



Blood Relations Senior Thesis Film

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BLOOD RELATIONS

SENIOR THESIS FILM

By

GREGORY ALEXANDER CASTRO

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College

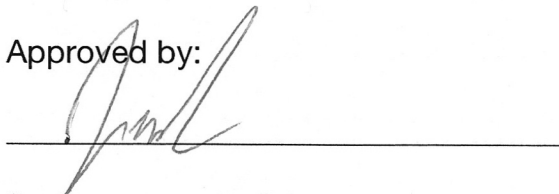
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree
With Honors In

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Approved by:



Professor Jacob Bricca
Department of Film & Television Production

ABSTRACT

WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW, UNLESS THAT'S BORING

The common advice given to any budding filmmaker is to keep their work grounded in their own experiences. This is completely reasonable, and most often leads to higher quality, distinct student films. If students didn't do this, then half of any given thesis filmmaking class would likely produce Lynch-ian knock-offs while the other half aped Spielberg. Occasionally, however, this filmmaking mantra "Write what you know," needs to be tweaked, worked around. Sometimes, "What you know," is actually somewhat common.

As my granddad used to say to me, "You want to be a writer? You need to be creative for that. All you have to write about is petting your dog." This may have been oversimplifying, but there was some truth at the heart of it. A twenty something white male from Overland Park, Kansas feels loneliness, disillusionment, jealousy, longing, angst. These feelings usually lend themselves to screenplays about surrogates for said white male ultimately finding love and an amazing sex life. Not exactly the stuff of Oscar winning short films.

So write what you know, but maybe add a twist. My thesis is about loneliness, disillusionment, longing and grandfathers. It's also about cannibalism.

Please watch the film by clicking the following link:

<https://youtu.be/4JPeWFT6sww>

If there are any problems, please email Greg Castro at gacastro@email.arizona.edu

- or call at (913) 787-3031.

Artist's statement below.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

DEVELOPING THE IDEA

During the summer of 2015 I was lucky enough to score two internships in Los Angeles, one working for Trigger Street Productions in the downtown area, the other for BBC Los Angeles in Century City. I knew that I would need to begin developing my thesis film around July, but I had received some quality advice from my professors to hold off on committing to any one idea until after I'd had three months of experiences in LA. Not only would I have more to write about, but also I'd have more experience reading screenplays and learning what worked on the page and what didn't.

This advice proved useful, though come July I had about ten different screenplays swirling around inside my head, and wasn't particularly thrilled about any of them. Probably my biggest fear was that I would commit to an idea and then be bored of it before I even hit pre-production. But I also had certain criteria that I wanted to fit. I'd picked up a lot of ideas about what makes a great short film in the previous semester, most especially from Roberta Marie Monroe's *How Not to Make a Short Film: Secrets from a Sundance Programmer*.

Monroe lays out a variety of useful tips, but two in particular stuck with me:

1. "It's extremely difficult to nail a period piece with millions of dollars...so your film...is set up to fail...miserably."
2. "The short film is successful economical storytelling."

Put more simply, these two pieces of advice mean that your short film better not be too ambitious, and it better, above all else, be short. This ruled out that feminist

western I had in my back pocket, and it certainly meant I wasn't going to try and cram my idea about a youth choir president who has visions of gay Biblical characters into the twelve minutes allotted me. I needed something that would fit the time, but be satisfying and distinct nonetheless.

The answer came one afternoon at the BBC where I was tasked with putting together a research binder on famed Edwardian horror writer HP Lovecraft. Most Hollywood horror films owe this author in one form or another, and I myself had been a fan of his work throughout high school. As I went about my research, I was surprised to find that many of Lovecraft's early stories are now in the public domain. Even better, a lot of his pre-1922 works are quite succinct, lasting only a couple of pages. Furiously, I began to comb the archives for a tale that could be adapted into a thesis film.

Ultimately I arrived at *The Picture In The House*, a short story about a bicyclist on a lonely country road who pulls into an old man's cabin when it begins to rain, only to find that the geezer has taken up the unusual habit of eating people. I thought the cannibalism twist was fun, and a trope that is almost always effective. Some of my favorite movies and video games such as *The Road*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Fallout 3* use cannibalism as the ultimate horror to be discovered by characters whilst on their dark night of the soul.

The problem was that viewers have seen cannibalism countless times before, and Lovecraft's 1920s sensibilities don't exactly translate well for a modern audience. I decided to move away from the story that inspired my idea, and instead create my own modern Tucson, Arizona version of the cannibal story.

WRITING THE SCREENPLAY

When trying to make the story my own, I considered the words of my junior film professor, who encouraged me to distance myself from writing about people my age, as that's something all film students do. He pointed out that I could immediately distinguish myself by writing about children, the middle aged, or the elderly. I sure as hell wasn't going to write about children, so I began to distinguish myself junior year by writing and directing a short fiction film following an old married couple on vacation.

On Vacation, Waiting to Die won Best Film and Best Actress (and a nifty cash prize) at Independent Film Arizona's 2015 Awards, which encouraged me to try and continue to focus on the elderly for my senior film. I feel confident channeling the voices of characters that age, as I grew up with both sets of grandparents as babysitters, my mother's parents being stern Midwesterners and my father's being a couple of fiery Cuban immigrants. I couldn't really imagine a story in which the old people weren't already cannibals though (we're all a slave to tropes), and so I quickly decided that my protagonist needed to be a young woman who discovers that her beloved grandpa has an unusual diet.

Luckily, before I left LA to return to Tucson, I was able to attend a double feature screening at the Egyptian Theatre of Stewart Gordon's horror classics *Re-Animator* and *From Beyond*. Both of these films also happen to be based on HP Lovecraft short stories. Gordon was in attendance, and provided insight on his own process:

"With *Re-Animator*, we wanted to make a film that shocked people, but I think too we wanted to make something fun. You can't take severed heads too seriously."

Something about his confidence and the fact that *Re-Animator* had just received uproariously positive audience response inspired me to try and get my own film to operate in a similar space; I wanted it to be scary, but I wanted people to know it was okay to laugh during it as well.

Once back in Tucson, I steadily worked my way through about the first six drafts with the aid of my first Capstone professor, which is the point at which I began to truly realize that this project would truly serve as a culmination of all I had learned in the program up to that point, and as a thesis for The Honors College. Casually interested students write maybe three drafts of a screenplay; by the time we began production, I had produced 15 drafts, some of them nearly identical, some of them almost completely different.

Through this process I eventually came to the realization that I wasn't truly adapting the Lovecraft story any longer, but that the project had instead evolved into something wholly my own. This was at once both encouraging and a little disappointing; having something completely original is always ideal, but the prestige and challenge of adapting Lovecraft had been what initially motivated my interest in the story.

Diana, as our protagonist came to be called, went through a wide range of events. In one draft, she was possessed by the spirit of an ancient Mayan god and became a cannibal. In another, she was nearly sacrificed to the old gods by a date-turned-sour. In yet another draft, she ate her mom. It was all fun, but mostly too big, too dark and too familiar. The grandfather idea endured as being the most unique and authentic to my experiences.

PRE-PRODUCTION

The scariest part of any short film is the point at which you realize you actually have to go out and make the damned thing. Anything can be written, but not everything can be filmed. Again I turned to Monroe, who devotes a whole chapter to working with a producer, the individual who can help you turn your ideas into a reality. While that sounds nice, the chapter itself is also called “How to Avoid Kicking Your Producer in the Throat,” so clearly the director/producer relationship can be a contentious one.

“The producer on a film, any film, is the most important person involved,” she writes. “...*nothing* happens...without a solid producer overseeing your project.” Now, Monroe in general writes from the perspective of the professional, someone who is probably working in LA or New York and has access to many a working producer. In Tucson such individuals are few and far between, and the ones who will work for free even rarer.

Rather than try and track someone down with experience, I followed another Monroe tenant, and simply picked a friend who I knew would have too much pride in herself and respect for our friendship to let me down. Her name is Cassidy Johnson, a BA in the film and television program, and she helped me throughout pre-production to secure locations, actors, food donations, and a sizeable chunk of the overall budget. She reserved rehearsal spaces, set shooting dates, and coordinated between myself and the Director of Photography, Gilbert Rataczyk, another (very busy) BFA.

As with the screenwriting, pre-production immediately proved itself to be a challenge worthy of an honor's Capstone designation. Again, the casually interested filmmaking student will come up with one, easy to secure location and shoot their entire movie there. Cassidy and I needed four total spaces to shoot the full story: A diner, a morgue, a gothic house exterior and interior. Before settling on our final choices, we visited three morgues, six diners and 60 houses.

For casting we again pushed harder than we had ever before on any project, auditioning about 40-50 young actresses for the role of Diana. There was even some difficulty once we finally decided, as the actress we offered the role to realized she had a conflict and pulled out after we'd already sent rejection emails to all the other girls. I had to call our second choice immediately, and, at Cassidy's urging, pretend like I had really wanted to cast her all along.

The grandfather and mother characters had to be hunted down, as older actors are generally harder to find in a University setting, and beyond that most were none too eager to participate in a grizzly tale of cannibalism. Mark Klugheit, our Grandpa David, is actually one of the top theatre actors in Arizona, and Lisa Sherman, our mother character, had never acted in anything before.

Fundraising was a slow process, with our Indiegogo campaign initially raising a quick \$1,000 due to our clever promo video in which we feasted on suspicious-looking pork. Donations fell off quickly after this however, with our ultimate goal being \$4,000. Consistent Facebook updates, hundreds of emails and a percentage night at a local brewery eventually got us up to \$3,500 however, which would be enough to pay for everything we wanted, at least for production.

Our shooting dates were solidified as November 12th-15th. Professor Skyler approved our pre-production materials and gave us her blessing.

PRODUCTION

Our production could very, very easily fill its own separate ten-page artist's statement. Despite intense planning, an excellent crew and careful attention to safety, our set still experienced myriad difficulties. We had men wander in off the street and start threatening us while shooting at the diner. The morgue lighting wasn't what we thought, and so we had to ask our grandfather actor to stay an extra two hours while we adjusted. His price? We write him a scene in which he was somehow alive and had dialogue with the lead actress.

That scene got written on the fly, and led to the third day of shooting lasting 17 hours. That day also featured our greatest tragedy, with our first back up hard drive failing, leading to the loss of two scenes that hadn't made it onto the second back-up drive yet. This accident would lead to me having to crawl back to the morgue owner and one of the homeowners asking if we could come back to reshoot, and personally cost me a few hundred dollars in equipment rentals and food costs.

Our last day of filming saw us blowing the circuit on our exterior homeowner's porch, right before Christmas when he would want to be putting up lights. It also saw our Assistant Director, ironically the one in charge of safety, stepping off a curb the wrong way and severely twisting her ankle. The ever-ready Cassidy was able to take her to Urgent Care post-haste.

My favorite story however comes from the morgue reshoots, which took place in early December. As we finished for the day and began loading our equipment back into

the U-Haul outside, the Director of Photography hopped onto the top of the truck to secure some long pieces of dolly track. Suddenly, a bright spotlight hit him from above, signaling the arrival of a TPD helicopter. Two squad cars arrived next, with officers hopping out and immediately wanting to know what we were doing on the premises. Apparently, a neighbor had called 911. They thought we were stealing bodies.

And while that alone seems worthy of Capstone designation, there were many artistic concerns throughout that truly led this project into advanced filmmaking territory. Gilbert and I had to come up with lighting schemes for interior and exterior locations with natural, fluorescent, and incandescent light. My production designer, Leah Dajches and I completely stripped the study room in our interior home location and re-dressed it with hundreds of creepy pictures, books, sculptures and other details.

As the director, working with the actors was of course my primary focus. Mark and I had lengthy, disturbing conversations about how exactly his character would have gone about tracking down his victims and eating them, and exactly what it was that drove him to do this in the first place. I had to get Lisa and Paige, the actress playing Diana, into a headspace where they could both shed some tears and I then had to find ways for them to exist in each space that felt natural, but also interesting.

One aspect of pre-production heretofore unmentioned was effects make-up, which went well in the planning stages but didn't show up once we finally got it on camera. That artist, Hannah Sweet, was on standby throughout the climactic scene with cups of blood, ready to re-apply to our victim as needed. There were truly ceaseless details involved in capturing our footage, though needless to say that it was

all only possible through the generous donations of others with their goods, services and time.

POST-PRODUCTION AND BEYOND

After a rather euphoric winter break we returned to begin work on the editing, sound mixing and color for the film. Our professor for the spring, Jacob Bricca, was ready to aid us, but also to push and ensure that we got the most out of our footage. I chose to both edit and do the sound mixing for my film, believing that this was the best way to continue to grow as a filmmaker throughout the semester. I'm proud to say that, to my knowledge, I'm the only one of the filmmakers to have taken on both of those roles on his or her own film.

My general editing strategy was to cut for performance, meaning that I favored shots and angles that allowed me to portray the actors in a specific mode or tone. Overall I found that I had perhaps allowed things to become a bit too dramatic on set, (forgetting my earlier advice from Stewart Gordon), and so I tried to isolate shots that highlighted the humor of the ridiculous situations the characters find themselves in. Through careful trimming and the deletion of one repetitive scene, I was able to take the film's runtime from 15 to 8 minutes, fulfilling Monroe's tenant that a good short film is just that: short.

Most satisfying has been the work on the sound design, which often goes unsung as an avenue through which a filmmaker can exert a significant degree of authorship. My sounds are a combination of live Foley, digital creations and stock effects, leading to a balance of realistic soundscapes as well as rather outlandish, familiar horror aural environments. This work took immense amounts of time, not only

due to the hours spent mixing but also from the basic work of locating and/or capturing the sounds.

The film's composer, Galen McCaw, worked tireless hours of his own writing eight different tracks specifically composed for the film. He also located musicians to play each part, including a string quartet, a pianist, an oboe player and a percussionist. Galen then conducted performances of each piece in the recording studio inside the university's School of Music. This work truly increases the effectiveness of the film by 50%, helping to guide the audience in their relationship to the film.

As we approach finally being finished with this mammoth undertaking and screening it for the public downtown at the Fox Tucson, my primary takeaway as a filmmaker is to realize how, despite my intense work on the project, from the script to the storyboards to the directing, none of it would matter without the contributions of about 100 other people, both creative and logistical. Authorship means nothing if there isn't a small army prepared to help you achieve your vision.

When looking at the final product I feel that we came very close to achieving that vision, if not exactly hitting the bull's-eye. The cannibalism could generally be more consistent thematically and as a visual throughout, and the actors likely could have benefitted from even more of my attention on set. If I could do things over, I would also commit more to the humor of the film, leading to less of an identity crisis within the work. As it stands now, it's pretty funny, and actually pretty disturbing, but it maybe doesn't completely excel at either.

Nothing could make me doubt that the effort was worth it however; everyone involved learned an immeasurable amount, and above all, the thing is actually

entertaining. It started with writing what I know, and ended with a whole lot of movie magic to make that something worth watching. It's a strange, exciting final product.