

# **LIFE WITH JOHN**

**MICHAL LABIK**

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Program in Film  
York University  
Toronto, Ontario

April 2016

© Michal Labik, 2016

## Abstract

*Life with John* is a 15-minute fiction film about a married couple, Peter and Elena, whose lives are disturbed when Peter's imaginary friend John comes to stay in their small apartment. Having hosted similar visitors in the past, Elena decides to play along and pretends that John is real. However, as John's stay prolongs itself, the lines between what's real and what's imaginary begin to blur, until the point where Elena begins to doubt her own sense of reality.

The film combines elements of dark comedy and psychological thriller to explore ideas around the differences in people's perceptions of reality, but also around long-term relationships and alienation from self. *Life with John* aims to be a battlefield of perceptions, one that illustrates how mental differences lead to people inhabiting very different worlds.

## Acknowledgments

I received an enormous amount of help with making this short film. Actors Courtney, Tony, Manuel and Linda lent their bodies to the characters and they all showed admirable commitment to the shoot. Cinematographer Rodrigo and production designer Samantha contributed many creative ideas and were instrumental in creating the film's look. Associate producer Chi was very generous in allowing us to use her apartment for the shoot, transport coordinator Raphael was crucial in making the load-in and load-out happen as planned, graphic designer Bea took care of creating the Space Angels flyers and doctored photographs of the married couple, and caterer Beatrix provided food which received more compliments from the crew than probably anything I managed to accomplish on set. Art director Lina was very resourceful in handling wardrobe and set dec, production manager Ryan went above and beyond the call of duty to help with the shoot, first assistant director Paco ran the set very effectively, and all the other crew members put in a huge amount of work for which I'm grateful.

I'd like to thank my thesis committee – my supervisor Tereza and my readers Laurence and Howie – for providing feedback on various drafts of the script and different cuts of the film. York's John, Kuowei, Phil, Brenda, Amnon, Nicolas, Maureen, Marcos, Jon, and my MFA classmates played many helpful roles during the development and making of my thesis. I'm thankful to ACTRA Toronto, Alter Ego Post, Casting Workbook, and especially York University's Graduate Program in Film for providing material support that made the film possible in its current form. I'm also

grateful to Ludovit, Beatrix and Megha, all of whom helped shape the final version of the film with their notes. Finally, I'd like to thank the author of the source material, Ivana, for giving me the permission to adapt her brilliant short story into a film.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents .....	v
Introduction.....	1
The Writing.....	4
The Meaning.....	8
The Visuals .....	12
The Cast & The Characters.....	16
The Production & Postproduction .....	19
Room for Improvement .....	23
Conclusion.....	25
Bibliography.....	26
Filmography .....	27

## Introduction

One time, as a high school student in Bratislava and years before discovering an interest in filmmaking, I joined my friends for a screening of *3-Iron*, a South Korean film by Kim Ki-duk. It's a slightly surreal story of Tae-suk, a young man who breaks into empty apartments and squats there while the owners are away on vacation. Just before the original inhabitants come back, he cleans everything up and moves on to the next place. He is eventually joined by a housewife who tries to run away from her powerful, abusive husband. The two fall in love, but the husband eventually tracks them down and gets the young man put in prison. Alone in his cell, Tae-suk learns the art of moving invisibly and soundlessly, which allows him to escape. He moves back in with the couple and lives there as a third member of the marriage, invisible to the husband, and presumably they all live happily ever after.

I didn't fully understand the story of *3-Iron* back then, and I don't think I do now, but somehow it affected me more than most of the films I've seen since then. It says something about a need to belong and an inability to do so, it's about alienation and withdrawal from the world and redemption in intimacy. Something about how these themes are combined with an ironic premise, an unwillingness to make things easy for the viewer (there's barely any dialogue) and a surreal twist just really resonated with me. To me, the film doesn't succeed despite its ambiguity, but because of it.

When deciding on the subject of my thesis film, I discarded several story ideas because they felt “too easy”. I wanted my thesis film to take me outside of my comfort

zone, away from logic and conventional storytelling. When I thought of the idea for *Life with John*, it immediately felt right. I think that in a way, *Life with John* comes out of my experience of watching *3-Iron* for the first time, and it aspires to be a similar kind of film – narrative but not constricted by realism, paradoxical but self-serious, evocative but ambiguous. While I aimed to take risks creatively, I really wanted to do everything by the book in terms of logistics. My previous films had all been shot in an improvised way, and I was determined to finally get some experience with directing under the rigid structure imposed by the machinery of crew, schedule, budget, etc.

*Life with John* is a 15-minute fiction film about a married couple, Peter and Elena, whose lives are disturbed when Peter's imaginary friend John comes to stay in their small apartment. To appease her husband, Elena decides to play along with it, but as John's stay prolongs itself, the lines between what's real and what's imaginary begin to blur, until Elena begins to doubt her own sanity. Despite its short length and a contained scope, this film is a step forward for me in many ways. It is my first film with union actors and an extensive casting process, with a professional-grade camera and complex lighting setups, with a significant period of preproduction and a crew whose size goes into double digits. It was an intensely educational experience, and I'm certain it will be useful in my future work.

In this paper I'd like to talk about the process of making *Life with John* and think through the various decisions that I made. My most important goal throughout was to learn – to try things that I haven't done before and to take risks instead of playing things

safe. I wanted to make decisions intuitively, and let analysis follow later. I think the project succeeds at least on those terms.



## The Writing

The seeds of *Life with John* go some five years back, when I first read Ivana Dobrákovová's short story *Žit's Petrom*, about a woman living with her presumably schizophrenic husband. It had won a nation-wide writing competition in Slovakia in 2008, and was published in an anthology of that year's best stories. The story immediately stood out to me, but at that point I didn't see its cinematic potential. In spring 2015, while thinking about potential thesis film subjects, I suddenly remembered the story and realized that it could lend itself well to a film adaptation. I found Ivana Dobrákovová's contact information and reached out to her. She was excited to hear about my plan and gave me the permission to adapt the story.

I suppose this raises the question why I chose to adapt an existing story instead of creating all-original work. The easy answer is that I wasn't happy with the two original scripts I'd written in earlier phases of thesis development. Working off an existing story gives me a non-negotiable starting point and something I can always come back to when there's doubt. The other benefit is the cross-pollination that happens in the adaptation process – taking an existing story and giving it my own spin results in an interesting mix, something that is mine enough for me to care about, but foreign enough to keep surprising me.

In a later email, Ms. Dobrákovová expressed the worry that I'd chosen “a very difficult story to adapt”. It is true that *Žit's Petrom* is not intuitively cinematic – it is entirely a stream-of-consciousness story, an uninterrupted internal monologue of the

wife, who seems to descend into hysteria over time. The resulting feeling indeed is hard to translate onto the screen, but I felt like the few observable situations in the story expressed its spirit very well, so in my script adaptation, I stripped the story down to a series of situations that an outside observer would see, taking snippets of dialogue and narrator's comments and filling out the blanks.

Aside from making the story more external, I made a few small changes to the plot. I added two scenes where Peter and Elena have a good time while John is away, to have some contrast before the big argument at the end. I also wrote in a scene where Peter apologizes to Elena while he's brushing his teeth, again to add contrast. For subjective reasons, I changed the names of the characters ("Irena", "Michal", and "Peter" became "Elena", "Peter" and "John"). After receiving feedback on the first draft of the script, I added a few more new scenes: the last scene where Elena, Peter and John all eat soup together is not in the short story, but to me it represents an intuitive conclusion to John's slow emergence as a "real" person. I also wrote two scenes centered around a fishbowl with two goldfish, but these didn't make it into the final cut of the film. Finally, I wrote in a fourth character, Prudence (formerly called "Jodie"), to add an outside perspective on the entire situation and to allow some backstory to come through.

I think I recognized from the start that the script doesn't have many of the attributes that make stories more dramatic – clearly defined stakes, a protagonist with goals and obstacles, a ticking clock, a save-the-cat moment. I made the decision to keep it that way and stick with the general story structure of the source material, for several

reasons. First, I felt that the short story was strong despite lacking many of these dramatic elements, and I wanted to see if the film could do something similar. Second, I thought that minimizing the weight of plot would help me focus on creating the film's mood and visuals instead. I'm realizing that one advantage that the short story has is that its confessional nature makes the narrator immediately likeable and it makes it easy to see how the invisible guest's arrival matters to her. I guess my script takes the likability of Elena for granted – it sort of assumes that we are on Elena's side and we root for her, even though she doesn't communicate her thoughts to the audience much. If I was adapting the story now, I'd try to find a way to help us identify with Elena a bit better, so that we are more invested in what she's going through.

A not entirely positive outcome of my adaptation is its strange cultural ambiguity. What I like about *Žit's Petrom* is its cultural specificity – Irena and Michal live in a small prefab apartment in Slovakia and the way they speak and live often has a recognizably real-life feeling to it. I shot the film in Canada, mostly with Canadian actors, but I don't think I infused the film with an equivalent sense of local authenticity. The outcome ended up being a strange mixture of cultures, reflecting more the inside of my mind than the observable world outside. There are plenty of examples - “Elena” is a Slovak name, but the actress doesn't have a foreign accent, while “John” speaks with an accent despite his English name. The Space Angels cult is a reference to a bizarre religious group which is notorious in Czech Republic and Slovakia, but which is little-known elsewhere. Because I didn't want to make a film about immigrants (which may have been slightly more authentic, but would likely have felt too safe to me), I embraced

a sort of Terry Gilliam-like approach, where I allowed the quirks of my mind to override concerns of cultural specificity.

## The Meaning

I suppose I should talk about what *Life with John* is actually trying to say. There isn't a very simple answer to that question, and my understanding of it has been evolving over time. It all started with a commitment to *Žit's Petrom* – I knew that it contained something to which I personally responded and that I wanted to build on. Although I'm simplifying here, I think *Žit's Petrom* is about how irreconcilable differences between partners can wear one of them down to the point where he or she gives up and resigns to a way of life that is alien to them. Going into the project, I adopted this as the working meaning of the screenplay.

Over time, I saw that my decisions were shaping the film into something a bit different. The biggest difference has to do with point of view - *Žit's Petrom* stays firmly with Irena's perspective, making it a personal story of suffering. It is also a very female-centered story – Irena's exasperation with her husband's imaginary friends can be seen as a stand-in for all kinds of less unusual issues, like a husband's emotional unavailability, an insufficient contribution to housework or childcare, and so on. While making *Life with John*, I didn't end up fully sticking with Elena's point of view. There are things that attract me to all three characters: with Elena, I understand her confusion, alienation from herself, and the sense of losing her grip. As far as Peter is concerned, the story is almost a wish-fulfillment fantasy: his beautiful wife remains loyal to him despite the fact that he's a very strange person and unable to change. Regarding John, I'm interested in his voyeurism, the misguided hope that if he can get physically close

enough to Elena and Peter, he could also experience and participate in the intimacy of a human relationship. I think because I was drawn to all three characters, the film's point of view remains more on the outside, rather than sitting firmly with Elena.

This also leads to contradictory allegiances – on the one hand, there is the impulse of wanting to see Peter and John win. I want Peter to be able to keep both his friend and his wife, I want to see John find the intimacy that he craves. On the other hand, there's the realistic recognition of what these victories would mean for Elena – lasting damage to her sense of self, a feeling of alienation. I remain torn about this conflict. My film doesn't offer a resolution to it, because I don't think I can offer one. I think long-term partners often have real conflicts created by their differing personalities, and sometimes there are no win-win solutions. Jenny Offill's novel *Dept. Of Speculation* sums it up in a memorable way when she writes that “every marriage is jerry-rigged. Even the ones that look reasonable from the outside are held together inside with chewing gum and wire and string.”<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, I've always been interested in the conflict between what's inside people's heads and what exists in the outside world, and it made appearance in various forms in almost all of my short films to date. I like creating moments of visual irony that illustrate this conflict, like the scene where Peter and Elena watch *Battleship Potemkin* and there's an empty space on the sofa left for John. I think this is also a big reason why I chose to rewrite the Prudence character from being a co-worker to being a proselytizing

---

<sup>1</sup> Offill, Jenny. *Dept. Of Speculation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2014. Chapter 22

cult member with outlandish beliefs. I wanted to steer the viewer toward thinking about the enormous differences that exist between individual minds, and about how much the perception of what's "real" can vary among people. *Žit's Petrom* isn't heavily focused on the issue of mental illness, but it does feature moments that refer to it, like a short conversation with a nurse or a comment on the husband's stay in a mental health facility. In my adaptation, I downplayed the mental health aspects of the material as much as possible, partly to avoid thorny issues for which I didn't have space in the film (medication, policy, discrimination, political correctness, etc.), but mostly to bring out the subject that really interested me – i.e. the fact that because of their mental differences, people by definition live in different worlds.

I think *Life with John* goes further than my other films, because instead of setting up a clear binary between fantasy and reality, it ignores the idea of an objective reality. It creates a solipsistic world where nothing can be really trusted as objective, where everything is a shade of fantasy. There is Peter's world where John is visible; there is Elena's world that's rapidly disintegrating; there is the TV screen fantasy that seeps into the living room through a single live maggot; there are the Space Angels looking out at the world from poorly designed flyers. *Life with John* is meant to be a battlefield of perceptions, and the viewer is implicated too by the camera, which is an "unreliable narrator" of the story. When Elena is cleaning up after Prudence's visit and John enters the living room to read, they don't acknowledge each other because they exist in parallel worlds – perhaps we are seeing the world as Peter would see it, or perhaps John is breaking out of his invisibility and "infecting" the world in front of the camera lens. I

don't think the question of whether John (or Elena, or Prudence) is real is something that the film aims to answer. John becomes real by being perceived as real. I didn't mean to design a Christopher Nolan-like riddle that takes some brain-racking and ends with a very logical answer. I wanted to create a mystery that invites the viewer to mull over it. I understand that by not committing to some kind of baseline reality I might be breaking an unwritten agreement that tends to exist between viewers and filmmakers. But in the end, films are fantasies on screen, and in this case I wanted to make a film that is self-conscious in that way.

To me, the meaning of the film then has a personal level (relationships, personal differences, alienation) and a theoretical level (the world as a perception, film as a fantasy). Whether I succeeded in communicating these ideas is a different question – my attraction to ambiguity may have worked against the film's ability to communicate clearly. My hope was to create space for the viewer to insert themselves into the film and to construct their own meaning, while picking up on some of the themes that were interesting to me.



## The Visuals

To me, designing the visuals was one of the most important parts of making *Life with John*. In the past, I would usually take a documentary approach to shooting and then let the collected material dictate the visual style. In this case, I wanted to exercise much more control over the image to make sure the film has a very specific feel. I wanted to find stylistic elements that support the story, and to achieve the blending of form and content on a higher level than ever before.

I set several limitations: first, the camera can never leave the interior of Peter and Elena's apartment. This was to create the feelings of claustrophobia and disconnect from the outside world. Elena is trapped here and unable to really escape, and everything that happens outside could as well be a dream. Second, the camera should be static (no handheld, no dolly except for one opening shot) and feature a lot of close-ups, on faces and objects, to give the film a fragmented feel. Close-ups should be cut together in very fast progression, accompanied by strong sound cues, to suggest the unravelling of Elena's mind. While my original intention was to base these in Elena's point of view, in the edited film, they have more of an omniscient quality instead. To set the ending scene apart and to make the exchange more unsettling, we shot the short dialogue between Elena and John with both actors looking straight into the camera, instead of looking to the side. I suppose many of these stylistic elements go against the advice that David Fincher gives in his commentary track on *Fight Club* – to make the surreal story of the Norton/Pitt split personality believable, he says it was crucial to make the rest of the film

look as gritty and realistic as possible. While I understand how gritty realism would have made sense for my film too, I thought it was important for me to try out stylized visuals on this film, so that I could work in an unfamiliar territory.

Along with the cinematographer Rodrigo Michelangeli we decided on a low-key lighting approach, and he managed to create some really beautifully lit shots. I insisted on a 1.85:1 aspect ratio instead of the flashier 2.40:1, because I felt it would be friendlier to the human face, especially in close-up. Another of Rodrigo's ideas that I appreciated very much is the use of a diffusion filter that made the RED footage look less digital and more organic. Because the film was to be shot all inside one apartment, I felt that the production design was very important, and that insufficient attention to set decoration could sink the film right from the get-go. We wanted to make the place feel small and cozy, to make John's presence feel more intrusive. That was one of the reasons why we decided to paint the walls with fairly dark, saturated colors (green in the living room, blue in the bedroom, purple in the bathroom). We decorated the apartment with ethnic masks, pictures of faces and humanoid figures that are meant to lurk around the edges of the film frame, to create the subconscious sense of a stranger's presence. The production designer Samantha Roddick showed a great sense of humor (and an understanding of my goals) by changing the body position of the wooden homunculus in the living room before each new scene, and also by decorating the bathroom with three toothbrushes, instead of two.

A visual strategy that was important during the conceptualization of the film but

that ended up on the “cutting room floor” related to the passage of time. It was challenging to figure out how to portray time passing by in a way that's connected to Elena's progressive mental unravelling – in the same way that Elena is separated from the outside world, her sense of time has to become hazy. Going into the shoot, I designed specific transitions so that Elena is transported between scenes that are obviously disconnected in time. For example, Elena's nighttime bathtub scene was originally followed by the daytime scene with Prudence, connected by a knock on the door. The time of day, along with Elena's hair and wardrobe, were to tell us that the knock on the bathroom door wasn't the same one as when Prudence knocked. I hoped that designing time jumps like these would create a sense of time that is unmoored, moving independently of the characters. However, during editing, I felt it was important to reorganize the scenes for story purposes, and as a result I had to sacrifice almost all of these transitions (the one surviving transition is between Prudence's visit and John's appearance in the background). I considered interspersing the film with exterior shots of the apartment building to accentuate both claustrophobia and the passage of time, but I eventually decided against it, because I thought it would bring in too much of the “objective” outside world, and because I thought it was important to stay on Elena's face whenever possible.

Many of these visual strategies came out of films that I look up to. *The Cremator*, the 1968 expressionistic horror-comedy by Juraj Herz, also uses fast close-up montages and unsettling scene transitions. Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* influenced me in its use of psychological horror, and *Requiem for a Dream* has similar montages of close-ups. I

wanted to recapture some of the feeling from the bedroom argument scene in *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* in the final nighttime argument scene, and the mood of the last scene in *3-Iron* influenced the intentional banality of the soup scene with Elena, Peter, and John. I used frames from these films along with other images to create a mood board that I shared with Rodrigo and Samantha, so that we were roughly on the same page. Still, I occasionally struggled to feel in control over the film's look. There were several scenes where I felt that I should have found more interesting compositions and more expressive coverage, but I chose not to hold up the production by experimenting and searching for better choices. Despite my shortcomings, there was value in making the film because it was both an opportunity to collaborate with others, letting them bring in their own creative contributions, and also to practice setting creative strategies and then seeing the actual results.

## The Cast & The Characters

Using both Casting Workbook and Mandy, I received over 400 applications for the three advertised roles. I then rented a rehearsal space at UoT and auditioned the top 40 candidates. My one big takeaway from the auditions was that it's important to select a smaller space and put less physical distance between the director and the auditioning actors. In this case, the space was quite large and it forced the actors to project their voices in a more theatrical way, which led them to perform differently from how they would on a film set. When making the final casting choices, I prioritized the actors' screen presence over how closely they matched the personality type I'd originally imagined for the characters. This was a leap of faith – since they were mostly experienced, union actors, I hoped they'd be able to inhabit characters with different temperaments. I felt very lucky about getting the cast that I did, especially because I think actors with screen presence are in short supply for student films. At the same time, I found myself rethinking the characters to match them more closely to what the actors brought in. This was quite new to me – I'd usually write characters with the actors in mind already, so I didn't fully understand how much the character can change through casting.

My original understanding of Elena's character was as someone who is highly intelligent but prone to anxiety and very vulnerable, someone who often gets labeled as a “gray mouse” by acquaintances. Courtney, who played Elena, is anything but a gray mouse – she's very expressive and naturally draws attention. I think the character that

we eventually arrived at was somewhere in the middle – in most scenes I asked Courtney to restrain her expressiveness, but then I was really happy about the intensity that she was able to bring to the two argument scenes. We agreed that Elena has a floundering professional career (part-time administrative job at an NGO), and because domestic life is her realm, she feels threatened by John's presence. Protective of Peter, she does her best to hold it together when she's with him, but when she's alone she becomes more susceptible to doubt. I originally thought of Peter as a dogmatically self-assured, inscrutable, corporate-type kind of husband, but Tony, the actor, again brought in different qualities – he is an unusually open, agreeable person. In the first meeting with the two lead actors, I was glad to see that they both understood that the relationship is defined by Peter's limited emotional availability to Elena, and Tony managed to portray that in the scenes that required it. I also realized that the vulnerability that he brought in made sense when connected to a bit of backstory that I wish I had placed more prominently in the film – all of the invisible people that Peter invites to his apartment are there because he's trying to help them. John is recovering from a stroke, and we also allude to a family of refugees and an orphan called Lucy. I think Peter has a subconscious need to help people and a lot of his self-worth comes from that, even though the impulse is absurdly misplaced. To account for the age difference between the two lead actors, we came up with a small backstory explanation – Peter teaches at a university, and the couple met when Elena was his student. Courtney, Tony and myself had two rehearsals before the shoot began, and I really appreciated their flexibility and commitment to the film.

I didn't do a special casting for John, because the character had so few lines. Instead, I offered the role to Manuel, who'd come in to audition for Peter's role. I was really happy that he accepted, because I felt that the role required someone with a very strong screen presence, despite the lack of dialogue. I was caught by surprise when someone on the crew asked whether it was intentional to cast similar-looking actors for the roles of Peter and John. I don't find the similarity too glaring – but even if it is in the eyes of others, I think it makes sense within the story. As for Prudence, I originally thought I'd cast someone around Elena's age who could play her coworker and “frenemy”, someone who pretends to be sympathetic but is filled with schadenfreude inside. After casting Linda, I rewrote Prudence into a cult member, to play into the themes that I mentioned earlier, and also to add another layer of irony – the only person in the entire film who says reasonable things about John is also someone who believes in angels who travel in flying saucers. Linda was wonderful on set, and demonstrating attention to detail, she came in with a small angel brooch pinned to her lapel. While directing, I drew a lot on Judith Weston's book *The Film Director's Intuition*. I made sure to use action verbs and to think of actor objectives during each scene, although I also made the discovery that simply saying “do it faster” or “do it slower” can sometimes work equally well.

## The Production & Postproduction

We shot the film over four days in June 2015, with two additional days for load-in and load-out, and two days for painting and repainting. In the weeks leading up to the shoot I read Ted Hope's memoir *Hope for Film*, and also Liz Gill's book on assistant directing *Running the Show*, both of which informed the way in which I dealt with practical aspects of production. Production limitations forced me to give up on certain stylistic ideas – we didn't have an appropriate zoom lens to achieve the smooth zooms that I originally wanted to include, and the slider that we had turned out to be very uncooperative when we tried shooting the opening shot. I produced the film, which was an important learning experience of its own, and it included dealing with ACTRA, insurance, equipment rentals, location issues, crew recruiting, and so on. We had the usual sundry list of production issues that always seem funnier in retrospect, but there were lucky accidents too: when I noticed a crew member's hand resting on the edge of the frame while he was sitting in John's seat in the pre-argument shot at the dinner table, I told him to keep it there – it's a tiny Easter egg moment announcing John's materialization a few minutes before he appears at the bedroom door. One memorable production problem was that the sound recordist whom I booked a month in advance sent a cancellation email just one day before the shoot. Finding replacement on such short notice was a headache, but it worked out at the last minute. One of the more fun moments of the shoot involved the wrangling of the maggot, which seemed intent on escaping at every opportunity and which had to be reset “back to 1” between takes



using a glass cup. The producing responsibilities were taxing, and there definitely were moments when they took my energy and focus away from directing. However, I'm happy to report that the shoot was repeatedly described as "well-organized" by crew members who thought they were out of my earshot.

I edited the film myself using Adobe Premiere and After Effects. Again, my goal was to do it differently from how I'd been doing things before – whereas in the past I'd often choose to let shots linger for stylistic effect, this time I committed to not letting any shot be longer than it needed to be. The first cut was 17 minutes and it corresponded almost perfectly to the script and the storyboard. Working off feedback, in subsequent drafts I chose to rearrange the scenes to make the film flow better, and I ended up cutting several of my pet ideas. It was difficult parting with the two fishbowl scenes (they were very nice visually and metaphorically, but they strayed too far away from the central story) and also with the special scene transitions. I removed a shot of the empty parked car that originally followed the car keys argument (I thought it would be interesting to have an eery, extended shot of an inanimate object that seems to be on the verge of coming alive, but the shot didn't end up working as well as it sounded on paper) and I also often trimmed dialogue to make it more concise. I've been alerted to the fact that the name "John" was repeated more frequently than it would be used in a natural-sounding conversation – although I wasn't able to do much about it once the footage has been shot, I decided that in my future films I'd go over the dialogue with native English speakers more thoroughly before going into production. Re-editing also involved a bit of trickery on my part: because I didn't have dedicated shots of the empty

couch that I needed, I reframed and repurposed footage from different scenes, using moments where actors were outside of the frame, and then just made the shots fit in using color grading. Finally, I changed the film's title from "Living with John" to "Life with John", to simplify it a bit.

In my editing decisions I generally chose to promote ambiguity, withhold information and postpone conflict. I thought that bringing in exposition too early (be it by including the other voice on the phone, or moving the Space Angels scene up earlier) would make the film less unsettling and it would make the viewer expect a more conventional story. The postponing of conflict was motivated by the characters themselves – they are a couple who hate arguing, especially when it's a subject over which they clashed many times in the past and never managed to resolve it. Elena spends much of the movie in denial, because she's afraid of confrontation, and her puzzling lack of emotional response during the first dinner expresses just that – she's bottling everything inside, which eventually starts messing with her mind.

Thanks to an in-kind grant, color grading was handled at Alter Ego Post. Going into it, I wanted to preserve a lot of the color that went into production design, while at the same time unifying the footage and making the whole feel more like a psychological thriller. The colorist and I agreed to do so by cooling down the color in most scenes, and by not shying away from darkness, especially in the bedroom argument scene. The only time we went for a really light, warm feel was the Space Angels scene, where I wanted Prudence's presence to illuminate the apartment, almost as though her "enlightened

mind” emitted light. I chose a subtle bleach bypass effect for the final lunch scene, to give it a different feel from the rest of the film, indicating that Elena's world has been shaken up in some fundamental way. We also managed to fix several issues that had been bugging me: lifting a heavy shadow on Peter's face when he looks up at John after the big argument, or desaturating the purple eye shadow on Elena's face when she's tickling Peter's nose in bed.

During editing I used music from Claire Denis' *White Material* as a temp track, but the final music was composed by James Atin-Godden, whose musical talents I hold in very high regard. He managed to compose a haunting theme song that nails the story emotionally. It was mildly disappointing that the only suitable place for this track was at the end, during the final scene and then over the titles, but it also makes sense story-wise – to me, the theme melody conveys resignation and sadness, and so should only appear after Elena has given up on her struggle and has accepted John as real. It took us a while to arrive at the right feeling for the other musical cues, and we eventually settled on electronic drones and reversed string melodies, to give the music an unsettling, abstract quality. I also used two public domain classical music tracks as diegetic music – a Borodin symphonic poem to accompany *Battleship Potemkin* (the film is in public domain, but the music that accompanies it on DVD isn't), and a Mozart opera to play in background during John's first dinner with Peter and Elena, to indicate that the couple are trying to “impress” their guest at this point.

## Room for Improvement

Given how much time, energy, and resources I put into *Life with John*, I don't think I can be anything other than proud of having made the film. That said, I think there are things that could have been done differently. I suppose the film occupies a strange in-between territory, where it rejects too many film conventions to satisfy viewers expecting a clear narrative, but it also relies on plot and characters too much to be considered truly experimental. Although Elena is the protagonist, my storytelling ended up having some distance from all of the characters, which may have encouraged a feeling of distance in the viewer. A similar feeling may have also been caused by the culturally ambiguous world of the film. Finally, my unwillingness to commit to a baseline level of "reality" in the film may mean that I'm pulling out one too many rugs from underneath the viewer.

Since my visual approach was more clearly defined than the message, I think it's easy to accuse the film of being a formal exercise. While I admit that formal elements were very important to me, I still believe there is consistent thematic content running underneath the film. It would have been more pragmatic to make a film that aims to emotionally affect the viewer and is consciously constructed to maximize that impact – in this case, I chose to indulge in my own impulses and see how people respond to the results later on.

These are the questions of conceptualizing the film. Another set of questions arises around execution – whether I actually managed to convey the things that I aimed

to convey. There are some shots that I intended to get and then dropped them during the shoot, e.g. a wide shot of the empty living room while John is watching *Battleship Potemkin*. In the script, the bedsheets were to be an important motif indicating John's presence, and I didn't get the footage to carry that out. In terms of framing and acting beats, sometimes I needed to rush through scenes before getting what I originally wanted, for example a sense of awkwardness during the breakfast scene in the kitchen, or a more interesting way to cover the bedside lamp scene. The car keys argument should have been longer and it should have had more complexity. Did I fully imagine and execute the idea of Elena's world unraveling? I'm sure there could have been more scenes to build that arc. Despite my wish to avoid safe choices, there were ways to push the film stylistically further (the way coverage was shot comes to mind as an example).

In general, I wish I'd shot more "connective tissue" material, small scenes that could be used during editing to build rhythm and mood. When writing and storyboarding, I expected to use every scene in the same shape and order as written, which limited my options later on when restructuring the film. I'm realizing that even when my intention is to withhold information in the finished film, a safer strategy is to still shoot extra material that conveys the backstory, so that I can fall back on it. Finally, I wish I'd built more space for improvisation into the shooting schedule, so that we could find unscripted, authentic moments to use in the film – unfortunately, the space was too small and the schedule was too tight to allow anything else other than a fairly controlled, rigid approach to shooting.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I tried to explain what decisions I made and where they originated, and I also tried to think about what could have been done differently. Going through the entire process of making the film was very educational – I'm proud of the parts that turned out well, and I can't wait to put the experience of making the film to use on my next project.

## Bibliography

Dobrákovová, Ivana; Pupala, Richard; Sklenár, Fero; et al. *Poviedka 2008*. Koloman Kertész Bagala, 2008.

Gill, Liz. *Running the Show: The Essential Guide to Being a First Assistant Director*. Elsevier Science. 2012.

Hope, Ted. *Hope for Film: From the Frontlines of the Independent Cinema Revolutions*. Soft Skull Press. 2014.

Offill, Jenny. *Dept. Of Speculation*. Alfred A. Knopf. 2014.

Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2005.

Weston, Judith. *The Film Director's Intuition*. Michael Wiese Productions. 2003.

## Filmography

*3-Iron*. Dir: Kim Ki-duk, South Korea, Japan, 2004.

*Battleship Potemkin*. Dir: Sergei Eisenstein, Soviet Union, 1925.

*Black Swan*. Dir: Darren Aronofsky. USA, 2010.

*Brazil*. Dir: Terry Gilliam, UK, USA, 1985.

*Fight Club*. Dir: David Fincher, USA, 1999.

*Inception*. Dir: Christopher Nolan, UK, USA, 2011.

*Requiem for a Dream*. Dir: Darren Aronofsky, USA, 2000.

*The Cremator*. Dir: Juraj Herz, Czechoslovakia, 1969.

*White Material*. Dir: Claire Denis, France, 2009.