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Tears At Dawn: An Action Short Film

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Tears At Dawn: An Action Short Film

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Report

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Abstract

Tears At Dawn

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The following paper describes the pre-production, production, and post-production of the short action film *Tears At Dawn*. When his little sister is kidnapped in an ice cream truck, Marine Corpsman Arthur Orange must rely on his specialized training to get her back. The report on making of the film consists of first-person accounts of the challenges and victories experienced in the making of the film. Supplemental materials include the original treatment, shooting script, and “Short Cuts,” a reflection on editing short films that was published in the July-August 2012 issue of *Moviescope Magazine*.

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Introduction

Genre films are valuable and popular forms of entertainment for the masses, yet I think they can frequently be the black sheep of an academic institution. While there are great academic reasons to explore the works of classic international talents, mentioning names like Quentin Tarantino, Brian De Palma, Michael Bay, or William Friedkin can be dismissed or confronted with active scorn.

There was a distinct mission upon entering film school: discover stories that one is passionate to tell. The other, and perhaps more important, is to produce stories that have audience potential. Many cinephiles and lovers of cinema can trace the infancy of their passion to Westerns, Adventures, and Sci-Fi movies, among many others. We watch a screen glow with images of other worlds and characters engaged in activities we are often unable to participate in for realistic and legal reasons.

The depths of my passion for movies originated in the late 80's and early 90's, when VHS tapes of *Back to The Future* and *Ghostbusters* were exhausted and repeatedly re-purchased. When I was an undergraduate, I had an extreme reverence for studio movies, and doubted my ability to tell a story in an equally engaging way. With time and with practice my abilities and confidence grew, but I'm comfortable admitting that the learning will never stop and I happily accept my role as a lifelong student of cinema.

The following will attempt to trace the story of the *Tears at Dawn* from start to finish, while shedding light on mistakes made and lessons learned.

Project Origins

Tears At Dawn originated in Richard Lewis' Producing course in February of 2012. We were tasked with pitching our graduate thesis film as our final project, and I had an idea for an action film that had been in my head for some time. I was saddened by the depressing news coming out of my hometown of Kansas City, Missouri, which had become an emerging hub of human trafficking activity and had a number of grisly murders that made the world of KC less like home and more like something out of David Simon's *The Wire*. I had several scenarios and characters both researched and overheard that influenced this composite piece.

I was unsure at the time if I would make the picture. The project was birthed out of an academic assignment, and a treatment was written with absolutely no regard to practicality or budgetary restraint.

It was refreshing to write this way. So often one comes up with ideas, then scales back to fit a narrow window an independent filmmaker must fit to accomplish a film within their means. A thirty page script was written in Charles Ramirez-Berg's Alternative Poetics course as a final project. It was a sprawling mess but the core remained intact from the first draft to the final produced film: a man must set out in desperate circumstances to re-unite his family. It's a trope explored in many Hollywood films across genre, from *The Searchers* to *Taken*.

Script

The original screenplay featured meticulously planned fight scenes that were explored in great detail. After the first draft of the film, I workshopped it in a screenwriting group that met weekly during the summer at Spiderhouse near campus and was facilitated by Britta Lundin. By this point I was extremely interested in making the film and so my initial priorities were to start scaling back details that would make the project infinitely more difficult to produce. The first was to shoot the film in nearby locations to minimize budgetary costs of transporting an entire crew to my native land, which, although lovely, could easily have been re-created in Texas. The next was the 18-wheeler truck which our hero employs as he journeys to rescue his sister. While the 18-wheeler posed practicality problems, it also seemed to hint at a much larger network and world. The final major problem with the script is the excessive character count. While the eventual produced film would contain nine speaking roles, I determined that the long script had unnecessary characterization and scope.

Simplifying the script proved rather simple, as I wanted to work within an economical framework. I met with my graduate thesis supervisor Stuart Kelban several times over the summer, and was pleasantly surprised to see him so excited about the project in its earliest stages. After being playfully victimized in his screenwriting course my first semester of graduate school, I was shocked that he enjoyed the first draft of the script. He helped immensely (as he always had before) in offering specific insight into

telling stories on a small scale. As always, I wrote the initial draft replaying his words of wisdom the entire way:

“The story is about a character who wants something very badly and is having a hard time getting it.”

“Tarantulas to boulders [an example shared in class about Harrison Ford’s mounting challenges within the frame work of a scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*].”

The 18-wheeler was replaced by an ice cream truck, with the idea that an ice cream truck feels more local and unique. The tone of the film is meant to be fun and playful, and shining a grimy cast over an innocent vehicle was a more inspired choice. There were also new ideas to play with such as the use of an ice cream jingle, and how this repeated spritely melody announces chaos, much like the shark music cue in *JAWS*.

I encountered my first challenge with the script during class feedback sessions in the fall. While early on I appreciated the critique, it lent itself to festering doubts about the project. I always knew the fundamental story was simple, but I became privately resentful of my peers’ insistence on turning my script into a skeet shooting session. I ultimately came to the conclusion that it’s okay that people do not “get it.” I realized I was sharing my passion with a group of people who did not particularly watch or enjoy the type of movie I wanted to make, and were trying to re-write my movie by proxy. While there seems to be a pre-occupation with being different -- with the misguided thought that “different” equates to “good” -- I felt burdened by a strong challenge to

distinguish myself as an author with familiar material that cineplex movie-goers have experienced already.

I quietly re-worked several scenes of the movie, adding an arc for our hero to arrive at stereotypical lessons like “Violence is not the answer,” “I am fighting monsters and turning into one myself,” etc. The biggest note was the request to flesh out the character, which I thought was a valid pursuit, but I believe it was ultimately a “lost in translation” scenario of what this movie actually was -- an action short that did not need excessive dimension to be enjoyed. I wanted to make an entertainment, not a De Sica film. While I have the capacity to appreciate “realism” in cinema, I’m at a point in my life and career where I’d rather put on a show and attempt to become a commercially viable filmmaker in the future. After all, I live realism every day.

The final script was twelve and a half pages. Most of the action scenes were described simply to reflect my intention on collaborating with a fight choreographer on those scenes. According to my mental math, the action scenes would inflate the run-time and I anticipated the final project to be around twenty minutes in length. I learned through rehearsals that an early diner scene in which the kidnapper engages in flirtation with a waitress was poorly written and ill-conceived. I tried eliminating much of the dialogue and through rehearsals honed in on a simple exchange to lead us to the first dramatic confrontation with our hero.

The most difficult scene of the script was the later scene with the girl in the warehouse who tips off where the main villain lives. Arthur needs information, and she's a brick wall who bats away his questioning. I had a great deal of difficulty with this scene, because I know Arthur has to manipulate her to get what he wants, but I kept coming up with ideas that cast a more harsh, unfriendly light on him as a character. Stuart Kelban explained that I should add a particular detail or memory that the girl has that will help him get what he wants. In the final scene, Arthur picks up her interest in horses, and uses that information to tell a "white lie" about how he has a friend in the country who owns horses and that he will take her once he rescues his sister.

Producing

I had incredibly difficult luck securing a producer for the spring because of prior commitments made to undergrad and graduate projects. Consequently I had to produce the film myself, with Deepak Chetty taking a heavy load of that work as well. The first mistake I made was thinking that I could handle the work load of a producer on top of the responsibilities of directing a project that was about 3 levels more ambitious than my last. Nevertheless, it was rewarding to discover that the scope of my projects has surpassed my ability to juggle these responsibilities. Luckily, Deepak had a rolodex of film crew and technicians to help us out, and locations were rather simple to secure with phone calls and airbnb.com reservations.

Casting

One of the major early challenges was trying to comprehend how I could make the film, especially in terms of casting an excellent lead with physical abilities as well as acting talent. I also wanted an African American male to play our hero's role, as I personally feel there is a dearth of action heroes that happen to be people of color. While Austin is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural city, I had very little in the way of African-American candidates on my radar. I spent weeks thinking about hiring a casting director or sitting in at a gym that specializes in the Martial Arts.



The original candidate was a young student named Jerius who I discovered in a Director's workshop where I was a TA. He appeared in 3 scene exercises and had a younger look (in keeping with the earlier iterations of the film), brooding intensity, and raw charisma. After casting particularly well the two narrative shorts I completed to date, I was confident that I could bring out a good performance despite his lack of professional experience.

The ultimate casting choice can be credited to the Director of Photography of the picture, Deepak Chetty. He recommended Aaron Alexander, a stunt double in his Pre-Thesis film *The Ascendant*. I recalled him instantly as professional with a great set personality. I decided to meet with him for lunch. He read the script and he instantly seemed drawn to the project and his enthusiasm was infectious. I also learned that he's a fixture in Austin's theatre scene, and furthermore, had a strong passion and experience with screen fighting and choreography. He was the perfect fit for the film. The prospect of working with a non-actor seemed less attractive as the demands of the project came to light.

Another major concern of casting was getting several little girls to be in the film. This was at first a scary proposition, as the film itself nods to very mature issues and the film itself would probably earn an R-rating if put before a ratings board.

To my surprise our casting sessions were packed with children from all over Texas, from San Antonio to Dallas and Houston. It was extremely difficult making final decisions but Alyssa Roussel was selected to play the critical role of Mya Orange, the girl the short orbits around. She read against Aaron Alexander and they had extremely good chemistry. She brought out the fatherly potential of Aaron, and he naturally brought out the spunkiness in her. As for the other girls, it was important for me to send the script to parents for review so that there was not any misunderstanding about the content of the movie.

Fight Choreography & Training

After whittling down the script, I sought a fight choreographer who shared my vision and passion to do something ambitious. Hector Gonzalez, who also worked with Deepak Chetty on *The Ascendant*, was the first candidate. In the fall I was a TA for an advanced narrative class taught by Nancy Shiesari and Gonzalez was asked to come in and lecture/choreograph a spontaneous fight scene. I got the feeling that Hector, who was a manager of RTF equipment checkout, was desperately hungry to reveal his passion and expertise. He wrote a poignant and vulnerable statement about the process of fights on screen, finding comparison with the discipline of dance.

We staged a quick improvised fight scene and I was taken by how he was open and encouraged collaboration. Watching him work with students and seeing their faces light up with the prospect of doing something exciting made me feel good, and reinforced my passion for *Tears at Dawn*.

The first meeting was wonderful. Hector marked up the script much like a producer breaking down a screenplay, writing notes to himself in the margins and circling points of interest. I explained my interest in fight escalation, hearkening back to the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* scene previously mentioned. In the first fight, Arthur Orange confronts a man in a hotel room, catching him with his pants down and getting the devices and information that will help him on his journey. I strongly felt this scene needed to establish the thorough, no-nonsense introduction to our heroes' military

training. The second fight was between two characters: Arthur Orange lures one into tall grass and dispatches him quickly, but then he finds quite the challenge in the man's partner. The final scene was supposed to be a large sequence in which he encounters the boss and leader of this operation, with the idea that the Boss would basically beat him within an inch of his life before a hand-drawn picture from his sister gives him the courage to dig deep within himself and overcome adversity.

Hector went off and planned out these fight scenes, and I told him he should consider himself the Director of the fights. While I would have final say about making the film a cohesive whole, he got to work in earnest and relished the responsibility. I was checking out equipment for a class I was assisting and he came to me and we talked in great length about my dissatisfaction with the second act, which required a cartoonish duo rambling incessantly only to have a simple coda. He came up with the idea of having it be a massive, ambitious fight with several people who are responsible for watching over Dallas' (the main villain) inventory of kidnapped girls. I immediately enjoyed the idea. I then transferred the expositional narrative information to one of the kidnapped girls.

Training began at the end of October 2012. Aaron Alexander and Hector Gonzalez, to my surprise, were already friends and co-workers. They taught workshops for actors wanting training in screen fighting. This synergy helped move the process along and Hector informed me that Aaron could do advanced things that most actors in

the area couldn't. Hector himself was also highly skilled, so I decided to have him be the final combatant in the major fight sequence.

To this day I am touched by the amount of work that the two did to enrich the action set pieces of the movie. Along with their busy schedule of teaching workshops, they met at Dane's Body Shop on Guadelupe every Sunday for an additional 90 minutes rehearsing and working on the fight scenes. I would stop by with Deepak Chetty (Director of Photography) and we would talk through the fights, shoot the rehearsals and get a clearer idea of camera position and filming approach. It was this preparedness that paid huge dividends when it came to producing the movie efficiently.

Production Design

Chris Yoo acted as the production designer for the project, an MFA Graduate student in the theatre department. We worked on sets together for Russell Bush's *Magpie* and Nina Vizcarrondo's *Clay Castles*. For my graduate elective, I took cross-disciplinary classes in the theatre department where I met her once again in the fall.

Her attention to detail was impeccable and she marked up the script thoroughly with what was on the page. It taught an important lesson that every word is important in a screenplay and there were several details I was more or less approximating and she was reading them as gospel.

In the script there were things that needed to be broken, and the budget for the film inflated because of the need to procure several matching items. For instance, a candy

glass vase needed to be broken against our hero's head in an early scene, and we quickly saw from the manufacturer in Los Angeles that these vases would cost about \$25 a piece. While she was able to return many of the items used on the picture, there were a great many things that could not be refunded and our production design budget grew to more than we had initially anticipated.

On set, she was a joy to work with and brought together an entire art department of theatre students (including Kevin Harger, Kara Konop, and Danica Salazar) to help her create the lived-in worlds of Dallas' and Arthur's homes. They also did a wonderful job decorating our equipment van that acted as the picture ice cream truck. As expected, the nature of the source material did not interest most ice cream truck owner/operators.

This was my first experience using a production designer and the experience was enlightening. By their nature they are also visually important storytellers and each piece of set decoration says something about the scene and story. It also massively expanded my choice-making abilities in communicating my story, which gave me an even deeper feeling of control over shepherding the project to completion.

Director of Photography



It is hard to articulate the profound impact Deepak Chetty has had on my filmmaking growth. I credit most of my ambition to reach beyond my means to him, and he has been immensely important in leading by example in that realm.

He was the first peer I met at the student orientation and it only took a few minutes to realize the depth of our mutual love for movies of all shapes and sizes, and I immediately knew we would become fast friends and work on each other's movies. Deepak is an incredibly visual centric filmmaker, and I was wowed by his ability to manipulate the image in dazzling ways. Do you hate the drab sky in a particular scene? Deepak can replace it. Do you need VFX elements? He can create them. His 16MM short *Ace In The Hole* (Produced in Andrew Shea's 881KB course) was only a taste of his potential, and it was his pre-thesis science fiction epic *The Ascendant* that his capabilities as an artist came into light. He poured over a computer for over 400 hours creating magnificent compositions using very basic elements shot in the Monahan's Sandhills in West Texas.

After seeing and enjoying my KB film *KNUCKLEBALL*, Deepak approached me about working together on my pre-thesis, a suspenseful drama called *Housebreaking*. The experience was excellent having such a seasoned camera person help me communicate my vision, and we shared the same influences and interests. That film was beautiful, and feels like a lost Michael Mann experiment from 1984. *Housebreaking* screened at the Kansas City FilmFest in April 2013.

Visual Approach

For *Tears At Dawn*, we wanted to experiment further with use of color, which I think is often overlooked in the making of independent student work. *Housebreaking* was cast in blue throughout, which helped filter in a powerful tone and mood for the film.

For *Tears*, it was apparent to me that we should further push the hard washes of saturated color. Influenced by movies like *Running Scared*, *Cruising*, and *Man on Fire*, we set out to research how we could accomplish a goal of two complimentary colors in every frame of the film. For instance, in the big Dallas confrontation that ends the movie, we filmed with green and red gelled lights, knowing that the green could be tinted yellow or amber in the color correction process, making it look more like early morning light.

We also wanted to experiment with fog effects to the lighting to give the compositions additional dimension and atmosphere. It was our first experience working

with the Arri Alexa camera, a powerful motion picture camera that lensed several major Hollywood productions. Our rationale at the time was that the atmosphere would help to flatten the image, giving us more film-like latitude to work with later in color correction.

Production: Week One

Due to the demand for the new ARRI Alexa camera, the film had to be split into two five day shoots over two months. I had never done this before, and my anxiety churned with thoughts of un-matched continuity or other production errors, but looking back I learned that it is was an excellent way to tell the story as it allows time to ponder how to improve the story and production after having time to tinker with scenes in the edit and highlight inconsistencies.

We scheduled the hotel, Dallas, and introduction scenes for the first week. I tend to front load my productions and since I had never dealt with fight scenes before, I wanted to try and defeat two out of three in the first go around to prepare and learn going into the massive fight scene the following month.

In the week leading up to the first week, I was pre-occupied with our hero's costume, which involved a forest green (military) hooded sweatshirt and loose fitting cargo pants to help Aaron's freedom of movement in the action scenes. The hoodie became a source of heated debate within my close circle of collaborators, after the Trayvon Martin situation in Florida the previous fall. Deepak insisted I consider changing the costume, his rationale being that we didn't want any sort of distraction or relationship

to that event. I made the grave joke that the poster should just be a sweatshirt with the caption “Fear the hoodie.” It was a comment made in extremely poor taste given the nature of the tragedy and miscarriage of justice, but I had a million other things on my mind and the potential for his costume becoming a CNN political talking point was a non-issue for me. Like continuity flubs in movies, if a viewer is assigning that kind of relationship to an article of clothing, they need to re-evaluate why they go to the movies.



The first night of shooting took place at a Quality Inn in North Austin, whose staff was friendly throughout the entire process. As it turned out, Terrance Malick had shot there a few months prior with Christian Bale and Ryan Gosling, so we were excited about being in the same environment as master talents. In fact, it became an ongoing joke that we were following Malick around town as our contacts and locations all dealt with him at one point or another.

The shoot was very relaxed, which is typically not my personality on set. Deepak told me after Housebreaking that my goal for the next picture should be to smile more, and that seemed like a reasonable goal to work towards on this project.

We started with Aaron's discovery of the little girl in the van, and everything went smoothly. Before a late lunch at midnight, we framed up a Dana Dolly shot of Arthur charging past the van and kicking the hotel room door open. I don't particularly think Deepak liked the shot, and after 4 takes he turned and asked what I thought. I ran into the mistake I made on my previous film *Housebreaking* with an actor named Drew Whelpley. Because I'm an editor by discipline, I find production to be more about collecting footage than pouring over every minute detail. I'm usually pretty casual with takes because I know most will be sacrificed in the edit. I told him it was "fine," which I think was received as a slight insult. There was a bit of friction in that moment, but we resolved it quickly and moved on--and the shot in question never made it into the movie.

After lunch we moved inside and shot the confrontation scene with Arthur and the ice cream truck driver. Things moved slowly, but it was because the unit was continuing to gel and feel things out. There were not really any deviations from our original plan, but I wish we didn't hold off until the end to get the dialogue portion of the scene. Night shoots do strange things to film crews, and I had a taste of it on *Housebreaking* with three consecutive night shoots that required an additional ten day recovery period. Arthur's line "I'm looking for my sister, where is she?!" was filmed at 5AM, when the crew was thoroughly exhausted. While everyone was in high spirits throughout, I feel I can see Arthur Orange's exhaustion in his single of that line.

We exhausted 3 of the 4 candy glass vases, with the first spontaneous master take

being the one that made it into the movie as the glass broke in just the right way to throw glittering sparks of blue towards the camera. The vase didn't look nearly as good in the pre-meditated lock off takes. I asked Aaron what it felt like and he said "It feels like someone breaking something over your head," which made me immediately guilty. After the 5:30AM wrap, I let him hit me in the head with the remaining vase in the parking lot. We had a couple laughs and it was on to the weekend and Dallas.

Dallas was played by Conrad Gonzalez, a fountain of ideas and a great asset to have on set. He's quite large and we were excited about the opportunity to see Aaron get tossed into some prop tables. This was the major "moment" planned for the scene but after we locked the location, we decided to make use of a huge square that led us from the living room into the kitchen. I gave a tour of the house to Hector and Aaron and we unanimously agreed that after the table smash the fight should be altered to make use of that location element. It was altered so that Aaron would get shoved against a wall, put through the table and then thrown through the hole into the kitchen. Deepak appreciated my idea to then set up the dolly parallel so that we could track past the frame as he is thrown from one room to the next.

The shoot went off without a hitch and there was a palpable excitement from the crew about shooting action sequences. Many of them had no experience with this kind of work, but recalled some of their favorite film moments and re-invigorated that youthful exuberance for cinematic spectacle.

The first table smash went off great and everyone almost ruined the initial take because of how brutal it looked to the naked eye. Aaron is a pro and was ready to go again immediately. On the third take it was pointed out to me that there was a huge hole in the drywall where Aaron was repeatedly shoved. I was heartbroken. We took a 15 minute break to tweak lights for the next setup and I was in the back yard with Assistant Director Andy Irvine. After some consoling the innate filmmaker took over and I told Deepak “If I am going to pay to get this fixed, we’re gonna get a close-up of it.” We carefully re-shot the beat where he is shoved into the wall, which buckled again but looked great on camera. The homeowner was happy with how quickly we repaired the wall a week after shooting wrapped.



After lunch we decided to do the dolly shot of Conrad throwing Aaron into the kitchen. The idea was for Conrad and Aaron to rush the wall, with Conrad playing the

motions while Aaron propelled himself over the counter. On the second take, tragedy struck as their feet got tripped up and the two of them ran directly into the wall, making a horrifically loud bang (balloon decorations popped loudly only adding to the shocking moment). Luckily they were not hurt, and urged me to do another take. We did a third take, but I could not watch the monitor. When the take was over I called cut, watched playback and moved on.

Sunday was the day we were to shoot the end of the movie where Arthur and Mya are sitting in the ice cream truck before the credits. The usually consistently sunny Austin weather was nowhere to be found, and we decided to push that final exterior scene to the following month. Because we had location difficulties in the lead-up to the second month, we had also pushed the opening scene between Arthur and Mya.

Production: Week Two

March would be a challenging shoot with one less day than the previous month. We began by shooting the warehouse scene, an important performance scene for the narrative where Arthur Orange receives the final clue to Dallas' whereabouts.

We filmed it at the Pedicab Depot on 4th and Attayac Street downtown. Our AC Taylor Thompson once worked for the horse stable there. It was challenging to get dialogue takes when the workers in nearby stations were working in the lead up to South By Southwest. Eventually we got our takes and it was time to move on to the final portion of the final fight between Hector and Aaron. Something didn't seem right, and

Deepak and I ultimately agreed (after 6 hours of physically demanding shooting) that we would look to shoot the entire fight the next night under a different lighting scenario.

Wednesday night we filmed the massive fight scene which was a lot of fun. We were saddened to hear that one of the fighters had to drop out at the last second, but our Gaffer Patrick Smith was excellent in filling the minor role. He got on the spot training as Deepak spent two and a half hours setting up the lighting for the night. We never went over twelve hours on a shoot because he prefers to light for the scene with minimal adjustments. This helped our days by giving me more opportunities to do multiple takes and allowed us the opportunity to add shots in the moment if we had good justification for them.

It eventually came time to shoot and out of the corner of my eye I spotted one of our fighters, Donald Brooks, being questioned by a pair of Austin Police Officers in a squad car. I waved him off and walked over only to have a tense 15 minute discussion about who I was and what I was doing there. I was incredibly nervous throughout the exchange. I had contacted the APD three times in the two weeks leading up to the shoot about securing a permit, with no response from their offices.

Eventually we worked out a compromise. Their biggest complaint was a light which they argued was “blinding” and would need to be moved. We followed their direction and they left us alone for the rest of the night. The scene was the most ambitious scene of the movie and the film would have been a disaster had we not been able to film this scene at the time.

When we finally got started, the six month training period showed. The fighters knew exactly what to do and when we waited it was for our crew, not them. The block was busy with Pedicab drivers putting sponsorship stickers on their bikes for the upcoming festival, and I made the decision on the spot to shoot the scene without sound. Obviously this would massively increase my workload on the post end, but it allowed us the benefit of talking through takes and resetting quickly to get more shots.

What happened later that night is possibly the most cherished moment of my young filmmaking career. We did about four takes before I started noticing the Pedicab drivers quietly assembling behind us.

We did a master take of the scene and received a hearty round of applause when I called cut. I turned and saw nearly 20 people standing around, grinning and smoking marijuana, standing with front row seats to our filmmaking process. They shouted “Go get em, Denzel!” at Aaron and hooted and hollered after particularly vicious takes. During breaks we had a chance to talk with them and their excitement for our project was extremely touching and emotional for me. Here were people who “got it,” who watched the kind of movies I want to make. I felt the fighters were encouraged to fight through the bumps and bruises, given the specifically performative nature of film fighting. This first-hand call and response buoyed us for the rest of the night.

Over the weekend we filmed the opening scene of the film. Alyssa, who was cast in the role of Mya, was oddly on her best behavior after being a terror on the first

shooting weekend. The scene worked great, but once again we were confronted with bad weather. We had to get the final scene in the van, and the sky was cloudy with a high probability of rain. We ran outside and got the scene filmed just as it began to sprinkle. We decided to heavily color correct the scene in post, but it's clear in some takes that there are a few raindrops falling.

The last day was a completely skeleton crew consisting of myself, Deepak, Andy (AD), Simon (AC/Sound) and Chris (Designer). We ordered pizza and had a laid back shooting day. After shooting so much action on this project, it somewhat de-mystified and simplified my approach to dialogue scenes in general.

Post-Production

When I entered the University of Texas program 3 years ago, I came in wanting to not only direct but edit films. I have a strong passion for editing and wanted to meet a talented crop of individuals who would allow me to nurture them in a process that is perhaps second only to the script in importance at communicating an author's vision.

The first year was rough because of limitations outlined in the MFA Production handbook, which prohibits a director the use of an editor. While I understood the rationale behind employing non-students to assist in realizing a film, I felt (and continue to feel) that the rule tends to undermine the importance of healthy collaboration in the making of a film. After all, it takes a village to make a movie, why couldn't a creative storytelling mind help a director see past his/her prejudices and close quarters with a

project? Nevertheless, I was able to work with several directors including Nathan Efstation (*Ronnie's Donuts* – Austin Film Festival), Andy Irvine (*Hearts of Napalm* – Slamdance), and Britta Lundin (*Lost Pines* – Indiewire Project of the Week), and I am heartened with their ultimate conclusion that it will be a necessity to work with an editor for future projects.

While I enjoyed these experiences and have every expectation to be approached with work in the future, I loved contributing to an altered point of view about collaboration in all phases of the filmmaking process.

Production informs my editing process, allowing for an efficient and sparse shoot. Conceptually it is akin to “collecting footage” as one would in a non-fiction environment, hoping that the final edit will lead to unexpected and rich surprises. While some may have one or four ideas about how a performance should come across, I tend to understand what is most needed and essential to telling the story.

This is not without consequence; by understanding/shooting only what I need (or more realistically, what I *think* I need), I exclude options in the edit and find myself with less choice and “wiggle room.” Putting it into words now gives me pause and anxiety. Directing is about making strong choices and living with them. There have certainly been a few moments where I wished I had a larger variety of material to pull from.

Because editing is so important to me in my future professional life, an explanation of my personal editing philosophy will hopefully illuminate my process with

any project but more importantly how it applies to my thesis film *Tears At Dawn* (Appendix C).

Within 2 days of wrapping our first shooting week in February, I cut a 60 sec. Teaser to show my cast and crew. I showed the teaser in Studio 4D (with some Ruby's BBQ) and the year long process was validated as faces lit up and I could sense a feeling of accomplishment and pride in the cast and crew. Aaron Alexander, our hero, asked me for a web-friendly file so "I can watch it every night before I go to sleep." I felt strong and ready to tackle the task of piecing the movie together. Earlier I was nervous about shooting over the course of a couple months for the first time in my young career, but I welcomed the challenge of getting back on set and completing the picture.

While students and friends celebrated the activity of South By Southwest, I was in my apartment making the first cut of the film. We turned in the equipment on the Monday of spring break in March. After a 5:30am rise on the following day, I had a completed cut of the film by 11PM CST.

Because I have experience editing film, the first cut was an economical 15 minutes. It was working well, but I realized that we failed to shoot an establishing shot for the warehouse scene in the middle of the movie. We didn't understand geographically how Arthur made it from the hotel to the next location. Because of weather limitations we also failed to grab a shot of Mya Orange chasing after an ice cream truck to re-enforce the important point that she left the apartment to get some ice cream and did not return. It

was apparent that a pickup shoot was necessary to indicate a passage of time as well as clarify geographical landmarks along the journey.

What decreased the run-time was cutting several beats from the major fight scene at the climax of the movie. I was nervous about telling Hector that we would have to sacrifice several beats to the fight scene, but he understood the process and was on the same page as I about doing whatever was best for the final picture.

The foley process for that fight scene, though demanding, gave me a newfound appreciation for the art of sound in movies. I had options to make sounds naturalistic or exaggerated, and through ADR I learned that adding specific lines in particular areas of the movie gave clarity to the narrative and helped with the pacing of the editing. We added a line in the coffee shop scene that references Dallas, the main villain. I realized that his name is only brought up 8 minutes into the movie, in a very important conversation about the situation Mya Orange finds herself in. I didn't want the audience to be distracted at that point by asking themselves "Who's Dallas?" when the content of the rest of her monologue is so important in understanding the situation at hand. In that scene I re-recorded her explanation to simplify what she is saying for a viewer watching the film.

In the later stages of post-production I entertained the idea of changing the chronological order of the film so that we start with a bang in the hotel room. Because viewers had issues with the linear order of events, I reasoned it would be a novel trick to

distract them from this displaced feeling. After trying it I quickly realized that doing such a thing only complicated matters, and I recalled action movies like *Die Hard*, *The Rock*, and others that function on a linear level. I meditated on this fact that in the action genre stories are more or less told in a straightforward way, while dramas and multiple perspective movies like *21 Grams* and *Traffic* function in a non-linear way because they offer multiple subjective points of view. After the pickup shoot, these original holes were filled and the film suddenly worked completely the way I had imagined.

Distribution

Tears at Dawn will be submitted to genre-friendly festivals in the United States. The current dream would be to premiere the film at Fantastic Fest, “the geek film Telluride” that takes place every fall in Austin. I am targeting the Austin Film Festival, South by Southwest, and a few specific festivals out of town with the express goals of finding a genre producer as well as generate interest in agency representation as a director or a feature film expansion of the idea. I currently have a feature draft written, and plan on revising the draft over the summer.

Reflection

This film was a demanding roller-coaster. However, I am excited that I’m reaching a maturity in my work where anxiety is replaced by a restless desire to push myself and my work harder. I discovered that I love the process of making genre films. Instead of dreading what could go wrong or how I could fail in my attempt, I looked

forward to going to set every day and having fun.

Tears at Dawn is the end of a trilogy of sorts of family-related films. My initial graduate film *KNUCKLEBALL* was about a boy with an undying dream of playing professional baseball and his cash-strapped father finding new hope through his son's unshakeable resilience. *Housebreaking* was about a son-in-law trapped within his extended family, so he hires a criminal to rob his father-in-law with the hopes that he could escape his desperate circumstances. *Tears at Dawn* follows along the trajectory of my Graduate School output: the films have been about fractured family units that come together in times of extreme stress. The films also have assets at their core that heightens the conflict and drama of the individual situations: in *KNUCKLEBALL* and *Housebreaking* it was about money being the subtextual source of freedom and comfort, but both teaching moral lessons about the true importance of family and being accepted within a group paradigm.

I never realized that the kidnapped child in *Tears At Dawn* is essentially a physical asset that is similar to the monetary desires of the first two films. Arthur Orange is Mya's brother, tasked with the heavy responsibility of being her guardian and father figure. In a certain respect he has possession of her as a human being at this stage of her life. I think this adds a certain degree of poignancy to the proceedings; while we as an audience are able to get behind a man who wants to re-unite his family, she technically serves as a commodity and goal for our hero to journey towards recovering.

I have been fortunate in the past two years to be surrounded by creative minds that challenge my expectations and inspire me to continuously re-evaluate my craft. Two years ago I was very much unsure of my ability to contribute to the highly regarded graduate program at UT-Austin. When I was ultimately accepted after enduring the wait-list limbo, I felt an immediate pull not to take it for granted. I began in earnest working on my own and other films, to look inside story and shorts and identify the parts that make them work.

My peers have trusted me with the large responsibility of communicating their vision in post-production as well as in key crew roles, and I feel my experience and ability have tripled in such a short amount of time.

I am reaching a point in my creative life when I am becoming increasingly confident in my abilities to tell thoughtful and entertaining stories. And the key to that, I've learned, is to throw myself and my feelings completely onto the screen. Frankly, it's a terrifying prospect. But I've been delighted to watch audiences revel in that presence and vulnerability of a deeply felt story. The learning never stops and I'm a committed lifelong student of cinema as I continue to develop my voice and understand the nuances of my craft. However, what I will take away most from the experience in the program is the wellspring of support and encouragement to reach beyond myself and attempt to try something truly ambitious. I wholeheartedly believe I accomplished that goal with *Tears At Dawn*.



Appendix A: Original Treatment

February 2012, Richard Lewis' Producing Course

ACT I

SALINA, KS - 3 AM

Eddie & LaRoy - two truck drivers - sit in a dingy interstate diner, clawing at oozing slices of cherry pie. They talk about their travels and the precious cargo that Eddie is carrying in the back of his 18-wheeler. Eddie is so ahead of schedule, he'll splurge on a shitty hotel room for the night.

In the background, a bell clanks and an African-American teenager enters the diner wearing a teal hooded sweatshirt. This is ARTHUR (18). A bulletin board covered in crude Xerox missing person flyers loom behind Arthur as he stands anxiously, watching the two truckers for what feels like an eternity. A waitress interrupts his gaze, offering him a menu. He shakes his head and leaves.

*

A row of colorful trucks sleep under a full moon. Arthur's dark skin glows amber beneath a streetlight. He sharply inhales a cloud of smoke into his lungs as he spikes the cigarette to the pavement and charges towards the hotel room.

Arthur punts the door open and Eddie leaps out of bed. Arthur shoves him up against a wall.

“Give me the keys!”

Eddie, startled, looks down and notices “U.S.M.C.” branded on Arthur’s right wrist. The trucker plays innocent, tells Arthur not to “kill the messenger,” and tells him he’ll get the keys, which glisten under a lamp nearby.

Arthur loosens his grasp and Eddie’s arm moves past the keys, only to grab the lamp and swing it against Arthur’s head! A grenade-blast of pain stabs his temples. The room snaps to the color of the Eddie’s soul. They wrestle in darkness, climaxing with the abrupt sound of blade to flesh.

*

Arthur stands at the back of the truck, blood trickling down his hairline. He notices immediately that none of the keys correspond with the custom lock. He enters the cab and searches around by flashlight: a map and GPS device on the seat, empty soda cups.

He probes under the seat and pulls out a crowbar.

It’s then he hears faint patting behind him. He walks back to the makeshift bedroom behind the cab and finds a slot, which he slowly opens.

Inside he finds 2...4...8 pairs of frightened eyes piercing through the darkness.

“Help us,” one of the girls gasps.

“Mya?” Arthur questions firmly. He looks around, but can’t see into the dark truck bed. He explains to the eyes in the back. “I’m looking for my sister.”

“She’s not here.” says one. “Help us,” pleads another. “We’ll help you find her.”

He nods and leaves the truck, crowbar in hand. He slams the door, which catches the attention of LaRoy in the distance, smoking a cigarette. LaRoy remembers to himself what Eddie was talking about earlier.

“Precious cargo...”

Arthur begins to pry away at the lock in the back before LaRoy comes around the corner with a hard right haymaker, assuming he’s a thief. He mounts Arthur for another strike, but his next punch collides against the cool steel crowbar.

In his moment of extreme pain Arthur grabs him by his denim jacket and yanks him to the left, slamming his head against the back bumper of the truck. He stands to his feet and with a swift downward motion slashes the bar against LaRoy’s head.

He wipes the blood off the crowbar using LaRoy's shirt. He stands. His nostrils flare and his shoulders swell with confidence. Something that might be mistaken for a grin emerges on his lips.

He puts the keys into the ignition and the 18-wheeled behemoth growls. The truck lurches forward before roaring down Interstate 70, heading east.

ACT II

MANHATTAN, KS – 6:00AM

The day breaks against the picturesque Flint Hills of Kansas. A dense layer of fog sweeps over the tall grass, waving lazily in the breeze. The expansive sky is an electric swirl of dripping colors, like orange and strawberry sherbet melted together.

Tom and Jerry walk out of a building that looks half-barn/half-warehouse, wiping the sleep from their eyes. They see the 18-wheeler parked on the shoulder of the highway. They frown to one another and walk toward it.

When they find the cab empty, they peer into the fog. They begin walking in opposite directions.

Tom squints and sees a faint, blurry patch of teal and walks towards it. 20 feet later, it disappears. He hears the grass sway. He swallows hard. He looks back towards the building, and is yanked down into the tall grass.

A few moments later Arthur stands and walks directly towards Jerry, tapping him on the back. Jerry swings and misses and Arthur eggs him on, toying with him. He throws the crowbar aside and clenches his fists. They exchange blows and Arthur overwhelms him with a flurry of punches. Arthur sneers with menace, before looking up and finding 4 men walk out of the warehouse.

Arthur marches across the highway to meet the group head on in the parking lot. Over the course of the big fight scene, Arthur is stabbed but emerges the last man standing.

Arthur limps inside the building where he finds a generic farm equipment storefront. He walks through a door to the back. His eyes flare with shock.

He walks up a row of bound, petrified girls with their mouths taped shut. He marches with purpose, holding out a Polaroid picture and analyzing faces.

The eyes of one girl – a little older than the others – twinkle with recognition. He pulls the tape off her mouth. She weakly explains.

“She’s at the birthday party... Dallas...”

Arthur gestures for her not to speak. “Help the others,” he says, bristling at the thought that he was more distant from his sister than he initially imagined.

He removes her from her zip-tied restraints and she proceeds to release the other girls while Arthur searches through a small desk. He finds a calendar with “Lisa's Birthday Party” circled on every Monday of the month.

He looks through a date book and on the first page he sees “Dallas” and instantly recognizes that Dallas is a person, not a place. He rips out the page, which contains a home address.

KANSAS CITY – 1:30PM

The 18-wheeler moans to a stop in a verdant suburban neighborhood. Arthur approaches the front door and looks inside. Darkness. He hears music in the distance, faint.

He hears a familiar voice; Mya’s voice.

He walks around the side of the house and finds Mya (5) and Lisa (5) playing together in the backyard. Dallas walks into the backyard, a big man with a flat top haircut. He asks Lisa if she's having fun. Lisa says she can't wait until her next birthday party next week, not understanding the logic of birthdays.

She says she doesn't want to “invite anyone new next time,” either. She wants Mya to be her party guest for the immediate future.

Dallas, ever the doting father, nods. He says he’s going to get the cake and turns towards the house, where he locks eyes with Arthur, who is watching. He nods towards the house.

Arthur walks right in through the front door and immediately the two fight like Gods. They tumble through the living room in a blur of chaos, Arthur always to have the upper hand. He holds Dallas down and hears the sliding door open behind him. He's about to finish him, but...

He sees Lisa in the doorway. Mya follows closely behind.

“Arthur!” Mya exclaims, relieved. Her face looks at his blood-slicked hoodie and her expression sours.

Dallas senses Arthur's hesitation – he’s dividing a family to reassemble his own. Dallas turns into negotiator, asking how much it will cost him.

“To keep me quiet after I get her back?”

“No, to keep the girl.” He grunts in reply. A wad of blood is expelled from his lips. “My daughter gets what she wants.”

ACT III

Arthur kills Dallas.

Lisa shrieks and runs from the room. Arthur's fists press into cream colored carpet and tears stream to his eyes.

Mya runs up and hugs him and the camera circles around them in their tender, reuniting moment. The camera travels around twice and on the third time Lisa re-enters the scene.

Lisa watches Arthur weep into his sister's arms and quietly mourns, sobbing to herself. She lifts a shaky hand.

Her hand is wielding a gun.

Appendix B: Final Shooting Script

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Smoke swirls around ARTHUR ORANGE (19), an imposing African American man, as he cooks dinner on the stove.

Chopchopchopchopchop. Arthur dices through celery with stunning accuracy and skill.

Sweat dots his forehead. His eyes are trained with deep focus on his task.

4 letters brand his trunk-like wrist:

U - S - M - C

MYA ORANGE (8) stands watching nearby. Arthur looks at her and drags his blade across the cutting board, nudging a few celery pieces in her direction.

MYA

I don't like celery.

ARTHUR

Nobody likes celery.

She takes a piece and pops it in her mouth, chewing slowly like a cow gnawing on its cud.

We HEAR the sound of an ICE CREAM TRUCK outside.

Mya looks at Arthur.

Arthur puts down a chicken breast and drives through it with a butcher's knife.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

No.

MYA

Arthurr--

ARTHUR

I'm making us dinner!

Beat.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

No.

Mya storms into a nearby room and slams the door behind her. Arthur is unphased.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Arthur's bedroom is a mess. Clothes and weights strewn about.

The sound of the ice cream truck gets closer as Mya digs in the pockets of a pair of Arthur's jeans, hanging from a chair.

She finds TWO QUARTERS.

She weighs them in her palm.

She looks back and then proceeds to climb out of the window, chasing down the ICE CREAM TRUCK.

The truck lurches to a halt in the street.

EXT. HOTEL PARKING LOT, NIGHT

The ice cream truck sleeps under a full moon as crickets drone a measured refrain.

Arthur stands beneath a street-light nearby, his TEAL HOODIE glowing amber on the edges.

He draws a large cloud of cigarette smoke into his lungs and gazes into the big windows of a sleepy interstate diner.

Watching.

INT. SLEEPY INTERSTATE DINER - 1AM

Fluorescent lights hum. A waitress floats through the cafe like a ghost, reviving cups of coffee and taking orders from the handful of truck drivers in for the night.

EDDIE (34) sits at the counter, catching the attention of the passing waitress.

WAITRESS

Don't think anyone has use for an ice cream man this time of night. Trouble at home?

EDDIE

It's fine. I'll get me a queen sized bed next door, watch some cute little thing get back at daddy on TV, you know.

WAITRESS

You're an animal Eddie.

Eddie sneers through the rising steam of his coffee cup, caressing the side of it slowly with his thumb.

EDDIE

Sugar, you don't know the half of it.

In the far distance through the large cafe windows, our focus shifts to ARTHUR, who disappears behind the ice cream truck.

EDDIE (CONT'D)

When do you get off?

WAITRESS

10 minutes.

EDDIE

When do we get off?

WAITRESS

Eddie!

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

BOOM! Arthur punts open the motel room door.

Eddie leaps out of bed. The WAITRESS falls out of the side of the bed and shrinks into the corner.

Arthur yanks Eddie around and shoves him against the open door frame.

ARTHUR

WHERE IS SHE?!

Eddie's eyes look like full moons.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

You should have changed the jingle.

Arthur swings a knee into his gut and Eddie falls to the ground. A coughing chuckle comes from Eddie's lips.

He goes to the ground and straddles Eddie, choking him with a left hand as grunts and groans emanate from the television as a pornographic film plays in the background.

Arthur shoves A PHOTOGRAPH in Eddie's face.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

I'm looking for my sister--

His voice quakes.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

I was told you were the man to see.

Eddie nods, his eyes moving to the waitress, then back to his assailant.

Arthur reaches back for another powerful strike but Eddie's arms shoot up to defend his face, painted with sweat.

EDDIE

(gasping)

Oke--Okay! She's might be at the warehouse. There's a map in my van. I can get you the keys. Just, please. Stop.

Eddie walks over, opens a drawer and fishes around.

Keys rattle.

EDDIE (CONT'D)

I'm really sorry about all this.

Eddie looks back at Arthur, nervous.

His hand quickly flees the drawer. He snatches the lamp and swivels around, swinging it against Arthur's head!

A grenade blast of pain stabs Arthur's temples as he falls onto the bed, BLOOD streaming down his hairline.

The two wrestle on the floor of the dim room, the television providing the only light.

Eddie lands 3 thunderous punches to Arthur's face. Blood sparks from his nostrils.

Arthur grabs Eddie's shirt and headbutts him with sickening force.

He reaches to his side and twirls a knife end over end and thrusts it under Eddie's ribcage.

A sick growling gasp escapes Eddie's lips as he collapses onto Arthur's chest.

Arthur goes to the end table and grabs the keyring, with a large metal "D" keychain on it, his sweatshirt smeared with BLOOD.

EXT. PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Arthur opens the back hatch of the ICE CREAM TRUCK.

He finds 3 bound girls between 16-18, sitting in front of the freezers, handkerchiefs tied over their mouths.

He climbs inside and closes the hatch behind him.

He turns on an LED flashlight.

The girls squirm at his presence. He is frantic. He casts light onto a photograph of his sister Mya.

ARTHUR

Have you seen her? Her name is Mya.

Their faces are blank.

He hustles to the front of the truck. His eyes scan: a map, a GPS device, empty soda cups.

A coordinate is starred on the map.

The girls eye him suspiciously when he returns.

GIRL

Are you taking us to DALLAS?

He unties one of the girls. She leaps into his arms in a tight hug.

He stands there, arms limp at his sides.

She stands back and sees blood streaming down the side of his face. She reaches up to touch his cheek.

GIRL (CONT'D)

You're hurt...

Arthur turns away.

ARTHUR

Go to the office right now and call the police.

Tell them he's in Room 28.

Without another word he gently ushers them out the back.

GIRL

Thank you--

Arthur slams the back door.

SOUND MATCH TO

INT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Arthur searches in a messy back office. Not finding anything of use he moves to the ...

INT. STORAGE ROOM - NIGHT

Arthur carefully walks into the room.

Bells from the door knob jingle. His head snaps to the sound. His pace quickens.
Someone might've been alerted of his presence.

There are a ROW OF COTS in the room.

SHELBY (O.S.)

(groggy)

Who are you?

A girl rises from the seat of a carriage where she is napping.

ARTHUR

Arthur Orange. Who are you?

SHELBY

You aren't supposed to be here.

Shelby sees the BLOOD on his sweatshirt.

He hands her the photo.

SHELBY (CONT'D)

Mya?

Arthur turns cold.

ARTHUR

Where is she?

SHELBY

At a birthday party.

His face questions, puzzled.

SHELBY (CONT'D)

Dallas spoils his daughter. Throws her a birthday party every week and she comes her to pick a guest. It always used to be me. Then she came along.

She throws the picture back at him in disgust.

SHELBY (CONT'D)

They had a pony last time.

ARTHUR

Where is Dallas?

She looks down. Can't tell him. Arthur thinks of something to say. He leans in closely.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

You know, whenever I get lonely, I go see my friend in the country. He has a couple lonely horses that could use some friends.

Shelby: A hint of a smile.

EXT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Arthur crawls beneath the door and closes it behind him.

He looks up and finds 6-8 FIGHTERS.

LARGE ELABORATE FIGHT SCENE.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Sausage-like fingers sweep across a close shaven flat top, revealing DALLAS (58).

He stands at a stove, grunting with fatigue as his spatula flips eggs lazily. Bacon sizzles in an adjacent skillet.

LISA (7) and MYA sit at a nearby table, drawing pictures with crayons.

DALLAS

You girls have fun last night?

LISA

Yeah!

A long pause. Dallas' groggy eyes rise to the ceiling.

DALLAS

Mya?

A moment passes.

DALLAS (CONT'D)

Mya?

Then another.

WHAM! His hand slams down on the stove top.

MYA

Yes! Yes...

Dallas scoffs. He turns around and grips the spatula, flinging fragments of HOT eggs at Mya, some of which stick to her hair.

DALLAS

Enjoy your breakfast.

Lisa shrinks slightly as he gracefully leans in and delicately sets a well-adorned plate of food in front of her, noiseless. He bends over to kiss her on the top of her head.

DALLAS (CONT'D)

Happy Birthday, angel.

Lisa looks over to Mya and smiles, sheepish.

LISA

My birthday party will be better this week. Right, daddy?

DALLAS

Yes, sweet pea.

The phone rings. Dallas picks it up.

The speaker of the phone emits sparks of constant static.

Dallas stands a minute.

DALLAS (CONT'D)

Hello?

He taps the receiver down on the stove.

Mya looks up at Dallas from the floor beneath the table, where she is picking up pieces of scrambled eggs from the dirty linoleum and eating them quietly.

He lifts the phone to his ear and the static ceases.

Beat.

The ICE CREAM JINGLE begins to play into his ear.

CLICK.

Dallas' face turns white. Mya's eyes follow him as he walks to the living room.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Dallas walks into the center of the room and through the sheer curtains can see the ICE CREAM TRUCK sitting outside.

LISA

Daddy? When can I open my presents?

DALLAS

Take Mya to your room.

LISA

Who's that?

Dallas puts his palms on the backs of both girls and hurriedly guides them up the stairs. Lisa's mind wanders. A smile.

LISA (CONT'D)

Did you get me a clown, daddy?

DALLAS

Yes, honey--

CRASSSSHHH!

Glass shatters loudly behind them.

Lisa shrieks.

Mya's eyes widen with surprise.

Dallas pushes them into the master bedroom.

LISA

What's going on, daddy?

Dallas reaches into a drawer and pulls out a REVOLVER.

DALLAS

You girls stay here. I'll come back and get you.

LISA

I'm scared.

Dallas smiles, panicked.

DALLAS

Dry those tears little lady! I won't let anything ruin your Birthday.

Lisa nods timidly as Dallas looks over to Mya with a cold, smug frown.

Dallas paces carefully down the hallway, quietly cocking the hammer back on his revolver.

He takes slow, measured steps down the stairs, holding the gun with both hands away from his body.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

In the living room, Arthur waits around the corner, wielding a knife.

Dallas lunges forward and Arthur swings around with his knife, tearing it across the tops of Dallas' wrist.

BANG!

The gun is fired against the opposite wall.

The girls squeal helplessly upstairs.

Dallas drops his gun and Arthur drives him through the glass door of an entertainment unit, where a stack of birthday presents are stacked.

Arthur's fists pound into Dallas' cheeks like bricks falling from the heavens.

Dallas' neck turns away from the onslaught, and sees the various birthday gifts strewn about the broken glass.

Arthur's heart is raging and he pants, straddling Dallas, trying to calm his burning heart.

DALLAS

You'd be wise not to fuck with a businessman's inventory.

Dallas' hand is probing, passing over a piece of jagged glass.

DALLAS (CONT'D)

She's gonna cost you a little more than your lunch money, kid.

Dallas clutches the ragged piece of glass and tears it into Arthur's side! Arthur chokes slightly as Dallas pushes him off and scrambles towards the kitchen.

Arthur extracts the glass blade and blood begins to soak through his teal hoodie. He limps in earnest behind Dallas.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Dallas rambles into the kitchen on his hands and knees.

He reaches up for a fork on the table, but Arthur intercepts him. Dallas' hands sweep over the table, the girls' drawings fluttering in the air and landing next to them.

Dallas hand moves out towards one of them, but Arthur wields his knife and stakes his hand to the ground with one powerful downward thrust!

Dallas shouts in horror. His eyes, now dizzy with subtle shock, drift over to a drawing.

Arthur looks too and sees what Mya was drawing, a rendering of her big brother, teal hoodie and all.

Dallas spits a wad of blood onto the picture.

Arthur yanks the knife out of the ground and Dallas chokes him with his bulky arm. Dallas pries the knife loose, and Arthur squirms out from under his grip.

Arthur shrinks back and Dallas waves the knife at him, threatening. He grunts and climbs to his feet, backing Arthur into the living room.

DALLAS

Murdering a little girl's daddy on her birthday. Hell of a birthday present.

He slashes weakly with the knife but Arthur sidesteps it.

Arthur staggers back. Dallas charges with the knife.

In an instant Arthur grabs a pillow from the couch and sidesteps the advancing knife like a matador as it tears into the pillow.

Feathers explode from the cushion and waft, settling like snowflakes on the plush carpeting.

Arthur drives Dallas into a wall, causing the wall to crack under his weight. He backs off and meets Dallas' face with hard fists.

Dallas goes unconscious and Arthur continues his fury with a series of relentless punches.

Arthur punching continues far past the point of being useful. It's a familiar voice nearby that breaks him from the excessive punishment.

MYA

ARTHUR!!!

Arthur looks over his shoulder and finds his sister floating slowly towards him.

The camera slowly does a 360-degree circle around the re-united siblings as they clutch each other in a panicked embrace.

Arthur looks back in horror at Dallas' mangled body. Mya looks, and begins backing away from Arthur slowly.

Terrified.

His tear-stained eyes glance up into the barrel of Dallas' gun, wielded by his LISA nearby.

Her hand is shaky, burdened by the weight of the gun, but her eyes are fierce in their scowl.

LISA

You ruined my birthday.

Arthur drops his head.

He expects the gun to go off at any moment.

But it never does.

Mya grabs the gun, the barrel bobbing precariously at Arthur. Mya eventually wrenches it away, handing it to Arthur.

Lisa crawls over to a gift with frayed wrapping paper and hugs it to her chest.

LISA (CONT'D)

You ruined my birthday!

INT/EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD/ICE CREAM TRUCK - MORNING

The door slams as Arthur and Mya sit in the front seat.

Arthur is battered, bruised, bloody.

ARTHUR

Let's go home.

MYA

Can we go get some ice cream?

Beat. Arthur sighs.

ARTHUR

Why not.

The van roars to life.

TEARS AT DAWN.

Appendix C: Editing Philosophy

“Short Cuts” - Published in *Moviescope* #29 (July-August 2012)

Anyone who has made a short film will appreciate that it demands a different approach to making a full-length feature. Here, award-winning filmmaker Jordan Kerfeld presents his personal guide to editing short fiction films.

Shorts editing boils down to a deceptively simple discipline: tell me a good story efficiently. Attack the last three words of that sentence individually – how can I do justice to them with this footage, for this project, right now?

While feature films allow one to explore complicated thematic issues and character, the strong short film is about articulating *one* clear idea. Audiences are typically confused by alternative storylines and dangling threads that are introduced but are not resolved. Furthermore, short films with multiple objectives and narrative threads that are resolved can dramatically diffuse the overall impact of the piece.

“What is the idea driving this short film?” If more than one comes to mind, I immediately look to eliminate the weakest ones. Usually this is already discovered as the script is executed on set, but sometimes leads to uncomfortable conversations with directors in the editing room about scenes and activities that serve purposes other than advancing the story.

“Can the film as a whole function without this scene, this line?” Many director-editors will opt to leave in extraneous details that weigh down their films. Every minute, second, frame is precious in a short. Make each one count.

The editing discipline exists under two large umbrellas. The first is an understanding of *when* to cut, which is rhythm, timing, whatever-I’m-calling-it-this-week so that people can see that, yes, what they are watching has been indeed touched by an editor. The second, and most compelling, discipline is *what* to cut out of the provided audio/video materials. And that usually means liberally discarding the provided audio/video materials.

It took me a long time to understand that the road to telling compelling stories is usually by a process of subtraction, by having the courage to eliminate entire scenes if they don’t service the narrative, but also this idea of building unimagined dialogue/moments from scratch. Much dialogue is completely unnecessary for narrative purposes. It’s a character-building tool, and it’s easy to get carried away.

While we can easily digest the self-reflexive editing spectacle of a Michael Bay film, how stories unfold is an abstract practice, a magic trick, a sleight of hand that is felt everywhere but elusive in its identification. The second discipline (the what-to-cut) requires a strict and ruthless sense of narrative economy, all contributing factors to ultimately figuring out why I’m doing what I’m doing—which I will never, ever, *ever* fully understand.

Performance is my primary focus as an editor. Make actors look their best even if the script didn't give them anything to do. Many a "bad performance" can be attributed to an unfocused/unclear/improperly-executed script. We can see the actor on the screen, and in consequence they pay for the sins of the writer and director. They're totally naked up there. My job is to protect them.

If we are immersed and invested in what's happening on the screen, we will ultimately ignore continuity errors, un-matched action, etc. In fact, the reversal is that you may be wildly praised for your decision-making: "The footage looks beautiful! (but you shot it on an SD camera in soft focus)" or "Wow, what great dialogue! (When the line would be ridiculous on paper)." Both are credits to execution in directing and editing. But the latter has the distinct power to elevate and enhance the former in unimaginable ways.

I try at every opportunity to define characters through dramatic action, glances, and non-verbal activities. I've found that dialogue alone is a poor substitute for character. Ignore soft focus, exposure problems, and continuity errors. The best/most interesting performance should go in the movie 90% of the time. Learn to let go. Editing the short film is NOT about following a script beat-by-beat. The work suffers when director-editors try to mechanically weave every line, camera angle, location, and sequence of shots to match the tidy imagined film that has been projected in his/her head.

One finds salvation with time and an open mind. I can only edit the material in front of me so I must be ready to make radical and bold decisions that draw out the best

in the material and challenge my initial expectations. I constantly have to remind myself to have the patience to let the footage transport me to unexpected and rewarding places.

Our lives are defined by disorder. I prefer to edit scenes in a way in which conveys important story material but does not resolve cleanly. To me, interest is generated when one can build tension and conflict in a scene and then flee from it to the next while making it seem somewhat resolved.

I've discovered that continuity and match action editing are grossly overrated. I think the reason people are "pulled out" of a movie due to continuity/performance is because a) they have seen the film more than once and have begun to scrutinize the images they are being presented (which is a highly presumptuous expectation for a shorts filmmaker) or b) the film has been executed improperly – on paper, in the performance, and in the overall makeup of the character. If those three things are being effectively communicated, continuity mistakes will be ignored.

Simply, when an audience isn't hooked by the story, their attention naturally drifts from the creative world and lingers on the technical/mechanical aspects of the movie.

Deliberately slow pacing passed off under the guise of "style" is a Hail Mary pass that rides on the hope that a scene will somehow be – if the audience manages to stay awake – more emotionally affecting. Pregnant pauses for effect are the last resort of the M.I.A. Editor, unless it was decided before production, and even then, it doesn't hurt to question its impact when translated to the screen.

Never forget the format. It's a short film. Life gets infinitely more difficult with every minute above 10. Make them wish the film were longer, not the other way around.