The Feeling of Falling:
A Student Filmmaker’s Approach to Short Narrative Filmmaking

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by
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“Making a film is like a stagecoach ride in the old west. When you start, you are hoping for a pleasant trip. By the halfway point, you just hope to survive.”

-Francois Truffaut-

When Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez finished directing The Blair Witch Project on a micro-budget of $60,000, they returned the camcorder they bought from Circuit City in order to stretch their money as far as possible. Kevin Smith shot his film Clerks at the convenience store he worked at for $27,000 by maxing out credit cards and begging family and friends for extra cash. Robert Rodriguez paid for his first $7000 feature, El Mariachi, by subjecting himself to experimental drug tests for extra cash. My film, The Feeling of Falling, was initially intended to be a tribute to the struggles, anxieties, and downright insanity of these filmmakers who had nothing to lose and everything to gain. For nearly five months, I wrote a script about a horror film gone wrong. My story was stuck in what is called “development hell,” a period in which scripts struggle to emerge from the haze and get the stamp of approval from the powers that be. But my screenplay was never fully finished, and the words on the page were for all practical purposes, impossible to film. As I stood in the local grocery store the day after Thanksgiving wondering what I was going to do, a wave of nausea hit me, and I dropped my cart to flee to the loading dock out back in fear of vomiting in the vegetable aisle after being. While I stood hunched over against the brick wall, I recalled a quote I had read earlier that day by screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (Being John Malkovich, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind). “I feel like I want to keep moving toward idiosyncrasy. Personal, personal, personal.”
Kaufman) It dawned on me that I had spent five months writing a script that contained no part of myself. The characters were two-dimensional, the plot was overly complex, and though intended to be a film about filmmaking, the script lacked the personal anxieties that make everything behind the scenes interesting to watch. This moment of nausea in the grocery store would later become the first written scene in my new thesis film. A film that had nothing to do with the filmmaking process, but everything to do with the personal anxieties and insecurities that I feel about the filmmaking experience. Thus, I decided to investigate the emotional expeditions of other filmmakers by examining films about filmmaking.

Filmmaking is a journey. Feature films take several years to complete from their inception, sometimes longer. The writing process itself can take years, as each script goes through dozens of re-writes before it is ready for the big screen. For instance, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, written by Eric Roth and Robin Swicord, was released in 2008. While working in a production office on the Columbia Pictures Lot, I found a copy of an early draft of the script dated “April 13th, 1990.” This is not all that uncommon. Hundreds of people work on a production for months, editors toil away for even longer, and it’s all whittled down to two hours of footage. Those two hours can become extremely poignant, moving, and utterly precious to some. For others, it is two hours that they will never get back. Either way, the years spent to make a film can take their toll on the few involved from beginning to end, with the director at the top of the list. And yet, if people do their job well, a film can
seem as if it were made with no effort at all. This can only be achieved through the synergy of all involved.

While at The Sundance Institute in 1991, a young Quentin Tarantino (*Pulp Fiction, Django Unchained*) was assigned the critically acclaimed director Terry Gilliam (*Brazil, 12 Monkeys*) as his mentor. At the time, Tarantino was preparing to make his first feature film, *Reservoir Dogs*. Being particularly concerned about how to translate his vision to screen, Tarantino could not have asked for a better mentor, as Gilliam is a director whose work is instantly recognizable. You know a Terry Gilliam film when you see it, making him what is known as an auteur filmmaker. According to the auteur theory, which was largely developed by French filmmakers and critics in the 1950’s, the director is the driving creative voice behind a film. An auteur is a director whose work, despite the hundreds of people who are involved in making a film, has a clearly recognizable and unique style, no matter the genre or screenwriter. Though this theory indicates that a director bears the bulk of creative responsibility, Terry Gilliam told Quentin Tarantino a bit of a different story. Gilliam told him that while the director has to have a vision, they just have to explain it to their collaborators in order to bring it to life. The director has to hire a group of talents that can understand the needs of the particular film, and they will make it happen. The director of photography has to understand what type of lighting and shot design is best for the story, the production designer needs to know what look the sets should have, the actors must understand the roles they are playing and so on. Therefore, filmmaking is very much a collaborative process. Because filmmaking requires the
efforts of many people, a tension develops based on the creative and the logistical. According to the films I’ve watched, it is this tension more than anything that causes distress for the director, and any member of the crew for that matter. In my experience, and what seems to be consistent with the directors I’ve studied, is that the vision is never the real problem. It is dealing with the numerous logistical difficulties so that the vision can be executed in a smart and efficient way. Often times it’s a problem of budgeting. Films require a budget much higher than other art forms, and inherently come with a bigger risk on investment. Sometimes it’s a problem of not knowing how to spend the money that’s already been secured. Sometimes money has nothing to do with it, and it comes down to just plain bad luck.

Even in the writing stage, which is most often times done by just one person, there are logistical problems. The writing has to be achievable with an eye towards translation of moving images. Often times those dealing with the logistical and budgetary side of things will call for cuts to make it cheaper and more appealing for a broader audience. So it is not possible to let one’s imagination run completely wild, especially when working with a small budget, running time constrictions, and numerous deadlines.

**Stage 1: The Script**

“A writer is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.”

-Thomas Mann

Narrative filmmaking, more than anything, has the goal to entertain. “This is true for a story told at a dinner party, and it’s true for stories told through movies,”
says Oscar-winning screenwriter Charlie Kaufman. (Kaufman)  And while this
statement may seem obvious, I can’t help but constantly remind myself of it. Above
all, a filmmaker is working for an audience. Every time someone in the theater looks
at their watch, checks their phone, or thinks about what they want to eat for dessert
that evening, the filmmaker is failing. It’s a game of constant engagement, and the
only way to keep them engaged is with a captivating story. Thus, any great film relies
on a great script, and no film echoes the screenwriter’s dilemma better than
Adaptation, penned by Charlie Kaufman.

Adaptation reflects my personal thesis writing process in several ways.
Adaptation follows Charlie Kaufman’s failed attempts to adapt a novel into a
screenplay, by weaving elements of the book into Kaufman’s own life. My first
attempt fell flat much like both the Kaufman in the film, and the Kaufman in real life.
So just as Kaufman did, though not quite so literally, I decided what I needed to do
was put myself into the script. I wrote characters and situations that were based on
things that had happened to me, things I had seen happen to other people, or ideas and
emotions that I have had in my own life. In the past I had always written more over
the top stories. These scripts were based on a high level of stylization, flashy images,
and bizarre situations. They were my version of popcorn movies. This time I opted
for something that more closely resembled my own experience of the world. In a
screenwriting seminar Kaufman gave in December of 2011, he said the following:

In many cases a major obstacle is your deeply seated belief that you are not
interesting. And since convincing yourself that you are interesting is probably
not going to happen, take it off the table. Think, ‘Perhaps I’m not interesting
but I am the only thing I have to offer, and I want to offer something. And by
offering myself in a true way I am doing a great service to the world, because it is rare and it will help.

This piece of advice is one of the most important lessons I’ve learned about writing, and a great many other things unrelated to filmmaking.

*Adaptation* was born out of Kaufman’s own inability to craft a story originally intended to be an adaptation of Susan Orlean’s novel, *The Orchid Thief*. Struggling for years on how to translate the book to screen, Kaufman emerged with a semi-autobiographical script that combines pieces from the original book and his own painful and humorous attempts at adapting Orlean’s work. Clearly a very personal film, Kaufman lays out all of his insecurities as a writer and a person on the page. This is what makes the movie so enjoyable to watch, as it is easy to relate to his futile attempts at creativity. The film opens on a black screen, and we hear a two minute long monologue by Kaufman speaking in a stream of consciousness riddled with self-deprecating humor. It is this monologue that inspired the opening sequence of my own film, in which the main character, Addy, confesses his dramatic view of the world and his own mortality to a dental technician.

*The Feeling of Falling* is about a character named Addy, a 20-something year old that is convinced he will soon be dead. While visiting his family for Christmas, he runs into Mrs. Hall, his former eighth-grade teacher with whom he previously had a strange relationship. The two end up on a search for her lost dog, Marbles. Just earlier that day, Addy had accidentally hit a dog in a parking lot, and throughout the film he is convinced that it is Mrs. Hall’s dog that he has killed. *The Feeling of Falling* is a deadpan comedy, but unlike what I’ve attempted in the past I tried to deal
with some truly serious issues. I find that the contrast between humor and drama is something I strongly identify with, as I often try and deal with difficult situations in my own life by imagining them in a humorous context. The real strength of *Adaptation* is its ability to be funny one moment and completely heartbreaking the next. The best example is the character development of John Laroche, played by Chris Cooper. As introduced in the film, he is an eccentric flower hunter that we see as a very strange man who happens to be missing his front teeth. Then, about halfway through the film, we see a flashback in which he accidentally kills his mother and horribly injures his wife in a terrible car crash. All of a sudden our bemusement at the character is turned into complete pity because we understand that his strange demeanor was a symptom of horrible loss, and he is missing his teeth because of an emotionally and physically damaging tragedy. Up until this point the film is shot in a fairly stylized way, using heightened performances and editing techniques along with an almost constant voiceover by Kaufman as he narrates his own pathetic life. The flashback car crash by contrast is extremely realistic, brutal, and jaw dropping, specifically because of the content and style that preceded it. Our feelings shift dramatically because we aren’t expecting for the film to take us to that dark of a place, but the shift is justified because it is truthful to the character. This sudden tonal change is something that I attempted as well.

The first half of my film is written in a stylized fashion, with hints of surrealism and humor. Addy is first seen in the grocery store looking at a sympathy card pre-written to his parents for his own death. This places his anxieties into a more
metaphorical and fictionalized world, which hopefully creates enough detachment from reality to allow his pain to be humorous. Kaufman’s character has similar fantasies, including a scene in which he begs the picture of Susan Orlean on the book jacket cover for inspiration, and listens as her picture talks back to him. Just as Adaptation switches tones and styles during the car crash flashback, halfway through my film Addy brings up his strange and somewhat inconclusive past with Mrs. Hall. This is the first time the audience finds out what kind of relationship the two had, and it is the first time the two characters have ever discussed the topic themselves. Throughout the script, there is an awkward tension between the two, but only while they are out looking for Mrs. Hall’s runaway dog does the truth about their strange past come out. From here on, the film develops a serious tone, turning Addy’s overdramatic and fictional perspective into a more concrete and realistic one. After spending the night in Mrs. Hall’s weekly stay motel, he pulls out a piece of red fur, confessing that that he thinks he may have accidentally ran over her dog. She then admits that her dog had run away months ago and didn’t have red fur, revealing that the entire search the night before was just an excuse to be together. For me as the writer, the fur symbolizes Addy’s irrational fear of dying, as most of his vague illnesses never amount to anything real. In the concluding scene, he and Mrs. Hall bury the other dog, standing somewhat hopeful together in a graveyard on Christmas morning. Perhaps Addy’s strange interaction with Mrs. Hall has helped him put some of his fears to rest.
I wrote the character of Addy similarly to how Kaufman wrote himself. I took certain qualities or experiences of my own that I thought were funny in hindsight, and put them into the script. The bigger challenge was writing the character of Mrs. Hall, Addy’s former eighth grade teacher. Unlike Addy, who is in my age and gender, Mrs. Hall is a 40-something year old woman. I simply don’t know any women this age on a truly personal level. A common character seen in movies is the man who never stopped being a teenager. I feel like there’s a good chance this will happen to me, and I’m sure it’s something that happens to women as well, though they never seem to be depicted this way on screen. Because my script about two people who are very different ages but in a similar point in their lives, it seemed like a good idea to try and write the character of Mrs. Hall as if she never truly grew up.

Addy is essentially having a mid-life crisis in his twenties. Convinced he is going to die, he suffers from a number of vague, inexplicable illnesses and anxieties. In some ways, he shares many of the same types of fears that I have as a filmmaker. In his opening monologue, Addy says “You know that feeling you get at the top of the stairs in the dark when you think there’s one more step but there’s not? I’ve been feeling that way for weeks now.” As much as I’ve looked I have been unable to find a word for this sensation, but it is very close to the feeling I get just after waking up from a filmmaking nightmare and not knowing where I am. A looming script deadline, or any creative deadline for that matter, feels a little bit like this. In Adaptation, Kaufman is hired by a studio to write a script, for which he spends much of his time listening to his fictional brother tell him all of his dimwitted and cliché
ideas for his own script, which in the end is sold for a huge sum of money to another studio. Despite being credited as a co-writer on the script and even more bizarrely nominated for an academy award, there is no such person as Donald Kaufman. The character was included to illustrate the contrast between the “art” that most writers strive for, and the marketable “popcorn movies” that are mass-produced from Hollywood. This was a similar theme in the film Barton Fink directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, in which a critically renowned New York playwright is hired by a company in L.A. to start writing feature films. Barton soon learns that Hollywood is only interested in spitting out thoughtless material that will fill as many seats as possible and cost the least amount of money. Finding a balance between art and entertainment always ends up being a challenge while writing, and I often found myself having the same fights with myself as Charlie had with Donald. In his initial meeting with a studio head, Charlie says, “I don't want to cram in sex or guns or car chases or characters learning profound life lessons or growing or coming to like each other or overcome obstacles to succeed in the end. The book isn't like that, and life isn't like that, it just isn't.” (Jonze, Adaptation) I usually start with this intention as well, but quickly remind myself of what story expert Robert McKee says later in the movie, about how sensational and amazing things that happen everyday, you just have to be able to know where to look for them. So in writing about a person in his early adulthood, I embellish details and imaginations of my own life into an unlikely romance with a former 8th grade teacher. Though I have no similar experience in my own life, one of the principle traits of both lead characters is the fear of aging and the
responsibilities and consequences that come with it. I feel like this is something most
people can relate to, and so even though the plot may be out of the ordinary, the
characters hopefully have some common human qualities that make their story
engaging.

**Stage 2: Pre-Production and Casting**

Once the script is ready to be made, there are a number of hoops to jump
through to insure that it is shot as efficiently as possible. While my thesis film is
nowhere near the scale of a big budget feature, many of the same rules of pre-
production and planning come into play. Even though short films generally work
towards a small idea, this particular project required eleven locations, eight actors, and
thirteen crewmembers. Therefore the amount of planning and preparation that went
into *The Feeling of Falling* was quite intensive. The sixteen-page script had to be shot
in five days, with a meager budget of roughly $4000. Locations had to be secured, the
schedule had to be locked down, the crew had to be assembled, not to mention the film
had to be cast.

It is my belief that a film is made in pre-production, and realized on set. There
is no such thing as fully prepared, because on the day when everyone shows up to set
there will be unforeseeable problems, guaranteed. A professor of mine has a quote
that he insists on repeating which goes, “If you’re early, you’re on time, if you’re on
time, you’re late, and if you’re late, you’re fired.” This statement applies to the
attitude needed for a successful film shoot. Over prepare, over prepare, over prepare,
it will still not always be enough. Another favorite quote comes from *Arrested*
Development creator Mitchel Hurwitz, who I was fortunate enough to see speak my freshman year at the Austin Film Festival. He said, “Luck favors the well-prepared.” I’ve tried to adhere to this piece of advice throughout my college career, as I have found it to be absolutely true.

One of the most important parts of pre-production is casting. Because The Feeling of Falling is a story based entirely on the relationship between two people, and less focused on stylistic camera or editing techniques, I knew that performance was the most important aspect of the final product. Elia Kazan (A Streetcar Named Desire, On the Waterfront) is known to have said that directing is ninety percent casting, and the other ten percent is fixing mistakes made in casting. This has since become a common saying in Hollywood, and it couldn’t be truer with my movie.

In the initial casting attempts, I felt a bit like Mark Borchardt from the documentary American Movie. The film documents a hopelessly enthusiastic filmmaker in Wisconsin, and his ill-fated attempts to make several different movies. All of the auditions he holds result in painfully awkward line readings, causing Mark to end up starring in his own films. The challenge of finding an actor to play Addy was that the character needed to be pathetic without being sulky, and sad while still being funny. A lot of the actors I auditioned were overly theatrical, making me second-guess all of the dialogue I had written, fearing that it was poorly written. The character of Addy is fairly dead in his outward appearance, so a theatrical delivery would have been inappropriate. Because I was going for a more naturalistic performance, I decided to look for an actor who was not classically trained in theater.
I instead went to the student improvisation comedy troupe on campus. Because improvisation requires such a raw performance, the reactions of improvisers tend to be very naturalistic. I approached one member named Travis Khoury, who had the most deadpan delivery of all, and cast him on the spot after one reading of the opening monologue. Unlike several others who had auditioned for the role, he was able to find the humor in Addy’s pain simply by playing the part as realistically as possible.

Casting Mrs. Hall would take a bit more searching, as the actress had to be someone that could pull off behaving much younger than her actual age; a teenage girl trapped in a 45-year-old’s body. She also had to be able to pull off being a complete mess, as the character is a closet alcoholic living in a weekly stay motel. No one in the Athens area that I knew of fit this description, so I decided to try something I had never done before and hire a professional actress. After auditioning several people that did not quite fit the role, I recalled a short film I had seen last year made in the media school starring an actress named Kristina Kopf. She plays a woman living with the guilt of accidentally killing someone in a motor accident ten years previous, and from what I remembered she might be a good fit for my film. I contacted the director of that project, got her name, and found her profile on a talent agency website based in Columbus. There was an introduction video that she had posted to her page, in which she explained that she had previously been a middle school teacher who tended to identify with the quirkier, shier kids. Perfect. I e-mailed her the script, and within a matter of hours she had accepted the role.
Because Kristina lives in Columbus, the small budget of the film did not permit rehearsal with the actors before shooting. This was a case of the logistical limitations interfering with the creative outcome, though I tried to make it work to my advantage. While there was an option for webcam rehearsals, I decided to deliberately discourage contact between the two leads of any kind before the first day of shooting in order to create an awkward tension between the two that was necessary for each of their characters. In the film, the characters are seeing each other for the first time in years, so a bit of uncertainty in how to react to each other works well. Because this was the case, we decided to schedule the scene where they first run into each other on the first day. I borrowed this idea from Wes Anderson, in which he used the same tactic on *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, a film about a Jacques Cousteau type figure and his seafaring documentary film crew. Anderson decided to not allow his lead actress Cate Blanchett to interact with any other cast members until her introductory scene, in which she meets the entire documentary crew on a beach at night. Anderson did this to create a bizarre tension between her and the rest of the crew. Though I did not hold rehearsals between actors, I did meet extensively with each lead to go over motivations and back-story, including what exactly happened between the characters and their relationship history. I believe that conversations about character and story are more beneficial than a rigorous rehearsal process, as there is something magically spontaneous about an actor’s delivery when they read a line for the first time.
Fortunately enough the rest of pre-production went very smoothly, largely in part to my producer, Truman Hatch. Each location was locked down early with little or no hesitation from the property owners. Scheduling was a bit of a headache, as the large majority of the film takes place at night, requiring some odd hours, but that is all too ordinary while in film school. Finding crew was also fairly simple. All this being said, I had been on enough sets where the unexpected problems wreaked havoc on the shoot, so I was cautiously optimistic. The week before production began, I felt a bit like Addy, living with the constant sensation of falling at the top of the stairs.

**Stage 3: Production**

As stated before, the most important part of this production was going to be the performances of the two principle characters. Most of the films I watched about the filmmaking process dealt with nightmare actors and their ability to completely unravel a production. While troublesome actors ended up not being a problem of mine, *Living In Oblivion* by Tom Dicillo is the film that best represents that nightmare, along with numerous other difficulties. Shots are ruined by technical issues, actors give heartbreaking performances while the camera isn’t rolling, and all the while the director is holding his crew together by a string of lies and bribes. The week before production began I had a similar series of nightmares, including one where every set we arrived at was flooded, and the crew had to spend half the day bailing out water from each location. As I described earlier, the feeling of falling in the dark is the best way I can describe the anticipated anxiety of everything that could possibly go wrong on set.

Because the director is the leader of every crewmember and every aspect of the film,
the level of responsibility is intense. If the director has to deal with a cast and crew that are all acting like children, as Steve Buscemi’s character does in *Living In Oblivion*, the film will undoubtedly fall apart. To avoid this, I specifically picked a crew composed of natural leaders, so that each department (camera crew, art department, etc) could run without having to be micromanaged. I attribute this strategy, along with the help of assistant director Eleanor Crew, as the reason my set ran smoothly, never facing anything nearly as bad as the nightmares I had been imagining.

Besides molding the performances of the actors on set, it is a principle job of the director to determine where to put the camera at what moment. Because film is a visual medium, the camera being the audience’s eye into the world of the story, the positioning and movement of the camera is crucial in crafting the tone of the film. This is why the director of photography is such an important collaborator throughout the entire filmmaking process. They are there at the beginning for the creation of the shot-list, all the way through post-production and color correction to make sure the look of the film is perfected. In the credits of *Citizen Kane*, which is considered by many to be the greatest film of all time, director Orson Wells shared his credit title card with director of photography, Gregg Toland. That is how important the role of the cinematographer can be. In following Terry Gilliam’s advice, I choose someone that I knew could not only create the kind of look I wanted for the film, but could also run a crew and hold the production together. This is why I decided to spend a good deal of the budget on flying in former HTC Film student Josh Young from Los
Angeles. Josh shot the film I directed last year, and I knew that the skills of someone with a years worth of industry experience would be worth the cost of a plane ticket. Many directors choose to work with the same director of photography for each project, because they develop a working relationship and set language that becomes very natural and easy to understand. This is certainly the case with Josh and I.

In terms of the look for the film, we settled on a visual style based on a select few films that had a similar tone to my own. For the first part of the film, we decided to go with a Wes Anderson inspired shot design, which includes very geometrically composed static shots, placing the character either in the absolute center of the frame or on the extreme left or right. The look of the film attempts to match the lead character’s emotional arc. At the start of the film, Addy is in a position of begrudging acceptance. His opening monologue is one of quiet loneliness paired with an exaggerated and melodramatic view of the world. By keeping the camera locked down instead of constantly moving which is more typical of a montage sequence, Addy’s loneliness and bleak perspective is emphasized.

This locked down, very deliberately framed aesthetic is maintained for roughly the first half of the film until Addy agrees to help Mrs. Hall search for her lost dog, Marbles. As the film begins to shift from deadpan humor to a naturalistic and serious tone, Addy becomes more confused and unsure of himself. Perhaps the biggest influence on *The Feeling of Falling* is a small independent film called *Submarine*, directed by Richard Ayoade. *Submarine*, heavily influenced by Wes Anderson films, tells the tale of a young teenager named Oliver Tate. Oliver goes through his first
romance and heartbreak, while simultaneously attempting to keep his parents from separating. *Submarine* masterfully weaves between the comedy of young romance with the drama of serious issues such as infidelity and cancer, all from the perspective of a lovesick boy. While Wes Anderson rarely takes the camera off of the tripod, and has maintained a consistent aesthetic approach throughout his entire career, we decided that the subject matter and characters required a less stylized design in favor of documentary inspired handheld shots. *Submarine* often mixes between two extremes, at times favoring flashy lighting, editing, and camera movement, then switching to a rawer, less choreographed feel during the dramatic moments of the film.

As Addy’s state of mind becomes more and more unbalanced, so does the camera, going from a fixed look on the tripod to a handheld approach. Throughout the scene in the parking garage and the motel directly after, the camera becomes more and more erratic to the point where we opted for a completely improvised shot design during the climax of the film. The morning after, Addy’s world has more or less fallen back into balance, and so the camera resumes it’s original look of a strong, static composition.

Murphy’s law states that anything that can go wrong will go wrong. While this was surely not the case during the production of my film, we did enjoy our share of mishaps and unforeseeable roadblocks. In all of the films about filmmaking I watched about filmmaking, these unforeseeable problems were the most common thread. In *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse*, Francis Ford Coppola watches as the Filipino Air force reclaims the helicopters he rented for a critical war scene in *Apocalypse Now* to go fight a real war, leaving him waiting for months before
finishing the scene. Martin Sheen had a heart attack on set, forcing Coppola to shoot with his stunt double for three weeks. Marlon Brando showed up on set eighty pounds overweight, without reading either the book or even the script. Ironically enough, the only actor trouble I had was on the first day when Kristina forgot to make housing arrangements for her dog during her three day stay in Athens. After that, I couldn’t have asked for better actors to work with, and their performances were spot on in each scene.

I did however have a number of problems concerning locations. *Ed Wood* by Tim Burton, is a film about one of the most critically panned filmmakers of all time, Ed Wood. Despite his determined, upbeat personality, Wood lacked a basic grasp on storytelling, which resulted in some bizarre and downright outrageous films. At one point when a policeman spots Wood in a dress filming a scene on a street corner, Wood exclaims, “We don’t have a permit, run!” (Burton, *Ed Wood*) While this may seem like an amateur mistake, many great scenes in successful movies were filmed without permission or knowledge of the proper authorities. The car chase in *The French Connection*, considered as one of the best chase scenes in film history, was done without city permits. The crew actually received help from off-duty NYPD officers, many of whom were involved with the original case file that the film was about. I was fortunate enough to find locations where I was able to secure permission, but I learned that bending the rules and asking for forgiveness gets you a long way. One of the locations I used for the grocery store scene was the Save-A-Lot in Athens, Ohio. I took the necessary steps of securing the location weeks in advance, following
up with the manager twice before the night of filming. Even so, when we arrived on set at 8 P.M., the employee that I was suppose to pay to stay late for four hours was under the impression that she was only to be there until 10 P.M. After absolutely refusing to stay for the extra two hours, I quietly bribed her with a hundred dollar bill, and she gladly agreed to help us with anything at all that we might need. While this logistical problem was quickly resolved, I ran into trouble again the following night, and this time I wasn’t able to bribe my way out of it.

Weather had been something I’d been concerned about for months. When it came time to shoot the most pivotal scene in the film, the scene where the truth about Addy and Mrs. Hall’s past comes out, weather was not our friend. According to the reports, snow and sleet would make shooting an exterior at night impossible. I am certainly not the first filmmaker to encounter weather problems. While attempting to shoot his Don Quixote film as show in the documentary *Lost in La Mancha*, Terry Gilliam was plagued with a number of problems, including a flashflood on the second day of filming that damaged equipment and permanently changed the landscape of the filming location. After a number of other logistical problems, the biggest being the herniated disc of lead actor Jean Rochefort, Gilliam’s production was abandoned and has yet to be resurrected. Fortunately, one night of bad weather wouldn’t be enough to ruin my shoot, though I was forced to compromise by shooting the scene one floor below in the parking garage. I had pictured the setting as being wide and expansive, as it was this scene in which the truth about Addy and Mrs. Hall’s past relationship first comes out in the open. Avoiding the sleet proved to be a happy accident
however, as the lower level had a great deal more natural light and allowed us to shoot
the scene in less time, and focus more on performance while retaining a naturalistic
feel. In an interview on Inside the Actors Studio, Steven Spielberg told those watching
in the audience that one of the most irrational fears of a filmmaker is compromise.
("Inside the Actor's Studio, Episode #5.9.") He insisted that the need to compromise
often results in finding the simplest solution to a problem, which often times is the
best one. On the first day of what was suppose to be an epic fight scene in Raiders of
the Lost Ark, Harrison Ford informed Spielberg that he was terribly sick, and had
roughly one hour of energy before he would pass out from exhaustion. Instead of
going ahead with the fight scene as planned, Spielberg told Ford to just take out his
gun and shoot the foe. The scene became one of the most famous and effective in the
film, because it defied expectations in a funny and simple way.

As far as my method for directing actors, I subscribe to the theory of Paul
Thomas Anderson, (Boogie Nights, There Will Be Blood) that a director’s duty to the
actors is simply to bring them a good script. From there, it’s a game of making things
 hospitable on set and every now and then reminding them to keep it simple. ("The
Charlie Rose Show" Episode Dated 30 October 1997.") Because the two principles
had never met one another before filming, there would naturally be some awkward
tension in the first scenes between them. For this reason, we scheduled the scenes in
which the characters first meet up first, and saved the more personal interactions for
later. Unlike any of the films I watched, I had no problems with actor’s personal lives
going in the way of filming. Both leads were extremely enthusiastic, got along very
well, and because I had met with both extensively during pre-production, understood the material very clearly. After the first day, if I saw that the two were chatting, I purposefully did not join in the conversation to allow them to become as comfortable with each other as possible. According to Constantin Stanislavski’s acting system, the bulk of acting is reacting. This means that the performance of one actor depends heavily on the others in the scene. By the end of the shoot, the two had become good friends, and were very comfortable with each other’s company. Some directors favor a tense, regimented set where the energy of the scenes is fed by the tension of making the film. Others, such as Wes Anderson who is clearly a big inspiration for the film, favor a set where ideally everyone becomes friends and feels like they are part of a family. Most of the direction I ended up giving was clarification of details, and making sure to get a variety of performances to give myself options in the editing room. Like Elia Kazan said, directing is 90% casting. Fortunately I got that part completely right.

**Stage 4: Editing and Post Production**

When Francis Ford Coppola finished shooting *Apocalypse Now*, it took a full two years before editors Walter Murch, Gerald Greenberg, and Lisa Frutchan completed editing the film. This added up to one-and-a-half cuts a day, meaning that if they had known exactly which cuts to make, they could have taken a full day to make one edit, decided which two edits to complete the next day, and finished the film on the same schedule. The point being that editing is not as simple as fitting together a collection of puzzle pieces, because many pieces fit into any number of different
places. Coppola had to wait two years to see the film that, while shooting, he called “a twenty million dollar disaster.” (Bahr, Hickenlooper, Coppola, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*). From the end of shooting my film, I had six weeks.

One takes an emotional rollercoaster ride throughout the editing process, though there really isn’t any kind of relief until the film is completely finished. Each shot must be cut to work for the scene, which all have to be cut to work for the final film. This means that even if a sequence is fantastic on its own, it may be completely wrong for the rest of the story. This is what makes editing so difficult, particularly if the editor also happens to be the writer and director as is my case.

After all of the transcoding, logging, and syncing of footage is completed, the first step of editing is completing an assembly cut. The assembly represents the original intent of the filmmaker, which is most often disappointing, as a film never turns out exactly as imagined, even if things went perfectly smoothly on set. Thelma Schoonmaker, frequent collaborator with Martin Scorsese and three-time Academy Award winner, lives by the principle that an editor should read the script once then put it on the shelf. She believes that after a script goes through the shooting process it becomes a different animal altogether. Compromises may have had to be made on set, camera angles may create a different tone than expected, perhaps an actor brought something different to a character than envisioned by the writer, any number of things may have affected what was actually captured on screen. In many ways, editing becomes the final draft of the screenplay, and things you never thought you would use you do, and some things you couldn’t imagine being cut are tossed out the window.
In the documentary *The Cutting Edge*, Walter Murch details how the iconic opening of *Apocalypse Now* came to be as a result of a happy accident. While sifting through b-roll, which is footage that was shot as a backup or supplement to the main shot, Murch found a static frame on a distant jungle. Helicopters occasionally pass through the top of the frame before all of a sudden the trees in the distance erupt in a fiery explosion. This shot was captured while filming a scene that takes place almost an hour into the story, and was not even intended for the final cut. Placed at the beginning of the film, it served as one of the most memorable openings in film history.

I came to find my opening shot by a similar accident. The original opening involved a scene in which Addy is playing ski-ball alone in a movie theater arcade. The sequence ended up being a bit bizarre, and didn’t flow well with the following monologue in the dentist office. Several weeks into the editing process, I cut out the first scene of my film entirely. In the editing world, this is referred to as “killing your darlings.” Being too precious about any part of the film can be dangerous as a writer/director/editor, as moments envisioned from the beginning of the scripting phase may simply not work in the final film. I realized the reason the opening felt awkward was because the context had almost nothing to do with the rest of film, and so I decided to look for something more representative of both the character and the plot. While sifting through shots from the opening montage, I came across a single take that had not been planned in pre-production, but we decided to get on set because we had extra time, something of a rarity on student films. In the shot, Addy opens the door of his car and steps out to stare at the dog that he has just accidentally hit in a parking lot; it’s fur
blowing in the wind in the bottom of the frame. Fortunately we had the actor start inside the car and walk out to his final position. The original intention was just show him standing in front of the dog from an extreme wide angle. The new shot ended up being a much better fit for the opening, and represented the character’s state of being far better than the discarded introduction had.

Cutting a film is a combination of problem solving, inspiration, and happy accidents, which is really the exciting part about editing. The film changes, and by the end there is something completely new on screen. Just because the first cut of the film turns out poorly doesn’t mean that the final cut will end up that way. Sacha Gervasi’s film *Hitchcock* details famed director Alfred Hitchcock’s struggles to make *Psycho*. After showing the first cut to studio executives and getting a horrible reaction, Hitchcock was expecting a box office disaster, thinking he had lost his touch as a filmmaker. Through the encouragement of his wife, Alma, he revisited the cut, sifting through different takes, adding music, reordering scenes, and the result was one of Hitchcock’s most successful films of his career. The first cut of any film is just a rough draft, and much like a script progresses in the writing phase, and edit becomes tighter and more fully fleshed out. At this point, I have successfully defended a cut of my film to my thesis committee, but would like to quote Hollywood legend Jack Warner. He is famous for saying, “I don’t want it good, I want it Tuesday.” Because the timeframe for editing my film was so tight, there are some aspects, such as an original music score, that I have not yet had the chance to address. Though I have
completed a cut of the film that I am happy with, I plan to continue fine-tuning *The Feeling of Falling* after graduation so that it can be the best film it can be.

**The Final Stage: Exhibition**

As I reach the end of the filmmaking journey, the documentary *American Movie* comes to mind. In one of the most painful films I have ever seen, Mark Borchardt attempts over and over again to complete his short horror film, spending nearly five years of his life on the same doomed project. It’s a wonder Mark made it all the way to the final stage of the filmmaking process, a theatrical screening. Mark was alone through much of his journey, but in the end he manages to wrangle his friends and family together to help complete his film, working tirelessly to the last minute before the theater doors open. The scenes showing the surge of support Mark receives at the end of his filmmaking journey are some of the most uplifting and inspirational moments I have seen on film. Had he not had the help and support of those around him, his movie would have never been finished. The lesson is that filmmaking is a truly collaborative process. I have yet to take the final step, but the date is set for the premiere of *The Feeling of Falling*, and soon the final copy will be burned to disc for the public to see. Though perhaps the most nerve-racking step of all, the enormous sense of relief and accomplishment after the curtain goes down simply cannot be beat.

After going through four years of film school, I feel that Gilliam’s advice about what it takes to be a director couldn’t be truer. I really owe the completion of
this film to a number of people, and it is a representation of many different creative
and logistical inputs. As Truffaut said, filmmaking is like a stagecoach ride in the old
west. This time, I survived. Hopefully one day I will get to take another trip.
Works Cited


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