

SCAFFOLD

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Abstract

Scaffold is a narrative short with structuralist and documentary aspects. Filmed in fragmentary close-up, *Scaffold* stitches together the conversations, interactions, and people-watching that make up the daily grind for two Bosnian-Canadian construction workers. The objective of my film is to present viewpoints of labourers that have travelled from afar to a foreign city to find work. To represent this stylistically, the film will document the process of construction using scaffolding as a framework for depicting immigrant construction workers. It will attempt to capture their essence, character, and idiosyncrasies as strategies to create a uniquely subjective view of the lived experience of their trade. It is my hope to capture the sentiment of a contemporary multicultural city by filtering it through this lens.

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Introduction

In 1895, the Lumiere Brothers pointed the first camera in the history of cinema factory, but a century later, films about work or workers have not emerged as a main genre. Filmmaker Harun Farocki suggests virtually none of the communication that took place in the workplace, whether through words, glances, or gestures, was recorded on film. Aside from a few notable exceptions like John Cassavetes or Frederick Wiseman, work is predominately shown as a source of alienation in social-realist depictions. Through my thesis film at York University, I intended to bridge these ideas by exploring contemporary daily work with a particular focus on marginalized multicultural perspectives.

The objective of my narrative short was to present viewpoints of labourers who have travelled from afar to a foreign city to find work. According to recent study by Fay Faraday, Canada's labour market has undergone a significant shift to rely increasingly on migrant workers who come to Canada from around the globe on time-limited work permits to provide labour. To represent this stylistically, the film documents the process of construction, using scaffolding as a framework for depicting immigrant construction workers. The scaffolding appears as something of poetic object, a temporary structure erected for a specific job. The scaffold, while towering and transformative when built, is never permanent. I attempted to capture the workers' essence, character and idiosyncrasies as strategies to create a uniquely subjective view of their lived experience. It is my hope to capture the character of a contemporary multicultural city by filtering it through this lens. As William James said in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*,

“Knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is made; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time.”

Stylistically, I used modes of experimental film and avant-docs to create aesthetic tensions that capture these experiences. Sound played an important role in establishing auditory space by juxtaposing intimate and atmospheric sounds. The passage of time was crucial to both the narrative and style of the film as it shifts from repetition and routine to moments of meditation. The surrounding neighbourhood was observed, but only from the viewpoint of workers atop the scaffolding, and with the depth of field favouring the point of view of the workers themselves. I intended to film the workers up close and in extreme detail to capture a textured sensory experience of their work. By intimately documenting these overlooked workers, the film captures a key fragment of the complex multicultural urban fabric of a contemporary western city. *Scaffold* was an experiment that asked: 'Can a film capture the subjective lives of migrant workers on the job, without ever once showing their faces?'

Background

Family Business and Background in Construction

A central guiding principle for me in filmmaking has always been construction. Starting with my earliest experiments during my undergraduate studies, I was drawn to filming and portraying construction workers. While pursuing my BFA at Ryerson back in 2004, I filmed a construction worker named Butch for my first assignment. My project was a minute-long silent film shot in black-and-white on a Bolex. I filmed Butch's face, eyes, forearms, and hands: this proved to be a stylistic choice that has become recurrent in my work.

In my 2007 short, *Assault*, made in my third year at Ryerson, there is a sequence where the main character, Ilya, works on a construction site. Butch, from the first year experiment, makes a brief cameo in that scene. The scene is largely based on my own experiences: it conveys Ilya coming from and going to construction site. I have worked part time for my family's construction business my entire life. Starting at age seven or eight, I would spend my weekends and summers doing small tasks like sweeping up and packing rubble into a disposal bin. My experiences were similar to Ilya's. In fact, I once had to work for a summer to pay lawyer fees in the same way that Ilya does in this short.

When I made my first feature film, construction work continued to be an influence. *Tower* follows Derek, a protagonist who drops out of university to create a computer animated feature length film. He lives with his parents and works for his uncle's construction company. Initially I wanted to cast a protagonist who looked like a construction worker. I pictured someone with a strong, imposing stature. However, I quickly reconsidered that notion when I met the actor I cast as Derek, who was quite

petite, and perfect for the role. He looked so out-of-place on a construction site that the film quickly became a study of nepotism, since it was now so obvious that Derek only got this job because of his family connections. Derek was framed in contrast to the other construction workers. I cast many non-actors who worked in construction to play against him. The dignity and purpose of the construction workers became an important counterpoint to Derek's aimlessness and existential crisis.

As I was preparing to make my next feature, my father passed away suddenly. I felt unable to go ahead with the production and put the project on a temporary hiatus. To rebuild myself and regain the confidence to make another film, I decided to make a very small film with almost no crew or actors. The film shows no faces and is comprised only of shots of hands. The hands in the film are of a construction worker. The camera follows his hands as he smashes concrete with a jackhammer, grinds off a piece of metal rebar, and repairs a water pipe. As he works, we see him injure his hand. He bandages it and continues to work. The time it takes for his hand to heal becomes the timeline for the film. Outside of the construction work, we gradually learn of a personal crisis he is going through; it involves the miscarriage of his unborn child. I was making this film to cope with death of my father in the same way that the worker was working through the pain of his hand and the miscarriage.

In making this film, I began to see that construction was serving as a metaphor for filmmaking. To cope with the death of my father, I was working through pain in the same constructive way that the character in *Cutaway* worked through the pain of his hand. This thematic treatment of work itself bled itself into my next feature, *How Heavy This Hammer*. In this film, we see a severely depressed Erwin, the film's protagonist, try to

find some purpose through renovation and odd jobs. The film is told in two parts. In the first act of the film, Erwin is married and there are unfinished renovations left in his home. Erwin attempts to work on these projects but quickly loses focus.

The incomplete home renovations represent both Erwin's need for purpose and also his inability to achieve it. In the second act, when he leaves his wife and moves into an apartment on his own, Erwin chooses to move into his friend's dilapidated apartment above a bar. He justifies his interest in moving there by saying that he will be able to renovate the apartment while living there. This focus on the potential for renovation becomes a tool to mask his emotional problems with practical objectives. Similarly, Erwin tries to teach his children how to do some electrical work at the apartment. Erwin's lessons are thoughtful and useful, but they also demonstrate his emotional limitations with his children. Erwin consistently opts to teach them how to work or play rugby, instead of emotionally connecting with them. Construction work becomes an ideal that distracts Erwin from looking inwards and overcoming personal issues.

With *Scaffold* I wanted to look at the act of work more directly. Instead of following a solitary character, like in *Cutaway*, *Scaffold* depicts two characters as they renovate a house together. We hear them talk to each other and make observations as they work. The primary focus of the film is their work. We only see a close-up of the construction workers' hands as they complete tasks, and the progression of the film moves forward only as they complete their tasks. They are working in and around someone's house and she is present some of the time. When the woman in the house speaks to them, it interrupts the work as they pause to talk to her. The perspective shifts from the insular view of the workers' personal involvement in their task, to the outside

perspective as they acknowledge the alternate view of the woman observing them. As they are working outside they observe other activities going on in the neighbourhood. Just as they observe these activities, the people present in the neighbourhood also observe them doing their construction work.

Decision to Use Scaffolding

As suggested by the film's title, *Scaffold*, my interest in scaffolding as both a physical and metaphorical object had a central role in film's conception. When I make short films, my guiding approach is to experiment and force my practice to evolve. When making feature films, there is a danger of developing a stylistic shorthand. When a film has a longer runtime, the filmmaking process becomes such an endeavour that you can easily lose the ability to play with form. I frequently shoot and use close-ups of faces. I never use wide shots. With *Scaffold* I wanted to give myself an obstruction that would force me to include wide shots.

As I began to think about what would warrant a wide shot, I soon began to think of scaffolding. While growing up, I spent a lot of time working with scaffolding for my uncle's construction company. The process of working on a scaffold is inherently fascinating. Many construction workers with whom I have spoken readily acknowledge the unique perspective of their position. Many roofers choose the job because they like the feeling of being up high and looking down on the world. It must be similar to the motivations of pilots wanting to fly every day.

The process of building the scaffold is transformative, largely as it is constructed level by level. The immediacy of the relationship between building and rising to new viewpoints is empowering. Suddenly, after a half hour's work, you have built a new structure that allows you a privileged viewpoint. A high view from anywhere can be invigorating, but physically building the structure that affords you the view creates a unique personal relationship to the vantage point. The platform now exists because of you.

The connection between the worker and the scaffold mirrors connections between character and form. I liked the idea that the characters would build the form of the film. The scaffold itself becomes the frame to organize the film around. It is a poetic object to view the world through. It provides the film's unique viewpoint. Everything we see is seen through the scaffold.

I've always wanted to find ways to articulate the connection between construction and filmmaking. My father and my uncle work in construction, and I suppose it's normal for a son to want to define himself in relation to his father. The death of my father of course amplified that feeling. However, the feeling was always there. The name of the production company I founded almost ten years ago is MDFF (Medium Density Fibreboard Films). It was named after a construction material. MDF wood is a cheaper engineered alternative to solid wood. I chose that name because at the time when I was completing my undergrad at Ryerson there was a really strong debate between film and digital means of production. I likened the wood particles in MDF to digital, and solid wood to analogue. The name represented a mission statement to us. It communicated the idea that you could make great films digitally, using resourceful craftsmanship, in the

same way that you could make beautiful custom bookshelves with MDF. It was a declaration that we valued process over materials, and collaboration and engagement over budget.

My ideology was informed by my years spent working for my uncle and father. My grandfather emigrated from Poland to the United Kingdom during WWII. As an immigrant living in the UK, he started a house painting company with his five sons (my father and uncle included). The legacy of my grandfather's company instilled a way of life and work in my family that is still present today. My uncle runs a profitable renovation company. He has a small crew of only four or five men at a time. He also very seldom files for building permits and finds resourceful ways to work around legislation. My filmmaking process is similar. Rarely do I have a crew of more than four people. I only want the essential crew on set; myself, the producer, the sound person, and the cinematographer. I am also wary of working with unions and permits. Furthermore, the act of shooting on location, inside a house or an apartment, feels a bit like working at a renovation site, where you can only work with what you have. You have to react to the building and use what is available. You can't simply imagine things: you have to adjust as you go along. I find this aspect of adapting to the circumstances inspiring.

Choice of House and Neighbourhood

I decided to shoot *Scaffold* at my mother's house, but it was not a decision I made immediately. The first location that I had in mind was a house my uncle had renovated many times over the years, on Roxborough Street. One particular summer, he set up scaffolding around the circumference of the house, so that he could repair the bricks and

paint the house. I spent many days working on this scaffolding and painting the house. It was a fascinating experience to spend enough time there to learn the routine of the neighbourhood.

The main routines I observed were those of the parking enforcement, and the people who used the street parking. The house on X STREET was located in downtown Toronto, and the cars on this street were regularly ticketed. So, as we worked, we quickly learned the routine of the parking enforcement. A man would bike by, inspecting permits, early in the morning, another officer would walk by around noon, and then a police car would drive by near the end of day. The routine was often comical, because every so often you would see people run out and argue with the officers if they had forgotten to move their car. Watching all this from the privileged birds' eye view of the scaffolding made these scenes especially memorable.

Another great and influential aspect of this house was how the scaffolding was set up around the entirety of the house. The front of the house was on a peaceful street; the side of the house overlooked a dog park with a lot of pedestrians; the back had a view of the downtown skyline. It seemed as though each side of the house had its own section, with its own atmosphere. Because of how the house was situated, it offered its own multifaceted cross-section of urban life. The differing views it provided were almost like a foreground, middle ground, and background—or a beginning, middle, and end. This gave me the idea that the film's plot could simply consist of defining or articulating the neighbourhood, and that defining these spaces could provide the base of the story.

As I investigated the possibility of using the house on X Street, it became obvious that it would be infeasible: I needed a location that would be more accessible and to which I could return for multiple reshoots. Two new candidates for the film's location emerged. My mother owned both of the new candidates; one was the house she lived in; the other was a property that she rents out to three different tenants.

The house that she rents out was attractive because it was large and open. There were a lot of sight lines that could offer interesting views. It was located on a cul-du-sac, which made the street a very quiet. From the front of the house, an apartment building was visible, and I imagined that it might be interesting to see someone from very far on a high-rise balcony. Perhaps they could be sun-tanning or exercising. The side view of the house offered a very interesting view of a backyard that is used by a hoarder to organize recyclable bottles. It's hard to understand exactly what is going on in that backyard, but it seems like the person who lives there goes around the neighbourhood collecting bottles and then organizes hundreds of them in his backyard to later take to a recycling plant.

Finally, the rental house's backyard had a vegetable garden where one of the tenants obviously spent a lot of time. I was tempted to use this location but in the end favoured the use of the house that my mother lives in. While we would have had fairly good access to the rental house, we would have full access to my mother's own home. Also, my mother's house provided the possibility of filming indoors as well as outdoors. What cemented this prospect was that my mother was planning to have a patio door installed on her second floor. This would be a major renovation that involved opening a large portion of the side of the house, making it perfect for us.

Also, the activity on each side of my mother's house was lively. At the end of the street, there was an elementary school where many children walk back and forth between the school and a day-care. It's an especially large day-care with over two hundred children. My mother is the head supervisor at the day-care. There seemed like a strong possibility that we could film a group of children walking from the school to the day-care.

My mother's house is located in the Greek part of Toronto, near the Danforth, and I liked that the house had a cultural identity that felt true to the multicultural neighbourhood of the city. The side of the house provided a view of an eccentric backyard, where an elderly Greek man lived. His backyard was essentially a scrapyard of old wood and random parts. The Greek man was frequently back there puttering around. He seemed like he could easily be a character in the film.

The house also has a back alley behind it which offers a very nice separate or less obvious world. It's a busy alley with a lot of pedestrian foot traffic. All of these aforementioned elements influenced the decision to go with my mother's house. Overall, it seemed like the biggest determining factor was the ease of access to the location. I would be free to return as often as I needed to, and could learn about the neighbourhood without disturbing the residents.

Multiculturalism of Toronto

According to recent study by Fay Faraday, Canada's labour market has undergone a significant shift to rely increasingly on migrant workers who come to Canada from around the globe on time-limited work permits to provide labour. Toronto seemed like an

ideal location to represent this trend because of its multiculturalism and high immigrant population. Between 2001 and 2006, Canada received 1,109,980 international immigrants. The City of Toronto welcomed about one quarter of all immigrants (267,855) to Canada during this period. Half of Toronto's population (1,237,720) was born outside of Canada, up from 48 per cent in 1996. In 2006, half of all Toronto's immigrants had lived in Canada for less than fifteen years.

There is also a very rich diversity of origin amongst Torontonians. Toronto's rich multicultural diversity is expressed by the more than 200 distinct ethnic origins residents identified in their response to the 2006 Census. Moreover, this diversity has created a mosaic of many languages. In 2006, forty-seven percent of the population had a mother tongue in a language other than English or French.

Because of Toronto's history of immigration, the city's identity is defined by its ethnic neighbourhoods. There is Little India, Little Italy, Koreatown, Chinatown, and Greektown. These long-established neighbourhoods are changing and new areas are emerging. According to a National Post article, "In 1981, Canada had only six neighbourhoods with ethnic enclaves (neighbourhoods where more than 30% of the population is a visible minority). Now, that number has mushroomed to more than 260."

The house we chose as the film's location is near the Danforth, and is in a neighbourhood known as Greektown. To quote the National Post: "At its height in the 1980s, the 10-block-long Greek section of Toronto's Danforth Avenue was the largest Greektown in North America. Street merchants hawked spanakopita and lamb souvlaki outside Greek nightclubs and coffee shops — while Greek families filled the verandaed homes of the surrounding neighbourhood. But lately, there are not a lot of Greeks left in

Greektown. The sons and daughters of the Giannopolouses and the Rossos, well-versed in the language and steeped in Canadian culture, moved off to condos downtown and ranch houses in the suburbs — if they have even stayed in Toronto at all.”

Locating the film in a notoriously Greek neighbourhood provided lots of opportunity to showcase an interesting locale. I also knew that I wanted the workers featured in the film to be from a community that had recently immigrated to Canada. Using immigrants in the cast and shooting in Greektown seemed like an effective way to communicate the ever-changing culture of Toronto and Canada.

Choice of Bosnian Language

The decision to have workers speak in a foreign language was largely informed by Nicolás Pereda’s film *Tales of Two Who Dreamt*, which follows a family of Roma immigrants who live in a Toronto housing block. The dialogue of the film is entirely in Hungarian and Pereda makes great artistic use of subtitles. He plays with the translations, sometimes accurately translating the film, while at other times using poetic license. There are some scenes where the translations are totally fictionalized. Occasionally, Pereda inserts Kafka-like prose in place of what the characters are actually saying.

Pereda’s film attracted me to the idea of working with a foreign language. I knew that using completely different text as a translation would likely be too drastic for my film, but I still liked this idea of poeticizing the subtitles. The dialogue found in the work of directors like Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Ingmar Bergman lingers more because of the subtitles. Just imagining the subtitles being read helped the tone of my film emerge. I wanted the workers in *Scaffold* to make everyday observations, but for these

observations to be profound. The added filter of reading a translation of someone's dialogue contributed a sense of layered meaning and intention which helped to enhance some mystery and poetry to the experience of watching the film.

Casting

In casting the film, I knew that I would have to cast a wide net and find the right pair of actors who spoke the same language. After talking to a colleague, Igor Drljaca, about the actors that he works with, Bosnian actors soon arose as a good option. Igor had directed two feature films with Bosnian dialogue set in Toronto and he told me that a lot of the actors he worked with had experience working in construction, and, as it turned out, a lot of these Bosnian actors were also employed in construction jobs. It seemed clear that there would be a lot of opportunities to find actors who could be a good fit for the film.

Igor and I have a very good friendship. I met him back in 2009 at the Toronto International Film Festival, when we both had short films screening there. Our work is very similar in some ways, but very different in others. We are often compared and screen at similar venues. We also share a lot of similar working methods. So this opportunity of collaborating with Igor on this project seemed like a good idea.

Moreover, my long-time collaborator, Ajla Odobašić, the editor of all of my films, is from Bosnia. Having an editor who was fluent in Bosnian would prove to be a huge advantage for ensuring that the translation was not only accurate, but that the way the characters spoke felt natural.

Our crew often has to be very resourceful because I have a very small budget. I rely on shooting at locations where I know that I have access, and with people who have time to collaborate. Beyond the practical considerations involved, choosing to focus on immigrants from Bosnia also helped a lot with creating the social context of the film.

A large part of the decision to have an immigrant perspective was my own family history. My family is both Polish and British. My parents are from the UK, and my grandfather was from Poland. He immigrated to the UK following WWII and started a painting company in England with his sons. His family migrated because of the war. Poland was invaded by Germany, and my grandfather was interned in a POW camp. He escaped from the camp by crossing the Rhine river into Switzerland, and from there he then emigrated to England.

Not unlike my grandfather, most Bosnians immigrants are forced to leave their home country to flee conflict. From 1992 to 1995 the Bosnian War took place as part of the breakup of Yugoslavia. According to the Encyclopedia of North American immigration, between 1991 and 2001 22,630 Bosnian immigrants arrived in Canada. That is approximately 90% of the Bosnian-Canadian population. There is a sense of injustice in their displacement, since they have moved to Canada to avoid political events completely out of their control, caused by the actions of their government. While this subject matter is not something I chose to discuss directly or explicitly in the film, the

undertone of the characters' situation is hanging in the background, guiding the direction of the film.

Themes of the Film

In many ways *Scaffold* is a response or reaction to my 2014 short film *Cutaway*. That film was made in the wake of my father's death in 2013. In a very direct way I made the *Cutaway* as an outlet to process my feelings. *Cutaway* was filled with alienation and anxiety. It was an immediate and painful reaction. The film was about a character overwhelmed by personal crisis. He could not deal with his problems emotionally, so he turned to work. *Scaffold*, at its core, is also about processing feelings about my father. However, it is a few years removed from the experience of losing him. By the time I was working on *Scaffold*, I found I was more interested in finding peaceful or meditative forms of recovery. In *Scaffold*, the work is foregrounded, and there are small inklings of crisis in the background. As characters emerge we parse small details about their lives. It is slowly revealed that the homeowner lives alone. She lost her husband a year ago and could be renovating as a way to start anew.

Details also emerge about the workers, who are obviously from another country, though the audience may not be able to discern which one. We learn that one of the workers is here while the rest of his family, including his wife and daughter, are in Bosnia. Rather than being directly confronted by these details, we learn about them somewhat passively and fill in the blanks. We learn partial truths or insights. This mirrors what the workers witness from their perch atop the scaffolding. They observe a man working in his backyard and a boy playing on a hover board. Their observations are their

own and may be incorrect, just as what the viewer perceives about the characters may also be false. We know that the workers are estranged from their families and the homeowner lost her husband, and this information gives us the ability to potentially empathize with these characters. These tidbits of information serve to humanize the characters and makes us wonder what their full stories might be.

Previous Work

Documentary / Hybrid Tendencies in Early Work

My first real breakthrough as a filmmaker was in the third year of my undergraduate degree at Ryerson University. I was making a short film about a boy who attended my mother's day-care. His name was Liam and, although he was only five or six years old, his doctor was considering putting him on mood altering psychotropic drugs. At the time, Liam was exhibiting extreme behaviour for his age. He was uncontrollable. Every day, he would be involved in a major incident, such as spitting at another child or hitting a teacher. His parents had tried everything. They were at such a loss that they allowed me to film him in an attempt to better understand him.

For weeks I followed Liam with my camera. As I filmed him, I became increasingly drawn to his face. I began to place my camera as close to his face as possible to record the swirls of emotion as he argued with another student or teacher. Those recordings represented the first time that I felt like I had actually captured something on camera.

At the time, I was frustrated with my studies at Ryerson. A professor had recently assigned us a project that required me to make a film based on a script written by another student. I found the process to be unsatisfying and somewhat humiliating. The process felt like a farce. It seemed to me like there was an elephant in the room: we ourselves had no stories to tell and no scripts. Also, no one in our year had any idea of how to cast or work with actors. Capturing Liam's face at the daycare was important because it allowed me to engage with something that was mysterious and beyond me. This experience was much more meaningful than producing a student's script that I felt no connection with.

Filming Liam grounded my process in so many ways. It helped me determine what was cinematic and what could propel and inspire a film.

I used these notions when conceiving of my first short film, *Assault*, in 2007. By then, I had created a number of assignments at Ryerson, but this was the first film I made that screened at festivals. It is still screened retrospectively from time to time. In making this fictional short film, I took what I learned from the short documentary about Liam. Rather than structuring the film around a script, I based the film's story around unfolding moments. I wanted to find a way to create a similar feeling of mystery as the one I found with Liam. Rather than tell a story, I just wanted to find and record something transcendent and fleeting.

Assault is about a young man named Illya who gets arrested for assaulting an officer of the peace when he is intoxicated. He wakes up the next morning and can't remember much, but he finds a charge sheet detailing his alleged crimes. The film follows Ilya as he tries to understand his predicament.

My goal was to capture an affecting performance. I decided to use documentary elements to ensure this. For the opening scene of the film, we had Illya open the Yellow Pages and begin to call real lawyers in the city. The actor playing Illya had to be as convincing as possible, because the lawyer would hang up on him if he found out he was an actor. The results of this approach were amazing. Not only did it help us achieve a very realistic performance, but it created a real atmosphere on set. Our approach created real-time tension and drama that helped ground the film in something we could all feel. That tension enlivened the rest of the shoot, and guided us through shooting the rest of the scenes.

For my next short film, *Princess Margaret Blvd*, I wanted to employ similar techniques, using a different subject. I decided to make a film about a seventy year-old woman suffering from early onset Alzheimer's. I was looking for another great performance, but one that came from a totally different place and person.

I was interested in Alzheimer's because it was so far from my own personal experience. I was a twenty-two year old male university student, and I liked the idea of making a film about someone at the opposite stage of life. This was also a great challenge and made me a little self-conscious. I wanted to make sure that I treated the illness realistically. I was afraid of getting the condition wrong or, even worse, sensationalizing the symptoms.

To overcome my feelings I again invested in documentary-like practices. I began visiting a man named Bill who lived at a nursing home. Bill was suffering from Alzheimer's. Being in the nursing home and watching Bill's behaviour closely proved to be hugely informative. The act of visiting people there was so beneficial that I decided to do call-backs with actors at the nursing home. We improvised a few sessions with Bill and the actors who we were considering for the lead role. Bill was so amazing that he ended up making it into the film. We shot the film's final scene there at the home with Bill.

Princess Margaret Blvd was met with acclaim and screened at many film festivals. The reaction to it was positive, but I felt uneasy about it. People's reactions seemed to be so greatly defined in relation to the subject matter, and not the film-making choices. Audiences were moved because Alzheimer's is such a sad illness. I couldn't help thinking that people were reacting more to the context rather than the moments that had

really fascinated me. As a result of this, I knew that with my next films I wanted to move away from subject matter that leant itself to an easy reading of my work.

For a while, I became obsessed with the idea of ordinary insanity. I liked the idea of trying to find banal or quotidian existences in which characters were alienated for reasons we were unsure of. I wanted to make films about people who, by all accounts, had good lives and lived in homes, where they were surrounded by people who loved them, but who, for some reason, were lost.

In 2009, I made a short film called *Out in that Deep Blue Sea*. The film follows Peter, a middle aged real estate agent with depression. My first feature, *Tower*, follows Derek, a strangely alienated failed animator who lives in his parents' basement. Most recently, my 2015 feature *How Heavy This Hammer* depicts Erwin, a father who walks away from his family due to a general, inexplicable anxiety.

I think a lot of my motivation to focus on these particular characters came from living in Toronto. These character explorations represented my reaction to the unique blend of personalities present around me. As a young filmmaker, I was drawn to stories of alienation, but I wanted the characters' sense of alienation to be true to life. Films like *Taxi Driver*, with straightforward crises, had already been made in the 70s. The Western world of the present no longer needed those stories.

I tried to imagine what moment Toronto was experiencing culturally. I saw Toronto as one of the safest cities in the world for its size. When I looked around, I tried to discern the problems that really haunted and affected people. What I saw was a recurring sense of mild alienation, sometimes without specific cause: alienation that was hard to talk about.

I was interested in exploring the lives of people and personalities who may not even be conscious of their own levels of alienation and how that might manifest in their social interactions or the progress of their lives. I was able to ground my process in a way that ensured I was not relying on context or a preconceived story to drive my films. The plot dynamics were so elusive that emotion, character, and tone were pushed to the foreground. By focusing on simply observing waves of emotion, like the ones passing across Liam's face in my early documentary, I was able to hone in on the subject matter that truly sparked my interest and inspired me.

In keeping with the trend established with my previous work, *Scaffold* is a response to the films I made before it. In fact, the direction of my work was really on my mind when I conceived of the idea for *Scaffold*. After making my first three shorts, (*Assault*, *Princess Margaret Blvd* and *Out in That Deep Blue Sea*) I felt I couldn't make another short film in the same style. The prospect of making a feature film refreshed my interest in focusing on an alienated character. Because of the longer runtime, I could now follow characters further than I ever had before, through a complete dramatic arc

I was a little afraid of the process of making my first feature film, *Tower*. It would take so long to write, shoot, and edit a feature that I knew it would be easy to get lost in the process. While trying to make my first feature, I started to feel as though I was getting sucked into the process itself. My work was losing creative energy. I had a strong desire to make something new and totally free, that did not have to live up to the scope and involvement of a feature film. I also wanted to start fresh and strip down the tropes and shorthand that I had developed.

My work had always relied on depicting someone who was an outsider, who struggled fitting in with society. With this new film, I wanted to find a more peaceful tone. I wanted to be more open-minded about my subject matter, so I could create a film that relied less on angst to create dramatic moments. Rather than focusing on one person's alienation, I wanted to find new entry points to character, story, and resolution. With *Scaffold*, I was able to pursue my instinct toward exploring a more ambient and collective community experience, set in a neighbourhood.

Influences

The initial influence for *Scaffold* was Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. It's a strange source of inspiration for me, but I wanted to force myself to work in new ways on this project. In particular, I wanted to disrupt the shorthand style of using entirely handheld close-ups and instead employ wide establishing shots. Wide shots felt foreign to me, so exploring how Hitchcock used them seemed like a natural place to start. I suppose Hitchcock jumped out at me because I've thought of his work as being artistically opposed to my own interests in cinema.

Seeing an experimental piece *The Phoenix Tapes* by German filmmakers Matthias Müller and Christoph Girardet incited my interest in Hitchcock. Müller and Girardet made a new film out of footage found in forty different Hitchcock movies. They re-edited the sequences and removed all of the dialogue. The filmmakers focused on empty frames that focused primarily on atmosphere. The film has no plot, and is an assembly of leitmotifs found throughout Hitchcock's work. I was particularly haunted by the wide shots the filmmakers chose to use. There is an emptiness and a strong feeling of location in these shots. I found the layout of the location intriguing and the geography of each shot enticing. It was almost as if an understanding of the space, the logic of the shot, or the *mise en scene*, could be enough to express a full idea.

Watching Müller and Girardet's film made me consider the value of Hitchcock's work. Looking at his frames out of their original narrative context allows for a greater appreciation of each shot. When the primary purpose of the shot isn't to semiotically communicate tension or character attributes, great depth and meaning can be found in the composition and subject matter.

Rear Window works so well because the entire story is told from the perspective of James Stewart's character, a wheelchair-bound photographer. He is a voyeur investigating a possible crime. The grammar of *Rear Window's* shots is simple. There is no coded emotive language. The choice of shooting from a particular angle isn't to symbolize something, but rather to accurately convey the character's limited perspective, from where he looks out the window at his neighbours.

Seeing and acknowledging the practical nature of *Rear Window's* shots was something liberating for me creatively. My system of using only close-up and handheld shots is similar, because of its simplified system of shot grammar. In my work, there are no symbolic shot choices: there is only the content of the shot. What had made me avoid the use of wide shots in the past was the general implication that the change of perspective would indicate something. Removing that implication created a system whose main logic was instead to explore a space.

I wanted to make *Scaffold* a film in which the explorations and routines of a neighbourhood could form the main plot. When I watch Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, the thrill of the film is not necessarily the solving of the crime, but rather the visually gratifying experience of exploring a space cinematically through a lens. Hitchcock chooses to show us the regular habits of the various neighbours in *Rear Window*. Showing a particular place's routine and function allows the audience to form meaningful ideas about the specific space depicted onscreen. There is something really wonderful about James Stewart being confined to the same vantage point day after day. We get to know what views are available and also a sense of his relationship to what he sees. In

addition to the neighbourhood, the other major visual element of *Scaffold* is the scaffolding that the workers use.

The work of Harun Farocki, in particular his film *In Comparison*, was a major source of inspiration for me. Farocki was intensely interested in labour and its representation on film. He suggests that virtually none of the communication that took place in the workplace, whether through words, glances, or gestures, was recorded on film, aside from a few notable exceptions. I really love one quotation of his: “In 1895 the first camera in the history of cinema was pointed at a factory, but a century later it can be said that films about work or workers have not emerged as one of the main film genres.”

A connection between Farocki’s ideas and the Lumiere brothers can certainly be drawn. There is something inherently cinematic about labour on film. Film’s depictions of labour create proverbial cinematic shots in the same way that a train arriving at a station did. Farocki’s 2009 film *In Comparison* became an important influence on my development process for *Scaffold*. The film is a study of bricks through different traditions of brick production. Farocki shows us workers burning, carrying, and laying bricks. He does this by traveling to several different regions of the world. What’s really incredible about the film that it is constructed without any voice-over or commentary. The bricks themselves do the work.

Like the Hitchcock piece by Müller and Girardet, there is no plot to *In Comparison*. The main event is the brick and an exploration of it. We compare how it functions and how it is used to inform building practices, create spaces, and organize social relations.

Seeing this film made me consider the possibility of creating a film about scaffolding. The limitations and opportunities provided by the temporary structure would define the film. The location where the scaffolding was built would necessarily define what we saw. The rhythm of how you build a scaffold would define the rhythm of the film. I saw the scaffolding as a structure that could organize how people would act socially.

In *In Comparison*, it was fascinating to watch bricks being used in different cultures around the world and how people would interact differently around them. It was not that the bricks influenced how people behaved, but rather that the process of bricklaying was an ideal filter through which to view and compare societies. Perhaps scaffolding too could be a good object around which to organize the logic of a film. It could represent the workers' temporary place in the neighbourhood, their momentary relationship with the homeowner they worked for, and people who lived in the area around them. The scaffold could become a poetic object that could embody something about the notions that revolve around it.

Another major influence on this film is Angela Shanelac's 2016 film *The Dreamed Path*. When I watched the film it had a strange effect on me. It felt very connected to my 2014 film, *Cutaway*. *Cutaway*'s use of hands and actions was very much influenced by Robert Bresson. Shanelac's film directly invokes imagery taken from Bresson's work. Referencing Bresson in cinema is like referencing Shakespeare in literature. The results can be exhilarating. Shanelac's film was clearly indebted to Bresson, but his ideas also felt fresh when reimagined from a new perspective. I felt

Shanelac had tapped into the deep truths or underpinnings of cinema. Watching her film reinvigorated my interest in exploring Bresson's influence in my own work.

Throughout Bresson's work, commerce and exchanges have always been a big focus, most notably seen in his 1981 film *L'Argent*. There are many shots of countertops and money being passed from hand to hand. These moments serve a practical function by displaying people's relationships, and then, through their repetition, a poetic tone emerges that captures something about society. Considering this made me want to use the windows and doorways as dividers or thresholds separating work and home life; worker and employer; inside and outside. In my mind, the relationship between the homeowner and the workers in *Scaffold* became more crucial. I wanted to find shots of the homeowner passing coffee out through the window, or the workers climbing inside to use her washroom.

The sequence in which one of the workers uses the homeowner's washroom was hugely influenced by *The Dreamed Path*. There's a really amazing scene in that film that takes place during an open house. A female realtor is showing a male prospective buyer a property, and a strong tension which arises as they navigate this empty house. There is no lock on the door for the washroom, so the realtor yells out that there is no lock and that she is using it. We then see her dry her hands on her pants because there are no towels in the washroom. It becomes fascinating to watch the precarious dance of trying to negotiate the social rules of this empty house. The film communicates something deep about how buildings and places form our social behaviour and how we interact with each other.

I was so moved by the shot of the realtor drying her hands on her pants that I decided to echo it with a shot of the worker drying his hands on his pants. The realtor does so because there are no towels in the unit; in my film, the worker decides to dry his hands on his pants so as not to dirty the nice towels of the homeowner.

There were a number of other contemporary influences on the film, in particular the work of Lucien Castaing Taylor and the other filmmakers at Harvard's Sensory Ethnographic Lab. The films *Leviathan* and *Sweetgrass* are both documentaries that follow workers but find a way to poeticize their labour. There is more of a focus on the sensorial moments than on the contextual ones. Both films have a wonderful way of finding a rich spectrum of emotive experience. There are moments that are brutal but also contemplative.

Another contemporary work that provides a lot of insight was Ramon Zürcher's *The Strange Little Cat*. Zürcher's film is very much grounded in the everyday experiences in a household. However, there is a mysterious nature to a lot of the film's events. They are seemingly ordinary, yet we feel as though we are witnessing some strange phenomena. The film crafts a feeling of surprise in everyday wonder. I wanted the observations of the workers in *Scaffold* to have that same slight feeling of wonder, especially when the children walk by and say hello and the workers see a little boy on the electric hover board who looks like Harry Potter.

Production Journal

Early Tests with Scaffolding

I was eager to get a feel for what it would be like to assemble the scaffolding. I wanted to get a sense of how it would play on camera. I wanted to learn the movements, sounds, and actions that were involved. I imagined there being a kinetic flow that would guide the tone and rhythm of the film. A clanking of metal and banging of walking boards. I was also curious to get a sense of what we could see on camera and if there would be room for a tripod. Could the camera be pointed up or down and would we get a sense of height? How would the depth of field feel when looking at the scaffolding up close?

In the middle of winter, I gained access to warehouse that my uncle was in the process of renovating. There was scaffold at the site that we were able to set up and film.. I went there with just my cinematographer Nikolay Michalov. We were able to familiarize ourselves with the scaffolding quickly, and we began to set it up. We almost immediately began filming. First, we connected a cross brace to one of the scaffold ladders and then figured out how to shoot. We would perform an action then film it. Next, we slid a walking board on top of the first frame and composed a shot for that action. Soon we were figuring out how to balance a tripod on the first platform.

As we worked, some things quickly became clear. The biggest breakthrough was that we could use our own hands in the film. We could set up the shot, press record, and then walk into frame and complete the action. The other major realization was that this was quite a time-consuming process. It was hard to plan shots out ahead of time. We had to learn by doing. We would first build the scaffold, and then block the action.

Sometimes we would have to build a scaffold for the action we were performing and then build an additional scaffold on which to place the camera.

The footage we shot in the warehouse was edited together for Phill Hoffman's production class. One of the options for an assignment in his class was to make a film that was a visual haiku. It was hugely rewarding to approach the footage we had shot in that way. There was no dialogue, but the movement and actions created a tone. These images were complemented by the occasional banging and clanging of the scaffold. It resulted in a five minute-long piece that helped form the scaffold as a poetic object to be used in the film.

Experimenting with Lenses / Outdoor Shoot

The next step was to try a test shoot outdoors. Again, Nikolay, the cinematographer, and I went to my mother's house to set up scaffolding and try shooting some experiments. The first day of shooting was a little precarious because the ground was so uneven. Using a combination of large stones and wooden planks, we were able to stabilize the scaffold and start shooting. As soon as we set up the first shot, we knew that we would be able to get some striking and dynamic shots. The sense of height from atop the scaffold was palpable. You could feel the vertigo, but at the same time enjoy the new perspective.

Aside from living in my mother's house for a number of years, I've also shot three or four films there. When I've shot there before, the feeling has always been that I was trying to find a way to push the aesthetic of the house to make it feel more cinematic. However, this time around it felt like shots were already there. I suppose the added filter

of shooting through and from the scaffold helped. I didn't feel like we had to force the look of the film: it was already there, and had occurred naturally.

We spent some time experimenting with lenses. Depth of field immediately seemed like it was going to play a big part in the look of the film. We experimented with some telephoto lenses, which were great for looking around the neighbourhood to pick up small details. For instance, we pointed the camera up in a tree and found a raccoon curled up fast asleep on a tree branch. We also recorded some footage of a man watering his lawn. Little did we know at the time, but he would become a large part of the project and eventually featuring as part of the final shot of the film.

We also did some tests with a wide angle lens. There were certain shots we wanted to be dynamic, with a large depth of field, to add a lot of levels to the composition. However, we found that the fisheye quality of the shot looked wrong. It was somehow opposed to the nature of the film. Both Nikolay and I felt that the rigidity and weight of scaffold needed to be echoed throughout the film. The wide angle lens made it seem flimsy and drew more attention to the placement of the camera, rather than where the scaffold was set.

Soon we settled on the 50mm lens. It's a lens I've always been attracted to because it is the closest lens to the human eye. The lens' qualities of directness and matter-of-factness worked for us. Furthermore, it didn't have the same problems that the wide lens did. Shots through the 50mm lens felt solid and right. Perhaps most importantly, we liked the depth of field and more shallow focus of the lens. We quickly learned that everything did not need to be in focus. Actually, the blurry scaffold in the foreground of the shot was interesting. It reminded me of Michelangelo Antonioni's use

of depth of field in *Red Desert*. A number of times, Antonioni framed construction cranes, and transmission towers or other industrial structures in the foreground out of focus with figures placed between. What particularly stood out in my mind was a shot of Monica Viti being framed between a few out of focus fire engine red beams and cross braces. The harsh yellow of the scaffold functioned really well in the same way and seemed suited for similar treatment.

Documenting the Installation of the Patio Door

I had a few ideas about what tasks the two workers would be doing, that could explain their time on the scaffold. Initially, I thought that they could be roofers. I also thought maybe they could repair the side panelling on a house. However, I learned that my mother was planning on replacing a patio door on the second floor of her house. This seemed like an ideal scenario to use in the film. I wanted to find a renovation that seemed major. It was important to firmly establish a sense of documentary realism, and for that it seemed necessary to prove that work was actually being done. The installation of the new door would require one of the house's exterior walls to be opened up, something I imagined would be amazing to see on camera. It also seemed ripe for creative and thematic treatment. Even in the early stages of the film, a concept that I had been playing with was demonstrating the exterior world of the house, and the interior one. I always wanted to create some tension around the idea of the workers not going inside the house or peering in from one of the window. The removal of the wall allowed them to go inside, breaking that barrier, but at the same time drawing attention to it.

The crew installing the door on my mother's house was from my uncle's construction company. I had actually worked with some of the men a few summers before and knew them quite well. I was able to figure out an agreement with my uncle that would allow his crew to work at a slower pace and repeat some actions, when necessary. That being said, we still had to work at a rapid pace. Fortunately, the cinematographer, Nikolay, and I had done so many tests with the scaffolding that we had a good sense of the type of coverage that would suit the film.

At times it was hard to keep up with the crew. They started by gutting the wall that they need to remove, and, before we knew it, the entire wall was down. Similarly, the doors were so heavy that it was hard to get them to do any extra takes. Some actions and details worked out well right away. There were also actions that needed to be repeated, which allowed us multiple attempts to figure out coverage. In the end we ended up get some really great moments within that chaotic and rapid shoot.

Fortunately there were also a lot of creative opportunities to fix and add to that sequence. We quickly realized that the hands we filmed were interchangeable. There was a man in his sixties and another in his twenties, but on camera their hands looked identical. I'm always amazed by how forgiving continuity is in close-up, especially if part of what you are looking at is obscured. The fact that we don't see anyone's face really helped this aspect of the film and gave us a lot of flexibility. We soon realized that Nikolay's hands and my own hands would also match those of the actual workers. We were able to restage a number of the actions later to give us the coverage we needed. We broke up a sheet of drywall and swept it up to fill out the demolition scene and fired blanks out of nail gun to finesse some of those shots.

Conclusion

Scaffold was an experiment that asked: 'Can a film capture the subjective lives of migrant workers on the job, without ever once showing their faces?' My approach to this question returned to the instinct to explore the importance and subjectivity of perspective, something that I have been drawing from since I began making films. The viewpoint of the workers is both privileged and limited. We see the importance on subjective and limited perspectives throughout all of my work. Despite almost all of my early work being shot in close-up, it's still only a partial view. Similarly, with *Scaffold*, the workers have a unique vantage point of the neighbourhood, yet still are on the outside with only a partial understanding of the things they can see. We, as the viewers, have only have a partial view of the workers, which reflects our partial understating of their lives and the context in which we find them. The film offers a carefully framed glance of a brief moment in the scaffold workers' lives, depicting their working relationship with a house and a neighbourhood. The film's goal was not to fully depict the workers' life stories through providing context, but rather to capture the sentiment and truth of genuine interactions. By focusing on momentary relations and limited perspectives, I have explored something more universal about how people coexist today in an ever-changing multicultural city. Ultimately, the unique process of making *Scaffold* has deepened my understanding of how I want to conceptualize projects, and how I want to prepare in order to be able to react to another level of meaning that is taking place within a carefully considered aesthetic system.

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