HELL IS A GAME SHOW:
AN ARTISTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE AFTERLIFE

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“Hell is other people,” shouts Joseph Garcin in Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1944 play *Huis Clos (No Exit)*. It was this sentiment that summarizes the entire play: man can never escape the judgment of others and in turn is always in the hell of his own self-judgment. It is this quote, in its various forms and parodies, that would come back to haunt me in ironic ways. But it was also this play that took me down the path that would eventually lead me to the creation of my film: *Hell is a Game Show*.

This project starts before Sartre, with my junior year film *Near Sighted: The Usually Alone Interview* - specifically with a supporting actress by the name of Evie Weir. Her acting was smart and funny, a natural with the kind of dark comedy that I had become so fond of writing. There’s an old Hollywood expression that goes “directing is ninety percent casting,” and I planned to take that a step further and write my thesis film around a talented actress that had a great knowledge of the craft. I had just finished watching two dark comedies: *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (2005) and *Seven Psychopaths* (2012). Both feature comedy that relies heavily on horrible murder or torture. The former features a comedic scene where Robert Downey Jr.’s character loses his finger when his ex girlfriend smashes it in a door, while the prior has a running gag about Woody Harrelson’s gun always jamming when he is trying to execute people.

I had at this point a vague idea of what I wanted my film to be: a dark comedy with a strong female lead. My first thought was a show similar to *The Bachelorette*. On this show, about twenty men compete for the love and affection of one leading lady (the “bachelorette”). This was an area of reality television that I felt was rather untouched by dark comedy. With my experience in comedy writing, this surprised me. After watching a handful of episodes there were plenty of places where just a slight increase in absurdity
could lead to strong moments of comedic irony and satire. For example, what if the bachelorette was murdering the contestants? Following the same tropes of the show, but adding this element of horror, would be comedy gold. There was just one major issue. Most of the tropes of this show revolve around splendor. They all stay in a giant mansion and wear fancy clothes and go on exotic dates. These things are what make the show interesting to watch, and unfortunately, very hard to replicate on a student-film budget.

So it was back to the drawing board, but this time I returned with a clearer sense of vision. In fact, *The Bachelorette* did leave me with another idea: the television game show. Where high budget and high production value was crucial with a replication of *The Bachelorette*, the lack of those things can become part of the character and kitsch of a game show. I was then faced with the challenge of turning a light hearted, family-friendly show into a dark, absurd comedy. I had just written a comedy piece based heavily on Dante’s *Inferno* (the first third of the *Divine Comedy*) and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, specifically on the relationship between biblical characters and their interaction with mortal human beings. It was with these two classical works on my mind that I decided that this was the angle I needed to take. I needed my game show to take place in Hell.

It was at this point that I read Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *No Exit*. Within this play, three individuals are placed into a room where they become the source of eternal torture for the other two. The part that stuck with me the most was that the door to this room was not locked. Any of the characters could have left whenever they wanted. It was the uncontrollable need to be around the other characters and the assumed guilt they would feel upon leaving that kept them together in the room. Having the system built in a way that traps the characters even though they have the illusion of freedom is something that I
knew had to be in this short film, as the culmination of the torture. The contestants on this Hell game show would compete for their freedom, only to have it stripped away at the very moment they believe that they have achieved it, much like the Myth of Sisyphus.¹

The minor difference, of course, is that Sisyphus’ torture is not being broadcasted on television.

I now knew that I had to create my own, unique take on Hell. There has been no shortage of texts on the subject, so I wanted to read and watch some of the various works featuring artistic representations of Hell so that I could create my own unique version. The trick was going to be blending the tropes of Hell with the tropes of old, campy game shows to fabricate the perfect blend of the two.

The first film that I watched on the subject was *Inferno* (2016). Directed by Ron Howard, this film was based on Dan Brown’s 2013 novel of the same name. The film follows professor Robert Langdon as he attempts to stop a world-cleansing plot by following clues hidden in Dante’s *Inferno* and Sandro Botticelli’s *Map of Hell* (which is also based on Dante’s *Inferno*). This film was a terrific starting point for my journey into the underworld, not only because that is literally what Dante’s *Inferno* is about, but also because this film directly addresses the fact that a majority of texts use Dante’s depiction of Hell as the real depiction of Hell. The example used most heavily in this film to support this statement is Botticelli’s *Map of Hell*. It directly depicts the layers of Hell described in the *Divine Comedy*. This was beneficial because it also put into historical

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¹ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, an essay by Albert Camus, follows a man named Sisyphus whose eternal punishment is to push a boulder to the top of a hill, only to have it fall back down to the bottom when he reaches the top.
context the Hell that most people think of when they think of Hell - the fire and brimstone, Christian underworld.

The next film on my list was *Constantine* (2005). Serving as the directorial debut for Francis Lawrence, this film was an adaptation of the DC Comic *Hellblazer*. This film follows John Constantine, an occult detective assigned to send demons back to Hell in order to earn favor with Heaven. This film takes heavily from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, specifically the ongoing battle between Lucifer and Heaven. This film also portrays Hell in Dante way, with fire and tortured souls all about. The unique take with this Hell depiction is that it is just the real world, but in fire and ruins. When Constantine enters Hell for the first time, it is as if the world around him becomes Hell. The thing about this film that struck me the most, and that most directly influenced my writing of the script, was the character of Lucifer. Although this is by no means a comedic film, Lucifer’s character shows such a twisted humor about what he is doing. Instead of being depicted as a giant monster or a demon, he is shown as a human male that just gets a sick rush out of torturing souls. When he goes to light Constantine’s final cigarette, he moves the lighter away from him a few times, making him move for it. This is a very dark, kind of chilling portrayal of the devil that I knew I needed to absorb for my film.

Moving forward came *What Dreams May Come* (1998), another novel adaptation. The title comes from William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Directed by Vincent Ward, this Robin Williams-led film follows Chris Nielsen through his life and after his death. This film focuses heavily on the Heaven side of Hell, but slowly turns into a Dante-esque tale when Chris has to go save his wife (Annie) from Hell since she committed suicide. Hell is a typical firestorm, with the center depicted as Chris’s home, abandoned and run down.
What made this film’s depiction of Hell so unique is its use of personal nightmares. Since it is Annie’s Hell, it is made up of things that scare her and torture her. This is the same way the film portrays Heaven, as all of the characters are who they want to be. For example, Chris’s dead son wants to be Albert Lewis, so that is who he is. Everything in this film’s afterlife is personalized to the person experiencing it.

All of the films to this point have been leaning on the serious side, so for my film’s needs I had to branch out and watch a few comedic films that depicted Hell. The first was *South Park: Bigger, Longer, & Uncut* (1999). Directed by Trey Parker, this film the most absurd of Hell depictions. Although the focus of this film is on censorship, Satan is a pivotal character. His unhealthy sexual relationship with Saddam Hussein is a major story arch within the film. The landscape of Hell in this film is again very Dante-inspired. Satan is portrayed in a very effeminate, submissive light, which is extremely unique to this film. Although it was filled with dirty jokes and fantastic social commentary, this film provided me mostly by showing me what I did not want to do.

The second comedic film portrayal of Hell was *Bill & Ted’s Bogus Journey* (1991). Originally titled “Bill and Ted Go To Hell” (Bill and Ted’s), the two heroes do in fact go to Hell. This Hell is just a bunch of floating rocks, and the characters even comment by saying “This is not what I expected this place to look like at all.” The characters then find themselves in an assortment of campy, German-expressionism style rooms where they must face their own personal fears. The set design of this film stuck out to me because it was extremely similar in nature to that of game shows in the 1970s.

While watching these films, I also was reading the novel *Eric* by Terry Pratchett. This novel stands primarily to parody the tale of Faust, with the secondary character of
Eric being the Faust character and the main character Rincewind being the Mephistopheles character. The entire novel is built out of smaller satires, such as a satire of Ponce de Leon and of Helen of Troy. The depiction of Hell in this film is that of a boring bureaucracy. The demon in charge of Hell explains that boredom might be the most effective form of torture.

There were also two television shows that heavily influenced me at this point of pre-production. The first was *Your Pretty Face is Going to Hell* (2013-), a show on the network Adult Swim. This show follows damned souls working in an office. Much like in *Eric*, Hell is an office. Although there is the standard torturing and whatnot, the focus is on the mundane business side of Hell. Our main character is a loser of a demon who, no matter what, cannot end up on top. What was most beneficial from this show is the way they showed humor in the actual act of torturing. The devil would make jokes and his underlings would laugh along. This concept that everyone was in on the joke except the person being tortured was another thing that was carried all of the way through my film.

The other television show was *The Good Place* (2016-). This show focuses on character Eleanor Shellstop who has died and was sent to “The Good Place,” a re-imagining of Heaven. As the show progresses, she is introduced to three other characters that drive her insane. It’s almost as if they were all put into this “good place” to torture one another. At the end of the season it is revealed that that is exactly what is going on. The Good Place is actually The Bad Place, and just like in Sartre’s “No Exit,” the Hell is created by one another. The biggest take-away from this show was its play on tropes. With my film I wanted to create a funny mixture of old Hell tropes and new ones, and that is exactly what *The Good Place* does. They make references to common afterlife
clichés and use the audiences pre-existing notions of Heaven and Hell to reverse expectations for comedic effect. The show even uses the character of Michael to orchestrate the chaos that is experienced by the tortured souls.

My research could not stay just within the confines of Hell-related media though, because that is only one part of my idea. I also had to do some investigation into the world of game shows. I wanted to first look at films that revolved around game shows, so that I could better understand the way a game show is shown cinematically. Surprisingly there were not many films that featured television game shows as a major plot device. The most notable one was *Quiz Show* (1994). Directed by Robert Redford, this film follows the true events that occurred in 1958 regarding the rigging of NBC game show *Twenty One*. This film provided a look at older television game shows, which featured simpler sets and camera placement. The set design of this film also inspired me when it came time to plan my own set design for my film.

Naturally I had to watch game shows as well. With so many out there, it was important to narrow down what kind of game show I wanted to make. I knew that I did not want to do a trivia or word-based shows, which eliminated shows like *Jeopardy!* (1984), *The Price is Right* (1972-), and *Wheel of Fortune*. (1983-). I did watch a good bit of these shows, but mostly for the presentation style of the host. The only thing that remains consistent between all of these shows is the larger-than-life people that present each show. Whether it is Alex Trebek or Bob Barker, these hosts are what bring life and charisma to their individual show. I also took note of the relationship each host had with their audience. The host would say something and the audience would react, and this kind of call and response style seemed to be a major part of each show.
The kind of game show that I found to be most congruent with the kind of cinematic show that I wanted to create was surprisingly found on The Food Network. *Cutthroat Kitchen (2013-)* was the show that most closely resembled that of a game show in Hell. The name of the game is simple - four contestants must complete the assigned food in the allotted amount of time, and then their food is judged. One contestant is voted off each round until there is only one remaining. This format, of one contestant being voted off per round, was exactly how I wanted my fictional game show to go. But the show had another element of hellishness. The host, Alton Brown, would offer the contestants opportunities to spend some of their potential prize money to sabotage their opponents. An example of a sabotage is making one of your opponents use aluminum foil in lieu of knives and spoons. This kind of debauchery caused by the host is incredibly diabolical, and what I wanted my devil to do during the film.

Having gathered some great ideas from this research, it became time for me to begin writing my script. In his book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Syd Field’s states that the first thing you need to know about your screenplay is how it ends. Now he is talking about writing feature-length, hundred paged screenplays, but this advice carries over to short-formed scripts as well. After all, how can you plan a journey if you do not know your final destination? Fortunately I knew my final destination: the winner of the show realizes their true punishment is never getting to leave the show. Much like how hope is the positive driving force in *The Shawshank Redemption (1994)*, hope would become the torturing force in my film. By dangling the idea of freedom from Hell in front of the contestants, the devil would deliver a crushing final blow to the
winner who has suffered through so much by pulling out the rug and explaining that they have to actually start *all over*.

So I knew, then, where I was going. Now I had to decide how I was going to get there. I decided to begin by deciding who my characters were. I knew I needed three contestants, because “omne trium perfectum” (everything that comes in threes is perfect). This is what is known as the rule of three.² In a short film there is no room for superfluity. This means that being able to convey an idea or a bit in the most efficient way possible is best. I could have had four contestants, but by understanding the rule of threes I understand that then I would have one contestant too many. So I decided upon three. Short films are, like their name suggests, short. And like I mentioned before, there is not much time for explaining things. In the case of my film, there was not much time to go deep into the backstory of the contestants. I had to explain who they were and why they were in Hell as quickly and as clearly as possible. Since their backstory wasn’t super crucial to progress the plot, and served more heavily as an opportunity for a joke, these characters did not need to be extremely complex. In fact, the more generic the characters were, the easier it would be for an audience to understand what they were about. I also wanted the characters’ deaths to summarize why they would be in Hell. Since I do not have much time to go into backstory, the more obvious the sin the better.

The first contestant, then, was going to be a dumb college bro named Cam. The most believable and comical way for a character like that to die would be in a beer-related accident. This covers both of my previously mentioned criteria. A dumb college

² According to “The Mysterious Rule of Three,” three is the smallest number required to form a pattern, so it has been used time and time again throughout history to communicate complex ideas.
kid is easy to identify and most audiences will assign their own backstory to this character because everyone knows someone like this (I do, and his name is coincidentally also Cam).

The second contestant originally was going to be a Goth girl with a drug addiction that overdosed in a bathtub. After running it by some colleagues, the consensus was that this was too dark and too topical. Although dark was the goal, I saw the writing on the wall and made a change. So instead of a Goth drug addict, the second contestant would be Maddie, a preppy girl who accidentally blew herself up trying to smoke dish cleaner. This is all the backstory that is provided to the audience, but her sin can be interpreted in a few different ways depending on the view of the particular audience member. She could be in Hell for being so stupid, or for trying to get high, or for trying so hard to fit in with her friends. These characters are like projectors, allowing for the audience to assign their own meanings to them.

The third and final contestant would be the one to go on and win it all. This meant there were a few more little pieces of information that needed to be applied to the character. I wanted this character, Jake, to be the returning champion. This would only add to the torture when he finally wins the game and is immediately assigned to be the new contestant on next week’s show. As for character, I wanted Jake to just be battered and just generally disinterested. This would be very funny later on, when the other contestants are distraught or breaking down, because Jake would not be bothered at all. This would make for fun comedic timing within the competitions, but also then when Jake shows excitement for getting to leave it’d be a cherry on top for the big reveal.
The host of this show, the Devil, is the primary character of the piece. Like in real-life game shows, the charisma and charm of the host is what makes the show. One of the things that I believed would add to the humor of the piece was if the Devil and the audience treated the show like any other game show, which would sharply contrast the actual misery that is being put onto the men and women on the show. Her one-liners and corny comments would add to the overall surrealism of the show. To combine a game show host persona with that of the devil creates room for all kinds of dark and twisted moments when it comes time to actually shoot, and I wrote the character a little over-the-top, knowing that Evie’s acting style would tone it down a little and make it feel more real and sinister.

With a beginning and end to my story, I had to sort out the middle. Obviously this was where the challenges were going to be. The challenges, besides being the majority of the film, were where the crossover of Hell and game show would be most apparent. They had to be campy and corny, like on a game show, but they also had to act as a form of torture for the contestants. As if by chance, I stumbled upon an all-white puzzle on Amazon. The filmmaking gods had sent a gift. It was the perfect combination of silliness and total horror.

I knew this had to be the middle challenge, because it was best served for two people. I also knew that I wanted preppy Maddie and disinterested Jake to be the players, because they contrasted one another the most. Just assembling the puzzle seemed good for the first half of the challenge, but like Alton Brown on Cutthroat Kitchen, I wanted the devil to have a hand in the mayhem. So after the two had been assembling the puzzle for a while, the devil would come in and ramp it up. Flashing lights and loud music
seemed to fit both sides of the coin, so that was the choice. Nobody would want to watch either of them actually complete the puzzle, because that is boring and fairly anticlimactic. So instead I opted for the music and lights to fluster the already-high-strung Maddie and cause her to have a full-blown mental breakdown. Not only would this be hilarious, but it also serves as a rapid conclusion to the challenge. Again, as I mentioned earlier, Jake’s disinterest creates a nice foil to the emotional combustion that is Maddie.

With one challenge down, I moved my focus to the first challenge of the show. I originally had in mind a physical challenge, something along the lines of a murderous track and field event. Without much success, I turned towards a test of the spirit. Using the infinitely terrifying force that is the audience’s imagination, I devised a challenge that would be mentally taxing for the players and the audience. I was going to brutally massacre a dog, but only with sound. The challengers simply had to not look away to win. All the audience needed to see was a happy dog, and then the reaction of the competitors, and they would understand that the competitors were looking at the dog. It’s a play on the Kuleshov effect. Then, all I would have to do in post is add horrific sound effects and the audience must imply that terrible things are happening to the dog. This is reinforced by the gruesome looks on the faces of the challengers. And there you have it, a successful Hell challenge that did not require the harming of any pets or actors. Cam obviously has to lose this challenge in order for the second challenge to work, and that works perfectly. The tough college bro has a soft spot for little animals. This is funny and believable, and worked just right.

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3 The Kuleshov effect, named after film theorist Lev Kuleshov, explains how the juxtaposition of two shots affects the interpretation of the shots’ meaning. This ordering, known as montage, is a vital tool in filmmaking (Fritts).
The final challenge was the hardest to come up with. After all, how does one compete against oneself? My original idea came partially from Eric but primarily from the show Black Mirror (2011-), specifically the Christmas Special “White Christmas.” The idea was that the greatest form of torture is boredom. In “White Christmas,” the consciousnesses of people are put into little eggs, called “Cookies,” where time is drastically different than outside the egg. That means that a minute outside of the Cookie could be twenty-five years inside the cookie. To spend twenty-five years inside nothingness would truly be awful. There were a few problems with this idea, however. For starters, it’s not very interesting for a game show, and that’s a huge thing when you’re making a game show. It also would require more explaining than actual doing, which adds to the boredom factor. How ironic, that the challenge of boredom was even too boring to shoot.

Scrapping that idea, I went for a more humorous challenge. Thinking of the old sayings to describe charismatic people, “he could sell snow to an Eskimo” or “he could sell a ketchup Popsicle to a lady wearing white gloves in the middle of July,” I decided to make the extremely uncharismatic Jake sell something difficult. Keeping with the Hell-theme, I decided that there’s not much worse than having to sell a fire starting kit to people whose homes had just been ravaged by wildfires. This also provided me with a clever bit to get out of the challenge. When Jake’s mother answers the phone, there is some lecturing and arguing (as mothers and sons are to do), ending with Jake conceding to his mother’s wishes in exchange for her purchase. At last, Jake is free to go off into the great big game show in the sky. Or so he thinks.
While writing the script, I noticed that there were instances in both the second and third challenge that required time ellipses. The film needed to be short, but the challenges needed to seem like they had been going on for a long time in order to up the stakes and add to the humorous element. I could have just used a fade out/fade in technique to imply the passage of time, which is a fairly standard method of time passage, but I feared that this wouldn’t fit tonally. I began to think of the structure of game shows and how they express the rapid progression of time, and then it hit me like a ton of bricks: commercials. Real life game shows cut to a word from their sponsors! This provided two new bits for my film. The first falls directly at the beginning of the film, a trope that I had somehow forgotten until this moment. At the beginning of many game shows it is common for the sponsors to be named by the master of ceremonies (the MC). It usually goes a little like this: “today’s episode brought to you in part by [name of sponsor].” The second bit then of course would be the actual commercials. This gave me the opportunity to create two fictional companies and their advertisements.

The first company was inspired by Trivago. Trivago is an online company that helps you “find your ideal hotel and compare prices from many websites” (trivago.com). The fictional company, called “Religio,” would act in a similar fashion, but instead of helping you find your ideal hotel it would help you find your ideal religion. The heart of the joke lies in the fact that there are a lot of similarities overlapping many of the major religions in the world, so it would be very helpful if a company could help a person find out which one is right for them.

The second company had an even more important role to play. In the movie Quiz Show, the host is always talking about Geritol. Often, he brings it up in the middle of the
show. That is what gave me the idea for having the second sponsor be the company that makes fire-starting kits. This way I could have the devil host introduce the third challenge in an advertisement kind of way. I decided upon the name “Fire & Brimstone” because not only would that be a good name for a fire-starting company, but it also has a hellish connotation.

After the addition of the commercials, I finally had a draft of my script ready to move onto pre-production with. The first seven drafts were all right, but this eighth one was really something. The draft was ten pages, which loosely translates to a ten-minute runtime. This is perfect length for a short film, especially one that has aspirations to be shown in a festival one day. So with the script ready to go, it was time to begin preparations to shoot the movie. From here on out, there was the real risk of catastrophe. The reason for this being that for the writing stage, I was completely autonomous. Everything was under my control. The pre-production stage is where more people are introduced, and the more moving parts you add to a machine, the more places it has to break down. More people also introduce new ideas and solutions, however, so it’s all about picking the most reliable and able people.

It was one of my primary goals for this project to have a much larger production than I had had on previous projects. My film last year, *Near Sighted: The Usually Alone Interview* was an exploration into the possibilities of mockumentary filmmaking. A mockumentary is a fictional movie shot in the style of a documentary (Mockumentary). I wanted this to be a fictional film but actually shot like a documentary would be. This meant that there was a skeleton crew of three people, the locations were basically exactly how they would be in real life, and all of the lighting was natural. I shot on micro DV
tape, which is an out of date format that more closely resembles old home videos than a cinematic film. It was an incredible experience and I am very proud of the final film, but for my thesis film I knew I had to go bigger. I wanted to have a built set, a large crew, elaborate effects, and a cinematic final product. And for that, I needed a producer.

When shooting a film, it is the producer’s job to deal with most of the logistical challenges, such as securing locations, hiring crew, getting paperwork filled out, etc. Most importantly, they provide an important second opinion to the director throughout the filmmaking process so that the director doesn’t have to carry the weight of the entire film the entire time. I researched possible candidates for this position, talking to the various other film students and trying to find someone who would be a great fit. I reached out to a stage-management student in the theatre school who was recommended to me by multiple faculty members. She was interested, but unable to due to her graduation. I then reached out to a few other candidates, all who were unable to.

At this point I was put into contact with Janhavi Chaudhari, a second-year graduate student in the Theatre Division who was studying stage design. She had voiced interest in being the production designer for my film, which was exactly what I needed. She would have the responsibility of securing a location (one of the theater stages, an incredible opportunity), building the set, and gathering/creating the necessary props. With her on board, the majority of the producing role has been taken care of, so I opted to not bring on a producer. Instead, I split the tasks between my Assistant Director and myself.

Corey Howell, who I had worked with on three other projects, was brought on as my Assistant Director. He also took up the role of my second opinion, for I would frequently bounce ideas off of him. I also gathered the rest of my crew, carefully
selecting my Director of Photography\(^4\), Assistant Camera\(^5\), Gaffer\(^6\), Key Grip\(^7\), Grips\(^8\), and Sound Recordist\(^9\). I also hired someone to take care of catering and craft\(^10\) services. In total, there were eleven crewmembers, not including myself. This was a big step up from my last year’s crew of three, but with so many talented people on board and ready to go I was very confident that this was going to be a great shoot.

As a director I have always understood the importance of casting. In fact, I believe that it is the most important part of being a director. Because of this, I take it very seriously. My first action in regards to casting was attending the Theatre Division’s biannual general auditions. This gave me an idea of all of the trained actors that I had to reach out to about casting the film. It was also beneficial, because a game show has a lot more in common with a stage performance than the average film does. There were also taped auditions, created by the second-year MFA film students, which I had access to. Studying my notes from the live auditions as I watched and re-watched the taped auditions, I slowly put together a potential cast list. I also chose the dates when we were to film, so that we could schedule everything. Historically speaking, this is where the wheels seem to always come off.

The first actor we met with was to play the part of Maddie, and she was perfect. She drank an entire smoothie in five minutes, but was absolutely fantastic for the part.

And then our luck ran out. We had scheduled to meet with an actor to play Cam. In lieu

\(^{10}\) The snacks and drinks provided to the cast and crew
of auditions, I like to just have a conversation with the potential actor. I have a large amount of faith in my selection up until this point, so this meeting is just to get a feel for whom the actor is and what they’re about. The Cam actor did not show up for the first meeting. When he did not show up for the second one, we knew we had to recast. Fortunately I was not unfamiliar with this kind of behavior, so I had plenty of time to contact and meet with my second choice. For the Jake character I reached out to my first and second choices, and it turned out both were in a show at the same time that we had planned on shooting. After thinking about it for some time, I decided to change the Jake character to a girl. This really allowed me to cast someone who I think would be a good fit for what the character was about. I kept the name as Jake, though, because I liked it. All that was left to cast were the two commercial spokespeople. I decided to play the part of one of them, because I love to act and it is quite common for actors to make cameos in their films (Hitchcock, Scorsese, Luhrmann, etc.).

My film was now fully crewed and fully cast, and production was in just a few weeks. I was just beginning to catch my breath when I learn that there is conflict with my lead’s rehearsal schedule and our shooting dates. She no longer believed that she would be able to do the film. This was a devastating blow. I could not replace her as simply as I could replace the other conflicted actors. She was the very muse of the project and without her it would be missing all of which the film was to be about. The production went into crisis mode. Fortunately, phone calls were made and strings were pulled and my lead was once again able to act in the film.

The very next day we lost the theater location that we were supposed to shoot in. They were doing construction on the fly system in order to make it safer. This was
arguably something we should’ve known well before this point, but nobody ever informed us that this was the situation. Calling back to Sartre and the title of the film, we began saying, “Hell is a thesis film!” We still had two weeks until we were supposed to shoot, so not all was lost. We embarked on an emergency theater-scouting mission. This was no easy task, because most theaters schedule their events more than two weeks in advance so pickings were slim. That’s when we discovered the Ridges Auditorium, a remarkable space that was available for the College of Fine Arts students. A few crewmembers and I took a trip to the auditorium to make sure it would work for our needs. We took some pictures, measured some things, and counted all of the outlets. It was exactly what we needed.

With the fires extinguished, I began to break down the script thinking visually. I had to figure out all of the shots I wanted to get over the course of this three-day shooting weekend. Taking what I learned in a few of my tutorials, I started to create an in depth shot-by-shot list of every day. I knew exactly how many shots we’d need to get each day, how many setups we’d have to do, and how long we’d have to do each shot. Technically scheduling the day is the AD’s job, but since that is what I want to do for the rest of my life I decided to do it for my own film. I thought about how I wanted the movie to look, and I played it over and over in my head. I made sure that there was good coverage of all of the dialogue and action. Coverage is just a film-speak way of saying that there are multiple angles and shots of the important words and actions. Once the three days of shooting are over, it is almost impossible to go back and get things that were missed, so it is very important to get coverage of everything. Then, once we had gotten the coverage, we could move on to more ambitious shots.
The shot list was finalized with my Director of Photography, concluding pre-production. It was finally time to shoot the movie. The first day of filming was a Friday, but due to the schedules of the talent we were not shooting until 3:00 PM. I had the crew shuttled to the auditorium at 8:00 AM in order to begin setting up lights and building the set. This was where having a large crew is much better than having a skeleton crew. Everyone had a specific job to do and this made everything run exceptionally. This was where all of the things I had learned over the last four years about the art of filmmaking came together in full effect. I had to make many directorial decisions on the spot, with a large crew all waiting in anticipation. We did a few camera tests at this time, testing out various gels and lighting setups. I decided upon red gels placed on the built in stage lights to create a red glow that was balanced with the white glow of our arranged lights. We also tried out a few camera filters, with the final filter used in the film being called “Fog 1.” It caused the lights to look spooky and ethereal, exactly what one would expect from a game show in Hell.

Talent arrived on time, and we were ready to shoot. Right away I knew I had made the correct choices in regards to casting. Each actor shined in their roles and fit exactly what I had in mind. I had given the host some clips and videos to watch beforehand so that she had a good understanding of the kind of host I wanted her to be. I wanted her to specifically focus on the work of late night king Johnny Carson. The way that Carson interacted with his audience during his opening monologue was the same relation that I wanted my devil to have with her audience. The chummier she seemed

11 A production term for the actors
with the audience the worse the torture would seem in contrast. She was to represent the camp of the game show, highlighting the dark humor.

As the day went along, I made a few directorial decisions that changed the style of the film slightly. With our lower budget and the constraints of a short film, it was clear that this was not going to be the kind of modern game show that would appear on a major network. This meant it had to be a public-access show. When I came to the conclusion that this wasn’t just a game show, but also one that had the flaws of being poorly financed, it became an even better medium for comedy. I made decisions such as having the production assistants’ hands be visible and for some of the lighting queues to be late. These little adjustments add to the comedy of the film, while also covering up our own shortcomings as a student film. It was a realization of the “two birds, one stone” metaphor.

At the conclusion of this first day, the talent went home and I had a quick crew meeting where I listened to everyone’s questions and concerns and voiced my own. Then we all went home and slept like logs. The following two days were very similar to the first. The crew and the actors were all on their a-game and everything went smoothly. It actually started to feel like we were really shooting a game show. After the third day, we broke down the set and clapped as the actors wrapped for the shoot. This was not the end for us, however.

The following weekend I took a skeleton crew to the School of Film’s green screen room and shot the two commercials on said green screen. The Fire & Brimstone commercial was supposed to look and feel like a horribly put together local ad, a style that is usually associated with car dealerships or law firms. As I had learned in the past, it
is just as hard to make something look bad on purpose as it is to make it look good. It had to be clear that it was our intention to make it bad and not just the way it turned out, which provided a bit of a challenge. The Religio commercial was originally inspired by the work of YouTube star Poppy (Sinclair) but then slowly evolved into its own stand-alone style.

The same skeleton crew met up a week later to shoot the three exterior shots that acted as the death-scene flashbacks for each of the contestants. The weather went against the forecast and was quite cooperative for our shoot, and we captured the final shots of the film without a single hang-up.

In keeping with the goal of making this a large-scale student film, I decided to work with an editor instead of editing the film myself. This really tested my ability to voice my vision to another person, and to make compromises and work as a team. My editor began syncing the footage, which is when you line up the audio and video, and I began to work on the special-effects compositing.

Two of the three flashback scenes require effects work. The first was when Cam jumped off of a bridge to his death. Obviously we could not have the actor actually jump off of a large bridge, so I had to fake it using the effects software Adobe After Effects and the SFX knowledge I had accumulated in my free time. I also had to create an explosion in an apartment, which was surprisingly easier than the bridge-jump. The other scenes that needed compositing were the two green-screen sequences. The Religio sequence was fairly simple, since the green was replaced with just a white background. The Fire & Brimstone ad required a bit more work, but because it was supposed to resemble a bad effects job it was much more forgiving than the Religio ad. I also got out
my old Sony Handycam and shot B-roll\textsuperscript{12} that I composited behind the Fire & Brimstone ad, adding to the amateur look of the commercial. The finishing touch came in the form of ridiculous flames placed on top of the ad, creating a kind of fire frame.

I gave the final composites to my editor and he added them to his edit. We now had a rough cut of the film that did not include music, mixed dialogue, or sound effects. It also still needed to be colored. I noticed that without the sound effects, many of the jokes and audience-interactions did not seem to work. I worked with my editor to add sounds and audience reactions to create a space in which the film felt like it existed.

At the same time, I hired a composer from Pittsburgh to begin working on the score of the film. I sent him a compilation of old game show themes, as well as some tonal suggestions like Fleetwood Mac’s “The Chain” and The Arctic Monkeys’ “The Jeweller’s Hand.” It was very important that the music not only was of a good quality, but also matched the tone of the piece. I believed that it could actually be used to heighten the feel of the game show and the contract between the light and dark elements. Many filmmakers, like Quentin Tarantino and Baz Luhrmann, preferred to use pre-existing music to fill their films, giving them absolute control over the piece (Cooke, pgs. 483-489). I knew that the sound I was going for was totally unique, so it had to be composed. I sent him the cut of the film, and he went to work.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, my editor and I worked diligently to create a soundscape that elevated the film to the next level. It is my belief, and the belief of many of my peers and professors, that the audio can make or break a student film. Also, I still had to go out and record the intro and outro MC audio. We were, at this point,

\textsuperscript{12} Supplemental footage shot with the intention of being intercut with the primary footage
comfortable enough to have our first table screening. In a table screening, my editor and I sit down with a faculty member and let them watch the cut and give notes. This first table screening, which happened to be with my advisor, was very important. It was also a bit daunting because it was the first time someone that hadn’t worked on the film was watching the film. The notes were incredibly helpful, and it was back to the editing room to make the necessary changes.

One of the notes was that the film needed to be bookended with a reference to the public broadcasting station that would be showing it. A terrific idea, so I got animating. Using techniques that I had learned in my Experimental Film class, I animated a short little bumper that felt like it was for a real public access station. This fictional station was naturally named “Occult Public Broadcast Television (OPB Tv).” Placed right at the beginning of the film, it acted as a nice opener for the movie.

The score was ready to be added to the film at this point, and for the first time I got to watch the film with a majority of its parts. This is one of the most exciting points of making a film because the vision has almost fully come to life. With the changes made to the film and the music added, it was time to go in for another table screening. The notes for this screening were mostly about fine-tuning, so we quickly made the necessary changes. I now took the film in all of its parts to show to the other members of my thesis committee. They all gave me notes about things that worked for them and things that did not work for them. This is the part of filmmaking that has always been the most difficult for me- deciding which notes to take and which notes to put aside. Some of the notes contradict notes given by other committee members, so it is impossible to take all of
them. It is my job as the director to, therefore, select the notes that I believe are the most beneficial for the film and make those adjustments.

Now with the committee’s notes taken into consideration, it was time to color correct the film. The objective when color correcting the film is to go shot by shot and make sure that each shot matches the others. This means adjusting brightness and color. Then, once everything matches, the next step is to color grade the footage. Color grading is similar to color correction, but the objective when grading is to stylize the color. This means, in the case of my film, darkening the blacks and deepening the reds.

After the film was colored, it became time to export. Since this film was shot in 4K but needed exporting in 1080p, this process took a very long time. I was dealing with very large file formats, so even with the best computer this export took hours. Once it was done exporting, it was time to watch the film in its final form for the first time. For that, my editor and I took the file to the School of Film’s screening room and watched it on a theater-style projection. This allowed me to see and hear the film in the same way that any other viewing audience would see and hear it. I then went back with my editor to make the final tweaks necessary to perfect the film. We then exported the final version, the one that was to be shown to my committee as part of my thesis defense.

The next step is to show the film at the Athena Cinema here in Athens. It is my hope that there will be a good turnout and that the audience will react positively to my film. With comedy, this is arguably the most important judgment of the piece. If the audience laughs, then the film will be a success. I am very excited to get to show off my hard work. Perhaps Hell isn’t a thesis film after all.
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