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"Carneys Point" - A Short Film

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Carneys Point

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2012

Honors Capstone Project in Film

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Date: May 25, 2012

Abstract

Carneys Point is a fifteen minute short film shot on 16mm film that tells the story of a woman's life, fractured into three facets each representing an important crossroad of a single life: the disenchanting prelude to the coming of age, the anxiety of motherhood, and the mental decay of old age.

The film is divided into three vignettes, which overlap to paint a multi-layered portrait of a woman, a trilogy of the human spirit, heart, and mind.

One is the story of a little girl who is obsessed with flight and dreams of escape. Though she has the naïve belief that she can change the world through her idealistic mindset and superhero-like intentions, her innocent faith comes to an end when she sees something sinister on the playground.

Another tells the story of a woman burdened by the anxiety of motherhood who loses her dog, her only companion, while on the beach one day. In the search for her dog she comes to the distressing realization that the responsibilities of caring for her child-to-be may be more than she can handle.

Lastly, as an old woman tries to perform her daily tasks it is revealed that her mental state is rapidly declining. She is suffering from Alzheimer's disease causing her memory and ability to communicate to interfere with living a normal life.

The idea for the film stemmed from my relationship with my grandmother, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease a few years ago. As I witnessed first hand the decline of her mental state, I became curious about memory and how it manifests itself in a woman who is losing it.

What began as a focus on memory became a new way for me, as a filmmaker, to represent a person's life, through stories of their past.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

It was a race against time. The sky was quickly becoming lighter and we still had a twenty-minute drive ahead of us. We wanted to be there at the precise moment the sun begins to peak over the horizon. My mom had her foot on the pedal and her eyes on the look out for any early-morning police officers. I sat tightly in the front seat, camera loaded and ready on my lap. My sister sat behind me, in her full costume – cape and all, struggling to wake up. As we approached Fenner Wind Farm, I began to notice that the morning mist wasn't lifting; instead it was becoming thicker and more opaque. We arrived at our location, a wind farm on top of picturesque rolling hills. The only problem was we couldn't see a single turbine, in fact, we couldn't see ten feet in front of us. I looked around, devastated that the postcard worthy location was now completely erased by a white blanket of fog. My sister hopped out of the van and began running into the fog, giggling, while she asked if I could see her. As I watched her disappear, I realized the location was perfect. Movie studios spend thousands of dollars on fog machines to provide a dream-like atmosphere, and here I was being provided with the same effect from nature. We filmed the scene without a single hitch, using the fog to our advantage. A lot of Carneys Point came together by chance, like this, but most of it came from hard work.

Carneys Point has been a film a long time in the making. It is almost unrecognizable today from its original treatment a year and a half ago. The film's conception began while reading Frank L. Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, followed by a viewing of the 1939 film. Nowhere in the novel does the story actually take place within Dorothy's mind, which was solely an addition by the filmmakers. I found this new take on Oz quite fascinating, because, according to the creators of the film, Oz and its supporting characters are all a part of Dorothy's subconscious. I felt now that Dorothy's journey into Oz was really a journey into her own mind.

This got my creative juices flowing as I began to deconstruct the characters Dorothy encounters in her mind, or Oz. Each one representing an important aspect of what makes us human:

The Scarecrow, who represents thought, consciousness, intellect; the Tin-Man represents love, affection, compassion; and the Lion, who represents courage, emotion, audacity. These three qualities create a trinity of a person's being.

That was the starting point for my project and the basic theme is still visible in the finished product, to represent three aspects (intellect, love, courage) of a single person's life with three different characters and stories.

What changed?

During my junior year of college I had the privilege of taking a documentary studies class. My focus of the class was creating a

documentary on the life of my grandmother and her recent decay into Alzheimer's disease. The short documentary was my reaction and my attempts to recreate memories she no longer had. Memory is a way of holding onto the things you love, the things you are, and the things you never want to lose. When your memory decays you leave room for others to interpret your past. The process of making that documentary was taxing on my abilities as a storyteller but also on my position as a grandson. I found the morals of holding a camera in my grandmother's face difficult to stomach; I was objectifying someone I loved. After completing that documentary I decided to make a subjective portrait of my grandmother.

This is why I chose to combine my previous script with a focus on my grandmother's life. I could represent a woman's life without the constraints of documentary and a sense of objectivity. This allowed me a chance to make a multi-layered subjective fiction piece on my grandmother's life.

Carneys Point is the story of a woman's life, fractured into three facets each representing an important crossroad of a single life: the disenchanting prelude to the coming of age, the anxiety of motherhood, and the mental decay of old age.

Chapter 2

Pre-production

The biggest hurdle to jump during pre-production was fundraising. My producer, Marla Christiansen, and I decided that in order to make this film a reality we would need \$3,000.

The cost of the project would come from one main source, shooting on 16mm film. We both agreed that the benefits of shooting film would outweigh the cost. Super 16mm film is rapidly going extinct, in fact during the filming of *Carneys Point*, Kodak, the film-processing pioneer and provider for our film, filed for bankruptcy. We knew that this would, more likely than not, be our last opportunity to shoot on this medium.

The decision to shoot on film wasn't taken lightly. There are many benefits to choosing film stock. The latitude, or range of values, film can expose still trumps any digital camera on the market. We were going to be shooting outside and inside, morning and night and only film has the durability and consistency to properly expose different lighting conditions.

We saw the medium as a way of setting our film apart from the plethora of student and short films seen online. Most student films are shot with new DSLR technology and while it is an impressive format, many short subject movies all look the same. Many in the film business know it takes a certain amount of craft to expose film. You don't see the image after you've recorded; you must measure the light to be sure you have exposed everything properly. Film cameras are less forgiving than video cameras. Film cameras are made for professionals; video cameras are

made for consumers. I think our film will stand out from other student films, hopefully increasing our chances in the festival circuit and reaching a wider audience.

I have experience shooting with multiple different formats, from a cell phone to 35mm film. There is a big difference in the way a film set is run depending on the medium used. Film costs money, therefore time isn't wasted and everyone understands that they must be on the top of their game, because retakes and mistakes cannot be afforded. Every shot must be rehearsed and carefully composed, because your wallet depends on it.

Those are the practical reasons for shooting on film, but when making a piece of art one must ignore the practical and choose with your heart. I will never forget how I felt when I watched my first 16mm film projected for my freshman class. I truly felt like a filmmaker. I still get that feeling when my film is processed and I watch the film grain flicker on screen.

We decided that 16mm was worth the price; we'd just have to work hard to pay for it. Our first step was to create a Kickstarter, to harbor donations toward the film. We set our goal at \$1,200, figuring we would pay the difference from part-time jobs and saved up money. We sent the link to our page to friends and family members and slowly the funds began to pile in.

One place I wanted to make sure I sent a link to was The Reisman Foundation. The Reisman Foundation provides financial support to community events and members and organizations. A couple years prior I had won a logo design contest for the foundation. I thought it would be a good idea to forward my Kickstarter page to them. Sure enough, Mr. Falter, the president of The Reisman Foundation responded and asked to have a meeting with Marla and me.

Marla and I dressed in our Sunday best, put together a production outline, budget, work samples, and rehearsed our meeting several times. We met with Mr. Falter and we were both surprised by how confident and personable we both were. Mr. Falter was impressed by both our production plan and our work and decided to donate \$2,000 dollars to our film.

Marla and I skipped out of the meeting barely containing our excitement. We met our finding goal. We were going to be making a film.

Chapter 3

Production: Courage

The first part of the film to go into production was the story of a little girl who dreams of escaping through flight. The story represents an important crossroad of life. The moment when a child realizes that not everything is possible and the weight of the world might just be too much

for flying. The disenchantment comes when she is confronted with cruelty and is unable to save the day.

Our first production decision was to cast my ten-year-old sister as the main character. My sister and I have a strong relationship and I felt as though I could stir-up a great performance from her, because I know her best. Our comfort level allows me to push her without her feeling threatened.

We had very specific locations in our script: a cliff, a playground, and a wind farm.

Each location serves a very specific purpose within the piece. The cliff is a meditative and quiet place, a point of escape for our main character. It is here that she feels she is at the edge of the world, weightless and free. We spent the summer looking for peaks in Syracuse and finally settled on an old quarry, isolated and grey.

The playground was the most interesting location to hunt for us. We visited dozens of playgrounds in the Syracuse area, from the modern to the dilapidated, parks to schools. We finally found a perfect little playground set deep in the back of Syracuse's Elmwood Park. The location offered both beauty and privacy. Playgrounds are an important part of childhood and a symbol for simpler more innocent times. There is no agenda for a public playground; they exist solely for children to play. It was an important location for our film as it touches on the moment when innocence is lost. The playground becomes a place of violence.

The final location we needed to secure was a wind farm. Wind turbines are a symbol of progress, clean energy, and fresh air. This touches on my own personal environmental concerns, highlighting the beauty these turbines have. While they never made it into the film, they still offered a great scene.

We decided on a distinct shooting style for each of the three stories, each bringing something different to the main character. For the scenes with the little girl we wanted a lot of motion. She is young and we wanted to show how the aging process really slows a person down. The camera was almost entirely hand-held and filmed a majority of close-ups, which causes a disorienting quality. The story takes place in the past and just like grasping onto memories we wanted the audience to struggle to orient themselves to the images on screen. The abstractions caused by the motion blur create beautiful moments of color, movement, and life.

The film takes place entirely outside, so we utilized natural lighting to accomplish the tone of piece. We shot almost entirely during the morning and evening hours to help get an even hue, saturation, and contrast. This helps capture the vibrancy of colors on the location and in the costume.

Each story also has a different color temperature. We wanted to reverse the traditional way of showing the past with desaturated hues, instead opting for a vibrant pallet of reds, greens, and blues. This was

another way of emphasizing the way aging diminishes vibrancy and potential.

A strong influence on how we filmed and composed the story of the little girl was Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*. *Ratcatcher* tells the story of a young boy in Glasgow, who accidentally kills his friend and must live with that grief while dreaming of a better life for himself and his family. What is unique about *Ratcatcher* is the perspective the film has. The film is able to paint a beautiful portrait of adolescence through the main character's eyes. It shows both the triumphs and the pits of childhood with such honesty while stills maintaining beautiful compositions.

Production went very smoothly. This part of the final film truly reflects our vision for it. It tells the story of a strong little girl who is faced with the overwhelming weight of growing up.

Chapter 4

Production: Love

Following chronologically, we filmed another important stage in life; motherhood. This piece of the trilogy tells the story of a pregnant woman who loses her only companion, her puppy named Oliver. How does this event reflect on her new responsibility as a mother? The story arose from conversations with my friends who view motherhood as the end of freedom. They are cursed to carry the burden of a child in their bodies. I

found this fascinating and decided to explore that idea in this film. Like the first part of the film, this marks another point in life when the weight of the world is too much for our character.

This part of the story takes place on the shores of New Jersey. The purpose of the location is to show how much possibility lies before the main character while she stares out across the sea. The ocean here represents travel, an escape from responsibility. This is the last moment of freedom for the main character. Like the little girl, who looks over the cliff at the possibility before her, at an older age she looks toward the ocean.

The shooting style for this section of the film is more stable with more establishing shots. Each shot a bit longer in duration than the little girl's. The progress of shots becomes more and more frantic while the woman searches for her dog, utilizing close-ups and a hand-held camera and a shallow depth of field. It was important for the end of the film to take place at night. The sun setting on the horizon echoes the closing of a chapter of life.

The color palate for this section is dictated by the time of day. We dressed our actress in neutral colors allowing for the sunrise to paint her clothes pink in the morning and the sunset to color her purple at night.

The film that influenced this section the most was *Rosemary's Baby*; the story of a young woman who is impregnated by Satan. The film taps into a subconscious fear of being a mother and makes the fear overt without being too heavy-handed.

We filmed on a beautiful (albeit crowded) location in New Jersey with a wonderfully friendly and cooperative actress from New York City. I feel as though our film is a subtle and restrained portrait about the weight of motherhood.

Chapter 5

Production: Intellect

The final part of filming was the most important to me. It was the recreation of my experience filming my grandmother.

This part of the film lacks a narrative arc that the other two have. This section is much more about the general mood and daily life of an old woman in a home. I was careful not to create any artificial moments, everything in this section I have witnessed. The importance of this section is to show that despite the mental limitations that someone with Alzheimer's has, there is a story behind their eyes that exists somewhere in their mind.

It was very important for me to cast the right person to play my grandmother. I met Amy Cobe a couple of years ago on the set of a grad

student's film *Cord*. She played a woman with dementia and played her well. I contacted her about six months prior to the shoot, because I wanted to make sure we had time to rehearse and make sure she understood the purpose of the film. Upon our initial meeting I provided her with hours of footage I shot of my grandmother, detailed shots of her hands, the way she walks, talks her facial expressions. This was to be the template of how Amy would portray her. Amy had many reservations; she insisted that she not mime my grandmother and only play a character with Alzheimer's disease. But after rehearsing some more Amy found a happy medium creating not just an impersonation, but a three-dimensional character. I will admit that it is an odd experience to have an actress play the part of a loved one.

We were fortunate enough to find the Hearth at James, a nursing home that allowed us to use a room at their facility and a free range in the common spaces. We wouldn't have been able to make this without their generosity.

The tone of this section was to try to be as naturalistic as possible. We wanted the audience to feel as if they were watching a documentary. We only used available light, which is a dangerous tactic for shooting on film, but we knew that if we wanted authenticity we needed to commit to natural and practical lighting. We didn't want the hand of the filmmaker to be felt by the audience, but we did make some important decisions. We wanted a cooler hue, gone are days of vibrancy and youth. We achieved

this through costuming Amy is only seen wearing blue. The sheet on her bed and the curtains on the window have the same blue tone.

The filmmakers that inspired this section were the Dardenne brothers of Belgium. Their films have an intimacy (the camera never ventures away from the subject) that really allows the audience to simply “be” with the main character. They achieve this with close-ups and very long takes. We were able to achieve the same with the old woman. Her scenes are rarely more than a few shots and most of them last several seconds. This invites the audience to simply sit with the old woman and exist with her in her space. There aren’t quick cuts or flashy camera work, because we didn’t want to distract or detract from the woman on the screen.

Amy really was able to capture the spirit of my grandmother. Her dark eyes really communicate a long history with just simple glances. I feel that this section really creates a tone and mood for the rest of the piece.

Chapter 6

Post-Production

When I wrote the script I knew that editing would take the film in different directions opening up interesting possibilities and paths and readings of the film. Sometimes the montage is an unexpected gift, for example by simply placing the image of the little girl on the swing after the

old woman finds her way out of the building, a new reading of escape and freedom emerges. Other times the edit is planned before we shoot, like when a plane is heard overhead and we see a balloon bouncing in a slide. Understanding the power of editing and juxtaposition allowed some creativity in editing. We also shot ninety minutes of useable footage, we filmed many different angles and moments in order to allow some freedom in the edit.

This film was an experiment for me. I wanted to explore painting a portrait of a woman through a trilogy told in one film. I wasn't sure if the pieces would fit together properly, but I made sure to allow myself to be open to the possibilities that an experimental film offers. This loose structure I think served the film well. I am a big proponent of what is called the "half-made" film. I only provide a vehicle for the audience to tell their own stories and make their own interpretations. I believe a good film becomes hundreds of films through different readings, a bad film dictates and spoon-feeds its audience. Something I consciously avoided while making the film was defining my audience. The film for me operates on much universality, and my hope is that everyone can connect with the piece on some level.

I made sure that I wouldn't be rigid in my construction of the film allowing for unexpected moments and interpretations.

Chapter 7

Final Product

This film has been a long time in the making, and it is truly wonderful to see an abstract idea take shape into a short film that I am very proud of. The film explores themes that I have always been interested in: coming of age, memory, and growing old. This is the perfect film for me to graduate with, a trilogy of the human spirit, heart, and mind.

I have grown a lot since the beginning of the process. My visual style has been refined to a point. After countless shooting days, different locations and actors I have somehow managed to maintain a consistent visual approach throughout. I believe I have reached a creative stride and found my “style.”

My directing skills have also vastly improved from this project. Before I was nervous and shy giving out direction to actors, often treating them as puppets. However, now, I am able to speak clearly with actors to get the best performance out of them.

My work has also matured thematically. Gone are the days in which I would spell out the themes of my films. I have quieted my voice, which has only made it stronger.

I wanted my film to show an honest portrayal of someone suffering dementia. Often times, characters with mental disorders are played for laughs or tears. I wanted to show the dementia that I come across on a

regular basis with my grandmother. I wanted to show that there is a past behind the glassy eyes of someone suffering.

Carneys Point also stands as a strong representation of women, which may be one thing I'm most proud of. Women are rarely portrayed as strong leads in film; they are usually either masculinized or sexualized or non-existent. I feel my film presents a multi-dimensional view of womanhood.

I feel it is also important to give space to those who have helped me throughout this process. It has been a successful collaborative process with my producer Marla; she made sure that the film was going to be made the proper way. The support we received from nursing homes, caterers, costumes, funding has been an overwhelming experience and I can only hope that they are happy with the product they helped support.

Summary of Capstone Project

Carneys Point is a fifteen minute short film that tells the story of a woman's life, fractured into three facets each representing an important crossroad of a single life: the disenchanting prelude to the coming of age, the anxiety of motherhood, and the mental decay of old age.

The film is divided into three vignettes, which overlap to paint a multi-layered portrait of a woman, a trilogy of the human spirit, heart, and mind.

One is the story of a little girl who is obsessed with flight and dreams of escape. Though she has the naïve belief that she can change the world through her idealistic mindset and superhero-like intentions, her innocent faith comes to an end when she sees something sinister on the playground.

Another tells the story of a woman burdened by the anxiety of motherhood who loses her dog, her only companion, while on the beach one day. In the search for her dog she comes to the distressing realization that the responsibilities of caring for her child-to-be may be more than she can handle.

Lastly, as an old woman tries to perform her daily tasks it is revealed that her mental state is rapidly declining. She is suffering from

Alzheimer's disease causing her memory and ability to communicate to interfere with living a normal life.

The idea for the film stemmed from my relationship with my grandmother, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease a few years ago. As I witnessed first hand the decline of her mental state, I became curious about memory and how it manifests itself in a woman who is losing it.

What began as a focus on memory became a new way for me as a filmmaker to represent a person's life, through stories of their past.

The film is a project shot on 16mm film stock, an old and dying medium, which takes a specific craft of lighting and composing. This will figure to be my last opportunity to use actual film stock on a production. Over the past three years in film school I have fallen in love with process of exposing 16mm film. It has a tangible quality that digital video can't compete with. 16mm film has experienced a recent surge of popularity, as filmmakers want to draw back to the craftsmanship of exposing raw film stock.

Studying in film school has helped me develop my visual style and filmic language. I was able to bring all the techniques and tools I've learned to add visual poetry to the film. The project utilized my strong sense of design, color, and form to bring the story to life.

Carneys Point was shot on film in a naturalistic style. Through the use of a hand-held camera I created a free flowing atmosphere that is

consistent with the idea of memory. The liveliness of the camera is in direct relation and dependant upon each of the characters in the film. In the scenes with the little girl, the camera functions in an active and playful manner. In those that take place in the present, with the old woman, the camera takes on more static shots. As the bridge between the distant past and the present, scenes with middle-aged woman combine both static and hand-held shots.

Carneys Point explores the use of color to create certain connections with the past. The palette changes with each character, becoming grayer and less saturated with the characters' age.

The film is an open-ended restrained piece that allows the audience to come to their own conclusions. The loose narrative structure creates a jarring piece, which reflects the attempt to hang on to fading memories, which serve as a reminder of the important crossroads throughout life.