

BLIND

SEAN GARRITY

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Abstract

“Blind” tells the story of a man who quits his job and buys an RV to drive his daughter, who is losing her sight, across Canada to see the Rocky Mountains before she goes blind.

The film is framed with the narrative device of a voice-over from a “filmmaker” who is contemplating a film he wants to make, about a girl who goes blind. The film comes into being as the filmmaker imagines it, with many details left out, to be decided later, before actually making the film.

The purpose of this thesis support paper is to examine and lay bare my creative process over the course of making the short film, BLIND; to make explicit, for myself, a process that has always been instinctual. In addition to a brief overview of some theoretical frameworks, this will involve an examination of the sources and references that I drew upon in creating the film, and more importantly, an analysis of the deeply personal, challenging insights I have been exposed to in the course of my study.

Acknowledgements

This film, and the paper that goes with it, would not have been possible, if I didn't feel I had the support and backing of a number of key people at York.

Most significantly, my supervisor, Ali Kazimi, whose quiet wisdom and willingness to work at my pace (alternately glacial and frantic) was a constant pillar of support. Also, Phillip Hoffman, who was always available to read something, look at a cut, or give advice on the project and the process. It wasn't until I started really exploring the films I had seen that had served as inspirations for BLIND, that I discovered one of them was Phil's!

The insightful, constructive feedback I received from these two accomplished filmmakers really made a difference in shaping the work, and in pushing me into areas that I would not have otherwise dared to explore on my own.

In terms of the nuts and bolts of getting the work done, I find it – personally – exhausting, if I feel like I am constantly imposing or asking favours of people. This was NOT the case at York, at all. Bill Byers, Kuowei Lee, Marcos Arriaga, Stephanie Adamson and John Hedley constantly went out of their way to help and encourage me in the creation of this film.

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Table of Contents

Abstractii
Acknowledgmentsiii
Introduction1
Development of the Idea2
Aesthetic Approach	.....9
The Mediated Narrative	.....11
Visual Style	.....12
Sound Design	.....12
Artistic Context	.....13
Theoretical Framework	.....15
Production	.....18
Creative Process with Actors	.....22
Post Production	.....24
Special Effects	.....26
Technical Process	.....26
Budget	.....27
Observations and Conclusions	.....27
Referenced Films	.....29
Bibliography	.....30
Websites	.....31
Appendix 1: Script	.....32
Appendix 2: Storyboard	.....41

Introduction

When I have made films in past, and done publicity to support the theatrical release, or attended film festival screenings to talk about them, I always have with me a collection of witty behind-the-scenes anecdotes, or have tried to make enticing arguments for why people should come and see the movie, or convince their friends to come and see the movie.

The idea of a personal mini-memoir of my creative process, something that sets out to dissect and analyze it, is counter-intuitive to me. Normally, I would never look under the hood, for fear of what I might find there. But this being a requirement for the thesis, I will bravely go where I have not dared venture, up to now.

Development of the Idea

In 2003, I heard about a man who had rented an RV to take his daughter across Canada before she lost her sight. I was unusually touched by it. As such, it struck me as an interesting set up for a film, and I filed it away somewhere in my brain.

Later that same year, I found myself speaking with a man who worked at an RV dealership, who was very enthusiastic in his affection for his job. Feeling like I wanted to add something to this conversation, but with no direct RV experience myself, outside of film, I shared the story I had heard about the man and his daughter. The RV rental agent smiled. “Ah,” he said, “A Last Wish Rental. Those are my favorites.”

As it turns out, the story I had heard is quite a common one. People losing their sight, or their mobility, or suffering from a terminal illness, are often taken on RV trips, fulfilling a lifelong dream held by either themselves, or their caregivers. A Last Wish Rental.

I quickly went to my computer, to scribble this down in my “ideas” file.

As I was writing it out, I found myself filling in all sorts of details that were not in the original story; the mom was absent, the daughter was a teenager, she had a bad relationship with the father, the father saw the road trip as an opportunity to reset their relationship, unlike the real life patriotic father I had heard, my guy wanted her to see the Rockies because they were the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and he wanted to share it with her before she ascended out of his reach, into adulthood. The ending, where

the daughter lies to the father about being able to see the mountains, also popped out of my head onto the page as naturally as though I was transcribing something I had read somewhere.

Once I had purged myself of this story, I saved the file onto my hard drive, and went back to the film I was working on at the time, my second feature, LUCID.

Two years later, between screenings at the Toronto International Film Festival, I was chatting with a frequent collaborator of mine about what our next project together would be. We were tossing ideas back and forth, and I told him my version of the story of the Last Wish Rental. It moved him to tears, and he insisted that we start developing it as a feature right away. But I was not ready.

“Why not?” my collaborator asked me. And I had to confess to him that I didn’t know why not. But, looking back, I know now.

In writing this paper, I have had to ask myself what it is about this story that attracts me, and what my personal connection to it is. And I believe that the answer lies in my relationship with my father. My own father was my hero, and my role model. Not as a filmmaker, but as a human being. People were drawn to him as a quiet but unmovable force of reason and fairness, and his presence anchored every group he was a part of, even when he said very little. The side of him that I saw was infinitely wise, patient and generous, and I constantly strive to be more like him, even today.

In 1993, my father was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, and in 2002, after having been slowly and painfully deprived of his motor functions, one by one, he was taken from us, as he slept.

So, in 2003, when I heard this story of a father making such a grand and selfless gesture for his daughter, it was something that immediately touched me, and I couldn't forget it. But even in 2005, when my collaborator wanted us to work on it together, I was not yet ready to write it.

My collaborator, however, was insistent, and every few months he would, once again, bring up the story of the Last Wish Rental, while we worked on our other projects. I told him – and myself – that there was always something more pressing. After LUCID finished, we started writing a comedy together, which would eventually become MY AWKWARD SEXUAL ADVENTURE and I started developing a Dogme-inspired film that grew out of my experiences during the recent birth of my daughter, which went on to become ZOOEY & ADAM.

Eventually, convinced of the power of the story, and its applicability to his relationship with his own father, he begged me to allow him to try and write a draft of the Last Wish Rental, just to explore the material, and see if he could convince me to start developing it with him. And I, recognizing that his persistence is a big part of the success we enjoy as a team, acquiesced.

There is an interesting clue that he may have understood the psychological obstacles I had erected for myself in terms of tackling this story much better than I did: In 2009, as I was wrapping production on ZOOEY & ADAM, a book was published by the Winnipeg Film Group, entitled “Place: 13 Essays 13 Filmmakers 1 City.” One of the essays, written by my collaborator about me, postulated that my creative drive, my methodology with actors, and indeed the thematic concerns of my work, could be attributed to my relationship with my father (Chernick, 2010).

He likely saw, more clearly than I could, that while I was really attracted to the story, I had a subconscious aversion to exploring this material too deeply, for fear of painfully opening up lingering feelings of regret and loss, and forcing me to confront the persona of my own father.

So, he started to develop a feature film script called BOREALIS, which was to be based on my story of the Last Wish Rental.

Over the same period, I had convened a group of writers in Winnipeg to develop material for a new film that would be shot in the same neo-dogme style that I had employed on ZOOEY & ADAM, which I call “Solo Cinema,” (Anderson, 2010) and kept myself busy with this, perhaps in an effort to avoid acknowledging the unresolved issues I had with letting my story, so grounded in my relationship with my father, go off with another writer.

The screenplay we developed out of this group would become my fifth feature, BLOOD PRESSURE, which I shot before starting the MFA program at York, and was posting, while simultaneously taking classes and proposing theses. The combination of the graduate work, the post-production on BLOOD PRESSURE, as well as MY AWKWARD SEXUAL ADVENTURE, both of which were finished and premiered while I was pursuing my degree, ensured that my Last Wish Rental story was far from my mind.

Indeed, I proposed two different (feature length) projects to my supervisory committee at York, over my first two years there, and presented a third at the symposium. Ultimately, I discovered that each one of them, upon further exploration, had its own problems, and was not going to be possible within the timeline and financial restraints of the MFA program.

But there was something more: the first time I proposed my thesis to my graduate supervisor, Ali Kazimi, he said something that stuck with me. He said that he would like me to push myself in new directions with my thesis project. He was keenly aware that, as a professional filmmaker, merely making a film would not necessarily challenge me in the same way that it might with other students, most of whom are less experienced filmmakers. It struck me as something very wise. It struck me as something my father might say.

I began to look at telling a more personal story, and telling it in a style that would represent a departure from the kind of work I had recently been doing. Specifically, something that would help me to get away from the “Solo Cinema,” approach that I had been doing so much of.

Additionally, there was the question of length. I had long held that I would take advantage of the opportunity of a thesis film, to shoot another feature. Ultimately, I can do more with a feature, attract better talent, more attention, and – significantly – generate income from it, after the program is done. None of this is true of a short film, and yet, the amount of effort and time required to produce a short is only slightly less than that required for a feature.

Strangely, though, when my supervisor’s advice to push myself dovetailed with the notion of revisiting BLIND, I knew this was the right choice for my thesis film, and I pursued it with a certainty that I had not felt with any of my previous proposals.

Looking back, I don’t believe I truly understood why I was making this decision. The story was already in development as a feature, and doing it as a short creates some complicated issues in terms of creative ownership, copyright, and the possibilities for the short film outside of the masters program at York. When I told my collaborator, and the three large production companies associated with BOREALIS what I was doing, they were not at all pleased, and tried to convince me to abandon the project.

So, why did I persist? Why did I take BLIND, out of all the other possible ideas I could have shot, and decide to pursue it with such determination? I have not asked myself this question until now.

When my collaborator first showed me the screenplay for BOREALIS, that he had written, it was very different than the story I had originally been attracted to. It was a well-written screenplay, and continues to enjoy development support from investors. We might be shooting it next summer, in fact. But, clearly, my collaborator – who is a very talented writer - writes what he knows, from his heart and his experience, and so he used the story to explore issues he had with his own father, and refashion the story so that it spoke to him.

His script is very good, but it no longer speaks to me the way that it did when I originally envisioned it.

Now that I am the father of a little girl, the story that I wanted to tell is especially poignant for me, and I can rarely get through the whole pitch without getting a lump in my throat.

BLIND, in the end, might well be an attempt to personally mythologize my father, and to give him something that I couldn't give him in life. While most writers identify most closely with the protagonists in their screenplays, in this case, I am definitely the daughter, receiving an incredible gift from her father, and not properly acknowledging it

until she can't see him anymore. And only at that point, giving him a gift in return. There might be an element of wish fulfillment in my creation of this work, and attempt to write a final scene onto my relationship with my father, who I lost before I had a chance to try to express the full depth of my gratitude and love for him.

Aesthetic Approach

I am drawn to cinema, first and foremost, as an emotional medium. While I also enjoy films that are purely intellectual, or purely aesthetic exercises, the films closest to my heart, and the ones that I want to make, are films with which I engage emotionally.

The aesthetic and theoretical framework, for me, need to serve the emotional experience of the audience. Given the intense emotional nature of this particular story, and the 'tearjerker' ending, my fear is that people will feel manipulated – and therefore recoil – if I treat the material in too raw, or too direct a fashion.

I therefore made the decision to try to create distance between the viewer and the subject, employing a number of narrative devices - which I will detail separately - namely: a mediated narrative, a clinical visual style, a layered sound design and an emotionally detached narrator performance.

The concept here was that, by creating a distance between spectator and spectacle, I would invoke a more participatory interaction with the narrative, and thereby maximize the emotional effect of the film's ending.

At the same time, this counter-intuitive approach to my content is my way of experimenting with a form that I want to explore more; a hybrid form that borrows formalistic elements from the worlds of both experimental and narrative film and blends them into a kind of experimental-flavoured narrative.

It has been argued that without breaking from narrative as a form, there can be no break from the dominance of mainstream commercial cinema, referred to by the Situationists as the "Spectacle" (DeBord, 1967) or sometimes called the "Institutional Mode of Representation," (Burch, 1991) among other derogatory labels.

However, I counter that fictional narrative itself, and indeed many of the story structure elements that dominate mainstream as well as independent cinema have their roots in the oldest forms of human storytelling, going right back to the civilization-defining myths that were maintained orally, predating the written word.

To say that the Institutional Mode of Representation now, in some way, owns that form, and in order to break free of it, we must abandon narrative altogether is, in my view, a defeat.

In "Primitivism and the Avant-Gardes: A Dialectical Approach," Noël Burch argues that the key to the Institutional Mode of Representation is "spectatorial identification with a ubiquitous camera." The audience is completely imaginatively involved in the film, instead of being distant from it and seeing it as an object to be examined." (Burch, 1991)

It is from this standpoint that I look at BLIND as a film that – while still maintaining a narrative form – breaks from the prescribed structures of the Institutional Mode of Representation.

The Mediated Narrative

In an attempt to deliver maximum emotional impact, BLIND attempts to reduce the perception of a manipulative intervention by the filmmaker on the content – precisely by making that intervention more salient.

I have always been very interested in the audience's relationship to the material in films like Chris Marker's "Sans Soleil" or Phillip Hoffman's "?O Zoo!," where the content is explicitly filtered through the filmmaker's experience of it. This mediated narrative puts the viewer at a comfortable distance from the material; a place where perhaps they feel that they won't be swept up in the narrative in the same way they are with a conventional fiction film, but rather, a place from which they can engage on a purely intellectual plane with the material. When I watch these films, I feel like I am sitting in the edit suite with the filmmaker, going through footage and listening to their thoughts on it. It is a safe,

private space, and that safety and privacy loosen my emotional inhibitions. My hope with BLIND is that this comfortable distance will disarm the audience, and make them more susceptible to the impact of the story.

Visual Style

The camera movement in BLIND is not motivated. That is to say, the audience should not get the sensation that we are following characters through the narrative with our camera. On the contrary, the traveling shots in BLIND are meant to create the sensation of being taken through the story on a kind of impartial conveyor belt, without being affected in any way by it. The consistently moving camera ideally helps to set up the illusion of a clinical distance from these characters and their painful story.

Very few of the shots relate to one another with any kind of continuity, but rather, they are chosen to create the sensation of casually flipping through a photo album. As opposed to the indexical visual style of some of my earlier work, these shots are meant to be symbolic of the scene they represent.

To further create this sensation, the colour palette is cool and clinical, and there are no close-ups on faces in the movie.

Sound Design

The sound design is meant to mediate the viewers' connection to the sync audio, thus, working together with the other formal elements, creating a sensation that they are being insulated from the emotional impact of the story.

By having the sync play quietly underneath the narration, I hope to create a kind of emotional buffer, not only by having a layer of sound over top, but also through a calm, quiet, emotionally detached narrator performance.

Artistic Context

For the approach I am taking with BLIND, I have been influenced by films from the wave of 1990s independent cinema in Japan, which experienced a renaissance after a long post-war decline, with films from the so-called *Shinsedai* ("New Generation"). I would like to specifically reference three of these films: Jun Ichikawa's TONY TAKITANI, Hirokazu Koreeda's MABOROSHI, and Shunji Iwai's UNDO.

Jun Ichikawa's TONY TAKITANI, from the Haruki Murakami short story of the same name, tells the story of a quiet, emotionally repressed illustrator in Tokyo who finds love, and profound happiness for the first time in his life, only to have it taken away when his wife is killed in a car accident. He then meets a woman who looks remarkably like his dead wife, played, of course, by the same actress, and tries to hire her to wear his wife's clothes, and help him at work. She finds this so sad, that she can't stop crying, and she

leaves. The film is told in long, single shots with slow, deliberate camera moves, which feel completely disconnected from the events unfolding before them. For me, the juxtaposition of the cool, detached tone against the emotionally tumultuous story intensified my emotional connection to the material, and made me want to get closer to these characters. There was no sense of being manipulated by the filmmaker, but rather, there was a sense that viewers were invited in, to become as involved or detached as they wished.

Hirokazu Koreeda's *MABOROSHI* deals with a woman devastated by the death of her husband, who is crushed under a suburban Osaka train. She moves with her newborn son to a small, fishing community in Japan's rugged north, and slowly rebuilds her life. The last shot in the movie is an extreme long shot of the woman and her new partner, silhouetted against the sea, walking out to end of a spit. As they walk, she confides in him that she doesn't understand why her husband committed suicide. She's known it the whole time, but it is so unbearably painful, that she couldn't face it until now. In a well-lit close up, this emotional moment would have overwhelmed the subtlety of the rest of the film. Koreeda, on the other hand, doesn't show us their faces at all, they are far away from us, in shadow, and the scene plays out in a single shot. But it is precisely this formalist choice that lends it power.

Shunji Iwai's *UNDO* follows a young couple who have started their life together in a small Tokyo apartment. He is a novelist, who, once he starts working, pays little attention to his new wife. Without consciously realizing it, she develops a habit of tying everything

in their apartment together, as her feelings of disconnection from him slowly reveal themselves to be the beginnings of a serious mental illness. Ultimately, she drifts away from him altogether, and becomes despondent, by which point the apartment, more full of rope and string than furniture, has been essentially converted into something more akin to an art installation. It is an emotionally intense story, but told from the perspective of the detached, analytical novelist with a hushed, near-monotone voice over. The juxtaposition of form and content makes UNDO an unforgettable film.

All three of these films frame intensely emotional narratives in detached, clinical forms, to ultimately craft work of tremendous emotional power, and have been strong influences on my approach to BLIND.

Theoretical Framework

In BLIND, I have added a separate level of ‘implied author,’ by having a narrator who is an extradiegetic character. Both Wayne Booth and Sarah Kozloff have defined ‘implied author,’ and I think it’s instructive to look at the differences between them, in the context of the film.

In Booth's “The Rhetoric of Fiction” (Booth, 1961), he asserts that the “The implied author is the ‘author’ presumed by the narrative. As such, he/she/it may not share the views of the real author. Being a personage presumed by the narrative, the implied author does not actually exist in the real world, and hence is not a real person like the actual

author, but merely a technical device.” (Talib, 2011). However, Booth is writing specifically about the author of a literary work, not a film.

In “Invisible Storytellers” (Kozloff, 1988) Kozloff posited, due to the uncertainty inherent in ascertaining the single ‘author’ of a film, that the concept of the implied author is more necessary in cinema than it is in literature. The importance of the visuals in storytelling makes it more difficult to establish authorship with any certainty, and for this reason, Kozloff asserts that it is “the image-maker, who is the moral/ideological agency of what is presented in the film, and therefore the implied author” in cinema.

By Booth’s definition, the filmmaker character I have invented to narrate the film is the implied author, and by Kozloff’s definition, it is me, the actual filmmaker. But what is the difference?

As declared at the beginning of the film, the narrator is a filmmaker who is thinking of making a film. This narrator speaks through my voice. He is thinking about making the exact film that I have made. Can we say that this character represents the person I was in the exact moment that I was writing the script? If so, is my performance of that character a simulation of my former self? Or is this character what Baudrillard, in his 1981 book, “Simulacra and Simulation” would refer to as a simulacra of the second order; a perversion of reality, created by me to “mask and denature” a reality which the sign itself is incapable of encapsulating? (Baudrillard, 1981) Clearly, the narrator is someone who is not quite ‘me,’ but not quite ‘not me.’ The essential question becomes, am I able to

simulate myself by making a film about myself making a film, or do I fail by not being able to mask and denature actually being myself?

Applying this to the original question; is the implied author of BLIND the filmmaker, or the simulated filmmaker? Even though the definition provided by Booth seems to perfectly describe the simulated filmmaker, there is an important difference between the narrator and the filmmaker that these approaches do not anticipate, and that is emotional involvement. As described elsewhere in this paper, I, as filmmaker, am tremendously emotionally invested in the story of this film, while the simulated filmmaker, who narrates, is not. I also contend that, as described earlier, the device of the narrator, and its particular execution in BLIND, serves my purposes, not the narrator's, in terms of emotionally affecting the viewer. Ultimately, therefore, it is Kozloff's definition that more accurately defines authorship, in my view.

Another approach I came across in my time at York that might provide an interesting framework through which to look at the subject matter of BLIND, is that of Joseph Campbell's work on mythology and the origins of story. Essentially, Campbell theorizes that any contemporary narrative, can also be looked at as the retelling of an archetypal story, containing basic narrative elements that have remained unchanged through time. (Campbell, 1968) Of these, one that interests me with BLIND, is the crossing of the threshold into the unknown; according to Campbell, an essential step in the Hero's Journey. A defining characteristic of this crossing, is that the threshold marks a permanent change; there is no going back, once you have crossed over.

The central narrative event around which everything else is built in BLIND, is the impending blindness of the daughter. Looked at in the context of Campbell's work, this event can be seen as the hero's crossing of a threshold from the world of seeing, into the world of blindness; a threshold from which there is no return.

Campbell elaborates that these thresholds traditionally have guardians, who must be defeated, and a feature of his "Monomyth" is that there is always a facilitator, who he refers to as a "Mentor," who, while unable to accompany the hero across the threshold, gives them what they will need to be able to cross on their own. Clearly, the Mentor would be the father, in BLIND, but the Guardian is a little less obvious. I have set up this story in such a way that the obstacles she must conquer before crossing over include coming to terms with her father, coming to terms with her fear, and coming to terms with the inevitable. Perhaps, then, it is these things cumulatively that take on the role of the threshold guardian who must be defeated.

Production

We shot BLIND over three days in October, largely on campus, and partly in Whitby and somewhere north of Ajax where we got lost, using the RV dealership as our base.

Given the visual style detailed earlier, it was important to rigorously storyboard every shot, and plan out the details on a thorough, day-long location scout. In doing so, I began

to log a series of logistical challenges, involving staging, parking, feeding crew, etc. that would eventually be the greatest challenge on this shoot.

The aesthetic experience, which I will detail next, was inspiring, enlightening and exactly what one hopes the process of filmmaking will bring. The logistical production experience, on the contrary, was exceedingly difficult. Given the visual demands of my director's vision, the crew needed to be larger than what I had originally planned, and as a result, all of the transportation, housing, feeding, and parking issues that accompany larger crews occupied far more of my cognitive capacity than I would have liked during the shoot. Suffice to say, what I saved in actual financial expenditure, I paid for in grey hairs and stress.

The visual concept, in a nutshell, was that the perspective of the film would shift gradually from the father to the daughter, and we would see a corresponding visual movement from clear, composed images to a slow erosion of vision, and its eventual disappearance. In other words, I wanted the film to go blind. I wanted the final image, of the Rocky Mountains, to be imagined by the audience as they stared at a black screen.

I decided to work with cinematographer Chris Romeike, because I am a fan of his work, and because he is a perceptive and insightful artist who really "got" what I was trying to do with this project. Chris suggested that we shoot on the RED Epic, because many of the very specific things I wanted to achieve visually seemed to be geared to the strengths of that camera. We were able to shoot the movie at 4K, and experiment with 225 frames-

per-second slow motion, 360-degree shutter, and a variety of other bells and whistles that are features of the RED Epic.

In doing so, we began to see interesting new dimensions of the visual concept emerge as part of the process. The idea of “vision” and the experience of losing sight have always been central in my approach to this movie, and while I had a basic treatment of it planned from the beginning, most of the variations on this visual motif emerged from the process of production.

As we were framing up shots, and deciding where to place camera, what kind of depth of field to work with, and how to dress set objects to the frame, a variety of unexpected possibilities presented themselves; from obscuring objects, to fog, to shooting through glass without fully polarizing, and exploring the possibilities the RED Epic presents for distorting or shutting down vision as a tool to effectively see anything. We discovered a wide variety of possible applications of these visual ideas, and this was, without question, the aesthetic highlight of the production phase.

After the daughter is told by her father that she is going blind, we see out the window of the RV, as Canada silently passes by. Through a manipulation of the shutter, lens choice and frame rate, we were able to come up with footage that was at times reminiscent of the scratch animation of Stan Brakhage or Norman McLaren, and at other times hypnotic in that the motion and blurring changed the very nature of the image. This opened up for me

the possibility that the blindness at the centre of our story might not be the loss of vision, but rather, the transformation of it.

In strictly mechanical terms, “seeing” is actually a function of the brain, not the eyes, which merely react to light. As such, when the eyes cease to function, does the brain not continue to create images? In dreams? In the imagination? Is this not also a way of seeing?

This line of thinking has fortified my determination to end the film in blackness, and to sculpt a visceral soundscape for the final scene; to allow the audience to see it in their minds.

In my previous work, I have avoided “beauty shots,” as I feel they are distracting, and pull the audience out of the movie. In BLIND, however, this distancing is precisely the goal of the exercise. So, Chris Romeike and myself went to great lengths to ensure that every shot in the movie had a certain idealized beauty to it. Six out of ten members of the crew were camera-related, and we prioritized shot set-up over coverage, in terms of our time allotment on set.

In casting the lead roles, I sought out actors with whom I knew I could trust to work with little direction, as I anticipated I would be also be occupied with producing and production managing on the shoot. This led me to cast actors with whom I already had a relationship, so that we could rely on a certain amount of shorthand on set.

Anthony Ulc acted in my fifth feature film, BLOOD PRESSURE, and since then he and I have worked together on a few improv exercises. He has a great look for the part of the father, with a gruff exterior but tremendous control of the cracks through which he also leaks tenderness. He also has a lot of personal history that allows him access points to this role, and I felt that working with him helped us find this character, both in prep and on set.

Jade Aspros has not done a lot of film work, but I had been very interested in casting her in something I shot last year, and brought her in to do two long workshop sessions with me. Ultimately, she wasn't right for that role, but I consciously logged her in my memory as someone I wanted to work with in the future. She has a natural sadness to her, and she has really been developing a nice cache of teenage angst since I last saw her. As a very "method" actor, we had to pull her out of some emotional holes once or twice, but I was very pleased with her performance. It was her first time improvising for camera.

Creative Process with Actors

My process with actors, in most of my work, is driven by a spirit of collaboration. I prefer improvisation on camera to memorized dialogue, and character preparation as opposed to scene preparation. I am also dedicated to having back-story discussions with my lead actors, and at least one rehearsal – of some kind – before production, and BLIND was no exception.

Narrative cinema has seen the repeated births of movements reacting against the perceived superficiality of commercial film - movements dedicated to re-establishing "truth" in cinema, or finding honesty in performance - from Neo-realism, to Dogme, to the Chinese "6th Generation," filmmakers everywhere consistently reject a style of commercial filmmaking that is seen to be over-manipulated and dishonest.

While the beliefs and approaches of each movement vary, often a key element is collaboration with actors through improvisation. Multiple generations of filmmakers, and indeed dramaturges before them, have recognized in improvisation the potential for profound, truthful performances, and an element of unpredictability within the framework of the film's narrative. I.e.: not the unpredictability of an actor falling out of character, or forgetting a line of dialogue, but rather, the unpredictability of discovering aspects of character - and therefore story, according to Robert McKee (McKee, 1997) - during the collaboration with the actors, either on set or in rehearsals.

This deepening of our understanding of the content of our films, through collaboration with other artists is perhaps the most valuable result of this approach.

Before the actual backstory workshops, the actors and I sit down and have creative meetings where we create these characters on paper.

In doing so, I hope to generate a series of conflicting ‘internal narratives,’ whereby actors work out the throughlines for their characters, but the intersect points allow characters – unaware of each others’ journeys – to misinterpret one another in the service of their own internal narratives.

During these rehearsal and backstory sessions on BLIND, myself, Anthony Ulc as the Father, and Jade Aspros as the Daughter, were able to shine a light on aspects of the story that I had not previously thought about.

We had to deal with the absent mother, and fill in the blanks on that narrative. We had to test drive the father-daughter relationship, and allow it to organically develop into the communication style that can be seen between the characters now in the film. We had to experiment with movement to discover how the Daughter, with her impaired vision, would get around without betraying her disability to her peers. And we had to deal with the visual practicalities of what they would wear, what vehicle they would drive, and all the questions of taste and economic status that come along with those choices.

This step is essential for my actors to be able to take their characters into improvised scenes and know them, know what they are after, and channel them moment by moment in a spontaneous, truthful way. I also enjoy the process of discovery that occurs as we ask questions about their personalities and histories, and reveal aspects of them that cast shadows into the film itself.

Post Production

I hope to create a viewer experience akin to witnessing a dream as the dreamer is dreaming it. The way in which images come into being should feel triggered by the musings of the narrator. We are watching him assemble, in his head, the vision of the film he wants to make. In part, this will be achieved by the timing of events on screen, relative to the voice over. But we are also designing some visual effects so that elements within the shot itself will change, as the narrator changes his mind about some of the details.

In development, to help me plan the practicalities of timing on set - shot length, dolly speed, etc. - I scanned all my storyboards into a Final Cut Pro timeline, recorded a scratch narration onto a handcam, and put together a rough pre-visualization of the film.

As such, the first assembly edit of BLIND was relatively simple, and consisted of merely replacing the storyboards with their corresponding shots, and finessing a little for rhythm. However, once the first assembly was done, I immediately felt that the combination of visual information and aural information created a sense of pacing that was more rushed than the contemplative short film I had envisioned.

My supervisor and a member of my committee were also quick to point out the beats in the film that were feeling overstated. This was further reinforced at a test screening I did for residents at the Canadian Film Centre, who made very similar observations. After my

second test screening, for friends, I began to see that the wall-to-wall narration in the film was the culprit. I set out to rewrite the narration, so that it did not double information being conveyed by the images, and underlying sync sound, and to create more ‘breathing room’ between clusters of narration. It was my hope that this would create the contemplative pacing and mood that I was after.

This exercise, therefore, informed the pacing of my narration when we recorded it for real. I slowed it down considerably, and – for many of the lines – made sure that I created a few options, to allow myself to really sculpt the pacing of the film in the final edit.

Special Effects

The effects are meant to further reinforce the narrative framing device, and make salient the filmmaker’s manipulation of the material. Ideally, by having elements of the image shift and change during the shot, the manipulation of the image itself, and its fallibility are brought to the forefront.

Technical Process

Here is a list of the media I employed in the shooting of this movie:

RED Epic (main camera)

Panasonic AF100 (for VFX plates)

3D Motion Graphics

Animation

Footage was transcoded to Apple ProRes 422 1920x1080 for editing, and then finished in HD. If the film is to play festivals or be sold, I will do a conform in a professional online suite, and finish in 2K.

Budget

The film ended up costing much more than I had hoped it would.

Observations and Conclusions

Going over the two most unexpected discoveries of this process brings me to the doorstep of an interesting conclusion. First, the discovery, through asking myself questions about the nature of my attraction to the story, that the film is actually about my relationship with my own father, and second, the discovery through the process of shooting and editing that the blindness in this film is not about a loss of vision, but rather a transformation of vision.

Synthesizing these ideas leads me to wonder if I have made a film about crossing a threshold; a threshold from which there is no return, but one that does not, at the same time, imply finality.

The last scene of BLIND plays out in blackness, but, significantly, the film does not end

after the disappearance of the image. On the contrary, it reaches its emotional climax.

Could it be that through making this film, I am in some way dealing with the transformation of a relationship, rejecting the idea that my relationship with my father must end because he has passed away, and instead, embracing the notion that he will continue to be present, although we must now communicate across a threshold; the notion that just because I no longer see him sitting next to me with my eyes, doesn't mean that he is no longer sitting next to me.

Referenced Films

?O Zoo! – The Making of a Fiction Film. Dir. Phillip Hoffman. 1986

Black Ice. Dir. Stan Brakhage. 1994.

Begone Dull Care. Dir. Norman McLaren. National Film Board of Canada, 1949.

Blood Pressure. Dir. Sean Garrity. Mongrel Media, 2012.

Lucid. Dir. Sean Garrity. Mongrel Media, 2005.

Maboroshi. Dir. Hirokazu Koreeda. Mongrel Media, 2000

My Awkard Sexual Adventure. Dir. Sean Garrity. Phase 4 Films, 2012.

Sans Soleil. Dir. Chris Marker. New Yorker Films, 1982.

Tony Takitani. Dir. Jun Ichikawa. Celluloid Dreams, 2004.

Undo. Dir. Shunji Iwai. Pony Canyon, 1994

Zoey & Adam. Dir. Sean Garrity. Kinosmith, 2010.

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Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967. Print.

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Appendix A: screenplay

BLIND
by
Sean Garrity

First Draft
May 12, 2013

Flying Horsie Films
3-229 Wychwood Avenue
Toronto, ON
M6C 2T5

INT. GIRL'S BEDROOM - DAY

A GIRL, 13, stares into camera.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
I would like to make a film about
a girl who goes blind. I think
she would live on the east coast,
somewhere. Maybe in New
Brunswick. You never see movies
that happen in New Brunswick.
Maybe Moncton.

INT. OPTOMETRIST'S OFFICE - DAY

A head brace for an eye exam is swung into frame. A HAND
makes some adjustments. Slides are projected on the wall.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
The film would start in the
Optometrist's office. She is
having some tests done, is being
treated with the apathy that
seems to be a prerequisite of
becoming a doctor; an apathy that
gives no emotional indication of
her condition. Is she getting
better? Is she getting worse? She
has no way of knowing.

INT. OPTOMETRIST'S OFFICE - LATER

The FATHER, 45, sits in the Optometrist's office. He mouths
the words "I'll take care it" along with the Narrator.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
I'd like to have the Optometrist
tell the father, that the
daughter will lose her sight
completely inside six months. The
Optometrist will offer to fill
the daughter in, as well. The
Father will say "No, I'll take
care it."

BLACK

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
But he won't.

EXT. STREET - DAY

The Father approaches the Daughter, sitting in the car,
feet up on the dashboard, earbuds blasting music into her
brain. She is looking at her phone, playing a game. He
watches her, gets closer.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
He means to tell her, but then he
sees his daughter, and while we
see only the sullen teenager, he
remembers the spirited little
girl, full of questions and
clumsy dance moves, and he can't
do it.

INT. CAR - DAY

Father drives Daughter across town. They do not speak.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
In Japan if someone gets cancer, the doctor tells the family, but not the cancer patient. It then rests on the family to deal this emotionally devastating blow to their loved one. Or not. There are a lot of really great Japanese movies that deal with this dilemma. I imagine it's probably less great if it's your life.

Once in a while, he steals a glance at her. He is clearly conflicted. She does not notice.

INT. TRUCK REPAIR HANGAR - DAY

Close up images of greasy engine parts. High contrast black & grey machinery.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
He has a blue-collar job. Maybe, given where this story is going, he works in trucking. He used to drive back and forth across Canada, until the divorce, now he stays in Moncton, doing repairs and upkeep on their fleet.

Father is working on some repairs to a large engine.

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
It isn't where he had hoped his life would take him. This is one of the traits that makes him like us.

ANIMATED COLLAGE

Flash cards of Argentinean presidents and airline logos.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
He has memorized all the presidents of Argentina, and all the airlines that fly to the Canary Islands, but he has never left Canada, except for one trip to Boston when he was a teenager and couldn't stop...

INT. TRUCK REPAIR HANGAR - DAY

Father stops working on the repairs, looks out the window at the passing clouds.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
...hiccupping, and none of the doctors in New Brunswick could figure out what was wrong with him.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 But that was really a trip to the
 Massachusetts General Hospital
 with his father, and aside from
 lunch at South Station while they
 were waiting for their train
 home, he didn't see the city at
 all.

EXT. SKY - DAY

Clouds pass.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 He never really talked about
 anything meaningful with his
 father, and this has been the
 model for his relationship with
 his daughter.

Dolly back from clouds through bedroom window to:

INT. GIRL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

The bedroom manifests the contradiction of a burgeoning
 sexuality in a world surrounded by toys, princesses, and
 cartoon characters.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 She should be 13. Or 14. An age
 when she's already angry and
 confused and frustrated and
 doesn't really understand why, or
 what's happening to her. She
 keeps her deteriorating eyesight
 a secret from everyone.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Dolly through empty high school hallways. It is a dark,
 foreboding place, with violent graffiti images, and
 profanity scribbled on bathroom walls.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 Her friends think she's clumsy,
 and her teachers think she has a
 learning disability. She prefers
 either of these to the truth.
 She's learning from her friends
 at school that's it's not cool to
 like the things that she likes,
 so she's trying to foster a
 dislike for those things; the
 optimistic, energetic music, the
 Disney products, drinks that are
 colourful and sweet.

Pan over the messages and obscene stick-man figures to a
 well-drawn graffiti picture of a window open to reveal a
 beautiful blue sky dotted with clouds.

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 She fancies herself an artist,
 because artists are outsiders,
 and that's how she feels.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Outside the high school, the father waits for her by his car.

He watches her come out of school - she is alone. She doesn't see very well, and trips over things, grabs onto trees and bicycles when she is unsure of her footing.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Her father feels terrible about not being able to tell her what he's learned at the Optometrist's, but it isn't until he starts to imagine what it will be like for her, what it's like for her now, that he feels a despair so profound, that he decides that he has to do something. To give her something.

He notices some BOYS making fun of her, out of her earshot.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Anything. The bigger the better. It occurs to him that the biggest, and most beautiful thing he's ever seen is the Rocky Mountains. It then occurs to him that she will never see them.

MONTAGE SEQUENCE

Images from Vintage TV commercials for RVs.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

All in the same day, he quits his job, he puts everything he owns up for sale, and he buys an RV, in order to take her across Canada to see the Rockies before she loses her sight. He doesn't ask his ex-wife for help, because, since the divorce, they've been in an undeclared competition about who makes better life choices.

INT. RV DEALERSHIP - DAY

Very slow dolly shot across an RV dealership following the Man and his Daughter having a fight. The SALESPERSON standing impotently by.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

The Girl's relationship with her father is not good.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

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He watches her come out of school - she is alone. She doesn't see very well, and trips over things, grabs onto trees and bicycles when she is unsure of her footing.

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NARRATOR (V.O.)

The Girl's relationship with her father is not good.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 On her own, dealing with the mechanic, she trips, and knocks over an anti-freeze display, because her sight is really deteriorating. Why would there be a stupid anti-freeze display in autumn, anyway? She blames the gas station. She blames Quebec.

INT. RV - DAY

In the passenger seat, she quietly stews. In the driver's seat, he quietly stews. Behind them, dark green conifers, and high majestic cliffs pass by out the window.

However, the image is darker, grainier than before, deteriorating.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 Among the endless twists and curves of the Canadian Shield in Western Ontario, the majestic forests dim to a flicker of dark green in her eyes, and I would have her take it out on him by saying that he exaggerates all the time and it embarrasses her. It could be at the end of a long day's driving, or during some heavy rain, or early in the morning after being treated unfairly at a motel, so he is threadbare, and ready to fight. He would tell her that she is self-absorbed and difficult and sometimes hard to be with. She would be very hurt by this, and he would feel bad. So when she returns fire with accusations of his lack of achievement, his many mistakes in life, he stews quietly.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

The Canadian Shield landscapes that the RV drives through morph into prairie landscapes.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 But when they bury their anger and their bruises from this encounter, they sprout roots, and start connecting to forgotten injustices, visited on one another over a life together. It all erupts again outside of Winnipeg.

INT. RV - DAY

With the flat calm of the prairie behind them, through dirty windows of the RV, we see the Father and Daughter fight.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 They fight openly;
 (MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 starting with precisely aimed criticisms - she doesn't listen to what people say, he condescends to her and her mother all the time - but eventually devolving into sloppily hurled insults: he is doing his best to put up with her moods, she hates him. As they frantically hunt for every hurtful comment in their artillery, he blurts out that she's not getting better, she's going blind. That silences her.

EXT. PRAIRIES - DAY

Prairie shots - calm, quiet, vast landscapes, shot through dirty lenses, or too dark, or out of focus.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 He will apologize, he will try to take it back; he meant to tell her earlier and couldn't work up the nerve. He's sorry.
 He's so sorry.
 She doesn't speak to him for the rest of Manitoba. Not one word.
 He promises himself he will never say anything hurtful to her again.

INT. RV - DAY

She tries makeup on for the first time, looks at herself in the car mirror. The centre of the frame is in focus, the rest is impossibly blurry.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 She looks in the mirror a lot, tries to imagine what she will look like when she's older. At a diner in Saskatchewan, where they are quietly eating breakfast, she has trouble getting a creamer open.

INT. SASKATCHEWAN DINER - DAY

Extremely narrow focus of hands trying to manipulate a small cylinder of coffee cream. Edges of the frame are now black. The creamer passes in & out of focus.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 She can't see it. Her attempts become desperate, frantic, and then the weight of the resentment and the silence break her. And she starts to cry.

A hand on a shoulder - barely visible.

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 He sits gently beside her, and offers his shoulder. She takes it.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Although she can't make his face
out clearly, she can tell he is
crying as well, tells him to
stop.

INT. ALBERTA MOTEL - NIGHT

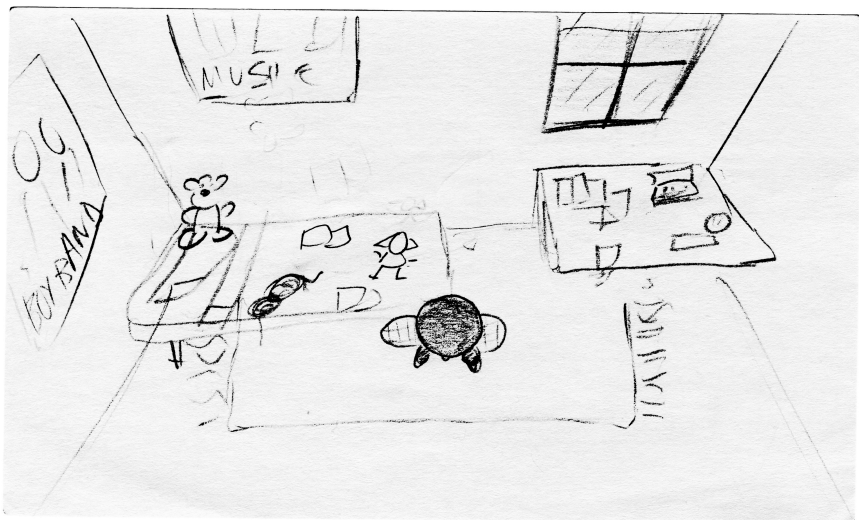
Blurry, indecipherable images. Handheld. Much black.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
At a motel in Alberta, she
accepts his help to get across
the oddly shaped room. She
finally talks to him about her
sight, about the loss of detail,
the blanks that have to be filled-
in, overwhelming what's left for
her to see.

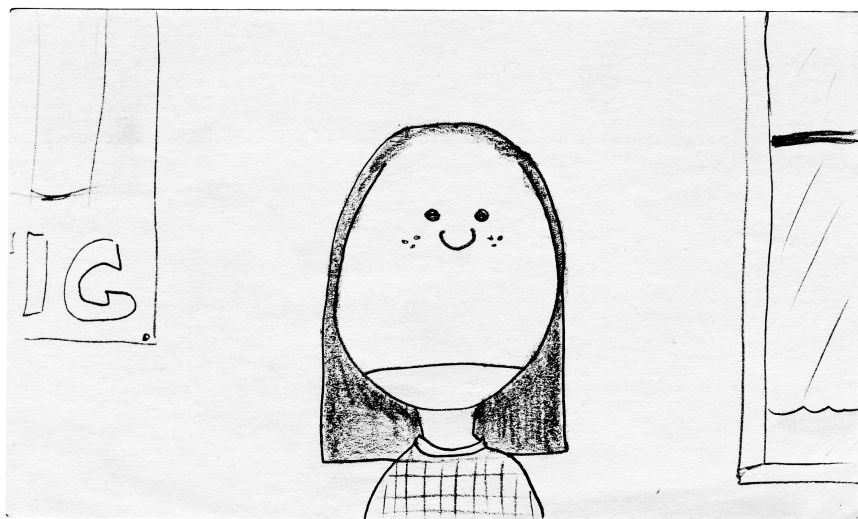
BLACK

NARRATOR (V.O.)
But she is lying to him. She sees
nothing anymore. She is blind.
(beat)
In the Rockies, they get out of
the car and look around. She
tells him that he was right; that
they are the most amazing thing
she has ever seen. She thanks him
for making sure the last thing
she ever saw will be so
beautiful. His eyes well up with
tears and he hugs her with all
his might.

Appendix B:
Original Storyboards

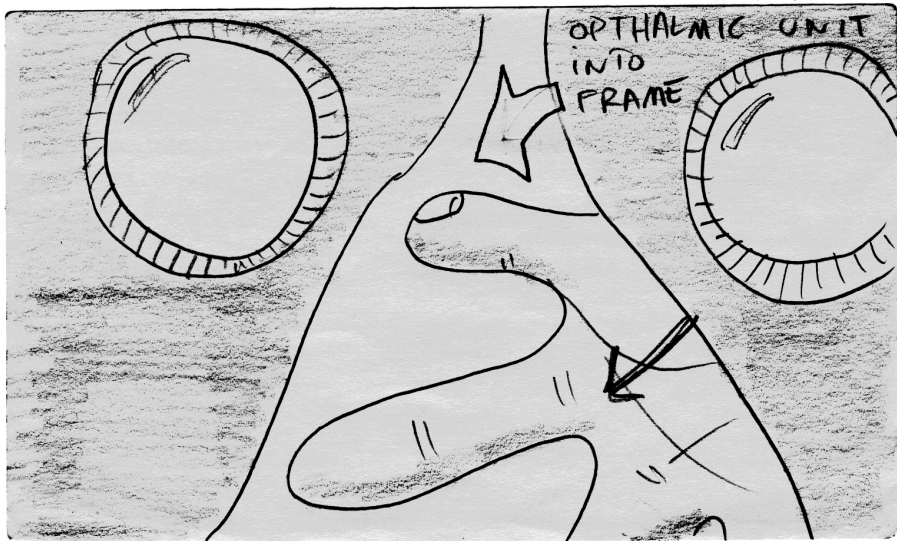


tone
down

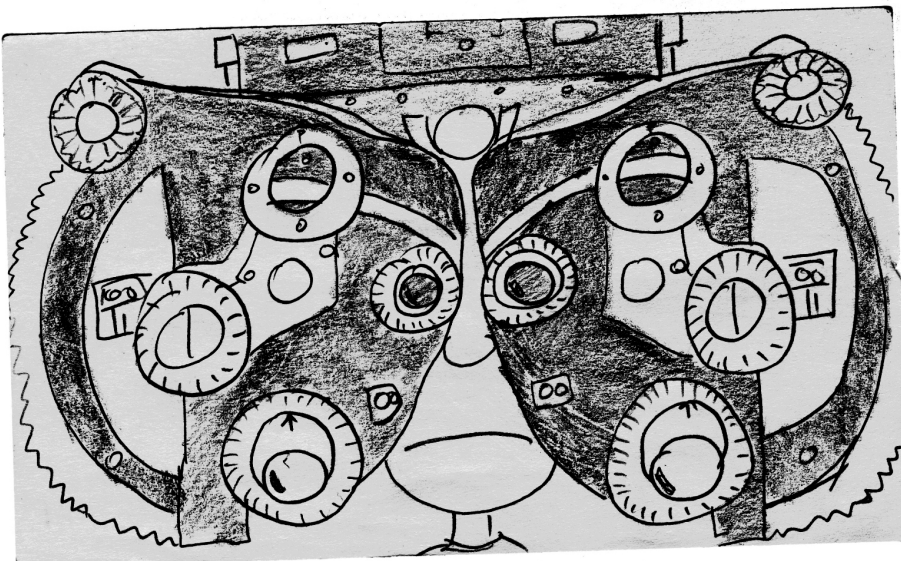


OUT OF FOCUS

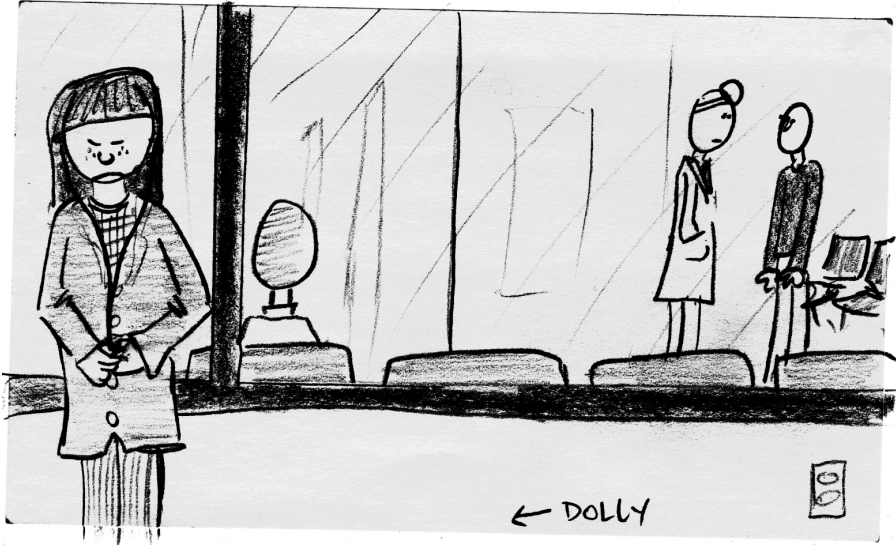
OUT OF FOCUS,
DAUGHTER P.O.V.



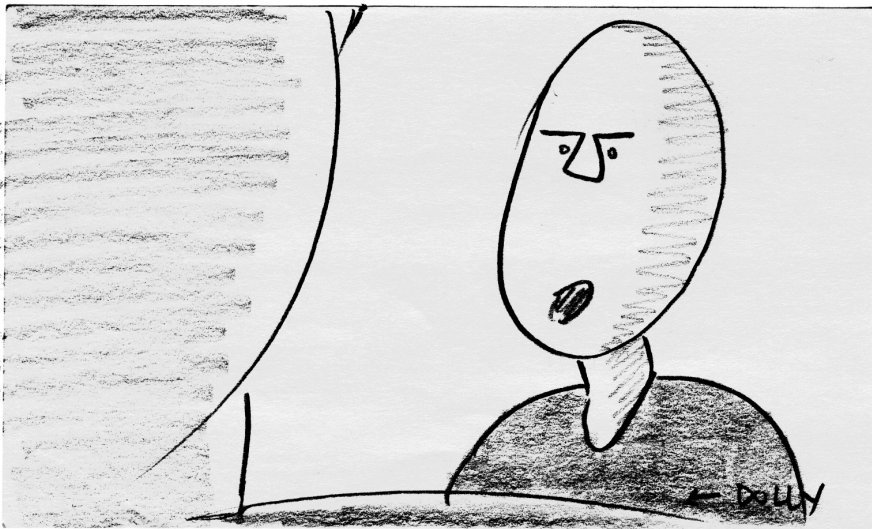
OPHTHALMIC UNIT IS
MOVED INTO SHARP
FOCUS. DOCTOR'S HANDS
MAKES ADJUSTMENTS.



REVERSE



Start from father sitting. opto comes out, father STAND UP. Framed over the side, so that we have to find them

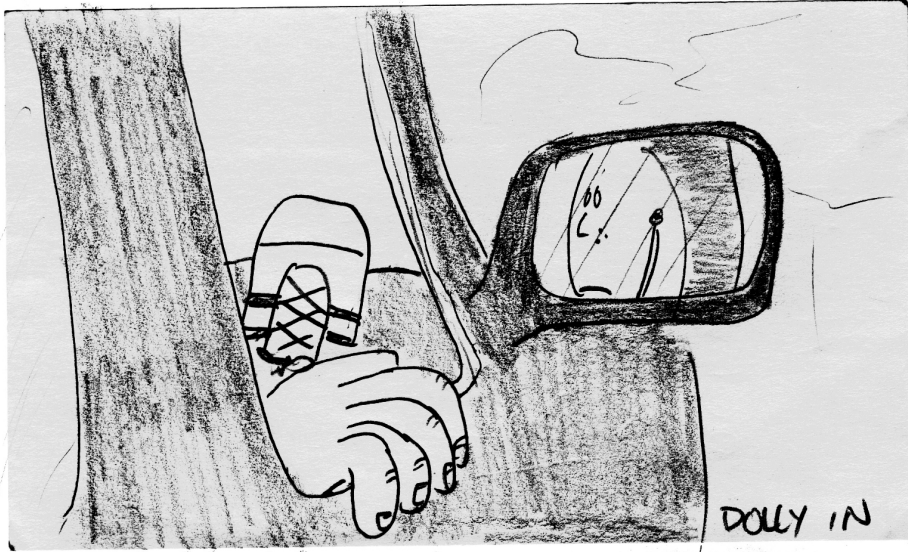


match dolly speed to wide.

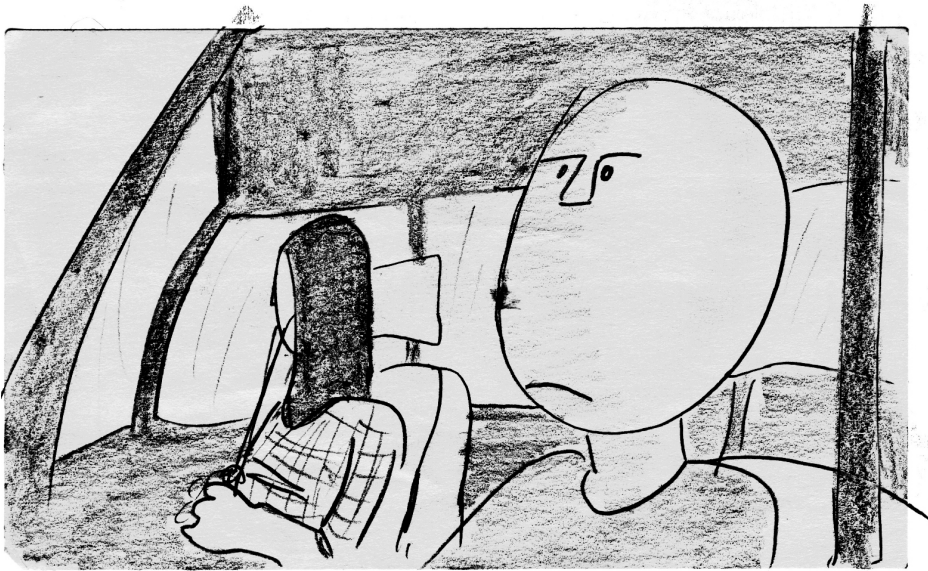


EXT CLINIC
NARROW FOCUS - long lens
DOLLY BACK
SLOW MO

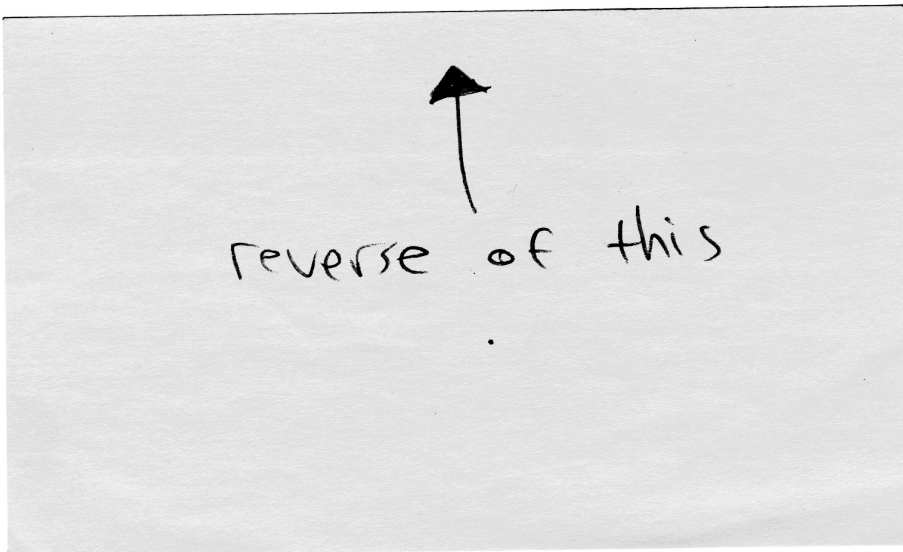
HE APPROACHES DAUGHTER
IN CAR

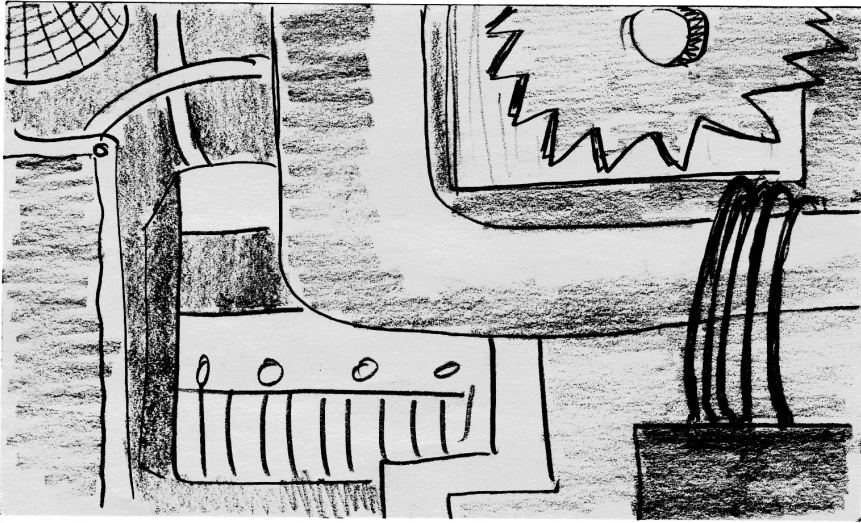


Dolly in - long lens
narrow focus
picks off
details
pen graffiti on shoes
heavy makeup
black fingernails (?)



crazy wide-angle lens
car mount

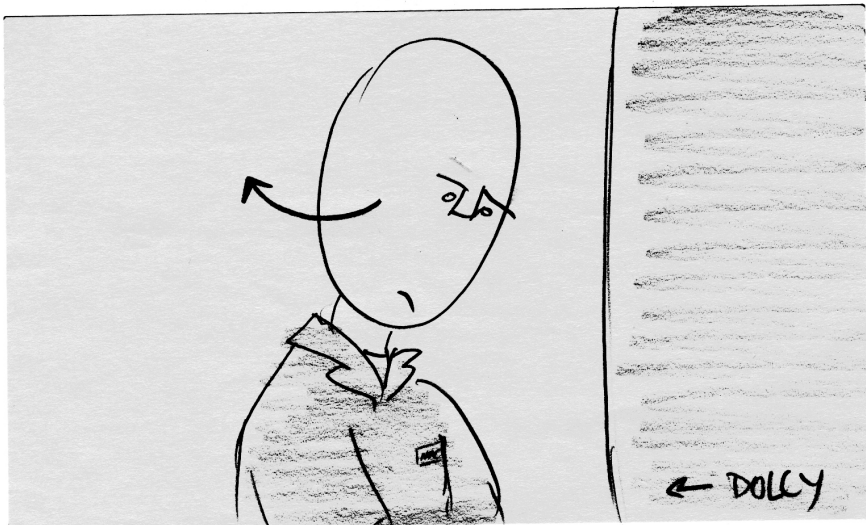




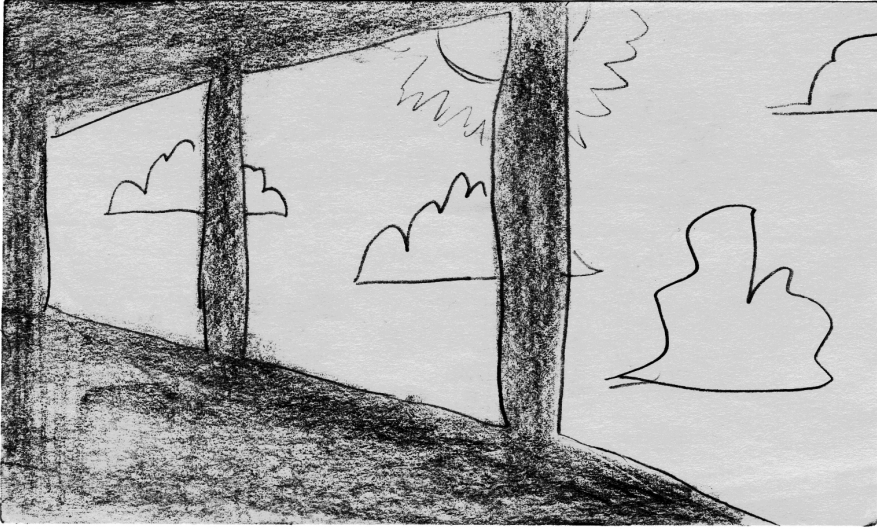
engine parts
 CU - XCU
 graphic
 static
 x4 or 5



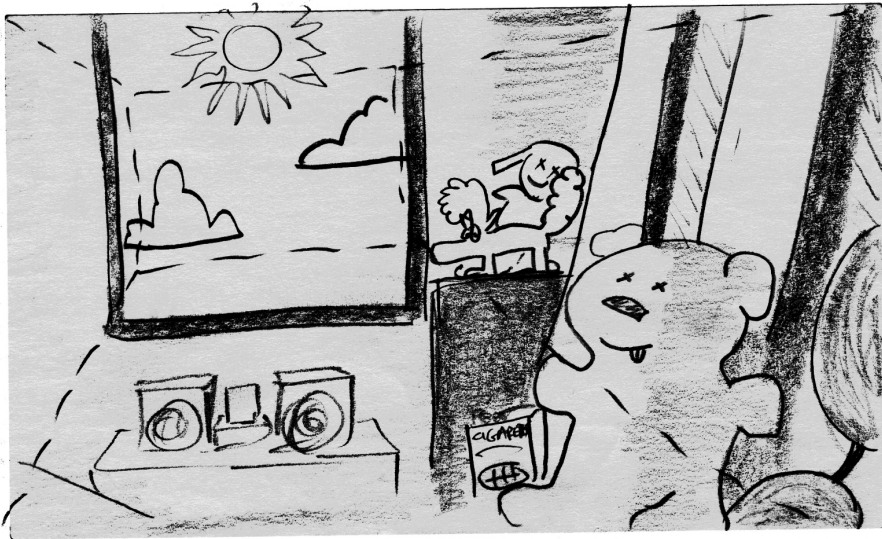
VAST hangar.
 he is tiny in the shot
 Dolly behind something



stops, looks out
 window
 → Dolly from behind
 something
 He stops, looks
 out window



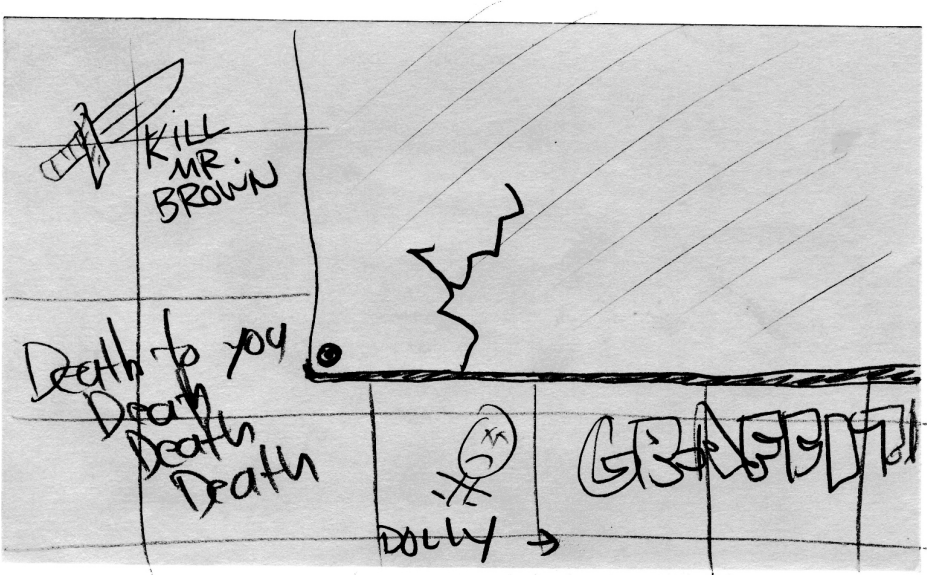
his POV



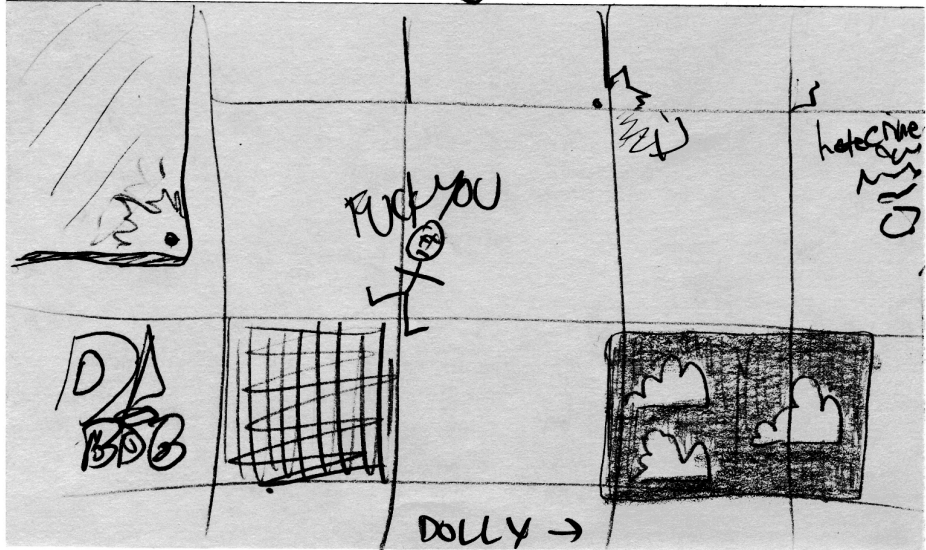
start on full frame
of sky
DOLLY BACK into
room to reveal
mix of teenager
stuff & kids' toys.



EMPTY SCHOOL HALLWAY
FEELS DARK & FORBIDDING



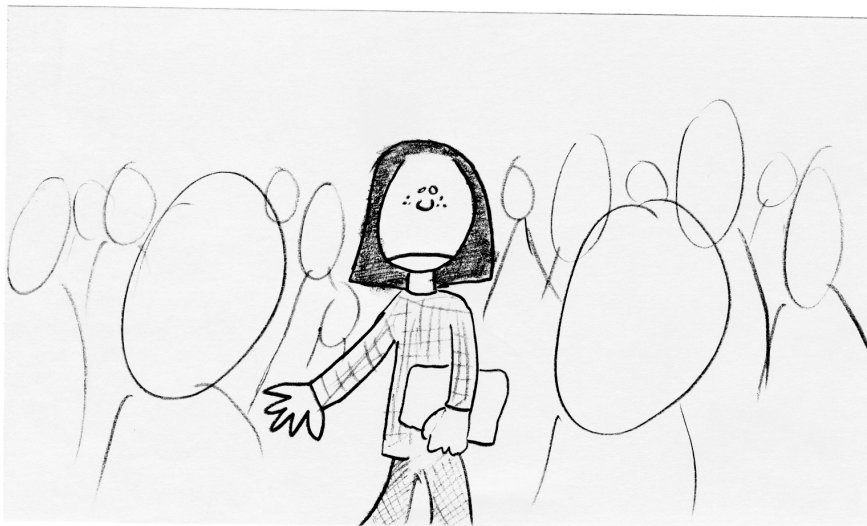
Dolly past violent, scary, profane graffiti



settle on graffiti image of clouds in a blue, blue sky



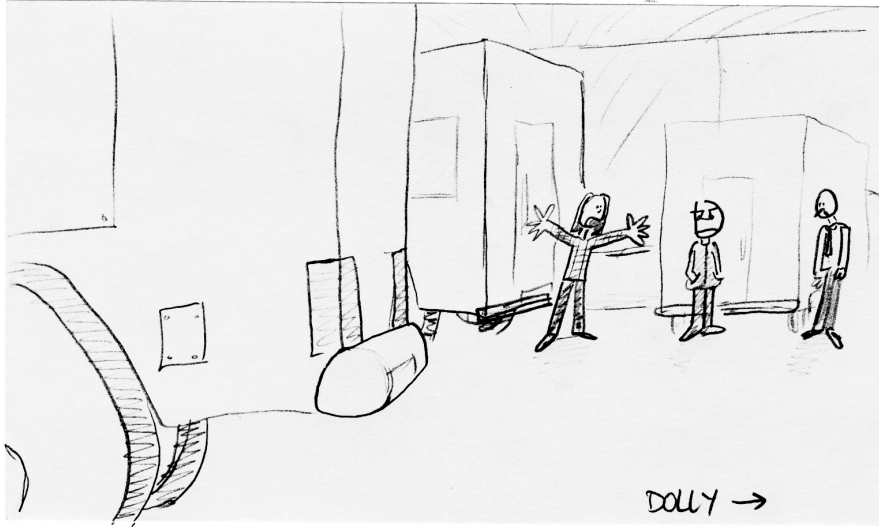
GIANT wide shot
high school let
out (so wide
so that extras' f
can't be seen)



shoot @ YORK
daughter stumbling,
almost blind, in
a crowd of students
Looming lens, narrow
focus

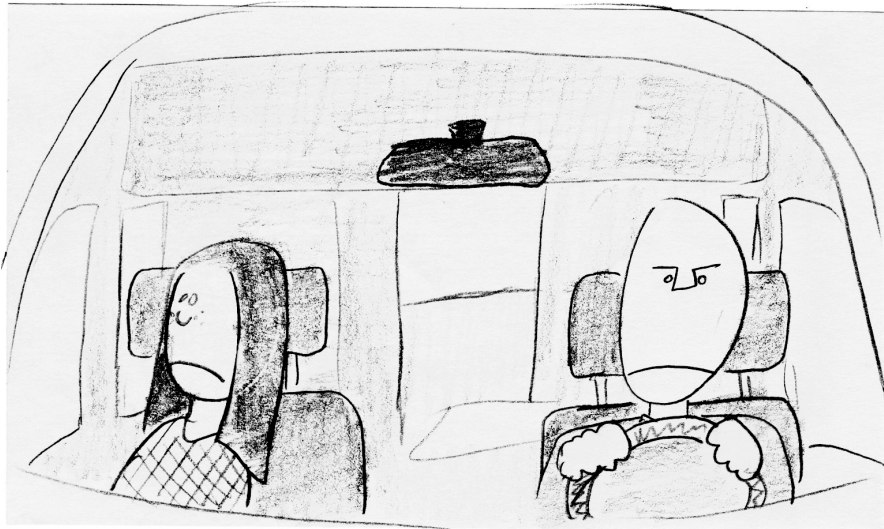


YORK village
Papa waits
dolly in slowly



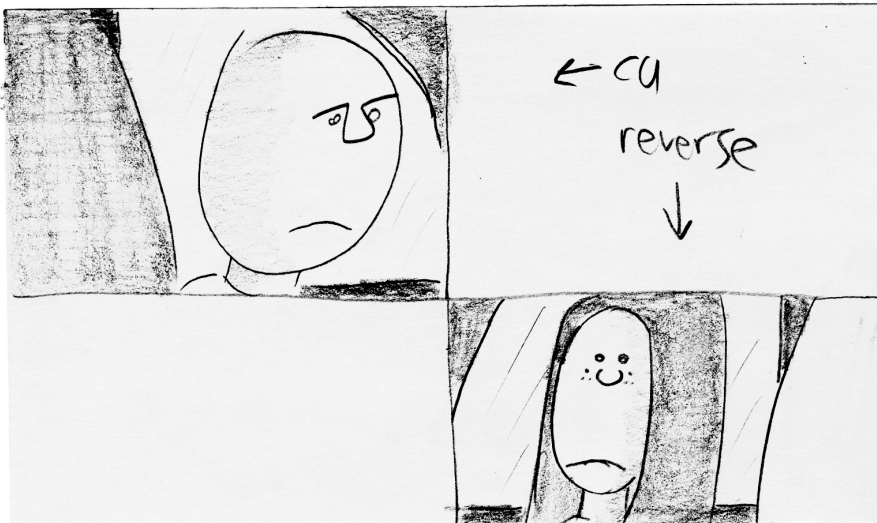
Follow them
try to get
reflections in the
floor when they
are obscured from
us.

VAST space



car mount
slight size changes*
(thanks 4K!) for
1) leaving New Brunswick
2) Cdn Shield
3) Dirty windshield - prairie

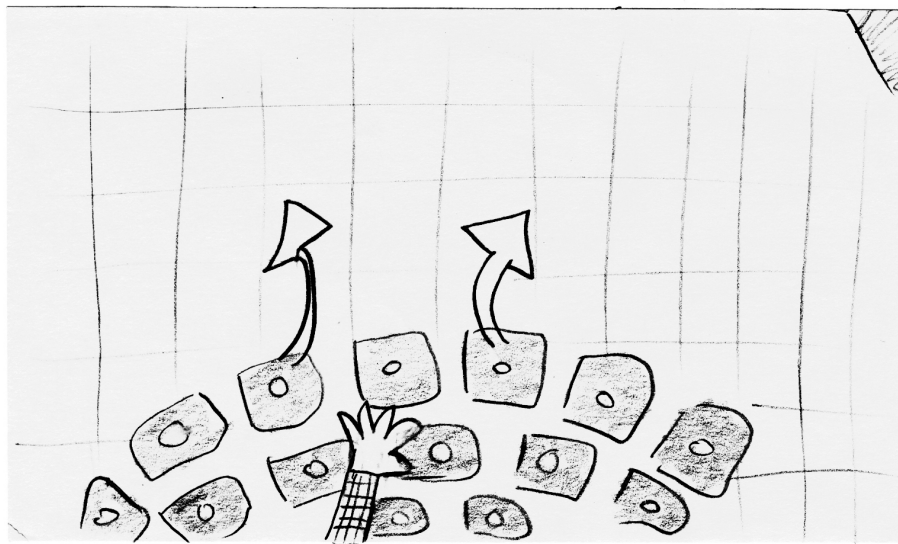
*also change wardrobe



car mount
~ same as above ~



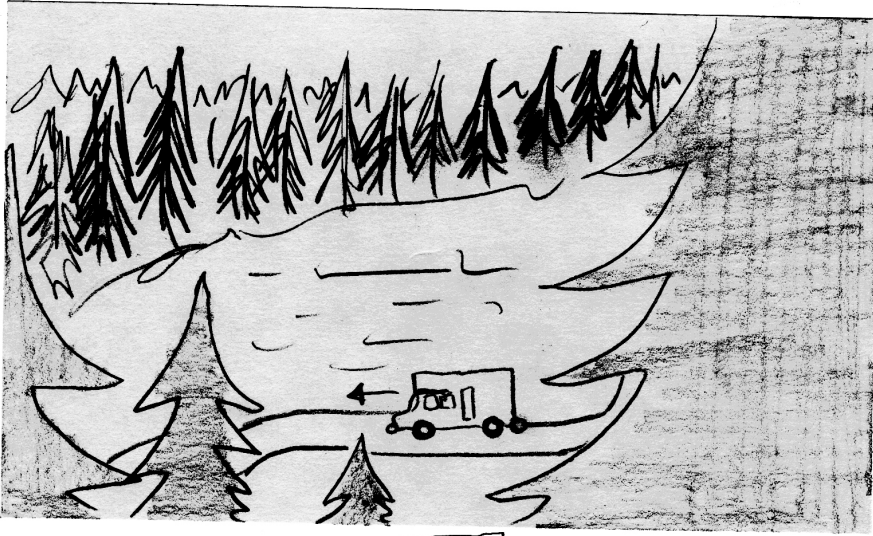
Anti Freeze display
being KNOCKED
OVER
extra slo-mo
(could easily be shot
in studio)



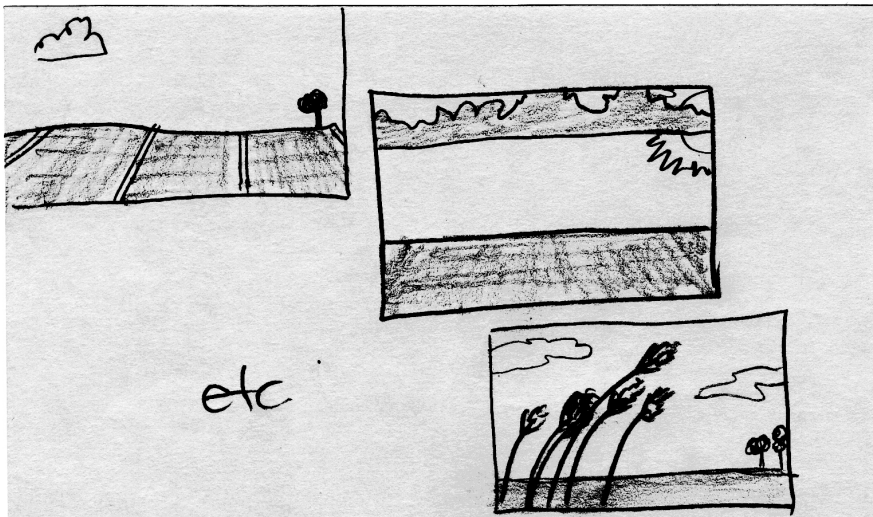
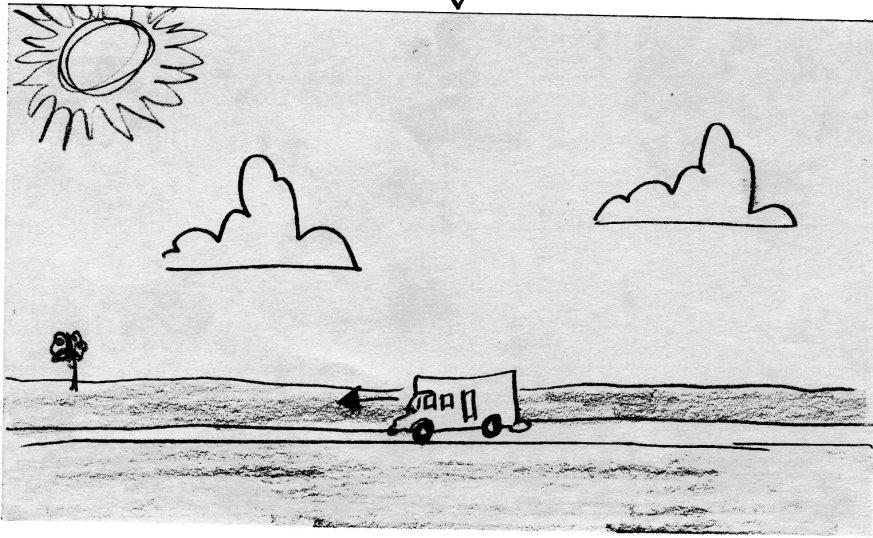
High angle
super slo-mo
coverage of
Anti-freeze bottle
display KNOCKED over



hotel room - out of focus
handheld
under-exposed
confusing, almost blindness



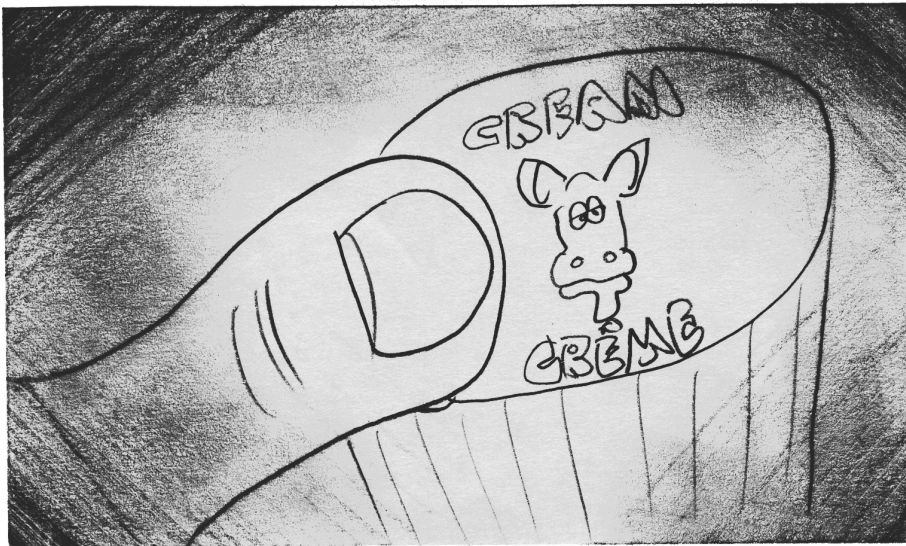
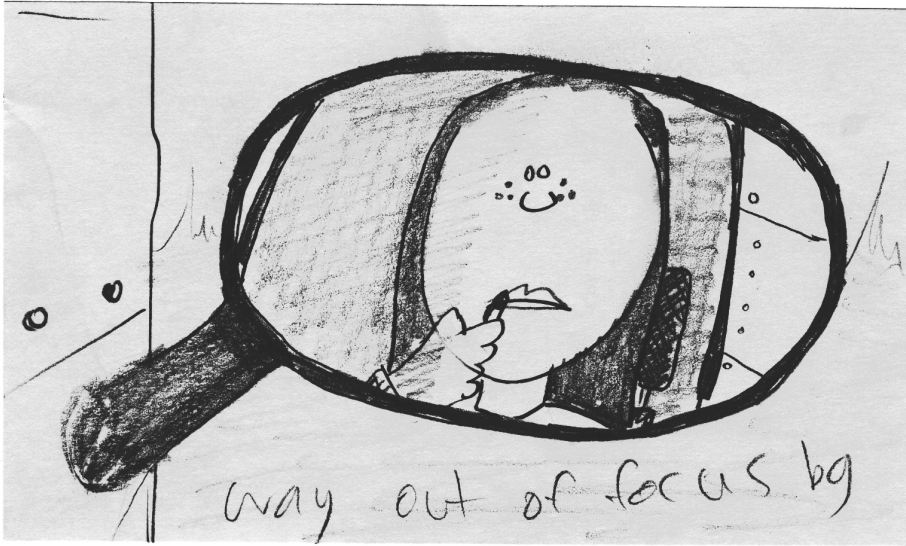
SOME
COOL
EFFECT



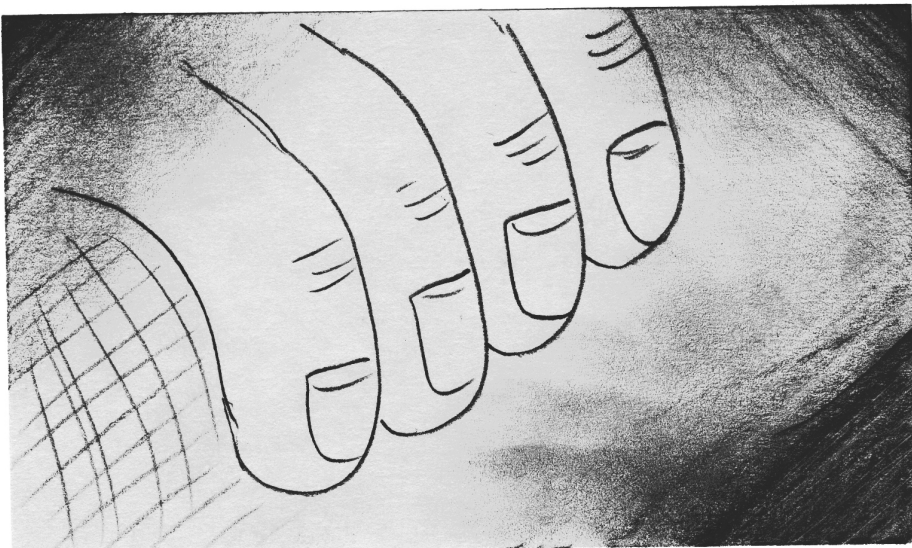
CANADIAN SHIELD
TO
PRAIRIE
(in my ideal world, these
are travelling shots)
TRANSITION

this is
(somehow)
a single shot

variety of contemplative,
static, isolated
prairie footage



creamer @
diner
macro?



hand on shoulder
macro?