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Little Trees

Maxwell Kane

Bucknell University, msk022@bucknell.edu

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LITTLE TREES

by

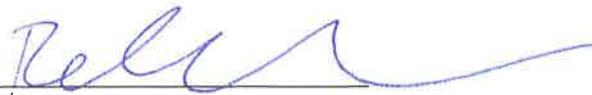
Maxwell Kane

A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council

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Approved by:

Adviser: 
Rebecca Meyers

Second Evaluator: 
Eric Faden

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Introduction

My grandparents used to take me to a small indie movie theatre when I was in grade school. During that time, I knew I wanted to be a writer and director. Since then, I have been obsessed with visual storytelling. Film has always inspired me in ways that mediums such as reading, theatre or photography could not. Cinema, in my opinion, represents reality better than any other form of storytelling because of its ability to manipulate time and place and implement moving images, vivid sound, and strong colors. Visual storytelling amplifies the world in a way that every other form cannot. The close-up, for instance, carries a distinct emotional weight that can deeply move audiences when used strategically. While film does not absolutely mirror reality, it creates beauty by intensifying and accentuating particular, typically unnoticed and unappreciated, aspects of life.

I produced a short film titled *Little Trees* as my honors thesis. My film revolves around Owen, an older brother to his sister, Vivian, whose parents are in a constant state of hostility towards one another. After a vicious fight between their mother and father, the siblings decide to run away from home. Owen drives them to a remote location in the woods of central Pennsylvania where they attempt to begin a new life without their insufferable parents. My film confronts themes such as alienation, trauma, and sibling relationships. This paper details where I draw my inspiration, how the film relates to my

previous work, my goals for the project, my experiences from pre production through post production, and my reflection on the year-long process.

Inspiration

I often lose my breath after a great film. I find myself at a loss for words, sitting in my seat with my mouth hanging open, dumbfounded. How was such a story conceived? As I study and practice film production, I realize the meticulous thought and precision that is put into every decision made. After finishing such a film, I become hungry for another: I yearn to be awed. Filmmakers that have inspired me include Alejandro González Iñárritu, Darren Aronofsky, Joshua and Ben Safdie, Sean Baker, and Yorgos Lanthimos. I am amazed that Iñárritu is able to tell divergent yet powerful stories ranging from a 19th century frontiersman seeking revenge to a teen in present-day Mexico who becomes entangled in underground dogfighting. I am drawn to Aronofsky's ability to tell stories that simultaneously confuse, irritate and downright upset me. I am enamored by the Safdie Brothers' psychedelic cinematography and Baker's ability to tell an impactful story regardless of his film's budget. Moreover, I am astonished by Lanthimos' aptness to create his own awkward and monotone, yet stunning, dystopia. Films that have inspired me include *A Ghost Story* (2017), *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) and *Donnie Darko* (2001). David Lowery's *Ghost Story* utilizes a still camera throughout the majority of the film to emulate a motionless, onlooking ghost. By viewing this film, I realized the weight

of carefully composing a scene and telling a story in a single shot. Contrastingly, I loved *Beasts* because of its handheld camerawork and immersion of the audience into a hidden community. *Darko* twisted my mind and is one of the only films that I have to return to time and time again to conceptualize it. These are the type of films that motivate me to produce and I will refer back to many of them throughout my paper.

The idea for *Little Trees* stemmed from my relationship with my younger siblings. As I have gotten older, I realize the power of the intricate bond that can form between siblings. The characters in my film were loosely based on a junior version of my impulsive self as well as my younger, yet more independent, sister. In my experience, relationships between siblings are rocky. Growing up with siblings is often coupled with intermittent feelings of jealousy and overprotection. I have learned that senses such as unconditional love and responsibility are habitually present, but must be obtained through maturity and self-acceptance. My goal was to emphasize this growing connection between siblings by sending them to the woods where they could only rely on each other to survive.

Past Work

Family relationships have played a momentous role in the three films I produced during my time at Bucknell. My first two shorts ran under five minutes and were made for

production courses. *Drive* (2016), my first short, recounts an experience where my mother comes to the aid of a victim of a car accident at the scene of a crash. My second film, *For Dad* (2017), tells the story of a young man growing up with an absent father. The film is divided into three stages of the character's life: infant, teen and undergraduate.

While shooting *Drive*, I recall my inexperience with a camera and the intimidation I felt holding one. My short also relied on narration to tell the story. Everything that was spoken was shown on screen, and without narration, the story was incomprehensible. My film involved two actors - my roommate and close friend. There were no clear motives to the lighting, camera movements or direction I gave my actors. I lit shots with the intention of them looking "good." I would also give my actors unclear instruction such as "look more scared." While I felt alien on my first set, I saw glimpses of efficacy. On reexamination, I appreciate my experimentation with sound and editing. The strongest aspect of *Drive*, in my opinion, is the recurrent use of a woman's heartbeat to help the film progress. I also value the film's nonlinear, unorthodox storytelling. From my first project, I knew that I wanted a sense of abstractness in my films.

For Dad exposed growth in my storytelling ability. I experimented with telling a story utilizing narration, still images, found footage and video. While the anecdote I told was fictional, my goal was to create a believable documentary-style film. I also made

deliberate decisions regarding lighting and focus: I used an overexposed shot to demonstrate a character's perplexity and later employed a rack focus to indicate a sudden realization. I cast four people as opposed to two, and I began to understand the difficulty of managing and working with actors' busy schedules.

Project Goals

Little Trees was my first substantial project. It was also my first film that relied on dialogue as opposed to narration. My thesis was created with a greater sense of purpose than my last two films - I wanted to grow upon my previous work and ensure that every choice I made was calculated and deliberate. In terms of story, I wanted to produce a film that represented the area around me, but which had nothing to do with college. I strove to create a piece that indirectly represented my four years at Bucknell. Lewisburg is a special and unique location. Less than 10 miles from our campus are endless forests, state parks, mountains and rivers. I also find the Amish community surrounding Lewisburg to be intriguing because our close proximity to one another is contrasted by our differing lifestyles. My hope was to respectfully represent this community in my piece without disrupting their way of life. I loved the idea that one could drive twenty minutes off-campus and feel as if they were transported to another world. I wanted my young characters to experience this feeling of change and wonder as they moved farther from their home.

One of my primary goals was to work with paid actors. I no longer wanted to cast my friends for roles, but instead rely on actors that would dedicate full weekends for the project. Knowing that I needed my actors for four long days (most of which began at 6am and ended at 11pm), I believed that asking college students or working adults to act as lead roles for my film would be unrealistic. I came to the conclusion that I would have to write a story that revolved around teenage characters.

Filmmaking is different from other forms of art because of its reliance on collaboration. All of my favorite and most influential films required dozens of hardworking individuals to create one piece of art. My goal was to facilitate a tight-knit sense of community between my cast and crew during the time of production. I aimed to shoot in unpredictable and uncontrolled environments that I was not necessarily comfortable with. By doing so, I would gain confidence in my own ability to capture shots regardless of the circumstances. Because of these challenging objectives, I knew that I would have to hire a dedicated cast and crew that were willing to embrace the challenges that lay ahead.

Direct Influences from Films

My ideas for stories often stem from pulling completely separate thoughts and molding them into one piece. There were three films I viewed this summer that acted as direct

influences on *Little Trees*: Andrey Zvyagintsev's feature film *Loveless* (2017), Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan's feature *Swiss Army Man* (2016) and Mark Lester's short *Orange Drive* (2011).

Loveless had a lasting impact on me because of the naturalistic manner in which filmmaker portrayed a failed marriage. Zvyagintsev had his main characters, a husband and wife, act inconceivably vicious towards one another. While the maliciousness that the couple treated each other with frightened me, it inspired me to write dialogue with similar themes of hatred, hopelessness and regret. Lines from *Little Trees* such as "I guess those meetings are going really well / It's the only thing that makes living with you bearable" were directly influenced by *Loveless*. In Zvyagintsev's feature, the couple argued about telling their son about their imminent divorce: "What do you mean we? You'll tell him whenever you want. If you want you can wake him up right now. Let's go!" My intent was to approach a broken marriage at odds with Zvyagintsev - I had my actors fight about everything except their children, exhibiting exactly where their priorities lie. The audience hears the couple arguing and sees features of their house, but their children are completely invisible until the very last moments. By taking this approach, my hope was that the viewers would enter the shoes of the children and begin to comprehend their alienation. Overall, I believe this opening scene worked well because of my close attention to sounds like the pendulum, fire, and water droplet. Using the Christmas song

to counter the merciless fight also created an uncomfortable contradiction that was intended to produce anxiety for viewers.

One particular scene in *Swiss Army Man* astonished me because of its alluring, warm lighting. This scene consists of the main characters, who are stranded on a desert island, entertaining themselves by playing around a campfire. Around the fire, they have a make-believe dinner, party and puppet show. Fantastic things occurred throughout the scene such as a dead body playing and talking, but it works because the campfire delivers a mystical type of lighting that creates a strong sense of fantasy. I was inspired to create a scene around a campfire that emits an inviting lighting. One shot that accomplished this goal occurs after Owen tosses a family photo into the fire. As the photo burns, the camera reveals a close up of Vivian resting on her brother's shoulder. The camera slowly pedestals up to a close up of Owen, underlining a growing connection between the two. By doing so, I invite the viewers to empathize with the troubled children.

Orange Drive is a 10-minute short that was shot entirely on the hood of a car. I was amazed that Lester, a former UCLA student who produced this film as his honors thesis, was able to create a moving coming-of-age story in one tiny space. I was inspired to incorporate a driving scene in my film with the power and sentiment that Lester produced in his. This is the reasoning for the extended montage of Owen and Vivian driving to the woods - I kept the sequence longer to indicate the movement from a suburban

environment to a natural one. In addition to the change of setting, my intent was to show a change in personalities between the siblings - the children in the car are completely different from the kids in their house and at school. At the beginning of their drive, Owen and Vivian pass signs promoting weapons and hunting. They see cows entrapped by a fence. However, as the siblings continue to drive, they encounter more hopeful images such as a flock of birds and a brilliant sun. The change in personality is visible once Owen parks the car and an optimistic Vivian is shown curiously scanning her surroundings. While their the change in personalities are not immediately telling, they continue to grow throughout the film.

I was particularly influenced by a handheld shot in Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* where six-year-old Hushpuppy goes about her typical morning: she plays on mounds of tires, holds various small animals to her ear to hear their heartbeats and cooks breakfast for herself. I was inspired by the blend of play and survival in the scene. While Hushpuppy is a young girl with a vivid imagination, she is also responsible for taking care of herself. This influence is evident in *Little Trees* when Vivian and Owen set up camp. While Vivian is still a child who finds joy in jumping on stones and sawing large tree branches, she has an obligation to herself and her brother. Hence, Vivian helps gather firewood and stones to contribute to their survival and is shown doing so with a constantly moving camera.

Production

I shot the majority of *Little Trees* using a shoulder rig. I am drawn to this shaky style of camerawork because I believe a purposeful yet moving camera represents reality better than static shots. Owen and Vivian constantly feel the presence of their parents regardless of where they are. There are two instances when this is most evident: once when Vivian looks over her shoulder while walking from her house, feeling her parents right behind her, and the second is after the siblings hear a gunshot at their campsite and look around in fear. I utilized a shoulder rig for such shots because it created a haunting sense of voyeurism. Additionally, I shot the film's opening scene of static objects with an unsteady camera to mirror the ruthlessness and instability of Larry and Marnie's relationship.

I had trouble directing Owen and Vivian's walk home after they discovered their car was stolen. I attempted to shoot the entire scene handheld in different locations - something that I dedicated the entire first day of shooting to. When reviewing the dailies, I became increasingly frustrated because the camera was too unstable and could not maintain focus. During our last day on set, our cinematographer, Justin Guzman, offered to sit in the trunk of a slowly moving car to shoot the actors walking. The footage turned out smooth and worked because it gave viewers a break from the copious amount of

handheld shots already used. In the editing process, I also utilized a jump cut during their walk home for the same reason.

The fact that I hired Justin to be the film's cinematographer meant that I had to create a detailed storyboard that I knew thoroughly. I also needed to be able to communicate exactly what I was picturing in my head. For example, I had a specific idea of the lighting setup for the dream sequence: I wanted Vivian to be placed in a black void with a low backlight to help her blend into the darkness. I had to communicate this to Justin quickly and precisely because our crew was racing to finish our shots for the day and I still had to rehearse the scene with the actors and help figure out our sound setup. That said, working with a cinematographer was beneficial to the efficiency of the production but also required a substantial amount of communication and patience.

Post-Production

The editing process was a daunting one. As an English major, I have learned that the key to a successful paper is to revise relentlessly and I attacked the editing process with a similar strategy. By knowing one's footage thoroughly, an editor can construct montages in their head before entering the editing room. I believe that a successful editor must run a very organized editing process. When reviewing my footage, I logged each clip I watched by marking the scene, take, duration, file name and specific notes about aspects

that did and did not work. I followed the same procedure with the eleven hours of audio that was recorded. While cutting, I chose to share my revisions with people I trusted to get feedback and suggestions.

I initially aimed to tell a continuous and comprehensible story without sound, so I ignored audio for the first part of the editing process. My film's first cut ran thirty minutes. Once I was able to condense it to seventeen minutes, I felt comfortable enough to begin pairing and editing audio. This unorthodox style of cutting caused a great deal of headache and I am unsure whether it helped me or slowed me down in the long-run. I do hope, however, to edit with audio paired for whatever project I tackle next in order to learn which method works best for me.

I am interested in the idea of music evoking specific memories and emotions and I attempted to explore that utilizing sound design in post-production. "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" was used during the initial fight scene and was brought back for Vivian's nightmare - a song that reminds her of the ferocious state of her home. "(I'm So) Over God's Horizons" was played over the siblings' dance sequence and was used to express a sweet separation from their parents. This song gave the brother and sister strength by bringing them together. This song was used again in the final sequence when Vivian reaches out to grab Owen's hand. This moment was meant to signify the growth

of the children and a willingness to reenter the home they escaped, but with a newfound sense of hope and connection.

Reflection

I learned the significance of delivery while directing actors in order to produce the best performances. Recording voice-overs from the first scene presented a valuable learning experience. During our only voice-over session, I told Isaac Conner to “be angrier” when addressing the line “MY house.” I felt as though he was not reaching a point of rage that I was looking for, so I began focusing on Virginia Zimmerman’s response as opposed to Isaac’s specific line. After many minutes of frustration for being at a loss for words, I directed Isaac to “roar in a manner that will immediately prompt Virginia to spit back at you with her line” (“And you paid for it with what money?”). Thus, instead of giving my actors the exact emotions I looked for, I gave them more autonomy to find it for themselves.

I learned that I have to consider every light and camera movement I utilize in order to build a film with greater purpose and meaning. Before pressing the record button, I must have a definite idea of the tone that I am attempting to communicate and assess if my lighting and camera setup will contribute to that desired feeling. I look towards Barry Jenkins’ masterpiece *Moonlight* (2016) as an inspiration for direct intention of such

movements. Jenkins uses a smooth pan between a husband and wife conversing at a dinner table to exemplify warmth and welcoming in their relationship - a similar shot to the campfire pedestal movement I discussed earlier. This contrasts Jenkins' use of circular camera movements. In another scene, Jenkins directs his camera operator to complete 360° around an angry school bully to indicate the intimidation he emits as well as his menacing intentions. Additionally, Jenkins uses deep-blue moonlight to signify characters revealing their true selves. Looking forward, I need to associate light and camera movement with the themes that I aspire to communicate.

I encountered many challenges during production that I was unable to overcome. I shot the final scene at 10pm on a Saturday night after 15 hours of shooting in the woods. The cast and crew were all hungry, worn and tired and I wished I could have motivated my crew more effectively to get as much footage as possible. I knew that I could not add another day of work because the scene involved a working actor, Isaac Conner, who had a hectic schedule and his next available date was uncertain. Consequently, going into the editing process, I felt that I had insufficient footage to engender a brutally moving final scene. I believe the film's final scene is reliant on the last song transitioning to the credits instead of smart shots and masterful lighting. One particular shot that I have trouble watching is where Larry opens the door for his kids. The shot is dull and flat. If I had another opportunity, I would have used a backlight to separate the kids from the

blackness behind them. That said, I should have taken a few extra minutes to capture a broader array of shots.

I discovered that I do not need a significant amount of dialogue to create a successful film. I ended up cutting over half of the dialogue in post-production because there were so many unnecessary lines that prevented the story from progressing. I sincerely believe that *Little Trees* is a stronger film because of those cuts. In the future, I understand that I must write dialogue with finer precision and purpose in every line.

Conclusion

I wanted to obtain as much experience as possible in pre production, on set and in post production. I knew that the only way I could improve as a filmmaker was if I faced the bulk of the filmmaking process myself. In order to create a complete film, I had to write, cast, direct, hire crew (including a sound recordist, cinematographer and production assistants), edit and color my film. I grew as a filmmaker in other unforeseen ways: I learned how to obtain music rights, scout and gain permission to shoot at challenging locations such as a school and state forest, handle a detailed budget sheet, apply for funding, consider wardrobe and props, pay acute attention to continuity, dress a set and create detailed call sheets. In order to find my strengths and weaknesses as a filmmaker, I needed to manage the process from start to finish.

Another reason I pursue film is because I cherish the ability to conserve memories. Owen and Vivian have a similar need to hold onto the past. Owen carries his camera into the woods to ensure that their time away never ends. As it becomes evident by the campfire, Owen also carries a family picture with him wherever he goes - one that reminds him of a happier time in his life. By throwing the photo into the fire, Owen is no longer bound by the presence of his parents. He is ready to create and preserve new memories with Vivian. Looking forward, I hope to continue leaving a part of me behind in every one of my films.

Producing an honors thesis was a rewarding process that changed the way I think about film and my future. Undergoing this arduous process will contribute to my next film, and that film will be instrumental in the production of its successor. I aspire to become an artist who creates meaningful cinema by telling deeply personal stories, evoking emotion from friends and strangers alike through the means of visual storytelling. *Little Trees* is one of many shorts that will contribute to my ultimate goal of making a feature-length film.

Viewing list:

Critical Mass (Hollis Frampton, 1971)
Magnolia (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999)
Kramer vs. Kramer (Robert Benton, 1979)
What Maisie Knew (Scott McGehee & David Siegel, 2012)
Happiness (Todd Solondz, 1998)
Irreconcilable Differences (Charles Shyer, 1984)
The War of the Roses (Danny DeVito, 1989)
The Quiet Room (Rolf de Heer, 1996)
Treeless Mountain (So Yong Kim, 2008)
The White Balloon (Jafar Panahi, 1995)
The 400 Blows (François Truffaut, 1959)
Child of Divorce (Richard Fleischer, 1946)
Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans (F. W. Murnau, 1927)
The Earrings of Madame de... (Max Ophüls, 1953)
Swiss Army Man (Daniel Kwan, Daniel Scheinert, 2016)
Ava (Léa Mysius, 2017)
Loveless (Andrey Zvyagintsev, 2017)
Moonrise Kingdom (Wes Anderson, 2012)
Orange Drive (Mark Lester, 2011)
The Squid and the Whale (Noah Baumbach, 2005)
The Meyerowitz Stories (Noah Baumbach, 2017)
Moonlight (Barry Jenkins, 2016)
Badlands (Terrence Malick, 1973)

Reading list:

In the Blink of an Eye by Walter Murch
Film Directing Shot by Shot: Visualizing from Concept to Screen by Steven D. Katz
Film Directing Fundamentals: See Your Film Before Shooting (4th Edition) by Nicholas T. Proferes
Producing and Directing the Short Film and Video (5th Edition) by Peter Rea
The Filmmaker's Handbook (2013 Edition) by Steven Ascher and Edward Pincus
Rebel Without a Crew by Robert Rodriguez
The Insider's Guide to Independent Film Distribution (2nd Edition) by Stacey Parks