

A DROP ACROSS

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER IN FINE ART

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN FILM
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTRARIO

May 2016

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ABSTRACT

A Drop Across is a short experimental fiction film that explores parallel realities and the role of free will from a broader perspective.

Told through interweaving narratives, we meet Charlotte in three different timelines as she encounters her love interest Harlow, some for the first time and another for the last. Their dynamics are similar but expressed in variant ways: she is tough but needy; he's caring but fragile. They are inevitably drawn together and yet, can never seem to get past their own barriers to really connect.

This cycle is disturbed by a fourth, ethereal version of Charlotte, who wanders the corners of each life from another dimension. She is omniscient, seeing and feeling everything her counterparts experience, but is unable to intervene. It isn't until she finds an opening through a crack in the pavement that she breaks through to make brief contact by causing one Charlotte to fall.

Like a pebble dropped through the dimensions, that Charlotte is left altered, while the others know that something has occurred. She offered a new choice, to move beyond the world of her relationship with Harlow and deeper into the relationship with herself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It takes a village to usher a film into being and to support a working mother through a master's degree. First and foremost I must acknowledge my family for their unwavering support and willingness to juggle their lives so I could see this through. My husband Jacob Lay, mother in law Deborah Hawley and parents Christine and Carl Svoboda have done everything in their power to ensure my success. I inevitably have to thank my son Jovan, for always bringing levity, raw creativity and moments of long silence during playtime where ideas can find their way to enter.

I'd like to thank the support of my committee John Greyson and Kenneth Rogers for their rich insight and encouragement. I would especially like to acknowledge John Greyson for standing with me as I both lit and extinguished many fires, always with a smile and humour rich with wisdom. My time at York has been wonderful with the support of my fellow MFA's as well as the faculty and staff. Many thanks to the ever gracious Phillip Hoffmann, Kuowei Lee and Marcos Arriaga, who is still nice to me even after we lost York's lenses.

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INTRODUCTION

*He raised his wings and spread them wide before folding them again.
“There,” he said, “I have just brushed ten million other worlds, but they knew nothing of it.”*

Phillip Pullman
The Golden Compass

In the far reaches of an infinite cosmos, there’s a galaxy that looks just like the Milky Way, with a solar system that’s the spitting image of ours, with a planet that’s a dead ringer for the earth, with a house that’s indistinguishable from yours, inhabited by someone who looks just like you, who is right now reading this very book and imagining you, in a distant galaxy, just reaching the end of this sentence. And there’s not just one such copy. In an infinite universe, there are infinitely many. In some your doppelganger is now reading this sentence, along with you. In others, he or she has skipped ahead, or feels in need of a snack and has put the book down. In others still, he or she has, well, a less felicitous disposition and is someone you’d rather not meet in a dark alley.

Brian Green
The Hidden Reality - Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos

But is it no consolation at all to be constantly aware that, on billions of earths, one is in the company of the loved ones who, here today, are no more than a memory for us? And is it not yet another consolation, on the other hand, to think that one has tasted and will forever savour this happiness in the figure of a twin—billions of twins? Who are, nonetheless, indeed us.

Auguste Blanqui
Eternity in the Stars

I’ll always start a new notebook when I know the idea is worth keeping. In my preparation for writing this paper, I discovered the first traces of this film at the beginning of a notebook dated April 2013. From there I filled three full books, followed by multiple script drafts and a film shoot that still left me scratching my head in the edit room. Never has a film idea or its realization perplexed or fascinated me more. I gave myself a puzzle to solve and I am continuing to discover how all the pieces fit together. I hope this document can reflect that process and accompany the film in a way that will enrich its viewing and open the topic for continued exploration.

CONTEXT

As a filmmaker, my work has always approached themes of divided worlds that seek to be reunited. My first short fiction film, *One Wing* (2007), told the story of a child severed from her imagination, and her journey to reclaiming it. *It Remains Unsaid* (2011) focused on an aimless young woman who was detached from her desires in her waking life, but haunted by her lesbian attraction to her best friend in her dreams. As the dreams intensify, she is forced to bridge the gap of her confused sexuality and explore the truth of her conflicting feelings.

Merus Breach (2014) took a science fiction approach to similar themes. Set in a dystopic future where a sound technology has been created to clean the air and water, the main character Drae is among the many artists allergic to this frequency. The artists are driven to live in quarantined isolation from the outside world and their former lives. In the film, Drae is recovering from a breach in the sound-proof filtering system in the safe-house where she lives. We are in her audio-laden world of distortion and old pain. It isn't until she 'hears' the sound of a bell played by a girl outside her window that she has a moment of peace and reconnection with herself.

In all cases, the protagonists find a way to bridge the divided worlds. Through rising above their existing circumstances and facing a greater truth, they experience a shift in their perceptual state. My interest lies in the internal epiphany, in quiet moments of awakening that result in a fundamental change. It is not finding a 'solution' to the given problem that resolves my stories; rather it is the fact that the characters have made a

connection that wasn't there before. The protagonist has become more whole, and, as a result, can appreciate their situation regardless of the outcome.

The scale of each of my productions has progressed with each project. *One Wing and It Remains Unsaid* were both personally funded films that were achieved with small pro-bono crews and many favors. Shortly after completing *It Remains Unsaid* in 2011, I was contracted to travel to India with Canadian band *Tegan and Sara*, to direct a short music documentary. The film did very well and was nominated for both Juno and Grammy awards. I have no doubt this assisted me in being awarded both Ontario Arts Council and Toronto Arts Council grants from the production of *Merus Breach*. Along with a successful Indie-gogo campaign, we were able to fund a 3-day studio shoot and pay our cast and crew of over 20 people.

Merus Breach gave me the experience of what a higher production value can offer to the creative process through a stable workforce and the resources to build a world from the bottom up. Shooting in studio was a fantastic experience for my internal control-freak, allowing me room to fret over singular aesthetic details and re-take performances at will. And yet, once I brought the project into postproduction, the process-based creator in me felt restricted by our perfectly executed storyboard and script. I knew I would need to create more breathing room in my next project for the editing process. With this, the creative thrust in post-production was dominated by the sound design, which was my research focus for *Merus Breach*. With very little dialogue, I wanted to see how much of

the narrative I could convey through sound, which expressed the internalized state of the character.

There are two primary aspects of *Merus Breach* that launched me into the creation of *A Drop Across*. One was the result of the ‘sound narrative’ experiment. My background as an audio technician in the film and television industry brings a particular interest in the function of sound in cinema, as well as a certain comfort in the liminal world of audio. When screening *Merus Breach* to various audiences, I was able to see how many viewers do not share this same comfort. With each screening, I would say about 30% of the audience could stay with the story, which also depended on the quality of the sound system that was portraying the intricate sound mix. This was a valuable learning experience; I recognized that while there were obstacles in carrying a narrative through sound design, the more potent result of *Merus Breach* was the creation of a ‘space’ or a world in which the story inhabited. I knew my next project would have more concrete narrative elements such as dialogue, but my sound design focus would be on building the world (or worlds) through sculpting the subtext and ambience.

The second element that launched the story inspiration for *A Drop Across* was a moment that occurred during the shoot. There is a scene in *Merus Breach* where the main character Drae is sitting by a sunny window with her male friend Hargrave. They are drinking coffee and sending written messages, as Hargrave is deaf. During the close up of the actor, Tyler Parr, something happened with both the tenderness of his character and the chemistry between him and Drae. I can only describe it as a magic moment; it pulled

at my heartstrings in a way I knew I needed to explore further. It was a jumping off point for my next story, which would consequently involve a heterosexual couple, coffee and the actor Tyler Parr.

ORIGIN

Much of my approach to cinema is rooted in over 15 years of meditation practice and metaphysical study. This idea of divided worlds comes from my own journey as a spiritual seeker trying to reconnect with parts of myself that have been cut off due to repressive and traumatic experiences in my life. Bit by bit I continue to connect to deeper parts of my imagination, sexuality and authenticity, like the characters in my films. Each of these projects is cathartic in nature and takes me through my own journey of discovery.

The connection of art and spirituality is inseparable in my mind. In many ways, I see creativity as being the expression of the internal experience that takes place through spiritual practices such as meditation. For me, one does not exist without the other. Through meditation, I foster my inspiration and gain direction as I'm developing my films. With this, my film practice takes me places in my mind and consciousness that I cannot achieve any other way. No matter how clear I am on where I think I'm going with a story, I'm always surprised on where it takes me. For better or worse, this process-based approach provides much of the thrill I experience from creating a piece of art.

In my early years, David Lynch was a significant inspiration for me. His use of sound, his subversive, inter-dimensional storytelling and rich cinematic textures had a way of taking me out of my everyday mind and suspending me in a greater kind of thought. It was only later that I learned that Lynch was an avid practitioner of Transcendental Meditation. He would approach his creative process by opening up his mind, allowing whatever

impression or thought to come through. He would then engage with it creatively, be it through painting or film.

I have heard many note their surprise at Lynch's spiritual foundation as an artist, as his narrative themes are often dark and gory. From my experience, when someone starts to dig deeper into the buried parts of themselves and connect to a greater truth, they gain a more vivid perspective of the outside world. This creates a clearer view to see the good in things, but also to expose any deceit or darkness that might otherwise remain hidden.

Lynch's thematic interest in the evil underbelly that resides behind the naiveté of small town America is explored through films like *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Fire Walk with Me* (1992). While it is disturbing, he is looking behind a type of veil to see the truth, which can result in a transformational experience for both the filmmaker and the audience.

It is this experiential quality that I hope to achieve in my films, to bring a catharsis of healing to myself and if all goes well, offer some kind of insight for the viewer as well.

While shooting *Merus Breach* I had the opportunity to work with veteran location sound recordist Brian Day, who was part of Cronenberg's core production team in the 1980's and 90's. In a quiet moment while shooting some wild lines with the actors, he looked at me reflectively and said, "for such a nice person, you've got to be pretty disturbed to make a film like this." I laughed and said to him, "Why do you think I can be such a nice person?" It is this element of illuminating the dark, presenting the truth and suggesting a more conscious path that is the heart of my creative drive and keeps me moving towards my own wellness.

It was with this healing process in mind that I approached *A Drop Across* with a desire to explore deeper emotions surrounding a death in my life. In 2006, while travelling home to Montreal from Toronto, my partner of 4 years, Tyson Howard, had a psychotic break and killed himself by jumping from the back car a train. I was present for the event and had to deal with all the various repercussions that followed, including my own shock and grief. It has been many years of very deep internal repair. Looking back now, I recognize that along with other themes, my film *Merus Breach* also tackled the fragmented and distorted perspective of the post-traumatic stress disorder that I was emerging from at the time. I feel the fragmentation of *A Drop Across* is a continuation of that idea, but from a more lucid and existential position.

Parallel worlds are an intriguing idea when you are considering alternative trajectories of choices that have been made. The question of, “what if” can be anywhere from comforting to crazy-making when you are considering something as dramatic as suicide. In contemplating this one singular, final choice that impacted so many people and so many corners of my life, I couldn’t help but wonder at times what life would be like if he hadn’t done it. Would we still be together? Would we be happy? Would the same dynamic have played out a different way?

Once I started to move on in my life and found a new partner, for some time I would have a recurring nightmare of Tyson returning to my life. He’d appear in various ways: “Surprise! I’m not dead!” or “I was really alive all along!” In the dream I’d then have to find a way to grapple with both the relief and horror of his presence, and how to reconcile

it with my new life and partner. This made my initial approach to the multiverse more akin to a haunting than an exploration of the nature of reality. I imagined what it would be like to stumble on the ability to pierce through to other dimensions, and how it might affect a grieving person to either dwell on or resolve their past.

As the draft of the story evolved, the suicide became less and less a focus. The final version that became the shooting script has an echo of a scene that was initially involved a suicide. Now, Harlow is leaning out the window of Charlotte's apartment, looking out with a cry of defeat. The decision to write out the suicide came on an impulse and was an unexpected turning point in my creative process. All along the way I had assumed it would be a part of the story, I had not anticipated how liberating it would be to take it out. It was my opportunity to feel a sense of control over this event in which I was previously helpless.

Ultimately, this film became Charlotte's story in which Harlow was a catalyst towards a moment of self-realization. While this may seem to divert away from the narrative of Tyson's suicide, it is the more sincere version of the story. His death forced me to dig deep within myself in a way I wouldn't have otherwise known possible. While it is a common cliché that tragedy either breaks a person or makes them stronger, I did find myself facing this duality many times. Having said this, I am not rewarded by his death, many years of my life were compromised and I still wish it had never happened. But through my recovery I have created a strong bond with myself and emerged with a deeper sense of inner trust and security. In re-focusing narrative to Charlotte and her journey to

connecting to herself is, in the end, the outcome and the empowered version of the story of this suicide survivor.

SCIENCE

To contextualize my understanding of parallel worlds, the quantum mechanics theory of Many World Interpretation (MWI) has been my primary scientific reference while creating the idea for this story. It hypothesizes that reality is a many-branched tree where every possible quantum outcome exists.¹ It states that each time we make a decision; multiple trajectories are formed containing alternate results of that decision. While there are varying theories regarding finite number of these realities, the evidence points to there being an infinite amount. This means that alongside each of us exist an infinite number of variants to our reality, some similar and others vastly different to our own.

From the onset of writing this story, I was interested in the idea of the impact each world might have upon another. Although we are separated from our parallel selves, my years of spiritual study led me to wonder if we are on some level, part of the same greater consciousness. For example, if an individual self in one reality becomes stuck in an emotional depression, are the others unknowingly touched by their struggle? If one self resolves the depression, do the others have an easier time finding a solution for themselves?

I was gratified that while writing the various drafts of *A Drop Across*, quantum theorists released a new theory of “Many Interacting Worlds” (MIW), which proposes that parallel

¹ Lev Vaidman, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Many-Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics” <http://plato.stanford.edu>. January 17, 2014

worlds not only exist but also can interact with each other at a quantum level.² This idea of a ripple effect took hold for me and became, in many ways, the center of the narrative focus.

This progression was further validated during post production when a study was released that found evidence of an alternative universe ‘bumping’ against our own.³ Material was discovered in the far reaches of space with unfamiliar levels of microwave light, suggesting an interaction with another world. While this collision between universes would have occurred a few hundred thousand years after the Big Bang, its discovery seemed to have arrived just at the right time for my creative process. While editing the moment of Omni Charlotte intervening into the lives of her multi-selves, I couldn’t help but feel encouraged that in the far reaches of space and time, this kind of epiphany may well be possible.

² Hall, Deckert and Wiseman, “*Quantum Phenomena Modeled by Interactions between Many Classical Worlds*” (American Physical Society: October 23, 2014)

³ Heather Peirce, “Scientists May Have Just Discovered a Parallel Universe Leaking Into Ours”. <http://upriser.com>. March 2016

NARRATIVE INFLUENCES

When reflecting on the birth of this story idea, I recognized two narrative events that cultivated my fascination with the multiverse. Phillip Pullman's Dark Materials series, (which includes *the Golden Compass* (1995), *the Subtle Knife* (1997) and *the Amber Spyglass* (2000)), was my first exposure to the concept of parallel worlds. In these novels a war is waged on the ultimate "authority" by ripping open the dimensions, with a young boy and girl at the center.

In the second novel *The Subtle Knife*, the young hero is gifted with a knife that has the ability to cut at the sub-atomic level and into parallel worlds. He discovers it when travelling from his reality into the Cittagazze, a landing world for many inter-dimensional travellers. This world is saturated Spectres, dark shadow creatures who eat the soul of any adult in their path. As a result, the world is of full gangs of orphaned children, who cannot see the creatures and remain untouched by them until they reach puberty. While dark vampire creatures are prevalent in many fantasy canons such as the Dementors in *Harry Potter* or the Wraiths in *the Lord of the Rings*, the Specters have a specific relationship to the phenomena of parallel worlds. As the story evolves, we learn that the Specters are from the void between worlds and each time one reality pierces another, a Specter is released. These monsters are the result of parallel worlds having access to each other, like a moral consequence for those who dare to challenge the natural laws of time and space.

It was this idea of consequential contact that stayed with me for many years after reading the books. I often considered that while one may long to connect to another world, or even find a way to do it, there would always be a price to pay. This idea is not new to time travel narratives, which often relate to multiverse concepts. Crossing time-lines or parallel dimensions is typically a forbidden practice, with the understanding that if you impact a timeline with a paradox (for example, meeting your parallel or past/future self), the results can be disastrous.

An episode titled, “Yesterday’s Enterprise” from Season 3 of Star Trek: The Next Generation tackled this issue in a manner that galvanized my initial brainstorming for this project. In this episode, the enterprise encounters a spatial time-rift out of which emerges ‘Enterprise-C’, their senior model from 20 years past. When the enterprise-C appears, the landscape of the Enterprise-D is altered. It changes from a ship of exploration to a warship, some characters are no longer there, while others long gone re-appear. We learn that the Enterprise-C has escaped from a battle where they were defending the Klingons, a recent ally. But due to their emergence in the future world, the timeline changes and the peaceful ship of the Enterprise-D becomes one that is now at war with the Klingons. The episode is resolved by the Enterprise-C going back through the rift to die in battle in order to return the current timeline back to a peaceful one.

What intrigued me most in this episode is how they come to recognize that their timeline has been altered. Guinan, the friendly bartender, is an El-Aurien, a long-living species described as having a ‘unique’ relationship with time. She is able to sense the shift in the

timeline and confronts the captain with what she can only identify as a gut intuition that everything is wrong. Captain Picard has no other basis than her testament to send the ship back and he does, because of his trust in this character.

As a being that lives slightly outside of time, Guinan was my initial inspiration of the Omni character. She has a transcendental quality that allows her to see the big picture, beyond the constructs of time and space. Driven by her intuition alone, she embodies the nature of feminine wisdom, which is often beyond words or linear explanation. It struck me with this episode that it was Captain Picard's comfort with the mysteries of the universe that allowed him to trust her. It brought me to consider what might happen to a character if they were lifted above their own timeline for a moment, in order to see if they were on the right or wrong track. Perhaps this might appear in seeing an alternate fragment of themselves through their own inner eye, or in the mirror, connecting them to another potential trajectory of themselves.

Once I'd settled on writing about the multiverse, I set out to watch or re-watch many of the films that had tackled the topic. *Donnie Darko* (2001) was my first exposure to the topic in cinema, where a plane crashing into teenage Donnie Darko's room creates a splinter through the realities. The film's unique multi-genre approach and philosophical heart has continued to inspire me since its release. *Primer* (2004) and *Coherence* (2013), were both low-budget science fiction films that approach the multiverse with a cerebral, conceptual creativity. Through films such as these, I recognized that on the spectrum of

art and science, my filmmaking certainly falls more the poetic side of the science fiction genre.

From the multiverse, my research spanned out to plotlines that included time travel, reincarnation, cloning, and dissociative identity disorder (DID), where the idea of parallel selves or realities are explored in some form or another. I was curious to study the visual and narrative strategies used by filmmakers to communicate not only the concepts, but also the experiences felt by the characters in relation to being split, looped or fractured.

The television series *Orphan Black* (2013) follows a woman who discovers she is part of a cloning experiment. Watching the first season was a significant study for how one actor can play multiple characters, with actress Tatiana Maslany playing up to 9 different clones within the series. My producer, Zoe Mapp works as a technician on the show and was able to give me a lot of insider anecdotes on how the production team and the actress manage the switchovers. This was something that proved very useful in pre-production when preparing the multiple versions of Charlotte and Harlow as well as when coaching my actors.

I also explored the classic film *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957) and television mini-series *Sybil* (1976). Both films tackle Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder. The dynamic performances of Joanne Woodward and Sally Field had much in common with what I was asking of my actors: to be the same person forged into different expressions. The key difference, I realized, lies in how these

split versions were created. One of the cornerstone ideas surrounding parallel worlds is that with each choice we make, an alternate exists or is created elsewhere. When dealing with DID, these multiple versions were not created through choice, rather the opposite, they are the result of trauma, often brutal child abuse. There is no doubt that these stories have a broader implication in terms of how women must partition themselves in a reductive patriarchal world. But when reviewing them, I parted ways with the similarities when faced with the pain and hysteria of the characters themselves. While Charlotte has her issues, in the end her state of division is derived from a natural order, not as a coping tool for an otherwise unbearable situation.

Other films I explored included time travel narratives *Looper* (2012) and *Predestination* (2014), both asking interesting questions regarding the role of pre-determinism versus free-will in the unfolding of time. This question of the role of choice is at the center of *A Drop Across*, where a cycle of relationship behavior is explored. While Charlotte makes choices all through the movie, does she actually have the power to change? Or is she just running on the same unconscious hamster wheel that leads her in the other realities? Omni, in effect, is waiting to stimulate Charlotte into an internal state of awareness so she can exercise a more connected form of choice. This idea is echoed in the time travel narratives, only when they understand the full scope of their choices can they truly exercise their power of free will, and, even then, pre-determinism lurks close by to suggest otherwise.

PHILOSOPHY

Early on in the development process committee member Kenneth Rogers presented some philosophical context for the ideas I was considering surrounding the multiverse.

Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) unpublished concept of "Eternal Return" had a fundamental resonance that in some ways correlated with eastern religious ideas of reincarnation and Karma, which I had explored in my years of spiritual study. Eternal Return was based in the idea that our existence is one of infinite repetition through which one must affirm life, all of it, including pain and suffering. Nietzsche suggested that in accepting that all of life has happened before and it will happen the same again, it is our duty to embrace and take responsibility for everything. This in turn gives us the opportunity for growth and fortification. Carrying the burden of it all "makes us something higher"⁴.

While learning about Eternal Return, I couldn't help but imagine the Omni version of Charlotte playing the poised role that Nietzsche describes, carrying the burden of all that has come and will come again. While she may not whole heartedly say "yes" to all she observes in her multiple selves, she must accept it, witness it and continue forward, knowing it is part of a cycle.

Auguste Blanqui, a French political activist and philosopher wrote "*Eternity by the Stars*" in 1872, while imprisoned in isolation. While the document spans a range of

⁴ Lacewig, Micheal. "Nietzsche on eternal return." Pg. 2. <http://documents.routledge-interactive.s3.amazonaws.com>

pseudo-scientific and political theory, his ideas regarding eternity echoed aspects of Nietzsche's Eternal Return, but also much of the quantum theory I was reading on parallel universes which deals with both finite and infinite versions of the universe:

*“Every star, whatever it might be, thus exists in infinite number in time and space, not only in one of its aspects, but as it is found in every second of its duration, from birth until death. All the beings spread across its surface, big or little, animate or inanimate, share in this privilege of perennity.”*⁵

It was when Blanqui discussed our relationships to our “doubles” that I was truly struck. The quote listed at the top of this document spoke to the romantic ideal that, while imperfect, motivated the progression of *A Drop Across*. He suggests the comfort of knowing that our beloved, while lost in this existence, remains alive elsewhere, on other stars, where can be together in endless ways. These musings inspired the original title for the film, *Eternity Without Stars*. This was a play on the idea that while we may always be together through our doubles, through the eyes of our eternal, omniscient self, it all exists at the same time. When the film turned its focus more towards the story of Charlotte and I added images of actual stars, the title lost its relevance. But Blanqui's ideas were at the core of the romantic musings that initially built this film.

⁵ Blanqui, Louis-Auguste. “*Eternity According to the Stars*.” Translated by Matthew H. Anderson. CR: The New Centennial Review, volume 9, Winter 2009

PORTAL TO THE MULTIVERSE

Starting in early 2013 until pre-production in summer 2015, I drafted enough versions of the script to fill a few parallel worlds. Many things varied: the point of view, narrative circumstance and my approach towards the ideas and themes, which ranged from experimental to highly literal. Within this development process, two core elements stayed the same: the relationship of Harlow and Charlotte as the narrative focus and coffee as the connective point between each reality.

In order to pierce the multiverse, I knew I would have to work a type of portal into the story. My interest in the subtle or internal magic of the individual steered me away from something as dramatic as a spatial anomaly or enchanted object that cuts through the fabric of reality. Instead, I considered the power of our daily rituals and how they might link us to our parallel selves.

As a passionate coffee drinker, the high point of my days is often when I order or make myself a coffee. I typically use precise steps to render it just how I like it, or learn how to carefully order my coffee from select baristas around town. Why all the fuss around my daily stimulant? Because when it is just right, I am offered a transcendental moment. I rise above my worries and enjoy the earthly pleasures of hot bitter awareness. For us in the West, we often live without the daily rituals of religious life, so for many of us, it's moments like these that allow us to pause and feel a sense of connection or control in life.

It was this kind of careful ritualized behavior that was prevalent in the early drafts of the script. Initially, Charlotte was dead and Harlow was grieving her loss. When he took on the task to make coffee in her precise manner, he caught a flash of her doing the same in his kitchen mirror. The coffee preparation was his access to another reality and the more he did it, the closer he got to making contact with her across the multiverse. In another draft, both characters were alive, but Charlotte was preparing to leave Harlow. While having her first sip of coffee, she sees another version of herself in the mirror and later, a different version of Harlow, putting her decision to end the relationship into question.

In many of my notes surrounding these drafts, I contemplated the idea of a loose thread or cracked mirror, something innately broken across the different realities that requires acknowledgement and mending. I realized that in a short film format and with a limited budget, the soul-perspective of the multi-selves was a challenge to express.

OMNI

It was through this desire to represent an over-arching view of the multiverse that emerged as a fourth element in the narrative, through the character now known as Omni. Omni is the omniscient version of Charlotte that is unattached to linear reality, the part that lives in awareness of all of her incarnations.

Initially, she appeared as the “woman at the wall”, a lonely figure pacing beside a large textured wall. The wall represented a giant record keeper, Omni’s access point to observing the repeating behavior of her human-selves. Bound to the wall, when she runs her fingers over the cracks and imperfections of it, images of the various Charlottes flash in her mind.

As production approached and the issues around building a large wall became more daunting, I sought strategies to simplify Omni’s locale. This evolved into bringing her closer to the fabric of this reality, which allowed me to phase her in and out of moments with the other Charlottes. With coffee established as the portal-zone to the narrative, to make a café her wandering ground seemed natural. This also gave me a physical portal through which the other Charlottes could circulate.

In her development, it was difficult to find a direct reference in which to affiliate Omni. People often ask if she is guardian angel to Charlotte, to which I reply, “she IS Charlotte.” And yet, because she exists in a state of all-knowing, she could be described as Charlotte’s ‘higher self’. The only difference is that Omni is not terribly happy in her

enlightened state. Instead she is bound by human Charlotte's inability to evolve past a certain point in her consciousness. While Omni holds a position of great perspective, she doesn't not have the power of free will that Charlotte has in terms of advancing the path of her soul. So until human Charlotte is stirred awake, Omni can only watch.

In my research, the most comparable character I have found to Omni is a Marvel comic character, Uatu the Watcher. The Watchers are a highly advanced race of immortals that have many advanced psychic abilities including eyes that serve as record-keepers. Uatu is an all-knowing observer, who swore an oath of non-interference after offering a new world advanced knowledge that eventually led them to self-destruction. He instead watches Earth from his observatory in the blue area of the Earth's moon, where he has stood silent for millions of years. With permission from the 'timekeepers,' he studies Earth's alternate realities, with the ability to see forward and backward in time with ease.

Of course, for dramatic purposes, Uatu does interfere from time to time, as does Omni when she sees her opening. Since the onset of her introduction into the narrative of this story, her moment of contact with one of her earth-selves has been the climax point of the film. The ability of Charlotte to see or feel her omniscient self, even for a brief moment, is the silent epiphany that allows her to make a choice that takes her closer to her evolution.

With this, Omni gives the Charlotte's ultimate agency over their destiny. When asked if this film was a feminist commentary, I was resistant to reply, as this was never foremost

in my mind when crafting the story. While I am an unflinching feminist, as a female filmmaker it can feel tiresome being asked about the gender politics of your films. Are men ever asked these questions? Perhaps if they portray a powerful female lead, which in my mind, should not be such a foreign concept anymore.

I have central female character, which is a comfortable point of view for me to represent. And yet I recognize the feminist nature of the suggestion that her empowerment is derived not from the man in her life, but from her internal world of mystery. To me, this is the natural order that is innately correct for all humans to address their own internal battles first. Still, I understand this is not the way women are typically portrayed.

Contemporary Science Fiction, in many ways, is a genre dear to my heart because of the agency it offers its heroines. Even growing up watching X-Men cartoons, I could find a hero in Jean Grey, whose power was so intense she would transform into the sub-Goddess of the Phoenix.

In many ways, *Omni* is the expression of how a woman (or person, as Harlow has an *Omni* too) contains all the keys to their self-realization inside their mind and soul. While the external world, in this case a relationship with a man, is there to stimulate experiences and growth, ultimately the quest for knowledge resides in the “cosmic self”. This does challenge the patriarchal ideas that women require the structure and systems of male control to tether their ‘wild’ nature. This also speaks to what I mention regarding the parallel of the multiverse with Dissociative Identity Disorder, where women must partition themselves to be functional and accepted patriarchal culture. In essence, what

Omni subverts is that there is no external authority and set of rigorous rules to follow as suggested by most religious doctrines. There is no great patriarchal God looking down from a cloud cover, creating a list of checks and balances that we must face when we die. Instead it is our own self, who in an all-seeing, detached form stands along side us each step of the way, ready for us to meet our potential through the drive of our own free will.

VISUAL INFLUENCES

Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) has been a prominent formal inspiration in the development of this project. In the loose narrative of the film, a group of unnamed aristocrats are convening at a hotel. A man approaches a woman and insists they met the year before, implying a romance, but she denies ever meeting him. The film then spins into a cyclical recounting of his memory, her resistance and the man's confrontation with another man we assume to be her husband. The landscape of the hotel along with select objects become part of the layered, repetitive storytelling, where we are shown the same places and people but with different wardrobes, different expressions. Voice-over carries the story in a dream-like manner that lifts the film into a stream-of-consciousness state. It could be a multiverse, or a recounted memory, a dream or fantasy.

The visual expressionism from this period of European cinema has always been my landmark for cinematic storytelling. Antonioni's *La Notte* (1961) and Ingmar Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) were both films I studied while developing my stylistic strategy for *A Drop Across*. When Omni as the "Woman at the Wall" became a part of the story, I saw an opportunity to attempt a formalism that is used in Antonioni's films. These include high contrast lighting, aristocratic glamour and subtle performances that suggest a deeper malaise. For some time, I was committed to shooting the film in 16mm black and white, until budgetary limitations ruled out the use of celluloid.

I also decided against 16mm black and white when I recognized that color would be an important tool to express the multiverse dynamic, with each reality embodying its own

color scheme. This strategy was influenced by Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain* (2006), which also has a multiverse theme, but it is expressed through the ideas of reincarnation, following a couple in three lifetimes as they seek the fountain of youth. Color plays an important role in connecting the stories: rich golden yellow is woven through each of the lives in varying intensity. In the contemporary life, it is a subtle background tone that gives you enough ambience that when you are brought to the future life, where the man is a meditating yogi in a golden bubble, the transition is fluid yet apparent.

VISUAL STRATEGY

As pre-production approached, I turned my focus to creating a visual strategy that would connect the worlds together. In the shooting script we arrived at four distinct worlds with three versions of human Charlotte: Party, Prim and Coffee, plus Omni in her liminal world of the inter-dimensional coffee shop. I knew that the storytelling would occur in a layered montage, with a lot of back and forth between stories, so visual cues would be important to keep the viewer engaged. Using the online blogging site tumblr, I created a visual storyboard with stock photographs found on google images as a way to visualize my script. Through this I experimented with visual patterns, objects and plot points that could create a greater flow between the four interacting realities.

Conversations started early with my Artistic Director James Bolton regarding the strategies we would use to both connect and differentiate the four versions of both Charlotte and Harlow. Sketches were drawn with a range of costume designs, with Omni proving the biggest challenge to pin down. As inspired by the early 1960's films listed above, I was initially quite intent on Omni having a moody, chiseled glamour. But as we came closer to production, we recognized the risk of creating time-based references to Omni would not serve an intentionally ambiguous character. We opted to dress her in a more neutral formality that would keep her timeless, a strategy we applied to dressing Omni Harlow as well.

“Jewel tones” became the color scheme that would connect all four incarnations of the characters, each one expressing a different note on the color palate. This color palate was

included in the casting call when we rallied extras for the various group scenes and eventually the lighting scheme as well. Hair and makeup were explored based on the character traits and time-efficiency, but we could not address Charlotte until she was cast a few weeks before shooting.

Harlow was cast early on in the project: as mentioned, after working with Tyler Parr in *Merus Breach*, I was eager to work with him again. He is both an actor and director with a keen interest in exploring character subtlety and emotional layering, so we understand each other well. Our challenge with Tyler was that following our production, he was scheduled to play Poseidon in a theatre production of *Trojan Woman*. That meant we could not remove his beard for any of the incarnations of Harlow as planned. James went to work researching different grooming methods of how to alter the looks of beards, along with variations for his hair.

I initially started pre-production with longtime collaborator Yoann Malnati as my cinematographer. The formalism I initially imagined suited his approach well, which is prevalent in *Merus Breach*, where as Director of Photography he used careful and precise camera movements and studio-based lighting schemes. A month before we were set to shoot, work commitments became too demanding and he dropped out of the project.

While this left me in a liminal panic for a couple of weeks, another longtime collaborator stepped in to take Yoann's place. Joffery Saintrap, who served as my editor on both

Merus Breach and *It Remains Unsaid*, was available and interested in expanding his Cinematography portfolio.

Joffery brought a different approach to the project. His background as an experimental filmmaker helped him to understand my process-based approach and he brought many out-of-the-box ideas to the table. While I had a clear narrative strategy, I wanted to have options to move the story pieces around in post-production. His experience as an editor insisted on coverage, so we would have various options to compile the scenes.

Since the interweaving of lives was going to be enough of a hurdle in the storytelling, we decided to shoot the three Charlottes and Harlows in a down-to-earth style, with a mix of hand-held and stationary camera. This would contrast the world of Omni, which maintained a formal approach, using primarily dolly shots to give her a smooth, otherworldly quality. Close-up and ultra-close-up shots were a priority to express the ‘inner workings’ of the characters.

With only four weeks before shooting, we entered into an intensive planning phase that included producer Zoe Mapp, James Bolton, Joffery Saintrap and first assistant director Alejandra Simmons. Once the shot list was established, the scheduling of a multiverse shoot took the organizational power of five people, each with their own department and set of issues to represent. With four character change-overs in make-up and costume, split-screen lock-off shots and various locations to cover, over a number of evenings and

many sticky notes on a wall, a schedule was achieved and pre-production was officially launched.

AUDITIONS AND REHERSALS

We posted auditions for the female lead a few weeks before shooting and had a generous response. Art director James joined me as a second set of eyes and Tyler Parr graciously auditioned with each contender, giving us a good sense of potential chemistry and physical compatibility. While there were numerous talented performers who arrived, none of them stood out like Lynn Rafferty's performance. She was raw, present and dynamic in the role. We found out after she was a prominent television actor from Ireland who was looking to build up her North American actor reel, so would be willing to work on a small low-budget project. We all agreed, despite her significant height over Tyler, she was the best match for the role.

Once cast, we scheduled two sets of daylong rehearsals that included make-up trials and fittings as well. Together we worked through each scene, playing them out and discussing the motivations behind each beat. It was important to establish the relationship patterns between Harlow and Charlotte and how each version expressed the same emotional dynamics in different ways.

When writing the relationship of Harlow and Charlotte, I was interested in the longing of human beings to connect with each other and yet, if we actually achieve it, how uncomfortable and fleeting it can be. Within rehearsals, we explored this in-and-out movement that was written into each scene, their draw towards each other and then the need to pull away. Together we worked through the underlying emotions for each

character that motivates these conflicting movements such as the desire to connect, the need to be safe and the drive to control.

In all three versions of Harlow and Charlotte, we aimed to express the same emotional struggle in various forms. Both characters have their own dualistic dynamic. Charlotte is dominant, controlling, impulsive and yet very vulnerable under the surface, where her need to connect resides. Harlow has bravado and self-deprecating humour, but wears his vulnerability and emotion on the outside, expressing his need to connect.

The varying expressions of Harlow were initially a challenge for Tyler, who struggled to see the connection between the tender and depressive Party Harlow and the brazen quality of Business Harlow. This brought me to reflect that Harlow was inevitably based on my late partner, who hid his inner helplessness and sadness quite deep and behind many masks. Through rehearsal, we explored the different ways people cover up these kinds of feelings, how they compensate and make the best of them.

Another discussion that dominated our rehearsals was the conceptual idea of the multiverse and the power of choices within it. It was Lynn who started to identify the moments in the key scenes which were defining choices “This is where a new reality would branch off”, she would comment, noting that these turning points were typically where the characters choose to continue on towards their connection or not. For example, the moment in the alleyway (when Party Harlow invites Party Charlotte for a coffee after he has just witnessed her throwing up) is a crossroads of choice. There is another reality

where she doesn't go with him or where he doesn't stay to invite her to continue their date.

It was during one of these discussions that Lynn shared a story about her dad choosing to walk a different way home from work one day and discovering a man attempting suicide on a bridge. Her father always noted that if he hadn't made that different choice, he might have not been there to talk the guy down. This inspired a re-write of a dialogue scene between Party Charlotte and Harlow, where we improvised this idea and came out with a new approach. While in the end I didn't end up using this scene in the final film, creating it together through improvisation enriched our collaborative process. Overall by the end of rehearsals, we were a strong team with a similar vision, which enriched the production experience for everyone.

PRODUCTION

Our four days of production were launched with the typical rush of last minute details and sleepless nights. We shot over the unseasonably hot Labour Day weekend in September, which is always interesting when there are days spent in close quarters and no air-conditioning due to noise. We kept the locations close to my home (which was the party location), so we could use it as storage for gear and food. I managed to rent the local coffee shop for a low rate and a friend lent us her loft for day two when we were shooting Party Charlotte's apartment scenes.

Cajoling sufficient extras from my pool of friends and acquaintances was a challenge, as there was a demand for thirty odd people in various locations to fill up our public spaces. Many crewmembers stepped in to be a part of the background action, which was skillfully managed by my first and third AD's. Overall, shooting on day one went surprisingly smoothly, with a range of exterior and interior shots. We finished with the alley scene behind my house, where construction on my garage offered the perfect raw look.

It wasn't until the morning of day two, when we were filming at the loft, that we discovered some significant challenges. After shooting all the Charlotte's in the bathroom mirror, Joffery asked to change the lens and we discovered that the lens case was missing. A mad search began in the truck, the loft and eventually my house and neighborhood. An hour later, since we still hadn't found them, we rented lenses as we couldn't afford to lose any more time. Questions abounded: were they stolen? Lost? Misplaced? It could have

been an easy moment for blame and frustration to bubble up, but the crew remained professional and focused on the task at hand. Once the rented lenses arrived, we continued shooting, but I can still see the tension in some of the apartment shots when I watch them today.

My production manager and fellow MFA Lesley Johnson took over the task of managing the lens situation so I could focus on my work as a director. After day two we were exclusively at the coffee shop, shooting mid day and into the evening with many change-overs for both Lynn and Tyler. I would get updates on the phone calls she was making to the school, the insurance company and eventually the police. As the days continued it seemed more plausible we had a theft on our hands.

Despite this, the shooting generally went smoothly. My first AD Alejandra had to work hard to keep up with a schedule that bounced around and had many specific notes of shots that were essential to the poetry of the film. Because we weren't able to find a continuity supervisor, some of these moments were lost in the shuffle, which was a humbling lesson for me regarding the importance of this role.

One of the most exciting moments of the shoot was the evening of day three. We were scheduled to shoot Omni's exteriors in the evening, but when we finished early inside, we saw that we could catch dusk if we moved quickly. The dolly tracks were already laid outside, so as 'magic hour' fell, Lynn paced the sidewalk and Joffery and his team chased her and the light on the dolly. It was during this time the experimental filmmaker in me

was able to come out and breathe. I was flying on intuition and fully in the moment, responding to the circumstances, which was true to the nature of the Omni character.

We shot our last scene late into the evening of day four. As we wrapped the last shot, the police arrived to take statements from the crew; it was a strange way to end what had been an overall fantastic experience for everyone involved. The next few days was a rush of phone calls, paperwork and moment to moment recounting of the events of the stolen lenses, not your typical way of closing a film shoot.

A few nights later I was awoken late at night by a knock on my door. It was the police who had taken our statements; they had heard a radio call about a large case of lenses being turned in. I was taken down the long alleyway behind my house and sure enough, there was the case. Whoever had stolen them had decided it was too much trouble to sell them, so they had returned them to the police. I showed them the serial numbers and returned home half an hour later with the case in hand. It felt like a miracle! Once they were safely returned to York University, I could finally let the dust settle and turn my focus towards postproduction.

POST PRODUCTION

Once we completed production in September I had a few weeks to let the footage breathe, as the editor I had lined up was not available until early November. I met Will Cyrl when he did the color grade for *Merus Breach*. He had a keen interest in science fiction and was eager to join the team when I asked him to edit *A Drop Across*. As a full time editor, Will works mostly on commercials and reality television. Initially, I thought his grounding in mainstream storytelling would benefit the project by making the narrative more broadly accessible. Once we came together to start the edit, this vantage point soon proved to work against our collaboration. I realized that while Will was a great technical editor, he wasn't really interested in poetry or working with abstract ideas. Instead he approached the non-linear parts of my storytelling as a problem that needed to be fixed.

After he presented me with an assembly that was more like a butchered version of my script, I realized that we weren't compatible. We parted ways on friendly terms and it was a good learning experience for me. I had worked with editor Joffery Saintrapt on my two previous fiction films, where an experimental approach was the natural way of working. I realized moving forward that I needed more than a technician. I was looking for a collaborator who could resonate with my vision and build on it.

I set out to find another editor, but enough time had passed that I knew it was a tall order to fill if I was going to meet my deadlines. One by one, my potential connections fell through, leaving me to take up the editor's chair myself. In some ways, I knew it was for the best. *A Drop Across* is a very personal film and which I designed to be discovered in

post-production. My discomfort was directed more towards the mechanics of editing fiction, because while I've edited many of my early experimental and documentary projects, I have always stayed on the other side of the console for my fiction projects.

I lumbered my way through to an assembly and then a consequent rough cut. I played with my original structure to clarify the single narrative stories as well as their connection to Omni. My greatest challenge was with the final sequence, which I had intended to be shot in slow motion to express a feeling of suspended time. We were on set and ready to shoot when we realize the RED camera we were using did not shoot the slow motion we were looking for. I didn't have the time to re-think my visual strategy, so we shot it as is. I was left with real-time footage that degraded in quality if I slowed it down with my editing software. After many failed attempts, I was unable to resolve this issue and began to feel saturated by my footage. Following the presentation of my rough cut to my committee, despite their very stimulating feedback, I hit a wall that left me creatively paralyzed for a number of weeks.

My supervisor John Greyson was convinced that the solution to my ending was to introduce a still-frame motif, as pioneered by Chris Marker's short experimental film *La Jetée* (1962). I briefly attempted the approach but felt uninspired by its impact. Around the same time, my husband was exploring his unblocked Netflix account and discovered an American television adaptation of the Terry Gilliam film *Twelve Monkeys* (1995). The television series *12 Monkeys* (2015) aired on the Syfy channel and just happened to be picked up by Netflix in India. Without thinking much about it, I joined him one evening

to watch the first episode. Within the first five minutes my heart was in my throat. The lead actor of the show, Aaron Stanford, in his character of James Cole, was the spitting resemblance of my late partner Tyson.

I could barely make it through the first episode. It was as if the part of my brain that formed while I was with Tyson was suddenly being stimulated with high intensity shocks. It was at once both painful and satisfying, like a longing that I had buried deep inside myself was being addressed. The trauma of his death left my relationship with his memory in a convoluted state for many years. In the early days, I could only think about him for a few minutes without the PTSD kicking in and sending my mind into a series of loops. As we made it to the end of the show, I was baffled by the intensity of the experience. The credits rolled and a line caught my eye, “based on *La Jetée*”. I had forgotten that *12 Monkeys* was an adaptation of the film John had recommended to me only days before. I’m never one to ignore experiences of synchronicity and recognized while I was blocked in the editor’s chair that perhaps another kind of process was at work in moving me forward with the project.

In a sense, Tyson’s apparition was a type of full circle for me. At this point of my process, his part in the story was less in my conscious mind than at its onset. This full circle effect was mirrored by the narrative in the *12 Monkeys* series and later when I finally re-watched *La Jetée*. In the story, a man travels through time to find the source of the virus that has eliminated most of the human race in his future reality. He is drawn through the process by an original memory, one that does not make sense until the end of

the story, when he realizes the source of the memory is his child self watching his adult self die. I was brought back to some of my original ideas concerning the narrative of *A Drop Across* being a cycle, which stimulated new ideas around how to sculpt my troublesome ending. I began to experiment with placing the folding mirror scene at the beginning and end of the film, connecting the two moments of direct contact with Omni and Barista Charlotte into one.

I quickly watched the first season of *12 Monkeys*, which perpetuated a very profound emotional unlocking for me. Tyson was not only my partner of 4 years, but he was also a creative collaborator. Through re-visiting his memory in a new way, I found myself accessing a type of creative memory, a state of mind I had shut off after he died. Despite the initial grief, I was both relieved and excited to reconnect with this part of myself, like finding the hidden treasure I didn't know I was looking for. It was here that I was able to see the story in a new way. I realized the narrative focus of my film needed to shift to focus on Charlotte with Harlow as more of an accessory character. For the overarching structure, I moved the point of view to rest with Omni Charlotte, which clarified her character and served to unify the other lives.

In earlier drafts of the script, Harlow was always looking up at the stars. While riding the bus a few days later, I had a thought: "what if the stars were looking back down at them?" I found some stock footage of stars via the Hubble website and used dialogue from the scene when Party Charlotte describes saving a girl from committing suicide. I was on the right track: the stars giving the story room to breathe, but the dialogue felt too literal. I

scheduled time to record extra dialogue with Lynn, but struggled to write words in advance. When she arrived for the session, I asked her to improvise various renditions of the fall to the floor depicted in the climax of the film, from the voice of various Charlottes. I imagined it to be like echoes from other realities in the multiverse, where an infinite number of Charlottes experienced some version of this fall.

It was at this juncture that I started to work on the sound design. As I mentioned previously, audio was always at the center of the strategy for the film. My primary focus was to create a spatial quality that would speak of Omni's reach into the worlds. While gathering sound effects for the diegetic audio of the film, I came across interesting files related to natural disasters, which included earthquakes, volcano lava, avalanches and tornadoes. These rumbling, textured sounds offered a rich under layer from which to build the Omni soundscape, and the transformative significance of the earth's disasters was not lost to me in the process. This step in the process brought everything together, sculpting with the audio the ambient feeling or state I was aiming to create.

Early in the editing process I was sharing my various cuts with composer Leslie Ting. A classically trained violinist, she assembled an ensemble of both classical and electronic musicians to develop a soundtrack for the film. The music offered a perfect accompaniment to the deeper, guttural qualities of the sound design, balancing the emotional spectrum and setting an overall tone for the stories to connect.

After a screening with a hand picked group of new eyes, I was able to culminate my final feedback into a fine cut. From there I spend two days in the sound studio at York to sculpt my sound design and sound mix into an intensive, multi-layered composition. I was eager to bring the project into color correction, as I was awarded a professional color grading with Alter Ego. This step offered the final seal on the visual strategy; bringing each incarnation of Charlotte its own tone and enhancing the otherworldly quality of Omni. Finally all of the pieces of the puzzle had come together and the unified composition of *A Drop Across* was complete.

CONCLUSION

In reflection on the process as a whole, it's clear to me that this has been a master's thesis, not just a simple film. It has taken me through my paces personally, creatively and intellectually in a way that has expanded my craft and enriched my practice as a filmmaker. Admittedly, I am still haunted by the many potential versions of this film I could still make and that potentially have been made by my counterparts in other realities. Perhaps the next scientific breakthrough for quantum science will be that peephole into another world, where I can see what those other films might be like. Or, if the multi-verse ripple effect holds true, one of my multi-selves will think of a new idea and guide me to the next project. Somehow, I don't think I'm finished with exploring the ideas around parallel worlds, or perhaps they are not finished with me.

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