HEIGHT MARKERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines formal conceits and production processes of my 75-minute narrative fiction film, *Height Markers*. I will focus on the evolution of the film's formal identity, through exercises in art cinema narration, on the process of working with actors in a psychologically investigative and improvisational manner, on utilizing the cinematic opportunities present in real locations, and on writing the film in the cutting room. *Height Markers* follows Neva and her son Aaron, on Aaron's last two days before leaving home, as Aaron seeks closure after a bad break up, and Neva contemplates a life without her son nearby. They are both haunted by memories of Aaron's late father, Ted. The film is an examination of the ever-present role of memory in shaping our perceptions of love and loss and tries to capture a sense of being unable to fully understand those you love the most.

This project is dedicated to Mom and Dad.

I could not be where I am without standing on your shoulders.

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The Original Narrative Trajectory

The first iteration of my thesis project was a 17-page script for a narrative short featuring an Indian-Canadian single mother and son. I originally described it as follows:

> *Strong willed, Indian immigrant Violet lives with her son Aaron, a late bloomer yearning for independence; they clash as he tries to move out. Mid-pandemic, a shocked Violet receives news of her estranged father's death in India. Not wanting a solitary end, she re-evaluates her relationship with Aaron; helping him move out, deciding that she needs to sacrifice her personal feelings for his happiness and to leave a positive legacy on him. While intersecting factors – such as class, culture and race – do set the backdrop, rather than adopting a macro-political lens, I want to intimately examine an intergenerational relationship involving a parent's sacrifice for their child. Observing my own immigrant mother, I am compelled by themes of legacy and sacrifice. Being isolated from her homeland, I witnessed her struggle to find meaning in her current life. I want my work to connect with fellow existentially disenfranchised immigrants in cultures that prioritize total assimilation. The research means to this end is a disciplined examination of the immigrant mother's psyche on screen, through a filmmaking style that prioritizes authenticity of performance and ease of production. The main narrative tool I will employ to achieve authenticity is a documentary-inspired shooting style which creates realistic immersion in the content of the character's daily lives, rather than prioritizing mise-en-scène storytelling. While being shot like a character documentary, the film will make no claim to factual truth, but rather an emotional and psychological truth.*

This first iteration of the script, called *Violet,* was drastically different from what *Height Markers* ended up becoming. The evolution of the project is reflective of my refining of what I wanted to explore cinematically, but also the impact my personal life had on the development process.

Lessons from the Test Shoot and Dealing with Personal Subject Matters

As a part of Manfred Becker's *Selected Topics in Production* class (a class designed to aid with thesis development), I planned and filmed a test shoot – a scene from *Violet* – where I played Aaron and my mother played Violet, since at the time, I was considering casting myself and my mother in my thesis film. Chasing a *Dogme 95*-esqe aesthetic and building on my own shooting style from *Murder Balloon* (2020), my fourth-year undergraduate project, the scene was shot with two camcorders and made use of highly improvised blocking and dialogue. The plot of the scene focused on the moment where Violet finds out Aaron plans on moving out and has already signed a lease without letting her know. An argument ensues.

I workshopped this scene for days with my mother, who had not an iota of performance experience or significant knowledge of filmmaking practice. Though I am extremely close to my mother, our relationship has endured much strain over the years, much of it stemming from a cultural gap that arose from her growing up in India and I, in Canada. The workshopping process drew us, in part, closer, however it was extremely difficult to – all at once – direct, perform and gain enough distance from the subject matter to healthily engage in an argument scene with my mother. The subject matter featured unresolved issues that are best left to a therapy room rather than hastily laid out on the big screen. In addition to the personal difficulties in dealing with the subject matter – acting and directing in an improvisational manner proved too difficult for me, as I had no formal acting training; to direct I needed to have my mind on the big picture, but to act, I needed to live in the moment – both of which were too challenging to do simultaneously with any degree of consistency. This was a task made even more difficult by some health issues I was undergoing at the time.

Despite it receiving positive feedback in Manfred's class, the test-shoot convinced me to change the fundamental narrative trajectory and political identity of the project, so I could best focus on developing my skills directing actors. As a result, I decided to cast professional actors and have a healthy distance from the (plot) subject matter of the film, while still exploring themes that were personal and that I found compelling. I was not then, nor am I now, interested in narrative cinema as therapy or as a means to explore personal unresolved emotions or relationships. I desired rather for the project to help develop my cinematic vocabulary and a mode of production that could work with any subject matter, personal or not. I find myself best able to articulate ideas and emotions with which I am not currently juggling and have had to time to grow wise about. *Violet* is a film I will have to make later in life.

A Reimagining of the Project

David Bordwell's seminal essay "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice" (1979) outlines mid-twentieth century European art cinema and its formal conventions in opposition to classical Hollywood narrative storytelling. Though containing some generalizations, as acknowledged by Bordwell in 2008[1], the essay offers practical distinctions between Hollywood narrative film practice and an art "mode of film practice, [which possesses] a definite historical existence, a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures." (Bordwell, 151) According to Bordwell, classical Hollywood narration, or 'classical narrative', has psychologically causal storytelling, and a protagonist that embarks on a journey to achieve a specific goal, who then enters into conflict and resolves their conflict, be it positively or negatively, by the end of the film. A protagonist in a classical narrative will have clearly defined

[1] Bordwell, David. The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice. In *Poetics of Cinema*, 158. Routledge, 2008.

desires and goals. Art film narration, contrarily – though still relying on psychological causation – lacks characters with well-defined desires or goals.

> "Characters may act for inconsistent reasons […] or may question themselves about their goals […]. Choices are vague or nonexistent. Hence a certain drifting episodic quality to the art film's narrative. Characters may wander out and never reappear; events may lead to nothing. The Hollywood protagonist speeds directly toward the target; lacking a goal, the art-film character slides passively from one situation to another." (Bordwell, 153)

Bordwell further examines, that the lack of psychologically well-defined characters, allows art films to have psychologically complex characters; realistic characters. In classic Hollywood narration, characters' motivations are simplified, in order to yield a clear cause and effect narrative, which requires a sort of psychological reductionism. Art cinema narration, therefore, can allow for a more nuanced exploration of a character's psychological reality because it shies away from said reductionism.

> "Ideally, the film hesitates, suggesting character subjectivity, life's untidiness, and author's vision. Whatever is excessive in one category must belong to another. Uncertainties persist but are understood as such, as obvious uncertainties, so to speak. Put crudely, the slogan of art cinema might be "When in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity." (Bordwell, 156)

Much of my formal film-production education, screenwriting education and cinematic consumption prior to my MFA had been centered around Hollywood narration with a powerfully motivated protagonist chasing a clearly defined goal. As a consequence, most of my prior short film work has sought to develop my ability to translate my ideas into a classical Hollywood narrative mode of practice. *Murder Balloon* features an insecure young boy searching for his mischievous friend's approval, but after being pressured by the friend to partake in a risky prank, realizes what imitating his friend truly entails, and consequently becomes secure in his own personality. Continuing in the vein of having clearly motivated characters embarking on a neatly resolved moral journey, *Violet* was written in an explicitly Hollywood narrative style. Violet

pursues a solitary goal of getting her son to stay, faces obstacles in said goal, and reaches a realization at the end, which resolves her issues. However, one of the main desires I had with the project, as I stipulated in an early precis document, was to "explore muddled and 'mysterious' psychological manifestations: moments when a person's actions do not imply clear intellectualized intentions, subconscious or not." It became increasingly clear, as I workshopped the *Violet* script, that a classical narrative mode of storytelling was no longer the ideal way to focus on the depth of characterization I wanted to reach, since I wanted to rely on ambiguity to evoke psychological complexity.

Thus, after considering that I wanted a subject matter with a greater distance from my personal life, as well as a departure from a classical Hollywood style of narration, I decided to fundamentally rework the story to allow for an exploration of cinematic language I had not yet utilized, and to develop practical skills which would prepare me for feature-length storytelling. Often labeling myself as a ruthless pragmatist, I created a rough list of practical goals I wanted the new direction of my thesis project to achieve.

I) I wanted to focus on developing my skills in directing actors – so having a character study with longer, dialogue-heavy scenes (like the films of Mike Leigh, Kenneth Lonergan, or John Cassavetes) was an ideal option.

II) I wanted to get a sense of working on a longer-form project. Thus far, I had only made shorts under 15 minutes, and my career goal is to make features, so this project could be a mid-length stepping stone.

III) I wanted to try (both in form and content) things that I had not before, without regard for what I thought would work or would not. To do this in a safe way, I would have a vague, cause/effect narrative through-line that I believed would work as a self-contained, tonally consistent character study – but then shoot as much digressive, exploratory footage and scenes as I could afford. This way, if

certain ideas failed, I could cut together a coherent film regardless – and if those experiments worked, I chanced stumbling upon something novel to my experience. This positioned the project as much more of an exercise than an intentional, pointed endeavour in storytelling.

The summation of these three goals formed the guiding philosophy of the entire project: to maximize production value by minimizing coverage and adapting the story to the cinematic opportunities the locations we were in offered. Minimizing coverage would have two positive effects toward my goals:

I) It would require long-take master shots that tested the ability of the actors and myself to create a fluid scene that could sustain itself throughout, without the need for an editor to control the pacing or rhythm. This allowed me to learn more about the actor's craft, preparation and rehearsal.

II) It would be significantly cheaper per minute of final film. Fewer set-ups means less time spent on each scene, means more possible scenes that can be written and covered for the same cost.

Adapting the story to utilize cinematic opportunities that the locations offered would make it seem to a viewer like the locations were tailored for the film's story (which would need significantly more time and a higher budget) when in fact, doing it the other way around is far cheaper, at the cost of creative control with respect the mise en scène. This would mean spontaneous re-writes or cinematography changes would take place as the locations were scouted or as we shot in new outdoor locations we had not scouted at all. In the final film, there are two prominent examples of tailoring the story to the location. First is the reoccurring moment of Neva picking up Aaron's shoes off the staircase, which highlights the routine of motherhood by juxtaposing the frustration she feels at tripping on the shoes when Aaron is young, the repetition of it when he is older, and ultimately the emptiness she feels when she has no shoes to pick up.

This detail was not written, rather I happened on this idea when we were shooting the pre-visualization (a sort of test-shoot which I will elaborate on, in section 3.3) and I was looking for a long take master-shot solution for covering several pages of dialogue. I noticed that by placing the camera in the center of the living room, I could pan to the dining table, front door (with a view of outside), and kitchen, thus allowing me to combine several shot-listed shots into one, reducing setup time (fig. 1). An unintended consequence of this new shot, was that I also saw the stairs in the reflection of a mirror. Initially, I thought this was an issue because a light was meant to be placed on the stairs, but then I realized this could be used to place additional visual information that could further theme and characterization: Aaron's shoes.

Image 1: A Still from a test-shoot/location scout

The second prominent example of utilizing cinematic opportunities the location offered is the recurring amphibian imagery in the film that is used to connect Ted's love for nature to Aaron's love for nature, which culminates in Aaron watching Ted's old tape and discovering a connection to his father he never knew existed. I will elaborate on how this moment was discovered in section 3.5.

Once I was clear on the newfound philosophy and goals of the project, I started to write a script that would allow me to achieve them. That script, with all its digressions, long, improvisation-heavy scenes and meandering sequences, is what ended up becoming *Height Markers*.

Formal Consequences of Pragmatic Choices

Violet had many surreal intrusions into the diegetic world as well as dream sequences to capture the protagonist's inner world. Unlike *Height Markers, Violet* was fairly restricted to a single protagonist's inner world.

In her doctor of philosophy dissertation, *Stream of Consciousness on Film: Strategies of Representation,* Christine Joy Trotter explores conventional (to classical narration) visual and temporal tools that portray interiority, in this case, in Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*:

> "Thus, in the beginning portion of Requiem for a Dream, several technical devices - surreal images, extreme close-ups, unusual lighting, an extremely rapid montage sequence, and peculiar sound effects - are used in combination to indicate the interiority of three of its characters […] In addition to these elements, structural devices help to establish and sustain these individual inner journeys throughout the rest of the film: (1) restricted points of view for each of the four main characters; (2) dislocations and distortions of familiar physical objects or environments; (3) dream and hallucinatory sequences; (4) temporal distortion; and (5) discontinuity in the narrative flow." (Trotter, 248)

The impact that many conventional visual and temporal tools like the aforementioned have on production however, is their high production cost and requiring of extensive coverage – a luxury I no longer had with my production conceit of maximizing runtime per dollar. Thus, my newfound choice of working with longer takes and master shots posed a threat of severely limiting my tools for exploring the characters' inner worlds. Therefore, I had to pin down a formal identity for the film that could appropriately serve the emotional tone/thesis I wanted to

express, while simultaneously being friendly to my production goals. A compromise I found, was to utilize realistic portraits of conversations (that were shot in one-takes) to ground the protagonist in the real world by making the audience view these conversations through an observational lens. Between these observational scenes, I would utilize more conventional, impressionistic filmmaking to capture interiority, during moments the protagonist was alone and reflecting.

The choice to mix – A) proscenium, distanced lensing, which creates a voyeuristic degree of inaccessibility to the protagonists' inner worlds, and B) impressionistic tonal montages and surreal intrusions, which place the audience directly in the protagonists' inner emotional world and thus maximize interiority – is intended to echo the central emotional thesis of the film: A sense of being unable to fully understand those you love the most. As said by one of the film's characters, Matt the Philosopher: *"The people that we love the most – we only know them for so much of their existence. So how much do we really know about who they are, or what they feel?"* The film is not supposed to yield a clean understanding of all the events and psychological through-lines of the characters it engages with, but rather give us brief glimpses into their emotional interiors and an observational stance on their interactions with others, which is how I often feel about my relationships with loved ones and is what I was keen to inject into the film.

Pretend That You Love Me (2020) is a feature film made by YouTube creator and comedian Joel Haver. It follows Joel in scripted and non-scripted moments close to his personal life, regarding dates he goes on with women, his health issues, his artistic work, and grieving the death of his father. Shot with a low budget, consumer grade cameras, and over the course of one year, the work often employs a distinct *hidden camera look* which toys with cinematic indexicality to invoke authenticity in regard to story events. Thus, the film straddles the line

between documentary and fiction. It is successfully able to juxtapose fragments of character interiority with observational conversations to paint a complex and effective psychological portrait, without featuring a plot-driven story. Consequently, the film became a considerable point of reference as I developed *Height Markers*, as it is a culturally contemporary, low-budget film, which achieved, formally and emotionally, much of what I was setting out to do.

CHAPTER 2 – THE CASTING AND PERFORMANCE PROCESS

Methodological References

In line with my creative and production goals, I had to find a method of working with actors that yielded meaningful character/psychological investigation rather than a straight forward technical performance of a locked script. My main source of inspiration for developing auditioning, workshopping, rehearsal and improvisational methods, is Mike Leigh's process of working with actors. Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* (1996) was a close reference for *Height Markers* because of its themes of intergenerationality, familial grief, and its extended, dialogue-heavy scenes, sometimes containing long takes. The film highlights a young woman's confrontation with her birth mother, after the death of her adopted mother, as well as a couple within the family who cannot conceive; *Secrets and Lies* climaxes with a dinner party in which many of the deepest family secrets are revealed.

Paul McDonald outlines Leigh's process of casting and working with actors in "Secrets and Lies: Acting for Mike Leigh" a chapter in the 2000 book *Screen Acting*, edited by Peter Kramer and Alan Lovell.

> *"Secrets and Lies* began from Leigh's usual starting point: no script and no characters. Unlike conventional methods of casting, in which script readings are frequently used in order to find the performer who will adequately fit the role, in the absence of a script and an established list of roles, auditions for Leigh's films involve a more open process. Leigh is quite guarded about exactly what the process involves. Usually actors will be invited for a 20 minute interview and then, if recalled, will spend a further hour working with the director. […] While all actors are cast because of their performance abilities, Leigh's auditioning process places less emphasis on the actor's ability to perform a specific role and far more on a general sense of acting skill." (McDonald, 139)

Though I had a script and sense of the characters I wanted to work with, rather than being attached to the characters themselves, I was more focused on exploring the key themes of *loss, lack of closure, uncertainty about the future,* and *distortion of memory,* and I was open to pivoting the characters to fit the sensibilities of strong actors, whoever they may be. This allowed me to find a mother-son pairing with strong chemistry, since I was not tied to who either of them was individually, but to their relationship.

I had extended conversations with Gabe Meacher, Maev Beaty, and Jesse LaVercombe – who played Aaron, Neva and Ted respectively – before any sort of formal audition or screen test. I got a sense of their personal tastes, experiences and creative sensibilities, as these would factor into their contributions to character development. Maev is an experienced dramaturg, Jesse, a screenwriter, and about Gabe, with whom I had collaborated with before, I was confident with his character development abilities. Since Ted's role required a shorter, more straight forward performance when compared to Aaron and Neva, I cast Jesse following our initial conversation which lasted a few hours – contingent on the ethnicities and familial resemblance of the other two roles matching, once they were cast. For the roles of Neva and Aaron, I held a workshopping session of the *last dinner* scene, which also served as a formal audition and screen test for both Maev and Gabe. Maev and Gabe performed, suggested revisions, improvised and arrived at a better-defined movement of the scene, with modified shifts of power and emotional arcs. I then took the audition footage, re-wrote the scene, and after casting Maev and Gabe formally, workshopped it with them once again, further investigating the scene and re-writing it to fit their sensibilities and strengths. We repeated the process for the *Aaron packing* scene. Once we collectively reached a version of the scene that felt close to being complete, I wrote it down in what would become the shooting draft of the script; the version of the scene we would take to

set. I encouraged improvisation and discovery on set as well: a *free roam* performance style, figuring it would only provide more of what we were able to achieve in rehearsals, and partly because I did not have the scope or budget to have as many rehearsal sessions as I wanted. A tool I used, specific to this project, to investigate the psychology of the dinner scene was showing the actors *Ted's Tape* before they performed the scene. We had discussions about how each of their characters remembered Ted, and the effect their memories had on the motivations they brought to the scene, as the characters discussed Ted's legacy. I will digress to explain how *Ted's Tape* was created and then return to reflect on what it added to the workshopping of the *last dinner* scene.

Ted's Tape

The first day of shooting scenes with actors was the shooting of *Ted's Tape* on July 25, about two weeks prior to principal photography. Since this simulated 'candid' footage would have to be gathered for inclusion in the diegetic world of the film, it had to be filmed before principal photography. This gave us the opportunity to refine details in the film based on the footage we got on July 25. The set decoration of a picture of a snail, for instance, in the film is revealed to be a picture Ted took, as seen in *Ted's Tape.* For this, we developed the film that was spontaneously shot by actor Jesse, to use for set design. Because the footage had to appear candid, the production requirements of the day were very low. We used a Sony Handycam Hi-8 camera from 1997, with an in-built microphone, and we had a modern Sony Handycam and lavalier microphones as backups in case the old camera failed. In the case of a Hi-8 failure, we would have resorted to shooting digitally and then shooting playback of said digital footage on Hi-8 tape during post-production, but the Hi-8 camera did not fail. The footage was shot partly

by the actors themselves and partly by myself, for instances where more deliberate cinematography was required.

The first half of the day was spent shooting outdoors, following a few loose improvisation prompts as indicated by the shooting script. The second half of the day was improvisation in the voiceover room, which would become the audio overlaid on shots that were pulled from my own Hi-8 tape library. The goal was to have the voiceover seem like it was coming from the camera operator or people behind the camera, thereby giving me a plethora of story options in editing, and the ability to fine tune the moments and emotions I could bring out in the tape. This also increased production value, as voiceovers cost less money and take up less time compared to filmed scenes. This approach gave us about 20 minutes of potential runtime (which in the final film is cut to about 15 minutes) from a single day of shooting, with no camera equipment rental or production design, and with a crew of four. To encourage naturalistic performances and chemistry, the characters of Ted and Brian were almost entirely improvised by Jesse LaVercombe and James Hyett, who played each character respectively. The only two stipulations I had were that:

i) Ted had to be carefree and full of life. We find Ted and Aaron at similar stages in life but in opposite states of mind. This contrast was important in highlighting a central emotion in the film – Aaron's yearning for a life he could have had, influenced by the positivity of his father's spirit were he alive; the aforementioned key theme of *loss*.

ii) There had to be some pseudo-philosophical conversations surrounding birds and flight. At the time, I believed birds would become a significant motif in the film, as they did. Birds came to represent a desire of freedom from the current state of affairs in the film, but also echoed the key theme of *uncertainty about the future*. This was not initially written in, but emerged as an idea as I gathered Hi-8 nature footage and noticed that I had many shots of birds. (I touch on how the Hi-8 footage was compiled in section 3.2)

I edited *Ted's Tape* in the two following days, which yielded enough time for us to make production design and wardrobe choices for principal photography that were influenced by the tape's content, and enough time for me to re-write and workshop the scenes in principal photography that were affected by *Ted's Tape*, namely the scenes of Neva and Aaron watching the tapes, and most significantly, the *last dinner* scene.

Improvisation on Set

Once I showed Maev and Gabe *Ted's Tape*, a conversation arose about the central conflict in the *last dinner* scene. Throughout our workshopping, we had not quite pinned down Aaron's motivation for strikingly refusing his mother's sympathy. It made sense that the characters had drastically different emotional states after recent events; indeed the severity of his response progressed the scene by inciting meaningful conflict, which allowed key themes to come out – namely the *distortion of memory* – however, the internal motivation for the severity of his response seemed vague or contrived. Watching *Ted's Tape* helped us understand that Aaron, carrying the weight of many years of pondering a life he did not have and now, the gloom of a recently failed relationship, took his mother's reinforcing of how full of life Ted was, as almost an affront to his memory of his own father, who was someone he never really experienced as being full of life, like Neva did. And Neva, having not only seen the tape, but lived through it, has the wisdom to sense the monumental nature of their final dinner together. Overwhelmed by it, she desperately tries to make her husband and father of her child a part of it, trying to keep him alive. However, by doing so, she proves herself unable to fully access Aaron's perspective. The effectiveness of the tape as a preparation tool to workshop and improvise scenes, makes me keen on creating and using visual prompts for workshopping scenes in the future.

Once the actors had a good grasp on their motivations for the scene, they had the freedom to get through the scene with totally improvised dialogue, as long as they hit the same conversational beats as we had workshopped, whether it was in a more round-about or more direct manner than we had rehearsed; whatever felt organic as we were rolling. Notably, Mike Leigh approaches set work differently:

> "Although Leigh uses improvisation throughout rehearsals, Leigh is always keen to emphasize that what appears on film is not a record of actors improvising in front of camera. Leigh works in such a way that improvisation is only the means to arrive at a tightly rehearsed end product. […] From this work, actors develop the subtext for scenes so that, in Leigh's words, 'what is going on is not simply what is being said'. For Leigh, the rehearsal process is always directed towards creating a precisely organized drama. The director and the actors work at 'distil[ling] out of all of the[inputs] ... to […] pin it down so that we do start to work from improvisation through to something which is very structured, very very thorough, and finally word perfect and moment perfect.'" (McDonald, 138-139)

In retrospect, I would follow Leigh's process more closely, and create, for certain scenes, a locked script inspired by improvisation rather than dependant on it, as was the free roam performance style I allowed on set. Other scenes, like the *back of the truck* scenes, could remain free roam, because those scenes, I believe, depended on improvisation to have the effect they did. (I will expand on this in the following paragraph). Locking the dialogue on certain scenes like the *final dinner* scene, and *party monologue* scene, would have helped me control the pacing of the film better. Since those scenes were captured in long take masters, intended to be played as a whole, I had virtually no control of pacing. Instead, the pacing was dictated entirely by the actors, since I allowed a free roam performance style. Consequently, each take had significantly different pacing and dynamics.

An argument for the free roam performance style emerged from the *back of the truck* scenes with Gabe Meacher and Alexandra Floras-Matic, who played Claire. In the shooting

script, Claire had no lines, and appeared in a solitary sex scene (omitted from the final cut). I had a similar conversation with Alexandra, as I did with the other lead actors, about workshopping the character and making psychological discoveries. I proposed potentially improvising a scene on set, schedule permitting. During a discussion of the sex scene with Alexandra and Gabe prior to shooting, the former suggested, that if we needed to truly feel Aaron's post-break up emptiness, we needed to see how full of life his relationship with Claire once was. Bearing that in mind, I wrote a few prompts for improvisation, less than a week prior to shooting. The prompts did not need significant production preparation, and they came from personal experiences. I kept them broad enough to both maintain a distance from the personal subject matter, and to allow for them to be used in many places in the edit, should I use them. The goal would be to let the audience project their own emotions and memories of relationships onto the scenes, given the scenes' limited expositional value. In keeping with the formal conceit of having conversations being shot in proscenium lensing, we planted the camera in one position, facing the truck for all the scenes; a wide master shot. We then had costume and blocking changes to indicate different picnic dates. We were also stuck with the master shots because we were chasing daylight and had no time for any other type of coverage, even if we had wanted it. These scenes were almost entirely improvised in front of the camera, and scene work would take place between takes, as we had not workshopped any of it prior to shooting. I pulled some exercises from Michaels's Shurtleff's *Audition*, specifically his *12 guideposts*.[2] Though I wanted the scenes to remain broad in a 'plot' sense, and not offer much exposition or backstory, the actors needed very specific moments and conflict to deliver an engaging scene. I partook in acting exercises related to the *guideposts* in Tony Nardi's *Directing Actors* MFA class, and found

[2] Shurtleff, Michael. Audition: Everything an Actor Needs to Know. Bantam Books, 1978.

success, particularly, in the guidepost of *opposites.* Considering the principle of *opposites*, an actor could generate their own subtext, simply by believing that for everything they say, the opposite could secretly be true. For example, they could say “I want to be in this relationship” and it be true, while also truly feeling “I resent this relationship”. This guided some of the discussions I had with the actors between scenes, because it allowed for them to generate specific and personal subtext, however, because I did not allow them to exposit much of what they generated – because they had to play it internally – I feel the scene attained a degree of universality by encouraging audience projection.

CHAPTER 3 – SELECTED NOTES FROM PRODUCTION

Save the Frog: A Script Tailored for the Process

I have frequently regarded screenplays as a means to an end; a blueprint for film language and not film language itself. I have thus far structured my projects so that the film is truly written in the editing room, and the screenplay is mainly for dialogue and remembering which story beats to cover on set. This opinion may be a privilege of only having written screenplays that I would go on to produce and direct, and as a consequence, I do not pay careful attention to my prose, as no one but myself would be trying to make sense of how my words translated into motion picture. My previous screenplays have effectively been jot-notes for me and my team on set: they were documents with the bare minimum of process or scene descriptors, because that information would directly be coordinated with my cinematographer, production designer etc.

Consequently, this time around there were many challenges in writing the new script; first and foremost, writing it in a way that adequately conveyed how process-driven and improvisational some of the content was going to be; this was important because, now, I had to communicate – primarily to my supervisor Laurence Green and reader Ingrid Veninger – *how* the scenes would be approached and not just what happened in them. A minimal screenplay format struggled to deliver this information, so, following the advice of my supervisory committee, I filled the script with extensive production notes that helped a reader understand the intended filmmaking process to get a better idea of what the scenes entailed for production. Below is how the first page of the script, which functioned as a sort of legend, read (fig. 2):

Methodology:

The making of this film will involve several non-scripted 'process-driven' scenes. These scenes will work off the location and premise that appears in this script, but - through improvisational shooting, acting, and engagement with non-actors - these scenes will find ends of their own. The intention is to give certain spaces and people their own voice in the work. The scenes will serve as digressions from the plot; moments where the film becomes interested in non-protagonists and environmental transience - allowing for the viewer - uninflected reflection of the subjects explored. I will mark those scenes with an asterisk and provide any relevant notes in Red text.

Color and Style Code:

Portions of the story are told in flashbacks. To clarify this, the flashbacks to 2002 (which include a 30 year old Neva and a 6 year old Aaron), are written in Violet text. These transitions will be readily observable in the film through Aaron's age, varying production design, costume, HMU, and color grading.

It also includes flashbacks to 2020, written in Purple.

Pink indicates a ***surreal intrusion*** - a dreamlike element in a real world scene - to externalize the inner thoughts of the character. These are often the hands of people who aren't really there, entering frame and physically engaging with the character or prop.

Green is a sequence that is a fullscreen scan of Hi-8 tape, it consists of several scenes that were filmed by the character TED, in the story world, in the mid-90s.

Blue is footage shot from the POV of the 'modern camcorder' as will be explained in the script.

~~Strikeout~~ indicates lines or actions that aren't essential, but we would shoot anyway, as an option for clarity or tonal experimentation in editing.

Image 2: Opening page of the shooting script

I discovered, that by fleshing out production notes out on the page, I was more likely to scrutinize my own ideas and play closer attention to how I would end up scheduling the shoot – as I was writing the script. I am aware that it can sometimes be limiting to think about production pragmatics – like scheduling – while in the midst of the creative writing process. In an interview with *MovieMaker Magazine*, Kenneth Lonergan reflects on his writing process:

> "You think of the film more in terms of the film and less in terms of the script. I don't know if this is good or bad, but when you write scenes you're not thinking about "how is this going to get done?" In a way, you can be thinking less freely [when you're also directing] because you're thinking, "My God — this will cost a fortune." There's a helicopter shot. Or, "They shouldn't be in the car this long. It's boring." Those are really not things you should worry about when you're writing the script." (Kenneth Lonergan)

However, I found that by keeping pragmatics in mind for every beat I write by adding process descriptors in red, I could understand how each scene relates to one another, in a production sense, as I develop the story, and for which scenes I can prioritize more production value. This expedited the breakdown and scheduling process and helped us get from the shooting script to principal photography significantly faster than if I had left these process descriptors out, as I have done on previous projects. Given my *maximum runtime per dollar* conceit, keeping a track of production scale as I wrote was a necesity for this project, but likely will not be in my future narrative work, as I will aim for a story scale that fits more comfortably within the film's bugetary means.

An example of a process descriptor can be found in scene 19 (fig. 3) (on page 15 of the shooting script). The scene description was initially simply "Aaron drives around town and watches strangers on the streets." I had figured the scene would be a target of opportunity on the tail end of a day spent shooting in St. Thomas. However, once I wrote out the process descriptor in red, I could much more readily see that it would require an entirely separate shooting day.

19 I/E. AARON'S CAR - ST. THOMAS - DAY* 19

We would find locals in the area, whom Aaron would organically interact with, asking for Claire's whereabouts. We would film their reactions in telephoto, then let them know they were being filmed and ask for their participation in the film (releases etc). Sometimes people offer interesting information about the town and its social centers - which can add breadth to the presence of the town in the film.

Aaron drives around town and watches strangers on the streets.

MOMENTS LATER

Aaron is parked on the street when he notices a woman get out of a street side boutique, on her phone, texting.

She enters a BLUE CAR parked in front of Aaron, with a man driving it.

The blue car drives off.

Aaron starts his car and follows this car.

Image 3: Process descriptors written in red

Location Scouting

Much of the story required specific shots of animals, which are very difficult to obtain during principal photography. I also needed to have animals on Hi-8 tape to establish Ted's point of view and have digital footage of similar animals during Aaron's experiences, to paint a picture of the inter-generational love for nature. To set ourselves up best for success, I first catalogued and marked all of the Hi-8 tape footage I had shot recreationally over the last few years, probably a few hours' worth, and see what would pass as being *Ted's Tape* from the 90s. Among this I found a well-lit close up of a toad and some caterpillars. I also catalogued the digital footage I had shot recreationally on my Sony camcorder (which could intercut with the Sony FS-7 on which was used principal photography, due to the two cameras shooting in the same resolution and colorspace) and here I found some caterpillars and garter snakes. I scheduled for two full days of simultaneous location scouting and nature footage gathering in and around the Springwater Conservation Area, south of Ingersoll, Ontario. On the second day, after many hours

of waiting in a heavily wooded area in the forest, my cinematographer Paul Villenave spotted a doe and her fawn and was able to get a shot of them. I would later write this shot into the scene of Aaron in the forest, where the deer lures him into the beautifully vibrant network of forest dwelling life. I also tied the shot to Claire, by giving her a tattoo of a deer, setting the viewer up to infer that Aaron associates those feelings of *life* and *beauty* with her.

I chose St. Thomas, Ontario as a town where Claire moved to during the pandemic, because it had on the surface what lurks beneath many Ontario small-towns, rich history, an opioid crisis and looming racial tensions. We stumbled across it when looking for a bar to shoot at, and after seeing a few confederate flags, wandering addicts, and a warm, hospitable bar owner, it seemed perfect. Ultimately, it helped externalize Aaron's anxiety about his ex-girlfriend and made him seem out of his element.

Digressive Elements in the Film

The original script had documentary inspired digressions from the narrative, in which we would film real people in their element, talking to each other about a topic of their choosing, not looking at the camera. We spent a day shooting around Mississauga and a day in St. Thomas speaking with people around the town/city and recording candid conversations. I hoped to cut these conversations into the film in a sort of Italian neo-realist inspired manner, where the film loses interest the protagonists amidst their journeys for a brief moment, and focuses on these everyday people that happen to occupy the same location as the protagonist. I was not able to achieve this effectively, partly because the framing of these shots differed greatly from how the rest of the film was covered, partly because some of the subjects I found treated the scene like an interview, but mainly because these digressions retarded the psychological progression of the protagonists in an inorganic way: they were not an extension of the character's psyche or

immediate social reality as is customary in Italian neo-realism.[3] For example, Vittorio DeSica's *Umberto D.* (1952) profiles elderly pensioner Umberto, who has fallen on hard times in an economically struggling postwar Italy. An example of a brief narrative digression occurs during a shot of Umberto leaving a tram (fig. 4). After he leaves frame, the camera stays, and focuses on another elderly man, who promptly puts his hand on his forehead, in a position of despair or depression, much like Umberto himself. This single shot signifies the world outside of Umberto, but importantly, unlike the shots I gathered, it extends Umberto's psyche and reality by showing a symptom of an issue in postwar Italian society that corresponds to what Umberto goes through himself. The digressive shots I gathered lacked such intent and planning, and were not executed consistently enough to be a part of the film's formal identity. I did end up using some of these shots as montage elements to set up locations in the film, where they serve a similar purpose of showing a living, breathing world existing independent of the protagonists' journeys, but now exist in these distinct montages where they do not retard the psychological momentum of the film.

Image 4: Umberto in the background, and the second elderly man, in the foreground.

[3] Thorburn, David. 21L.011 *The Film Experience*. Fall 2013. Massachusetts Institute of Technology: MIT OpenCourseWare, https://ocw.mit.edu. License: Creative Commons BY-NC-SA.

The difficulty of integrating these digressive elements into the rest of the film was my concern from the time they were shot, as they became *targets of opportunity* during production: a way to make use of extra time and resources on set by compiling footage for exploration in the cutting room, even though I had no intentional way of integrating the footage with the story. On set, these scenes became an afterthought.

My notes about the digressive footage in hindsight – I could have:

i) Shot those interviews in telephoto, maybe from the perspective of the protagonist watching strangers from his car (as I had planned to do but logistics did not allow for).

ii) Found a way to collect footage of strangers' conversations that echoed the theme of the film.

iii) Abandoned the narrative entirely at first, gathered digressive footage, then found a narrative in post, that was able to weave the footage I gathered together in a meaningful way.

Inspiration for a fourth option is found in *Secrets and Lies*, which integrates brief digressive elements through the conceit of a central character's occupation.

> "Maurice runs his own photography business and, periodically, the film steps to the side of the main narrative for a succession of short vignettes in which various individuals, couples, and groups are photographed by Maurice in his studio. Each is literally a portrait, capturing succinctly the personality and private dramas of Maurice's subjects." (McDonald, 139)

I could have employed a similar technique and made Aaron a photographer or journalist in order to justify the digressive footage I filmed, working the footage into the diegetic world.

Pre-visualization and Storyboarding

An activity undertaken meant to benefit the location scouting, cinematography and ongoing writing process was creating a pre-visualization of the more complex and challenging shots in the film, within the actual locations we intended to use. Here, I define pre-visualization as the act of test-shooting on location with actor stand-ins, before principal photography, and then cutting together said footage to get a sense of the spatial coverage and intercutability that a desired shotlist yields, all with the expressed goal of refining coverage and searching for cinematic opportunities within the location. We utilized this technique at our indoor house location, where the second block of shooting would happen, and workshopped different ways to cover scenes (Fig. 5). We then cut these shots together to see how they worked, and then readjusted our plan accordingly. This is how refined ideas about the coverage and scheduling arose. In addition to previsualizing challenging scenes, we digitally storyboarded the remainder of the scenes. The storyboard was then edited together and overlaid with a voice-over readthrough of the script to give us a sense of the pacing of the film and spur further creativity (Fig. 6).

Image 5:Stills from the pre-visualization. We had the idea to combine a shot and reaction shot by going on the roof and using the window's reflection to show what Aaron was looking at. (bottom left, and right)

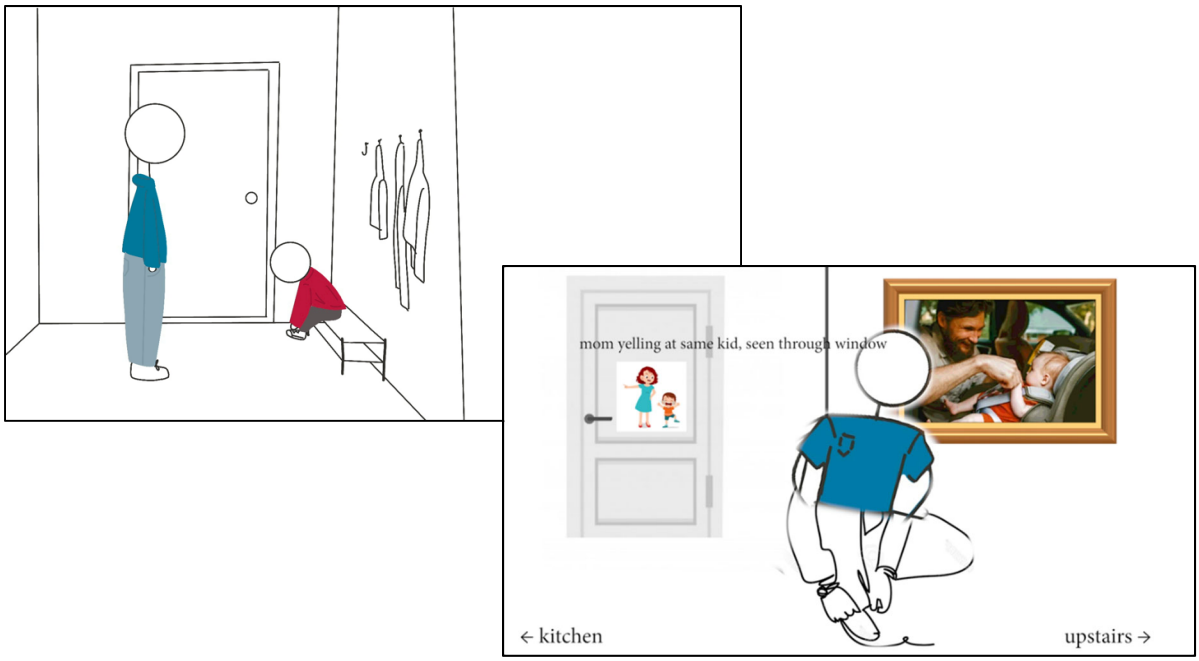

Image 6: Stills from the storyboard edit.

Cinematic Discoveries During Principal Photography

The first shooting block was August 6-9, 2021. We shot in South-Western Ontario, around Ingersoll, St. Thomas, and several forest trails in and around the Springwater Conversation Area. After spending a couple of days in the forest during pre-production and only getting one useful shot – the shot of the doe and her fawn, I was concerned that when we went into the forest with the actor, we would not be able to accumulate enough footage of animals and that I would have to schedule pickups before the weather turned. However, on the first day of principal photography, when we wandered into the forest with the actor, we were met with the most wildlife we had seen all summer. Our sound recordist Evan Hoffman, an amphibian enthusiast, spotted a little frog. We had Aaron pick up this frog, admire it and then release into the river. I spotted another massive frog in a pond and I instantly recalled the large toad from the Hi-8 footage I had gathered, and realized that these amphibians would provide a visual link between father and son.

The second shooting block, August 13-17, 2021, was shot almost entirely indoors, in a house in Richmond Hill. During the *last dinner* scene, I had the idea of Aaron walking out into the backyard for a breath of fresh air during the take, while Neva was upstairs. While playing this, Gabe Meacher instinctively went to the tree swing outside. Since we were shooting the Young Aaron scenes the next day, I decided it would be meaningful to see Aaron's younger self also engage with this swing during dinner time, indicating a habit and showcasing the passage of time between the two mirroring scenes.

CHAPTER 4 - WRITING IN THE CUTTING ROOM

Editing Philosophy

Being conceived of as a non-linear film, the cut would have to concern itself with streams of information both in the story time and real time. I chose to tell the story non-linearly because it deals very intimately with memory, inherently a hazy and fragmented part of human consciousness.

The film was meant to be written in the cutting room, therefore the first step was achieving a strong organization and understanding of all the footage we had and the ways in which they could be exploited. This meant that the goal of the first assembly was to reveal natural weaknesses and tonal inclinations in the footage we had. Myself and co-editors Bryden Frankish and Dylan Posgate would then index-card the scenes, with each card laying out the contents and possibilities within the scene, and pin these cards up to get a visual idea of the progression of the film prior to doing any fine cutting. *Cutting with the gut* was a guiding principal, which, relatively early on, helped us lose intellectual conceits that did not work in practice. Effectively, we would allow our visual-auditory senses and initial *gut-reactions* (to story beats) to dictate how we cut, rather than trying to impose an idea we may have had prior to shooting, but which no longer worked in execution. This editing methodology prioritizes understanding the footage we have and not being married to the footage we hoped we would have gotten during principal photography. The success of such a methodology, however, relies on fresh eyes, on people who are not encumbered with the knowledge of what transpired on set or what was intended by the script. As a result, careful consideration was given to who feedback was solicited from at each stage of editing. Collaborators had to be sympathetic to what the

positioning and goals of the project were, but honest and decisive enough to identify what parts of the edit were not working toward those goals. Our hope was that this methodology yielded a film which was tonally consistent and possessed a distinct voice and identity.

Insights from the Assembly

After the assembly was screened for my supervisory committee, former professors Manfred Becker, Matt Johnson and Matt Miller, as well as several cohort members, a consensus arose that I should revisit the cut at the very basic structural level and, as Manfred suggested, try to *cut inside out* by starting a new timeline and radically rearranging scenes; gutting the content to re-write the film without a crisis of identity, to find a film that possessed a consistent tone and style. In the first assembly, the order of scenes in the film more or less followed the order of scenes in the shooting script. Johnson and Miller noted that the opening of the film was unnecessarily confusing, because we see Aaron packing, then him on the road, leading an audience to think they are seeing him on the way to his new apartment. However, in story time, he has not yet left home, he is simply visiting St. Thomas, a fact the audience does not yet know. Juxtaposing those two scenes induces confusion when the audience sees Aaron back home later in the film, after visiting St. Thomas, and thus creates unnecessary logical questions, at a time when the audience should be firmly delving into the theme of the film. This was one of the key clarity issues we had to fix.

A separate creative note we received from Johnson and Miller, was to show the actual call Aaron describes to his friends, and show it as being drastically different from what Aaron recounts to his friends. (This scene was a scripted pickup shoot and not in the shooting script.) The call showcases Aaron's projections of his insecurities about how his last relationship ended, by showing in what manner he chooses to embellish the story. I thought this was a great

suggestion and one that fit the emotional identity of the film well, so I wrote a scene around it, shot the pickup and placed it into the edit.

Re-structuring

Before shooting the pickup, Dylan and I spent the better part of a day re-structuring the film on index cards, in a way that maintained the heart of what I was trying to explore while not bearing confusing diegetic chronology and geography. The film had 3 diegetic chronologies (or story timelines): ***Modern day*** (following Aaron and Neva in the present)*,* ***non-Hi-8 flashbacks*** (featuring Young Aaron and Neva, and Aaron and Claire), *and* ***Hi-8 flashbacks*** (footage from Ted's Tape).

We first focused with the ***modern day*** sections of the film. The sequence of *Aaron and friends hanging around Mississauga* (scenes 24 and 25 in the shooting draft), had not been working in the assembly and felt like it was from a completely different film, so we made the easy decision to cut it out entirely. Opening the ***modern day*** chronology with the *party monologue* scene (which was initially after the *last dinner* scene), gave the film a plot trigger for the ***modern day*** sections of the film: Aaron's search for closure about Claire. Even though the film subverts a classical Hollywood narrative solution to this plot trigger, it helps ground the audience in a story event to begin the film. In the scenes that would follow, the audience would clearly know Aaron is in St. Thomas looking for Claire, whereas in the original chronology the audience would not learn about Claire or what happened between her and Aaron until after the *last dinner* scene, leaving the audience searching for relevance in the *St. Thomas* scenes. Speaking of the non-diegetic chronology (the edit), there is a much stronger psychological cause and effect relationship between the *party monologue* scene and the *St. Thomas* scenes when

Aaron's story about the past precedes him digging it up in the small town, whether or not it is clear where these events exist in the diegetic chronology.

Next, we focused on the ***non-Hi-8 flashback*** sections of the film. Since the *back of the truck* scenes were all improvised and not written into the script, I did not shoot them with any type of continuity in mind, so we could place them virtually anywhere on the timeline, ideally somewhere that would feel like an appropriate moment for Aaron to recall the memory. After toying around with the order, we ended on what was in the final cut: being introduced to Claire during a happy memory and then exploring a complicated melancholic one; which paints an incomplete and mysterious portrait of an intense relationship with many highs and lows. With the new arrangement of scenes, *the young Aaron flashback* sequence naturally felt like a prologue, which could be called back to when Neva finds Buster during the *Aaron packing* scene, so we decided place this sequence near the beginning of the film. In the shooting draft this sequence (scenes 6-11) came later on in the film.

Finally, we had to address how to deal with the ***Hi-8 flashback*** sections of the film. Originally, all the Hi-8 footage was played chronologically during Aaron's watching of it – as *Ted' Tape*, save for the *opening tonal montage*. I found that by starting with the *Ted's interview* scene and following it with *the young Aaron flashbacks*, the film strengthened in two important ways:

i) It now had a strong framing and expositional device that highlighted the dad's absence throughout the rest of the film in a very clear and present manner.

ii) The scene of Aaron watching the *Ted's interview* part of the tape was far less emotionally gratuitous and on the nose. This time around, when the audience recieves simply a fragment of *Ted's interview*, they have to recall the whole interview from the beginning of the film. Having the audience recall the interview

and make associations during Aaron's revelatory moment, deepens their identification with him.

Once all the sections and chronologies of the film were addressed, the cut closely resembled what would become the picture-locked version.

Editing Case Study: The *Young Aaron Flashbacks*

As a sample of how the editing process looked on a micro level, I will examine how we addressed issues in one particular sequence: The *young Aaron flashbacks.* I will track the sequence's evolution from the assembly version which resembled the shooting script, to how it appears in the final cut. For reference, the *young Aaron flashbacks* are scenes 6-11 in shooting script.

This sequence remained a puzzle for months, and required a bit of good fortune to solve. In the original chronology, the sequence begins with a frustrated Neva trying to get Aaron to eat. When he does not budge, she goes up to her room, finds Ted's camera and watches the tape. She then comes back down to find Aaron swinging outside and calls him back inside. She finds a way to use Buster to convince Aaron to eat paneer instead of chicken. We then see the two returning from the grocery store where Aaron remarks about being bullied at school. Then we see Neva cooking, followed by Aaron eating the meal and liking it – and on this shot the sequence concludes – leading us into the *opening tonal montage*. The biggest issue this sequence had, was the psychological unbelievability of the mother leaving her son unattended for what seems like a long period of time, when it is clear that he needs her patience. The sequence feels this way because it comes so early in the film. It is the first time we meet these characters and we are not fully clear on any sort of subtext that would help make sense of her decision. My intention was that the audience would piece together that Ted had recently passed and Neva had

not yet figured out how to navigate her grief while looking after her son, and that this was a defining moment where she finds strength. However, after test screenings, it was clear there were not enough indicators to justify her choice of leaving her son downstairs. This made the sequence tonally disjointed from the rest of the film. Another issue was subpar performances by the child actor Colm Sawyer in scene 6, which is a difficult way to open a film, as an audience's first impression of the quality of performance will be a poor one. As a result, we cut as many of his lines as possible and emphasized reaction shots of Neva wherever possible.

The main puzzle we had to solve then, was to avoid showing Neva going upstairs mid-conversation with Aaron, but maintain the heart of the scene which is about a mother learning to look after her son, in the absence of his father. Luckily, the shots from Neva talking to Aaron before she went upstairs and after she came downstairs were lit very similarly, so with a little color correction, we were able to intercut between the two scenes seamlessly. We were even able to match movement from when Neva gets up from her chair in the shot before she goes upstairs, to when she sits down in the shot after she comes back downstairs. We then cut directly to the two returning from the grocers, then to Neva cooking the food. However, we now needed another naturalistic beat before they sat down to eat it, otherwise the sequence would seem *rushed* and *odd* (our *gut reaction*). After watching every frame of footage we had, in the same location and with passably matching lighting, I found pre-roll from the child actor wandering at the backyard door trying to go outside to the swing (A, fig. 7). I realized that by combining that shot and the tail end of the shot of Neva calling Aaron inside from swinging (B), we could get a quick little story beat of Aaron trying to play before his meal and his mother calling him inside. Then comes the dinner table shot, in which Aaron eats his meal (C), which allowed us to cut back to the shot of him swinging outside (D) – showing his reward for eating and Neva's

successful parenting, followed by Neva walking upstairs (E) (which would be too jarring to cut to directly from C). The scene was tied together by a moody score, leading us into the room where she watches Ted's tape.

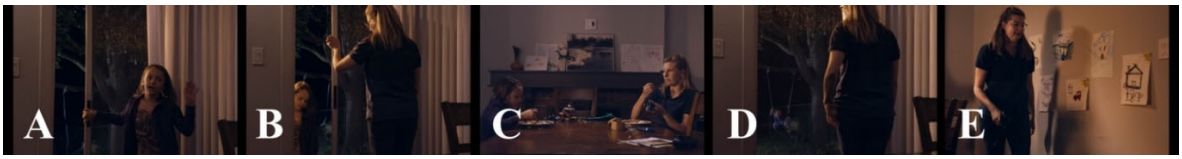

Image 7:A sequence of shots in the young Aaron flashbacks, as it appears in the final cut.

CONCLUSION

Treating the film as an exercise allowed me to best learn about cinematic character and thematic investigation and the practices that come with it, in the space outside of classical narrative but not approaching avant-garde. I was able to witness the difficulty in painting a complex psychological portrait in a cohesive manner, without the structural aid of the classical narration I relied on previously. For all my own internally perceived criticisms of the *Height Markers*, such as its lack of character sophistication, subpar moments chosen for investigation, and evidently low-budget shooting style (which I do not personally mind, but understand it can put off certain audiences), I was able to grow my skillset immensely at each turn. I learned to better utilize framing devices; giving the audience the right tools for *how* to view the film, is just as important as what the film is about. Careful attention must be paid, to how the film opens, it must position itself and its mode of narration accordingly; it must not begin with what seems like classical narration, but then disregard the very plot it sets up, unless that is the desired effect. In a film where plot development is a secondary goal, no story beat must generate unnecessary logical questions in the audience's mind, as these distract an audience member from focusing on the intended reading of a scene, and could leave them asking questions which the film does not plan to answer. Especially when a scene relies on audience projection, it must not encumber them with prominent details that do not later develop.

This project has certainly motivated me to write a more deliberate and focused feature length emotion-driven character study, using the visual vocabulary and insight into the actors process I have attained from this film.

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