happening concurrently, granting us an unexpected and unplanned homage to one of my favourite romantic films, *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* by Leos Carax. For nothing, we were given some Hollywood magic as a climax for the sequence.

Day 10 - April 20th, 2024

This, however, is not a Hollywood film, which I sought to undercut in a scene we shot a couple weeks later on what was our last day of production. The two characters find themselves in a bathroom together, and almost begin to play footsie under the stall before my character withdraws, leaving Harvey alone again. We shot this sequence once again up at the York campus, our crew consisted of myself, Nick, Alex and Ben, who made up the core group of the production team throughout the process, and the tone was from the beginning celebratory.

Following that, we drove to Mississauga to shoot a brief scene in a Russian Sauna where I had booked us a private room to shoot, for one last scene that offered some queer texture to Harvey's sexual gaze. While I had checked in with the management, I was nevertheless paranoid that our activity would be interrupted by an uninformed staff, in one final indignity of our

constant public facing methods. Thankfully though, this was unwarranted and we came and went unnoticed.

For the final sequence of shooting for the film, Nick and Alex had to move on, so once again it was just myself and Ben at Steven's, a convenience store near my home that had always struck me for its visual impact. The production in this final moment stripping down to just the subject and author was a poignant moment for me, and once again, as I waited for the sun to set with my large camera setup, I had members of the community approach and ask me what we were doing. As perhaps has been clear, the ways that this production called attention to ourselves would always make me uncomfortable, either because I was worried we would be admonished or inhibited somehow, but also perhaps because of my own general discomfort with public perception more broadly. Instead, though, in these final moments, people approached us warmly, asked us what we were working on and seemed generally interested. It is easy for filmmaking to become a kind of anti-social endeavour, separating the world of the film and the material world. Our holistic public approach to shooting, while it created its own challenges, let in room for the unexpected, for the real life of community to happen alongside this contrived life we created.

Post-Production III & Queer Time

The Niagara sequence, in editing, revealed itself to be almost a short film in and of itself. The slight shift in style that came from me shooting myself, with a different camera, made the segment stand out from the film in a way that I appreciated. The film has an expected visual language and pace that Niagara, ever so slightly, interrupts, offering a new kind of transgression or dream in the midst of the main narrative. Feedback from peers had me tweak some of the elements, pulling back from my character a little and making my intentions more mysterious, but nevertheless the sequence was working for me as a new expression of Harvey's desires. It's feeling of being unstuck from the rest of the film also began to push me to rethink the film's relationship to time, both in narrative and in form.

I had initially broken the film into 4 sections, one for each of the corresponding seasons. I also had placed the film just around the turn of the 20th century, the same time as the publication of the film's inspiration *The Fat Angel Times*. However, once all the scenes were accounted for and placed together, those real world conditions of contemporaneous shooting began to bleed into the period-world of the film. I hadn't exactly been a stickler for historical details, instead playing off of aesthetics memories of that time instead of strict research, but that lackadaisical approach to design, mixed with the effects of being in public created a strange sense of being stuck out of time. Still, Harvey's life felt deeply stuck in the past - we never see him use a computer, the decor of his home feels decidedly old-fashioned, and his camera is the absolute oldest version of digital camera that was made available to consumers. However, the lack of control we had over the public meant modern cars, cell phones and contemporary fashion styles would sneak into the frame. These anachronisms, however, began to drag the film into a more

dream-like association with time, and the linear objectivity I had initially envisioned had to be abandoned. I instead chose to name the segments on different Saint's Feast days that approximately corresponded to the time of year but also a loose connection to the tone of that particular segment of the film. Saint Veronica, for example, plays as the title of the summer section, as her feast day is in July, but also because she is occasionally associated with photography. These details, though not originally planned, unmoors the film from any particular time period, and so I also decided to remove any reference to the year in which the film takes place and fully cloud the period of the film. While I was initially anxious to properly communicate a time period so that the proper conditions of Harvey's life would be clear to an audience, I began to relax my expectations of adhering to a normative experience of time and instead rethink the film as an expression of "queer time" which offers "ways of formally thinking and utilizing time. Time can be represented as a discontinuous entanglement that problematizes linear—and reductive—fictional and social narratives. The constructed nature behind the temporalities of normative-identity-producing repetitions and performances can be formally exposed, inviting viewers/readers/players to question their own performed identities." (Avila & Encarnación-Pinedo 2024, 6) The pace of the film itself took on different temporalities in this mode of thinking. While time is very much felt in the film through the longer takes and slow moving action, there are also jumps in time that are difficult to measure, which by further distorting the period enhances that sense of temporal ambiguity.

The pace of the film was certainly something people responded to when seeking feedback. While much of the feedback appreciated the length, I also certainly got feedback that encouraged me to move along the scenes more briskly. While I appreciated that perspective, I

also again thought about this idea of “queer time” against the aspirations of the project and of myself as an artist. The film is full of moments of things *not happening* in a form that encourages action. However, as much of my own life as a queer person is charted by the things that *don't happen* as much as the things that *happen*. Missed connections, life milestones, failed expectations - these were just as much as shaping my experiences as a queer person than fully formed anecdotes. Fatness, too, has its own sense of time that is informed by a “unique interplay between restriction and release” in which “losing weight is required to successfully follow heteronormative timelines” (McFarland et al 2018, 136). My fatness constantly distorted my *now*, as life felt like I was only a moment away before the inevitable future where I would be thin and begin realising some person I *actually* was underneath my body. Harvey's central action of the film - creating an image of himself - seeks instead to unmoor that moment, not unlike the Deleuzian time-image. Perhaps this is a big part of what attracts me to this mode of filmmaking, that in it contains the tension of desire, of waiting for something to happen, and what lies in the interim of those moments, should they ever come or not. Time, in this case, “would hardly be a queer ally. It would be, instead, an actant where identities align normatively or, at best, a continuum where the struggles between oneself and the rhythms and repetitions imposed to and by others take place.” (Avila & Encarnación-Pinedo 2024, 6).

Conclusion

When asked what kind of film I am making, I often reply: *a character study*. The process of creating this film was also the process of creating Harvey, who was formed and reformed many times through writing, pre-production, shooting and editing. I will admit I grow to have a certain protectiveness over my characters in a way that may not always serve me as a filmmaker. I go into the process hoping to play the part of impartial observer, and find myself assuming some kind of parental role, overly preoccupied with the judgements of observers over these pretend people. I tried my best to separate myself from this impulse in this film, allowing Harvey moments of private perversions, but when it came to his sexuality I still felt uneasy placing him too cleanly into any box. Again, I usually described him as *ostensibly straight* but by the end of this process he was actively trying to cruise a man in a public bathroom. This moment was made even more explicit when on the suggestion of a test screening I removed a shot of my character tapping his foot, essentially handing back agency to Harvey, removing all uncertainty that he would be willing to engage in some physical intimacy with another man. If I were to interrogate this reticence to place too clean a label on his sexuality, it would likely stem from my own discomfort around being too closely tied to this character as I actively sought to reject using this character as a one to one cipher for my own insecurities. I think, though, going forward I will try to internalise that a film is owned by many people, not just myself. That Harvey is just as much a creation of Ben, Nick, Anastasia, Annette, Mithila, and anyone else who played a part in painting this character. As such, I simply cannot know Harvey inside and out, and those limits are exciting to me. There are still mysteries and depths to him, not because I am some brilliant writer or

filmmaker, but because he is made out of many lives and many minds and I am grateful for the collaborators and advisors that pushed me to continue allowing space for him to flourish.

As I finish writing this reflection on this process, I am on the precipice of sharing this work with its first audiences at a pair of film festivals. Having only ever produced shorts in the past, I always found comfort in being able to hide within the broader shorts programs at a festival. This film, standing all alone as my first feature film, leaves me feeling a greater connection to Harvey than ever. That I have offered very real vulnerabilities for myself in the form of these images, not only through Harvey's semi-naked body but of my own as well. Ultimately, if images can be a site of a transformative process, it is through their relational power, through both their production and dissemination. I try to have no expectations of what folks will make of it, but again, the different layers of my own life and the character's life seem to intersect as I now put these images out to a broader audience, to see what is echoed back towards me. I think ultimately, if the film is about nothing else, it is about this silent conversation that is born through the exchange of art, images and ourselves.

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