

PUER FUNGUS

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Abstract

Puer Fungus is a short documentary portrait of Eyal Glass, a charismatic 40-year-old Israeli entrepreneur in the midst of self-funding an ambitious business plan. An unstoppable optimist, Eyal is haunted by past failures and holds an unshakable belief in the potential of psychedelic substances as medicine. Through a cinema vérité lens, Eyal's journey is exposed without judgments nor moral frameworks. The documentary showcases him as a multidimensional character, providing space for complexities and contradictory motivation. His quest asks us to contemplate the delicate balance between ambition and delusion, offering moments of great promise yet that sow seeds of destruction within them. *Puer Fungus* is a chronicle of complexities and aspirations shaping a gloriously flawed human being.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For the last 12 years I have worked in the Israeli film industry in the roles of cinematographer and focus puller. Despite achieving success and appreciation in my field, I was haunted by a lingering sense of my inability to direct a straightforward narrative film throughout my career. This feeling of malaise led to my decision to uproot and join York University's Graduate Film program.

During the second term of my MFA, amidst mounting pressures and creative hardships, I decided to unearth an unfinished documentary film project. This project, initially undertaken in August 2020 with co-director Gili Azgad, was left dormant for the last couple of years due to a loss of direction and lack of funding. However, the story held untapped potential that served as the foundation for my thesis film. Despite the project not aligning with my initial expectations, I seized the opportunity to breathe new life into my prodigal film, recognizing that this project was a chance for personal growth—a manifestation of commitment, ownership, discovery, and creative strengths.

This defense paper chronicles the process behind the creation of *Puer Fungus* from its inception to its current form. By exploring the pre-history of the project and tracing my personal experiences in film school, military service, and the film industry, I delve into the meticulous process of giving life back to an archived and forgotten story, sifting through raw takes, discovering hidden gems, and sustaining a creative vision through different obstacles. This paper also examines the philosophical underpinnings of the editorial process, shedding light on the film's transformative journey, and the different factors that shaped it.

Chapter 2: Background

My family's immigration to Israel in 1991 kicked off a lengthy relationship with film. Not knowing the Hebrew language at the age of six left me confused and spending most of my time at home. Instead of playing with peers at the playground, I was glued to the television set for days, watching Russian dubbed VHS tapes that my parents had brought with them from the USSR. Subsequently, the movie theater became an escape from mundane reality with its cyborgs, aliens, dinosaurs, naked guns, and Austrian giants—the 1990s Hollywood blockbuster dominated my childhood. At the age of 11, I started exploring the idea of communal viewership by organizing screenings of popular VHS classics to invited guests, i.e. *Little Shop of Horrors*, *The Terminator*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Toxic Avenger*, and *Alien*. The act of curating and hosting movie events was a highly evocative and attractive activity to me. Video rental stores seemed full of endless variety, mind-blowing thrillers, and VFX extravaganzas—sharing them with others was pure joy.

In high school, I hosted my own film club, curating screenings of non-mainstream films where I could find them. Growing up in a blue-collar port town meant that there were no art-house cinemas in my vicinity, yet I got to discover many gems of higher artistic merit in my local DVD shop. My tastes grew, and so did my curiosity, researching and curating for my film club exposed me to new levels of nuance in the world of film. However, even though I was a cinephile of sorts, my main motivation was to leave my parents' home and join the army as a paratrooper. Military service seemed like the only way to become masculine, aggressive, and self-reliant. Eventually, my proficiency in English, general intelligence, and cognitive abilities got me assigned to the field intelligence corps as an artillery guidance specialist.

The relationship I was fostering with film evolved during my service in different and unforeseeable ways. The platoon I was assigned to was full of other “smart” and “nerdy” draftees, all chosen for their analytical thinking. Unsurprisingly, a majority of my mates were as passionate about film as I was; each one of us brought in their own DVD collections for nightly viewings on our tiny army assigned television - my modest film club persisted throughout my service. Another aspect of the three-years I spent in the Israeli Defense Force was my exposure to different types of people and personalities. The initial culture shock that I experienced in boot camp turned into an exercise of observation, non-judgmental attitude to view others, and acceptance of different perspectives during my routine service. Lastly, the elements of my military profile inadvertently influenced and prepared me for my future film career: by focusing on optics, long range cameras, observations, small unit operations, adaptability, and synergizing with many types of people.

At my return to civilian life, I took a gap year for work and travel in the US, upon my return to Israel I applied to the only place I had the grades to apply to—Film School. The years I spent in the Steve Tisch School of Film and Television in Tel Aviv University were a journey into a world that felt simultaneously natural and foreign. I found myself in a place of raw creativity and action, surrounded by an abundance of likeminded and talented individuals who worked on short productions every other day. I was both entranced and anxious by the plethora of things I had yet to discover about cinema.

Emotional safety came from assuming crewmember roles on the productions of my undergrad cohort. I dared not foreground myself as director and avoided claiming the creative roles of cinematographer or editor since my self-doubts were too strong. However, by being observant I learned through the mistakes of my peers. I excelled as a camera assistant, gaffer,

and grip, eventually taking part in 50 shorts over my four years in film school. Upon graduating, this experience and volume of credits allowed me to be hired immediately on feature films and prime-time television.

Three years after wrapping my academic course work I challenged myself into directing my own thesis project. Trying to come up with a short drama with no success, I turned to sketch comedy writing, which came naturally to me since I held myself to a much lower benchmark when writing comedic scenes. Personally, I did not see much merit in the skits I casually wrote, but my good friend Hadar Keren loved them, as she saw untapped potential for graduation from our film program, with her support as my producer I was able to commit to a thesis project. After spending seven years in film school, we finally claimed our undergrad diploma for an original thesis project—Hadar as producer and myself as director. We happily graduated in 2016.

In parallel to working on my thesis film, I unintentionally entered the realm of documentary filmmaking. In 2013, I was hired as a focus puller on a John Stewart feature film being shot in Jordan. On set, I became friends with Omar Sawallha, my Jordanian second camera assistant. Months later he was hired as a documentary cinematographer by an English documentary director, Jake Witzenfeld. It is during this time, while Jake continued his documentary shoot in Israel, that Omar introduced us, and shortly thereafter I was hired as a second camera operator. On this sprawling three-year documentary project, I advanced and capitalized on my strongest traits: observation, critical thinking, adaptability, and curiosity. In documentary practice, I did not have to come up with drama, enter anxious writing weeks or go on expensive production cycles—life itself provided me with fascinating compositions, stories, and people.

In the following years, shooting documentary films allowed me to engage with a wide array of stories. I met Palestinian LGBTQ+ activists in *Oriented* (Jake Witzenfeld, 2015), took inspiration from Israeli film auteurs in *Tel Aviv l'illusion d'une ville* (Pierre-Antoine Susini, 2016), witnessed the complexities of Jewish settlements in *A Muslim Among the Settlers* (Daniel Lombroso, 2017), and was challenged by leaders of the American Alt-Right movement in *White Noise* (Daniel Lombroso, 2019).

In parallel to my documentary work, commercial work paid my bills and expended my employer network. In 2019, I was hired on a corporate video shoot directed by Gili Azgad, a young and upcoming director from a generation of filmmakers brought up on social media. Lacking any formal film education, Gili found traditional films tedious, most of his motion picture reference bank was found on Instagram snowboarding stories, branded commercials, fashion shoots, and music video aesthetics. While getting acquainted in pre-production, Gili found my “classical” film school approach to be refreshing and structured. We bonded quickly and discovered that we complemented each other creatively.

As it often happens in the arts, one fateful meeting led to another. In August 2020, Gili asked me to join him for a documentary project with the following pitch: “I’ve got a project for us, you’re going to love this, it’s about psychedelics, it’s a documentary, and there’s a lot of money in it.” Intrigued by this proposition, I was introduced to Eyal Glass, the future protagonist of *Puer Fungus*. A 40-year-old man with a permanent smile and at the peak of his physical health, Eyal looked like a militant raver. He was covered with Ethiopian poetry tattooed all over his body and head.

I quickly learned that Eyal was an individual with extreme ideas. Claiming to be a mental health entrepreneur in possession of 3,000,000 Israeli Shekels (the equivalent of \$700,000 US

dollars), he wanted to hire us to document him picking up homeless people off the street, bringing them to his farm, and treating their drug addictions with psychedelics. After discussing the legality of such actions, Gili and I refused to partake in these kidnappings and moved to the next topic on Eyal's videography agenda. He asked us to generate 10 five-minute long videos, aimed for social media platforms, where he hoped to find investors and gain followers for his business venture. We accepted the offer, but on the condition to be paid cash as soon as the production wrapped. A week later, Eyal introduced us to his psychedelic world and community of peers, including cannabis therapists, alternative veterinarians, professional farmers, venture capital investors, robotic engineers, folk musicians, and his very own family, who were all part of his elaborate business plan.

As the first day of shooting was nearing its end, I approached Eyal and told him that the volume of ideas he was aiming to express in a five minute YouTube vlogs would be incomprehensible. I proposed that he reconsider his on-the-fly approach, and petitioned him to write a couple of screenplays for his promotional videos. Eyal replied that he was not interested in going the corporate video rout. Instead, he wanted an immediate and raw experience for his online fans and followers. Following this goal, I suggested that his lifestyle and business venture would make for an excellent cinema verité documentary for one of the streaming services, like Netflix, Crave, or Amazon. At the time, Netflix's *Tiger King* (Eric Goode, 2020) was exploding with popularity and when Eyal heard that his story could be turned into the next *Tiger King*, he replied: "You're right, I truly am very interesting."

Chapter 3: Principal Production in 2020

The production period of *Puer Fungus* began in the sweltering heat of August 2020, and amid the partial lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite challenging circumstances, this independent shoot was both refreshing and exciting. Gili, who was working in a shared co-working collaborate space at the time, utilized his connections with fellow commercial videographers to gain access to essential equipment, such as a camera, microphones, and tripods. Additionally, we rented a supplementary camera and sound equipment to have the ability to cover and record at least four people per scene.

During the initial days of filming, Gili and I handled directing, camera operating, production management ourselves. This approach proved to be problematic as our overreach led to major oversights resulting in technical issues, missed shots, poor sound quality, and noisy footage. After two days of shooting, we decided to hire a dedicated sound mixer—no longer considered as a privilege, but an undeniable necessity to secure usable audio recordings. With the hiring of an additional crew member, the on-set dynamics with Eyal underwent a change which brought limitations to the documentary atmosphere. For example, the boom microphones limited his movement and framing and made Eyal feel boxed-in and self-conscious. Compromises were also inevitable between the freedoms of camera movement and the needs of the sound mixer. Gili and me had to adapt and cater to another professional on set, a limiting dynamic that compensated us with clear audio recordings.

As a crew of two cinematographers, Gili and I divided our responsibilities based on our preferred shooting styles. I gravitated towards long shots and rich compositions, focusing on placing human subjects within their spatial context. Gili favored de-contextualizing single characters from their environment, with shallow depth of field, close-up framing, and long

telephoto lenses. Our complementary coverage schemes allowed for a broader spectrum of choices in the editing room.

Gili's personable visual approach contrasted with my clinical style of shooting, yet the collaboration between us proved beneficial, as we knew each other's strengths and compensated for our weaknesses. The emotional tone of the same event would differ through our coverage styles. For instance, a scene featuring a character passing a joint in my composition would appear melancholic, while Gili would frame the event with a sense of intimacy.

In the beginning, neither of us had any personal connections or stakes about the project—it was simply a job for both of us. Yet the more time we spent in Eyal's world, the more his true persona emerged. Eyal was haunted by failures and driven by uncompromising dreams, he was striving to build a new utopia on the ruins of his past. A contradictory and complicated man, Eyal held delusions regarding his entrepreneurial abilities yet had brilliant insights into human nature. Documenting him called for more patience and sensitivity than we expected and each scene generated both a sense of empathy as well as repulsion.

My directorial style favors observation, allowing scenes to develop naturally once the camera started rolling. This approach involved emphasizing the inherent frictions Eyal had with people around him, prompting others to ask him questions, and probing him to go deeper into his own psyche. However, my approach also slowed him down and dampened momentum. Eyal often wanted to cut the camera immediately after finishing his presentation, as he did not care for capturing the moment or spending time in silence. On the other hand, Gili's directorial talent was in impulsively pushing for topics that interested him in the moment. With his background in shooting commercials, Gili had a concise and straightforward attitude towards achieving a desired outcome in a scene. This approach proved useful in dealing with Eyal's scattered nature.

Nonetheless, Gili often defaulted to testimonial videography, directing Eyal to address only very narrow topics. Understanding our blind spots in our respective documentary techniques allowed our different approaches to complement each other. Gili understood Eyal's narcissism and need for self-expression, he did not shy away from exploring every topic Eyal brought up. While always kept rolling and provided the time and space for moments to expose Eyal's relationships with people and locations.

One major lesson learned from the first day of shooting was that scenes were more rewarding when Eyal was spontaneously responding to what was happening around him, rather than him acting solely as presenter of ideas. Initially, we asked Eyal to explain situations which resulted in him coming across as too controlled, similar to a news anchor. However, we quickly realized that to capture a deeper level of his character, we should document scenes in which Eyal actively engages with people in the moment. Spontaneity revealed hidden emotions, micro expressions, and unrehearsed statements that brought depth to Eyal's character, transforming him from a presenter to an active protagonist.

As we delved deeper into Eyal's life, we realized that some of the footage could be used for the initial purpose of creating the requested online promotional videos. Eyal opened up regarding his inner world, sharing his family conflicts, drug use, and personal traumas. He claimed that he recently cured himself from all doubts about his life, and that he was now completely fearless. It dawned on us that Eyal's wild aspirations and dreams originated from a manic state, most likely induced by his constant self-medication with psychedelic drugs. This shift in understanding called for new levels of compassion and introspection.

After four intense days of shooting, we bid farewell to Eyal and his field encampment, promising to return with an edited sizzle reel for local Israeli broadcasters and streamers.

However, after delayed payments to the sound mixer and rental house, Eyal could not deliver on the promised funds to hire an editor. This led Gili and me to lose confidence in Eyal's ability to finance his own project, including the short videos for social media. Eventually, Eyal lost interest entirely and we archived the footage until further notice.

Chapter 4: Failed Thesis Film Development and Re-Discovery of *Puer Fungus*

Prior to York University, I was predominantly employed as a focus puller which brought in consistent work and steady income. However, I saw it as a golden cage when I struggled to establish myself as a cinematographer and find collaborations with experienced directors. Hoping to break free from this creative stagnation, I believed that pursuing a Master's program abroad could offer me a solution. I aspired to integrate myself into a new community of likeminded filmmakers, and build a network with narrative-oriented collaborators. I was also hoping to reset my directorial aspirations and create a narrative short film as my thesis project.

I arrived in Canada in the fall of 2021. At the time I was inspired by filmmakers who dealt with the contradictory aspects of the human condition and created stories with undertones of tragedy and inevitable entropy. I deeply cared for character-driven narratives, naturalistic performances, and diverse visual storytelling. I aspired to make films in the spirit of legendary 20th century directors, such as Stanley Kubrick and Roman Polanski, who were the biggest influence on the work I wished to make. Other directors to whom I feel a great deal of personal connection include Jonathan Glazer, Yorgos Lanthimos, Pawel Pawlikowski, Luca Guadagnino, Kathryn Bigelow, Hiro Murai, Derek Cianfrance, and Justin Kurzel.

Throughout the first term of the graduate film program at York, I was inspired by the work made by these directors and wanted to draft an ambitious idea for a short film. My aspirations dissolved during my first Canadian winter when I realized that I had carried my personal vices and depressions to Toronto. I descended into self-doubt and found it challenging to connect with the experimental filmmaking ethos I perceived as the program's benchmark, this state of mind developed into a self-defeating thought pattern. My creative process became fraught with anxiety and jealousy. I was lacking in focus, too proud to ask for help, overcome by

discontent, and sabotaging my own writing process. By June 2022, I completely stopped development on my short film and lost faith in my proposed thesis project. Despite these struggles, I was determined to complete the program and gain access to the permanent residence program by Canada Immigration. My family and friends had strong faith in my abilities, and I felt a sense of inner responsibility to graduate and deliver on something of my own.

In a serendipitous turn of events, during a casual catch up call with Gili my thoughts were drawn back to Eyal. While sharing our different summer experiences of June 2022, Gili told me that Eyal had been admitted to a mental rehabilitation center. This tragic reminder made me consider taking up his story as my thesis project. Two weeks after our initial conversation, I asked Gili about the status of the raw footage, Gili generously suggested that I take full charge of project and with the help of my supervisor Tereza, who was then visiting Israel, shipped the hard drives to Canada the following week.

Receiving the footage, I was filled with a mixture of excitement and trepidation for committing to a short film plagued with potentially crippling narrative restrictions. Phillip Vannini, a filmmaker and ethnographer, identifies documentary narrative restrictions as such:

The writer has endless creative analytic and rhetorical strategies and sources to choose from. In contrast, participatory filmmakers uninterested in voiceover do not have this luxury; the only material they have available to create a story is words exactly as they were spoken and images as they were shot. If a narrative element is not “on tape,” it cannot be depicted. Telling a story through participatory film is thus an act of editing already-existing pieces together in order to patch a coherent whole (2019, 65).

Having largely forgotten the scenes I had captured in 2020, I worried about a lack of a satisfying conclusion in the raw footage. At the same time, I eagerly wanted to re-discover and appreciate the work Gili and I had left unfinished two years ago.

Upon plugging the hard drive into my laptop, I was re-acquainted with the optimistic and manic version of Eyal from 2020, a stark contrast to the disturbed state he was experiencing in 2022. Since our last encounter, his mental health had significantly deteriorated which lead to forced admission to mental asylums and rehabilitation centers. With his self-medication turning into addiction and abuse, Eyal became a lost soul, posting conspiratorial rants on social media and living in Tel Aviv's skid row. As I delved deeper into the footage, I recognized that the lightweight promotional story documented back in 2020 carried the seeds of a looming darkness. With a renewed sense of purpose, I set forth to resurrect the story to life.

Chapter 5: Logging and Exploring the Footage

With 16 hours of footage to review, organize, and log, finishing these technical tasks would be the first step in developing a structure for my short film. To make sense of the contained potential within those 16 hours, I thoroughly reviewed each and every shot and audio bite, and meticulously scrutinized the video clips for strong dramatic beats, generating an 80-page log document in the process. I categorized and indexed the footage based on dramatic logic, summarizing different needs, choices, or inner conflicts characters disclosed in front of the camera. By following this method, I successfully mapped the expositional traits of each character and gained an overview of the available material. Summarizing Eyal and the 12 contributors evolved them into archetype characters. With this log document, I was able to synthesize and outline the main themes, assign ideologies to the different characters, and decide which of Eyal's characteristics strongly resonated with me.

The next step was the transformation of the log document into a 35-page scene-based summary document. A “documentary screenplay” which outlined the beats, conclusions, and outcomes of different clusters of clips. Sharing the documentary treatment with my editor allowed us to explore the wealth of avenues available to us. To visually map the material present in the film, I glued post-it notes containing scene summaries to a large board. Lastly, I generated a five-page document containing the themes and narrative anchors I wanted to explore. I decided that Eyal's business venture was a narrative gateway into a deep character study, a critique of the tech entrepreneur and a debate about the darker aspects of the psychedelic movement.

Certain thematic elements remained consistent throughout the logging process and were marked as thematic anchors: familial trauma, healing, liberation, legacy, and rejection. Eyal emerged as a paradoxical character on his own holy quest for redemption. In psychedelics, he

saw a way to rid himself of limitations, heal his loved ones of their mental barriers, and create positive change in the world. Unfortunately, Eyal's inability to empathize, listen, or connect with the perspectives of others led him to tension and conflicts, making him both zealous and hyper-defensive when challenged. Always in pursuit of a new and ambitious goal, Eyal was seeking to rid himself of fear and anxiety, while idealizing a state of pure animal instinct. His peculiar fascination with mortality and death added further layers to his character. He was being tormented by inner turmoil, and every rejection he experienced fed this destructive force.

Throughout the logging process, I found myself connecting with many of Eyal's thoughts and musings on life, business, capitalism, mortality, liberty, and the pursuit of dreams. His reflections resonated with my own torments and regrets, and I felt empathy and discomfort in our similarities, both being aging millennials. A week after wrapping the logging and thematic writings, I started examining the impact of Eyal's story on me. His character was triggering to me on multiple levels, even causing me to feel shame. I did not want to edit the film on my own and needed an external set of eyes on the project. It was crucial to get someone who would push against me and help ensure the film's integrity, coherence, and completion.

Prior to the editing phase, I connected with Eyal to ask for his consent on the film I had decided to make. I reached out via international phone call and informed Eyal of the film resurrected as a York University graduate thesis project. Eyal had no objections, and told me that in his current state of being he was neither for nor against the film. I learned of the details of his precarious situation on this phone call—he suffered two psychotic episodes caused by a self-administered overdose of Mescaline, and he was forcefully kept in a mental recovery center. Acknowledging this situation, I reached out to Eyal's family and friends with a similar request. Once everyone gave their blessings, I carried on with the editorial phase.

Chapter 6: Editing

Initially and despite the potential difficulties inherent to the film, I was drawn to the idea of collaborating with fellow students from my Canadian cohort. I welcomed an outsider perspective on an Israeli story and many students in my cohort had expertise with experimental editing techniques that intrigued me. Moreover, it offered an opportunity to expand my network within the Toronto filmmaker circuit, fostering a sense of belonging in the local filmmaking community.

As I began my search for an editor in Toronto, I had to resolve the film's language barrier. The footage was entirely in Hebrew, making it impossible for an English speaker to perform any work without extensive translation. The cost of translating 16-hours of raw footage to English stood at a staggering \$20,000 Canadian Dollars. Unable to raise the necessary funds, I attempted to caption the footage myself. However, the process consumed an enormous amount of time with poor results to show for. Unphased, I decided to try out an AI transcript algorithm that unfortunately produced limited results, due to the poor quality of the audio files and the lack of sufficient support for the Hebrew language. After a meeting with several editors from my cohort, I realized that cultural customs, references, and humor needed to be explained and contextualized. Ultimately, I made a realistic decision and turned to my Israeli filmmaker network to search for an editor.

One of the people I contacted for the editorial role was Dean Klein, a longtime friend from Tel Aviv University. For the last six years, Dean has been working as a news editor on Israeli prime time television, a position that paid his bills but did not satisfy him creatively. He became interested in Eyal's story, and the themes I cared to explore. With Dean touring Europe

with his punk band and my fall term coursework in Canada, we decided that we would start the editorial process in December 2022, in Tel Aviv.

Initially, the edit focused on anchoring the film around Eyal's business venture, delving into his preconceptions and promises, but limited by his lack of business experience. However, during an assembly cut screening with fellow Israeli filmmakers, we realized that the core of Eyal's story was not merely his irresponsibility or propensity towards failure, but the emotional impact of repeated rejections. He was ruled by his emotions and pain, growing more entrenched in his views with each rejection. This realization shifted the direction of my film's narrative. We restructured the timeline to focus on the progressive series of painful emotional encounters Eyal had experienced in the past. When it came to our editorial technique, Dean and I experimented with the contrasting of scenes as an expressive tool for characterizing Eyal. His scattered and conflicting philosophies about business and life were the backbone of our narrative logic. Dean and I wanted to construct a sequence of both escalating and contradictory emotional beats that could express our protagonist changing moods.

The month Dean and I spent editing proved to be an exercise in the creative process, as well as in creative trust. As the director of the film, I had to give Dean directions on the narrative, which he would wrestle with, according to the best of his abilities. At times, Dean would suggest imprecise solutions and other times arrive at dead ends. This would raise doubts in his skills and competence. I had to learn how to calm my impulsive judging of the editorial process when prejudging work-in-progress. My solution was found in mindfulness and a stoic approach towards Dean's style. As long as I could articulate my critique, his editing would improve on a second or third pass.

I conceptualized scenes as emotional nodes that relate to and vibrate into each other and amongst themselves. When in sequence of each other, a scene with a euphoric tone injects something like euphoria into a scene that eventually ends with disappointment. That which in turn vibrates that disappointment into a hopeful scene that would in turn carry the accumulated emotional weight into a further scene of palpable rejection. This concept was inspired by Stanley Kubrick's perception of film as an emotionally progressive art form:

“At its best, drama consists of a progression of moods and feelings that play upon the audience's feelings and transforms the author's meaning into an emotional experience. A film is—or should be—more like music than like fiction.” (Kagan, 2000, 44)

The building of an emotional cascade established the psychological and emotional state of Eyal, imbuing sequences with a momentum not achievable by simply following chronology alone.

Following four weeks of intense editing, we assembled a working rough cut of the film. However, this cut contained a significant problem: the film had no concrete ending. Originally, Gili and I planned to follow up on the development of Eyal's venture, but his mismanagement and misguided promises led to the quick collapse of his business plan. As it was, our film captured only half of Eyal's story, but with the tragic conclusion of his demise unavailable.

The rough cut had followed the events as they had unfolded in time, yet it was this chronology of events that was causing our film to have a lackluster finale. The solution to our missing ending had to be found outside the chronological order of events. A scene we documented shows Eyal on his cellphone, pacing back and forth in the middle of a desolate field, describing and debating his beliefs with Ben, a buddy from the world of psychedelics who had inquired about Eyal's business idea. The unfolding scene contained the full spectrum of Eyal's character. It begins with him charismatically selling his idea, then avoiding straight answers, then

arguing with unproven theories, and eventually announcing himself to be correct, loudly and with overwhelming conviction. If the scene was to be split into several sections, and brought back at critical moments throughout the film, it could illustrate Eyal's character as a sort of Greek chorus.

Initially the ending of the film concluded with the confrontation between Eyal and his mother. It was a climactic moment in which Eyal threatens to feed her psychedelics on her deathbed, without her consent. This was the strongest and most radical statement by Eyal to that point - he was threatening his own mother because she disagreed with his views. And yet, concluding the film on that note felt unresolved and lacking in emotional closure.

We only managed to come up with a solution for the film's ending by taking a break from the cutting room. Even just a couple of hours outside the edit room generated new ideas. To trust our subconscious mind as much as our analytical one had become essential. Upon our return to the editing suite, I asked Dean to sequence two scenes for the film's ending: The conclusive moments of Eyal's phone call at the field followed by him performing one of his slower songs at a creek ("Can you just be—nothing"), the aim of this short sequencing was to diffuse the tension remaining from his threat towards his mother. Seeing Eyal's lonesome righteousness in the empty field while phoning Ben was an image of him practically talking to himself, following that by his somber song about letting go of identity gave the film a sense of hinted tragedy. With this new ending we thought that we had finally determined the scene order on *Puer Fungus*. Further adjustments of the cut were to be expected, but I would do those myself, back in Toronto.

Upon returning to Canada in February 2023, I was ready for a presentation for my cohort and faculty. The feedback I received was eye-opening, as cultural translation proved to be a

significant factor—scenes that resonated with Israeli viewers failed to evoke similar emotions in my North American audiences. Humor, place-specific references, and Eyal’s nuances with the Hebrew vocabulary generated strong responses among Hebrew speaking viewers. Meanwhile in Canada, the film was judged on different merits, and the responses I received were a lesson on the nature of universal versus culturally specific art.

Eyal as overly talkative protagonist was a shared comment by many. Non-Hebrew viewers relied on subtitles and needed to read the film as much as they would watch it. That required a change in pacing, adding moments of silence, providing the viewers with breaks from reading text, and engage with the film’s narrative. Another common critique was the lack of sympathy for Eyal, due to his character being presented as obtuse and without any redeeming traits. This could be resolved by concluding Eyal’s journey with something honest and concise, preferably a personal triumph—true or pyrrhic—which could conclude Eyal’s story arc. Lastly, Israelis watched the film and saw a fellow countryman with a funny nostril accent and indicated that despite that, they saw themselves in Eyal. Non-Hebrew viewers, on the other hand, saw a foreigner who spoke too fast, making them long for a more straightforward narrative, and requests of musical cues for emotional direction. One student commented on the rough cut: “Why do you think I should care about this guy?”

With the above feedback, I continued editing throughout the 2023 winter term. The dialogue and interview content had been trimmed to its most relatable form, and the film lost five minutes of its length. Subtitling was reworked, with the second draft of captions translating dialogues for further simplicity. I understood that the international viewer had to contend with shaky handheld images and dialogue in a foreign language. The font, color, and size of the subtitles was revised to minimize distractions to the viewer’s peripheral vision.

With previous rejections as Eyal's essential motivation, I searched for a scene in which Eyal could show himself by his most positive, getting some kind of confirmation from those he cared about. Finding such a scene was a challenge, since those around him either silently enabled Eyal, or challenged him with disbelief in his abilities. I did eventually find a small victory in his phone call from the farmer's field as explored earlier, in which Ben relents from questioning Eyal, and wishing him success in his endeavors. In that beat, Eyal enjoys a moment of silence and relief. He doesn't need to react defensively, and can simply smile to himself with the acceptance he got. The moment concluded Eyal's journey in the film. His quest for someone to show faith in him closes the documentary, and an epilogue text describing Eyal's eventual downfall casts a shadow on this rare moment of relief.

Chapter 7: Post-Production

By Spring 2023, I locked picture, and accepted a three-month position as focus puller for a television series in Israel. Once the series wrapped, I decided to stay for an additional month in and work on the color grading, original score, and sound mixing of *Puer Fungus*. I connected with my long-time Israeli collaborators, and we made plans to meet in early June.

The first leg of the post-production journey took me to Adam Edelstein's color grading studio in the northern district of Israel. Color grading plays a vital role in a film's visual consistency, by emphasizing certain hues and creating color contrasts. Color choices can also influence storytelling by setting the mood, directing the eye, and amplifying the composition. Adam and I chose an expressionist style for the film and decided to align the film's colors with Eyal's psychedelic and colorful experience of life. We incorporating deep primary colors with an emphasis on strong harsh darks for shadows. Additionally, we aimed to illustrate the sensation of intense heat in Israel's summer months by applying bleached image highlights. I brought in documentary photographs by Alex Webb and Constantine Manos as a visual reference for their rich and dense color choices.

We also I encountered technical challenges with the raw footage. Back in 2020, Gili and I had used two different compression codecs on our cameras, resulting in the inability for the colorist to automatically match shots covering the same scene. To resolve this issue, both Adam and I had to find new technical tools and discovered of a new AI based color grading tool that could color match the raw footage of both cameras. Overall we spent six days coloring the 24-minute cut of the film. It became a good lesson to better schedule a post-production workflow for future projects.

Next on the agenda was the musical score of the film. At first, I intended to stick with the film's cinema vérité approach, and employ only natural sounds, recorded in actuality. I did manage to convey the plethora of conflicts and rejections that Eyal encounters with only the diegetic sound and moving image, yet, the mere chronology of rejections did not reflect the impressionistic impact I wanted to convey throughout the film. I still desired to convey Eyal's raw emotion. In his "Minnesota Declaration," Werner Herzog articulates his vision on documentary truth:

"There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization." (1999, 91)

Inspired by Herzog's approach towards stylization as a gateway to truth, I chose to forgo my puritan approach and incorporate a musical score to deliver on a sincere depiction of Eyal's inner world.

Back in Tel Aviv I met with Dean to discuss musical directions for the film. He suggested that I reach out to Daniel Slabosky, a recent collaborator of his who would fit the role of composer perfectly. Daniel and I found mutual understanding about the tone and atmosphere in Eyal's story and agreed on moments that should be highlighted through music. Drawing inspiration from Jon Hassel's composition "Blues Nile" (1977), I sought to capture its winding and spiraling sounds as a mirror illustration of Eyal's inner state—a restless spirit winding into itself, echoing, and maintaining its own spiral decent. Daniel embraced this idea wholeheartedly.

We developed an interpretive process for scoring the film. First, I provided poetic and metaphoric prompts for Daniel, who would jam and create an interpretation of the described sentiment. Meanwhile I would take notes of his performance and utilize the different instruments he used as leitmotifs. This back-and-forth approach allowed us to craft three distinct musical

pieces: *Blessed Euphoria*, *Painful Tenderness*, and *Mad Conviction*, each representing different states of Eyal's being. As our collaboration progressed, my direction for Daniel became more concise and grounded.

Chapter 8: Ethics

The project's unique circumstances and evolution from a commercial project in 2020 to an independent short documentary film in 2023 presented unique ethical challenges that needed to be addressed. As the filmmaker, I found myself grappling with issues concerning client-contractor relations (Eyal and Myself respectively), influence of the filmmaker on the subject, and vice versa, and cross-interests about the nature of the film. Additionally, the intimate portrayal of Eyal's life and family traumas raised concerns about representation and consent. Bill Nichols foregrounds the ethical considerations that must be taken into account in documentary filmmaking:

Ethics exist to govern the conduct of groups regarding matters for which hard and fast rules, or laws, will not suffice. Should we tell those we film that they risk making a fool of themselves or that there will be many who will judge their conduct negatively? [...] Ethical considerations attempt to minimize harmful effects. Filmmakers who set out to represent people whom they do not initially know but who typify or possess special knowledge of a problem or issue run the risk of exploiting them. (2017, 36).

A required practice in maintaining ethical standards in documentary filmmaking is obtaining an informed consent from all subjects involved. "This principle, which the fields of anthropology, sociology, medical experimentation, and others heavily rely on, states that participants in a study should be told of the possible consequences of their participation" (Nichols, 2017, 37). In the early phase of *Puer Fungus*, none of the film's subjects were given the opportunity to review or sign an informed consent document. The video project had been commissioned by the film's protagonist, Eyal, doubling up as a producer, obtained consent from his subjects in informal ways, through familiarity and prior relationships. When the project was abandoned in 2020, Eyal went on with his life and the subjects considered the footage to be another one of Eyal's failed projects.

It was therefore essential to communicate the shift in the project's direction to Eyal and the rest of the film's subjects, and ensure that they were aware of potential impacts to their public image and privacy. As a starting point, getting Eyal's consent to the new creative direction was crucial. I received verbal approval over a phone call at the beginning of my logging process. Subsequently, I informed others who appeared in the film, explaining that I was making a stand-alone film as part of the York Graduate Film program that no longer aligned with Eyal's original intentions. After one week of emails and zoom correspondences, I gained everyone's verbal consent and proceeded to the editorial phase.

Given the sensitive nature of the documentary and the personal aspects, I recognized the need to involve Eyal and his family in the editing itself. I shared the first rough cut with all, and explained my creative choices. I also remained open to all input and potential changes he or his immediate family would request. The aim behind this collaborative approach was to ensure that the final film resonated with the subject's perspectives, addressed any potential concerns, and gave me the option to present the story I considered essential. My ethical stance with representing Eyal was to portrait him in a multi-faceted way. For it, I aimed for a critical perspective, yet did my best to not judge his actions and choices. I sought to portray Eyal as I perceived him—as a complex individual, haunted and full of contradictions—hoping my sincerity would be approved by him.

During the completion of the film's edit, I once more opted for open communication and collaboration, and respect the subjects' expectations. Different parties were interested in different additions to the film before signing a revised post-edit informed consent form. Eyal's family wished for the film to have the elements of a cautionary tale, while Eyal requested to have more of his music featured in the documentary before signing. I complied to both requests—Eyal's

musical numbers became an integral part of the narrative, and the text for the epilogue caption was written in conjunction with Eyal's parents.

As a documentarian, storyteller, and witness, I carried significant responsibilities towards my contributors and handling them was a large part of my learning process. By navigating these ethical challenges with transparency, collaboration, and understanding, I aimed to create a film that sheds light on the human condition, encourages critical reflection on the entrepreneurial dream, and treats its subjects with dignity and respect.

Chapter 9: Eyal as Anticelebrity

Eyal's primary motivation for a film in 2020 stemmed from his desire for exposure within social media and television. Enamored by popular internet influencers like Joe Rogan and online celebrity tech entrepreneurs like Elon Musk, Eyal had perceived himself as a trailblazing leader of industry but was unaware of the stark difference in organizational traits, experience, achievements, and managerial qualities, he had from his idols. While Eyal's charismatic character could exude an aura of positivity and exceptionalism, his true nature, as I perceived it, lacked the virtues he wished to project to the world.

It became evident to Gili and I throughout the filming process that there was a discrepancy between Eyal's self-perception and his actual abilities. I sought ways to expose this inherent conflict in Eyal's persona, when coming across Jason Middleton's insights on the concept of the "anticelebrity" portrait film. The "anticelebrity" portrait is a product of the relationship between the subject (Eyal) and the filmmaker (myself). Middleton suggests that during the filming process, the documentary subject often projects their own desires of representation onto the film and filmmaker. Middleton then elaborates further about the nature of this relationship:

"The filmmaker projects the notion that he or she is capturing an image of the subject as the subject wishes to be seen, and the subject sees in the filmmaker a reflection of this ideal self-image. These films' awkward moments foreground this disavowal and the ways in which mutually incompatible needs and desires are subsumed by the fantasy of mutual recognition." (2013, 57)

Puer Fungus became a complex interplay of taking and giving on my part as filmmaker. By revealing the gap between Eyal's aspirations and his actual capabilities, I denied Eyal the representation of a credible entrepreneur and visionary psychedelic activist he had initially sought. Yet, paradoxically, the film gave Eyal an opportunity to be represented authentically.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

The journey of creating *Puer Fungus* has been a profound learning experience. At the outset, I envisioned an entirely different outcome for my thesis film, intending to explore a different avenue of filmmaking. However, fate had different plans that took me in an unforeseen directions. This learning experience presented numerous personal and external challenges to me: adapting to a new culture, grappling with the impact of the COVID pandemic, dealing with issues of self-esteem, navigating academic rigor, and staying motivated creatively.

When I finally embarked on the production of *Puer Fungus*, I had to learn from scratch how to make a short documentary. The process of deep research in my own material and editing without a script were crucial steps in grasping the heart of documentary storytelling. The filmmaking process also led to collaborations that spanned the Atlantic Ocean, and the privilege of creating a film with universal appeal will undoubtedly influence my future directorial endeavors.

Working with a documentary protagonist and delving into his precarious situation made me a more sensitive director. Initially, I approached the project with a contractor's mindset, detached from the main subject. However, upon revisiting the film in 2022, I realized the responsibility of a storyteller is to convey a story in a way that respects both the artistic vision and the subject's humanity. This process of questioning and reevaluating was a significant creative step forward.

The collaborative nature of working on *Puer Fungus* challenged my understanding of directing a fellow artist. Overcoming distrust and anxiety about how others perceived the film in their respective disciplines was a valuable lesson which I could not have gained through scripted

work where the filmmakers controls the narrative. This aspect of the project proved to be a big step forward in my growth as an artist.

As I move forward in my career, I carry the invaluable lessons learned from *Puer Fungus*—a film born from unforeseen circumstances which reinforced my belief in filmmaking as a powerful medium for observation into the human condition.

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Filmography

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Jonathan Agassi Saved My Life (2018) – Tomer Heymann

Kill List (2012) – Ben Wheatley

Little Shop of Horrors (1986) – Frank Oz

Mandy (2018) – Panos Cosmatos

Mr. Death (1999) – Errol Morris

Oriented (2015) – Jake Witzenfeld

Red Rocket (2021) – Sean Baker

Shame (2011) – Steve McQueen

Suspiria (2018) – Luca Guadagnino

Taxi Driver (1976) – Martin Scorsese

Tel Aviv l'illusion d'une ville (2016) – Pierre-Antoine Susini

The Look of Silence (2014) – Joshua Oppenheimer

The Other Side of the Wind (2018) – Orson Welles

The Toxic Avenger (1984) – Lloyd Kaufman

Tiger King (2020) – Eric Goode

Triumph Over Violence (1965) – Mikhail Romm

Under the Skin (2014) – Jonathan Glazer

White Noise (2019) – Daniel Lombroso