Film Portfolio Assessment
Production Reel and Pages

IB Film SL
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gcz791

Production Reel URL: https://youtu.be/lv9yc6lZaRE
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In “Dinner without a Ring,” I want to explore the unravelling of a married man’s mind as he abandons his marriage to dine with another woman. As art director, I will use inspiration from Edgar Wright’s visual trademarks and collaborator Courtney Hoffman’s costuming to allow my props and costumes to emphasize character intentions.

**INQUIRY:** In telling the story of a husband’s moral conflict, I wanted to explore morally complex characters, emotional instability, and innocence. To engage my audience I decided telling the story in reverse would structurally creating stronger dramatic tension, and provided unique opportunities to explore art direction. I could explore drama genre by expressing internal conflict visually, using the German Expressionism element of dark and light contrast. My research revealed how Edgar Wright uses costume colour for characterization; Wright often associates a colour with a character’s internal state. Hoffman “gradually dyed a white shirt to be four stages of white to grey” (Pasquine, 2017) in “Baby Driver,” as the character delves deeper into the world of crime (F.1). In my film, associating black and white with the characters through props, set, costumes, will exaggerate the darkness of the man (as black in German connotes evil) and innocence (white) of the woman.

**ACTION:** I filmed the woman against a lighter background (a window; a light source), with the man against a darker wall. costumes were respectively dark and light, the left wall was dark grey, the right white, and pepper (black) was on the man’s side (F.2). In addition to this breadth of details based on German Expressionism, I allowed the audience to understand the characters’ inner emotional conflict by using art direction symbolically. Only he has a menu, as he must make the key decision, while only she has a napkin, as is morally “clean” and innocent. The art direction emphasized the character’s behavioural interactions with props and set elements such as fidgeting with a tie or tapping the table to communicate their emotional state visually.

**REFLECTION:** In a growing cultural phenomenon, fans dissect each frame of a trailer, looking for clues or “easter-eggs.” As I wondered if some of my attention to detail was too subtle, I reflected on Chris Stuckmann’s analysis video of “Enemy,” where he praised the art direction, noting one shot where a movie poster, seen only for a few seconds, out of the depth of field (F.3), emphasizes the theme of women dominating the male protagonist’s life. I realized that elements of art direction, though subtle, can elevate a world’s realism and, for more analytical
viewers, offer the ability to derive greater meaning from these details. While I did not include shots that explicitly revealed that the film was in reverse, I paid attention to minute details, such as liquid level of the drinks. Whether a keen viewer observes this on first viewing, or only appreciates the detail when re-watching the film, I learnt that art direction is often under-appreciated, because, when done well, it is subtle. The viewer is encouraged to piece clues together for themselves to discover the truth of the narrative.

Clip 2: Stain (00:43)

In “Stain,” after a young boy is given a packet of an illegal substance he finds his innocence threatened. As art director, I will investigate techniques proposed by the New York Film Academy for blocking and dressing in exterior scenes. I will focus on building anticipation by using art direction to establish the crime-thriller genre.

INQUIRY: My major intent for this short film was to build tension up to the climactic arrival of the police, suggesting the young boy being framed, damaging his innocence. In such a short film, I realized that I could build up audience expectations to achieve a more impactful climax if I clearly established the film’s genre, as exposition would be substituted by the audiences anticipation of what usually occurs in crime-thrillers, but could be subverted by the ominous and unconventionally bleak ending. As trailers often feature genre codes and conventions to appeal to certain audiences, I researched staples of each genre. Crime dramas often feature leather streetwear, picking up low key light well, and compliment cinematography conventions of the genre. The New York Film Academy’s stages revealed my opportunities for art direction (F.4, yellow), and I realized that I could be involved not just in preparing the set, but constantly checking in during filming to make alterations.

ACTION: Location was essential in my art direction: I selected an alleyway with a cobblestone-like pavement, that suggested the dirty, grimy atmosphere often featured in crime-thrillers. I marked key areas on the street where my actor was to stop or fall, which were helpful when resetting the scene. In the test shoots, I realized that the ground would be too dark to be picked up on camera. Unsure how to combat this issue, I researched further, and found that a technique often employed is to hose down streets in night scenes so the camera can pick up reflections to define form in the darkness (Savant, M). I decided to further extend the gritty feeling of the location into makeup, as I used a mixture of dirt and water to smear across my actor’s face after they were knocked over (all with his enthusiastic consent). This exaggeration also symbolically emphasized how he was becoming more “stained” as he encountered an illegal substance for the first time. To make the “drugs,” I used simple icing sugar; this was highly effective, as the distinctive prop clearly established the conflict.

REFLECTION: A lesson I learnt through this process was to think outside the box. Using research to solve my issue with street visibility, or using over-exaggerated
makeup to emphasize the genre and my character’s arc made the film more impactful. Another instance where being open-minded was important was when I designed the title. I realized that I had opportunity to establish genre even before the film began, by overlaying a grunge texture over a jagged typeface. This reinforced to me the importance to thinking creatively about how to execute my intentions.

Clip 3: Blown (00:43)
In my spy-action genre film, “Blown”, when a young spy overwhelmed with curiosity opens a briefcase, mass destruction looms. As art director, I will use study Hitchcock’s idea of the “MacGuffin.” I will use inspiration from the Laurent Piron’s art direction for the Bourne movies to build high-stakes and establish character identity within the genre.

INQUIRY: I identified developing tension and high-stakes as a fundamental to the spy-action genre. I realized the power of props in developing conflict, as Hitchcock explained, a “MacGuffin you see in most films about spies,” and, when complimented by the reactions of the characters, or through dramatic irony by showing the audience the literal or figurative “bomb” (F.6), develops suspense (Hitchcock, A); prop creation would be pivotal. I studied Piron’s art direction in the Bourne franchise; public locations helped develop higher stakes, as the implications of failure became more severe. By filming in a public location the greater amount of people will create more movement and visual chaos to compliment the tension.

ACTION: I created a bomb as a MacGuffin by using a variety or wires and a timer app on a phone inside a briefcase. For additional preparation for the shoot, I pre-shot a low res, long-lens photo of my actor, as if it had been taken inconspicuously. I kept this in my pocket and crushed and re-smoothed it to make it seem worn – its closeup had to be reshot against a darker background to disguise the location change. I chose costumes reflective of the characters’ background in that genre (a suit for a spy), and emphasized the actor’s use of props such as glancing at a watch or reading a newspaper. These indications that the spies’ plan was running smoothly became challenged by the introduction of the bomb in the briefcase.

REFLECTION: Through the process of making this film, I discovered how I could overcome the challenge of clearly communicating character motivations through art direction. I was learnt to communicate high-stakes through careful location selection of a mall I knew would be busy. I also was able to rely on genre codes and conventions by creating props which have, over time, become widely recognized, minimizing exposition and focusing on conflict development. However, upon reflection I wondered if I abided too closely to convention. Perhaps I could take more risks by defying generic expectations – e.g. having the clothing and accessories of the spies less conventional (long coats and briefcases) could create a mystery around the identity of the characters, and allow the audience to become more curious.
Film Production Role #2: Cinematographer
Clip 1: Lure (00:50)

In “Lure,” a spy unquestioningly follows orders, leading herself into a trap. As cinematographer, I will source inspiration from Oliver Wood’s techniques of using long lenses with obstacles in front of the subject, zoom-ins, and constant camera motion to elevate to visually explore confusion and entrapment in the spy genre.

INQUIRY: The spy genre incited me to investigate the Bourne movies, staples of the genre. The waterloo sequence (Greengrass, 2007) inspired me to use a long-lens, similar to Wood’s. This seemed to emphasized the camera’s distance and create an onlooker-feel; obstacles to momentarily blocked the character, and could be used to mask cuts. I was drawn to the idea of creating momentary lapses in visual focus, reflecting my character’s state of confusion. I researched how spy commercials incorporate genre clichés and conventions (a commercial is very clichéd, incorporating many genre allusions in a short time). To build suspense, the commercial used a variety of angles, allowing for constant changes of perspective (Geico, 2016). Multiple layers (foreground, mid, and background) allowed for the illusion of more dynamic movement (F.7). Different angles and quick cuts created urgency and confusion, something I intended to mimic, using a long lens, and filming with foreground elements in front of my actor.

ACTION: I used a long, zoomed lens, as if the viewer were spying on the story – adding a meta element to the narrative (focusing on spies). I used zoom-ins instead of dolly-ins to emphasize the presence of a digital camera, a spy genre convention. Shooting at sunset juxtaposed the initial warm lighting with the slightly colder interior of the abandoned warehouse (created by blue-toned shadows), emphasizing the tone shift as the antagonist is introduced. Throughout shooting, I ensured constant camera motion; never using a tripod to stabilize, allowing for continuous action and suspense. I shot the protagonist from 180° in front of her, creating a sense of entrapment and suspense, restricting the audience from being able to see from her perspective. This also created dramatic irony, such as the revelation of the gun, which we see, but the protagonist does not (F.9). I hid the actor completely in the film, to eliminate the competing competing focal points in the storyboard. In post, I edited the line “turn left” after the pan down to the phone, establishing the source of the voice visually to avoid confusion. I also decreased the saturation slightly from the first shot to last, mirroring the sinister tonal shift.
REFLECTION: My first impression of the cinematographer role had been that it was only concerned with filming. However, I learnt how they are quite pivotal to the pre and post-production processes. Designing a storyboard in pre-production allowed me to identify issues that I otherwise may have missed on set such as the competing subjects in one frame (F.9). I realized that I was still able to dramatically alter the visuals after filming wrapped, and could further emphasize intentions I had formed in post. I first used a vignette over the film, however I realized it eased transition to the screen edges. As I experimented, I decided that a harsh border suggested entrapment within the frame, so I removed it. Although I ended up not making any change, by going through the process of adding it and discovering that it contradicted my intentions, I solidified my reasoning for why my initial decision worked. I remembered that in “The Hunger Games: Catching Fire,” Jo Willems had filmed the scenes in the arena with a different camera to the scenes in the village. This allowed the arena scenes to expand the black bars from the village sequences. Through the film, I gradually converged the vertical black bars (F.10). From beginning to end, the amount of screen space between the bars decreased approximately 18%, creating gradual constriction, emphasizing the theme and feeling of entrapment. Although I did not have the equipment that Willems had to accomplish this effect, I learnt the importance of resourcefulness, and using other methods with the technology I did have to accomplish my intentions.

Clip 2: Esc (02:10)

In “Esc,” a student attempting to outrun her fate finds herself trapped in a never-ending loop. As cinematographer, I will explore escaping your own fate, drawing in inspiration from David Fincher’s regular cinematographer, Jeff Cronenweth. I will synchronize subject and camera movement to emphasize my theme and create empathy.

INQUIRY: Identifying my film’s theme as accepting an inescapable fate, I intended to adopt an action-style chase, which brought to mind a video essay on the TV series Mindhunter (Fincher, D). The essay explored how Fincher and Cronenweth match the camera’s movement exactly with the characters’. The essayist (Nerdwriter) remarks that this suggests that “what’s happening was doomed to happen” – perfect for a story about a set, inescapable fate. I intended to sync the audience and protagonist, especially during the quick action sequences. I planned tilts, pans, and tracking shots to maintain the character’s position. I was initially unsure about how I could indicate the complex camera moves I had planned, so I investigated techniques to use symbols to represent camera motion in my storyboard (F.1, eg. frame 2, a tilt and pan up).
**ACTION:** To synchronize the subject and camera, I made careful decisions on what equipment to use. I created a table, comparing advantages and disadvantages of my two camera options to help inform my decision (F.12). Although I was afraid to sacrifice cinematic-looking shallow depth of field, I used my iPhone 7 for its powerful stabilization for tracking shots (F.11, eg. frames 6, 20). My DSLR was not wide angle, and my locations posed a few restrictions – notably the constraints of shooting in small classrooms and narrow hallways. Weighing a variety of factors (see F.12), I decided the wide-angle and stabilization abilities of the iPhone would be of greater benefit to accomplishing my goal.

A large element of the film was seamlessly cutting between different doorways. Scouting my locations, I considered if the hinges opened the same way to ensuring continuity. In an instance where two doors opened on opposite hinges, I framed the first door scene with motion from left to right, which allowed me to horizontally flip the image in post to create continuity with the following shot (F.12). There was a slight jolt in the cut in the one-take staircase scene; I should have used a tripod to eliminate even any movement, however, I was able to use cropping tools to minimize the jolt. I used angles capturing movement from right to left to suggest a circular story; that she never truly advanced in time. I was inspired by how “Birdman” concealed cuts (Just Write, 2015), choosing to cut from the door to the house when both shots framed only a blank white part of the door at 1:38 in the film (F.13).

**REFLECTION:** Through this process, I discovered how cinematographers must be critical thinkers and must stay open-minded to solve problems. I creatively modified my equipment by using intersecting rubber bands over the screen as a customizable grid, allowing me to position the intersection over the subject to maintain their position in the frame (F.14). I further grew as a filmmaker when exploring a question I had long held: is good cinematography aesthetically pleasing, or emotionally meaningful? I often disregarded films that paid excellent attention to blocking, or used subtle compositional techniques that created meaning, since they did not exude the commercialized “perfection” that I had associated with high-quality cinematography. I learnt that great cinematography lies in the balance: carefully constructed and beautiful images can also add levels of meaning, such as my decisions to control movement from left to right, or using centre framing and subject synchronization to connote entrapment. I realized that especially in earlier scenes, my lighting was a little scarce. Although I originally thought this an artistic move: creating a dramatic, low-key atmosphere, allowing her face to emerge in and out of the darkness, I realized that I may have been drawing attention from the performance in favour of flaunting cinematography skills. I have learnt that a great cinematographer must be humble, and sometimes must sacrifice aesthetically impressive shots to be more generous to the actor’s performance.
Film Production Role #3: Writer
Clip 1: The Accused (02:52)

RATIONALE
As screenwriter for “the Accused,” I aimed to illustrate our human tendency to return to unhealthy and destructive patterns by exploring hypocrisy in a married couple’s relationship. I developed key intentions for each act:

1) I will examine how a film’s structure can reflect its themes and characters by employing concepts from Robert McKee’s *Story*. I will use inspiration from John Michael Hayes’ screenplays to learn to effectively introduce my character, themes and context.

2) I will interweave timeframes to unify character behaviour with structure. Taking inspiration from Eric Heisserer, I will adapt his structural style. I will investigate Gillian Flynn’s use of action lines to communicate my filmmaker intent in my screenplay.

3) I will express the protagonist’s reversal of values and create an impactful conclusion to the story’s dramatic arc. I will reference Robert McKee’s chapter, “the Structure Spectrum” in “Story,” and Christopher Nolan’s use of cyclical motifs in his screenplays.

INQUIRY: Robert McKee suggests that an effective story “is a symphonic unity in which structure, setting, character, genre and idea meld seamlessly” (McKee, 1999). Similar to John Michael Hayes’ “Rear Window” screenplay, which introduces the protagonist by observing him in a private moment, sleeping, I will begin in-media-res (F.15 comparison), rendering the viewer uncomfortable by watching the woman in distress in her private bedroom (elaborating on motifs of distrust and prying into people’s privacy). The woman’s yelling at the audience will create intrigue and establish the motif of accusations. While researching screenplay formatting, I realized parentheticals can be used more than simply to indicate who dialogue is addressed to, but to denote attitude or verbal direction. I made a list of words that described the attitude of each line (F.16), and decided how to integrate the attitude into the script (through context, parentheticals, action lines etc.). I realized I needed to pursue further research into writing effective action lines.

In Act II, I will introduce the first time-jump. I researched how screenwriter Eric Heisserer’s adapted screenplay for “Arrival,” interweaves ‘past’ and ‘future’ timeframes. Instead of distributing ‘flash-forwards’ consistently, Heisserer begins in media-res, and bounces between two timeframes in the third act (F.17). Michael Tucker suggests that this “ensures a steady flow of reveals,” (Tucker, 2017) contributing to audience investment. Eager to dissect and modify this structure, I found that allowing my character’s revelations to occur simultaneously with the audience’s developed empathy for my character. Gillian Flynn’s action lines in “Gone Girl”, effectively
communicate tone and intention: e.g. “painful pause” (15). I compiled a list of examples of Flynn’s action lines to reference when writing my own (see F.20).

In investigating writing a strong conclusion, I discovered that an effective climax causes “a major reversal of values,” (Story, 37) to be the most impactful moment. In researching how to express this climactic reversal in my screenplay, I realized that featuring a similar scene at the film’s beginning and end would juxtapose the differences in behavioural choices. In Christopher Nolan’s screenplay for “the Prestige,” the first scene heading is simply “TOP HATS.” The final scene returns to this setting, leaving the audience “staring at the top hats.” (Nolan, 2006) The scene evolves in meaning by book ending the story; the audience approaches the same scene with a new perspective. Repeating elements of my first scene will emphasize the evolution of my character’s values.

ACTION: While I wrote the script, I had a discussion with my actor about the character’s entrance through the door – we considered where her character had just been. She asked me how I would convey background context. I looked at how Steven E. de Souza’s “Die Hard,” sets up the protagonist as a cop through the gun “peeking out through his jacket,” (De Souza, 1988) and his unhappy marriage through his a double take at a female flight attendant. Instead of explicitly referring to her cheating on her husband, her figure behaviour – pressing against the door and retrieving her ring – suggests her temporarily leaving her affair, returning to the reality of her marriage. Conveying meaning through by writing specifications for costumes (“leather coat and deep red makeup”), props (the ring) and setting (F.18) taught me how effective writing is enhanced by condensing context into visual details embedded in the mise-en-scene.

I had difficulty arranging the sequence of the time-jumps that began in act two. I decided to write the events of both timeframes onto cue cards and physically rearrange them to discover the most effective order (F.19). Determining the sequence was guided by my research into Eric Heisserer’s work (F.17) to maximize emotional impact. I considered the following while writing the time-jumps: 1) the protagonist’s characteristic of snapping between being innocent and aggressive would be mirrored by structure (jumping between timeframes). 2) In each time shift the audience would learn new information – in the first jump, the realization that the phone call will end with the protagonist in physical and emotional distress, provoking the audience to wonder how she will arrive at that point. In the phone call scene, I used an action line inspired by Flynn’s work to establish tone and duration simultaneously (F.20).
To write an effective climax, I developed a cyclical motif similar to Christopher Nolan’s in two ways. By writing the final scene with her screaming at herself in a mirror, I used the similarities to the first scene to highlight her reversal of values, as she comes to terms with her own actions instead of accusing external forces. Similar to the two hat scenes, which develop the motif of duplicity (visual, structural and thematic), this encourages a new interpretation of her actions at the end. Second, I developed the motif through dialogue, as the line “where were you” initially represents her suspicions against her husband, but is reversed as she redirects her anger to acknowledge her own guilt.

**REFLECTION:** There is often a large gap between what is effective on a page versus on screen. In an interview, actor Ben Foster said he often cuts 40% of dialogue because screenplays are overwritten in order to be clear and receive a green-night. I grappled with how I could alter my screenplay after its approval, to be less explicit, and because certain scenes did not work on screen; although hair and makeup changed in my first time jump, I was not confident that my screenplay effectively communicated the time-shift. I added to the script that a “swelling noise” would build with the phone ring, building to the jump. I learnt the importance of writing many different film language elements (makeup, mise-en-scene, sound design etc.) into the screenplay, since writers have a major role in harmonizing all components of a film.

Comparing my time-jump structure (F.21) with Heisserer’s (F.17), I noted that both developed tension by increasing the frequency of time jumps as the narrative approached the climax. To solve a pacing issue in Act I, I introduced the first time-jump earlier, extending the rising action and development of tension in the last two acts. Dialogue in films must strike a fine line between naturalism and hyperbole in order to be engaging. However, I also learnt that dialogue can be used a visual tool to increase impact. I used em-dashes to denote dialogue interruptions, increasing conflict, however, the interruptions registered only briefly. I identified a key moment when the protagonist accuses her husband of lying (“are you really leaving tonight?”). Instead of following the woman when leaving the bedroom, I wrote her lines O.S., returning when accusing MAN. The moment became more impactful by adding a visual dimension to the interruption.

I changed the dialogue, introducing the last lines with a “pre-lap,” (F.22) melding the timeframes so that the “future” scene began before the “past” scene finished. The pre-lap mirrored the character’s internal conflict, contemplating her past regrets and uncertain future. As the structural pattern changed, so did the character’s world, as she learnt to abandon her destructive patterns. Allowing my actors to have freedom with the script was something I wrestled with. In the end, my action lines allowed my actors to understand my vision while having greater freedom to make alterations. In F.20, “Hollow pause” (and punctuation contrast) indicated the husband’s sour attitude, informed my actors’ delivery, and set tone. I had to learn to find the balance between my instinct to put as much detail as possible in the script to ensure my actors understood my vision, yet I began to realize that descriptions that expressed my intent, yet left room for interpretation were most effective.
References


Hayes, J. (Screenwriter). (1953). Rear Window [Screenplay].


*All music and sounds effects in these clips are of my own making, using Garageband and Audacity