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Tiny Tape Recorder

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Tiny Tape Recorder

by

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Report

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Abstract

Tiny Tape Recorder

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The following report details the creation of my thesis film, *Tiny Tape Recorder*, from the genesis of the original idea through writing, pre-production, production and post-production. *Tiny Tape Recorder* is a short narrative fiction film about a man who discovers a tape recorder embedded in his head and the physical and emotional pain he must endure as the tape recorder malfunctions and replays his past. This science-fiction project attempts to balance the absurdist nature of this premise with a naturalistic treatment of the material in a desire to keep the focus of the film on the characters. This report seeks to serve as both a documentary representation of the process of creating *Tiny Tape Recorder* as well as an attempt to reveal and decode the intentions and motivations behind the use of that process.

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Introduction

Herein I will break apart and examine the constituent particles of my third and final narrative film produced here at the University of Texas-Austin—my thesis film.

Thesis. We throw that word around casually here as one person or another inquires as to the state of yours or bemoans the state of his or hers and always we worry about the money and how will we ever afford to make a *thesis*? And as the word comes and goes in our everyday banter, it becomes detached from its root meaning like a boat loosed from a dock. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the fifth definition of the word "thesis" corresponds to the common usage of the term among MFA students:

" **5.** A dissertation to maintain and prove a thesis (in sense 4); esp. one written or delivered by a candidate for a University degree."

Here we find a puzzle. The fifth definition cannot stand without the fourth:

" **4a.** A proposition laid down or stated, esp. as a theme to be discussed and proved, or to be maintained against attack (in *Logic* sometimes as distinct from hypothesis *n.* 2, in *Rhetoric* from antithesis *n.* 3a); a statement, assertion, tenet."

Buried inside every usage and application of thesis$_5$ is the implication that this signifier refers to a thesis$_4$, even if it lurks undisturbed and unmentioned. Thesis$_5$ cannot exist without thesis$_4$. If we are to acknowledge this fact, than we must admit that a "thesis film" is something very different from a "third-year film," even if we may use the terms

interchangeably. A thesis film implies that there is a "proposition laid down" which this film is attempting to "maintain and prove." This is not, of course, proving a proposition in the tradition of morality plays. Our interest of study is not in the content of the work made, but in the form and formation of it. We may use morals and themes as part of our expressive repertoire, but the focus of our study here is that of film and film production. So then, in theory, the thesis film maintains and proves a proposition about film production.

That proposition, however, must lie outside of the film itself. There is no clear room for a thesis statement, no opportunity to part the curtain and speak to the audience and say, "Hey, watch this." If it is not self-evident upon first viewing, than its necessary to work to peel back the layers to reveal the beliefs and statements that form the architecture of the final product. We work backwards to understand what the author's formal intentions were, and to see how those intentions weave their way through the entirety of the work.

Here, in the present, I am looking backward at my inner self, trying to recreate the psychology and structure of my creative mind at the genesis of the idea that led me to this point, and I've come across an impossibility. The mind can only bend back upon itself so much. Humans have a great tendency—and a great talent—for looking backwards and finding the logical steps that led from point A to point B. Now, in retrospect, I can look at the work I've done and find common elements and interests, but at the time, when I first thought up the words "tiny tape recorder," I wasn't aware of all the paths those words would lead me down. If anything, I was left with the uncertainty of an idea that could go

in a hundred directions. We can take any random sample of our lives and find a pattern and re-dress our past selves in the mental clothes of the present and take full credit for the final outcome as the logical product of our original intentions. At the beginning, all I had were these three words sitting as a single node in a new mental network beginning to work its way through my brain. The only proposition I was then ready to put forth was this: film is a process art. In many ways, it's an intensely personal art form. The only individual who truly gets to experience the entirety of the work is the filmmaker himself. Everyone else—from the grips and assistant directors to the audience members—only flit in and out, stepping in to sample a portion of the whole before stepping back out, and so then the challenge for the filmmaker is to be able to distill down and focus the essence of the whole into every individual aspect, every individual experience, so that in some way, everyone involved can have at least a flashing of the true experience of the work.

The medium I am working in is not just film, but narrative film and so the narrative must come first before anything else. The story is the beginning of the process. The story isn't everything, but it is the first thing. And so, I had to first ask myself—what am I interested in? What am I curious about? At some point I became highly interested in the idea of something illogical embedded inside a person's body. I have a tendency to incorporate elements of my current life into my work in an attempt to make each film a collection and catalog of things I like, and so originally I had an idea for a tennis player with a tiny city embedded in his arm that was draining all of his energy. I was playing a lot of tennis at the time. I'm not sure where this idea came from, but I chewed on it for a

while and I realized it was essentially Dr. Seuss' "Horton Hears a Who." What stuck with me, however, was that image, of a large thing turned small inside a person's body.

Along with film being a process art, I also believe that every artist's career pushes forth like a sailboat in a heavy wind. You take one turn, make one work, and then you see where it has taken you and you adjust course accordingly. Part of what appealed to me about this idea was that it would be very different from my pre-thesis. That doesn't mean I didn't think my pre-thesis worked—I generally do, even if there are some dodgy bits— but I was eager to try something else. My pre-thesis, "Wind Session Tiger Woman," was a quiet, calm piece in which I tried to consciously keep the whole thing warm and mellow and like one uncut and unstitched length of fabric. By the nature of its narrative and characters, the filmmaking wasn't a very dynamic process—I didn't want the way the story was told to be untrue to the content and tone of the story. After making this, I wanted to make something that swung more erratically and didn't look over it's shoulder to see if anyone was watching—I wanted to make something that wasn't trying to be cool. I wanted to make something with enough meat and enough layers that it wouldn't have time to be cool—it was too busy getting things done. More concretely, I wanted to tell a story with bigger emotions and a definite, specific premise that I could poke at and manipulate until something interesting happened. So with this idea of a thing inside someone's body, I felt I was onto something that had a specific premise that I could explore rather than a vague set of starting conditions for the world of the film.

Each film is in a way a time capsule of the person you were at the time you made it. Bits of you that no one but you would recognize end up on-screen, and you let others

into your inner being without them even knowing it. Every story is the result of our interests and passions and dilemmas and emotions clumping together and spitting out a set of circumstances and characters to embody the un-seeable. During this mostly subconscious process, this idea collided with other interests swirling around inside my brain. I've always been intrigued and fascinated by the conflict between technology/progress and nature and the way mankind gets stuck in between the two. Most of the films that I return to time and again tackle this issue in one way or another, and at times I feel it is the central conflict of human existence: how does what we choose to create conflict with what we had no hand in creating and how does this conflict shape and destroy us? I attempted to look at this issue in a ham-fisted manner with my first-year film, *Fertile*, about an infertile breast-pump salesman. The execution left something to be desired, but that conflict was there. As a corollary to this, I've always been interested in the idea of technological progress. We are always somehow amazed by technology and become caught up in whatever the most current technology is even though history has shown that the current technology will always be outmoded and we will be amazed over and over again.

Like I said before, I can look back and connect the dots between these ideas and say, "Oh, this makes perfect sense. If you combine all of these parts in the right proportions, you will get "Tiny Tape Recorder."" But I think just as important are the fragments of ideas and interests that didn't make it: tennis, artistic performance on film, a professor running late for a faculty meeting, caves…The list goes on and on. All of this is

part of the process. You grope for something that feels true and correct and you run with

it.

The Writing Process

With all of this in mind, I somehow forged the idea of "Tiny Tape Recorder," and began to feel a pressure I had not felt before. I had come up with a fresh, intriguing premise, and now I had to fulfill it's potential. Having co-written with my classmate Monique Walton a premise-heavy film, "The Becoming Box," I already knew the brutal under-handed compliments that come with such a film. The worst thing you can hear after someone reads a script or watches a film that hinges on a novel conceit is "I love the idea" or "What an interesting premise." This means that it didn't work, that you have somehow disappointed your audience. The essence of what the film was supposed to be, the distillation of your experience of it as filmmaker, somehow did not make it to the final product, and you have not shared the process with your audience. In fact, in many ways, it's worse than a film without a flashy premise because you have dangled the possibility of something to be explored in front of the audience and have not succeeded in fully exploring it—when as film such as this is being judged, it can feel as if the filmmaker's very imagination and intellect is being judged because whenever someone thinks that the film doesn't work, they wonder how could it not have worked with a premise like that? Someone fumbled the ball.

Distilling these ideas and turning them into a story was a uniquely difficult endeavor. If we look at the classical, 3-act narrative structure typical of Western film, it is a character-driven format. A protagonist wants something and attempts to obtain it. Their wants and fears drive the story and the world and its other inhabitants shape themselves

around this protagonist to thematically support his transformative journey. The "big ideas" float on top like foam rising over the lip of a pint glass. Here I was starting with nothing but foam. I had the big ideas—tape recorders inside heads, failed government conspiracies, technology versus nature—but I didn't have characters. It was like working blind, attempting to find the character and circumstances that would best illustrate the ideas I had decided to explore. This story went through more drafts than anything else I've ever written. At final count, there were at least 50 distinct drafts—with many intermediate drafts that were not saved separately—with at least three or four distinct stories contained therein. The recurring challenge throughout the many iterations was to constantly re-center and reconsider what the story was about. As I wrote, I also wrestled with my tendency to not put enough faith in each step of the process. I did not want to force the script to do too much work. The process of re-writing involved a lot of me attempting to convince myself that I could say a lot of what I was interested in saying in the actual performances and with the camera rather than through the written words on the page.

Over time I came to believe that this was a story about the idea of a protagonist changing. I was, in many ways, attempting to grapple with the very fabric of what we are taught here at UT about traditional narrative structure. What does it mean for a character to change? If I look at the films I most admire, it's hard for me to see the changes on the surface—*Solaris, L'Avventura, The Life Aquatic, Eternal Sunshine,* etc. I think the flaw I see in many films, especially mainstream films, is that we're expected to believe that the events we've witnessed have been so momentous that they've changed the fundamental

nature of who these people are. In reality, change seems to me more akin to the idea of tactics that we use when adjusting performances—the individual is the same and what they truly, deeply want is the same, but the tactic they have decided on to continue to pursue that desire has changed. I worked through draft after draft worrying about the moment of change, and I always came back to the idea of the protagonist hearing himself being born. But I couldn't figure out why that felt important. Upon reflection, I think each of us would feel a strange disconnect upon encountering ourselves on the day we were born; it is not an experience we can remember or relate to. I realized over the course of many drafts and many consultations that the moment of change had to come from something the protagonist could remember. But then what? I think at the end of "Tiny Tape Recorder" I've attempted to present something of a paradox. The character states he is ready and open for change, but he only states this after hearing the way things once were and wishing to revert back to a time and place he can never actually experience again. Does the desire for change count as change? Or is he just trying a new approach to getting what he's always wanted? In truth, I feel that nothing about who Herman is has changed, and I hope that the dissonance between the perception and the reality of the moment we are presented with—both in the past and in the present tense of the story— will generate an air of melancholy as we are presented with a desire to change that may never be fulfilled.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The truth is I didn't think of much of any of this until I was deep into the editing process and began only then to finally understand what I was making. I say again, film is a process, and it's easy to feel discouraged and a little

ashamed that you did not know everything from the beginning. What matters is that it is

all there at the end.

Pre-Production

Choice of Format

At the same time as I was working on the script, I had to begin to figure out the practical side of filmmaking. Making films costs money. Even a small film costs at least a small amount of money. There's no way around it. This was not a small film. The draft I ended up shooting was perhaps the smallest and simplest of any script I had come up with, but it still involved a lot of unique and complex elements that would have to be paid for. On top of this, I was determined to shoot on film. Looking back, I can rationalize now and say that this mattered to me because I wanted to keep everything analog to match the content and thematic strands of the film. However, at the time, there was a much more practical reason. It just looks better. The film cameras were at the time the highest quality image capturing devices UT had. One could argue that the resolution of Super16 isn't particularly greater—and perhaps is even less—than the F3 or another high-end 1080p digital camera, but the way film renders motion and captures light has always felt better to me, and I could see no reason not to attempt to use the best medium available as long as I could afford it. To that end, I applied for a Texas Filmmakers' Production Fund grant from the Austin Film Society. The day I submitted my application was a total nightmare, but I luckily got it in with ten minutes to spare. I had requested funds for film stock and processing with plans to shoot on super16 at the very least and possibly on 35mm if I was awarded enough money.

Lo and behold, I won both film stock and processing through the TFPF, but not enough for 35mm. For my previous film, *Wind Session Tiger Woman*, my DP, Hammad

Rizvi, and I had purposely chosen the grainiest stock we could find and even pushed it a stop at times to make it grainier. For that project it had felt right to help wash everything in a dream-like haze. However, for this project, we agreed from the outset that we didn't want to play up the graininess of the Super16 stock. If we were going to stand by the principle of grounding this in a naturalistic world, we didn't want to distract the viewer from that by making them feel cut off from what they were seeing or that they were looking at something alien. This, also, was much more of a "movie" with tangible plot points and conflicts, and not as much of a meditative piece. We felt a smooth, clean look would be the best route to making sure the medium was not interfering with the content of the film. To that end, we decided to test out Kodak's 7203 Vision3 50D stock as well as their 7213 200T stock.

I like to be very hands-on with the cinematographic process. As this is a visual medium, the appearance of a film is extremely important. I understand when individuals say, "It doesn't matter what it looks like as long as the story is good," but I hope to aspire to something more than that. Why not aim for both a good story and a beautiful look? I also find that the vast menagerie of classic films serves as a counterpoint to this spurious argument. It's hard to say the films of Bergman or Fellini or Fritz Lang would be as beloved if they did not look as wonderful and unique as they do. The stories may be there, but the execution and presentation are what take it to the next level.

We shot tests with both stocks and the Cooke Mark IV 25-250 zoom lens to test that glass. We shot a little with the Zeiss primes, but we already knew what those looked like with these stocks, so we weren't as concerned with them. We were both interested in

exploring extremely long focal lengths, and we felt if we shot with the 7203 at 150mm or longer, we could get some aesthetically striking images. Beyond this, I wanted to harken back and reference the films of the early to mid-70s, as a complement to the idea that the technology in Herman's head dated from that time period.

Casting

As we worked through the look of the film, I began to consider the casting process. I had never really gone through a traditional casting call. For my KB, my lead, Rommel Sulit, was pretty much the only actor who came out to read for the part who had any real grasp on it, so he got the role on the spot. Then for my pre-thesis, I saw each of my two leads in other projects—Heather Kafka in *Lovers of Hate* and Garrett Brantley in a scene-directing exercise in Andy Garrison's directing workshop class—and offered them the roles right away, thereby skipping the entire process of auditions. For this film, however, because of how I had worked backwards from big themes and ideas to a protagonist and situation, I did not have as clear of a mental image of who the characters were as I had for my previous project. My producer, Monique Walton, had begun an internship for the casting director Vicky Boone, so she was deeply involved with the casting process, and she pushed me to do an open casting call.

We attempted to go through the usual channels of message boards and mailing lists, and even though we were swamped with replies, it was clear there was some sort of fundamental misinterpretation of the roles being offered. After becoming discouraged over the prospects of finding a suitable actor through an open call, Monique and I agreed that we would have far better luck if we worked with Vicky. At the time, this felt like a

strange decision. It was a fair chunk of change to be able to work with her, and I felt like casting was something that I could've done if I had more time and patience to go to screenings and theater performances and sift through the world of Austin actors to find the right people. At the same time, I was excited about the possibility of seeing actors outside of the usual pool that turns out for UT student projects, and I knew Vicky would be able to bring those individuals out. Weighing the pros vs. the cons and realizing that because of the TFPF I actually had more money than time for once in my life, I decided to go with Vicky. I do not regret this decision in the least.

Upon deciding this, I had to begin contemplating what I was looking for in the actors who would fill the roles of Herman, Susan, and Saul. The main thing I knew I wanted, and what I look for in pretty much anyone I collaborate with, was someone who was bringing something to the table. By that I mean an actor who would be able and willing to do more than just try to get the performance right or try to offer exactly what they think I was intending when I wrote the lines. I wanted actors who would look below the surface of the text and say "It's written like this, but what else could this mean? Who else could this character be?" I'm highly uninterested in actors who just give me exactly what I think I want. With that as my main guiding principle, I arrived for the day of auditions that Vicky had set up. This was one of the most intellectually overwhelming days of my life. In the course of one day, we saw over 50 actors, and the hard part was that out of the 54 actors we saw, only 2 or 3 of them were bad! It's incredibly draining to creatively engage with that many people in a row, but I would recommend the process to anyone who can afford it. Not only was it valuable for finding actors, but also by the end

of the day I had an exponentially firmer understanding of the characters and their relationships than I had when the day began. Furthermore, as the actors worked through the sides, the same adjustments kept coming up over and over again. I began to wonder why I was having to correct course in the same way for so many different people, and I realized that the scenes were fundamentally flawed in such a way that even though I intended one interpretation for the scenes, there was no way to actually meet that intention with the way it was currently written. There is nothing like hearing your own writing read aloud about a hundred times in a row to realize how bad it is. Even with the flaws in the scenes presented to the actors, there were a few individuals who really shone.

As I said before, for my pre-thesis I had cast the first two actors I liked. I wanted to try to work away from this and not automatically "go with my gut" and give some other alternative choices a fair shot. At the end of the day, though—even after protracted deliberation and a full round of callbacks—I ended up going with my gut choices for all three roles. For Saul, Peter Malof just nailed it from the get-go. He was Saul. Thankfully he seemed to have some intuitive, intrinsic understanding of who this character was because as it would turn out our schedules would never align and allow us an opportunity to rehearse before the shoot began. For Susan, Betsy Lindley was my first choice the moment she read for the role. She was clearly digging beneath the surface of the text and bringing something unique and personal to the material. She was the only person who auditioned for Susan who didn't feel like she was hitting emotional beats and trying to predict what results I was looking for. She made choices for the character that I had never planned for and didn't even know could work until I saw her make them. Surprisingly,

this was only the 2nd film she had ever done. Finally, for the role of Herman, after the initial audition and a round of callbacks, I decided on going with an actor named Brentley Heilbron. He was a dynamic performer, and he was bringing a life and energy to the role that was almost completely counter to what I had originally envisioned. I knew it was a bold choice, but he felt truly alive when he was working through the material—even though I had written the words, when I watched him I had the strange sensation of not knowing what was going to happen next.

However, because of scheduling conflicts, he regretfully had to pass on the role. I was very upset over this at first, but I was determined to use this as an opportunity to look at other ways of playing the role. We did another round of auditions with only two weeks before production was scheduled to begin. We also had to figure out how to cast the smaller roles of the lousy friend Mike and the doctor in the hospital. Catherine, Monique, and I all decided that we would kill two birds with one stone and cast someone to play Mike from the people who came out for this set of auditions, and we would offer the role of the doctor to someone who hadn't made the cut for Saul. At this set of auditions, I ended up being really impressed by the work of Brian Villalobos and Michael Joplin. They each auditioned for both roles, and choosing between them became a question of how was I going to define the character of Herman.

Michael Joplin's performance hewed closer to that of Brentley's—he was sort of a smart aleck and seemed like he had a real chip on his shoulder—while Brian took the role in a different direction. As he played Herman, he seemed to harbor genuine pain and heartache because of the hand life had dealt him. I had always conceived of Herman as

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someone who lashed out with anger in response to the bum deal life had given him, but there was a depth and honesty to Brian's interpretation that really appealed to me. Also, another consideration that Catherine, Monique, and I debated was the value of likeability in a protagonist. One of their concerns about Brentley had been whether or not he would be likeable on-screen or whether people would think he was a jerk. I'm torn on the idea of likeability. I understand that it's hard for an audience to find something to latch onto if they don't feel like the protagonist is someone they can sympathize with, but I also feel that puts a severe limitation on the form. One of the best films I saw in 2012 was *The Comedy* by Rick Alverson. In it, Tim Heidecker plays a total asshole loser. There is little-to-nothing redeemable about his character. He's selfish, gluttonous, and has an almost sociopathic disregard for the well-being of others. But it was one of the most stirring and mind-blowing performances I've seen in a long time. He is not a likeable character, and yet I wouldn't want him to be any other way. There are things you can do with un-likeable characters that you can't really do with likeable ones. After weighing these considerations, I decided that Brian's interpretation of the role was the one most likely to gel with Betsy's Susan, and I was curious to see how having someone who felt genuinely wounded would change the final product. I cast Michael Joplin as Mike, the bad influence. After this round of auditions, I continued to hone the script, whittling it down to the essentials. Each time I spoke with the actors or met with them, new flaws in the script revealed themselves, and I continued to refine the words up until production began.

Rehearsal

With only a week and half before production was to begin, we only had time to squeeze in one full rehearsal, and even then, it was not really a full rehearsal because Peter's schedule didn't match up with anyone else's. I met with Peter once to film a promotional video for our Kickstarter campaign and we discussed his character at length then, so I was able to find some solace despite him not being able to rehearse. In terms of the dynamics between the characters, I felt it might even be a blessing, as Saul is supposed to be a total stranger to Herman. Trying to squeeze the most value out of our time together, I met with both Betsy and Brian individually to discuss their characters and give them my notes. I wasn't interested in discussing the content of the script in these meetings. I wanted to discuss the internal worlds of these characters outside of what is written on the page. We can have motivations and tactics and wants and needs, but I've always felt that unless you really create a strong historical and psychological base for these to rest upon they will feel forced and artificial. With each of them we spoke a lot about who this character was before the script began, what their hopes and fears for the future were, and why they are here in this moment we find them in now. We worked to build up realistic psychological idiosyncrasies and flaws to round out how they approached their relationships with others. For Brian especially, I returned time and again to the ideas of regret and nostalgia. As much as I harped on them at the time, I realize even more how much these are the two driving forces for this character and for how any of us interact with our past. I gave him a copy of the poem, "The God Who Loves You" by Carl Dennis (included in the appendices), to attempt to read and internalize. It was

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very important to me to build up a texture of distaste for the world and a misgiving that somewhere along the way he had made a terrible mistake that kept him from a whole other life he was supposed to have lived. None of this is particularly on the surface in the film, but as long as it was percolating in the back of Brian's mind, I hoped maybe it would give his performance some extra color.

After doing what I could on such a limited schedule to try to establish the internal lives of these characters and hoping there would be enough time before we started filming for some of what we decided on to actually sink in, we planned for rehearsal. For me, perhaps the most important part of rehearsal is improvisation. Not only is it possible I'll hear something worth poaching for the script, but I feel it's the most authentic way to establish the nature of the relationship between characters. Without explicit words or goals to worry about, Betsy and Brian were able to *be* together in character, and attempt to figure out the specific manner in which they communicate with one another that is distinct from how they communicate with anyone else. We improvised a lot. We improvised not only around scenes in the script but also moments from their past that aren't in the script but must have happened at some point in their history together—their first date, the first time she came over to his house, the first time they discussed buying a cat, etc.

Production Design/Locations

One of the difficulties of writing this report in somewhat of a chronological manner is the fact that because of our casting difficulties and the large number of revisions to the script, we had to juggle many different aspects of pre-production all at

once. As we were attempting to resolve our casting issues and figure out if and when we'd be able to rehearse or whether we'd have to push back the start of production, my production designer, Danielle Dyar, and I were beginning the laborious process of planning out the intricate production design elements for this film.

Even as the script fluctuated and changed, we knew the locations we would need from early in the process. The majority of the film would take place at a house. There were a number of aesthetic and logistical concerns when it came to choosing a house for the film. One, it needed to be a house with a layout that would allow for action to take place in a lot of different, connected spaces. Two, it needed to have a lot of sunlight as we were committed to shooting a story set during the day during daylight hours, and if we were going to shoot on such a slow film stock we would need as much natural light as possible. The school's lights would help to boost that light, but with 1.2 HMIs as the maximum available size, there was only so much they could do on their own. Three, I wanted to be able to see out those windows and shoot action inside or outside through them. Four, it needed to be very natural feeling. I didn't want to shoot in a house that felt like it was not made of real materials. I wanted to avoid the "dorm room" feeling that results from the film being shot in cheap student housing. Fifth and finally, we needed extended access to the space at a reasonable price. Because of the intricacies of how we were going to shoot certain portions of the script, we would need to have access to the location for 4 to 5 days in a row. With all of these concerns in mind, and after a half-hearted search through the Texas Film Commission listings, it became clear that we would end up using our own house. Having worked on multiple films shot in people's

homes, I initially had misgivings because I knew how much it would disrupt our lives and wreck our house, but the benefits outweighed these concerns. And, from a personal standpoint, I was incredibly attached to the idea of shooting at our house. I love the wall of windows in the living room, the massive amount of light that streams in through them, and the mass of greenery they look out upon. Furthermore, from a directorial standpoint, some of the camera blocking that was going to happen was far more intricate than anything I had done before, and I really needed the time to pore over every detail of those shots and understand how they would physically work in the space. Having the ability to work on the script and the storyboards in the actual space where we were going to shoot and be able to physically walk through each character's blocking was a huge benefit that outweighed any concerns about personal discomfort.

Once we settled on that, we had to start answering questions. How do we define this space for the characters? What feel do we want to give it? And how do we use the production design to help indicate the shifting time frames as the tape malfunctions and Herman shifts from the present to the past an vice versa? One of my main concerns was to not do anything too theatrical, or to make the space look too good or planned out. Our first priority was filling out the living room with suitable furniture that would double both as set dressing and as a way to break up the room and delineate it into discrete areas. After this, our main challenge was to work item by item through the inventory of knick-knacks and ephemera that would populate the space and decide what belonged to which character, and at what point in their time together was it there. We wanted to use production design to show shifts in the time period being depicted and the nature of

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Herman and Susan's relationship. On top of that, we decided these shifts were going to be done in-camera, and we had to consider the logistical feasibility of any re-dressing of the room. The two overriding visual concerns of mine were that it feel earthy and neutral and that we play up the rectangles and squares as much as possible, but not so much that it felt designed. Danielle has a keen eye and great design taste, and if anything I had to continue to decide whether what she was coming up with actually looked too good. We approached the production design much as we approached the lighting—design the space and allow the characters to move through it rather than attempt to tweak the production design for every framing. We decided that the most visually alacritous solution to indicate the shifts in time in a manner that we could actually pull off was to put the weight of that responsibility on wall hangings, so over the course of the next two months we amassed a substantial collection of thrift store wall art. This also had the added benefit of breaking up the off-white walls. We also seriously considered painting the living room a different color, but ended up deciding that the benefits didn't outweigh the financial and logistical difficulties of undertaking such a large infrastructural labor before production began. We did, however, repaint part of the kitchen to match the shade of green in the tiles on the opposite side of the room to help define the depth of the space a little more clearly.

One of the other advantages of using our own house is that I felt we were able to maximize the unique properties of the location. I always feel this is important and helps to lend your film an almost intangible sense of being one of a kind. I always try to ask "What is it that I can do here that I could not do somewhere else?" I think it might drive

me crazy to shoot in a studio and to have the ability to design a space from scratch. You would be working with infinite possibilities. With the access to the space and the determination to have the film shift organically from present to past and vice versa without cutting, Hammad, Danielle, and I began to decide how this was going to happen. How were we going to shoot this film? It was very important to me that we pull off the transitions without cutting so that there would be no sense that we were pulling the wool over the audience's eyes. I wanted them to feel the same sense of confused amazement as Herman does as he moves from moment to moment in the same space. One of the script decisions that I made as a way to pull these transitions off and to really sell the difference in time and space was to set the past memories during a house party. That way, not only would it be production design and sound that would cue the transitions, but also the presence of other people in the house would be a clear indication that we are in one time period or another.

Tarkovsky's *Solaris* was a huge influence on me as I worked on my thesis. Tarkovsky utilized the circular rooms onboard the space station in that film to allow the camera to pan and reveal the subtly shifting production design as the planet Solaris tricked the protagonist by causing visions of his past to reappear; and, even though we had no circular rooms, I imagined using pans in the same way to sweep across the space and reveal the difference between one time and another. We would move crewmembers in just ahead of or behind the camera to adjust the room, and then the camera would sweep into or out of whatever space they were just in. Even though another evident influence is *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, we wanted to avoid the Gondry-esque

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aesthetic that draws attention to the artificiality of these tricks. It worked for that film because it was all inside the character's head. For this film, Herman is literally re-experiencing these moments in the space and viewing it from his perspective, we should feel that they are as real as he does.

Visual Approach

Once we had the locations and transitional choices decided, I began to plan out the visual strategy for the film. As I wrote earlier, Hammad and I had discussed from the beginning using long lenses and attempting to play up the idea of big versus little and macro versus micro as much as possible. We also discussed how the film would change as we moved from time period to time period, and much like the production design and what we would come to agree on for the lighting, we didn't want anything to feel overly regimented. Even though we would come up with motifs and general style guidelines, we didn't want to hold fast and true to those guidelines at the expense of keeping a flowing film that didn't feel like it was forcing anything. At first, we discussed changing over to entirely hand-held camera work once the hallucinations began, but we backed off of this, thinking it would feel too much like we were changing from the indicative to the subjunctive mood as it were and clearly stating "this is different." We then shifted in the other direction, and I felt very strongly that everything should be totally locked down and smooth with very little unplanned movement. Hammad, wisely backed me off from this, saying it went against the overriding principle of keeping things natural and using whatever tools felt right for the moment. We ended up finding a middle ground where we decided on a few principles with the camera: we would use zooms as transitions between

sections of the film; we would use nothing but long lenses until Saul showed up to maintain the sense of voyeurism and surveillance; any camera movement had to be motivated by the motions of the characters like in Kurosawa's *High and Low*; the movements had to be clean and feel intentional—no "steadicam" or *Tree of* Life floating camera stuff; and any opportunity we had to shoot through something, whether a frame or a window or to obstruct the image, we would take it, like in *The Long Goodbye* or *Three Women*. This last point was especially important to me as I wanted to play up the idea of peering through or inside of something. This was a central motif for the film, and for me the three most important images al share this in common: the x-ray in which we literally see inside of Herman's head, the microscope POV shots in which we see what otherwise couldn't be seen with the naked eye, and the moment when Herman sees himself out the window, in which we are seeing something that only he can see. In all of these instances the images are presented in very specific circumstances out of which they could not exist, and I wanted the entire film to feel similarly specific as much as possible. I liked also playing up the visual similarities between the macro scale wall of windows in the living room and the glass microscope slide that the tiny tape recorder is placed on. The whole form of the film was designed to mirror the content—a very large thing crammed inside of a small thing: how much visual detail and content can we put in each frame? How much can we ask the viewer to notice? How much plot can we afford to cram in? How much of a life can you record on a microscopic tape?

In terms of coverage, I stuck to the idea that less is more. Unless a shot is absolutely necessary, don't shoot it. If that means the film is not visually dynamic, well

that means there must be a flaw in the blocking or in the script. Any scene worth shooting will reveal how it should be photographed. If nothing comes to mind, then the scene probably needs tweaking. I was also interested in mixing in long takes with standard shot lengths. I felt that the long takes, if used at the right moments, could help let us sink into the scene and feel a part of the past that we are supposed to be experiencing alongside Herman. However, I was not going to be a slave to the long takes—I learned that lesson on my pre-thesis when I wasted about three rolls of film on a long take that I ended up deleting the majority of and splitting up what remained. If a cut felt natural then so be it. I built a lot of these cuts or "pivot shots" into the blocking with looks and POV shots and a change in a character's direction of movement. Above all, I wanted to avoid imbuing the already strange material with any additional visual strangeness.

To go on a brief tangent here…why zooms instead of dolly moves? It's a question I've pondered many times. Why does one or another feel appropriate at different times? I think at times the classic dolly push can feel manipulative, as if the camera is trying to supply gravitas that the scene otherwise lacks, and I find I shy away from this kind of overt manipulation. The zoom on the other hand can feel a bit distant. A well-executed zoom-in to me feels like we are only taking a closer look and are not interested in finding a different emotional angle at this moment. Used at the right time, it's much more a move of curiosity and questioning rather than one of authority and emotional definition. Other times, it's just lazy and perhaps compensation for a shoddy focus puller.

As we planned out the visual style of the film, one of the principles that we returned to again and again was the idea of it being "good enough." Counter-intuitively, I

didn't want the film to look too good. I didn't want the lighting to be too beautiful or too perfect. I find, many times, especially in student work, that the high fidelity of the film can come at the detriment of the viewing experience. It's akin to being offered a feast of crème brulee. It's lovely and enjoyable, but there's no substance. All we have are visuals that outpace the narrative. We agreed that anything that looked too polished wouldn't fit with the tone of the picture, and it certainly wouldn't feel as natural or real as we wanted. In terms of personal taste, I've always highly disliked hair lights or rim lights. Unless there is a clearly motivated source, I find it extremely distracting and ridiculous that there is always a convenient light emanating from somewhere behind the character. And I have no problem with even, "boring" light. I think, especially with color film, that often times you can get away with this type of lighting because the range of colors present in the foreground and background will do a lot of the work in terms of defining the character in the space and supplying contrast. And to contradict myself, I also was interested in having hard, unforgiving light where possible with little to no fill to balance out the contrast ratio. Ideally, especially with the slow stock we were using, we would have had access to a bank of 2ks or larger to provide a huge source through the windows in the living room. We only really got the lighting we wanted for about two hours each afternoon when the sun was at the proper angle. Otherwise, it was a matter of faking it with carefully placed HMIs casting hard shadows through the window.

Miscellaneous

As we ramped up for production, other issues reared their heads. The question of makeup came up time and time again. I consulted with various people over whether to

have makeup at all. I couldn't decide if I wanted Herman's ear to look infected or not. My worry was the same here as it was in every other visual arena; I didn't want it to draw attention to itself or feel too science-fiction. I didn't want to fetishize the weirdness. Due to this concern, I held on to my plan to not have any makeup for a long time, but as we neared production I realized it would probably be a crucial tool for making the audience believe Herman's condition. Unfortunately, I didn't make this decision until a few days before production, and Monique and Catherine had to scramble to track someone down who could convincingly pull off what I was looking for. Charli Brath came on board and did a fantastic job of making the ear stand out and look infected without looking too sensational. There was another version of this script that involved a giant ear-cave and a gushing wound cut upon with a hatchet, but the story had evolved immensely since then and anything like that no longer seemed to fit. Looking back, it's funny to think about the places where I had thought I could cut corners or save money. I thought makeup might be an area to save money, but I think the final product would have suffered as a result. The many people who said that if it's in front of the camera it's worth the money to make it look good were right.

The other substantial aspect of pre-production was the design and fabrication of Saul Giovanni's kit by Ben Slamka and Danielle. Ben Slamka is a highly skilled craftsman, and we agreed early on that the tools that Saul uses to remove the tape recorder from Herman's ear and the tape from that tape recorder should be one-of-a-kind. If they looked like something you could get off the shelf, then it would be a detriment to the reality of the film, even though we would only see these tools for a brief period of

time. Again, the idea of making these unique tools wasn't to have something cool and science-fiction that we could flaunt but to add to the texture of the world. If anything, I wanted them to seem like tools of the trade, like something that anyone in Saul's position would use. Considering the amount of time, money, and effort that went into their production, I wish that I had been able to feature them more, but it just didn't make sense for the overall film to linger on them for too long. And if at the end of the day having something tangible and unique helped Peter slide into the character comfortably, then it was worth it. Originally, there was going to be much more business with Saul's kit, and Danielle and I spent an unnecessary amount of money acquiring the pieces for the kit that Ben was not going to be making from scratch.

And so, with all the concurrent strands of planning and development coming together, production was set to begin. I am very grateful for the time and hard work that Catherine Licata, Monique Walton, and Danielle Dyar put in to take the reins of the logistics and scheduling prior to and during the shoot. Without their help, there's no way I could've been prepared to make this film. I hope that what I've already recounted has made it abundantly clear that because of all the different novel elements and challenges this film presented and the truncated schedule we were working with due to the casting issues, pre-production was a creatively and intellectually grueling experience. Another shout-out should be given to Kelly Ota, who came in at the last minute as Danielle's assistant and ended up being an all-star. There was so much last minute preparation for Danielle to do that without Kelly's help it would have been impossible.

Production

Equipment checkout went smoothly, and we complemented our haul from UT with a couple of rental items. The only way to pull off the dolly moves we had planned inside the house was to use a Dana Dolly, which is a speed rail dolly system that's much more compact than the typical doorway dolly. Also, we had to rent a custom matte box since none of the school's could actually fit the Cooke and we wanted to be able to apply neutral density or polarizing filters as necessary. Hammad and I walked through the entire schedule shot by shot with our gaffer, Emmett Kerr-Perkinson and the first AC, Nathan Duncan as well as sound recordist, Roshan Murthy. We wanted to be clear before hand what was going to be happening from shot to shot so that we would all be on the same page, especially for the 3rd day of shooting when there would be at least 30 people on set at the same time. After the walk-through, Emmett suggested we use lumber to build a quick and easy lighting grid into the ceiling where we could mount Kino-Flo lights for fill. Because of the extent to which the camera was going to survey the entire space, there was limited room for any sort of stands and it was the only feasible way to have the lights available without having to constantly re-route extension cords and hide stands. So on our first production day while we filmed outside, Emmett worked inside the house installing the light grid and routing cable in a circuitous path along the ceiling.

In one of those strange quirks of film scheduling, it ended up making the most logical sense to shoot the final shot of the movie first. Our first day was only going to be for three to four hours so we could focus on nailing this shot while the lighting was

correct near the end of the day. Hammad, Nathan, and Roshan very carefully set up the camera in the back of Roshan's van and safety cabled it to as many surfaces as possible, and then we began shooting takes of Brian running down the street as the camera pulled away from him. Brian demonstrated ample dedication. I was happy after take number 9, but Brian felt that he could do better. I didn't want to hold him back on the first day, so we went for another three takes. Each take involved him sprinting at full speed for about 100 yards uphill. He was exhausted by the time we were done. Looking back, the direction I gave him for this moment makes very little sense in the context of the finished picture because I didn't know then how the scene right before it would end up changing, but his performance still ended up working in the final cut.

Brian went home and rested up and Emmett finished up his work inside, and I girded myself for day two.

Day two was our first with a full crew present, and we decided to stick with scheduling convention and shoot everything that required the camera to be outside first. We began with an emotional confrontation between Herman and Susan in the driveway as Susan walks to her car to leave. Technically, this scene worked out very well, but it's probably the one moment that I have the most misgivings about. At first, I was worried that the performances weren't quite there, and I very seriously considered tacking a re-shoot of this scene onto our last day. Now, looking at it, I think I may have shot it differently. It feels a little out of place with what immediately precedes it and what follows after, but it's not a major concern. If anything, it's just an indication of how rapidly one's artistic taste grows and evolves, and how much I am already a different

person than I was when I first planned that scene out. We moved on and met our first of many technical challenges as we needed to be able to shoot into the house through the picture window and see Peter in the foreground, Brian in the mid-ground, and Betsy in the background all in the same shot. To do this, we had to elevate the camera four and a half feet off the ground as our house is elevated at least three feet. We used a motley assortment of apple boxes and sandbags to get the camera up, but we figured out a more elegant solution later that day when we used the Dana Dolly to elevate the camera, since the speed rail could be mounted in triple risers. This shot was also the first of many to require extensive lighting as we were going to see into three different spaces at once. We also had to have precise coordination as there was no audio communication from the outside to the inside and we had to be able to choreograph a zoom, a focus pull, and three different actors moving all at the same time.

Because of a few minor miscalculations, Catherine and I had believed we had six more hours than we actually did to shoot at the house. Upon realizing our error, it became necessary to spread scene 8—the scene after Saul removes the tape recorder from Herman's ear—out over three different shooting days. What this meant in practice was that we were squeezing in bits and pieces of this scene at the end of each day and that we were always fighting the setting sun. We hustled and churned out the setups we needed to cross off the list for that scene on day two, but they were all rushed and I didn't feel good about them and I never quite got the blocking right for Peter and I never felt quite happy about the framing and we had to compromise on the lighting to be able to get everything done.

The next day was our big test. I said earlier that the casting with Vicky had been one of the most intellectually and creatively exhausting day of my life—this day quickly outpaced it. Michael Joplin's schedule allowed him to only be on set for Sunday; and since all of his scenes corresponded with the party, we had to film everything that required extras on this day. This also meant that we had to film all of the highly choreographed trick shots in one day.

We began the day with the shots in the kitchen, and after taking a while to tweak lighting we got into a flow and got great takes of the fight scene. Thankfully, pretty much the entire crew was game to jump in as extras when needed. Otherwise, I'm not sure how we would have done it. Catherine put a lot of effort into scouting extras and all of us extended offers of food and fame to our friends, but we were still coming up short. Two people responded to our Craigslist casting call.

The next couple of shots after we were done in the kitchen really taxed everyone. Ideally, we would have been able to devote an entire day to the following two shots. They were both long-take trick shots that involved in-camera production design and personnel shifts as well as dialogue and camera movement in multiple spaces. It was a unique challenge to direct the camera, four actors, and a room full of extras at the same time. The only way we were able to pull these shots off was to go bit by bit through rehearsing them. We must have spent over an hour just setting marks for each of them. Then, we walked through the scene with just the actors until they felt comfortable with everything. Then, we brought the camera into the mix, and practiced the movement, the focus pulls, and the zooming, and finally we practiced with the production design and party

transitions happening outside the frame. Danielle and Kelly coordinated these efforts, and it was pretty spectacular to watch as each person in a group of nine or ten as the camera panned away from where they were hiding entered the room and placed one or two pieces of production design into position and then took their spot as an extra in the scene—all in the space of about fifteen seconds as Peter and Brian spoke by the window. We rehearsed until no one made any mistakes two times in a row. Then we started rolling and it was a great feeling to watch it all working on the monitor. We had to adjust the lighting a couple times as the extensiveness of this shot had pushed the power supply of the house to the limit. We had lights up in the living room, the kitchen, the hallway and outside the window and front door, and we had to unplug every electronic device in the house to be able to draw power for all of them. All in all, we got five great takes of the shot with no huge mistakes—a far better showing that I had predicted. At the end of the day, we continued with our piecemeal approach to scene 8, and again I felt like we had to rush through the shots and they could've been better.

The next day felt like a vacation after what had come before it. After the dissatisfaction with the way scene 8 was progressing, I began to wonder if there was something I could do to tweak it. Something felt off in the pacing and urgency, or lack thereof. I felt I hadn't fully explored what this scene was. I stayed up later than I should have that night and wrote a whole new version of the scene at two in the morning and emailed it to Peter. This was mainly Peter's scene, and I needed to give him something more to work with. I felt the scene as written played too much on the stereotype of what Peter's character was. I wanted to stay away from the "magical stranger" stereotype that

is ever so pervasive. I needed to make him more human, and less like some kind of all-knowing guru. The next day we finished up the shots that didn't require extras, including the shots that would later be composited together by Deepak Chetty to create the image of Herman watching himself through a window caught in a loop outside. Then we found ourselves again dealing with the issue of squeezing scene 8 in. On this day we seemed to have more time than on the previous days, but I never had a clear vision for how I wanted to shoot the scene. It was always hazy and indistinct, and I had finally come up with something I thought I liked the night before. The main challenge of the scene from a practical standpoint was the fact that there was a considerable elevation change in the middle of it. Herman and Peter went from lying on the low coffee table and sitting in a low chair, respectively, to standing. Hammad and I had stayed away from the jib except for one specific shot earlier in the day because we wanted to maintain the specific, intentional movement that I mentioned before, and the jib tends to float and bob as it moves. We attempted to construct the Dana dolly in such a way that it would move on an incline and we'd be able to ramp our way up to their standing positions, but it wasn't working. The device was clearly never designed for that application. We wasted at least an hour trying to make it work, and in a moment of desperation, we decided that our only option was to shoot the scene on the jib. The team of grips and camera crew set it up as quickly as possible, but we were again losing light; and we had to rush everything. Compounding our time crunch, part of what I had re-written for Peter involved a bit of improvisation and a lengthy monologue, and the master wide shot for the scene ended up being almost seven minutes long and eating up two thirds of a roll of film. We were

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running out of film, and since it was an all hands on deck situation we had no other magazines loaded. So we settled for doing one take of the master and all the other set-ups. After that lengthy master, I realized that there was no way I could stay in that shot for the entire scene so we added in four extra set-ups on the fly. It felt like we had pushed our way through a marathon. We finished the day and wrapped Peter—or so we thought. As founding father Ben Franklin once said, "Haste makes waste."

The next day was going to be a fairly light one. We convened at the UT nursing school and filmed the opening scene of the film in the simulation hospital room with Garry Peters coming in to play the doctor. Again, it was challenging to really give him a full profile of the character to work with since we hadn't had any time to rehearse or even meet to talk about him. But it all worked out and we finished up the brief scene of Herman and Susan walking to her car in a nearby parking deck.

We wrapped knowing that we still had to film both the shots of the x-rays of Herman's head and the shots of the tiny tape recorder under the microscope, but for the moment we were done.

Post-Production

Re-shoots & Pickups

Having consulted with my colorist, Dan Stuyck, I had decided that because of my award to help cover the cost of processing and transfer at Alpha-cine, I could afford to get a high-quality LOG flat Prores 4444 transfer to hard drive. This transfer would retain the most information and dynamic range and allow us the most control in the color grading process while staying true to the negative. I had never worked with a true offline/online workflow, but because of the way the footage was transferred, it was necessary to do so. I loaded everything into Avid as DNX 115 files with the plan to online back to the Prores 4444 originals for final color grading. I had made the decision from the beginning to edit the film myself. Although I think it is highly valuable to bring another voice in at this point in the process, I was on a tight schedule, and as can be easily forgotten, the production of the thesis is supposed to be a learning experience. I wanted to re-learn Avid Media Composer and keep my editing skills fresh before graduating and entering life beyond graduate school. I think my one regret is that it would have been nice to bring someone else in to put together an assembly cut/rough cut before I dove in so that I could have some distance and fresh eyes. However, because of the staggered nature of the production process, it just didn't make sense to bring anyone else in who didn't have a crystal clear idea of the finished piece.

It became clear our production process was going to become even more staggered upon watching the dailies and realizing that seventy percent of scene 8 was out of focus. Even though this is the sort of thing that might get someone fired, I don't blame anyone

in our camera department. If anything, I felt it was the inevitable outcome of the lack of having a solid plan in place for that scene. I never felt happy with the pages I had written for that scene, and because of that, I didn't have a clear vision for how we were going to shoot it, and because of that, I pushed it off to the last minute to plan, and because of that, I made shoddy visual decisions and second-guessed everything and because of that, I put the crew in a position where it was extremely likely that someone would make a mental error. I did not set that scene up for success, and it all goes back to the writing and visual planning. I attempted to edit together what I could from the scene, but even then, I knew we would have to reshoot it.

The truth is I'm thankful that it was out of focus. Without that technical error, it would have been difficult to justify bringing everyone back together or for me to spend another thousand dollars because I wasn't quite happy with the way it had turned out. Once I had everything in place, my producers and I hustled and got everyone back onboard for the reshoots, and because of my actors' availabilities the only open weekend until the end of July was the one coming up immediately. We were going to shoot the pickups in four days. After watching the assembly cut, I knew exactly what needed to be changed and I banged out a rewrite of the scene that was far superior to the previous version. It was slimmer and somehow more substantial because each word meant more and had actual intention behind it. Up until that point in time, I hadn't fully understood why this scene mattered for both of these characters. The re-write and the visual strategy that Hammad and I decided on felt right and specific to the moment.

The reshoots went swimmingly, and after a week of nervous waiting as the film traveled to Seattle and back, I cut the scene together and slid it into place. My next consideration was planning for the next round of pickups while cutting together what I already had. We still had to shoot the x-ray and microscope footage. Ben and I met up to plan for the microscope shot, and after realizing that would occupy a lot of his time, I took the reins on generating the x-rays.

In low-budget filmmaking you end up doing a little bit of everything, whether it's recording sound or operating the camera or even making fake x-rays from scratch. I had already toyed with using filters in Photoshop to alter the colors of a photograph of a deconstructed tape recorder, but it didn't look right. I looked far and wide for an x-ray image of a cassette recorder, but none were to be found. After analyzing x-rays of other electronics, I realized that I needed to isolate and accentuate the metallic components, including the metal tape inside the cassette. I had some blacklights left over from my pre-thesis, and I realized I could use those. I took the cover off a tape recorder and painted the metal components with fluorescent paint and lit it with the blacklight. Then I photographed it and desaturated the image and pasted it into an x-ray of someone's head I found on the internet—I tried to track down whose it was or where it came from with no luck. Then, after repeated trial and error, I figured out that the best material to print it on was the material used for movie poster lightboxes. This material had the correct density and didn't look like it came from an inkjet printer. Thankfully, I had lucked out and been able to get a couple of free light tables to serve as both an x-ray lightboard and the

surface of a microscope from the journalism department as they were throwing them away.

While working on the production of these x-rays, I was continuing to whittle away at the film. As I was cutting, I was beginning to have another moment of crisis. The scenes were working, and the film had a good flow to it, but it felt thin. I wasn't happy. I felt like what I had was nothing more than a well-executed narrative. As I said before, I view film as a process and unless I've maximized the potential of each step of the process, I don't feel like I've seen how far I can take the work. I felt the film was lacking anything to indicate its tone or feel at the beginning. It had nothing to anchor it in a specific mode of communicating. Furthermore, I realized that Herman's pain was not very well established in the first half of the film. At some point during production I must have grown tired of telling him his head was hurting or had begun to take it for granted, and there was almost zero indication from his acting that he has any sort of head condition when the film begins. I needed to find a way to strongly indicate in a concise manner that this he had a serious condition that would resonate throughout the film. For this I returned to an idea that had persisted in the script up until the 11th hour. I would film Herman scalping tickets and being brought to his knees by a bolt of pain as the tape malfunctions before he arrives in the hospital. Hammad and I planned to shoot footage of him in excruciating pain outside the Frank Erwin Center. We shot this at 72 frames per second to accentuate the moment and crystallize exactly what he was experiencing. This combined with the more abstract imagery I was planning to shoot would help to articulate

the tone and texture of the film from the outset while also providing a sense of the severity of the issue at hand.

We shot the pickups, and the final shot I needed—or again, so I thought—was of a bird at the birdfeeder outside my window. This turned out to be the single most difficult shot in the entire film. All told, I sat with a super16 camera at my side for almost 10 hours waiting for a bird to land on the feeder.

Sound Design & Final Touches

With this footage in place, I turned my attention to the sound of the film. The sound was always going to be a crucial component of the film, and I had been considering what to do with audio from the very beginning. I knew for sure that I wanted sound design that originated from analog sources. I was interested in working on the sound design myself to gain some experience handling that role, but because of the staggered nature of the pickups and the editing, I had neither the time nor the resources to actually do anything beyond pull clips off the Internet. I needed a sound designer, but I didn't know where to look. At the same time, I had begun thinking of scoring the film. Music has always been a hugely important part of the creative process for me. Before coming to Austin, I was an active musician and while here I made numerous attempts to get a band up and running again. After cycling through numerous styles and genres of temp music, I settled on a simple piano score to counter-balance the complexity of the sound design that was to be laced throughout the picture. After consulting with other MFA students and checking sample work, I decided to ask Hanan Townshend to work on the film. He's scored a number of MFA films and is currently scoring one or two films

for Terrence Malick. Everything I heard from him indicated a composer who was technically adept and creatively open. We met and in the course of our meeting we began to discuss how sound design and music would work together, and he suggested Will Patterson as a sound designer. Will also was working on Malick's films. Will and I met and he immediately latched onto the project. His area of expertise is tape based music and sound manipulation. He had even built a custom keyboard out of 32 reel-to-reel recorders. He came onboard and over the course of the next few weeks I sent him different cuts and he went to work. It was a strange feeling being able to hand something that creatively involved off to someone and have full faith that they would come back to you with something amazing.

I wish I could speak with authority as to the methods he used, but since I wasn't there I don't know for sure. From what he told me, he outputted to half-inch tape a bunch of wild lines that Betsy, Brian, and I had recorded of them in various states of domesticity and then manipulated the speed and pitch and delay of the various recordings and then layered them over each other to create the unique sound collages that represent the tape recorder malfunctioning and replaying the past. Hanan had designed the score to be cut up and manipulated and re-ordered in whatever way we liked—almost like score syllables. Will outputted sections of the score to tape, and I also chopped it up digitally and re-structured it and layered contrasting parts over top of one another to help emphasize the increasing chaos and distress the tape recorder was causing inside Herman's head.

As I prepared to lock picture, I still felt like there was something not quite right about the ending of the film. I had realized through the course of editing that the ending of the film was not saying what I originally thought it had to say. The issue was not whether or not the moment he was hearing was true, as I had believed for a time. The moment had to be a one that he felt nostalgic for. The theme of nostalgia and regret had always been in the back of my mind, but it wasn't until the very end of the editing process that I realized that is what the film is about. It's about longing for a thing that you can't ever have again. I needed to find a moment that would hit home for Herman— something that he would long for but never be able to attain. During some of the earliest drafts of the script, when Herman still got kidnapped and taken to Saul's cabin in the woods, I had written in a series of subjective POV shots like in *Enter the Void* that would pop in while Herman was listening back to his life. Even with the hallucinations and malfunctions in the script, I had toyed with bringing this idea back as a way to indicate the shift in perspective as Herman goes from physically re-experiencing moments he is hearing to actually remembering them from an isolated position where he can't actually interact with them. With two days to go before picture lock, I gathered Monique, Betsy, and Brian up to film this material on a DSLR. I felt ok about switching to digital for these couple of shots because it was intended to feel purposely distinct from the rest of the film in the first place. Another issue that I spoke about at length with various people was the conflict I felt about the very nature of the tape recorder and the idea of a moment popping up at the end that would be meaningful enough to change Herman's mind about everything. I found logically preposterous that randomly fast-forwarding would bring us

to a spot on the tape that was, first of all, something with useful content since a third of the tape would be Herman sleeping, and, secondly, something that actually held some meaning or significance for him. After talking with PJ, he reminded me that maybe it didn't have to be anything significant, that maybe that was the beauty of it—that there was meaning in the small moments as well as the large moments. So I brainstormed and came up with the idea of catching Susan in mid-stream as she's heading out the door as a way to echo her pattern of leaving throughout the film. I worked this footage in and filming was done with 48 hours to spare.

A note of caution here and a lesson learned: I made edits after sending what I thought was the picture-locked version to Will for his final timing. I then forgot I had done this, so when I received the final files from him, I had to spend a substantial amount of time re-aligning his work with the latest cut. When you are picture-locked, you should stay picture-locked. Or don't say you're picture-locked unless you are absolutely confident that you actually are. After fixing this minor issue, I was ready to move into my mix and color correction.

Two days after shooting the final material I met up with Dan Stuyck and we conformed the online and spent a day grading the film. Even though this was going to be an all-digital process, we had spoken early on about retaining an analog feel, and we referenced films like *A Woman Under the Influence* and *Grey Gardens* when discussing the look of the final product. We wanted to make sure that the grades we were applying were consistent with what would be possible if you were to grade the film photochemically. To that end, we attempted to keep any blacks from being too crushed or

any highlights from registering too hot and we allowed colors to bleed into one another rather than making anything too clean and precise. We were trying to stay consistent with the subtext of the film as a eulogy or tribute to analog in the face of digital—an idea Monique had mentioned after watching a cut of the film and the inspiration for writing in the line "It's all digital, now" for Saul.

The mix with Korey Pereira went smoothly as well. It was a lot of fun working through Will's sound design layer by layer and trying to balance the different elements in what we called a "symphony of noise." We accentuated the dynamics of the mix and Korey worked a couple miracles by mixing out the sound of the crew moving during the trick shots as well as by being able to completely mix out the sound of the van at the end while Herman is running down the street.

Final Thoughts

After going through all of this and dealing with a project of exponentially greater complexity than anything else I have ever made, I find myself returning to my original thesis. Filmmaking is a process art, and it is the job of the director to steer that process in the proper direction. However, if you leave yourself open to that process, what that proper direction is will shift along every step of the way. From conception to execution, every single aspect of the film I thought I was going to make became something else, and yet somehow the core of it stayed true. When I began I was deluding myself—I did not yet know what I was making; I only thought I did. Film is an experiential medium as much as a process. We don't have the answers at the beginning and maybe not even at the end. Yet somehow, as we grope through the dark, we find clues as to what we are making, and it feels as if slowly but surely are pulling up the wreckage of a thing that we felt compelled to share but never knew existed.

In making this film, I've found myself questioning my beliefs and assumptions about filmmaking the entire time, and I think that's what the films I most admire and the films I hope to make will do. They don't give answers because no one really has any. They simply raise a question or two and ask the viewer to engage and join the process of discovery that I and every filmmaker who is pursuing the presentation of honest work goes through. If I am able to give that same feeling of not knowing what lies ahead but knowing you must get there to the audience, than I have succeeded in truly relating the experience of the process of making the film. That is my thesis, that narrative film, when

done the right way, is hardly differentiable from telepathy as we collectively experience

the same consciousness in a way that is nearly impossible in any other medium or form.

APPENDIX: "The God Who Loves You" by Carl Dennis

The God Who Loves You

It must be troubling for the god who loves you
To ponder how much happier you'd be today
Had you been able to glimpse your many futures.
It must be painful for him to watch you on Friday evenings
Driving home from the office, content with your week—
Three fine houses sold to deserving families—
Knowing as he does exactly what would have happened
Had you gone to your second choice for college,
Knowing the roommate you'd have been allotted
Whose ardent opinions on painting and music
Would have kindled in you a lifelong passion.
A life thirty points above the life you're living
On any scale of satisfaction. And every point
A thorn in the side of the god who loves you.
You don't want that, a large-souled man like you
Who tries to withhold from your wife the day's disappointments
So she can save her empathy for the children.
And would you want this god to compare your wife
With the woman you were destined to meet on the other campus?
It hurts you to think of him ranking the conversation
You'd have enjoyed over there higher in insight
Than the conversation you're used to.
And think how this loving god would feel
Knowing that the man next in line for your wife
Would have pleased her more than you ever will
Even on your best days, when you really try.
Can you sleep at night believing a god like that
Is pacing his cloudy bedroom, harassed by alternatives
You're spared by ignorance? The difference between what is
And what could have been will remain alive for him
Even after you cease existing, after you catch a chill
Running out in the snow for the morning paper,
Losing eleven years that the god who loves you
Will feel compelled to imagine scene by scene
Unless you come to the rescue by imagining him
No wiser than you are, no god at all, only a friend
No closer than the actual friend you made at college,
The one you haven't written in months. Sit down tonight

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And write him about the life you can talk about
With a claim to authority, the life you've witnessed,
Which for all you know is the life you've chosen.

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