

# **Doppelgänger**

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## Abstract

*Doppelgänger* is a short film set in the mid-1980s about a young gay man's visit to an alternative nightclub with a new wave/punk flair where he has an intimate conversation with a mysterious man several decades older than him. Returning to the revamped club decades later, the protagonist finds that his role has shifted when he meets a young man who reminds him of his former self. The film's story, while fictional, draws on my Master's thesis research and is inspired by my own experiences as a gay man who came out over forty years ago. In developing and finishing the film, I have fulfilled my personal goals over the course of my Master's studies by learning how to manage a production on a much larger scale than I previously attempted. Intended primarily as a "proof of concept" for the longer feature script I am developing, the short version of *Doppelgänger* is meant to provoke conversations about how the transference of queer experience and wisdom across generations continues to evolve.

## Acknowledgements

As an artist who, over the course of my practice, has focused primarily on the written word, I wanted to step out of my comfort zone in creating my latest project in collaboration with other artists to draw on the full potential of film as a multidisciplinary medium in telling a story through performance, music, light, colour, and movement. To achieve the images and sounds of *Doppelgänger*, I relied on the talent and support of many of my peers and friends.

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## Introduction

*Doppelgänger* is a dramatic, narrative film about Devon, a young gay man who “cruises” Gregor, a mysterious older man, while a “gay cancer” lurks on the sidelines. Four decades later, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic with HIV already half-forgotten, an encounter with Gabriel, an uncannily familiar younger man, reminds Devon of that magical, unsettling night from long ago, stirring long-dormant desires and fears.

An exploration of changing attitudes towards gay sexuality over half a century punctuated by two pandemics as well as seismic changes in how people meet and communicate, *Doppelgänger* is shot in a heightened style using bold design elements to draw attention to the archetypal nature of the film’s protagonist, his would-be lovers, and the setting where they meet: an alternative club with a new wave/punk aesthetic in an unnamed North American city in 1985 and the present day. The film’s vibrant colours and dim lighting evoke the joyful but also the traumatic experiences of generations past as well as the imperfect, evolving technologies that have imperfectly preserved a collective “queer story” in the form of light, sound, and motion.

By casting queer actors from different generations, I have fostered a collaborative approach in developing the characters’ dialogue and actions by drawing on the specific, unique experiences of the men inhabiting the main roles. The final film is intended to provoke thought and engage queer viewers of all generations in a consideration of how queer experience was once passed down (specifically by gay men during the AIDS pandemic when gay sexuality was still anathema) versus how it is passed down today in an age of heightened visibility. How will our collective story will be shared across future generations during future pandemics in a world filtered through the Internet? Can queer people—haunted by traumas that could serve to unite

them—find a way to pass down their stories to effectively fight their collective enemies?

*Doppelgänger* updates these questions for a new generation.

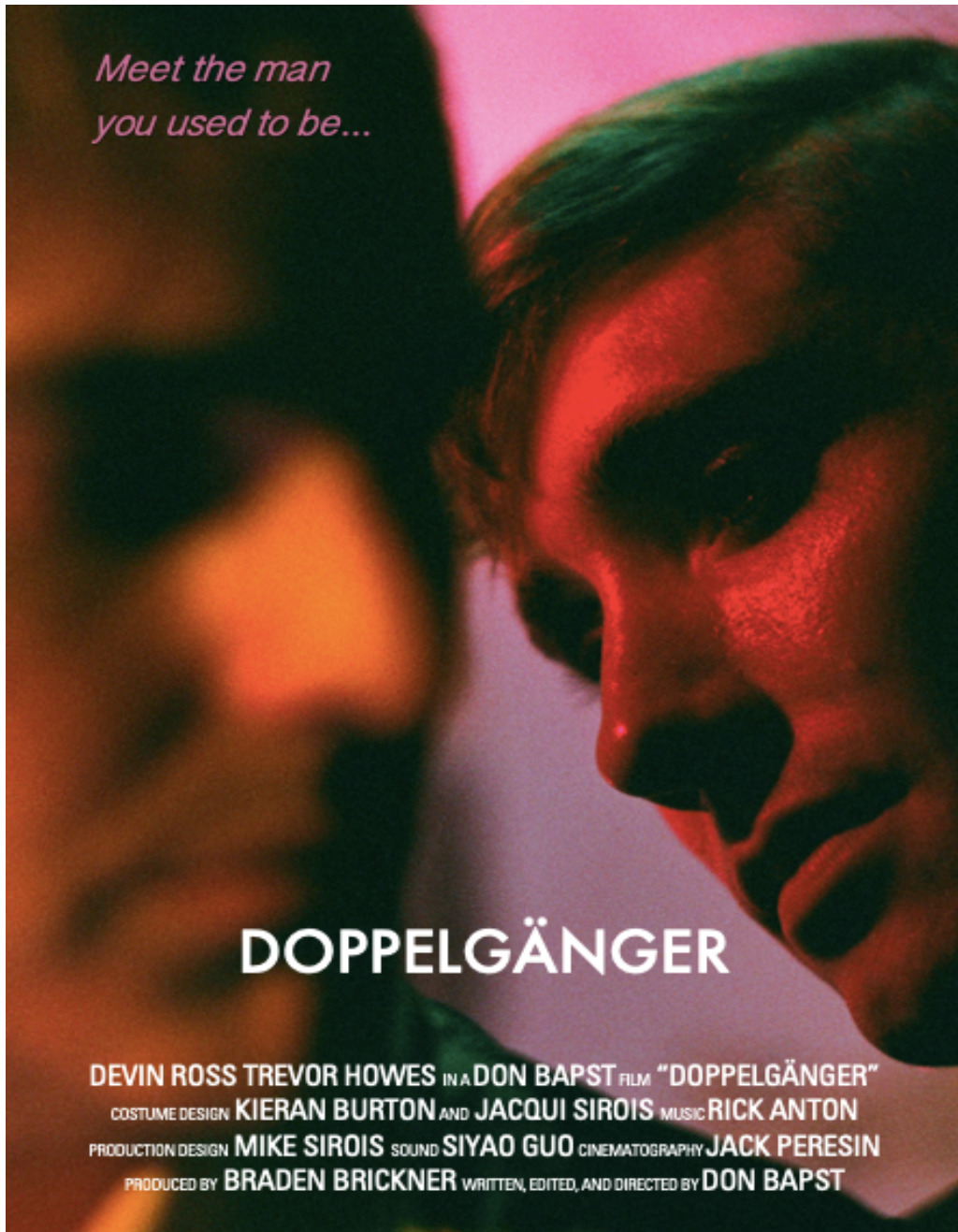


Image 1: Poster for *Doppelgänger*: Mature Devon returns to The Club

## Story Origins

As an artist who has worked in a variety of media, my creative process often begins with an image or a scenario rather than a conscious choice about what “message” I want to convey or to whom that message is directed. In first conceiving of *Doppelgänger* more than a year before I applied to the MFA in Film Studies Program at York, I found myself haunted by images of the bars and nightclubs I had visited when I first came out as a gay man in early 1980s when a “gay cancer” had just begun killing gay men in cities with densely populated “gay ghettos” such as New York, San Francisco, and Paris. Remembering the theatrical design and lighting of these transformative physical spaces and their tendency to heighten social interaction with a dramatic flair made me think of them as places where I might set my next feature-length script. The “story” I developed would come later, but first I began thinking of the physical spaces I had explored when shaping my own sexual identity and how such a space would translate to the screen.

I first visited gay bars and clubs when I was still under the legal drinking age and had only just passed the legal age of consent for consensual sexual activity. Such environments were one of the primary environments where gay (and bi) men met, not only to dance and flirt but to exchange life experiences specific to what it meant to be “gay.” Armed with a fake ID that pretended I was of drinking age, I was able to enter some of these establishments to begin my own gay coming of age story, and the clubs I was most drawn to were those that featured the avant-garde music of obscure musical acts such as Princess Tynymeat and Secession rather than the more mainstream gay clubs that pumped disco and pop hits onto their dancefloors. The more experimental new wave/punk clubs of the era weren’t necessarily “gay” and the term “queer” was only just being reclaimed as a positive moniker for those of us whose sexual orientation was

just one of the many aspects of our personalities that distinguished us from the heterosexual mainstream, yet it was in such clubs that I preferred to congregate along with those who appeared and acted differently from the “straight-acting” gay men in Lacoste shirts who frequented the more polished gay venues of the time.

In developing a draft of my feature script, I began to think of a story that would allow me to capture something of the magic and the danger of these formative spaces that haunted my memory, and I began to focus on a particular club that had most inspired me. I decided to keep the location and identity of that club hidden since I didn’t want to make a film about that specific club’s history and legacy but rather about an archetypal club the likes of which could have been found in almost any big city in North America or Europe in the eighties. The protagonist would be a man as young as I had been when I first went clubbing at a time when a new “gay cancer” had just appeared on a scene already fraught with dangers such as anti-gay “bashing” and police harassment. Ironically, the dark music and décor that were such an integral part of the aesthetic of alternative clubs in this period also carried with them a sense of danger, which only added to their dark beauty, mystery, and allure.

Devon, as my protagonist soon became known to me, was drawn to these qualities of the archetypal club, which I named Narcissus (which also became the working title for the feature-length script), drawing on the title of James Bidgood’s 1971 film *Pink Narcissus*, one of the earliest examples of an unapologetically queer cinematic work and an inspiration for the design of my favourite club from the era. Just as I was drawn to the more experienced men I had met in such spaces, Devon found himself drawn to an older man who became known to me as Gregor. Was Gregor a trustworthy guide through the queer new world, or was he a predatory killer? This

danger made him terrifying to Devon, and it was this very potential for danger that made the dark, handsome older man all the more mysterious and alluring.

I now had my setting and my initial premise, but where was my story? I can't say that I fully remember or understand exactly how I came to find it, but eventually I decided that just as I was going back in time to look at myself visiting "The Club" as a young man, so Devon should return to Narcissus in the COVID area of the present day to try to remember the young man he once was while confronting a new virus and a new set of complicated cultural conditions. In the process, I found him drawing the attention of Gabriel, a new young character who in many ways resembled Devon in his younger years. Their conversation would remind Devon of the conversation he'd had with Gregor decades before, only now their roles had been flipped. As I wrote, I decided to divide the film into three sections, much like Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*, with a middle act focused on a thirty-something Devon encountering a doppelgänger his own age around the time of the 9/11 disaster.

Initially, I wanted the film to tread into the territory of horror, the genre that created and sustained my love of cinema, but as I explored the script, the nature of the story and the behaviour of my characters took me in a different direction. I began to understand that my story was really an exploration about how queer experience is transmitted across generations in a "community" with extremely nebulous borders. Few people are born into a queer family, and few gain their knowledge of what it means to be queer from their family, church, or school, the three institutions from which most people take their formal lessons about how to be a human being. Instead, queer people must seek out others who are "different" as they are, and often the only places to meet such people—particularly in decades past when the most available environments in which to meet fellow queers were venues that turned profits based on the sale of

alcohol and often tolerated the use of other mind-altering substances—are not necessarily as “safe” as they may initially appear. The dramatic tension and danger in such spaces could, therefore, lurk in the background of my script without an overt horror/thriller component. Instead, the true dramatic nature of my story had to do with how information is shared across queer generations by people who have all, to one extent or another, been marginalized by society and have formed their own imperfect coping and survival strategies to navigate a world that is often more dangerous for them than it is for their non-queer counterparts.

By the time I applied to the Master’s in Film Production program at York, I had completed a feature-length script, and upon being accepted into the program, I immediately distilled a short version of the script from the feature, taking elements from the first act (set in the 1980s) and the third act (set in the present day) to focus on the dramatic question of the transmission of queer experience, wisdom, and history across generations. My motivations for applying to the program had more to do with expanding the tools in my toolbox as an artist than it did with telling this particular story (see “My Background”), but *Narcissus*, as I was still calling the work, was a perfect focus for the program since its emerging themes and questions were fertile for academic research and discussion.

In writing my précis for use in applying for grants and to officially document my thesis goals and ambitions, I began researching my topic more deeply, both by reading texts and watching films suggested by my professors and peers in the program and by independently seeking out work related to my topic and artistic approach. Already familiar with the writings of queer cinema theorists such as Vito Russo, Barbara Hammer, and John Greyson (who would eventually become my thesis supervisor and whose presence at York was one of my main

reasons for applying to the program), I became acquainted with the work of Richard Dyer and Thomas Waugh.

Waugh's critical writings on obscure queer cinema along with essays from *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* curated by Martha Gever, Parma Pratibha, and John Greyson, gave me much to consider in terms of reaching an audience with my film. Did it matter if my film was only seen by queer theorists and academics, or did I want to aim for a broader audience? Did the very choice of limiting my story to queer experience mean that it was inherently limited in appeal to such a focused audience as would certainly have been the case when I was first coming out as a gay man in the 1980s, or did the mainstreaming of queer discourse and the increased visibility of queer people mean that it was possible my film could resonate on a broader platform? The works of these scholars shed much light on the challenges and opportunities inherent in passing on "history" within a community joined not by blood or national identity but considerations of alternative sex, sexuality, and gender.

In Summer 2022, just a few months before pre-production on my film began, I participated in the Queer Summer Institute facilitated by John Greyson and Mary Bunch where I met queer artists and scholars from around the world for a four-week intensive program of panels, workshops, performances, and conversations exploring these very questions. I was particularly touched by the words of T.J. Cowan and Cabaret Commons co-collaborator Jas Rault who in presenting to our group described the chaotic form the process of creating queer art often takes, citing a long list of personal experiences that informed their own work, from temporary employment and relationship drama through financial hardships and major trauma, to reach precious moments of solidarity and catharsis. They spoke about how the "community" in which their work was created was ever-shifting and included people who were perhaps difficult



at times to appreciate yet essential. I felt as if they were reading pages from my own journal as a queer artist who had often doubted my own vision—as much due to feeling at times like an outsider within the queer community that I was a part of as feeling alienated from mainstream society. I was inspired to persevere in working on my latest film. The entire institute allowed me to reflect on the line between activism and art and how my film, even if initially intended as an exercise in improving my production skills and artistic practice, had an inevitable activist component at its core.

I drew further inspiration from Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore’s anthology of essays *Between Certain Death and a Possible Future: Queer Writing on Growing Up with the AIDS Crisis*, which focused on my generation, a generation that came out when AIDS had already begun decimating the community that we had just discovered we were a part of but before there were life-saving treatments or prophylaxis for HIV. In my early days as a gay man, I had been plunged into attending ACT UP meetings and demos before I ever had time to worry about or be rewarded for a “career” as an artist. By merely examining the dramatic questions I’d set out to explore in my latest film, I realized, I was treading back into the activist territory I’d been born into when I emerged on the queer scene in the 1980s. I also realized that my generation—the Generation X my protagonist Devon was a part of—was (at least in terms of the queer experience) truly the Lost Generation. We had emerged onto the queer scene to stories about the “good old days before HIV/AIDS,” yet we had not yet obtained the level of visibility and support enjoyed by those emerging as queer today. Which is not to say that each generation isn’t faced with its own challenges and threats but rather that my generation is often overlooked in the tendency to categorize history, particularly queer history, according to a bipolar “then and now”

dichotomy of life before and after the decriminalization of queer sex, the legalization of same sex marriage, and the prophylaxis and treatment of HIV/AIDS.

Another source of inspiration for the film came from a course I took in Glendon's Translation Department entitled Fictional Approaches to Translation, which focused on artistic works (most in a literary form) that involved a translator as a protagonist and featured translation as a theme. While there was no one specific work of art or piece of theory from this course that stood out as a major influence on my work, the whole notion of considering translation as a central theme caused me to understand my story on another level. In speaking to each other across several generations, my characters were engaged in a discourse involving some uncomfortable "lost in translation" moments. This new awareness allowed me to embrace the discomfort and conflict in rewriting my dialogue. I realized that the *tension* between the generations was central to the film's dramatic question, and I began looking at works (both literary and cinematic) through this lens.

I reread a mountain of seminal gay/queer novels that had influenced me during my formative queer years, including works from Sade, Genet, Rechy, Burroughs, Curzon, and Glück, and I discovered work by Orange, Whitehead, Symons, and others too numerous to mention. I read these works not so much to draw specific connections to my own work but rather in the spirit of keeping the voice of my literary ancestors, contemporaries, and descendants active in the back of my mind during the birth of my latest project.

In addition to filmmakers who informed my aesthetic style, I also revisited cinematic works by filmmakers like Pasolini, Jarman, Fassbinder, and Rosa von Praunheim to see how their early approaches at tackling queer content in a visual medium could inform my own. I also revisited Visconti, whose precise if flawed interpretation of Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*,

for better or worse, stands as the quintessential portrait of an older man looking back at his own youth by observing the physical beauty of a much younger man. I discovered the work of Arthur J. Bressan Jr. whose film *Buddies* has become a classic though it was largely unavailable outside of a few targeted screenings in cities with large gay populations when it was first screened in the 1980s. I also discovered Frank Vitale's *Montréal Main*, Bruce LaBruce's *Gerontophilia*, Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau's *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, and Todd Stephens' *Swan Song*.

While most of these films dealt to some extent with intergenerational gay relationships, some placed a great deal of focus on the sexual nature of such relationships, particularly those in which the younger character is barely pubescent, suggesting a predatory aspect to such unions evocative of a gay *Lolita*. Other films avoided discussing the sexual desire inherent in their characters' relationships and idealized the passing down of wisdom from older, "wiser" characters to their younger proteges. Still others focused on the tragedy of the physical degradation of the older character's body while idealizing the beauty of the youthful lover. And then there were countless examples of films *without* a gay or queer angle that explored intergenerational exchanges, both romantic and platonic. None of these references quite captured the specific details I was striving to explore in my work. Not that I can pretend to have seen every film or even every queer film ever made, especially not the thousands of shorts that have been screened in festivals over the decades since film festivals began. Nevertheless, I reviewed enough to feel confident that my approach to my story was, at the very least, under-explored.

In my film, I didn't want the sexual nature of my characters' relationships to become the primary focus of the story, nor did I want to deny the sexual nature of the flirtation that introduced them to each other in the queer club where such flirtation is often the launching pad

for communication. Instead, I remained focused on the tension that inevitably emerges when different generations confront each other with their unique visions of the world, visions informed by the very different realities in which they emerged as queer individuals. Whether or not this flirtation led to a sexual encounter was beside the point. What was important was that the flirtation, born out of desire, launched a complicated and at times fraught discourse that raised more questions than answers. In having my characters explore these questions, I wanted my audience to be forced to explore them in their own turn on their own terms.

## Influences

### *Cinema*

“People say sometimes that Beauty is superficial. That may be so. But at least it is not so superficial as Thought is. To me, Beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible” (Oscar Wilde).

In the previous section, I explained the genesis of the story and characters at the heart of *Doppelgänger*, but long before conceiving of a specific set of themes and finding a story structure in which to present them, it was an intangible series of images and sensory details that first haunted me to explore what would eventually become the basis for my latest film.

One of the challenges with speaking of the genesis of a film is that the medium is an intersection of many media, including writing, design, performance, photography, movement, sound, music, lighting, and wardrobe. While the ideal process for creating a film arguably begins with a script, the mind has its own ideas about where it will allow inspiration to strike first, and film is undeniably a visual medium above all.

The filmmakers who have most inspired me to be passionate about the form are those who use the full palette of creative options, painting in bold strokes with a heightened approach that pushes the limits of the form. In addition to experimental queer filmmakers like Pasolini, Fassbinder, Greyson, and Anger, it was filmmaking pioneers who have tested the limits of the form on large-scale commercial projects for a broader target audience (often with a heavy genre focus) whose work most drew me to film. William Friedkin, Gaspar Noé, Dario Argento, Ken

Russell, Peter Greenaway, Tobe Hooper, and Stanley Kubrick are just a few of the landmark auteurs whose work continues to inform my own for their bold choices in design, structure, and form: choices which infuse commercial cinema with images, sounds, and rhythms that challenge the viewer to see the world in a whole new way. While these directors embrace the theatricality of cinema, they use all of the affordances of the multi-disciplinary form to their full potential, playing with vibrant colour schemes, dramatic set and costume design, and dynamic movement to take audiences on a full sensory “trip.”

While creating *Doppelgänger*, before I ever conceived of a tale about exchanging queer experience across generations, I had a vision of “The Club” that would give my audience a sensory experience, transporting viewers to another mindset through dark yet bold colours, tactile sets and costumes, heightened performances, and stirring music, all evoking a highly specific aesthetic reminiscent of the most avant-garde clubs of the 1980s and their contemporary descendants. I discovered my story through my exploration of this sensory environment rather than the other way around.

In considering the work of other filmmakers, there was one film that stood out from all others in its specific influence on this project, both for its striking aesthetic and its themes. Slava Tsukerman’s 1982 *Liquid Sky* is one of those cult films that is derided by some as B-movie trash and upheld by others as a prescient work of cinematic genius. An emerging body of criticism on the film supports the work’s importance as a definitive portrait of a punk universe in which the most fabulous freaks fail to find a common language to fight the force that threatens their existence. Though the film is ostensibly a work science fiction, its themes include sexual trauma, alienation within marginalized communities, and the shaping of gender identity in an urban environment fraught with danger: The Club.

As much as I love *Liquid Sky*, the largely comic tone of the film and its focus on a bisexual female protagonist make it different from the film I had in mind. While the film's heroine Margaret is one of the figures in cinema history I most treasure, I wanted to tell the story of gay male protagonist, for I strongly believe that one most closely approaches universal truth through focusing on the personal details of a specific human experience; this is best done by writing what one knows from personal experience rather than trying to tell someone else's story. I also wanted to confront the dangers lurking in the setting of my film without leaning into the comedy that punctuates *Liquid Sky*. In lieu of its somewhat campy sci-fi aesthetic, therefore, I opted for a darker, moodier tone.

Another important influence on my cinematic aesthetic may seem at first glance to be a far more unlikely influence on *Doppelgänger*. Tobe Hooper's 1974 *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is a towering landmark of cinema for horror buffs and filmmakers alike even if it remains, like much of horror cinema, at arm's length for many arthouse film scholars. Drawing on the post-Vietnam War trauma that infused popular culture across North America at the time, the film is ostensibly about a group of teenagers who fall into the hands of some twisted rednecks with an appetite for human flesh. Shot, like *Liquid Sky*, on a miniscule budget, Hooper's film maximizes the impact of his vision through highly tactile art direction and costume design captured with precise lighting and heightened with tightly paced editing and an unforgettable score and sound design. Originally drawn to this work for its form and aesthetics, I have only recently come to realize what may be obvious for some: it is ultimately a film about the dysfunctional American family. And upon close examination, is not every family dysfunctional to one extent or another, including one's chosen family? While *Doppelgänger* may not bear an obvious superficial resemblance to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, look carefully at

the two films and that you will notice my decisions about how long to linger on shots, how to use music to drive the pace of the edit, and even how to write dialogue to allow characters to respond to the violence on the edges of their experience are all influenced by this formative work.

One of the stylistic choices that distinguishes *Doppelgänger* from comparable films is the use of Voice Over (V.O.) dialogue to allow the audience to read the thoughts of its characters, and while my work bears little resemblance to the work of Terrence Malick, I must acknowledge his use of V.O. “thought bubbles” as an enormous inspiration that helped me see the possibility of using audio for more than dialogue, foley, and narration. As in Malick’s works, my characters’ V.O. lines are less about telling the audience the subtext of the words they speak to each other than they are about capturing a sample of the non-linear thought process that operates constantly behind the scenes in any human interaction.

In addition to the films referenced above, I spent much of my free time during my two-year tenure at York University watching films assigned or suggested by York professors as well as those referenced by my peers in the Film Production program. Toronto has become one of the great film cities on the planet, and so, as we began to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and screenings of cinematic works again became available on big screens with live audiences, I took full advantage of attending screenings of work at TIFF, TIFF Cinematheque, Hot Docs, and Inside Out. As a member of Film Independent, I also enjoy advance access to screeners of the latest work from independent filmmakers around the world. Many of these films had an influence, whether overt or subliminal, on my filmmaking practice.



*Literature*

“For how can a man be worthy as an educator if he have a natural, inborn, incorrigible penchant for the abyss? Much as we renounce it and seek dignity, we are drawn to it” (Thomas Mann).

As an artist who has mostly expressed myself in writing in one form or another, it’s impossible to understate the influence of literature on my creative practice. Given that my motivation for enrolling in York’s Film Production program was to work outside of my comfort zone, my focus during my two-years in the program was far less on literature than on cinema. Nevertheless, I reviewed the works mentioned in the “Story Origins” section above in the context of the themes of *Doppelgänger*.

A complete list of authors and novels that have in some way shaped my literary voice would be far too lengthy for a paper supporting a ten-minute student film, but I can say that the literary figures whose voices loom largest for me as ancestral muses are Sade and Genet, both of whom I have read in their entirety in the original French. Additionally, the work of Gabrielle Wittkop, whose novel *Le Nécrophile* I had the honour to translate into English, is an uncompromising oeuvre that gives me courage to keep creating.

A review of Thomas Mann’s *Der Tod in Venedig* in a recent translation made me realize once again that a great work of art bears rediscovery, for often one is less mature than the work itself and only upon reexamination can one begin to understand more of the many layers of meaning the text has to offer. Whether one sees Mann’s work as having literal relevance to gay/queer identity or whether one takes it as a parable about an

artist confronting the terror inherent in creating works of beauty while trapped within a physical body destined for decay, the novella certainly touches on themes relevant not only to cross-generational gay relationships but to the role of the self in art.

I will conclude my reflections on the creative process as it relates to the written form with a few words by author Michael Cunningham from his introduction to the English translation of Mann's novella, words which I suspect resonate with any artist working in any form:

"I always feel the same when a novel has finally exhausted me, and I feel compelled to admit that, although it doesn't seem finished, it is as close to completion as I'm capable of getting it. Some wholeness isn't quite there. While I wrote, I felt it hovering around me. I could taste it, I could almost *smell* it—the mystery itself. And even if the published novel has turned out fairly well, there is always that sense of having missed the mark" (Cunningham, 2005).

### *Practical Training*

In addition to six courses taken at York University in fulfilment of the requirements for an MFA in Film Production, I attended many of the optional Friday workshops hosted for MFA candidates on the York campus, including sessions on Black Magic Cameras, Colour Correction, and Sound Recording. While I have no desire to be a Cinematographer, Colourist, or Sound Recordist, these workshops helped lead me to the people who would fulfil those roles on my project and gave me a more specific vocabulary to use in communicating my vision to them.

To further supplement my education and development, I attended workshops hosted over Zoom and provided by Trinity Square Video in Toronto, the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers

of Toronto, and Film Independent in Los Angeles. Some of the most notable sessions were those on: working with the role of a D.I.T. in digital productions (which helped me establish a systematic workflow for managing large digital files on set), DaVinci Resolve (which I used to edit my film), Script Breakdowns (which helped me pull sides, character notes, and design profiles for cast and crew), and Assistant Direction (which helped me establish protocols and roles for managing the work on set).

It's also worth calling out the influence of Phil Hoffman's Process Cinema class at York, which I took as one of my electives in the Film Production program since I'd heard how it had reacquainted some of my predecessors in the program with the joy of making films. Not only did the course have precisely that effect on me, I was able to draw on some of the photograms I created in the course for use in the projections that give texture to lighting of the fictional nightclub in my film.

## **My Background**

My work as a novelist, playwright, and filmmaker has always tested the boundaries of form and genre to explore the most uncomfortable parts of the human condition. Rather than appealing to mainstream audiences, my work asks those who lie outside the “norm” to confront their own darkness even while celebrating their difference.

When I first entered college in 1985, I was still in my late teens. I spent my first year taking film production classes at Columbia College Chicago where I shot on Bolex cameras and edited films by hand. Though this early training instilled a love of the medium deep in my soul, I found myself unprepared for the collaborative nature of a film business largely dominated by an “old boys club” that wasn’t exactly eager to fund radical queer work. I switched the emphasis of my major to Creative Writing so that I could focus on developing my voice in a medium where I could create with no need for equipment or major funding. Concurrent with my studies, I became active in Chicago For AIDS Rights which became ACT UP Chicago during my time in the organization. This is where veteran activists introduced me to the overlap between art and activism. Nevertheless, with no clear end to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in sight, activism often took precedence over art, and I participated in some of the earliest demonstrations fighting for research, treatment, and prevention, as well as the humane treatment of people living with HIV/AIDS.

Continuing my studies at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, where I earned an MFA in Creative Writing with an emphasis in Poetry, I had the honour to work closely with Allen Ginsberg who inspired me to trust my poetic, artistic, and activist instincts. Allen was one of the warmest and most approachable human beings with whom I’ve had the fortune to work, and his voice is always speaking to me from somewhere over my shoulder as I create in

whatever form. While studying in New York, I became active in ACT UP's original New York chapter and participated in more major demonstrations that shaped not only how the world dealt with the HIV/AIDS crisis but how it would deal with health crises to come.

While I published some poetry and prose during these early years, my priorities were to fight for the rights of my friends who were dying of AIDS with no reliable treatments in sight and to experience as much of the world as I could in case I too succumbed to the virus that everyone around me seemed to be fighting. I continued writing, but I never took my "career" as a writer or artist too seriously, for it seemed foolish to expect that I would live long enough for any of that to matter. As it turns out, I not only managed to stay alive, but I managed to remain uninfected, though as a visible AIDS activist I carried some of the stigma of those living with the virus, and I bore this stigma with pride. Most of my lovers through the early 1990s were living with HIV. Some of them died from opportunistic infections to which the virus made them vulnerable. Eventually, the threat of the virus became less severe due to effective prevention and treatment options made possible in large part through the activist work I'd been a tiny part of.

By the 2000s, I was alive and healthy, had traveled to six continents and lived on three, and had a handful of publications to my credit. While the odd jobs that had supported me on my adventures hardly translated into a career or a "practice," my life experience proved to be the perfect base on which to delve more seriously into work as an author. I wrote the interactive e-novel *Posthumous Timeline*, which drew on my early years as an "activist" living through the early days of HIV, and I wrote a contemporary retelling of Laclos' *Les liaisons dangereuses*, entitled *danger@liaisons.com*, which was set in the fashion industry with an all-male cast. The latter novel was eventually published in a bilingual French/English edition by Textes Gais in

Paris where I lived for almost three years. I adapted this book for the stage, and the adaptation was performed at Bailiwick Repertory Theatre in Chicago.

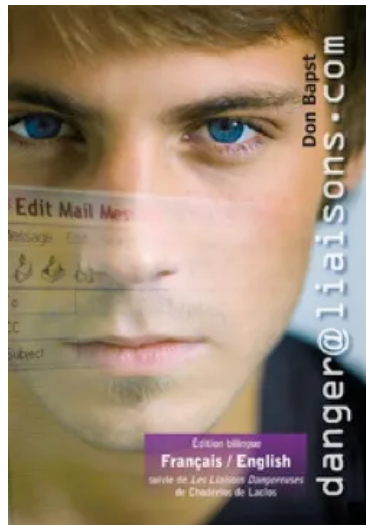


Image 2: The cover of *danger@liaisons.com*

This experience of working with actors led me to write more plays. Most notably, *The Horror*, my theatrical anthology thriller (which drew on the Grand-Guignol origins of the horror genre in a spoof of its major sub-genres) was given a full month's run at Chicago's Cornservatory Theatre in 2007.

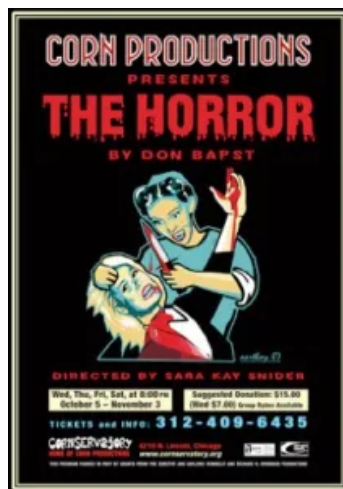


Image 3: Poster for *The Horror* at Chicago's Cornservatory

Working on these and other stage pieces reminded me of my passion for cinema, which had never gone away, but now that digital technology was making filmmaking more accessible, I began thinking of returning to the form. In the 2000s, I made a handful of short films shot on video on miniscule budgets, including *A Haunted House*, which allowed me to work with two friends (who happened to be actors) on a relationship drama masquerading as a ghost story.

In 2007, I moved to Canada after my application for permanent residency was successful. During my first year in Canada, while living in Montreal, I made *Chris*, a short bilingual film about a cisgendered gay man's romantic encounter with a transman, which went on to be screened at Inside Out, where I won the Best Up and Coming Toronto Film Maker award in 2010. My hybrid documentary *How to Immigrate to Canada*, which recounted my journey to Canadian residency in no-budget guerilla video glory, was screened at festivals that same year and went on to become a part of the archives at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier One in Halifax.

Over the next decade I made several more shorts, including *Modeled*, a close-up look at the work and technique of G. Elliott Simpson, whose haunting portraits of men covered in black paint are known for their strikingly disturbing beauty. Shot in a mixture of high-definition video, 16 mm and Super 8, the work looked beyond the gloss of the artist's stylized photography to explore the relationship that homophobia plays in shaping body image as well as the role of sex and art in transcending violence. The film went on to play a number of festivals and was acquired by the IndieFlix online platform for international distribution.

*Good Grief*, another notable short I made during this period, incorporated Super 8 films from my family's personal archives to explore the grieving process I was experiencing as an only child who became an orphan when my parents died of different cancers just ten years apart.



Image 4: The cover of *The Hanged Man*

The “Teens” was also the decade in which my novels began to receive recognition. My psychological thriller *The Hanged Man* was published by Signature Editions in Winnipeg in 2011, the same year that my translation of Gabrielle Wittkop’s *Le Nécrophile* introduced both the novel and its author to English language readers for the first time.



Image 5: The cover of *The Necrophiliac*



After obtaining my Canadian Citizenship, I did what many Canadian filmmakers do at some point in their artistic journeys: I spent a year in Los Angeles. There I learned as much as I could about the art and business of filmmaking and had the honour of assisting Werner Herzog with his Rogue Film School, a three-day seminar-style workshop in which the iconic filmmaker shared stories and best practices from his long, prolific career. Not since Allen Ginsberg had I worked with such an inspiring mentor.

Around this time, I wrote a number of screenplays and eventually optioned one of my features, *Recalculating Euphoria*, for production. Though the feature was never greenlit, a proof of concept entitled *Calculating Euphoria* was shot in 2020, and I was given an Executive Producer credit on the short, which went on to win awards in several festivals. I also adapted the film into a novel, which is currently being shopped for publication, as is my newest novel, *An American Canadian Home*, a trio of stories about individuals struggling to find identity and purpose in a century oversaturated with conflicting messages about the nature of self and community.

My focus in recent years has turned towards distilling my personal journal, which I've been keeping daily for four decades, into a form fit for consumption by an audience wider than myself. This document is unique in that it records my experience as a gay man living life on three continents against a background of ever-changing attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people. Though novels are still being published and (some) people are still reading books, putting a text out into the world in the Twenty-First Century comes with a whole new set of challenges than it once did. As I've been distilling the work in this journal for others to experience, I've been considering innovative ways to engage readers with interactive and possibly even video "content."

It was at this point in my artistic journey that the opportunity to apply for my second MFA program, this one in York University's Film Department, presented itself. Before moving back to Canada in 2020 in the midst of the latest pandemic, I'd already begun working on the feature length script that would become *Doppelgänger*. Only upon completing the short, proof of concept version of this story while at York did I fully realize that it bears a certain resemblance to some of the student films I shot in the mid-1980s. Unlike my early attempts at telling such a story, my latest film is informed by decades of experience. From a purely technical perspective it is also the most advanced piece of filmmaking I have attempted and accomplishes what I set out to do when enrolling in the program: to accelerate my mastery of the most technical aspects of filmmaking while allowing me to draw on the filmmaker's full toolkit. From a thematic perspective, it also happens to return my focus as a storyteller to a queer-themed narrative.

While much of the work that came in the decades between my earliest days as an artist and now has not been overtly gay or queer in nature, it has always given voice to the marginal and the forbidden, and *Doppelgänger*, which challenges queer people—particularly gay men—of all ages to confront their own assumptions about our mutual responsibility for defining and sharing our own gay/queer history and experience across generations.

## **Pre-Production**

The process for planning the *Doppelgänger* shoot was complex yet rewarding, calling on me to be resourceful in ways I never could have anticipated.

### *Script Development*

In the “Story Origins” section above, I explained my process for conceiving the original story behind my project and turning it into a feature-length script. Once I was enrolled at York and began writing grant applications, my attention turned towards making the short film I had distilled from the feature into something that could realistically be shot on a shoestring budget during a pandemic. As funding didn’t materialize until shortly before shooting was to begin in Summer 2022, I spent a great deal of time imagining alternative scenarios for my production in which I could return to the guerilla-style filmmaking strategies that had allowed me to complete previous projects. Happily, the project did eventually obtain funding; nevertheless, the time I spent scaling back plans for the shoot would prove to be useful in the long run for keeping the project on time and within budget.

During early meetings with my thesis committee, my supervisor John Greyson suggested that I take the word “doppelgänger” from the pages of my script to use as its title. This simple change gave a heightened focus to the script and helped me tighten its pages on each of the twenty or so drafts I completed before production began. Writing is rewriting, and it’s a lonely endeavor in the best of times; nevertheless, the countless sleepless nights I spent toiling over the script’s structure, the language in its scene descriptions, and the subtleties of its dialogue helped me to enter the next phase of pre-production with purpose and direction.

### *Location Scouting*

When describing my project to peers and mentors, I found that as soon as I spoke the word “nightclub,” many imagined “The Club” that lived in their own memory, and I knew that I needed to make the club in my film remind viewers of their version of this iconic space while keeping it uncompromisingly unique. Almost everyone suggested that I try to find an existing club in which to shoot my film in order to take advantage of lighting that already existed in such spaces to raise production values and simplify the process of production design.

Though I appreciated these suggestions and spent some time considering which clubs I might be able to approach to use as a setting for my film, I kept returning to a vision I had for the dreamlike setting of my film in a club with a very specific, heightened décor. In order to be able to make this vision materialize and to take full advantage of the precious resources that were available to me on the York campus for the brief time I would be a student there, I decided that shooting on the large soundstage in York’s CFT building would not only allow me to best bring my vision to life but would make managing a closed, controlled set far easier, which was of particular importance during a time of continued COVID restrictions. What’s more, by shooting in this space, I would have the opportunity to use more of the gear available from the Film Production room at York without having to transport it elsewhere. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I took full advantage of it.

### *Cinematography*

Though far from a luddite, I do not pretend to be a highly technical person, and while I enjoy what technology (both digital and analog) can provide, I can’t imagine placing myself in

the role of Cinematographer when there are so many others who devote themselves to pushing the limits of what cameras can do. I knew that as a York student I had access to an impressive array of equipment during a limited window of time, and I knew that the Cinematographers who would best know this specific equipment would be graduates of York's undergraduate film program.

My supervisor suggested that I pitch my film to Chris Romeike's advanced Cinematography class, which I did. Jack Peresin was the first to express interest, and though I interviewed a number of other candidates for the position, his enthusiasm for the project and his already impressive body of work made him the obvious choice to be my DP. He was the first person I brought onto my crew, and I involved him in most aspects of the planning process. During the weeks leading up to production, we tested out cameras and lights at York and experimented with projections, filters, and accent LED "disco" lights to create a look for the club in my film. His knowledge of the craft combined with his experience with the specific gear at York allowed me to put my trust in him for everything related to the camera department. Jack was also excited about my idea to incorporate Super 8 footage as well as 35mm stills, and he stepped up to supplement the gear at York with his own analog cameras. We worked closely together to source the best film stock for the job and to supplement the gear at York with colour gels and filters acquired through industry suppliers.

### *Production Management and Budgeting*

Having made my other films without the assistance of a Producer or Production Manager, I knew I wanted this time to be different. I put out a call for a Production Manager and pitched my project to an undergraduate course in which some aspiring Producers stepped forward for my

consideration. However, my instinct told me that no one was as perfect to fill this position as a filmmaker in my own cohort who had already made a number of films and had both an advanced knowledge of the craft and a healthy work ethic. Braden Brickner was not looking for a job as Producer when I approached him about the role, yet I somehow managed to convince him to consider my project. Eventually, my perseverance and enthusiasm was rewarded and he accepted. Through his work on my film, I learned lessons in budgeting and scheduling, but also how to manage people during a complex film shoot. Without him I could not have completed *Doppelgänger* at the same level of professionalism.

### *COVID-19 Protocols*

We have all shed our tears over the events of the pandemic that has shaped our collective experience over the first years of the 2020s, and anyone working at any level in the film industry knows that we have faced some especially difficult to navigate challenges. Going into pre-production with a robust set of back-up plans for getting my film in the can even if COVID managed to shut us down, I don't think I was ever fully prepared for our protocols to work so effectively that we would manage to actually shoot the film without anyone getting sick and without a single dark day. I attribute this victory largely to the tireless dedication of Braden with whom I brainstormed countless scenarios and contingency plans as well as a robust set of policies drawn from boilerplate language generously shared by Emily Barton, whose work on projects directed by John Greyson had been equally safe and efficient. At the core of the COVID plan was mandatory testing for all cast and crew as well as a rigorous adherence to masks being worn on set at all times. In communicating these policies to all cast and crew at the hiring stage of the process, I was able to ensure that I was working with a team of people whose number one

priority was our collective safety and health. This selfless dedication spilled over into all aspects of production.

### *Production Design*

Once I had decided that sets would need to be built for Narcissus, the fictional club in *Doppelgänger*, I knew I needed a talented Production Designer to pull my vision together. Using a similar process to the one I'd used in recruiting my Cinematographer, I found someone to fill the role. Unfortunately, that person ended up being overcommitted, and only days before going into production I needed to find another person to replace her.

Luckily, before I was faced with this late-breaking creative emergency, Program Director Manfred Becker had suggested that I apply for an in-kind grant from Wiseacre Rentals. Working with an industry rental house was something so far out of my own realm of experience that I hadn't even considered it, and securing the grant allowed me to step up the production value of my film exponentially. Most notably, the neon sign that forms the centerpiece of Narcissus in both its 1985 and present-day manifestations came on generous loan from Wiseacre. When I explained my film's premise to Peter Miskimmin, Wiseacre's Director, he said, "Oh, it's a time travel piece without a time machine," an astute observation which I've subsequently used to explain the concept of my film. Peter's enthusiasm for the piece helped me source other highly specific props and set pieces from the Wiseacre catalogue for use on set.



Image 6: The neon sign stealing the show in *Doppelgänger*

Additionally, Jon Hedley at York University helped gather monitors and other equipment for use in Narcissus' lounge with its colourful cluster of analog technology. I had already decided that the best way to give my club the distressed look it needed was to take existing flats from York's soundstage and assemble them into a form that could then be further distressed. Picking out a pile of flats that already approached the kind of bombed-out chic of the era was easy. I sourced other pieces by calling on friends (Braden's couch became the loveseat in the film), visiting just about every Value Village in the GTA, and even borrowing a painting off the wall of the Artscape artist residency at Toronto Island's Gibraltar Point where I spent a week refining my script and planning out the production schedule.

Obtaining access to all these pieces was one thing. Bringing them to the set was another, and planning out the rental of vans during the pandemic when there was a heavy demand for a limited supply of vehicles was no small feat. Eventually, the plan was firmly in place. The only thing still missing was a Production Designer who could pull all these elements together. With just a few days left until production, Braden introduced me to Mike Sirois, who happened to be the sibling of Jacqui Sirois whom I'd already chosen to help me dress my actors. Mike (who had



graduated from OCAD and was interested in acquiring some experience on a film set) had a fascination for 1980s queer/alternative culture, so we hit it off right away. Only a few days after we met via Zoom, Mike and I were driving around in a rental van picking up pieces and depositing them on the sound stage at York then running back out to Home Depot for supplemental supplies to pull it all together.

### *Casting*

In shooting a narrative film, there are a few things you can't afford to skimp on. The first is the script and the second is actors. If the actors are not both convincing in their roles and do not read well on camera, the rest of the house of cards will come crashing down. Understanding that the intimate conversational nature of *Doppelgänger* made its success especially dependent on actors who could carry the story, I decided to take Braden's suggestion and hire Casting Director Jesse Griffiths to cast my film. Though logistically I could have done the casting myself through a service such as Casting Workbook, Jesse was able to take the film's very specific needs into consideration and find a range of actors to fulfil them. His work on the project not only saved me a great deal of time but allowed me to refine my search to an extremely specific set of criteria.

For starters, I knew that I wanted actors who identified as gay (or queer) in their personal lives so that they could draw on their personal experience in portraying the characters in the film. Over the last decade, filmmakers have been cited with being insensitive or even sensational for casting non-queer people in queer roles, yet casting gay/queer actors is not quite as simple as one might imagine. After all, one's sexual orientation is not something that is necessarily externally apparent, and grilling a person on their internal desires to consider them for a role is

inappropriate at best. Nevertheless, I decided in my casting call to explicitly state that I was looking for actors who were willing to draw on their own experiences as gay/queer men. Jesse confirmed that this would greatly limit my pool of actors, but I didn't let that dissuade me.

Interestingly, I received far more audition tapes from actors looking to fill the younger parts in the film than I did for those looking to fill the more mature roles. For the latter, I received some reels from veteran actors who'd worked on major television and film productions but were only interested in an offer, not a chance to audition. I realized that actors of my own generation had grown up as I had in a world in which being gay carried a heavy stigma, especially in the film industry where they'd surely had to masquerade as "straight" to be considered for major parts. Now, to be asked to be "out" to be considered for a role in a student film was a lot to ask, especially when the characters they were being asked to play were confronting their advanced age. Fortunately, the audition tapes that I received for those interested in portraying both generations brought me the ideal actors for the project.

Another challenge in casting was that I hoped to have two actors filling the four major parts in the film: Young Devon (the protagonist in 1985), Gregor (the older man he meets in Narcissus), Mature Devon (the protagonist in the present day), and Gabriel (the younger man he meets in the revamped Narcissus club). While I could have cast these parts with four different actors, I wanted to try having a younger actor playing both of the younger characters and a more mature actor playing the two older characters. The challenge of pulling off this high wire act was cited by both actors as being part of the appeal of the project, affirming my initial instincts.



Image 7: With my actors on the set of *Doppelgänger*

Watching the audition tapes was one of the great experiences of my creative life, and I was humbled to the point of tears to see so many talented gay and queer individuals drawing on their own experiences to bring my characters to life through the words I'd given them. Though each brought something unique to the roles, two clear stars emerged: Devin Ross and Trevor Howes. In negotiating the details of their contracts with their agents (a process I couldn't have navigated so successfully without the support of my Producer, Braden, who handled most of the follow-up and paperwork), I made sure to carve out time for two four-hour rehearsals via Zoom with these talented actors. Shortly after virtually meeting Devin and Trevor they told me they rarely enjoyed the luxury of such rehearsals and were intensely grateful for them. During our rehearsals, we dug deep into the script and the characters, exploring much of what I articulated in the previous sections of this paper. Whatever intentionality is apparent in my explanation of my film can be largely attributed to having had this intimate time with Devin and Trevor to begin to understand the film we were making together.

### *Filling Additional Roles*

If the script and the actors are the first two things one can't afford to overlook when making a fictional, narrative film, I would argue (as many savvy filmmakers have before me) that sound is the third. While audiences may be able to watch an out-of-focus shot or two without feeling pulled from the world of the film, even the slightest inconsistencies with audio can pull viewers right out of the story, even if they may not be able to cite "bad sound" as the problem. Jack, my cinematographer, was able to recommend Siyao Guo for the job of Sound Recordist, and we hit it off immediately. Not only did she add to the level of professionalism on the project, but her cheerful manner was infectious, and she was never afraid to pitch in on set construction or whatever else was needed.



Image 8: Camera and Sound Departments on the *Doppelgänger* set

Jack also brought Sebastian Eguiarte on as Gaffer and Grip and Alise Rosemin as Assistant Cameraperson. While I knew Jack wanted a bigger camera team to help him manage the ambitious project we were undertaking, I asked him to begin setting up gear a full day before production began on the York soundstage in order to avoid having to start the lighting process

when the actors were already on set. During this time, Jack brought on volunteers Matten Missaghi and Alex Lo as additional pre-production camera support, enabling us to maximize our production hours on shooting days. Alise, who I discovered aspires to becoming a full-time Script Supervisor, was able to draw on that skill set when she wasn't pulling focus for Jack to give me additional notes on details that had an effect on continuity. Like Siyao, Alise's positive energy would help keep us energized on the most exhausting days.

Given the stylized nature of my project, Costume and Makeup Design were elements that required a bit of extra attention, yet during the pre-production planning phase, I struggled to find a specific person to fill this hybrid role who was available, experienced, and willing to work on a project of this modest size and budget. At Wiseacre, while sourcing set pieces and props, I met Kieran Burton who helped me pull wardrobe items from the rental house's massive collection, a process that proved more challenging than I'd anticipated and which earned Kieran a credit, which he shares with Jacqui Sirois, a veteran theatre and film professional whom my producer Braden brought to the project days before we went to production. Jacqui remained on set during production to help dress the actors and ensure they had everything they needed to look their parts.

In the final hours leading up to production, I realized we needed more posters for the walls of Narcissus of then and now, and I called on Amy Kristensen, a dear friend who happens to be a graphic designer, to put together some looks while both my Production Designer and I also created unique posters of our own. Collectively, these images, printed out just moments before we went to camera, formed the patina of images and textures that shape the look of the Narcissus lounge in its two on-screen eras.

Overwhelmed a bit by the scale of the production I'd embarked upon (for at this stage in the pre-production process, the film was beginning to grow beyond my vision and take on a life of its own), I called upon other filmmakers in my program to help me in an advisory capacity. Beau Han Bridge offered to fill the unpaid hybrid role of Script Supervisor/Assistant Director for a day. Jonathan Watton, a veteran actor in my cohort, introduced me to his friend Frank Power who graciously filled the same role on another day of the shoot. Fully casted and crewed, we were ready to start shooting.

## Production

After an intense two-day build, principal photography on *Doppelgänger* began on September 2, 2022 at York University and lasted three consecutive days. On day four, all the Voice Over lines were recorded in a soundproof booth on campus. Several weeks later some additional exterior shots of the Narcissus exterior were captured over the course of a few hours on Super 8 film in an alley in Toronto. That the production occurred on schedule with hardly a hiccup can be attributed almost entirely to the amount of careful planning that preceded the shoot, and I urge anyone reading this paper in preparation for shooting their own film, regardless its theme, style, or budget, to spend as much time in the planning stage as possible if you wish to enjoy a smooth production experience. All the tedious, painstaking pre-production work pays off exponentially on set, and surrounding oneself with talented, capable people who share one's vision is a critical part of that planning process.

### *Day One*

Though I had made a number of films in the past, nothing quite prepared me for the size of the beast to which I had given life, and when I set foot on the completed set for the first time, already exhausted from the last of the pre-production work, I was stunned to see how the Narcissus lounge exceeded anything I had ever imagined. This was the moment I met my actors in person, having only seen them till them during our Zoom rehearsals. It was also the first time the entire crew was assembled in one place. They too were visibly awe-struck by the set. For all the trouble that went into building them instead of finding existing locations on which to shoot, having such beautifully constructed sets specifically designed for the precise story that we were

collectively exploring as a team caused everyone to kick up their level of investment in the project.

Questions were flying at me from all directions, and I was dizzy from lack of sleep yet charged with the excitement of the world we were building together. Because I had put such focus on this one project for so many months and had given so much thought to every detail, I found that I had no trouble answering everyone's questions instantaneously and with great certainty. I experienced something like an out-of-body transformation in which I watched myself directing the whole process, and any trace of imposter syndrome wafted away. For the first time, I realized, this crazy thing was actually going to work.



Image 9: Shooting day one on the *Doppelgänger* set

On day one, we shot everything that took place in the Narcissus lounge as it appeared in the 1985 version of the club as well as one brief scene of Young Devon speaking to a friend on the phone at his parents' home about his adventure in The Club. Though everything ended up getting shot on schedule, I found myself discouraged during the first half of the day when my



Cinematographer Jack needed about thirty minutes to change the lighting setup before we ever got a single take. Rapidly approaching the lunch hour, I feared that my time with my actors was melting away before my very eyes. “First days are always hard,” Devin (playing Young Devon) reassured me over lunch. Happily, once we settled into the new lighting setup, we were able to find a rhythm as a team, and from that moment on, the sense of everyone working together to bring the project to completion was palpable.

### *Day Two*

On day two, production moved into the smaller studio where we’d shot the telephone scene. Meanwhile, my Production Designer and Sound Recordist transformed the main set into the present-day iteration of the Narcissus lounge. This set change was an all-day project that stretched into the night and involved covering our majestic 1985 club with white paint. While that was happening on the main soundstage, we shot the dancefloor scenes in the smaller studio against a screen on which phytograms and fractals were mixed with archival stills.

As these dancefloor scenes had no audio (hence the availability of our Sound Recordist to double as Set Builder), I was able to direct my actors in the scene by playing specific music from the period for them to dance to: Visage, Throbbing Gristle, Ministry, Fad Gadget, D.A.F., Severed Heads, and Anne Clark to name just a few. The entire cast and crew were transported from the York University campus to a nightclub in the 1980s, and a sense of joyfully invoking the ghosts of the past infused the production. Jack stepped up to treat the capturing of 35 mm stills like a fashion photographer, and the actors served up full punk-era glamour for him. It was truly a thing of beauty.

At the lunch break on day two, the actors changed wardrobe and came back as different characters to shoot the scenes of the Narcissus dancefloor in its present-day iteration against the same screen but with more minimal projections and different lighting. Again, I directed my actors through music, this time through music from artists like Robyn, Kiddy Smile, Peaches, Shamir, Scissor Sisters, TR/ST, and even The Weeknd, all of whose music has within its DNA some traces of the avant-garde club classics of that other era. As we wrapped day two, we were all exhausted yet exhilarated. So far, the production had far exceeded my own expectations and those of everyone on the set.

At the close of day two, Trevor, who had already transformed from Gregor into Mature Devon, confided in me that while he'd been excited to be a part of this project when he learned of the opportunity to draw on his own experience as a gay man and to explore the script's themes, it wasn't until he got to the set that he realized how huge this thing we were creating actually was. Whether or not that proves to be true for audiences remains to be seen, but I realized in that moment, which was filled with joyful tears, that the *process* of creating this project was in itself such a transformative one for me and everyone who was pouring their creative forces into it that it had already been worth the trouble, regardless of whatever was to come of it all.

### *Day Three*

Day three, the final touches on the revamped Narcissus lounge went right up till the actors arrived on set dressed as their new present-day characters (Devin as Gabriel and Trevor as Mature Devon). Production Designer Mike Sirois had taped off the letters in the club's name on the old set, painted over the entire set in white, and then peeled off the letters so that the patina of

faded posters from the old club now spelled out its name on the revamped walls of the new one. The LED lighting cubes I'd brought for the new club, combined with the purple and blue lighting scheme Cinematographer Jack Peresin and I had settled upon, transformed the space into one that I liked almost better than the moody red and gold of the older lounge. Whereas on day one of the shoot Jack seemed a bit restrained by his formal training and had clung to realism, he was now really settling into the film's aesthetic and was able to push himself out of his comfort zone to light the final set with only the boldest colours.



Image 10: Shooting day three on the *Doppelgänger* set

Thematically, this club was supposed to feel more sterile than it had in its early days, yet somehow in its contemporary form, the lounge was transformed into an entirely new space. I realized that at this point the film was practically directing itself, telling us all what it needed. *Of course* the contemporary version of the club had its own heart and soul, I thought, just as the new generation of queer people who frequented such venues breathed their unique energy and spirit into the spaces they inhabited. I was humbled by the very scenario I had created and knew

immediately that the long final scene we were about to shoot was one that I was going to have to completely rediscover over the course of this last all-hands-on-deck day.

When my actors and crew stepped onto the new set and witnessed its beauty, there was a bit of a gasp as it all sank in. My Script Supervisor and AD for the day, Beau Han Bridge said, “It’s like the Milk Bar in *A Clockwork Orange*.” He didn’t know at the time that I’d used a still of that very scene in my look book when describing my vision for the club. Nor did he know that I’d shared an article with Jack on Fassbinder’s conversations with his DP on *Querelle* about avoiding white, realistic lighting entirely. Later, after getting in one stumble-through take of the film’s final long scene, Beau whispered in my ear, “Don, you’re making your *Querelle*.” Fortunately, I’d remembered to have a box of tissues on hand throughout the shoot, for this was one of many moments on that emotional day that I needed one.

That last day of shooting was the most difficult for me because I wasn’t at all sure where the scene needed to go, and it took the whole day to find it. I think the actors felt the same. The two longest scenes in *Doppelgänger* are set in the Narcissus lounge (the first one in 1985, the second in the present day) and each scene shows two men sitting and talking. A number of people on my crew asked me at various points during the shoot if I wanted coverage for these scenes in the form of close-ups or alternative angles. They wondered if I didn’t think it would be better to have the camera dolly in or craning down. I thought of what Werner Herzog had said about setting up a shot whenever he worked with a larger crew: “They always ask me, ‘How many shots are you going to have for this scene?’ and I tell them, ‘Well, I know I will need at least one.’ And then they go completely crazy.”

Instead of running the scene from various angles and distances and moving the camera all over, I did a number of takes framed in the same mid shot. As we were shooting RAW footage

on the Black Magic URSA, I figured I could punch into closeups on whatever footage I captured without losing much quality, so in the moment I could focus on performances and worry about close-ups later. I had worked hard to carve out time with my actors, and I wanted to use every moment of it.

After several takes, I realized that everyone was starting to lose a bit of faith and energy. Something was flat. Something wasn't quite right. I tried not to panic, but time was ticking away. But again, *Doppelgänger* told me what it needed. I decided to give a little pep talk to the whole cast and crew: just a sentence or two to tell them that I knew they were tired and that they had been bringing a professional level of work to this whole production. I just needed them to trust me for a couple more hours and keep it coming. They did. Then I took each of my actors off to the side and told them some secrets. I told Devin as Gabriel to be more manipulative with Mature Devon, and I told Trevor as Devon to let himself be seduced by Gabriel. This was almost a complete flip of how we'd been playing the scenes. The resulting take sizzled and the entire crew burst into applause when I yelled cut. It was one of those moments of movie making magic.

### *Day Four*

Day four was bittersweet. Most of the crew was already wrapped. Braden, Mike, and Jack broke down sets and packed up gear while Siyao recorded my actors and me reading Voice Over lines in the sound booth. I played the TV announcer, and a faint trace of my performance can still be heard in the telephone scene. Before wrapping the actors, the remaining crew shared a final lunch with them. It had been a true whirlwind.

A few days later, I sent this email to Devin and Trevor:

I can't express how grateful I am to both of you for sharing your profound interpretations of the characters I wrote but had yet to breathe full life into.

Trevor, your Gregor sizzled with mystery informed by the trauma (but also the unique flavour of joy) of a life lived as a gay man before any of us were alive to know the full depth of that specific experience.

Devin, your Gabriel bubbled with the playfulness of a young person playing with their gender identity and sexuality in a life lived with no memory of a time before smartphones and social media, but you also managed somehow to capture the heavy weight of that generation's burden, for they must carry on a torch passed to them from teachers who never learned what to teach.

Devin and Trevor, you collectively brought Devon to life. In the process, I rediscovered the character, and in the process, I felt I was meeting him for the first time. As this character was based on my own experience (for is not all we truly know our own experience?), I felt as if I was meeting myself again. This was a beautiful, terrifying, and important discovery. Together you are my Doppelgänger, and I will always cherish these magical moments we shared together.

### *Day Four and a Half*

A few weeks later, Jack and Braden and I went to the alley behind Braden's apartment in Toronto where we'd obtained permission to shoot a couple of quick exterior shots to show the Narcissus exterior in the film. Braden played the club's bouncer at the 1985-version of the club,

and I played the more jaded bouncer in the club's present-day manifestation. The latter scene ended up being unnecessary in the final film. It was now officially a wrap.

At a recent screening of *Perdita Durango* at the TIFF lightbox, director Álex de la Iglesia introduced his film to the audience by saying that he never cared about how one of his films was received. For him, each film was a collection of memories related to the experience of shooting the film, and the film we were about to see was one of his favourites because of moments he'd shared on set with its stars, with its crew, with the people on location, and so on. For me, whatever becomes of *Doppelgänger* at festivals and beyond, it will always be about this collection of experiences I have shared with the film's cast and crew, for collectively, we watched the film take on an extraordinary life of its own, steering itself when we thought we were driving.



Image 11: On set with the *Doppelgänger* cast and crew

## Post-Production

There's an old adage generally attributed to filmmaker Robert Bresson that goes something like, "You write a film three times: once on the page, once on the set, and once in the editing room." Anyone who has ever seen a film not only knows this to be true but that at the start of each phase of the process one is fully confronted with a blank slate and a sense of starting from scratch, complete with all the terror of endless possibility and risk such an empty canvas awakens in the soul. For weeks, a hard drive, full of the priceless footage I'd gone to such trouble to capture, sat on my desk and laughed at me. "You'll never edit me," it seemed to say every time I passed.

## Music

My composer Rick Anton, who had previously composed the score for *How to Immigrate to Canada*, had been hard at work on the music for *Doppelgänger* even before we began shooting. Working on alternative club music was out of Rick's comfort zone, which is why I asked him to take a stab at it. I didn't want music that sounded too perfect or like a copy of something else. I wanted something that was as rough and edgy as the underground club music I'd loved in the 1980s, and for the present-day Narcissus, I wanted something that drew on that experimental tension from the earlier time but brought it forward to the present. This was not an easy ask, and Rick and I spent many hours listening to samples he'd created and talking about directions the work could go. He did some of his own vocals and kind of hated them, and he wrote his own lyrics and wasn't too sure about those either. His lyrics did get me thinking, so I took a stab at rewriting them with the themes from my film in mind. Then, just for fun, I tried recording the vocals myself. Surprisingly, Rick loved what I'd done. Several rewrites of the



lyrics and a few dozen vocal performances later, I found myself further woven into the DNA of my own film. Rick's final edits made me practically disappear into the mix, and our new club music was born.

### *Editing*

Though I had planned to hire an editor for the project, I soon realized I was kidding myself. There was no way I could summon the patience to wait for someone else for days if not weeks as they took my baby into surgery. I needed to do this myself. Before entering the York program, I hadn't cut a film in around a decade, and then I'd used Final Cut 7. Ever since the industry had abandoned that software, I'd stopped keeping track of the latest editing tools. Happily, I discovered that DaVinci Resolve was not only powerful and intuitive, it was free. By the time I cut *Doppelgänger*, I had already tested out the software on a few student projects at York, and soon I found myself not only loving the tool but was glad I'd decided to edit my own work, which allowed me to experiment with pacing, placement, and punching in on shots. I was also able to shuffle the digital transfers of 33mm stills into various positions so they could serve as visual accompaniment to Voice Over lines representing the thought bubbles of my film's characters. The blank canvas did not remain blank for long, and I soon had the reverse problem: too many options. And yet, as it had done before, *Doppelgänger* told me exactly what it needed, and from cut to cut it found its own voice.

Throughout the editing process, I obtained feedback from a wide variety of viewers. I listened to those associated with the project, such as my Producer and Cinematographer, who offered precise notes on movement, pacing, eye-lines, and other technical considerations. I also reached out to friends who had no knowledge of how films are made and knew nothing

whatsoever about the story I was trying to tell. They told me where they were connected and where they were confused.

I asked several of my peers in my cohort at York for their notes, and, naturally, I obtained several rounds of feedback from my thesis committee who generously provided hours of their time to give precise feedback on various cuts of the film. Moussa Djigo, whose feature *Obamas* had inspired me to ask him to be my reader, shared my concerns with clarity in transitioning my protagonist from being played by one actor to being played by the other. In Moussa's own film, three sets of actors had taken turns at playing his two protagonists, so his notes on how to cut my film to help the audience better understand that my actors had switched roles at the film's midpoint were especially insightful.

My supervisor, John Greyson, whose film *Zero Patience* had stunned me when I first saw it the year it was released while I was living in Paris and was involved in that city's ACT UP chapter, gave me pages of written notes for which I was infinitely grateful. I'll be the first to admit that I find verbal feedback difficult to digest as it's being given, so having his notes to chew on for a while before having to find a way to address them allowed me to really absorb them on a deeper level. Eventually, I was able to find creative strategies for using these notes as a launchpad for a tighter edit.

Once I'd taken the film close to what I thought was a final thirteen-minute cut, John came back with more notes suggesting I trim another three minutes from the work. At first these notes were a tough pill to swallow, but then I considered that I've always been an advocate for a "less is more" approach, and I began to embrace the idea of a tighter ten-minute cut. I ended up trimming almost half of the film's final scene set in the lounge of the new Narcissus club. This required not only cutting but changing the order of bits of dialogue which gave them new context

and meaning. And yet, I was able to retain at least a tiny fragment of every major image and set piece captured during production. The film I had intended to be fifteen minutes was now only ten minutes long, but its pace was brisk. Never had *Doppelgänger*'s story been so clear.

### *Sound Editing*

While capturing quality sound during production is critical for fictional narrative cinema, all is lost if that sound is not professionally edited and mixed during the post-production stage. Finding a Sound Editor/Post-Production Sound Mixer was a bit of a challenge. Fortunately, just as I was reaching a dead-end in my attempts to fill this position, graduate film production students at York were invited to attend an optional workshop on sound recording, and I asked the workshop's instructor, Elinor Svoboda, for tips on recruiting someone for the role. She put out the call to some of her students who'd graduated from the film program at Sheridan College where she teaches, and several candidates stepped forward. When I spoke with Beatrice Chu over Zoom, I knew immediately that she was the clear choice to work on my film. I spoke to her about the "problems" I was having, such as finding a distinct sound for the Voice Over dialogue. "I wouldn't say these are problems," she reassured me. "You captured great audio, so what you're talking about are sound challenges and opportunities, not problems." She was excited about the amount of experimentation my film would allow her to bring to her work, and she jumped into the role with great passion. At the same time Rick sent over his final music mix, Beatrice had tightened up her edit, and the soundscape of *Doppelgänger* was complete.

### *Colour Correction*

I first met Kevin Luttman during my first term at York when he hosted an optional workshop on Colour Correction for graduate students. I repeated the workshop in my second year so that I could refresh my memory on the Colour Correction tools in DaVinci Resolve and ask Kevin in person if he'd be interested in working on my film. Like Beatrice, Kevin was interested in my project because it offered him so much to play with: RAW footage, 33mm stills, Super 8 footage, zooms and pans added at the editing stage, unnatural lighting, two time periods, two colour schemes,... All of this needing a bit of a touch up to blend together seamlessly while preserving the overall look of the film. His work on the film balanced the images to perfection and I was finally able to say, "That's a wrap on *Doppelgänger*."

### *Festival and Distribution Strategy*

As I reached the project's completion, I realized that the deadlines for some of the festivals I planned to apply for had either come and gone or were coming up in a matter of days. Rather than rushing to submit something that was half-baked, I allowed the final post-production work to linger as long as it needed to in order to bring the film to its full completion. Once I have defended my thesis project at York, I'll begin the submission process without succumbing to deadline fever. At the end of the day, this is a *short* film, not a feature, so the pressure of festivals to secure, say, the world premiere is not as pronounced as it would be for a longer work. Ultimately, I hope to place the film into a half dozen or more festivals. Ideally a few of these festivals will be larger festivals than those in which I've previously screened my work, for films are made to be seen, after all, and having more eyes on the film is undeniably appealing. Maybe

the film can pick up a couple of awards along the way. Only time and audience reactions will tell. Nevertheless, my ultimate goal for the film remains to have it as a proof of concept to generate interest in a feature version of the project, and to that extent the film is already a success for its concept has already proven itself to everyone who has worked on it. No matter what happens next, I am happy to have created and engaged in this artistic experiment.

### **Ethical Issues**

In writing *Doppelgänger*, I drew primarily on my own experience as a gay man coming out in the 1980s to explore the question of how experience is passed across generations of queer people. Rather than trying to tell a story of this experience as it is lived by people at all points on the spectrum of queer identity, I took an approach of a close look at one specific experience, and by looking at that specific experience in detail, I trusted that truths universal to a wider spectrum of experience would emerge.

I know what it's like to be Devon at age 17 and what it's like to be him decades later. I do not personally know what it's like to be Gregor, the older gay man young Devon meets in 1985, nor do I know from first-hand experience what it's like to be a young queer person navigating the current queer scene as Gabriel does in the film. And so, as is true of any work of fiction, I was forced as the author of this film to imagine myself in the shoes of these other characters. In asking my actors to draw on their own experiences as gay men coming out at different points in time, and in reaching out to queer people who came before me as well as those who emerged as queer more recently, I have tried to acknowledge their different perspectives without trying to claim ownership and without exerting any judgement. I hope that the resulting film will not serve as a statement of how this or that generation is better or worse at processing their experiences. Rather, I hope the film will cause viewers to question where their own experience and knowledge has come from and how they will in turn pass on their own life lessons to others.

## Conclusion

I began this support paper asking some big questions that are ultimately rhetorical in nature. I would argue that any creative work that resolves itself in tidy conclusions, culminating in a “moral of the story,” has less potential for inspiring audiences into a thoughtful engagement with its themes than work which leaves its questions at least partially unresolved.

*Doppelgänger* may not explicitly answer the question, “How will our collective story be shared across future generations during future pandemics in a world filtered through the Internet?” Nevertheless, I believe the film forces viewers to confront that question on at least a subliminal level, which is the level at which cinema works best. My characters, like the creative people who gave birth to them, don’t have the answers, but they are struggling to find information from one another, much as queer people struggle every day to reconcile our truth with the truths of a heteronormative society. However much we come out of the shadows, queer people will always be a minority, so we will always need to define our own history, and we will need to constantly reinvent this history as it is rewritten over time.

Which brings me to the other research question I set out to explore: “Can queer people—haunted by traumas that could serve to unite them—find a way to pass down their stories to effectively fight their collective enemies?” Again, there’s no complete and definitive answer to this question, but in Devon’s initial conversation with Gregor, we see the young character taking pieces of information from the older man who, though guarded (perhaps due to whatever trauma he faced in his coming out process), manages to transmit a few pieces of potentially useful wisdom. When he returns to the revamped Narcissus as an older man, Devon finds himself trying to teach Gabriel but from the younger man he also learns something about how perceptions of gender and sexual orientation have changed. He realizes, as most of us do as we go through life,

that the wisdom we have accumulated through the experience of our lifetime can be partially transmitted even if much of it is untranslatable to another time. Ultimately, the young must learn for themselves. And so, Devon leaves Gabriel alone in the club to discover his own truths.

There will always be a thread of communication across generations, both within the queer community and beyond, and this imperfect transmission of experience will make uniting to fight those who may want to destroy us challenging at best. And yet, in the flirtation that occurs across generations, there's a spark of love and desire, a spark which I believe my actors have brought to life in portraying their roles, which gives us the strength to carry on. I believe that *Doppelgänger* communicates this intangible spark that is so difficult to put into written language yet is almost palpable when seen in action.

While still in the midst of editing *Doppelgänger*, I took on the role of Producer on the first film of my dear friend Darien Taylor, a longtime HIV/AIDS activist who had become involved with Viral Interventions, a research-creation project led by John Greyson and Sarah Flicker at York University to engage people living with HIV in making films about their experiences. Darien, who was already a cineaste with a strong film vocabulary to complement her experience in activism but had no training as a filmmaker, needed some help deciding how to translate her vision into a script, how to hire a cast and crew, and how to run a production.

Though I'd made other films before, I never aspired to being a producer or to teach someone else how to make a film when I still felt after all these years that I was only just figuring out how to do it myself. And yet, the lessons I'd learned from making *Doppelgänger* translated seamlessly into my work with Darien on *The Worst Disease in the World*. Darien, who happens to be part of the generation just before my own, is queer not through her relationship to sexual orientation or gender but rather through the stigmatization of a life dedicated to fighting



for the rights of people living with HIV. In helping her achieve her cinematic vision (by doing what Braden Brickner had done for me on my film) by clearing away all the obstacles in her path, I found that experience can certainly be passed on across generations as well as across different experiences, at least when that experience is passed on through working together on the creation of art.

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*Palm Trees and Power Lines*. Directed by Jamie Dack, United States: Momentum Pictures, 2022.

*Pickpocket*. Directed by Robert Bresson, France: Compagnie Cinématographique de France, 1959.

*Promising Young Woman*. Directed by Emerald Fennell, United Kingdom: LuckyChap Entertainment; United States: FilmNation Entertainment, 2020.

*Querelle*. Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, West Germany: Planet Film and Albatros Filmproduktion; France: Gaumont, 1982.

*Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*. Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy: Produzioni Europee Associate, 1975.

*Swan Song*. Directed by Todd Stephens, United States: House of Gemini and Luna Pictures, 2021.

*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Directed by Tobe Hooper, United States: Vortex, 1974.

*Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*. Directed by Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, France: Ecce Films and Epicentre Films, 2016.

*Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched: A History of Folk Horror*. Directed by Kier-La Janisse, United States: Severin Films, 2021.

*A Zed & Two Noughts*. Directed by Peter Greenaway, United Kingdom: British Film Institute, 1985.

*Zero Patience*. Directed by John Greyson, Canada: Zero Patience Productions, Telefilm Canada, and Ontario Film Development Corporation, 1993.