

BUTCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper details the background and production process of my 6-minute animated narrative film, *Butch*. I will focus on my exploration of the theory of change of comedic film and the gender politics that informed the conception of this project, and I will discuss my creative process. *Butch* follows the trials and tribulations of Butch, a large left breast who struggles with his masculinity, as he tries to impress a new love interest by emulating toxic gender stereotypes. The film examines the tensions of transnormativity from the perspective of one of its exiled subjects, the breast.

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Image 1. My DIY green screen setup in CFT 130 with my working area on the risers and television monitor to the side.

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CHAPTER 1: FROM DOCUMENTARY TO NARRATIVE

Background: Learning Narrative Writing in the MFA Film Program

I have no prior experience making narrative films—my filmmaking background is in documentary. My previous film, *Unmanageable*, was my first feature documentary, and covered the historical institutional abuse of poor and working-class white children in little-known Ontario youth jails called Training Schools from the 1930s to 1980s. It was a self-funded collaboration with my co-director about her mother's teenage incarceration. The project spanned 6 years, during which time I worked as a freelance videographer and sound engineer.

I entered York's Film MFA program in the fall of 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the intention to improve my filmmaking abilities by focusing on making short films. I wanted to avoid a repeat of my previous lengthy filmmaking process and speed up my cycle of learning. Much of my freelance work had been interrupted by the pandemic, and thanks to CERB and the fellowship funding from the program, I had a temporary reprieve from the financial pressures of my normal life. I found that the course offerings were a delightful opportunity to explore creative areas I had never considered before. Howie Wiseman's Selected Topics in Screenwriting and Tony Nardi's Directing Actors for Screen Performance were particularly novel exposures, even though I attended them exclusively over Zoom. For the first time in a long time, I was able to enter a zone of creative play and learning.

Howie's class sparked an unexpected self-discovery. He expertly cultivated a meditative space where we drank in stories and pondered how they made our insides feel. As I struggled

pleasurably through the task of writing my own, I realized that what I really wanted as a creator was to make people laugh! The two short comedic scripts I submitted for this class dealt with transmasculine insecurities and the tensions of being the only racialized person in a setting of white faces. Howie's encouragement gave me the idea that it might be possible to actualize one of my scripts into a short film.

Exploring Fun as Change Agent

At the same time, I was starting to question some of my long-held beliefs and theories of change around documentary film. According to Bill Nichols, the primary purposes of expository documentary are to give voice to untold stories of injustices, provide critical perspectives on society, and to fuel popular rage and anger that galvanizes change.¹ This resonates with my personal experience. For me, the process of acquiring a critical perspective took place in my 20s, through exposure to peoples' histories and documentaries. These were shattering experiences that fundamentally shaped my understanding of my lived experiences and of the world at large. The rage I felt at systemic injustices was formative to my pursuit of documentary filmmaking.

But as I've gotten older, I've also struggled with the consuming, embittering nature of this rage, anger and hurt. These feelings threaten to overwhelm my person, especially in reaction to the vast global problems of our time. Over time, this big rage has metabolized into cynicism, and it's settled into my psyche and my body with a pronounced numbing effect. I'm increasingly doubtful that these affective flames and embers are helping me thrive.

¹ Nichols, Bill. Introduction to Documentary. Indiana University Press, 2017.

I feel another source of doubt in my work as a documentary maker—I’ve noticed that very few people I know watch documentaries, whereas most of the documentary enthusiasts I know are themselves documentary makers. The stories I hear my friends and peers discussing are almost always popular entertainment. Among my close friends, television is a means for relaxation, something to take the stress off at the end of the day, something to fall asleep to—they wilt when I propose a documentary for movie nights. Tired people, it seems to me, tend to seek out entertainment rather than somber critical perspectives.

This isn’t an anti-documentary tirade—I continue to love documentaries and to have interesting debates with friends, whose counter-arguments provoke new musings in me. Rather, it’s a sketch of the thoughts that have fueled my interest in comedy. This film is my first attempt to put activist intentions into narrative form, delivered with light-heartedness.

There’s a good deal of literature about the benefits of comedic narratives in promoting ideas. People are not only more prone to sharing funny content, they are also more likely to discuss it.² Comedy can be a fresh and engaging approach to subjects that are fraught with “inertia and fatigue”.³ Humor has the political power to rebuke “prejudices and preconceptions” and can be an act of support that provides oppressed peoples with “psychological strength.”⁴

² Campo, Shelly, et al. ““Wow, that was funny” the value of exposure and humor in fostering campaign message sharing.” *Social Marketing Quarterly* 19.2 (2013): 84-96.

³ Borum Chattoo, Caty, and Lauren Feldman. “Storytelling for social change: Leveraging documentary and comedy for public engagement in global poverty.” *Journal of Communication* 67.5 (2017): 678-701.

⁴ Friedman, Hershey H., and L. W. Friedman. “The pen versus the sword: Humor in the service of social justice.” Available at SSRN 3396640 (2019).

One universal element of jokes is that they demand a reevaluation of the familiar from a new, comedic perspective. Cris Mayo suggests that this can give humor subtly didactic qualities:

We can learn from the humor of an exotic or unfamiliar group because it challenges our comfortable notions and plays havoc with our facile generalizations. In order to derive pleasure from humor, audiences need to move beyond their comfort zones and commonplace understandings. Though they may do so only to get the joke, the shift in understanding can remain beyond the time and place of particular jokes. Humor is an invitation to think differently, from another perspective, while at the same time inhabiting one's own perspective; in other words, humor encourages one to learn.⁵

Mayo further writes that the self-conscious nature of laughter uniquely positions humor as a critical tool that disrupts “the earnestness of the spectator.”⁶ In laughing at a joke, the audience is keenly aware that “one's body, identity, gestures are all open to critique”—“humor is fundamentally about rethinking and re-embodiment one's relationship to the topics raised.”⁷

From the perspective of a filmmaker, I can report that I've never laughed so much as I did in creating this film, more than any other project I've directed on worked on before. I see a stark contrast when I think about my experience making *Unmanageable*, and the overwhelming amount of vicarious trauma my co-director and I experienced in the uncovering of that horrifying colonial institutional ethnography, that I still feel the weight of today. I don't for a second doubt the importance of that project and the work it now does in university classrooms disseminating those histories. I'm not yet able to draw any conclusions from this comparison, only that I know that there is an important message about my role as an artist waiting within.

⁵ Mayo, Cris. "Being in on the joke: Pedagogy, race, humor." *Philosophy of Education Archive* (2008): 244-252.

⁶ Mayo, 247

⁷ Mayo, 251

CHAPTER 2: MASCULINITY, TRANSNORMATIVITY, AND TENDER BOOBS

Loud, Proud Boobs: A Tradition of Cis Breast Activism

Activism around breasts is nothing new among feminist cis women in North America. The trope of “bra-burning” originated in 1960s protests, and the fight against patriarchal fetishization of breasts has been a constant theme throughout the decades leading to the present.⁸ In sexist patriarchal discourse, breasts are both framed as objects which must be covered up, and also fetishized as sex objects on display—logics which are internally consistent in that they center men’s desire and superiority.⁹ Feminist resistance to these ideas has, correspondingly, taken many different forms of sexual and non-sexual expression in the effort to actualize women’s own agency and autonomy, and to assert body and sex positivity. Fronts of struggle around breasts have included resistance to bras, the freedom to be topless, representation of breasts and nipples on television, the fight against the stigma and shame of breast cancer, and the right to breastfeed in public and in workplaces.^{10 11 12} These issues are plentifully visible in North American cultural production, depicted in an abundance of visual and performance art, documentary and narrative film and radio. And yet, all of them remain contested in the year 2023. The following discussion of masculinity, transmasculinity and breasts draws upon this long activist tradition in many direct and indirect ways.

⁸ Hinds, Hilary, and Jackie Stacey. "Imaging feminism, imaging femininity: The bra-burner, Diana, and the woman who kills." *Feminist Media Studies* 1, no. 2 (2001): 153-177.

⁹ Coleman, Jenny. "An introduction to feminisms in a postfeminist age." *Women's Studies Journal* 23, no. 2 (2009).

¹⁰ Boyer, Kate. "'The way to break the taboo is to do the taboo thing' breastfeeding in public and citizen-activism in the UK." *Health & place* 17, no. 2 (2011): 430-437.

¹¹ DeShazer, Mary K. *Mammographies: the cultural discourses of breast cancer narratives*. University of Michigan Press, 2013.

¹² Matich, Margaret, Rachel Ashman, and Elizabeth Parsons. "# freethenipple—digital activism and embodiment in the contemporary feminist movement." *Consumption Markets & Culture* 22, no. 4 (2019): 337-362.

Toxic Masculinity and Emasculating Boobs

In heteronormative culture, boobs are the ultimate antithesis of masculinity. “Boob” is used as an insult in common parlance, synonymous with weak, stupid, laughable, unimportant. Man boobs are a familiar and ubiquitous trope, once you start paying attention. In movies, men with boobs are comical, pitiful and disposable supporting characters. On the internet, anonymous confessors spill their shame, despair and self-loathing at bodies that do not meet male beauty standards. Hated politicians are satirized with boobs photoshopped onto their bodies in attempts to turn their images from powerful to ridiculous. Plastic surgery journals are rife with accounts of teenage boys whose lives are almost ruined by the “nightmare” of “excessive” chest fat, but who are thankfully saved and placed on their rightful path to manhood by a discreet surgery.¹³ All of these variations share the underlying themes of misogyny and fatphobia: boobs are a threat to masculinity in the same way that anything associated with femininity threatens masculinity.

¹³ For example, Machado-Borges, Thaïs. "Middle-class compassion and man boobs." *Anthropology Now* 5.2 (2013): 1-09.

Transnormativity and the Missing Man Boobs

Possibilities for transgender self-actualization have grown by leaps and bounds in the last several decades. In tandem, a transnormative culture has developed, with its own dominant narratives and contested borders.

For transgender men, the production of this culture has taken place through a diversity of media, including documentary films and an increasingly recognizable genre of YouTube videos.^{14 15}

Themes of medical transition are ever-present in normative transmasculinity, particularly the use of top surgery and androgenizing hormones to achieve a physical appearance that conforms with desired images of masculinity. In defining just what that masculinity is on a personal level, transmasculine subjects are also faced with the complex task of navigating their relationship with internalized heteronormative masculinity.

Austin Johnson points out that “the privileging of the medical model over others creates a marginalizing effect for gender-non-conforming people who cannot or do not wish to medically transition.”¹⁶ In other words, trans men who choose to forego top surgery must reconcile their breasts with both normative transmasculinity and toxic heteronormative masculinity, and contend with the transnormative expectations of others in negotiating how their identity is understood.

This is the current subject position I inhabit and which I explore in this film.

¹⁴ Johnson, Austin H. "Transnormativity: A new concept and its validation through documentary film about transgender men." *Sociological Inquiry* 86.4 (2016): 465-491.

¹⁵ Borck, C. Ray, and Lisa Jean Moore. "This is my voice on T: Synthetic testosterone, DIY surveillance, and transnormative masculinity." *Surveillance & Society* 17.5 (2019): 631-640.

¹⁶ Johnson, 465.

CHAPTER 3: RELEVANT FILMIC TRADITIONS

Subversive Queer Junk on Film

As I conceptualized this project, I began by researching previous queer film works that personified body parts.

I first thought of John Greyson's "Butthole Duet" from *Zero Patience* (1993), a musical number between singing anuses in rhyming verse, where one unsuccessfully tries to seduce the other. It exemplified his signature jokester, male-nudity-loving approach to AIDS activism. I was inspired by his rationale for this scene, as he articulated it in an interview: "a great way to reach people you don't necessarily agree with..." namely, "people who are offended by graphic depictions of the pros and cons of ass fucking."¹⁷ I mentally celebrated the idea of this art reaching homophobes!

Reading about Greyson's duet led me to the notorious singing asshole scene in John Water's deeply chaotic film *Pink Flamingos* (1972). Here, a naked birthday entertainer lies on his back and gapes and clenches his asshole in rhythm to a song. The shot consists of his bare, unadorned buttocks and anus. This is just a passing joke, without much plot significance, and hardly the most uncomfortable or violating moment in the movie. The film is meant to shock and stun with disgusting images, which is Water's apparently main goal, as he details in his book:

¹⁷ Cagle, Robert L. "'Tell the story of my life...': the making of meaning," monsters," and music in John Greyson's *Zero Patience*." *Velvet Light Trap* (1995): 69-82.

To me, bad taste is what entertainment is about. If someone vomits watching one of my films, it's like getting a standing ovation. ... I've always tried to please and satisfy an audience that thinks they've seen everything. I try to force them to laugh at their own ability to still be shocked by something. This reaction has always been the reason I make movies. I hate message movies.¹⁸

I don't share Waters's goals of shocking audiences into vomiting, but I value his work as a kind of statue of liberty of shameless campiness and body positivity. The work he's done to broaden the realm of subversive queer art gives me permission to release my inhibitions and express thoughts that feel transgressive.

Soon, I stumbled upon other genital characters. "Cipka" (2016), by Polish animator Renata Gasiorowska, is a gentle, non-verbal hand-drawn animation film in which the protagonist's vulva becomes a furry kiwi fruit-like creature with its own arms and legs that detaches from her and escapes while she is experimenting with masturbation. It playfully provokes and almost antagonizes her while roaming the apartment complex on its own, before returning orgasmically to her body. This was one of the first pieces I saw that abstracts the genitals as an independent entity.

I found a much more aggressive walking vulva in "We're Talking Vulva" (1993) by Canadian performance artists Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan. It was made as part of the NFB Studio D's Five Feminist Minutes program. It is a "mock music video," not a narrative film, in which a woman in a large pleather-looking vulva costume (also possessed of a genital area, in a meta-

¹⁸ Waters, John. Shock value: A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste. Running Press, 2005.

design decision) does a dancing, singing MTV-style performance. It's a classic '90s white feminist production.

A more obscure piece of queer trans genital art is "Trannymals Go to Court: An Eight-Genital Movie" (2007) by Dylan Vade and Abe Bernard. This advocacy piece was produced by the US-based non-profit Trans Body Law and Education Project. Premised on the observation that anti-trans legislation so often fixates on trans genitalia, this film dresses them up as characters using little puppet outfits, complete with googly eyes and wigs, to talk back to the court system in a series of witty little skits.

Looking for more breast-specific films, I came across "Breast Friends" (2019) by Caitlin Young, a short film where a woman's two breasts cajole and give her pep talks about her low self-esteem and body image distress as she agonizes over whether to go out to the bar with her friends. This film was a valuable reference to me because of how strongly I disliked its visual imagery. Here, the breasts' nipples were replaced by miniature faces, and each breast would sprout arms to smoke miniature cigarettes and handle other objects. What I disliked most of all, however, was the way that the breasts had autonomous physical motion. They would spontaneously elongate and wrap themselves around the protagonist's body, often rising up to confront her face to face. I found these snake-like motions horrifying, although I appreciated the film's feminist message wrapped in cheeky dialogue.

This diverse collection of references made it clear to me that a central visual problem I would have to tackle was that of how to turn each boob into a character, without invoking body horror.

Additionally, to my surprise, I did not discover any films that personify breasts from a queer or transmasculine perspective. The one film I found covering the intersection of breasts and queer masculinity was a three-minute documentary by Jen Crothers called “Butch Tits” (2010). It seemed to me, then, that my film would be breaking a little bit of new ground in the niche world of talking body parts.

Transmasculinity in Film

I understand “Butch” as part of the long arc of transmasculine representation in film that is slowly moving from otherness to normalization. As recently as two decades ago, virtually the only transmasculine narratives available to a mainstream audience revolved around trans men as tragic, doomed figures who suffer violence and isolation. *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), the story of Brandon Teena’s brutal murder, is still one of the most well-known films about trans men.

In the decades since *Boys Don’t Cry*, there has been a steadily proliferating flow of documentaries about trans men, such as *Southern Comfort* (2001), *The Aggressives* (2005), *Real Boy* (2016), *One of the Guys* (2018), and *No Ordinary Man* (2020), among many others. These documentaries seek to humanize trans men, show their relatable existence, and as a body of work, they also reify transnormative narratives about gender transition and resistance to a transphobic world, as discussed above.

Comedies about trans men are still relatively few. My research has only been able to turn up two films: *Two 4 One* (2014), about a trans man who accidentally gets pregnant while helping his ex

with artificial insemination, and *3 Generations* (2015), about a teenage trans boy who struggles to get emotional approval and the paperwork he needs from his parents to begin his medical transition. I would speculate that this scarcity is due to the fact that comedic narratives are premised on the audience's fundamental unconditional acceptance of their protagonists, no matter what their faults, and this is only beginning to be possible for trans men thanks to the work of countless storytellers.

Queer Writer/Director/Actors

I wrote, directed and acted in "Butch" out of necessity, rather than as a deliberate artistic choice. In hindsight, I can link my work to that of two queer filmmakers whose films I greatly admire, who have similarly written, directed and acted in projects with autobiographical elements.

Cheryl Dunye is a Black lesbian American director best known for her mockumentary comedy *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), in which she plays the protagonist, a Black lesbian filmmaker. The film follows her archival research into the story of a fictional Black lesbian actress who is difficult to trace because she has been denied proper credit in the films she has acted in and omitted from records. It was the first theatrically released feature film directed by a Black lesbian woman about Black lesbians.¹⁹ Many of Dunye's early films are experimental and reflexive hybrid documentaries exploring life as a Black lesbian who dates white women.

¹⁹ Sullivan, Laura L. "Chasing Fac:" *The Watermelon Woman* and Black Lesbian Possibility." *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 (2000): 448-460.

John Cameron Mitchell's rock musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) was originally co-written and produced as an incredibly successful Broadway musical. The film draws on characters and scenes from his childhood to tell the tragic story of a lonely and embittered genderqueer German drag queen living in a Kansas trailer park, as she plays gigs with her rock band in the shadow of her former lover antagonist's much more successful rock tour.²⁰ Mitchell co-wrote and directed the film, memorably playing the protagonist Hedwig, and also recorded the lead vocals on the soundtrack.

These are directors who took close part in the actualization of their vision, although they worked with very different levels of resources. I've taken comfort in their films many times. As a filmmaker, I feel bolstered by the knowledge that I'm part of a tradition of queer creators who have gone through the grueling process of taking multiple key roles on their films to achieve the story they had in mind. I'm in good company.

²⁰ Hundley, Jessica. "Diary of a Drag Fiend." *The Guardian*. September 1, 2001.

CHAPTER 4: THE WRITING PROCESS

Finding a Story Method

I spent several months of the summer of 2022 creating drafts of the screenplay for “Butch”. My first draft, which John and Brenda helpfully critiqued, had no real narrative arc and was more a collection of vignettes. Using the resources from Howie’s class as a springboard, I searched for more guidance on writing short stories. I sifted through numerous different story methods before finding two I really resonated with by John Truby and Lisa Cron.

A few things that stood out to me about John Truby’s method. He rejects the three-act structure and the Hero’s Journey as writers’ tools and argues that they are analytical tools only. Instead, for Truby plot flows from the “third rail” of the protagonist’s inner desire, which rubs against their main obstacle to create a driving narrative.

Lisa Cron’s method targets novelists, but has significant overlap with Truby’s. Although her writing does not use therapeutic language, she essentially proposes a trauma-centered understanding of a protagonist’s inner world and their resulting unconscious beliefs. The protagonist’s formative experiences are intricately fleshed out to create a rich psychological substrate that the writer can draw on. The plot is carefully constructed to push the protagonist’s most sensitive buttons.

I struggled with terrible writer’s block over the summer. At first what felt like endless procrastination turned out to be invaluable learning about the process of creation. I was

constantly troubleshooting the question of how to get into the headspace of writing, and I felt like I finally understood what Virginia Woolf meant when she wrote about the importance of having a room of one's own. I learned that I required long stretches of uninterrupted alone time—uninterrupted especially by myself—but that even when I managed to have these stretches I couldn't be certain that I would be able to generate output. Every few days I would desperately come up with some new system to get myself to write. Some of these methods have stuck, happily. The moments of writing flow I did manage to get were pure fun and enjoyment, and I know that I will be cultivating my access to this place for a long time to come.

My second draft finally had a narrative arc, and I sought a round of feedback from many helpful friends and colleagues in the MFA program. This second draft had new problems—the characters were really flat, especially the love interest. The separate worlds I had set up of humans and boobs was confusing. The dialogue was painfully cheesy at many points.

I could not get out a third draft, try as I might. John encouraged me to start production, but I was afraid I would commit myself to irreversible mistakes. Finally, since I was so stuck and had no other real options, I decided to just shoot it on his advice.

CHAPTER 5: THE PRODUCTION PROCESS

From Big Crew Vision to Solo Production

I started out with a modest budget of \$2,000 a plan to use a small crew and traditional film sets. Although I've worked on narrative sets, I'd never directed a film of my own with a full crew, so I thought this would be my chance to have this new experience. I found a producer, Melissa Green, who was interested in the project through my queer softball team, and we started a casting process through Mandy.com, a networking website to search for other creatives. Quickly, we hit a number of snags. Try as we might, we just could not seem to find queer actors who would be willing to appear topless, even though we did our best to communicate exactly what would be required, and that the project was not of a sexual nature. I'm not entirely sure why, but I would hazard a guess that the unpredictability of letting one's naked body be photographed in a time when images can be disseminated far and wide instantaneously may have felt like a big risk, and one too big to chance with a little-known student director with no background in narrative. Another obvious route was to hire porn actors—but I did not have the ability to pay their rates. Then, Melissa began getting quotes back from prospective locations and it became apparent that renting a boxing gym to shoot in would cost much more than I could afford.

So, I made a tough decision and switched gears to the mode of production that I know best, which is to work as a one-man-band with what resources I could access easily. John suggested that I shoot against green screen, as I'd successfully run the technical side of several green screen shoots over the summer during his intensive course, the Queer Summer Institute. A plan began to click into place to work around the previous obstacles. I would myself play the role of the topless

protagonist, and his opponent, as well as the referee. I had no prior acting experience, but I did have a very straightforward script and a tendency to overconfidence on my side. I asked my partner Kate to play the protagonist human's date, and to my surprise, she agreed. Even more unexpectedly, my partner Rachel said yes to letting me film her breasts, which then I would superimpose onto Kate's chest.

As for the shooting device, I decided to shoot on an iPhone 13 Pro that I had on loan from a freelance client, as it could record 4k footage, which would give me more latitude in post-production. I trialed footage on both my Canon 5D Mark iii and the iPhone. The DSLR had more complex color information, but the iPhone won out with its higher resolution. It also had the advantage of being easier to rig for the high angle and overhead shots. I would create all of the sets, including furniture, in post. I booked the Cinespace Mixed Media Studio, which was only available for a two-day shoot, thinking I could perhaps get most of the film shot. I quickly realized that the entire process of production and post-production was going to have to unfold in an organic way, because so many aspects were new to me. At Cinespace, I spent two days experimenting with single shots and developing a green screen to animation pipeline. I roughed out a few different animation styles.

I still needed lots of space and time, and I was very lucky that CFT 130 on the Keele campus was available for the last two weeks of August, and that Jon Hedley, the production area coordinator, was willing to let me occupy it for that entire period. Access to this space is what made the film possible. So, I checked out the maximum amount of equipment Marcos Arriaga, the equipment technician, would let me have, and brought my work gloves and a set of little music speakers to

keep me company. I spent a full day and night clearing the studio and rigging up a massive 20' x 30' greenscreen on one end of the studio, consisting of a huge greenscreen cloth stretched across multiple c-stands. Honestly, I felt pretty lonely, especially when another MFA came in with some of his crew members to scout the space for a later shoot. During the times I was doing ladder work, I had a friend accompany me on zoom for safety. I found four excellent heavy-duty risers on wheels in the corner of the room that I made use of as a stage, which gave me an excellent working area. I used a large rolling TV monitor plugged into the iPhone so that I could monitor the shots - this was crucial for working alone. In some ways, this DIY greenscreen setup worked better than the setup at Cinespace, because it allowed me to work against an even larger backdrop without having to manage green splash from multiple green walls and green floor.



Image 1. My DIY green screen setup in CFT 130 with my working area on the risers and television monitor to the side.

For each scene, I planned minimal subject lighting to evoke the settings in each scene—a hanging light over a diner table, street lights, natural light from a window, a bedroom lamp. A repeating playlist of doo wop kept me company during this time. The feeling of being alone in that studio for 10 days is intensely imprinted in my body, and I wouldn't do it again. That's what I will do differently on my next project—I will focus on bridging the gaps I need in order to work collaboratively. Even so, it was my first time being able to make use of such a large amount of equipment and facilities for a self-directed project—I had barely spent time on campus prior to that, thanks to the pandemic—so in that respect the shoot was also a great, eye-opening experience.

Then, I gathered the costumes and props I needed. For the boxing scenes, I went to Yorkdale mall and bought \$400 worth of sports clothing and boxing equipment. I also went to Spirit Halloween—happily they were open far in advance of October - and bought a wig to play my opponent.

I went through scene by scene and gathered my shots. For some of the more complex shots involving two (or more) of me, I had to stop and check that the shots would composite the way I wanted them to. For scenes that involved shot and reverse shot, I had to rotate the setup 180 degrees between shots to shoot against the green screen.

Rachel and Kate each came in for full 10-hour days, and they were very good sports. The lack of crew meant that we could take as much time as we needed with the shots that required nudity.

Kate had a higher standard for our on-screen performances than I did, and often suggested retakes when I would have moved on.

CHAPTER 6: THE POST-PRODUCTION PROCESS

The Hairiest Workflow Yet

Once I had it all in the can, I had a huge amount of post to do. This was the most complex workflow I've managed, involving more than 100 After Effects compositions embedded in a Premiere project. It took some figuring out, and inevitably I committed myself to some workflows that in retrospect were less efficient than I would have liked. There were loads of little details to work out even for actions that would normally be simple, for example, the intricate keyboard choreography required to locate the in and out points of a given clip through these many layers of embedding. There were a few annoyances that were external to my project, such a bug that as of this writing is still making it impossible for me to export a copy of the film directly from Premiere, even when everything is fully rendered, and even when I try to export small portions. The only way I've been able to output my film is by ripping it off my screen using OBS.

Early in the edit, I realized I had to buy a new computer with more processing power to handle the job. My 2016 laptop simply couldn't handle it. I got a Mac Studio to save on cost and maximize my spending on processors. Happily, I was able to return all of the props I bought to save on costs.

I started post-production by recording a scratch track of the dialogue. I recorded 8 separate tracks for each of the characters, and then used audio processing to alter each character's track into a distinct voice.

Then came the first pass of animation, which involved chroma keying, cleaning up the key, and loads of manual masking. Unfortunately, there's just no way to do masking quickly.

Visual and Aural Illusions

The second pass of animation involved building the sets. I developed a variety of strategies to create environments. I used stock photographs, which I often modified or combined with other photographs and video footage to try to create a little bit of realism.

For some of the set elements, I used 3D models. I learned how to use Unity to achieve this. I actually built a second virtual green screen set within Unity and lit it and placed my props against it. It was even more massive than my studio green screen! This is how I secured the boxing ring, the boxing gym, and many other pieces of furniture. Initially I had experimented with using The Sims for this purpose and discovered that there is a robust community of machinima filmmakers using this game, but ultimately it was too inaccessible with multiple layers of paywalls. Unity was a better tool for my purposes with assets to choose from.

Sound design was another new world for me. Previously in documentary films, ambient sound had been a low level concern, and I was mostly concerned with eliminating distractions. I spent some time studying sound design tutorials and watching reference films and realized what a complex aural illusion was necessary to make the visual illusions credible. I studied workout footage and amateur boxing matches to create the sound effects of the boxing gym scene. As with the visual animation, I used a collage of approaches. I sourced sounds from royalty-free

sources on the internet, and also used a mini recording studio setup in my office. Sometimes I would search for sounds and then realize that it was easier to simply record the clips myself and add audio processing as needed.

Re-Writing in Post and Central Story Problems

I met with Brenda and John about four or five times during the editing process. I can't overstate how vital their support was for the film. I showed them so many completely incoherent mashed together visuals—and they kept me going by seeing past all of the weird, jarring things to the film's potential, and showering me with encouragement. It really was a privilege to work under their supervision.

John was right—some of the dialogue rewrites were best done in post. Something interesting happened to my understanding of the story as the film began to form. The rewrites I needed to make became more intuitive, part of the holistic film that I could see in front of my eyes. What the characters needed to say was more obvious, rather than something I was straining to imagine. I rewrote significant parts of the opening and the ending in an attempt to make the characters slightly less flat (they're still cardboard cutouts, but that's a problem for next time). One big problem that Brenda and John pointed out to me repeatedly was that I wasn't able to communicate the premise of the film to the audience. I finally tackled this problem in the 3rd cut in the most obvious way, by adding first-person expository narration that spelled it out without any kind of subtlety.

One interesting challenge was to define the boobs and not the humans in the film as the main characters. As John and Brenda pointed out to me, the viewer is strongly drawn to perceiving the humans as the speaking characters, and will take any opportunity to perceive them that way, so I needed to tightly focus attention on the boob characters at every moment.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Looking at the final product I've created, I have mixed feelings. It's a very simple story, and I cringe at many of its unartful moments. But, that's what I had the newly-acquired skills to create this time. I'm very interested to know how my storyteller's intentions will be received, and I'm looking forward to conversations with queer and trans artists and organizers. I'm also excited for the next chapter of my artistic practice. This project has been massively challenging on personal, artistic, and technical levels. I'm excited to continue growing as a writer and improve my abilities to depict characters with more realism. As a filmmaker, working collaboratively is my next most important horizon.

In creating "Butch," I've attempted to explore short-form narrative comedy as a way to raise questions and disrupt normativities in a light-hearted way that invites delight and laughter. I draw on a long tradition of feminist cis women's activism around breasts and body positivity, while pushing against the normative irreconcilability of masculinity and breasts. In doing so, I contradict both long-established heteronormativity and also contemporary transnormativities that are in the process of being reified, which dictate narrow, medicalized definitions of transmasculinity. By using the narrative device of personified body parts and genitals, I join a playful tradition of irreverent filmmakers like John Greyson and John Waters. The fact that I was able to imagine a romantic comedy featuring a transmasculine boob is thanks to the work of countless filmmakers who have normalized transmasculinity to the extent that I can take for granted that my audience will likely understand my unspoken premise. This film is my attempt to contribute to that effort by continuing to complexify the possibilities of trans representation.

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