

MY THESIS FILM:  
A THESIS FILM BY ERIK ANDERSON

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## Abstract

*My Thesis Film: A thesis film by Erik Anderson* is a narrative feature film which recursively explores the author's own journey in arriving at the concept for the thesis film the viewer is watching. As such, the film ultimately acts as its own contextual document, depicting the socio-economic, political, and creative reasoning behind its conception by way of dramatizing the behind-the-scenes life of the author. While the film takes some liberties in this dramatization - including fictionalizing scenes and dialogue, compositing characters, using discretion in veiling others, etc.- it aims to remain an honest depiction of the author in the time and place of its origin. In doing so, the film uses humour to call into question the ideas and ideals which permeate through its character-driven zeitgeist, especially those belonging to the author. And in problematizing the author's struggle to make transcendent personal art, the film ironically threatens to become it.

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To my committee reader, Scott Forsyth, for his measured mind and zen-like patience.

To friends who continually offered their time, including my most obliging of roommates, Anders Yates, who never said 'no' to helping me shoot things, sometimes over and over again.

It also occurred to me during the making of this film that I have never had a supportive partner during the making of any of my films. I had one relationship on the rocks during my first feature, and that didn't make things any easier. But Victoria did. Each and every day she helped to take weight of my shoulders or to ease my troubled mind. For her boundless support, enthusiasm, encouragement and love, I am truly in her debt.

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## Preface

Dear Reader,

As mentioned in the Abstract, the film this document is meant to support ironically undermines the purpose of the document, as the document is supposed to be contextual, but the film itself is semi-contextualizing. Thus, this supporting document is then left to be the proverbial ‘God of the Gaps’ of the thesis component, explicating what the film could not, and laying bare the practical steps of production for the author as a filmmaker, such as the artistic choices made in the film’s dramatization which were perhaps not rendered self-evident by nature of the exposition in the film itself.

That said, while I shall strive to spare the reader any lengthy redundancies, there will undoubtedly be some overlap in information, as I attempt to clarify, and separate, fact from fiction. Moreover, as biographical content is at the heart of the film’s creative context and stylistic approach, I shall go slightly further than the film at contextualizing the impetus for its expression. Please bear with me in this regard.

Finally, I will occasionally refer within the confines of this paper to the character I play in the movie as ‘Erik,’ though he is essentially me. I don’t mean to confuse you, and please don’t take me for a cliché grad student teetering on the edge of a caffeine-and-essay induced breakdown –I am, but that’s beside the point– I merely use it as shorthand when speaking about the film as a work. It is not a desperate attempt to distance myself from the character –though I did leave a sliver of wiggle room by never mentioning my last name in the film, to acknowledge the fictional aspects of the piece– but the reality is, it’s a pretty close depiction, warts and all.

I hope you still want to be friends at the end.

-Erik

## Film Origins

To make my thesis film about my thesis film was, as depicted in *My Thesis Film*, not my first idea. Upon hearing that universities might look warily on anyone pitching features in their MFA applications, I applied to the university pitching a short dramatized version of the first book of Plato's *Republic*. It was something that I fancied doing at some point anyway, and it seemed like a universally acceptable subject of interest at academia, almost synonymous with higher learning itself.

Yet, what I was yearning to make was a spin-off film for a character in my second feature, *Misogyny/Misandry: An Evening of Dialectic*. I felt that in terms of my own craft, I had hit new heights with that film, and was keen to write a protagonist-driven vehicle for an actor/friend I had made while shooting it. Tristan D. Lalla had been cast as Tyler in the movie, and had exceeded expectations—he was natural, had a great ear for my style of dialogue, and he never seemed to need a note. The only 'directing' I really had to do with him was logistical, which is to say: blocking. And as *Misogyny/Misandry* (M/M) had depicted echoes of gender politics arguments I had been present for, hitherto 2011, I thought it would be interesting to tackle similar, yet unmediated issues surrounding race, and as Tristan is a black actor, who had been through his share of racist indignities, it seemed like ripe territory to approach things as I am wont to do.

My goals in cinema haven't really changed since I made my first feature, *The Second Times of Troubles*. I've wanted to challenge character archetypes by creating characters that are as complicated as the people I know in real life. They are not 'good' or 'bad,' as characters seemingly remain in most Hollywood depictions, but all shades of grey. The individuals I know are alternately funny, kind, smart, silly, annoying, selfish, difficult, etc., and sometimes all of these on a given day. Thus, I've wanted to create characters that resonate with audiences on a more realistically familiar level. In turn, I've also wanted to make films that were anti-sensationalist; films which didn't rely on murder, violence, gratuitous sex, gross-out humour, etc., in order to be interesting. My feeling has been that most of us (thankfully) in urban Canada don't live through much sensationalism, so why is it that sensationalism is nearly all that's depicted in cinema? In real life, sensational feelings in life can arise from the minutia and banalities of everyday life; social anxiety, arguments, daily interactions, family matters, etc. Hence, I've wanted to somehow communicate, or make cinematic, the little moments, interactions, farcical

situations, successes or failures which weigh on myself and others I know, in our relative safety of Canadian living. This includes writing dialogue as realistic as the characters, complete with all realm of colloquial un-polish; e.g. inserting all the ‘you knows,’ ‘I means,’ ‘ums,’ which regularly occur within every fleeting minute of real-world speech, but are almost always omitted from theatrical or stylized writing. Moreover, I’ve wanted to place emphasis, or at least be mindful of the relationship between form and content; focusing not merely on content or plot points therein, but reconsidering their interaction. And of course, this all falls under the umbrella of the desire to express myself, by not only being as honest as possible, but by taking as much as I can from life around me. Being personal in the hopes of being universal, and not the other way around.

By fall 2012 I had written a first act of the unnamed Tristan project. I nervously sent this to Tristan and awaited his response. I say ‘nervously’ because nerves were unavoidable given the dynamics at play, I was/am of course, a white male sending my black friend a piece I’ve written on race, which claims to have something new to say. Moreover, the first act hadn’t even touched on any of Tristan’s personal anecdotes. Hence, it was comprised only of my own ideas spun into a dialectical, fragmented, slow-burning narrative. In short, it was unusual in its form, risky in its content, and I was on tenterhooks. A day after I sent it, Tristan got back with enthusiastic, unreserved approval. I was thrilled, feeling vindicated in my efforts and like I was indeed flying into new personal heights of creativity with all the confidence that bounds along with it. The timing and means to make it, however, were another story. I was still editing *M/M*, which had been set back by a first editing attempt misfire by a close friend of mine. He wasn’t an editor by trade, but had thrown his hat into the ring to try bringing things round to a rough cut after we wrapped in August ’11. However, by January 2012, with less than a handful of scenes even partially assembled, we agreed that the project was too ambitious for him to take on, and I should take it back. Although I was ensconced in my undergrad at Concordia University, the film was my baby, and so I started chipping away, slowly but surely, starting from scratch.

After a few months I started sending a rough assembly of *M/M* out to festivals. To some extent this went against the standard wisdom that one should only deliver a final product (despite festival assurances that they ‘understand’ rough cuts), but a ‘final’ product was something I might never be able to deliver on anyway. *M/M* had had a crowd-sourced budget of \$4200, which was in fact the most I’d ever had to make a film, and yet it was clearly next to nothing. It would never be enough for a proper sound mix or colour grade, and despite some sliding scale efforts made by

friends of friends, it ultimately looked like it would be up to me to take things as far as I could in post-production. However, while I was capable of cutting the way I wanted, I had basically been an autodidact in cinema without any formal training hitherto, and the advanced elements of post-production were beyond my expertise, not to mention the capabilities of my humble little laptop. And so, by the time there was finally a hint of good news—the film got word around Christmas 2012 that it was to be included in the Rendez-Vous du Cinema Quebecois film festival (Feb 2013)—the post-production process had become tired and protracted, some of the cast were impatient for greater results, and I was itching to use my creative momentum to shoot something new (like the *Tristan* film). Moreover, I was also growing increasingly concerned about just how to get *M/M* out there, beyond the RVCQ. Indeed, any answers to questions of further post-production financing or distribution were not presenting themselves to me, and without a big score from a major festival, it occurred to me that my hopes for *M/M* might already be dashed; the proverbial tree falling in the woods without anyone hearing it. Not only did the ramifications of this prospect keep me up at night, but the end was nearing for my Political Science undergrad, and within months I knew I would find myself out of school, out of work, heavily indebted, and with no gear of my own to shoot anything. In short, despite my best efforts, burning desire, and having made the best work of my life, the horizon was quickly presenting itself with nothing on it.

I had shunned academia out of high school, unenthusiastic about my options, which were monetarily limited to university in my home town; a university which didn't have a film program. For me, it was cinema or bust. Yet when I finally did come around to the idea of university ten years later, I leapt into the Political Science department, for I had started to make films on my own in the interim and thought it best to exercise those parts of my brain which occupied my thoughts, but were not linked directly to my vocational aspiration. In other words, keep making films outside of school, but get an education for its own intellectual virtue. I had always been somewhat philosophically minded, and I thought at the very least it would coerce me into reading texts and books that I had always wanted to, but was too lazy to pick up without the institutional coercion. And indeed, it was the philosophical underpinnings of politics that I found most interesting. Reading Plato's *Republic* in particular was a highlight of my undergrad. Socratic dialogues were much more dramatic and dynamic than I had envisioned, and of course I appreciated how thorough the ideas themselves were explored. Yet, I couldn't stay away from film entirely, and ended up picking up a minor in Film Studies, which proved more useful than I had initially imagined, filling in some gaps of my own self-taught knowledge and offering



introductions to theorists I found appreciable, like Susan Sontag, who had written on issues of form and content in art that resonated with me.

Besides, I reckoned, perhaps with a minor in Film Studies and a large portfolio, I could always make the jump if need be to an MFA in Production, if things weren't really going anywhere with my artistic career. By the Christmas holidays in 2012, with one semester to go and a film in limbo, applying to an MFA was looking like a self-fulfilling prophesy. With Plato now in tow, I sent out my applications in January 2013. Tristan would have to wait.

Meanwhile, societal discourse began to change rapidly around this time. Bizarre pronouncements by Republican candidates about sexual assault and abortion in the 2012 run-up to the presidential election, coupled with the heinous news out of New Delhi around Christmas of that year, and the well publicized assault in Steubenville in early 2013 brought gender politics even more to the fore on social media, nearing a fever pitch. The conversation was necessary, yet the tone was becoming polemical. What was once a forum for jokes and travel pics became an echo chamber in outrage and confirmation bias. Insipid dance numbers by posturing playboys like Robin Thicke became hyperbolically demonized as typifying all that was wrong with society, and an arbitrary 'test' extrapolated from a 1980s zine by Allison Bechdel was given near-institutional importance in deciphering which art was now part of the problem, despite its tautologically arbitrary underpinnings.

These outlooks, which were permeating media and influencing vernacular more and more, took an axiomatic moral high ground, leaving any attempt at further exploration of ideas –such as constructive dialectics, playing devil's advocate, etc– as perceived offenses. Fittingly, there was talk of being 'allies' to various groups. A strange term, it conjured ideas of war, or partisan teams, and indeed, it felt as though there was less and less room for a no-man's-land of ideas. Words like 'systemic' and 'privilege' became oft-used shorthands for complicated issues, and as feminist vernacular and theory came more to the fore of the mainstream, so did other 'intersections' come with it. All realms of concern over representation, voice, depictions in media, etc., came under sharp scrutiny. For instance, a trending topic one day might be that a non-native girl may have worn a native-styled headdress at an outdoor rock concert. The ensuing conversation about cultural appropriation might have been necessary, but rarely were the discussions constructive. Whoever that girl was, was not only morally wrong, but typified wrongness, and any suggestion of 'intention' was irrelevant.

Again, this is not to say that illumination of these issues wasn't important, or even a great thing, but to take a step back and witness it as a phenomenological movement acting on social mores, was a fascinating one. One of the noticeable effects was the embossing of the inherently relativist idea found in 'intersectionality'- that nobody can understand the plight of someone at the corner of another identity intersection, and should therefore never attempt to 'speak for' someone else, and/or be extremely wary of their depictions. And this was especially directed at the emblem of privilege and colonialism, the white male, who was effectively seen as culpable for creating, perpetuating, and exploiting intersectional differences. Art school was heavily steeped in this growing style of rhetoric, and anything that didn't adhere was not only morally questionable, but an outrageous affront to what was right and True. But of course, coming from a philosophical-political background, my understanding was there probably wasn't a Truth, what was considered morally right or wrong was relative, and that all ideas were open for debate.

Given that brewing (and continuing) context, I was growing worried about my Tristan project, for clearly, no matter what the intention or content, it now seemed apparent that it would be rejected out of hand as being morally in err, based on our optics alone. Indeed, it would ironically cease to be a film by an auteur filmmaker about an important topic, but a white guy making a movie about a black guy, which was fundamentally wrong. Even the playful mirror I had held up in *M/M* became a cause for concern. Was even depicting people arguing gender politics now egregious? Was the corresponding title, *Misogyny/Misandry* -originally intended as a contemporary pastiche of Godard's title, *Masculin Féminin*- now radioactively offensive outright, if it was inferred that the author might be suggesting some equivalency of sexist victimhood? With each passing day and festival rejection, my concern grew and my confidence was rattled. The movie was getting older, I was getting older, I was growing more impoverished, yet I was to be conspicuously held out of extra funding, and seemingly looked at with greater skepticism in a program which was not the safe academic harbor of ideas which I had originally presupposed coming directly from my undergrad.

By Christmas 2013 I was thoroughly depressed. My film was going nowhere, my prospects were dwindled, I was penniless, indebted, had no idea if/when I could ever make my Tristan film, and socially I was feeling more ostracized, both personally in the program, and rhetorically, as a visual member of a body politic considered morally bankrupt in the eyes of the iconoclast zeitgeist of the social media era. But of course, I was not a body politic, I was just me.

## Concept as a Becoming

Questions of the thesis began to weigh heavily, both at school and on my psyche. The safe bet remained Plato. People would almost glaze over when I mentioned it, which at that point was almost all I wanted. My depression, fears of being tainted with my previous film, fears of switching to something more challenging and provocative all made me want to crawl under a rock, or at the very least, fly under the radar. I went as far as writing a second draft of a screenplay for the first book of the *Republic*. Yet I knew making it as my thesis would bring no solace from my own ambitious compulsions, and ultimately, do very little to further my path to said ambitions either.

I knew I wanted to do more, say more, and kill a few birds with one stone. But these birds were awash in contradictions. I wanted to comment objectively on the zeitgeist but needed to acknowledge my own subjective limitations in it. I wanted to be critical of festivals, but create something indisputably worthy of their entry. I wanted to satirize elements of academia, yet I needed its approval. I wanted to admonish the English-Canadian film industry while finding a place for myself in it. I wanted to call attention to my work being overlooked, without being self-aggrandizing. I wanted to talk about why I couldn't make the Tristan film, but foster interest in its future production. I wanted people to get caught up in the ideas of the movie, but to never lose sight of the formal method of conveyance. But how to accomplish all that whilst adhering to my aforementioned cinematic goals? How could I do it all in one film? This was the quandary that germinated in the back of my mind as I wandered around the slickened city streets of Victoria that Christmas.

The moment of conception for the film was, of course, different than how it appeared on screen. I say 'of course,' because in the scene of its depiction, Erik reflexively hints that ideas in real life never arrive cinematically, and thus, there needs to be some sort of cinematic conceit to make the moment of conception more interesting. Karen (played by Shaista Latif), who is depicted as incepting the idea, recursively suggests it could arrive in a conversation like the two characters are currently having. 'Of course,' this depiction *is* the conceit, as fabricated by myself in real life. Indeed, as low key as the scene is, the reality was even less dynamic. There was no conversation, nor a Karen-inspired friend around. The reality is: I was simply walking home (to my mother's) through Beacon Hill Park in Victoria on a grey winter's day. There were no flashes of lightning, no inspirational interventions, nor any catalysts which make for good fodder. The quandary in the

back of my mind simply resolved itself as I brought the issue back to mind; it clearly having had enough time to germinate. I would make a film about the quandary itself. It seemed so simple an answer that everything which came before it was instantly rendered in 20/20 hindsight. ‘Of course,’ I thought, this was exactly what I’d make. Nothing else made sense. It was personal, honest, offered a chance to navigate the contradictions through open dialogue, and was inherently playful in form. My mind ticked boxes: Check, check, check...

However, despite the clarity of the concept, and the rightness of the feeling immediately attached to it, writing it all did not necessarily come without great effort or contemplation. Dialogue comes easily to me once I have the scenes, and the sentiment, impressions, and things I want to say are the impetus for all, but scenes and plot points themselves are the logistical containers of all that, and these typically come last for me. I often liken my process to that of dreams and Sudoku puzzles. Elements of dreams will be crystal clear in one’s memory, but their connecting tissue is often fuzzy; “I was talking to Mark, and he was in the chair, and then I was at the mall with Cathy... but how did I get there?” The clear bits therefore come part and parcel with the idea—these are like the numbers given to someone off the bat in a Sudoku puzzle. e.g. There is a 9 here, a 4 there, etc., but the rest of the numbers will need to be mentally crunched, or chewed away at until they become as clear as the given. Most of this is, what I assume to be, diametrically opposite to how most films are made, which I believe to be based on plot concepts— ‘Let’s do a western with a heist and then big shootout in the end...’ characters, impressions, or any commentary coming subsequently. For me, what I want to express is the crux of the film idea itself, the expression bringing along some of the aforementioned imagery, visions, moments, or character ideas, but the plot, or narrative connecting-tissue comes last by way of logically ruminating on things.

The writing process itself is pure tedium for me. By the time I sit down to do it, there’s little left to be conceived, and it’s mainly a self-motivated task in stay-at-home drudgery. I will have already written out smatterings of dialogue, ideas, etc. on loose pieces of paper (or even draft emails to myself in lieu of pen, paper, et al.), but those notes represent spontaneous expression in real time while the ideas are hitting me, and don’t feel like work. Whereas if even a few hours have gone by before I can write the idea down, things feel like a chore. Hence, by the time I come around to typing things out in a screenplay formatted processor, the film already exists in a rough-draft version in my head, and the ‘writing’ process becomes about as interesting as doing one’s taxes. Consequently, I’m a terrific procrastinator, and much prefer to ruminate over things,

which is exactly what I did for a better part of a year, building things in my head and jotting down more notes sporadically as they came to me after the first day of conception, in which I ran home after my Beacon Hill epiphany and immediately scrawled out about 4 pages worth of ideas as the floodgates opened.

## Taking Shape

I made up my mind that this concept was the Hail Mary I was looking for. And it would definitely be what I proposed going forward. But this decision did not come without its own counterbalance of fear. I knew the idea itself was risky, and sure to provoke the ire of some, regardless of how well I finessed the contradictions. After all, the film would revolve around me and my life at school. Thus, even its fictionalization would draw comparisons to real life people and events, not to mention its somewhat heretical/satirical nature which was bound to make idealists wince. Moreover, my pre-grad school understanding had proven sage: the program was decidedly not very interested in features, and yet this would certainly be epic. And then of course there was the problem of how to actually make the movie. Besides making a few exercises in class, rust was accumulating on my filmmaking (and acting) instincts. I was also coming off the miserable experience of having a beloved work land dead on arrival. Having it happen again was not something I could stomach. Hence, the idea of taking on the monumental task of making yet another no budget feature was beyond daunting, not to mention how panic-inducing the realization was that I would have to ask for the same favours from friends all over again. I couldn't pay anyone, had no camera or audio gear of my own, had only a failing laptop to use for processing and editing, and had no budget for even the basic craft-service necessities. Thus, it would be beg, stealing, and borrowing—all troubling prospects for a natural introvert who was already depressed about his situation.

The department was eager for us to shoot in our third term, which would have been summer 2014, but that would have been impossible. I hadn't had time enough to incubate the film, and without OGS or SSHRC funding, I would have to work during the summer. I put my tail between my directorial legs and asked a friend if there might be space for me at a café she was day-managing. Indeed there was, but farcically, I was quickly demoted. Having an ear for dialogue apparently did not translate into being a great barista, and I found myself doing menial tasks like coring kale. However, this too, would provide fodder for the film, helping to illustrate my artistic purgatory.

Indeed, as the situation leading up to my thesis was essentially the narrative basis for the film, the longer the wait drew on before I actually hashed it out, the more I could incorporate into the script from my own life. I was living a (potential) mirror image of my content. For instance, after I delivered a 60 page starter script to my supervisor, Amnon Buchbinder, in December 2014, he

noted: “So you’re feeling burned and now you’re going to double-down.” I later incorporated this line into one delivered by the advisor character in the film (though that character was not based on my current supervisor). This is not to say that I was interested in stretching things out, mind you. In fact, I had hoped to start shooting in the late Fall of 2014, a few weeks after I presented my thesis idea at our class’s symposium. However, I hadn’t come far enough in fleshing out the narrative connecting-tissue, or doing the mental ‘crunch’ as I mentioned before.

With *M/M*, I came to the conclusion that perhaps the best way to talk about something was to literally talk about it. To have the characters really talk about things, as they do in real life, arguing as they do in real life (which is to say, not perfectly). It would offer the audience a chance to see their own arguments; giving them a degree of witness with which to reflect. This seemed to be a break from the laconic style of most arthouse films I saw, which seemed to assert great profundity through silence. I reckoned however, a lack of dialogue was not particularly profound, nor was it inherently realistic. In the first place, humans almost never stop communicating, from the first check of their phones in the morning to the, erm, last check of their phones before they go to bed. Silence is terrifying to people and a rarity. Secondly, silence onscreen is derivative of other silent moments onscreen, which are used as a shorthand for existential worry. But this is somewhat lazy, as it does not actually grapple with profound existential issues. Instead, it merely avoids them with silence. To challenge ideas is actually much more difficult, and perhaps it is why –I reckoned- philosophy like that of Plato still resonates, as it is daringly substantive and unafraid of being thorough.

Thus I matched the form with the content, creating a dialectic between the scenes, and indeed, the entire form of the film. Things moved back and forth in a thesis-antithesis zig zag, leading to a sort of ambiguous synthesis in the end. I even coupled this with a proximal coming together of the main characters, who started the film in different locations. Now, with my thesis film, concern for form expressed itself through its meta-recursive nature, as the content itself would create a Droste Effect with the form. Here I could have some formal jokes about cue cards, shooting chronologically, and calling up the actors that the viewer was watching perform. But this interplay was only one aspect of what the film was ‘about.’ Like *M/M*, I wanted to continue on this path of ‘the conversational film,’ to create compelling conversations that would not only keep people discussing what was discussed, but discussing the fact the film itself was so stylistically discursive.

Moreover, insofar as I had so many contradictions in my goals for the film, I knew I needed as many contradictions as possible *in* the film, or more precisely, internal counter arguments, to complicate things as much as possible. The contradictions would not just be found on the surface with characters' dialogue, but in their actions, their positioning, etc. and sometimes across these lines. e.g. What someone says might contradict what they do. This happens in everyday life, as people rarely befit the view they have of themselves, thus I wanted to incorporate that as much as possible. For example, while Erik initially argues against a facile gender-switch of characters in his Plato film, he points out in the symposium that indeed, that particular argument was 'a fairly Socratic dialogue, with female characters, about gender.' Therefore, in reality, the film was doing what the character said it could not. This too was related to the discussion of the Bechdel test in the film. As the characters argue its merit, 'Gary' reflexively asks the question whether talking about it on screen would suffice for the passing of the test itself. While the implication is that it ironically wouldn't suffice, Cleo and Megan defiantly illustrate the test's simplicity, and in doing so, the actual film passes the test.

And of course, I also needed to navigate what was true to life and what wasn't. In the film, the symposium at the end represents Erik's creative end; his thesis gets the chop in a cross examination which has more in common with a thesis defence or even a trial, thus taking on a greater weight, and acting as a symbolic execution, or existential dismissal of the character. However, in reality, a symposium would not be the be-all-and-end-all of an artist, nor did my own presentation of my thesis idea at the symposium of autumn 2014 go so poorly. In fact, for all intents and purposes, it went fine. The symposium in the film was conceptualized before I had even presented my thesis idea at symposium. And yet, when it came to film the fictionalized ending, I used the actual powerpoint I had used at the symposium in 2014, replete with some of the same jokes I had made to warm up the crowd. I even wore the same outfit I had worn for good measure. Indeed, it was my presentation, but it wasn't the same outcome.



## **Fiction vs. Non-Fiction**

The sort of poetic license I took with the symposium scene was always in the cards for the sake of the narrative. The idea that Erik's idea would be rejected in the end was too delicious to pass up, considering it was both his idea that you (the viewer) were watching and the fact the film itself would need to be defended in real life. Not to mention the fact that Erik notes how the symposium doesn't go well for him in the movie he's proposing, which not only matches my own proposition, but foreshadows his character's fate. However, I had no play-book as to how to navigate the fictionalizing of other events or characters in the narrative. So here I must apologize to the reader, for I have no great insight here to offer. I'm embarrassed to say I didn't learn much about that decision-making process, as it all came fairly intuitively. But perhaps the secret lay in the fact I was never out to depict certain people (besides myself and some caricaturizing of family), I was only out to relay ideas, and thus, the characters were more emblematic of attitudes, argumentative positions, and points of view. I might take character elements of two-or-more people I know, whom are like minded in some way, to synthesize one character in the film. Hence, the compositing and veiling was never too difficult, as the core of each character was their perspective, which acted as a mold for a melting pot of externalized characteristics.

And while there are, however, several moments and snippets of dialogue which are virtually verbatim to real life –I did work at the aforementioned café (and was demoted), and I did find out for instance, that upon hearing my thesis proposal one of my cohort quipped behind my back that I was 'going to do a white male thing'- the character in the film who makes that complaint is not squarely depicting that real person, nor did she and I ever have lengthy debates back and forth about the value of my Plato project. Moreover, while I had initially proposed doing the first book of the *Republic* in real life, no one suggested I make the characters all female. That suggestion, and the 'party scene' argument which corresponds with it, were entirely fictional, crafted by me as vehicles to explore topical debates which do swirl around academia and society, and which do impress themselves on our creative considerations as artists.

That scene in particular came early and was already in some state of repair in the 60 page starter script I delivered in December 2014. I then took a break with writing the film over my last term of the program, and picked things back up in late April 2015. A complete draft was delivered to my supervisor in May, and I continued tweaking things through till July, often making small changes right up until the day of shooting a scene, occasionally telling actors on the day of extra

lines I might want to insert. The casting of the actors themselves was a point of great significance, considering not only how close the script might come to reality here or there, but because of the latent ideas of representation that the film would be taking into consideration. Hence, I knew how important it would be to draw from a number of different circles.

## Casting & Characters

The York swing-agreement with ACTRA proved to be an important (reinforcing) factor in deciding to make the film. My first feature was made non-union, and my second was made union; both experiences giving me some insight into how difficult it normally is to adhere to union regulations as a no-budget filmmaker. Primarily, in both cases I was not allowed to cross over. In other words, I couldn't include ACTRA friends of mine in my first feature because I was playing the lead and I was non-union, and in my second feature, I wasn't allowed to use anyone who was non-union. This included myself, and I therefore resigned myself to finding a replacement who could handle an Erik-like role, replete with family scenes which I would happily echo in this current film. While there was something liberating in not taking on a part in *M/M*, allowing me just to direct and shoot, in general it remained just as frustrating to have productions that fell on either side of the ACTRA boundary.

Being a filmmaker who likes extrapolating as much as I can from my own life, it is a great temptation to include non-actor friends in my films, even for cameo purposes, and yet, many of my friends are professional actors, so the two worlds are constantly rubbing up against each other and intermingling, making it difficult to work within the parameters of the union rules, not to mention the difficulty in working with them without a budget. In order to make my second feature union, I had to use a 'M.I.P.' agreement, which left me (technically) with only 20% share in my film (under that agreement, the actors need to have 55%, and the union itself 5%). Considering I wrote, directed, produced, edited, and shot a large swathe of the film, it has never sat well.

With a new idea for a film in which I would necessarily play the lead, and with the desire to use both ACTRA friends as well as student friends who were non-actors, while at the same time shooting without a budget, the York-ACTRA agreement was essentially too good to pass up. I knew that once again outside of school I would never see the kind of flexibility it offered, and considering the content of the film that was brewing inside me, it seemed serendipitous. With the decision to go forward, the liberty of the agreement meant I never had to give a second-thought as to whether to cast an individual role with a union member or not, I could simply cast based on whom I felt fit the roles best, including getting several non-actor friends like Juan Arce to play characters who had some similarities with themselves in real life, while getting close actor friends like Kyle Gatehouse and Matthew Raudsepp to shine in supporting roles.

Although I didn't need to be specific about union or not, the characters themselves were quite specific. Not only did I want to make sure the student body reflected the diversity found in the real student body, but as mentioned earlier, the characters themselves often reflect ideas, perspectives, or schools of thought. For instance, Erik is the white male Canadian of his class, which comes with all sorts of preconceived ideas, perhaps both projected and inherited. He is in the interesting position where he is pedagogically being reminded constantly that he is emblematic of the prevailing power, yet is struggling more than nearly all of his peers, who are pedagogically positioned as less privileged than he; and the pedagogy itself is ironically being wielded by those in power who also sit further down the ladder in the intersectional narrative. His inexplicable lack of funding, his inexplicable omission from festivals, etc., all playing into questions and themes of equity. His friend Fernando, a Mexican student, who is more street-wise as a filmmaker, yet wet-behind-the-ears in terms of Canadian social mores, is in the best position to notice and recognize the oddity and contradictions of Erik's dilemma. He begins to notice them when he realizes that his thesis idea would likely have been considered problematic were he ethnically/nationally the same as Erik. This reflected some real-life conversations had between Juan Arce and I after we had pitched our respective thesis ideas.

Whereas Fernando has much to learn about Canadian feminism, for instance, Erik's moderation is mirrored fairly closely in Karen. Her character is feminist, though not a dogmatic reactionary like Cleo. Cleo's perpetual outrage is emblematic of much of the online world, but also comes with its own contradiction- her projection is disconnected from her own relative position. Indeed, while Cleo and Erik butt heads, they are also the most similar ethnically/nationally. She is a well-educated, white, Canadian woman, who is at least middle class. Hence it was important for the visual dynamics to also play with these affiliations. In Cleo's case, I wanted someone who looked as similar as possible to me. Whereas with Karen, the character who is in many ways closest to Erik, I wanted the actor to visually be my diametric opposite-- a woman of colour, from Islamic background, etc., everything down to body type. Thus, Cleo and Erik are the most similar visually, but the most combative (aside from Fernando), and Erik and Karen are the most dissimilar visually, but the closest together in sentiment. Cleo can't stand Fernando's outlook, but her own politics foster a sort of cognitive dissonance about how to deal with him given his ethnicity, whereas she feels no problem attacking Erik or making presumptions about his character, based on his race and gender.

While Juan was game to play Fernando, he was also going to Europe when I was set to begin filming, leaving me scrambling to find a replacement. In the end, I didn't find a replacement, and the Fernando scenes got pushed far enough that (thankfully) Juan came back and reprised the role. Karen was more of a challenge from the onset, as I'm from the West Coast, and my circle in Toronto is relatively limited. I didn't really know any actors who fit the bill, but my girlfriend mentioned having seen a performer named Shaista Latif who might be the actor I was looking for. With a couple phone calls we managed to track down Shaista's email just in time, as by the time I met with her to talk about the project, the film was threatening to be derailed for this lack of casting. Thankfully, as it turned out, Shaista was lovely and charming, and took on the role.

The advisor character also needed to be specific. While the character is written as a bit of a composite of previous Canadian political science professors I had at Concordia, I wanted to make sure the supervisor was also elder, white, and British, thus best suited to represent the fleeting pedagogy of the Enlightenment, empire, and its now-under fire value system. But finding an actor who suited that, had great acting chops, and was willing to work for free was one of my early problems. While there are always a plethora of 20-somethings hungry for roles and willing to work just to build their demo reels, most of the dabblers shake off the acting bug by their 30s for fear of poverty, so anyone still acting at a more refined age is likely worth their salt and firmly established in a paying career, and thus more likely to be choosy about projects when they do agree to take on a smaller film or theatre production. My actor friends didn't seem to have any ideas on the matter either. I eventually got in touch with Gwennyth Dobie from the York Theatre Dept., whom I had met randomly on Galiano Island in British Columbia the year before. I was working –post café- at a small film camp there, and she and her partner stumbled upon us, inquiring as to what exactly the film camp was all about. The York connection was made quickly, and we lamented the lack of social cross-over between departments. By the time I was casting for the advisor, about 9 months had gone by, but she remembered our interaction, and graciously brought up a couple names, including Robert Fothergill, who had been a theatre professor at York. I met with him over coffee, where we spoke about the character and the rapidly changing atmosphere in schools. Thankfully he agreed to take things on, for he was pitch perfect in the role, bringing acting fortitude and an air of authenticity that would have been almost impossible to replicate with an amateur in his place. And on a personal level, he was a pleasure to work with.

If the advisor was to typify the outgoing order, the professors at Erik's university needed to reflect the new politics. There would be three, with a main teacher having in-class scenes. I knew

that prof in particular would be a white female, and advertised as such on Mandy.com. As for the other two, I wanted diversity. Allison Duke had become a school friend from a Hybrid Cinema class we took, and despite her misgivings about acting (she was resolutely “not” an actor and I was “crazy” to want her), she gave in on a lark, and we had fun with the process. On the other hand, Anand Rajaram was an ACTRA actor of great repute, whom two friends recommended highly. The question would be whether he found the project interesting enough, had the time, and again, was willing to work for free. Moreover, there was a question of age. I did expect the symposium professor to look around 50 years of age, but Anand was younger, closer in fact to my own age, and when he was shaven, he looked as much. Yet, his beard was greying, and I knew from photos that its effect on his appearance offered a stark contrast. He gained years with stately dignity, and would certainly seem professorial, with even a few days growth. Of course, being a working actor he often had demands made on his appearance, and not having any money to pay, I had to hope for a window where he was unbound of being clean shaven so that he could dust things up a bit. Allison and he were in fact very tricky to schedule, and I had to think of alternatives when my booked date for the Nat Taylor Cinema at York (where I would shoot the symposium scene) was rapidly approaching in July. In the end, I wasn’t able to secure anyone for those parts in the scramble leading up to the shoot, leaving me with a major dilemma(s) of needing to shoot around those roles as much as I could, trying to reschedule the room for later (no small order), and hopefully having better luck aligning the stars. But with the room becoming extra salient (as it was now already used for half the scene), it would be the new determining factor. If I could get the room, but not those actors, I would need to recast, no matter what. And if I couldn’t get the room, I would be in deep trouble trying to cheat things. As it turned out, booking the room did take some haggling, but in a small stroke of fortune, both Anand and Allison were available on the same day in September to shoot, and we got everything we needed.

While the upward-moving academic powers-that-be represented a newer post-modern, post-structural/feminist pedagogical order, one of the lingering white males of power in the film is ‘the programmer’ who dashes Erik’s hopes with his film. I wanted to keep this character white and male so as to not add any fuel to a conspiratorial fire about why Erik wasn’t getting into the festival, but also to give validity to the patriarchal power structure outside of academia that students like Cleo so readily railed against. As such, I wanted to keep the programmer as ambiguously white and male as possible, so he wouldn’t represent a single white male, but remained emblematic of said order. He is at the same time a programmer, and every programmer/CEO in a position of power outside of academia, as he is essentially the only power

figure outside academia we see. Hence, I never showed the face of him. There were a couple side benefits to this choice as well. 1. Keeping the programmer (and the festival) technically ambiguous freed me from drawing too close a parallel to any existing programmers, as I didn't want to directly inculcate a particular programmer (though viewers might indirectly speculate who the programmer might be based on). 2. It offered a sneaky chance for me to get my own supervisor to cameo in the movie without being overt about it. Since a thesis film naturally has someone overlooking the work of the artist behind the scenes -an invisible hand in the process, as it were- it seemed like a fitting visual metaphor to have my own supervisor play someone whom we never actually see, but who clearly holds some authority over Erik. Thankfully, Amnon agreed, and we were able to find a couple hours to shoot the scene during one of his hectic trips back to Toronto.

Uncle Doug is free of any idealism, and while he can act as a sexist lout and thus represents certain qualities about men lamented by feminists, including by his sisters, he also remains somewhat realistic and practical. This was a fun character to play with, inasmuch as in Erik's day to day world, Erik might be casually lumped in as Doug-esque by someone like Cleo, yet juxtaposed with Doug, Erik is clearly less macho, old school, or clueless as to the sensitivities of the new social mores. In fact, Erik finds himself frequently reproaching Doug for his insensitivities, political incorrectness, and neglect of feminist concerns. The two are from different generational worlds, and yet, they are both the only boys in a tight-knit matriarchal family. It occasionally gives them some common ground, but only when they're being lorded over. The two would likely never have a relationship if they weren't related. And though Doug has some waning ideas about men and women, in his family he is absolutely picked on by his sisters. Again, contradictions abound.

Some of the meta fun in the film lies with the sisters themselves. Whereas Uncle Doug is a new character, Danette McKay and Leni Parker are actually reprising their respective roles from *M/M*. Danette played Faith, the mom, and Leni played Auntie Carol. The dynamics between the two were the same. As mentioned, I did not play their son/nephew in that film, despite the fact the son character was essentially a version of myself. Hence, the concept for *My Thesis Film* initially posed a quandary- I would want to shoot more family scenes, but I wouldn't want to replace those actresses. But this was problematic, because within the diegetic worlds, they are the family of the 'Jeff' character from *M/M*, and reusing them as my own family would seemingly burst the bubble of continuity. Eventually I decided to do it anyway, as doing so ironically seemed even more

playful of the formal concept- not only would it retroactively be made clear that I was sort of the inspiration for the Jeff character in the previous film, but I could create a larger echo to that work by shooting the scenes the same way, and cheekily infusing talk of that film into the table conversation this time around. For instance, Auntie Carol asks about the previous film, and mentions how she doesn't like the title. Of course, Leni the actress (who plays Auntie Carol) was in that film, and is playing the same character in this one. She is continuous in her character, yet the character is unknowingly in different worlds unaware of the continuity issues; to her, Jeff was a character in a movie that Erik made, and yet, Carol was Jeff's aunt- it was her reality.

This kind of brain twister was pleasurable for me to write, and ended up being more indulgent of the form, as I say. There were other throw-backs to that film as well; Jennifer Miller, who had a cameo as a crying club-goer in *M/M*, made another memorable cameo as a jogger who reproaches Erik's street-side advances in this film. While these sort of meta in-jokes can only be entirely appreciated if one has viewed the other film, they do not detract from this one, and ultimately, if they can build interest in the previous film, viewers await an even more enriching experience. After all, this film is not entirely a one-off anyway, as it clearly speaks about my other work as a basis for my character's struggle. In this sense, it begs retroactive viewings for curious viewers. As such, it was also interesting to have Tristan now play himself outside of the diegesis of *M/M*. Indeed, while Danette and Leni reprise their roles, continuing the *M/M* diegesis (albeit with discontinuity), Tristan now plays Tristan, freeing he and I to not only talk about *M/M* as a film we made together, but about the real-life project I had pitched to him. It also makes Tristan one of only three people in the film to essentially be playing themselves in a sea of actors playing fictionalized roles. The other two are of course, myself, and Shireen, who was indeed the experienced kitchen person whom I was sent to aide in real life after being demoted at the café. Like Allison, she was initially sheepish about acting, but eventually agreed after my assurance that it would be a piece of proverbial cake.



## Working with Actors

I have no set theory as to how to direct actors; most of my interaction is intuitive. Not to sound too glib, but actors are just people. And as people, the most universal thing I've learned is that all actors are different. Some are happy to have the director explain as much as possible, and even find demonstrative instruction helpful, and others become irritable at little more than an encouraging word. There really is no hard-and-fast rule. Perhaps the closest thing to an even cursory rule of thumb is that non-professional actors –be them friends or family members, or whoever- have no scruples about the process, and, as most do it on a lark, they have no ego about their task either—meaning they're happy to say and do whatever a director likes, including full line readings (many will even ask for line readings). Professional actors on the other hand, have chosen acting as a craft, want to feel part of the creative process, and take certain pride in their abilities. While that may sound rather obvious, it's also very helpful to keep in mind when approaching them. Mixing and matching non-actors and professional actors in the same production means I would go from giving full line readings to offering little more than an encouraging push—'great, but let's just bring up the energy a bit,' all on the same day.

With a production such as this, half of the battle is simply casting the right people in the right roles. Actors all have their own proclivities and aspects of themselves that they bring to parts. And especially when doing something hyper realistic, as opposed to stylized, casting someone who suits a role can significantly decrease the amount of time needed for the actor to 'get there.' Perhaps if one had months to rehearse and organically build characters, as with famed Mike Leigh productions, it might be more reasonable to find a creative actor less suited to a role, but who has a dynamic range to 'create' their own character. But when you know exactly what you want, and have limited time, this incubation period is out of the question, and it's best to simply find someone who suits the role. Inasmuch as I've never had the time or space to go through extensive work-shopping, and insofar as I'm acutely aware, as both writer, director, ostensible DP, and editor, of what I ultimately need to construct my finished moments, I have never had need to employ those methods either.

I usually give a brief preamble to the actors about the scene and the dynamics or tensions between characters, block things, and then begin shooting. Rehearsals are rare, not because I have any methodical issue with them, but again, because there is generally no time. With so many shoots back to back, and with ad hoc crews being used on any given day, there is no time to work on

things beforehand. Some venues too are working establishments, e.g. Victory Café. Rehearsing would have therefore meant extra hours or even multiple days, but this was impossible given the fact we weren't paying for the space or could even technically block off an area. A mock rehearsal might have been possible at somebody's house, but again, with shoots on either side of that one, and considering that the actors themselves weren't getting paid and their time was thus limited as well, it too was an impossibility. The best that could be mustered on the day was for me to call the actors a littler earlier than the crew, just to run the lines for 30mins beforehand, offering notes and things to keep in mind for when we went inside to shoot. And yet, this was more than could be offered some scenes.

This should not imply then that most scenes were also shot in an impromptu or free-form way; that would only have been possible if I had complete trust in the camera operator and we had been working together for some time. But this was never the case. Without a budget, the meager crews of 1-2 people were almost always thrown together, and camera operators were infrequently people who had any formal training. Even on the odd occasion where an operator had training, such as a BFA, the lack of familiarity in working together would have impeded spontaneous shooting. Hence, what this boils down to is me, as the director, needing to have all the answers on set. I would have to quickly acclimatize everyone around, concisely explain and set up the pre-visualized or storyboarded shots, and give the actors everything they needed to know to start trying things.

With professional actors, a couple rehearsal-style takes is usually enough. Again, not to sound too glib, but a thing about professional actors is that they do tend to know what they're doing. They have familiarity with what cameras will be doing around them, they've put wireless lavs on before, they tend to be more intuitive with understanding and delivering their lines, and best of all, they almost always come off-book and prepared. Non-actors rarely know their lines. This is a major difference. Not only are they not used to memorizing text, but they will generally show up without any prior preparation at all. Hence they are really looking for a director to walk them through things, step by step, including explaining their line-by-line cadence. After a couple quick run throughs, I will usually shoot about three takes. Although this is somewhat contingent on performance, the number of takes is usually more a consequence of the ability of the camera operator to get the shot. My shooting style proved tricky for most, and indeed, this was by far the greatest reason for wasted takes during the production.

## Camera Operation

Considering the size, scope, budgetary restrictions, and scheduling of the film, having a dedicated cinematographer was not possible. I knew a couple of decent shooters, but neither had the time to be involved all the way through, and could only offer me a day or two sporadically. Hence, I was to effectively be my own DP. That was okay with me in principal, as I have typically been the ostensible DP on my films; lensing, framing, composing, dictating the style of execution of the shots, and indeed, shooting or acting as secondary camera operator. But the process is made much easier when A) I'm not acting as well, and B) there is a capable shooter all the way through who has a feel for my style. Neither of those would be the case with this production. Essentially, it meant that I would be grabbing whoever was willing and could physically hold a camera. This would range from friends with some experience and/or training, to people who have literally never used a video camera before. All in all, nearly twenty people took a shot on the film, which is practically unheard of, and which made consistency all the more difficult.

One might assume the pros and cons to trained help would run parallel to those with professional actors, and indeed, there are some similarities. However, actors are there to bring what they personally offer to a limited or contained role, whereas an ad hoc crew, on the other hand, are there to offer an impersonal hand to a continuum of stylistic consistency. In short, their work needs to be interchangeable with other crews' work, as the shoots combine in aggregate; the director being the only constant. Were a crew or DP to be solidified in their roles from beginning to end of a production, this would be a very different story, likely affording greater collaboration. But if the crews and camera ops change hands daily, this is not the case; any lack of authoritative vigilance by the director can cause a clear lack of stylistic consistency. Regardless, a more seasoned camera op may still approach the situation with what they've hitherto understood as the industry standard, including the importance of a DP's input, and/or the relationship between the director and the cameraperson, which can lead to the encroaching of territory.

Perhaps the best example of this would again be found in the Victory Café shoot. On that particular day, I seemingly had the luxury of having a BFA grad in film production helping with camera. But as a one-off, this proved not much easier than grabbing a random friend to hold the camera. Some things were initially taken off my shoulders, for example: I didn't need to explain the Rule of Thirds, nor did I have to set up the specs within the camera itself (though truth be told, they were already set, so we still had to go over things due to the camera op's desire to be

informed, which wouldn't have happened otherwise). But the operator was also used to a certain amount of departmental autonomy. They may have even had their reel in mind (not unusual for a professional helping out pro bono). This led to two aesthetic compromises. Firstly, my desire to have the camera tension match the scene's tension can often result in a more apparent handheld movement with the camera. This look is replete throughout the film. However, the operator was more comfortable keeping things reigned in, or keeping a tighter grip on things. This resulted in some takes being virtually motionless, looking more like footage from a tripod. While the operator may have felt it looked better in and of itself, it was of course, inconsistent with the rest of the shooting in the film, leaving me with a significant problem in post-production. The second issue was one with exposure. Although the side of the table with Franco Nguyen and myself was decently lit by the existing lighting, the other side of the table where Juan Arce sat was decidedly darker, putting the side of Juan's face that was in front of the camera into greater shadows. My feeling was to simply open up the aperture to expose for Juan's face. The cameraperson however felt that would create too much blow-out with the window behind him, and we would lose the details in the outside world, including a tree. This would never be a conversation I would have with a friend unfamiliar with camerawork, and even someone happy to humour the director might not have put up much of a front, but those trained in the medium might certainly be expected to regard any blowouts as amateurish, or somehow faulty, and thus something to avoid at all costs. Indeed, it was something that might ultimately compromise the clip for their reel and reflect poorly on them.

They suggested bringing up Juan's face would be no problem in post. Having done almost all my own post-production work hitherto, this set off alarm bells in my head. In my experience (as a non-professional colour corrector) bringing things down was usually easier (so long as there wasn't a total loss of information), whereas bringing things up was a bit more difficult. The concern was great enough that I raised it. The response came swiftly that in fact, it would be easiest to bring Juan up. Not wanting to ruffle feathers, and not being physically able to look over their shoulder while I acted in the scene and dealt with the usual barrage of questions, I acquiesced somewhat, shrugging my shoulders and suggesting they open up as much as possible while trusting what they think was right. After all, it was the first time that person had helped me, and in a situation like that, I, as an autodidact of film, can feel unsure of myself in the face of someone who has been educated in the proper ways of the craft.

Looking at the footage at home, there was no question—Juan was too dark; it looks out of step with the other side of the table. But the tree outside the pub looks great! Now, I have no idea what the tree has to do with anything. It has no lines, nor is important to the narrative, symbolically, metaphorically, figuratively, or literally, but it's visible thanks to the exposure. Unfortunately, I find it actually distracts from Juan, who is the only important thing in the frame.

These issues would have never happened with a novice who didn't have experience with cinematography, as novices need more explanation, more hand holding, more reassurance, and feel less sure of themselves holding the camera. While both have their pros and cons, there was no correlation to who was a better operator. Indeed, in the camera operator debate of nature vs nurture, nature won time and again. Shooters had visual acuity and an aptitude, or they didn't, regardless of how much training they had. Knowledge may have become exponentially more important were the camera rig more sophisticated, or were there to be lighting involved, but this wasn't the case. Lighting is certainly the key element of cinematography that I myself have little experience with, given my own lack of formal training. And it's where my cinematographers have been most integral in the past, such as on *M/M*, where lighting set ups were needed on several shoots. But as my style favours realism, I typically like as much natural, or available, light as possible. And since this film called for no real lighting (except for one scene), the camera work was literally pointing and shooting once I set up the shot, and in the end it didn't matter much what was the level of the person's training.

Some issues also occurred irrespective of the person's familiarity with cameras. For example, Dutch angles might be described as the bane of my aesthetic cinematic existence. It didn't matter whether a person was trained or not, a certain (high) percentage of people simply hold the camera crooked and never notice. An inordinate amount of shots would need to be straightened in post. Eyelines were (more) surprisingly similar. While trained camera operators presumably understand the Rule of Thirds, and can theoretically shoot under the nominal instructions of keeping the eyeline at the standard 2/3rds line, what happens in practice can vary greatly. Indeed, it wasn't unusual to find that seasoned ops had misjudged the fractional breakdown and held gazes too high or too low (though usually the former, leading to shots where the eyes rested at about 90% of the way up the screen, jumping out of frame as actors moved their heads).

I think perhaps it was the handheld nature of the photography that was the natural leveller of all the camera operators. Anyone can learn the Rule of Thirds and compose for that on a tripod, but

with tight telephoto shots, moving subjects, and little to anchor oneself in terms of focus or background, operation relies on a natural affinity or ‘feel’ for the camera combined with visual acuity, and not everyone –regardless of training- has either. Far and away, the most proficient and competent camera operator I had was my friend, Kyle Gatehouse, a seasoned actor by trade, who had only really made a few iPhone videos in his spare time. Incidentally, Kyle played the masters student in the first symposium scene who talks about a ‘male crisis’ in cinema. Kyle was always the quickest to not only understand what I wanted, but the most efficient in his execution. Being a friend of mine, I also felt freer to rely on Kyle’s help, though unfortunately, due to his busy acting schedule, which included a run as Professor Moriarty in a touring production of Sherlock Holmes (opposite David Arquette), he was unavailable for much of the shoot. Had he have been available however, things may have been much different, or at least, less stressful for myself in accomplishing what I wanted.

## Shooting Style

I like to shoot with a very long focal length, depicting almost everything in close up. I do this because I'm mainly interested in the psychological interiority of the characters, and find the visual effect of the lenses on space to be aesthetically appealing. I am not interested in deep focus, or Bazinian style theories that still (unfortunately) permeate film theory about the audience self-editing in their heads. Not only do I not trust the audience to do so, but I am the *director*. Why else would I make a film other than to direct people to what I want them to see? Nor do I think long-winded static shots necessarily make things more realistic. For me, these can actually draw too much attention to themselves, and I prefer what might be dubbed a more 'cinema vérité' hand held approach, which feels almost documentary-like, despite the fact I compose the shots beforehand, and generally use more angles and more cutting than something of that style (nor would cinema vérité ordinarily employ telephoto).

The widest shots in the film were about 35mm, and only because I didn't have space for anything higher. Limited space is the largest factor when shooting telephoto, as the operator literally needs significant distance between them and the subject, though shooting telephoto and handheld isn't particularly easy for most people either. In fact, several friends claimed shooting handheld above 85mm was 'impossible.' This is of course, nonsense, owing more to their own level of comfort than anything else, but it does get trickier the higher one goes. One issue created is the wide variety in handheld motion. I am fine with the organic movement caused by the camera operator's grip, and if precision is possible, my stated goal is to match the formal movement of the camera with the tension of the content in the scene. However, some operators are literally more stable when holding a camera than others, and as my aforementioned instructions are seemingly unusual to most people –in terms of execution- I rarely received movement which was perfectly in keeping with my desires. For instance, there is a scene with myself and Juan speaking in a cafeteria. That was shot at 135mm (because we had the space), and the camera movement is, to put it mildly, intense. Part of this is admittedly due to the high focal length causing a greater visual sensation, part of this is due to the operator either not being able to keep steadier, or misjudging how intense the handheld motion was in the LCD screen (the smaller the screen, the less jerky things tend to look). Compare that scene to the one of myself, Juan, and Franco speaking at Victory Café, which has a similar (limited) tension in content, and there is a wild disparity.

Ironically, as space was indeed often limited, very little of the film was shot on 135mm. The median focal length was likely between 70-85mm, with 50mm perhaps being more readily used than 135.

For the camera, I predominantly borrowed my supervisor's Black Magic Cinema Camera, which offered a good dynamic range and a more cinematic look than DLRs. I also used a Black Magic Pocket, but ran into far more technical problems with it.

The only shots used from outside these cameras were with a computer's built in camera for the Skype conversations between Tristan and Erik.



## Collaboration

By now you may have gathered that I might have something out of the ordinary to say about collaboration. And indeed, I do. The ordinary would of course be that film is a collaborative medium. It's a platitude that gets bandied about in interviews, essays, and even thesis support papers to a near-sacrosanct degree. And the banality of the suggestion can ultimately prove influential, as it not only becomes prescriptively wielded as a sort of truism, but even as a conceptual model for how to make a film. But this is utterly nonsensical, as films are made in a multitude of ways with wildly variant means, fluid interpersonal dynamics, and daily contingencies.

And in this sense, collaboration might be understood as a multilateral set of compromises. For whether it's an actor doing something unanticipated with a part, a composer adding a rousing score, or even the weather misbehaving to a degree that causes a pragmatic re-write of an on location scene, collaboration is the aggregated catch-all of compromising influences that pushed and pulled a film to its finished product. But why assume those compromises are necessarily positive?

Indeed, collaboration is a loaded word, as it predicates itself on the misguided notion that only the positive value of the work owes itself to the amalgam of influences working on it. In other words, the final product only became as good as it was through the aggregated talents of those who made it. But this is not necessarily true. In fact, the opposite is not only as readily as true, but in my own experience, much more likely. Not only do too many chefs in the kitchen tend to spoil the dish, but some chefs should never even be in a kitchen to begin with. Thus, I would posit collaboration is just as readily as a negative, or depreciating factor in the qualitative value of the work, than as a positive. And it's something that occurs to different extents. The more one needs to rely on the help of others, the more things tend to go awry. The more one needs to compromise with questionable input, the worse the product can become. Indeed, everyone has input to offer, but few people have natural aptitude, clarity of vision, or constructive insight. These qualities are to be found much less frequently than the ubiquity of input itself. It really depends on the caliber and talents of the people involved. Yet compromises must often be made despite one's better judgment, for a variety of reasons owing to circumstance, not least of which being the social necessity to avoid the impression of not being collaborative. After all, film is a collaborative medium...

For myself, collaboration is a two-headed beast. On the one hand, I appreciate the idea of entering into projects with friends and making things in the spirit of collaboration, and do enjoy working especially with actors, but on the other, when it comes to a preconceived idea of my own, collaboration is often a troublesome and inconvenient means sitting between me and ‘the ends.’ It is indeed difficult to make a fiction narrative film of any substantial length without the help of others, and even more difficult -without money or the sort of reverence a famed reputation might muster- to make one from a succinct vision. And yet, tellingly, although cinema is upheld as a model collaborative medium, the highest heights (and artists) of the medium are often seen as the most authoritative, over bearing, micro managing, and singularly visionary.

I felt buoyed by Hitchcock when I saw him state in an interview with Dick Cavett that he liked most about filmmaking was the conception and the final product itself. This makes complete sense to me. Once the idea is fully formed, the process is nothing but an arduous daily grind to manifest the idea, complete with trials, tribulations, tears, wastes-of-time, money down the drain, etc. In short, the actual making of the film is merely a middle-man to the realization of the conception, because ultimately, cinema is the final product. Hence, the means are not cinema, the ends are. And yet, in many cases the process itself might be the allure, or even a space where the product is partially conceived, making it both a creative exploration for those involved, and indeed, an important collaborating partner in fomenting the ends, be it good or bad. Films that rely on improvisation would be a textbook example of this, or again, perhaps the character workshopping of a Mike Leigh-style production. However, this is not how I make films. The movie is, for all intents and purposes, already made in my head. The process of filmmaking then is the near-impossible task of qualitative execution and adherence to a preconceived film. It is the process of being constantly on guard, constantly vigilant in the dogged task of manifesting the standards already dreamt up.

Happy accidents do occur, however, including genuine moments of playful collaborations with actors, many of which will remain in a given film. But for every happy accident or included line of ad-lib, there are usually five-ten things that go painfully wrong, or fail to manifest as well as one had envisioned. Indeed, one must include every Dutch angle, bad eyeline, tinny-sounding moment of audio, or wooden delivery in their conception of collaboration. So the pros of the on-set reality do not outweigh the cons, as without the hermetically sealed means of Hitchcock or Kubrick, the variables of production almost invariably bring things down. I have thought about

this in the sense of percentages. Things almost never go perfectly, which would of course be 100% as well as conception. Thus the war of production is to get things to at least the level of 80% as good as they were in conception, while pushing on a daily basis to get things even higher. And if collaboration is inextricably connected to the means, then the dip in fidelity from conception to product is also inextricably linked to collaboration. In other words, collaboration - to someone who really knows what they want- is a weight constantly threatening to pull things down.

Of course, if one is relying on collaboration to create the ideas of the film for it, then perhaps the numbers swing the other direction. A half-baked idea might start at 50%, with collaboration only boosting its numbers. For instance, my understanding is that Sophia Coppola had a very bare bones script for *Lost In Translation*, and Bill Murray essentially filled in the blanks. This is perhaps unsurprising given how much more amusing the film is than her other work, so clearly, the collaboration with Murray benefitted things substantively. As did Sven Nykvist's famous partnership with Ingmar Bergman, and just as John William's scores help catapult *Star Wars*, *Superman*, and *Indiana Jones* into mythic territory.

But again, this is not my situation. When you are the only constant on a film, then ad hoc collaborations are more likely to throw things off kilter. Thus, in my own experience, when I stop pushing for what I want, no matter what the reason, whether I'm tired, the cast/crew is tired and I don't want to upset anyone, money runs out, getting the right prop would take too long, the weather isn't what I wanted on the day and rescheduling would be too hard, etc., things have depreciated. Indeed, I have yet to have an experience where putting my hands up and saying 'sure,' has led to better results. Not a single time in 14 years (aside from the odd ad-lib by an actor). And I'm not opposed to it- it would be fantastic if it happened, as compromise is inevitable, and it would be much more pleasant and easier, but thus far in my artistic career, even momentary lapses in directorial vigilance have proven costly.

While this goes against much of the dogma and platitudes of making films and may even make me sound like a mercurial tyrant on set, the daily reality is never warlike- compromises and contingencies are made regularly, for the exact reason that what can go wrong will, everyone gets tired, and if I didn't balance my artistic desire for fidelity with sociability, acceptance for variables, and an appreciation for people's time and energy, there would be no one left to help. People are of course, helping for free. Thus, the struggle is largely internalized, and aspects of

production, such as working with actors/crew is an exercise in subtly finding ways of getting everything and everyone to move in the right direction.

Hence, like I say, it is a fluid daily exercise of balancing moving parts and mitigating the loss of conceptual quality against social fallout. And indeed, leading up to the beginning of the shoot I lived in fear of how I would find the strength. It's an introvert's nightmare. I've often described the process of the singlehanded feature to friends as akin to pushing a boulder up a hill. Every inch is moved with enormous difficulty thanks to nothing other but self-motivation, will, and mental and physical energy which will invariably leave one drained each and every day, for it goes without saying: the boulder doesn't want to go up, just as the film has no desire to make itself. So one must summon the strength again and again, not only for oneself, but for others- for if you can't summon it, no one will be willing to help or do it for you. It takes resilience, and tenacity, as the desire to quit will be loud and present every day.

I imagine these things get easier with more means. With a budget comes accountability. But without one, everyone is doing you a favour, and people will happily point this out. It is a nightmare, for accountability without restitution is by definition voluntary. There are no ramifications to quitting, nor much ado about help of questionable quality. Yet this help will also leave the artist deeply indebted to those giving it. And in the end, the final product may only end up a fraction as good as the idea, working as a disservice to the artist's soul and oeuvre, while still increasing the debt load and making the next work even more difficult, by regressing the artist's meagre means. This is merely the reality.

That all said, without help and compromise, there would be no film to begin with.

## Production

The only rule adhered to by the film was Murphy's. Indeed, anything that could go wrong, did, and nothing came easily. As mentioned, crews were almost always ad hoc, which posed difficulties. Actors were often friends who were not very prepared, and the schedule didn't allow for any substantial rehearsals. There was no transportation besides the TTC, so I mainly hauled gear on my own, carrying and strapping up to 5 bags on me. The gear itself was entirely borrowed, which took pleading, scheduling, and extra running around. Actors and crews on any given day would all have conflicting schedules, as no one was paid to be there. Hence shooting would take place on the small windows of overlap. E.g. Juan is free 10-4, Franco 9-2, Victoria (for crew) 1130-130. This would mean the time to shoot would be 1130-130... so long as that was plausible for the location, and/or the weather was right if it was outdoors, and/or I had access to gear at that time. But any extra variable could throw things into greater disarray. If, for example, the gear had to go back at 12, then Victoria would need to be replaced, and I would need to try and push the shoot earlier. This was the tip of the iceberg in terms of complications, and yet it was the daily struggle, 35 times over. Indeed, the film was shot on (not full days necessary), but on a total of 35 individual days. This roughly matches the number of scenes in the film, though scenes would often be shot non-sequentially, and with bits of multiple scenes being shot on any given day.

Shooting began in Montreal, with Leni, Danette, Al Goulem (Uncle Doug), and Tristan. The rest of the shoots were in Toronto, with locations at York (Nat Taylor, CFT 137B, etc.) being used several times. My apartment in Kensington was utilized, as were my roommates, specifically Anders and Matthew, who played my roommates, naturally. Anders, an actor, also helped out frequently with small pick-up shots I needed around the house, and was very generous with his time. He also helped procure the Central to shoot at, where he also works as a bartender.

The shoot was initially supposed to leisurely span June and July, but because of the aforementioned casting difficulties, virtually everything besides the Montreal shoots were pushed into July, squishing as many as ten days of shooting in a row. This was incredibly testing. Given that I was not only the director, but the lead actor (so I needed to memorize huge swathes of lines on a daily basis), the line producer (so I had to run all the sets and get everyone organized), the script supervisor, the producer, the continuity supervisor, the first AD, the ostensible DP, the sometimes camera op, the sometimes sound recordist, the location scout, etc. I was at wits end. It really was too many days in a row, but it couldn't be helped. I was under-slept, stressed out, and

spread too thin. Thankfully, I had my wonderful girlfriend to support me, who often acted as a production assistant, and would pick up extra necessities like batteries, snacks, props, etc., if I was incapable. She would also lend a hand with the boom if I had no sound recordist on the day, posted call-outs for extras, and even worked the camera here and there, learning as she went. In short, she deserved multiple trophies.

And yet, the cluster of long days was not enough. I had a plane ticket booked to British Columbia to work for the rest of summer at the film camp, and couldn't afford A) to change my flight, or B) not go and work, because after all, I had no money and no budget. I would have to leave Toronto with an unfinished film and the production hanging in the balance. I say 'hanging in the balance' because there were no guarantees that the equipment I was borrowing, the actors I was using, or the locales I was shooting in would be available again come the fall. People's lives change, circumstances change, haircuts change (a genuine problem for continuity). This was not to mention the fact the season would quickly be changing once I returned, and the exteriors of the film were mainly set around summer.

I wasn't feeling great about everything that had been shot either. There were lingering scene issues such as the fact I had to shoot around two profs in the symposium scene (as mentioned in the Characters section), and didn't know at the time if that situation was even resolvable. I also worried about certain scenes I had already shot not living up to their potential. The 'party' scene in particular deeply concerned me. It was a cornerstone scene, and yet, little had gone right the day of shooting. For starters, the only apartment I could use on the day didn't look quite right in my head. It wasn't well decorated, and didn't have the cozy feel I associated with the character who was to live there. But without other options, I had to let my ideal look go. The room also needed extra lighting however, which was concerning to me, as it would need to be rejigged several times and might not look realistic as apartment lighting, nor even consistent from shot to shot. Yet there were still bigger fish to fry. I had asked an MFA student in the year below me to play a small role in the scene. She agreed to it earlier in the week, and then when the shoot day came, she never turned up. I didn't know the person very well, and had taken her on her word. She even proved difficult to get on the phone for confirmation that she wasn't turning up. And so, I had to write her out on the spot, but that was even easier said than done, because I felt it created a new problem for the remainder of the character dynamics in the room. In particular, the dynamics didn't seem right anymore for Cleo's character. She would need another female friend. Yet, there was no choice but to shoot. And so we did. But I knew the shoot didn't feel right, and indeed, this was confirmed when I later scrubbed the footage.

Hence, I went to BC not knowing whether I could reshoot, but feeling like that scene would let everything down. Moreover, Juan announced he was moving to New York in late September, further jeopardizing the chance at reshooting. This issue played into the complications for another scene he was supposed to be in as well, and without being able to schedule a reshoot of the one, or the principal shoot of the other, I asked Juan if there was a time in the fall he could come back to Toronto to finish all his scenes. In October he let me know that he could scrounge two days in mid-November. I would have to take them. This also defaulted Juan as the lynchpin of scheduling for those scenes, forcing my hand to make sure everyone else could free-up the same dates. Not that anyone was pleased about reshooting. Nor did other issues immediately resolve themselves. For instance, I was still short the one character from before.

My girlfriend, Victoria, had already been used as a ubiquitous extra, filling in the backgrounds of multiple shoots, and playing a very small part in an early scene where Juan, Franco, and I are given swag bags. Yet, I was still without a friend for the Cleo character at the party, and I didn't want to introduce new characters at that point of the film, so I conceived of a way to work Victoria back into things. It worked well enough, despite feeling like a somewhat tawdry fix, but the reshoot itself ran late. Shaina needed to leave by midnight, Shaista around 1am, followed by Juan and Franco. This would mean we would cover lines in that order. But the staggered exits posed small issues- both Juan and I would be acting against Shaina with Shaina not there. I would be acting and interacting with Shaista, but she wouldn't be there either. We continued to plug away until about 3am, but the drowsiness was wearing on Juan and Franco's faces. Juan would need to come back the next day to shoot the rest of his lines. As would I. However, our access to Victoria's apartment was limited the next day- we had about 90 mins to try and shoot. Juan was the priority, and he got finished, but we had to cut me off after a take or two. Not only that, but Juan needed to shoot me, and I him. Considering his relative position to the end of the couch, I could shoot him without the need of me being in the frame. However, as Erik was in the middle of the couch in the scene, I had to have either Shaista or Juan beside me, as things would look empty without another shoulder. I was out of time with Shaista, and so we eventually wrapped Juan's shirt around pillows and stuck it beside me. When I had to go back one last time to finish things off, I used the back of Victoria's head to dirty the frame where Juan would be, and then used Victoria's arm as a stand-in arm for Shaina.

This is just one example of how challenging things were, and yet that sort of cheating was par for the course, despite the fact it was for a shoot which could be fairly controlled. I employed a plethora of tricks throughout the film to fake things into looking diegetically normal. Yet other

issues abounded. There were issues with lenses (ghostly vignetting), and there were issues with cameras. For instance, I borrowed a Black Magic Pocket without knowing that the SD cards I was using weren't fast enough, despite being led to believe otherwise. This resulted in dropped frames in my recorded footage, irrecoverably sullyng key footage I couldn't reshoot in Montreal. Here and there an audio recordist hadn't hit record, and I didn't have sound for some (of the best) takes. Moreover, though I was lucky to be lent a computer by a friend who was going on vacation, he didn't want to update the operating system, which means I couldn't use sync-sound software. While I eventually used yet another computer to sync a few scenes, most of the syncing in the film was done manually by me, without use of clackers, as I presumed I would have the software when I was recording sound on set. All of these issues, including some aspects of performance, would need to be dealt with in post-production.



## Editing

I am a big believer in editing's ability to not only cover for certain flaws, but to create the semblance of a great performance where there perhaps wasn't one before. Depending on how one shoots, there is perhaps little that can be done in this sense. For instance, to bring things back to wide, static shots, not much beyond a multitude of takes can hide a performance if there is little cutting. However, with multiple angles and multiple takes, even wooden performances on set can be made to look reasonable in post-production. As it's in the film's interest to make all the performances shine, I will often play guardian angel in this regard. Or perhaps a better term would be mad scientist, cutting even individual sentences up for a single speaker, intercutting a reverse shot, taking a different piece of well-delivered footage to finish the sentence, using one take's aural delivery underneath another take's visual delivery, or using two angles within the same note. Whatever it takes to make the performance real. While it can mean long hours, it is also helpful in levelling the playing field with actors and non-actors. Typically actors will deliver something fairly usable with every take, but non-actors might only deliver a fraction of a usable take. Thus, cutting and pasting can build a performance piece meal.

However, sometimes I'll find there literally isn't a reaction or moment I need. Or if there was, it wasn't caught on camera. This happened in a scene with Juan and Mikel (Mikelangeli). We were running out of shoot time at the Central, and there was only enough for one close-up take favouring Juan. However, though my instruction was to stay on Juan, my friend working camera ventured over to me and Mikel, as we were the primary speakers. As I wanted to cut in an ad-libbed joke I had made on a reverse angle, I needed a reaction shot from Juan, because if we the audience do not see his internalization of my quip, the realism would be lost, as the moment would cease to be a clandestine one between the characters within the diegetic world the film, but a mere sit-com wink to the audience that any realistic characters on screen 'should have noticed.' However, as I only had one take from that angle, and it didn't include any workable reaction. This put me into a panic, as I would have to cut the moment full stop. So, I started combing the take for a moment to cheat. Finally, I noticed that after Juan smilingly says his 'hello's to Mikel, he looked over at me and dropped his welcoming grin to listen to what I was saying. Since I needed a shot of him covertly recognizing my sarcasm before looking to see whether it registered with Mikel, this would have to do by way of literally reversing the shot. Thus, it went from:

Smiling at Mikel >> dropping grin >> Listening to me  
to  
Listening to me >> grinning >> looking up to Mikel

Extrapolating a 'thank you' that Mikel had said elsewhere and adding it when Juan looked up to him only helped punctuate the joke and the idea that Mikel had missed my sarcasm while Juan had gotten it, all realistically in the diegesis of the film. So, it worked, though had I have had the actual moment on camera in the first place, it would have worked even better. That said, it's worth noting how something like that not only can create a moment, but how it can affect the impression of performances all around. The reality is, the performance in that shot never existed. It never happened and was never performed. The reverse did. However, what's there on screen is adding to the audience's impression of the film and the actor's performance.

There is also the ability of incrementally fixing issues like Dutch angles and uncomfortable eyelines. With Dutch angles, the footage can be zoomed in slight, with the corners incrementally rotated, getting things closer to an even keel. As for eyelines, affecting the aspect ratio can help here. My final aspect ratio will be 2:1, despite having shot at 16:9. The letterbox this creates is usable space to be pitched up or down. In other words, with the effective omission of footage, one can decide via a frame shift how much or how little to move off the top or bottom (within the ratio parameters). So, if an eyeline was too high, for instance, I can move the top of the existing frame down as far as the new upper limit, relegating twice as much of the bottom being cut off, and thus incrementally bringing the eyeline back closer to the harmonious 2/3rds line. It won't be perfect, but it will look better.

The biggest concern then of post-production has been sound. Sound is perhaps a greater make-or-break of cinematic quality than image, especially on a low budget film, for if things sound bad but look great, the audience will write the film off as amateurish, whereas if it looks bad but sounds great, the audience can chalk the look up to 'style.' I had long felt this going into the production, and made efforts to safeguard the element by always using lavs and a boom, but the lack of help, the pressured variables of the shoots, and ultimately, the failure on my part to always be vigilant led to some qualitative lapses in the audio that was recorded. These are by far more difficult for me to work with in post-production, and ideally need outsourcing. But as sound is such a technically advanced element, help in the department rarely comes without great cost, and without a budget, it's not currently possible for me to outsource. Thus, it may be something I

continue to work on myself until I can find someone down the road who might be willing to take things beyond what I can do, and/or perhaps if I can find a home for the film in a large festival, I can attract a post-production company to polish things off.

## Influences

I am placing a note about influences here, as not only does it bring things back to the ideas of the film, which are indeed the most important, but fittingly, because influences are more of an afterthought for me; a convenient pastiche added for fun to enrich the outermost layers of what I'm already wont to do. In this sense they are not something that earnestly affects how or why I make the film, at least at its core. But through my minor in Film Studies at Concordia University and the MFA at York in Film Production, I have become very cognizant of the pedagogically perpetuated idea of 'influence' in filmmaking and art; not only that any ideas are ultimately derived from others –thus, there are no new ideas- but of the shorthand rhetorical necessity to speak about influences as almost a badge of honour; the more esoteric or revered the influences, the more intellectual legitimation the project appears to take on. However, I personally reject all these notions. I'm sure they ring true for many filmmakers. But I'm not particularly interested in most films or filmmakers. Without going into a long-winded problematic on post-modern ideas of constructivism, its chicken-and-egg blindspots, or its difficulty in explaining the mutations that have occurred to foster advances, I will merely pronounce my interest in expressing myself through original work. If anything, I have always been interested in showcasing what I fail to see in cinema. Therefore, I try to film what is not only interesting to me, but what I feel is missing in industrial film. One could argue then that I have indeed been heavily influenced by mainstream cinema by way of inversion –if one subverts a thing, then their subversion is still shaped by a reaction to that thing it's subverting- and there is some validity to this, but nonetheless, I can only reiterate my genuine desire to express how I see things in my head, not purposefully as a response, but just because the way in my head is how I would like to see things.

Antithetical to all this is the fact I do enjoy placing winks to films I enjoy into my work. Indeed, there are direct references to lines in *Beverly Hills Cop*, *Ghostbusters*, and *Reality Bites*, which were the sorts of movies I actually watched in my formative years. But these references are merely that- referential echoes inserted on a lark, like quoting a comedy sketch or joke at a water cooler. They don't influence the style or approach of the film itself, I merely find the emulation of a line amusing, as sort of a topical comedic indulgence.

The only divergence to this is the final scene of the film, which more or less pays homage to *La Dolce Vita*, parodying major aspects of how the scene functions. Because the parody is sustained beyond just a line, it might become nominally greyer as to whether that film is playing an

influential role on my film. To some extent, if it is a sustained parody, then to say ‘influence’ is fair here; whereas if I had to cut the parodied lines from Beverly Hills Cop, Ghostbusters, or Reality Bites, the film would be left essentially the same, but without the La Dolce Vita pastiche, I would not have the same final scene at all. How much then it can be claimed the film is influencing mine is questionable, as the approaches are different, as is the content. I never set out to make a film like Fellini; I was only taking things from my own life, thus the reason I used the *Dolce Vita* ending was because it already fit the exigencies of what I was trying to accomplish, and there was something satisfying in that mash-up of content, like, for instance, how music artists have created albums that overlay two pre-existing records, highlighting their similarity while synthesizing something new. e.g. The mash-up of the Beatles White Album with Jay-Z’s Black album to make the ‘Grey’ album.

In conceptualizing my character’s journey, and positing a connection to what a grad character in the first symposium talks about, it left a space ripe for a circular reference, and I thought the action of *La Dolce Vita*’s ending best overlaid with what I wanted to say and symbolized in my final moments. In other words, I could say what I wanted about my original ideas and characters while simultaneously indulging in a pastiche that narratively satisfied as a self-fulfilling prophesy. So for me, it didn’t speak to influence, but acted as clever mechanism to kill a few birds with one stone.

I do like Bergman’s quantity of dialogue, and the movie starts on a movie-within-a-movie Bergman parody (from a previously made film), but I don’t write dialogue like Bergman, who still wrote in a stylized, expository way. As mentioned, my interest is writing with more realism; that of how I, and my friends, literally speak. And topically my characters speak a bit more about the everyday, and with more humor. In this way there is perhaps more similarity with Woody Allen and Noah Baumbach (the former certainly influencing the latter), though both writers still write in a more theatrical or stylized way, to my ears at least, and neither approaches things visually how I would.

When pushed to mention influences in my actual symposium, I also mentioned Susanne Bier, in addition to the aforementioned three dialogists. Both her work, and someone’s like Thomas Vinterberg’s represent a stylistic sensibility that I find appreciable when it comes to finding the humanism in a story. In fact, a lot of Scandinavian directors seem to share a certain humanistic approach that I have an affinity for. Perhaps it’s a sensibility that resonates in me through my

Scandinavian heritage (I'm sure my mother would enjoy such an assertion). But of course, I am Canadian, and my filmmaking concerns lay here. I don't set out to emulate those Scandinavian directors, nor do I adhere to any 'dogme'-tic rules. I do whatever I feel necessary to tell the story the way that feels right to me. Any similarities are just those.

Thus, if there are influences to be found, they are likely literary, philosophical, or like the *Dolce Vita* homage, made via the spirit of reflexivity. Indeed, the most overt influences are from my own works. *My Thesis Film* is filled with stylistic throwbacks to the other two films. Some scenes are shot similarly to *The Second Times of Troubles* (TSTOT). For instance, I positioned myself and Shaina in our final argument the same way I had positioned myself and Melissa Paulson in a daytime café dialogue scene in *TSTOT*. This would be inconsequential to an audience of this film, and maybe even unnoticeable beyond a similarity of style for someone who have watched both, but it's meaningful to me.

I've also reused names of minor characters, for little other reason than I enjoy giving those names to minor characters. E.g. Terry, Richard, etc. Of course, I needed to be careful that these playful layers and winks weren't detracting from the film or alienating viewers unfamiliar with the other works. They could only exist as an insightful bonus were one to familiarize themselves after. Only a couple of exceptions were made—the reference off the top of dinner to 'Trina and auntie Suzie,' which is a direct reflexive nod to *M/M*, for instance, I indulged in, as because of its positioning at the top of a busy scene with the introduction of new characters, I figured I had a few moments where the audience would be adjusting anyway. Thus, almost anything said in the first few seconds would wash over people as they acclimatized. Hence, I could sneak in a couple throwaway lines, but have fun doing it. And of course, those dinner scenes are shot in the exact same way I shot the dinner scenes in *M/M*. There are also little goose eggs, such as the Seagull photo, which appear in all three films inexplicably. And there is the aforementioned *Scenes From Another Marriage* inset at the top of the film, which is indeed the start of a short film I had made for class. But that of course played with a parody of Bergman.

Yet there are the reflexive literary references. An echo of the final symposium is the town-hall scene in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, where Dr. Stockman stands in front of his community, unapologetically claiming the problem with his community (and society) is the liberal majority. As Erik has railed against the majoritarian film industry, there is a similar overtone. Ibsen's scene leads to the conclusion that 'the strongest man in the world is the one who stands the most alone.'

and indeed, I wanted the last images of Erik in symposium to depict his aloneness in the moment, to make it feel as though despite the crowded room –which even includes some supporters- he is the most alone man in the world at that moment, at least in how he sees and feels. The multiple camera angles on Erik act as eyes of judgment from the audience, and in my desire to reflexively reference my own work, I largely shot the symposium scene based on how I shot a monologue exercise for Rafal Sokolowski's York class, Acting for Directors. The monologue I shot for the exercise was, naturally, an abridged version of the town-hall scene from *An Enemy of the People*.

While this might seem like it's adding up to a clear inspirational connection, it's important to note that a connection like that is, as with *La Dolce Vita*, a layer I add subsequent to the initial idea. As mentioned, the idea to bookend the film in symposiums came part and parcel with the entire concept as a natural way to begin and end things, giving the film a clear timeframe for the arc to unfold. The thematic 'full circle' connections between the male 'crisis' speaker at the beginning and Erik at the end made the bookends even more satisfying, as did the idea to end the symposium with Erik's failure. It was only after these concepts had come to fruition and been honed that I mused I could also encourage a proximal dramatic affinity to the town hall scene in *An Enemy of the People*. It was never a starting point, nor something I set out to make something 'like.' For myself it was superfluous fun to what I was already doing, and 'besides', I thought, it wasn't likely to be a connection that anyone would make anyway. In fact, knowing it would be a stretch, I thought of throwing in some overt allusions to Ibsen, which would be fairly easy considering the oft mentioned Norwegian heritage connection and 'Scandinavian Pain' of Erik and his familial characters. From there I could make an explicit connection to the 'strongest man in the world' outlook, but as my character mentions in regards to Socrates, I didn't want to so explicitly be self-aggrandizing or connecting myself to such esteemed icons. And ultimately, I felt I had already added enough goose eggs to the film without adding Ibsen to the mix, and going any further would have really meant committing to his influential inclusion, which already felt tenuous at best, and unnecessary at worst. So I decided to forego Henrik altogether.

That said, the symposium scene also shares some overtones with Plato's Apology, as tacitly foreshadowed by Erik's old advisor in their final meeting. He reminds Erik of not only Socrates' fate for pushing the wrong buttons in Athens, but that Socrates could have dodged his proverbial bullet by acquiescing and claiming all his provocations hitherto were made in err. To an extent, Erik has a similar chance; his proposed thesis idea is likely to draw some ire, and it would be much easier to simply roll over and make a piece that would appease those around him –for

instance, making a ‘Book 1 Republic’ film with an all-female cast- but this isn’t true to Socrates, nor in his own lesser way, Erik, who burns with an endless compulsion to challenge the prevailing ideas around him, from whatever direction they might come, in the hopes of getting closer to the truth that may lie at the heart of ideas. It is part of his ‘nature,’ as understood by some of the philosophy discussed in Plato’s *Republic*. The fact Erik bucks the chance to make the *Republic*, but is nonetheless making something about his own predicament that is referential to the *Republic*, the *Apology*, and heavy on dialectical dialogue, is of course, not lost on the author. Moreover, the Gary character played by Franco also has overtones to Glaucon from the *Republic*. Gary’s odder interjections in the party scene being somewhat reminiscent of Glaucon’s typically unhelpful two cents. This I did admittedly keep in mind.

Finally, in the *Apology*, Socrates tells how Chaerephon went to the great Oracle at Delphi, to ask if anyone was wiser than he. Upon Chaerephon relaying that the Oracle claimed no one was wiser, Socrates went round to the wisest men, begging discussion, assuming that he would meet someone wiser than himself, and would thus disprove the Oracle. But in discoursing with these sage members of the community, he finds that they are in fact, not very wise at all. Thus it is by default that he confirms his own wisdom. There are similar trials and tribulations to this for Erik, as his rejection from the festival(s), leads him to not only go see the caliber of films that are getting accepted, but to meet with some of the filmmakers as well, not to mention the ‘business man’ former golfer, who is said to have ‘good ideas’ and who has friends in the industry. These screenings and meetings confirm what Erik already suspected- that he is likely producing more interesting work than what is on offer, and the festival entry process must be less than merit based.

While these connections are certainly there, and I’m happy for people to make them, they were not immediately influential in the writing process. They were secondary to the major themes and ideas, and in fact, I didn’t want them to become so influential to the extent that I felt I had to adhere to any narrative points specifically. I enjoyed the loose connections, finding them intellectually satisfying, but I wanted complete narrative liberty to express myself and indulge in the moments of my life I felt worthy of cinema. And so, with Plato in particular, who would unquestionably come up in the narrative (considering the Political Science connection for my character), I ironically had to give myself reminders to find ways of conjuring parallels once I had already sketched out my own frameworks. So they were connections partially by convenience.



That said, perhaps it all amounts to the same thing in the end. Considering the importance of the connection my character draws to Socrates, the constant need of reminder for Platonic overtones certainly rendered Plato as the most important pre-existing influence on the work.

## Observations & Conclusions

Where Erik goes at the end of the movie is of course, inextricably linked with where I go from here. The open ending is certainly a personal question about the future which only time will answer. There may be no place for me or my work in the Canadian landscape. To some extent this is linked in the film to issues of identity and representation. As Cathy says, at the end of the symposium scene, ‘the last thing the world needs is another white male in an existential dilemma, feeling sorry for himself that nobody has recognized his genius.’ While the film is inherently making a case for Erik’s merit, the sentiment may hold true enough for its overlooking. And in this sense, beyond the glass ceiling of cronyism, Erik’s fate may be tied to the changing winds of tastes and social mores, which are becoming more preoccupied with representation than with anything to do with the formal mechanisms of the art. Hence, he may get lost in the rallying iconoclasm against the hegemony of the white male (which has certainly been worthy of some iconoclasm) before he ever breaks into the industry. Though whenever there is massive change being undertaken on a societal level, the baby can often get thrown out with the bath water.

Indeed, though it was important for the movie to remain satirically a-political, and thus, not saying anything straightforward, or becoming didactic (hopefully it’s more complicated and challenging than that) there is certainly an implication that there are fallacies made in representation. This generation has become well versed in the idea that stereotypes don’t speak for everyone, yet are happy to interpret one person as symbolic of the whole. Both are logical fallacies. Erik, ultimately, does not represent all male, white, or Western voices, nor should he be taken as such. He can only represent himself, and that is all he is trying to do; having his voice heard amongst growing noise and wariness. And yet, though he somewhat succeeds in conveying this to Cleo, whilst denouncing her self-segregating identity politics as inherently relativist and ‘Kuhnian,’ in the end, he ends up not being able to communicate across an ‘intersection’ from Karen, over the chirping sounds of the crosswalk pedestrian signal. It is an unfortunate acknowledgement that regardless of what he is trying to convey, perhaps we will still just be seen as tokens of our intersectional identities, and won’t be understood by each other after all. Indeed, the idiosyncrasy of his voice may simply get lost in the intersectional noise anyway.

For me as an artist, I’ve done what I can to lead the horse to water. Ultimately, some of the film’s success will depend on how it fares with its post defence life. As mentioned, some of my goals for the film lay beyond academia. Were the film to resonate with people, if it perhaps gained

some recognition, this might affect my own voice as an artist. Liberating me from the scenario of the film. As I say, time will tell. And even as a student, although I've perhaps ran afoul of conventional parameters here and there, it was only in the attempt to go above and beyond and do something great. I hope I've proven to be studious, thoughtful, hard-working, and someone who engages with the pedagogical concepts at play.

That all said, I roughly feel as though I made the film I tried to set out to make, despite all the trials and tribulations. And there is some satisfaction in that, though I would never want to have to make a film like this again. It was extraordinarily difficult; perhaps the most difficult of my artistic practice. But that is not said as illuminated hindsight. I knew it would be this difficult going in. I simply did what I felt I had to do to express myself.

You may get the sense from that statement, and this document as a whole, that in a way, I in fact dislike filmmaking. Even hate it. Well... you're right. I do. It's a grueling slog of misery and muck and it's offered me nothing but tremendous pain and disappointment.

And it's the only thing I ever want to do.

I hope I get to do it for the rest of my life and I hope this film plays a part in that.

Still friends?

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