

# **BIRTHDAY**

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## **Abstract**

*BirthDay* is a 28-minute experimental narrative film set in Toronto, following one day in the life of three immigrants: an Afghani woman, a Serbian man, and a Syrian boy who lives with his grandmother. Their lives are interconnected through montage, giving the illusion that they are one family. Toronto becomes a space that seems to embrace the characters, while at the same time separating them through the hardships of immigration.

The ongoing wars and conflicts in the world today have affected the lives of many people, many of whom are ready to abandon their home countries in search of a safer, better life. These journeys, all of which start with the hope for a better future, can also be full of fear and ambiguity. Immigrants face daily racism, prejudice and xenophobia. Often, they end up feeling alone and isolated. Away from family and friends, they lack the support networks that they grew up with. In this sense, sympathizing with other strangers who are experiencing similar situations offers them a sense of hope and security.

## **Dedication**

Dedicated to my mother, Zohreh, to my uncle, Majid and to my sister.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank my thesis supervisor and mentor, John Greyson. I would also like to thank my reader, Michael Zryd, who supported me from the start. A very special thank you to Kuowei Lee for his help and assistance throughout this whole process, and to Amnon Buchbinder and Howard Wiseman for their time and advice.

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Finally, I would like to thank my great crew, especially Amir Hasan Asgari (1<sup>st</sup> AD), Saied Zagar (sound-recordist and gaffer), Ramzi Maroof (Cinematographer), Hossein Ghouchian and Megan Gover (script supervisor), and in addition to my cast (Sakina Oqilbeck, Mladen Obradovic, Mazda Soroor, Yousef Abeji, Zoe Barrettwood, Fariba Sedighi, Kuowei Lee and Nicole Alexander), for their dedication and labor.

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## Introduction

*Birthday* captures one day in the lives of three immigrants to Canada. Through this story, I want to explore a narrative of strangers who have not found one other yet, but who if they had a chance to be together, could perhaps complement and comfort one another. However, *Birthday* acknowledges that in the end, each character must remain within his or her own isolated existence. Accordingly, this film interweaves the lives of three lonely characters together using a unique form of split-screen montage. In doing so, this montage of the lives of the characters could create a new concept of family, approximating the sense of belonging that all these three characters are striving for.

*Birthday* is a social drama with a major focus on the themes of immigration, family bonds, loneliness and human connection. The film suggests that there are people in the world that have not yet found one another, but if they did, they could perhaps complement one another.



Image 1: Still of Split-Screen from 'Birthday'

The day in which the film takes place is the main woman's birthday. In the beginning of the film, it seems that the three characters are one family, and each is preparing to celebrate the woman's birthday. However, as the story moves forward, we gradually realize that they do not know each other, and are in fact strangers who have never met. Although the film's characters have different nationalities, they live in the cosmopolitan city of Toronto. Ironically, they are all the more isolated, but somehow united in loneliness. The characters' stories are visualized through a collage layout, comprised of two or three different shots layered together into one single frame using split-screen. The film uses a neo-realist aesthetic to capture the daily life of the characters.

While I was writing the film, these three crucial questions came to my mind, and through the process of making *Birthday*, I tried to answer them:

- Can we weave together images of three distinct characters who have completely different cultures and languages, and who live in three distinct places, in a way that makes viewers think that these three characters are one family unit living in the same space?
- What is gained and what is lost by juxtaposing three lives which have distinct home countries, languages, cultures, customs?
- Can the layering of film shots in the editing process effectively create a new storyline for the film?

Pre-production took place in June and August of 2018, and the film was shot in the fall of 2018. I edited the film in the winter of 2019.

# Chapter One: Background of Content

## How I came up with this idea:

The first spark of the idea came to me as I read a poem called *Love at First Sight* by Polish poet and essayist, (Szymborska, 1990). The film *Red*, directed by Kieslowski Krzysztof in 1994, was also influenced by this poem.

*Love at First Sight*  
They're both convinced  
that a sudden passion joined them.  
Such certainty is beautiful,  
but uncertainty is more beautiful still.  
Since they'd never met before, they're sure  
that there'd been nothing between them.  
But what's the word from the streets, staircases, hallways—  
perhaps they've passed by each other a million times?

(Szymborska 1990)

After reading it and watching the film, *Red*, I realized that I really wanted to write a script about the unknown moments in peoples' lives. There are some moments in our lives which include the most extreme experiences of loneliness. We are usually not aware that someone out there is probably also going through these moments in some other place, sharing them with us. We may even be thinking of the same things, or doing the same actions in those moments simultaneously.

The inspiration of my first idea has not changed a lot. In terms of form, from the start, I knew that this film would be the story of a woman, a man and a child doing the same actions at the same time, during a single day from morning to night. I also knew that the screen would

be divided into three parts, presenting the actions and routines of these three characters simultaneously.

The scenes are arranged in a way as if the characters are in contact and communicating with one another. However, at the end of the film, we realize that each character lives alone and is occupied by their own life story.

With the content and themes, I was sure that two main themes of this film would be loneliness and human connection. My initial characters were: a woman (35, Japanese), a man (42, Canadian), a boy (8, Syrian) and an elderly woman (80, Syrian). These four people lived separately, and in fact, they had neither known nor ever seen each other. The boy lived with his elderly grandmother, while the man and woman were single and lived in separate buildings. I thought these characters could potentially make up a virtual family.

In early drafts, I selected my characters from different parts of the world, and they lived in their own countries (Japan, Syria and Canada) but they did same actions. I intended to show that although many people are far from each other, they can experience the same emotions at the same time.

However, when I came to Toronto, I realized that I was really missing my family. So, I changed the three stories to become those of three lonely immigrants in Toronto. Therefore, two additional crucial themes were added: family bonds and immigration. I thought that these additional themes would forge a stronger link between the characters.

I believe that there are many different reasons for people to leave their home countries. While one of the main ones is to seek a better life, many also must flee their motherland because of war, where their lives are perhaps constantly in danger. Leaving your home to save your life is a big tragedy that occurs in our world every day. All three main characters in my film carry the pain of war within them. They all have experienced conflicts as part of their back stories.

*Birthday* is now focused on the lives of four characters who left their countries because of war and emigrated to Toronto. They are:



*Image 2: Still of Maher from 'Birthday'*

Maher (10), a smart, sensitive and introverted Syrian boy. He lost his parents in the war in Syria and lives with his elderly grandmother in Toronto;



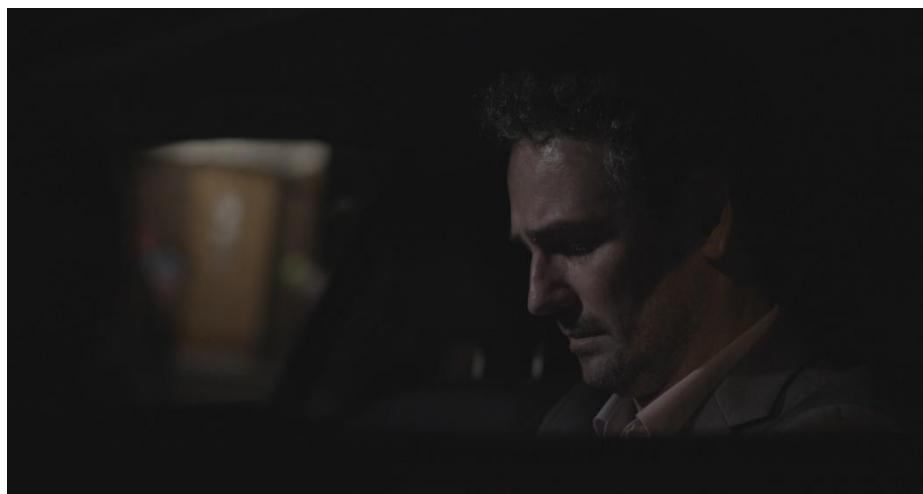
*Image 3: Still of Zoya from ‘Birthday’*

Zoya (70), a Syrian refugee and elderly woman who lost her daughter in the war. She lives with her grandson, Maher, in Toronto;



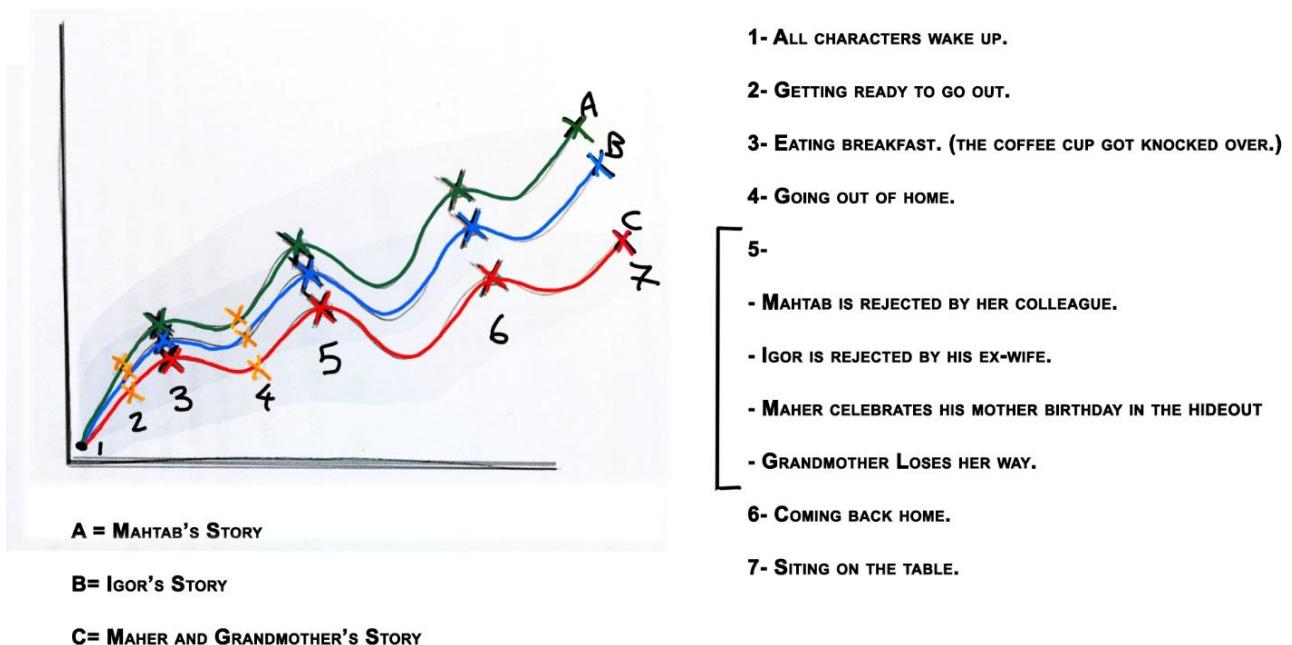
*Image 4: Still of Mahtab from ‘Birthday’*

Mahtab (32), who works as a dishwasher in a restaurant kitchen and sends money back to her family in Afghanistan;



*Image 5: Still of Igor from 'Birthday'*

Igor (37), a Serbian immigrant who has recently quit drinking. He wants to start anew with his family but his ex-wife will not allow him to see his six-year-old daughter.



*Image 6: First Diagram of 'Birthday'*

The story is comprised of three stories that will merge with one another to make a single story. I drew a diagram that shows the ups and downs of the characters' emotions. The X's in the diagram illustrate shared moments in the lives of my characters as they experience similar emotions at same time.

I was first attracted to this method of storytelling, as it was used in *The Hours* (directed by Stephen Daldry, 2002). *The Hours* shows how the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* influences three women from different generations, each of whom have suicidal thoughts at some point during the film or in their lives (*V*, 2009).

Four other films also inspired my storying-telling style. The first was *Time Code*, exploring events that revolve around a Hollywood film production company (Mike Figgis, 2000). The plot of *Time Code* is narrated through four simultaneous frames on screen, which juxtapose simultaneous actions of various characters, including a lesbian lover who is obsessed about her partner's flirtation with another character. (*Time Code*, 2000).

The second film that inspired me was *Babel*, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu (2006). *Babel* is about a married couple on vacation in Moroccan desert, where a tragic accident connects four groups of people on three different continents (*Babel*, 2006).

The third film is by Iñárritu, titled *Amores Perros* (2000). A dreadful car accident connects three stories about three characters who have to deal with loss, regret, and disturbing realities that are associated with love (*Amores Perros*, 2001).

The fourth film is *Crash*, directed by Paul Haggis (2004). In Los Angeles, in the aftermath of 9/11, several citizens collide in interweaving stories of race, loss and redemption (*Crash*, 2005).

All four of these films follow three to four characters simultaneously. Sometimes they do similar actions unconsciously and sometimes they complete the deed of one another. Watching them helped me find a pattern through which to extend my story. The idea of visually seeing different lives unfold in sync is captured beautifully in these films. I wanted to recreate that in my own film, seeking to find common themes in their stories. This kind of filming may be critiqued for trivializing the struggles of different people, by comparing and equating their very distinct struggles and miseries, such as in Paul Haggis' *Crash* for example. However, in *Birthday*, I am not using this parallelism to compare, or see who lives a worse life at all. I am using it to specifically allow a fourth storyline to flourish, one that is outside the three storylines in the film to arise. I would like to visualize the common feeling of loneliness or pain that newcomers tend to go through, regardless of culture. It is not about 'colliding worlds', but about revealing something that is inherent to immigration *regardless* of what world you come from.

## Chapter Two: Background on Form

### Francis Bacon

*Birthday* tells a story very much produced by its structure or form. The principal triptych form of this film is inspired by the paintings of Francis Bacon (28 October 1909 – 28 April 1992). Bacon was an Irish-born British artist and an Expressionist painter. He is best known for his “emotionally charged unique imagery” that explored deeply personal subjects (Harrison 2006).



*Image 7: "Three studies for Portrait of Lucian Freud" by Francis Bacon, oil on canvas in three part, each 14" x 11 7/8", 1964 (Theophandis 2012)*

Bacon's abstracted characters are generally depicted alone, far away from other places and people. They live in “geometrical spaces which give them a blurry 3D depth”, while the backgrounds are flat and undistinguished (Harrison 2006).

In his book, *Out of the Black Cavern*, Martin Harrison recalls: “Bacon has said that he saw his images ‘in series’.” (Harrison 2006)

On Bacon's style, John Russell observed in 1971 that "there was painting in England before the Three Studies, and painting after them, and no one ... can confuse the two." (Russell 1993)

"It seems that the crucifixion effected on Francis Bacon's paintings heavily." Critic John Russell wrote that the crucifixion in Bacon's work is a "generic name for an environment in which bodily harm is done to one or more persons and one or more other persons gather to watch". (Russell 1993)

Seeing Bacon's triptychs for the first time, I thought about what would happen if these paintings could tell a single story through motion. The story could be achieved by putting these images together into a single frame, although there is no link between them individually in terms of their character's lives.

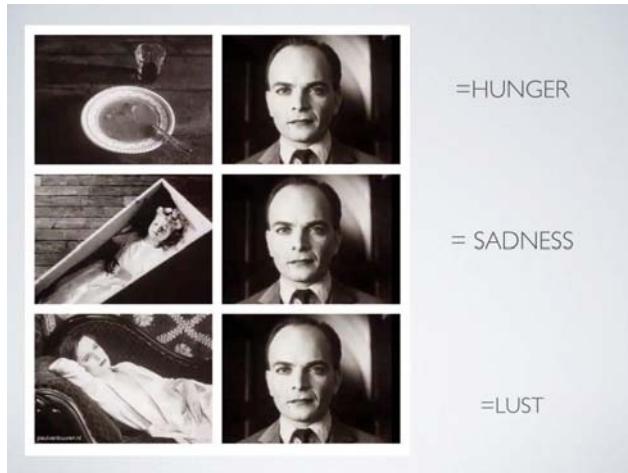
## Kuleshov

**Kuleshov's Theory of Montage** helped me push my idea further.

"The **Kuleshov effect** is a film editing (montage) effect demonstrated by Soviet film-maker Lev Kuleshov in the 1910s and 1920s. It is a mental phenomenon by which viewers derive more meaning from the interaction of two sequential shots than from a single shot in isolation." (Kuleshov effect 2018)

In his famous short experiment, Kuleshov edited together different shots that were bookended each time with footage of Tsarist matinee idol, Ivan Mosjoukine. When the shot preceding the shot of Mosjoukine's face is that of a plate of soup, the audience understands that Mosjoukine must be hungry for that bowl of soup. When it is proceeded by a girl in a coffin, Mosjoukine's face appears to be sad. When proceeded by a woman lying dad, Mosjoukine appears

lustful. In reality, all the shots of Mosjoukine's face are the same repeating shot, but the mechanism of montage attaches different implied readings of his emotions each time.



*Image 8: 'Effekt Kuleshova' (1969)*

Viewers bring their own interpretation of each scene depending on how they process the scene before (Russel 2018).

More specifically, Kuleshov understood that montage can also play with space, and he innovated the idea of creative geography. He inferred that cutting together different locations back to back implies that they are somehow interconnected and can co-exist even if they couldn't do so in real life, like Doctor Who's TARDIS for example, which is massive on the inside but just a police call box on the outside (Mariniello 2017).

Based on this, I had the idea of creating a false perception on screen of a united family home using a montage of shots juxtaposed through split-screen techniques and soft wipes. I wanted to create links between the woman, man, and child, without ever having them actually exist in the same place, but rather through using montage only. That way, the audience themselves will infer that they are one family even though the film never explicitly states this as

a truth. Without the tool of montage, this innovation would be impossible. At first glance, the split-screens in the film may be invisible to the audience as they are so seamless, but their content might raise some flags based on why the characters might be behaving unexpectedly. However, with time, the split-screens become more and more obvious, thus deconstructing the creative geography of the film and allowing the fourth storyline to rise to the top.

## **Eisenstein**

Discussing his thesis, Sergei Eisenstein argues that an assembly should be understood as a clash of elements that creates a novel concept.

“Sergei Eisenstein marked a note of accord in "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form" when he noted that montage is "the nerve of cinema". Eisenstein's view that "montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots" wherein "each sequential element is perceived not next to the other, but on top of the other" has become widely accepted.” (Soviet montage theory 2018)

Eisenstein believed that the act of editing is the driving power behind a film’s emotional delivery, as noted in Pudovkin’s book on film technique, (Soviet montage theory 2018).

“In other words, the editing of shots rather than the content of the shot alone constitutes the force of a film.” (Soviet montage theory 2018) Eisenstein proposed three elements to a successful revelation in a film using editing. The first being the establishment of a thesis, followed by the arrival of an antithesis that reacts with the thesis, forming a new and unique synthesis to the film.

*“Thesis* – An initial force, statement, or mode. For film, thesis could be narrative, as in the foregrounded social harmony that is later disrupted; visual.

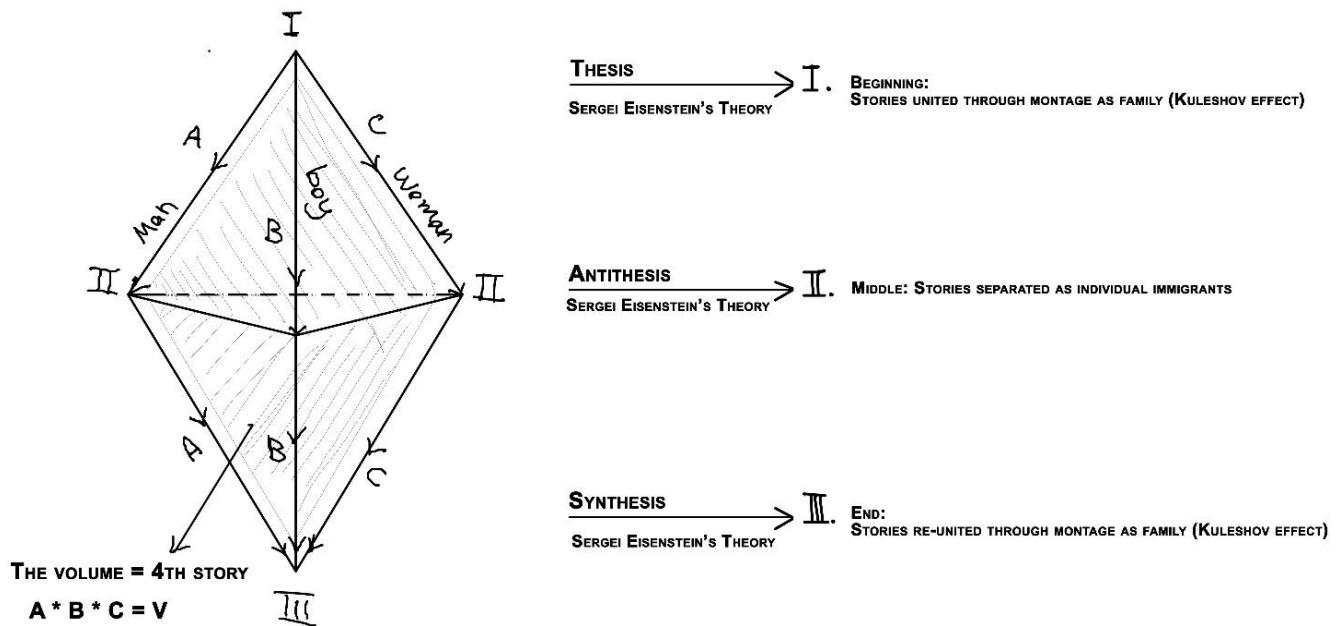
*Antithesis* – A conflictual force, statement, or mode designed to negate or otherwise amend the thesis in some way.

*Synthesis* – The result of the conflict between the antithesis and thesis, which possess within it the mechanics of its own undoing... The affective result might be best demonstrated through the cattle slaughter scene in Strike, in which images of violence inflicted on workers is cut within images of a cow being slaughtered in an abattoir.”

(Soviet montage theory, 2018)

Accordingly, this theory made me wonder about creating a thematic synthesis in addition to the visual synthesis of the Kuleshov effect. My split-screen version of the Kuleshov effect helped me to achieve the illusion in the audience’s mind that the three separate characters appear to be one family. However, the Eisenstein synthesis of the film would create a new meaning of loneliness and longing that transcends the individual scenes visually. It would use the “thesis” of the characters as one family and contrast it with the “antithesis” that they are actually not connected, so that a new meaning arises through this “synthesis”.

Drawing on the aforementioned theories, I created a new entity out of the isolated lives of these characters. This new concept is of a perceived family unit that connects them to each other.



*Image 9: Second Diagram of 'Birthday'*

The three stories, A, B and C each start from a common point, and the layout of shots with the help of split-screen and montage using Kuleshov's creative geography effect is intended to convince viewers that all these stories are only one story, that of a family preparing to celebrate the woman's birthday. As the story unfolds, gradually each character follows his/her own story and their storylines get further and further away from each other.

As a result, the shape of the top pyramid forms. In the climax, viewers understand that these characters are not a family at all, and that the reality of each characters' lives is something completely different. Together, the juxtaposition of these three unconnected stories explore issues of immigration, family bonds and loneliness. But then, when the story continues towards the conclusion, the three narrative strands, A, B and C re-converge until they meet again at the

same point, in a scene when all 3 characters are at a table at night, seeming to share a birthday cake. In this moment, viewers know that they are not a family but might wish they were.

On one hand, and through my variation on the Kuleshov Effect, these three storylines come together once again, creating a forth story which only could exist through montage. On the other hand, Eisenstein's theory on synthesis also comes into play. The "thesis" in *Birthday* is that all characters are a family and they are happy together. However, these characters will be recognized as immigrants who live alone, and neither know nor see one another, and so this insight is the "antithesis". Consequently, the "synthesis, which is the result of the conflict between the antithesis and thesis, argues at the conclusion that loneliness is a common experience among immigrants, despite being unrelated to one another. *Birthday* then suggests that if they have a chance to find each other, they could form a bond between one another and might perhaps handle the hardships of life better.

## Chapter Three: Previous Work

### ***Resonance***

I had once explored this method and style of filmmaking in one of my earlier short films entitled *Tanin (Resonance, 2009)*.



*Image 10: Still of a split-screen shot from ‘Resonance’      Image 11: Still of a split-screen shot from ‘Resonance’*

*Resonance* is a 5-minute poetic experimental drama about a couple who live a lonely life; however, they have neither known nor seen each other though they can feel each other spiritually. At the end of the film, they disappear into each other's worlds as they creative geography merges into reality and they appear in each other's real spaces. The film played at many film festivals across Iran and worldwide.

## *Cafe 469*



*Image 12: Still of a split-screen shot from 'Café 469'*

Similarly, in my short experimental film *Café 469* (2006), I also used this split screen technique.

*Café 469* is about a girl who goes with her hidden camera to spy on the customers of Café 469 as they're eating their last meal. She describes her point of view about their last meal and when she leaves Café 469, a bomb goes off, which she seems to have known about somehow. The real café's explosion and the film's café where the interior shots were filmed become one and the same through Kuleshov's creative geography concept. The film won a number of awards in Iran as well as in Italy, and screened globally, including in Berlin and at the AFA.

However, in contrast with these earlier films, *Birthday* is a much more developed project both in terms of form and content. The method of overlapping stories becomes very complex in this film, and the length of it leads to a better understanding of the emotional landscape in the film. For many years now, this split-screen method has inspired me, and with *Birthday* I continued exploring its potential in juxtaposing intense stories about human

emotions and relationships. As I did with *Resonance* and *Cafe 469*, I chose to use a realist storytelling technique, influenced by both European and Iranian Classical Realism and New Neo-Realist filmmaking traditions. In visualizing my thematic concerns, I wanted to draw upon two repetitive and conflicting notions: the ideal of family-life as exemplified by security, affection and human connection; and in contrast, the reality of solitary life and loneliness.

## Chapter Four: Making the Film

### Script writing:

When I started to write the script for *Birthday*, I had to draw a map for all the characters' movements, both separately and also together. So, with some suggestions from my supervisor John Greyson, I designed a new form of screenplay, in order to write my script. Using Excel, each character's story is developed in a vertical column.

A	B	C	D	E	F
THE BIRTHDAY: SPLIT-SCREEN SCRIPT		SYMBOLS: /red bar= blurry splitscreen			
MAHER, 9 yrs, Syrian boy	Igor, 35 yr, Serbian alcoholic		MAHTAB, 30 yr, Afghan housewife		
SCENE 1: INT. MAHER'S ROOM - DAY					
An alarm is heard. MAHER, 9-year-old, Syrian boy with black eyes sits on his bed.					
		INT. Igor'S BEDROOM - DAY		INT. MAHTAB'S BEDROOM DAY	
		An alarm clock is heard. Igor, 38-year-old Serbian man rolls in his bed.		An alarm is heard. MAHTAB 35-year-old Afghan woman is in bed. She wakes up to SOUND of her cellphone's alarm. As she wants to turn off her alarm, she notices several missed called from her mom who lives back home in Afghanistan. She throws the phone away and gets up.	
INT. MAHER'S ROOM - DAY					

Image 13: 'Birthday' Script

These columns are aligned, so that when they are read horizontally, they form a scene from the script together. When the characters' stories connect to one another, a red line between the columns indicates the use of a soft-wipe/split screen, meaning that we see two characters/actions in one single split frame.

At the same time, I drew a simple storyboard for each shot, because I needed to be sure that in my split-screen scenes, the actions that I designed would line up with one another, creating an illusion of one bed or one table extending across two spaces in one frame. After finalizing the script, we rehearsed twice with my actors, and I took photos of each proposed frame. Then, in Photoshop I made a model of the entire film. This method helped me realize that I would have to change some scenes, because my imagination did not always match the reality of the juxtapositions.

For example, I had designed a scene where Igor, the Serbian man, is driving to the shop, and Maher seems to be sitting in the backseat of the car, when in reality, he's on the bus by himself. Writing this scene was as follows:

INT/EXT. MAHER/ BUS- DAY

Maher sits next to a window and stares out. after a second, he looks at Igor.

INT. IGOR'S CAR- DAY

Igor drives and sings along to the Serbian music playing.

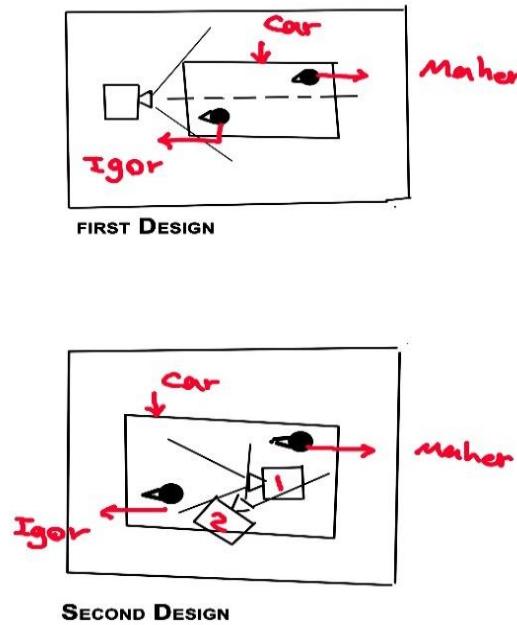


Image 14: Storyboard from '*Birthday*'

At first, I planned to place my camera in front of the two characters, looking at them both. However, it proved to be impossible to shoot the scene in this way, because we did not have the equipment, crew or time required to prep and shoot such an ambitious driving shot.

In the end, I updated and designed the last version of the *Birthday* storyboard to match our abilities, budget and available facilities, and during the shoot we followed the storyboard very closely. In fact, not only was it an essential map for us, showing us which split-screens might be impossible, but it also helped us to save time.

## **Casting**

Selecting actors was the other challenge that we encountered. The characters came from different nationalities, so each actor must speak their character's mother tongue fluently. This took a lot of time, and after reaching out to the different immigrant communities, cultural centers, and settlement services in Toronto, we were finally able to locate our actors. The actress who plays the grandmother in the film was so flawless in her acting during the casting, that I chose to cast her even if she didn't speak perfect Arabic. In the end, we made her character deaf, and told the same story with the added advantage of a creative obstruction.

## **Writing Dialogue**

In the script, I did not write actual dialogue for the characters. Instead, I just summarized the action and situations of each scene. During our rehearsals with actors, they improvised lines for each scene. We filmed our rehearsals and then watched them together, and in this way, with each rehearsal, improved and refined the dialogue for each scene.

I had never used this method before, and for me it was a great experience. It gave space to the actors to explore their characters and 'own' their stories. I think I will use this method for my next films.

There were three methods employed to assist myself and the crew with maintaining continuity: photographs, a marked script, and continuity logs. Once the art direction and set decoration were established for a scene, my script supervisor took pictures of all set pieces and props in situ. This helped to ensure that anything that was moved could then be returned to the same place for the next take. It also served as an essential record in case, the scene needed to be

revisited on a separate day. This method also helped to indicate which items could be cheated, if required, as the photographs established the relative position of the props and set pieces.

In addition to photos of the set and props, she took pictures of the actors in full costume and makeup. These pictures were full body shots and close-ups, and included profile shots. We also took pictures specifically of any jewels or nail polish. As with the set pieces, this method helped both in resetting a scene, and in maintaining continuity across the days of the shoot.

The Script Supervisor had pictures for each costume change for the actors, so that we could be sure that they were wearing the correct costume for the time of day. When the actors were rehearsing, the Script Supervisor observed and made notes on a copy of the script.

In particular, we wanted to make sure we knew the specifics of the actors blocking, timing and gestures. In this way, we knew when they would perform a given action, and how they would move. For example, when an actor had to turn to walk across the room, we needed to know not only in which direction they turned, but also on which line of dialogue, and to where they walked.

We put extra focus on those actions which would most likely provide a motivation or beat for the editor to cut on. We also amended the script in regards to the dialogue. If there were any changes made to the script during the rehearsals, the script-supervisor would note those down. In addition, she would note any minor changes that each actor seemed to find easier to say (for example, substituting “somebody” for “someone”). In that way, we could focus on noticing deviations from their standard delivery.

Throughout the different shots and takes, the script-supervisor noted the script changes to the dialogue and actions, and then transferred that information to the continuity logs as needed. She numbered the lines within a scene for easy reference.

The continuity logs were comprised of separate sheets for each shot. These sheets included overhead views, information on the camera position, props, and wardrobe, as well as the specific take information. For each take, we attempted to note any information that would be helpful for an editor. This included the quality of the take, the timing of the shot (which we kept with a stopwatch), and any notable deviations from established blocking and dialogue.

All of this is fairly standard practice for a fiction film shoot but was especially important on *Birthday* because in split-screen shots, every centimeter and light ray, and every hand-movement and color temperature mattered to make the scenes as interesting as possible during editing. It also meant that we could revisit a scene to re-shoot in case something didn't line up in post.

## **Measuring for Split Screen Shots**

During our shoot, we measured every distance between subject to camera and also the hypothetical distance between the characters. Achieving the same scale for each character in a split-screen composition was important because their separate images were supposed to combine to make up a single 'believable' image.

In order to accomplish the split screen effect, it was important that the frames of the different characters and locations be as close to each other. To assist with this, we made sure to

take photographs of the first frame of each shot. For the split screen shots, the Script Supervisor took photographs with each take, in case there was a difference.

We also measured the positioning of the camera, including the height of the camera, and the distance from the camera to the relevant object or person. In addition, we measured the relative position of the set pieces in the room, such as where the table was placed, and the position of the camera within the room. We also made a note of the camera settings, particularly the lens being used. Once the frame was set up, we compared the frame with the photographs of the previous shots, and we adjusted accordingly.

## **Challenge**

We had some difficulties with finding the correct framing for the split screen shots. There were times when the measurement was somewhat rushed, and was less accurate than desired. However, I discovered that our biggest challenge on set concerned camera angles, because we had neglected to plan a way to measure the correct angle of the camera. This led to a lot of debates among the crew about the degree to which the camera should be tilted. Fortunately, the photos allowed us to confirm the positioning fairly well.

Additionally, we had to be careful to block the action within the section of the screen designated for that character. This sometimes led to difficulties where the actor's instincts had to be stifled, and it was a challenge to find a way to make their action appear natural within the constraints of the space.

## **Production Design**

First, we had to design and prepare accurate and believable costumes, makeup and locations for the three families from three different nationalities (Afghan, Serbian, and Syrian). Second, due to the production's limited budget, we had to design and dress our single apartment location to serve for the film's three completely different families over the four shoot days inside the apartment.

The first production design challenge was overcome through a carefully planned pre-production phase. After meetings with myself and discussions about the story, the characters, and the film mood and tone, the production design team commenced with extensive research about the characters and their social and cultural backgrounds, costumes, home designing style, food, etc.

In doing so, our first source was online articles, photos and videos. Second, we reached out to members of the Syrian, Serbian and Afghan communities in Toronto, and in some cases were able to visit their homes. The resulting research materials were gathered into a scrapbook of information and visual references. I reviewed the collected data and visual references with the production design team and the actors to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the references and designs. The next step was to collect, borrow and purchase the costumes, props and furniture and set pieces from different suppliers and sources, and bring them to the set.

The second major production design challenge was resetting and redecorating the apartment for each of the three families/four characters as quickly and accurately as possible. In doing so, we discussed the sets for each, allocating different rooms/areas of the apartment to

each of the characters. For example, the kitchen was divided in two sides: one designed and dressed for Mahtab, and the other side for Zoya. The balcony was assigned as Maher's bedroom, and the only bedroom of the apartment was dressed up for Igor. However, there were some sets that were shared between the characters, such as the living room, and we had to be prepared to move and change the entire furniture, curtains and set props during the shooting. To manage this challenge, the production designer and her team had reviewed the shooting schedule and the storyboards carefully in advance, and packaged, stored, located and labeled the furniture, props and costumes efficiently so that we could switch between the scenes quickly and also to be prepared for changes in the shooting schedule due to unforeseen circumstances.

Our production designer, Mahsa Rasavi, commented: "For me, the production design of the short film *Birthday* was a challenging but also rewarding and insightful experience for everyone on the production design team. *Birthday* helped us to learn more about the three different cultures (Afghan, Serbian and Syrian) and the film's experimental form and style inspired us to creatively participate in the process of creating and framing the unique mise-en-scene of this split screen experimental film."

## **Cinematography and Lighting**

There were challenges associated with lighting of the scenes, especially with continuity. The lighting for the exterior scenes was minimalistic, relying mostly on natural and practical lights. Small practical lights and bounce boards were used to shine extra light on the cast whenever it was needed. However, interior scenes had more complex lighting since most of the interior scenes took place in the early morning or at night time in the story. Therefore, it was important to keep a consistent lighting for the morning scenes that required directional lighting to

mimic sunlight. Also, flags were used frequently to kill the shadows that were generated due to heavy usage of artificial lights for the interior locations. The night scenes were illuminated in such a way to show that moon light and practical lamps are responsible for the scenes' lighting. Day for night shooting, which was used to speed up the production process created extra problems at one point due to its complexity. We blocked some windows using black fabric to prevent sunlight from illuminating the scenes.

For the split-screen scenes, we had a proper record of every lighting setup for the scenes that made up the split screens. Photos were taken to keep track of the type, orientation, and position of all the lights that were used for every scene to make sure that there is enough information to mimic the same kind of lighting during the next shooting days. This detailed recording of information allowed the camera team to recreate lighting situations so that the scenes matched with one another between the film's 'locations' while re-dressing the same real life location.

## **Sound Recording**

Sennheiser 416 shotgun and lavalier microphones were used to record sound in the exterior and interior locations. All these locations had different challenges that had to be taken care of. Any device that created unwanted sound was turned off prior to filming. However, there were some locations such as the kitchen scene that had some devices, like the refrigerator and freezer, that we were not allowed to turn off. Several ambient tracks were recorded in every location in order to make sure that there were proper ambient tracks for post-sound work.

The great challenge for audio recording was the existence of too much unwanted ambiance in the locations that were selected for filming. The apartment that was used as home for the three characters was in a noisy complex. There were children in the other units who were constantly making noises, making clean audio recording a very difficult task.

One way to deal with this challenge was to try to run takes when there was less noise. The unwanted ambient sound was not limited to the interior locations. One of the exterior locations was near the airport, so there were the constant sound of airplanes landing or taking off, interrupting our takes. We tried to overcome this problem by running the camera between planes as much as possible, in order to make sure that no airplane sound interrupted the recording. Additionally, we used lavalier microphones that have shorter pick-up ranges as backup tracks to make sure that we always had a good quality track despite the nature of ambiance.

It is noteworthy to mention that certain scenes have a wide range of sound levels that went from quiet to loud. Therefore, audio peaking during some parts of the recordings was a frequent issue that had to be addressed. This issue was resolved by taking advantage of the ability of Zoom H6 to record a simultaneous backup track at a lower decibel. The results were multiple dialogue tracks that had to be synched prior to editing. This created additional work in post-production but guaranteed the existence of at least one high quality audio track for every shot.

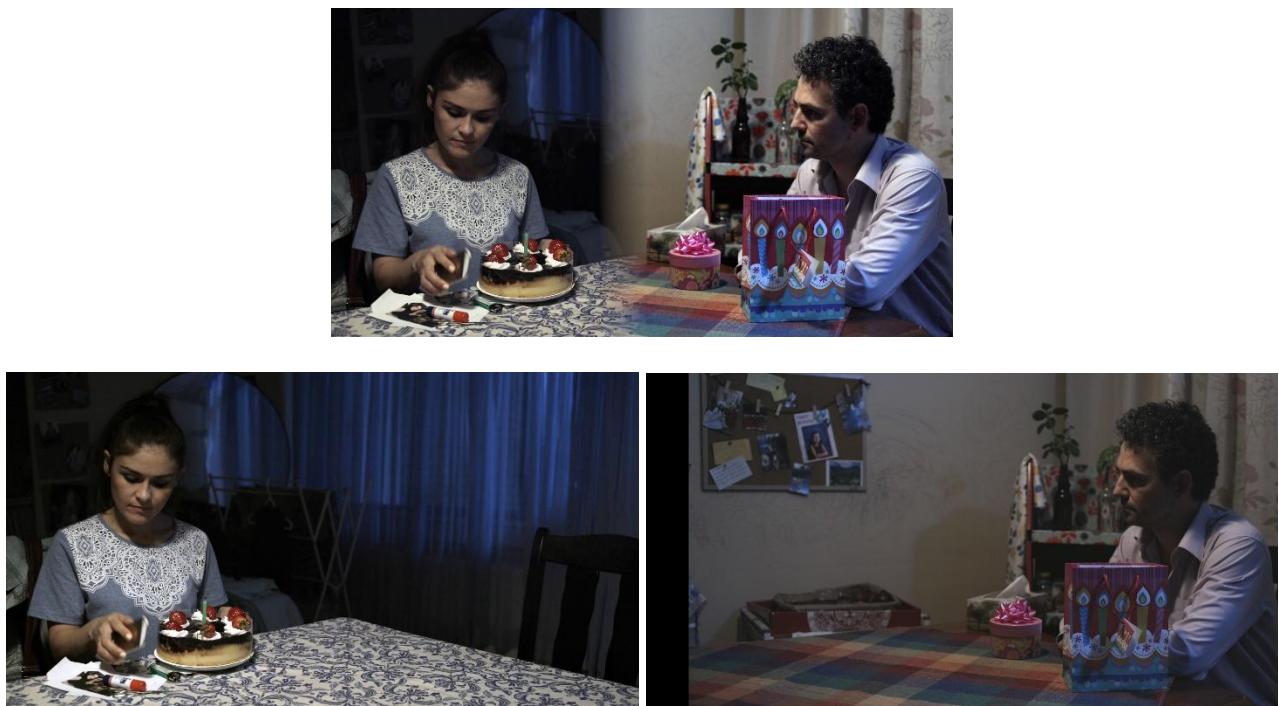
## **Editing**

There were some difficulties with finding the correct framing for the split screen shots. The process began by importing all of the selected shots into the timeline according to the storyboard. Then, the split-screen shots were combined on the monitor in order to visualize the creative geography, or artificial landscape. Maintaining the same scale of the characters who are

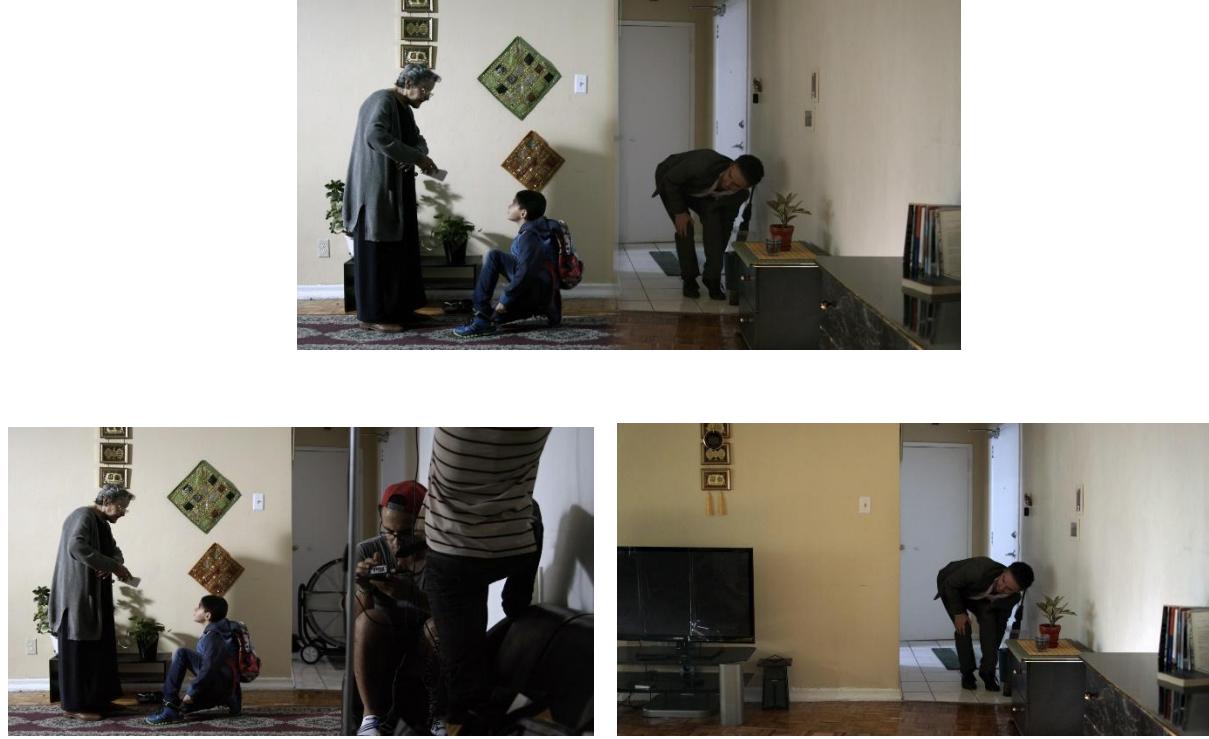
sharing one shot was important because their separate images was supposed to make up one correct perspective.



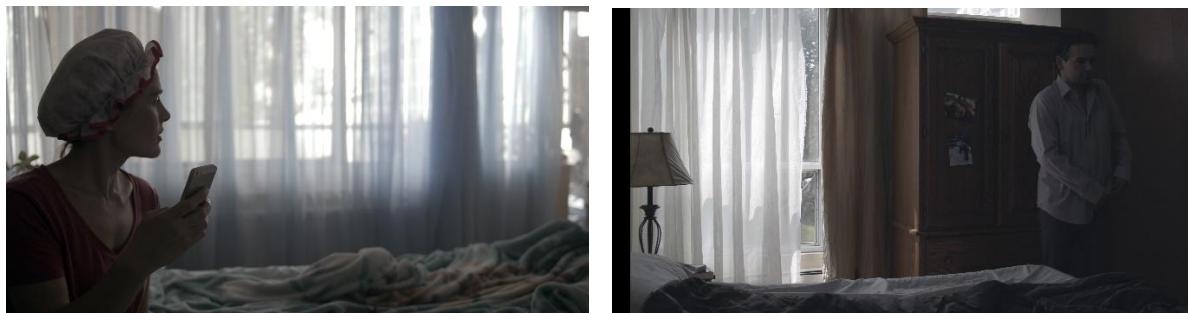
*Image 15: Stills of Split-Screen scenes from 'Birthday'*



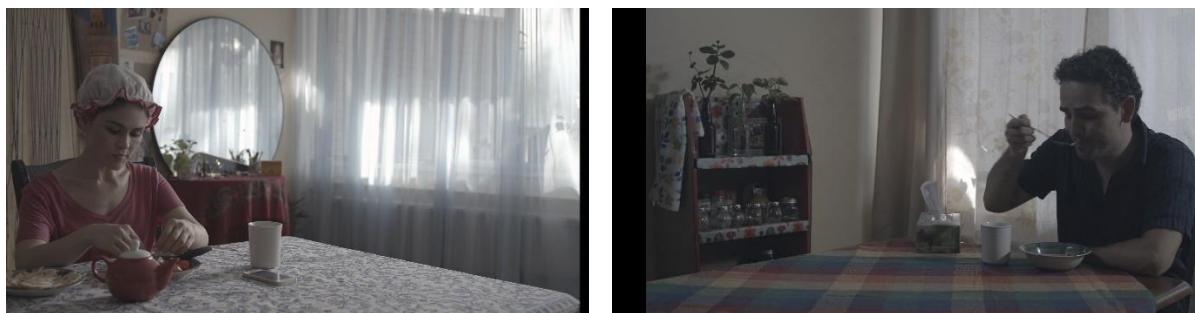
*Image 16: Stills of Split-Screen scenes from 'Birthday'*



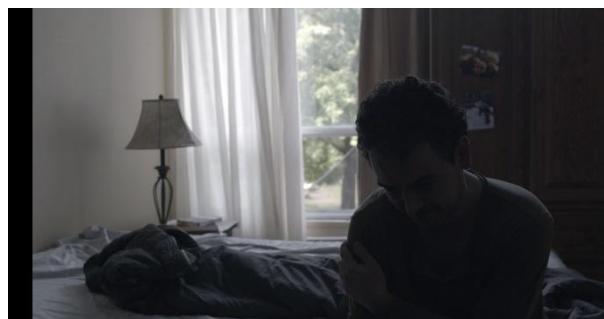
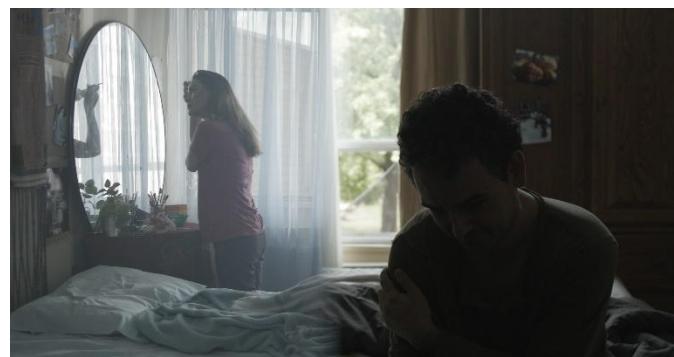
*Image 17: Stills of Split-Screen scenes from 'Birthday'*



*Image 18: Stills of Split-Screen scenes from 'Birthday'*



*Image 19: Stills of Split-Screen scenes from 'Birthday'*



*Image 20: Stills of Split-Screen scenes from 'Birthday'*



*Image 21: Stills of Split-Screen scenes from 'Birthday'*

## **Chapter Five: Focus Groups & Target Audience**

The subject of *Birthday* is a current issue in the world today. Therefore, a wide range of audiences will be able to relate to or sympathize with the characters of the film. Nonetheless, there are three crucial groups that make up my target audience. First, there are the immigrants and refugees, and those who are far from their homes and countries. Secondly, there are those who host refugees in their own countries, including settlement and newcomer service centers and communities. Thirdly, the film is also meant for other filmmakers who are interested in innovative cinematic forms and a new style of storytelling.

After the first cut, I screened the film to my main crew, including my producer, cinematographer, first assistant, and script supervisor. I wanted to check that technically, everything was working. Based on their feedback, I changed some parts and then I shared the film with six friends whom I selected according to my three target audiences. It was important for me to get their first impressions. I noted all of their thoughts in detail, and noted which points were similar in their opinions. I went back and made edits based on this feedback.

I also asked filmmaker, editor, and York professor, Manfred Becker's for his feedback, and held a rough cut screening of *Birthday* in his editing class. The discussion afterward was very beneficial and helped me make changes that impacted the rhythm and pacing in the film, given that this audience was comprised of filmmakers and film students.

Finally, I also worked repeatedly with the feedback from my supervisor, John Greyson, and my reader Michael Zryd. We talked in-depth about content, form and story. What they had

to say clarified for me what was still unclear and ambiguous in the film, especially in terms of story, and pushed me to tighten the loose connections between the three storylines.

What was most fascinating throughout this whole post-production process was the difference between Muslim and Middle-Eastern viewers, and all other viewers. In *Birthday*, there are some actions that don't require context for Muslim Middle-Easterners as they are directly pulled from a well-known context to them, such as when Zoya, Maher's grandmother, cooks Kibbeh and shares it with her neighbor on the anniversary of her own daughter's passing. Here, the kibbeh, a traditional Syrian meat dish, is used as the offering that is served either at funerals or after the passing of a family member, and shared with the broader community. This act of offering is meant to ask God to bless the soul of the dead. It is context like this, which is obvious to me, that I had to think about twice as hard when editing the film, after I realized throughout the multiple feedback that these concepts were not universal.

In order to avoid these kinds of unexpected "lack of understandings," I have made plans regarding my next films. When visualizing a specific tradition or belief that is shared among a specific community but not a more general audience, I plan to do the following. I believe it is possible to write a scene which is understood by everyone at least on an emotional level through how a scene is developed. Sometimes, screenwriters might forget that routine acts and daily life in a community could be completely unfamiliar territory to other communities. This results in having part of the story stay in the shadow for a number of the audience members.

In general terms, according to the screening feedback I received, most audiences could connect with *Birthday* and were impacted by the story, especially by the ending but mainly by

the form of split-screen. Even if not all the cultural specifics were obvious to everybody, the emotions were still effectively portrayed visually.

In addition, by juxtaposing three lives which have distinct home countries, languages, culture and customs, I am exploring a narrative of disconnected people who have not found each other yet, but if they had a chance to be together, they could perhaps complement one another beautifully. Using all of these elements together with split-screen in *Birthday* created an illusion where the characters react to one another and interact with each other's lives but only inside the viewer's imagination. That is more than I could ask for in a film about sympathizing with the loneliness of newcomers.

## Conclusion

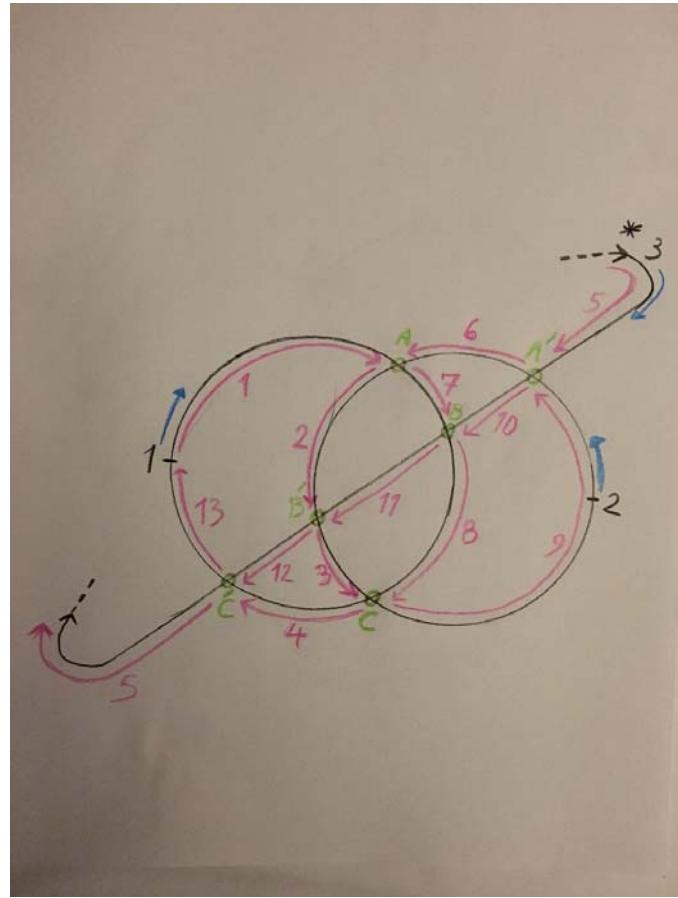
To find my individual style as a filmmaker, I must first ignore fears and doubts, especially as a newcomer myself. I need to have the courage to risk. Making *Birthday* helped me move forward on my path as I took creative steps in both content and form, while I myself was personally struggling with the loneliness of immigration.

I will very likely work with the subject of immigration again in the future. In Iran where I came from, a wide range of youth dream of immigrating to Western countries in order to find a future that wouldn't exist for them back home. I was one of them. One and a half years have passed since my arrival in Toronto, and my feelings and perception of immigration have definitely changed with my own experience.

The contrast between the idea of immigration in Iran and the facts of immigration in Toronto has affected me dramatically. In a way, my two previous films that I made during my studies at York University, *Dejavu* and *Spin*, were also about facing the hardships of immigration. In *Dejavu*, a 12-minute long take, an immigrant Kurdish family packs their belongings to return to their homeland from Toronto, until they find themselves trapped in a nightmarish circle of events. The structure or form of *Dejavu* is based on a circle diagram.



*Image 22: A shot the daughter from 'Dejavu'*



*Image 23: Diagram of 'Dejavu'*

The film's form emphasizes this issue of migration and loss. Immigration is a costly process. It forces people to leave a part of themselves behind until after a while, when they get used to living in a new place, the losses keep coming; new births, funerals, weddings, graduations - all missed because their life is somewhere else now, and they cannot be next to their own family or friends. This is also shown in *Birthday*. One day the cycle may break, but not for the foreseeable future at least.

In *Spin*, a 5-minute experimental short film, I tried to visualize the anxiety of entering a new world. Through digital manipulation, the audience gets to experience a new world where everything is spinning and changing.



*Image 24: A shot from 'Spin'*

It is the experience of disorientation, both culturally and politically as expressed through poetic and experimental filmmaking, that interests me most.

After watching *Birthday*, one of my friends told me that ‘immigration is like a rebirth.’ He said, ‘It is always accompanied by changing, vicissitude and conversion. Although change is a painful process, the result is growth and evolution’. His words were powerful, but I wonder how this definition can be seen from the perspective of forced migrations and exile. Nonetheless, I agree that much better realities exist for many new immigrants, but the process itself is not easy.

I am happy that I did make *Birthday* as a short film and not a feature because the process allowed me to target the strengths and impact points of idea while exposing the weaknesses and bugs in the original structure and form when the idea was a feature. I still hope to make a feature version of *Birthday*, but this time I have a much better understanding of what I need to do.

Finally, I just wanted to note that one of my crucial reasons for coming to York University was to get closer to my own style of filmmaking and listen to it more. Over the period of my studies here, and after working on my thesis project, I feel happy to have come much closer to achieving this goal. In directing actors, writing dialogue, and even the rehearsals, I experienced new methods of working and navigating different cultural contexts and actors. My screenwriting abilities expanded as I experimented with form and layout, creative geography, and non-traditional methods of writing using graphs and spreadsheets. I had the chance to spend time with my actors in their immigrant communities and share out experiences. They were able to work with me to bring their own authentic experiences into the film and inspired me to always look for human experiences in-person when building characters who represent real people and are acted by someone who knows these realities. Although the short film format doesn’t allow for a deep exploration of each character’s inner world, I feel confident about the

accomplishments my team of actors and crew were able to create with me in telling this story in a different way.

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