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Spring 5-2017

### “The Imaginary Dragons” a Short Film.

Christina McDonagh  
*Syracuse University*

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## **“The Imaginary Dragons” a Short Film.**

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

Christina Maria W. McDonagh

Candidate for Bachelor of Fine Arts  
and Renée Crown University Honors  
Spring 2017

Honors Capstone Project in Film

Capstone Project Advisor: Mišo Suchý

Capstone Project Reader: Vasilios Papaioannu

Honors Director: \_\_\_\_\_  
Chris Johnson, Interim Director

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## **Abstract**

It's mid September of 2001 and Fawn, a sheltered yet curious girl living in Manhattan, begins to feel as if everyone is keeping a secret from her...

– A Short Film Based on a True Story –  
My Story.

Think back to the day of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when the tragic news broke? Most Americans do, but what if it was kept from you? What if your world was so sheltered you didn't realize the city you lived in was falling apart around you? That was the kind world I lived in when I was a kid.

*The Imaginary Dragons* is intended to provide a fresh perspective into the events of that day- my perspective. However, I'll be the first to admit this isn't a 9/11 story. This is the story of a young, privileged girl who attempts to seek out the truth despite her over protective Mother's attempts to shelter her from the tragedies that exist just beyond their perfect world- 9/11 just happens to be the catalyst of their conflict. When it comes down to it this film is about the importance of awareness, and perspective became a key tool in bringing this story to life.

## Executive Summary

*The Imaginary Dragons* is a short film that tells the story of Fawn, a quiet and observant 8-year-old attending an all-girls school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. She may not realize it, but she leads a fairly privileged life. She is an only child living with a **M**other who adores her and protects her from the world; but she's at an age where she's beginning to see beyond the perfect world her **M**other and her school have built for her. We enter Fawn's life on an average day, when Fawn finds herself embarrassed by her **M**om for waving at her while in ballet class, but from there the tides change. We follow Fawn through a particularly unusual day when she is dismissed from school early. The day gets progressively peculiar as she faces whispering adults, fake smiles, her oddly behaving mother and her ash covered classmate whose eyes seemed to have aged overnight. As Fawn's curiosity develops into anger over the following week she ends up in a car accident that sends her to the hospital where she finally receives the answers she's been looking for.

Now, what if I were to tell you that ~~Fawn's story is my story. I am Fawn.~~ That's not to say every aspect of this **narrative story** is true, rather, this film is a dramatized re-creation of my own memories from my perspective. Many who have read my script or watched my film without knowing it's context have commented that there is absolutely no way this story could occur in real-life. How could a young girl living in Manhattan go a full week without finding out that the twin towers had been attacked? It is that exact reason that I feel this is a story worth sharing, because it is in fact true.

In bringing this story to life, I first went through the process of taking my own experiences and making into (what I hope is) an entertaining and thought provoking story. That meant writing down the true story, trimming the fat, and then finding ways to tie all of the loose ends together. Then I needed to

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Maybe "Fawn's story is my story."

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work towards making fact into fiction by adding drama and conflict to the story. From there I was able to find and focus in on the true meaning behind it all. Part of that process involved kindling the tension of the mother/daughter relationship to add conflict and telling this story from a perspective of privilege to add depth. Then came the process of translating the script to screen. This meant taking steps to tell this story singularly from the perspective of a child. This was important to me for three big-major reasons. First, because this story is from my perspective as the writer/director, so I wanted to convey that by telling this story from my cinematic equivalent. Second, by, because the subjects I'm addressing in this film are so dark, and heavily discussed I wanted to tell this story from the perspective of an innocent child for a fresh take on that day's events. Third, by, I wanted to see everything Fawn sees, nothing more and nothing less, because I wanted the audience to be having the same experience as her in trying to figure out what's happening.

In this film, I am attempting to tell the story of a young girl trying to figure out what is happening in the wake of a disaster, despite those around her trying to keep the truth from her at every turn. Part of the reason I wanted to tell the story in this manner, was because even though the audience isn't provided any more information than Fawn is, the audience is able to apply their knowledge of real world history to figure out what is happening long before Fawn does. I feel it is not often that a story teller is provided the opportunity to tell their story in such a manner.

The Imaginary Dragons is intended to provide a fresh perspective into the events of that day- my perspective. However, I'll be the first to admit this isn't a 9/11 story. This is the story of a young, privileged girl who attempts to seek out the truth despite her over-protective Mother's attempts to shelter her from the tragedies that exist just beyond their perfect world. 9/11 just happens to be the catalyst of their conflict. When it comes down to it this film is about the importance of awareness, and perspective became a key tool in bringing this story to life.

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~~Whitney Koski~~

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~~Colleen Reynolds~~

Anita Weckenmann

Irmgard Weckenmann

Kuno Weckenmann

Thomas McDonagh

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Mary-Alice Kozak

Gary Kozak

Eileen McDonagh

Colleen Reynolds

Eliot Grigo

Danielle Ring

Kevin Wegener

Natalie Vinciguerra

Kathryn

Eleanor Koski ~~Ruby~~

Ruby Landow

Whitney Koski

## Film Credits

### CAST

Eleanor Koski – Fawn

Ruby Landow – Fawn’s Mom



Ashley – Samarah Conley  
Victoria – Anastasia Albert  
Victoria’s Mom – Karen Romero  
Ashley’s Dad – Gregory O’Connor  
Mrs. Weathers – Leigh Anne Poulos  
Dance Teacher – Monique Massiah

### **Film Credits**

#### CREW

Writer / Director / Producer – Christina McDonagh  
Assistant Director / Line Producer – Danielle Ring  
Executive Producer – Anita Weckenmann  
Associated Producer / Script Supervisor / Art Assistant – Kathryn Ferentchak  
Production Manager – Samuel J. Kolber  
2<sup>nd</sup> Unit Production Manager / Grip / Sound Mixer – Justin Ramer  
Script Supervisor / Production Assistant – Notes Kaewbaidhoon  
Script Supervisor / Art Assistant – Natalie Vinciguerra  
Production Designer / Make-up Artist – Kierra Jordan  
Director of Photography – Eliot Grigo  
1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Camera – Henry V. Grenier  
1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Camera – Forrest Vreeland  
1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Camera / Gaffer – Grace Cannon  
1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Camera – Josh Chang  
2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant Camera / Grip – Mike Koslov  
Gaffer – Prashanth Sampathkumaran  
Electric – Justice Allen  
Grip / Production Assistant – Aryaman Gautam Khanna

Grip / Production Assistant – Kevin Wegener

Grip – Josh Curley

Sound Mixer – Gabrielle O’Byrne

Sound Mixer / Sound Designer – Elias Alba

Production Assistant – Richard Day

Production Assistant – Emma Russo

Production Assistant – Summer Russo

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### **Critical Statement**

#### **Chapter 1- A Story Worth Sharing**

I’ve always technically been aware of what I had experienced the week of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001; but, I used to remember it as you recall a story that had happened to someone else rather than a string of my own memories. That is, until September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, when my teacher for “TV in the Age of the Internet” decided to focus our class on how the attacks on the World Trade Center affected pop culture in the year 2001. Something about the imagery on the screen triggered me. Watching back to back documentaries brought forth a flood of my own suppressed memories and in that moment, I knew I had to write it all down. I stayed in that classroom jotting down recollections into my notebook until 11PM that night because I was worried that if I took a break to walk home I would lose my stream of thought. I couldn’t risk that chance, because I knew this was a story worth sharing.

I'll be honest, I still can't recall absolutely every detail of what happened over the course of that week, so there are places where I had to elicit the help of people who had been around me at the time to help me fill in the blanks. A few weeks later Honors contacted me and asked what I would like to make my Capstone project about. I brought out my notebook, typed down everything I had written, edited it down to its key elements, changed the perspective from "I" to "She" and clicked send. Of course, that was just the very first treatment. From there I spent a year re-writing, dramatizing and adding to the story until I had a polished script that was no longer "a true story" so much as "based on a true story".

In this paper, I [want to will](#) discuss how I took a true story based in my memories and reworked it into a script I felt was worth filming. Then I would like to dive into some of the cinematic devices I utilized to maintain "my perspective" throughout filming. But before I can talk about the changes I made, I think it is important to share the events of that day as they happened...

## Chapter 2- The True Story

Growing up, I went to an all-girls Catholic school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, so that was where I was ~~to be found~~ on the morning of 9/11. I still struggle to recall that morning because everyone around me made it seem like any other day. I couldn't even tell you what I was doing when our first-grade teacher told us that school would be ending early because she made a point of ~~putting on a happy face and~~ pretending everything was fine. My school then contacted the parents of every girl in my grade and insisted that they ~~don't~~not let us know what was happening, going so far as to instruct our parents not to turn on the TV or the radio where we could hear it in case we may figure something out. As per her instructions, when my ~~m~~Mom came to pick me up she pretended everything was fine. My mom used to have a car she would pick me up from school in, but because the roads were closed, we had to walk through Central Park to get back to our Hell's Kitchen apartment on the Mid-West Side. A friend of mine, Kayle, lived in the same area so our parents decided we would all walk together and called it a "playdate". I thought it was a little strange that I wouldn't be attending my usual ballet class that

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day, but I honestly wasn't nearly as inquisitive as one might think. While making our way through the Park, we ran into our classmate, Colleen, and her dad.

Because Colleen had been sick that day she'd stayed home with her ~~F~~father. That is, until the towers were hit, because Colleen's apartment just so happened to be in a building next door. Now, I don't know exactly what Colleen went through that day as she struggles to talk about it, but I do know this much: - Colleen's ~~D~~dad rushed her out of the building so quickly that he didn't have time to put on her socks before slipping on her sneakers. Upon exiting the building Colleen thought it was very strange that it was snowing... little did she know that those were ashes falling from the sky. I know she was witness to some horrific events such as people jumping from the buildings, but I don't know the details. Because the phones all went down that day Colleen's dad was unable to contact the rest of the family and let them know that they were safe. Colleen's three sisters attended the same school as us and were in class that day, so Colleen and her ~~D~~dad trekked all the way from Battery Park (downtown) to our school (uptown) to reunite with their family. This landed them in Central Park, headed towards the location from which we had just departed, which is. ~~That dear reader is~~ why we coincidentally collided.

Here is where my memory of that day begins. I knew something was wrong as soon as I laid eyes on Colleen and her ~~D~~dad because they appeared to be lightly coated in dust. Kayle's mom and my mother hugged Colleen and her dad and the adults began talking, leaving us kids to our devices. Ashes aside, there was something different about Colleen. It was as if she had aged overnight. I couldn't tell you the exact words that were said, but essentially, Colleen tried to confide in us what she had just witnessed and Kayle and I refused to believe her. During recess, we would play make-believe games all the time, and sometimes the stories we imagined were surprisingly gruesome, so when Colleen tried to explain what was happening we genuinely

believed she was setting up a game of make believe. As Kayle and I began attempting to play along I noticed Colleen growing more and more upset, as did her father. He quickly swooped her up, told our moms that they had to get going, and off they ~~were~~ went. I felt that there was something strange about that encounter, but it hadn't dawned on me that there was any possibility, whatsoever, that Colleen's story could have ~~possibly~~ been true.

The next thing I can recall is later that evening. While my ~~D~~dad was at a hospital giving blood, my mom was on the phone with my grandmother. ~~I remember her~~ saying, "I know, I can't believe it, it's awful... To think, just two weeks ago we were down in Miami and the sun was shining and everything was absolutely perfect. You know we can't even think about escaping down to Miami now because the airports are going to be shut down for God knows how long". Even though I ~~can recall remember~~ those words so clearly, I didn't make much of them at the time. However, what I did find strange was my mom's decision to then throw a last-minute make-shift birthday party for a little girl who lived on the first floor of our building. I remembered the girl seeming upset, but I couldn't figure out why. It wasn't until a few years later that I was informed that, due to the chaos of that day, no one could make it to her actual birthday party and that's why her and her mom wound up on our terrace with my mom and ~~me~~.

Fast forward one week later, I had just performed in a ballet recital and my mom and I were taking a cab-ride home. I looked out the window and saw an American flag waving from the window of a car passing by. I had started seeing American flags everywhere but I didn't ~~spare too much thought on them~~ think too much about them. My parents and my school had done an excellent job of keeping everything under wraps, so I still had no idea what was going on. Just as we were at a stoplight the driver took a sip of coffee and started fiddling with the radio. He was distracted when the light turned green so he hit the gas without checking the road and ran

head on into an elderly couple crossing the street. He then stopped short with such force that I (not wearing a seat belt) slammed my head into the divider. The elderly man was fine but his wife had been knocked to the ground and cracked her skull open. We jumped out of the car and found blood seeping from between the old woman's silver hair. I'd gotten a concussion from hitting my head so an ambulance had been called for both the old woman and myself. We bonded during the wait. I remember thinking it was both hilarious and admirable that while her husband was too shaken to form a sentence, the old woman lay there chatting away as if nothing happened. We exchanged addresses and sent each other Christmas cards for some years to follow.

When we arrived at the ER the old woman was wheeled right in, but because my injury wasn't nearly as severe the woman at the front desk told my mom and I to take a seat in the waiting room. As we entered ~~the waiting room~~, I immediately noted that the glass walls were plastered with posters covered in faces. Each face was accompanied by a note such as "Have you seen my Dad? Last seen 9/11" or "Have you seen my sister? Last seen on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Twin Towers", along with a number to call. I didn't know what to make of them, but my mother began sobbing instantly. At first I assumed she was crying because of the accident, but after the emotional roller coaster that had been that week, my mom couldn't keep up the pretense any longer. It was then and there that she finally broke down and revealed to me the tragedy that would forever be known as "9/11".

### Chapter 3 - Reinterpreting Truth into Fiction

Now if you watch the film it will quickly become apparent that I went ahead and made some major changes to the original events in producing this project. In attempting to communicate the original events through a screenplay, I had to make some major changes. My script for the film made major changes to the original events that I've described. For example, I turned my ballet recital into a ballet rehearsal because it was easier to enact and I added Colleen's character to my ballet class to provide her with an introduction. As another example, I cut my Dad from this story because in all honesty he wasn't relevant to the plot and I felt the addition of another character would simply overcomplicate things. Within the realm of the film, Fawn's parents are divorced whereas in reality, it would be another 10 years before my parents



~~actually~~ filed for divorce. I feel small details such as this are insignificant to the plot, therefore they aren't taking away from the "truth" of the story. The general chain of events is still in line with the true events, so I don't see the changes I applied as detracting from my ability to label this film "based on a true story". Some may ask why I chose to make ~~the~~ changes in the first place and to that I'd have to answer- to make this "story" into a "screenplay". ~~Nothing against documentary filmmaking, but~~ I am simply not a documentary filmmaker; ~~I~~ I am a story-teller. I like to use the art of cinema to entertain viewers by submerging them into an unfamiliar space, while also making them think. ~~Therefore~~ Essentially, I had to take a story that is interesting enough to share with someone in casual conversation and solidify it into something worth dedicating the next two years of my life to.

First, I'd like to touch on some of the simple and obvious deviations from the true story, so let's start with the name changes. I wanted to re-name the characters not just for legal reasons, but so that I could separate myself from the story. My connection with the true story gave me the drive to reach that point, but if I were going to produce anything of quality I knew I had to gain distance from the facts.

My first order of business was to re-name my own character. I knew I wanted this character to evoke innocence, so I named her "Fawn" so as to bring forth the image of a baby deer. Though my child-hood friend Kayle was anything but bratty, I needed to make her character a foil to Fawn. I chose the name "Victoria", which means "the victorious" or "the conqueror" because of its association with confidence. Lastly, I chose the name "Ashley" for Colleen because of its rough translation to "one who comes from ashes". As for their parents, I decided to name them "Fawn's Mom", "Victoria's Mom" and "Ashley's Dad" not out of laziness, but because I wanted to take every measure I could to tell this story from Fawn's

perspective. Children never call their parents or their friend's parents by their first names, so if this script is based in Fawn's psyche, why would she be referring to adults by their first names?

Next came the change in age. ~~Seeing as~~ Because I was 6 at the time that this story takes place I ideally would have loved to cast 6-year-olds for this film, ~~but (but good actors within that age range are nearly impossible to come by.~~ Truly convincing actors of any age are already difficult ~~challenging~~ to find ~~as is, at any age.~~ So, you can imagine and howt's even more challenging it is to find ~~nonetheless~~ child actors. While casting this film, I received upwards of 500 applications, but I only had enough time to hold live auditions for about 50 actors, approximately 30 of which were children. ~~I can't deny, those~~ Most of those auditions were rough to say the least. Then came ~~. Many of the kids weren't even capable of reading their lines nonetheless, much less vocalizing them and convincingly at that. Then came~~ Eleanor Koski. She had just completed her run as "Little Cosette" on Broadway's "Les Misérables" and lucky was in need of footage for her reel. Honestly, I was star struck. Luckily for me she had been so busy with her Broadway career that she didn't have much film exposure at the time. Actors require reel footage to get invited to auditions ~~and because it takes reel footage to get invited to auditions,~~ so she needed to start somewhere, and that somewhere was with me-my film. I will forever be grateful that I landed her as my lead because she isn't just talented for a child actor, she is talented for an actor of any age. Not only that but her patience and dedication could outlast people twice her age. However, she was 10. Fortunately, she looks a little younger ~~young for her age~~ so I was able to pull off casting her as an 8-year-old by surrounding her with ~~by~~ other actors of ~~around~~ that age. I have no regrets over having to age up the cast a couple years, but it did make for some pretty drastic changes in characterization.

I've always struggled with my ADD, but I was not able to obtain the necessary medications until I was in my senior year of High School, so as a child I honestly was nothing like Eleanor's Fawn. Eleanor is wise beyond her age as a 10-year-old, so surrounded by 8 year olds her intelligence stood out that much more. Maybe her portrayal wasn't consistent with the dazed and confused child I was, but even before I cast Eleanor I knew I had to take the character in that direction. When writing a script, it is common knowledge that the protagonist is supposed to actively seek their ~~goal~~objective. A series of events can't just happen to a character while the character aimlessly wanders through the narrative, the character needs to work towards a goal. ~~Truthfully, in reality, I was a scatterbrained 6-year-old child who~~ had no idea what was going on during 9/11. ~~I was a scatterbrained 6-year-old child, so even if I had grown suspicious of something going on, I doubt I would have known where to go to seek the answer.~~ This meant that I had to deviate from reality and write my character as if she were a child prodigy. Fawn had to be smarter and more observant than her peers so that she could stand out as the only force seeking the answers. This provides the audience with a reason to back her. A hero in search of the truth is much more interesting than a character aimlessly going through the motions. As Pat Cooper and Ken Dancyger explain in their book *Writing the Short Film*, fiction films tend to portray characters in challenging situations. After something happens to someone, how do they react? Does that person take action to change or struggle to make things as they were? Either way, the character isn't simply letting the situation happen to them. "If the main character engages us, that struggle- which is, in essence, the story of the film- will most likely engage us, too"<sup>1</sup>. For this reason, casting the ~~ever~~sophisticated Eleanor simply made sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Dancyger, Ken. "Discovering and Exploring a Main Character." *Writing the Short Film*. By Patricia Cooper. 3rd ed. Burlington, MA: Focal, 2013. 41. Print.

As a result of upping Fawn's intelligence, I had to re-develop the character of Fawn's ~~m~~Mom as well. ~~Now that Fawns would be actively~~ ~~With a character as intelligent as Fawn~~ seeking answers, Fawn's ~~m~~Mom needed to actively keep her daughter in the dark. Yes, my mom kept the truth from me, but she didn't have to try all that hard to do so. As Fawn ~~actively~~ went in search of information, Fawn's ~~m~~Mom had to ~~fight to~~ ~~actively~~ keep it from her to create conflict. The further I developed these two characters the more it occurred to me that this is where the true story lies. In film, circumstance is rarely a satisfying enemy so I found myself in need of an antagonist. That is where Fawn's mom comes in. Fawn is what we would call our protagonist, ~~or which can be defined as~~ "the main struggler in the story". In storytelling, every protagonist requires an antagonist, to be the force or obstacle with which the protagonist must contend. It's worth noting that "the stronger the antagonist, the stronger the conflict, and the harder the protagonist must struggle to achieve his or her goal"<sup>2</sup>.

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My mom, honestly, is a really sweet person. She may be a little over-protective from time to time, but nowhere close to the degree that Fawn's mom is. As my mom has been such a vital part of the production process (and obviously a highly important person in my life in general) I've felt terrible making her out to be the villain, but that is just one of the necessary evils that comes along with taking fact and re-working it into fiction. So, for example, the scene where Fawn's Mom tucks her into bed and tells her that she has "nothing to worry" is entirely a work of fiction, as is the confrontation outside of the dance class and inside the car. Nothing remotely

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<sup>2</sup> Dancyger, Ken. "Telling the Dramatic Story." *Writing the Short Film*. By Patricia Cooper. 3rd ed. Burlington, MA: Focal, 2013. 48. Print.

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close to those conversations occurred in reality, but those scenes supplied much needed confrontation to the story. In drama, the main conflict is the struggle between the protagonist and the antagonist. The more at stake, in this case the relationship between mother and daughter, “the more dramatic- in every sense of the word- the conflict”<sup>34</sup>.

Another ~~portion-part~~ of reality that I chose to manipulate was the social class Fawn and her Mom were a part of. We have heard detailed stories of those who have experienced 9/11 first hand time and time again, and those are incredibly important stories to share, but that wasn’t what I was trying to achieve here. When working out my treatment I came to realize that what was so interesting about my experience was not the fact that I went an entire week without finding out about 9/11, but that I lived such a privileged life that those around me felt it was unnecessary to concern me with the reality of the situation. They wanted to keep me safe, protected and unaware. For this reason, I felt exaggerating this by making Fawn and her ~~m~~Mom part of the upper class added a much-needed layer of depth to the story. If Fawn’s ~~m~~Mom felt it was unnecessary for Fawn to be informed of the world around her because they too were struggling, that would send a very different message than having Fawn’s ~~m~~Mom wanting to protect her daughter because she believed they were above it all. So, watching this film unfold from a place of privilege became very important to me in creating this film.

This is not to say that I am not privileged. I grew up in a comfortable apartment in Manhattan and attended Marymount ~~S~~school (one of the most expensive schools in New York) for 13 years. However, my family was just scraping by. There were girls in my class who lived

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<sup>3</sup> Dancyger, Ken. "Telling the Dramatic Story." *Writing the Short Film*. By Patricia Cooper. 3rd ed. Burlington, MA: Focal, 2013. 48. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Dancyger, Ken. "Telling the Dramatic Story." *Writing the Short Film*. By Patricia Cooper. 3rd ed. Burlington, MA: Focal, 2013. 48. Print.

in penthouse apartments, got around everywhere by limousine and went on frequent weekend trips around the globe. This was the level of wealth I was trying to replicate in my film. As a child, I was very much unaware of the privilege I had because in comparison to some of my ultra-wealthy classmates I believed we were poor. It wasn't until the 2008 recession hit and my family lost everything that I received a dose of reality. My dad is-works in real estate so when the housing market crashed our financial stability was gone. The first sign that times were changing was when we were nearly kicked out of our home and I nearly had to switch schools. My grandparents chipped in so that we could keep a roof over our heads and my school gave me a full scholarship, so I could maintain some sense of normalcy, but it was in the little things that I began to notice the differences. We stopped going on vacation, shopping for clothes, going out to dinner and attending the theater and ballets. We had to sell anything that was worth money around our home so that we could afford groceries and r(now courtesy of Morton Williams instead of Whole Foods)- ather than attending a summer camp I began working at oneI could no longer spend money to go out with friends, and had to get a summer job to save up for college. I can't say we became poor by any means. Even post- recession I still consider myself to be extremely privileged, but experiencing a drastic lifestyle change, just as I was coming of age, over the course of a single year made me hyper-mindful extremely aware of that privilege in a way I previously had not been. Being made cognizantaware of the wealth my family once had, opened my eyes to how unaware of my own privilege I had been been at the time. That was a scary realization to come to. It felt like I had been brainwashed and the effects were just then fading away. It is this insider look at theis impenetrable bubble that is of the Upper East Side culture and the impenetrable bubble they place themselves in that I wanted to convey to the audience.

To establish this film in Upper East Side high society, location scouting was of the utmost importance. However, I also wanted to convey that Fawn did not choose the privilege she has. Rather, it was thrust upon her despite her attempts to shake it off. To convey this feeling I picked locations that while luxurious, were very contained. From the gorgeous (yet boxed in) garden and mansion lobby, to the (overwhelming) Manhattan apartment, I used every connection I could think of to secure locations that reinforced the feeling of forced luxury.

Then, there were the changes I made simply to ~~craft~~make this into a more interesting and fluid story. For example, I chose to set up the dragon's game in the play-ground before bringing it back around in Central Park. I did this out of concern that if the first time we saw the girls playing make believe was while interacting with Ashley, they would appear to be making fun of Ashley. Rather I wanted to portray them as genuinely misunderstanding the situation and resuming a game they regularly play. I also purposefully chose to have the game involve dragons because dragons fly through the sky, like planes, and breathe fire, so as to evoke the fire and smoke that billowed from the towers as they collapsed.

~~Moving For the scene of the to the~~ car accident, rather than having the driver be distracted simply because he was sipping coffee, I decided to bring some loose ends together. As the argument between Fawn and her ~~m~~Mom settles down, you can hear a radio reporting on 9/11. Rather than having the driver get distracted by his coffee, I had Fawn's ~~m~~Mom's request to change the channel (to keep Fawn from hearing the radio report) be the distraction that causes the accident. The irony being that it was Fawn's mom's efforts to protect her daughter from the truth that put her daughter in danger. Another notable change to this scene was the exaggeration of the accident itself. In early drafts of the script I had the accident occur just as it did in real life (the driver hits the ~~breaks~~brakes so Fawn hits her head), but I was told that was too anti-

climactic. To add drama to this scene I increased the severity of the crash and made out Fawn's injuries to be more serious than my own had been.

Finally, I would like to touch on the changes made to the ER scenes. Of the entire film, this was the final part of the story I'd chosen to fictionalize. This scene stayed true to the actual events, as they happened, through to the final draft of the script. However, due to the tight schedule I had while ~~filming shooting the film~~ in September and October, this was the one scene I didn't have time to film. ~~I then grew ill. Due to the illness I encountered~~ post-shoot, so six months went by before I was able to film the final scenes. This afforded the time to stop and reconsider the story. Now that I could piece together the footage up until this climactic scene, I was able to get an idea for what that scene needed to round out the film as a whole. One critique I kept receiving was that because the film was so active and dialogue driven, the final scene would be more effective if I provided a moment to breathe rather than going straight from the crash to having Fawn's Mom rush her into the ER. Also, it was pointed out that despite my best efforts, Fawn was still a fairly passive character. It was my director of photography's idea to re-write the ending so that Fawn would wake up, already in a hospital bed and go out in search of her own destiny. To tell the truth, due to my clear memories of this instance, some part of me really wanted to re-create the scene as it happened; but, for the sake of the story, I had to make sacrifices.

Until now I've gone through and stated- matter-of-fact- the changes I made and why, but I would be lying if I said making these changes was easy. Some part of me wants to share my exact memories, but that wouldn't make for an interesting and cohesive story. Because this story was based in reality, I struggled throughout to balance re-enacting events with proper story telling. On the one hand, I didn't want to act out the true story because that would simply get



boring. Also, accurately recreating true events is nearly impossible, so if I couldn't do it right, why should I attempt it at all? At the same time, I didn't want to stray too far from the true story either because, as I stated at the [topbeginning of this essay](#), I believe part of the reason this is a story worth telling is because it is true.

#### **Chapter 4 – Utilizing Cinematic Tools**

In the previous [segmentsection](#), I discussed how I reinterpreted fact into fiction at a script level, but now I would like to discuss the tools utilized in bringing that story to the big screen. My director of photography, the [ever](#)-talented Eliot Grigo, was very involved in the process of translating my script to screen so going forward if I refer to “us” or “we” instead of “I”, it is because I am referring to the decisions made in collaboration with my DP.

The big thing I wanted to experiment with in shooting this film was perspective. Because I felt a large part of this film's significance stemmed from it being a product of my own

experience, I wanted to maintain that perspective throughout. Yes, the film deviates from reality here and there but at its core it's my story and Fawn is a representation of myself, so I felt it was vital that this film be told and shot entirely from the perspective of Fawn. To accomplish this, I turned to the film "What Maisie Knew"<sup>56</sup>.

During my senior year of high school, I interned at Red Crown Productions in New York City. During my first day there they had me sit in a screening room and watch a few films they had produced so that I would be familiar with their work. All of their ~~filmswork~~ was excellent but it was "*What Maisie Knew*" that really stuck with me. This film shared the story of a 6-year-old girl, raised in Manhattan, caught in the middle of her parents' heated custody battle. Maybe it was because I too was a child of divorce raised in Manhattan, but what really struck me about this film was the way in which the story was told. Films involving children with parents tend to idealize what it means to be both a child and a parent. The logic seems to be that as soon as a person produces a child, they become flawless. *What Maisie Knew* ~~on the other hand~~ subverts this ~~trend-cliché~~ by letting us in on the secret that not all parents are meant to be parents. Selfish and immature people don't become any less so once they have kids. At the same time, the parents in this film aren't abusive, un-loving villains who ruin their child for life either. They're simply people who shouldn't have kids. Now, I wouldn't say Fawn's ~~m~~Mom shouldn't be a mother. Unlike Maisie's parents who prioritize their own interests above being parents, Fawn's ~~m~~Mom's fatal flaw is that she just may love Fawn too much. The idea that parents can be flawed

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<sup>5</sup> *What Masie Knew*. Dir. Scott McGehee and David Siegel. Perf. Julianna Moore, Steve Coogan, Onata Aprile. Red Crown Productions, 2013. Film.

<sup>6</sup> *What Masie Knew*. Dir. Scott McGehee and David Siegel. Perf. Julianna Moore, Steve Coogan, Onata Aprile.

Red Crown Productions, 2013. Film.

is a major inspiration that I took from ~~What I did want to bring from~~ *What Maisie Knew*, was the

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~~idea that parents can be flawed~~. Also, because this film deals with so many heavy topics, I

wanted to harness the innocence of a child's perspective and utilize that in conveying my story in

a way we're not accustomed to. In preparation, I studied the cinematic style of *What Maisie*

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*Knew*, even going so far as to asking my DP, Eliot, to watch the film before we began shot

listing. ~~During principle photography, we didn't attempt to replicate the precise film technique~~

~~used by the creators of *What Maisie Knew*; however, we did source their work as inspiration.~~

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~~That's not to say we replicated that filmic style, rather it was a jumping off point.~~

Commented [KH4]: Rephrase

To address the idea of dysfunctional parents, the directors of *What Maisie Knew*

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considered the home life of their protagonist, Maisie, through her eyes. If I wanted to accomplish

the same thing I knew I needed to one, find ways to tell this story as if from the perspective of a

child, and two, I needed to find ways to limit the audience's experience to that of a single

character. In *What Maisie Knew*, this was accomplished by keeping the camera at Maisie's eye

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level and often by placing the camera in Maisie's physical space, thereby imitating her point of

view. For *The Imaginary Dragons*, we too kept the camera at Fawn's eye level in very nearly

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every shot of film. The power structure between two characters is normally accomplished by

placing the camera lower than one person (the figure in a position of power) and higher than the

other (the weaker figure), but because we were trying to maintain the camera at Fawn's eye level

we had to place the characters themselves at different levels within the scene to accomplish this

same affect. Fortunately, the adults in my film maintain the position of power up until the very

end so it was not too difficult to place them above Fawn. However, at the end of the film I

wanted to flip that dynamic, so I had to find a way to place Fawn's mom lower in the frame

than Fawn. In the end, I decided to keep Fawn's ~~m~~Mom sitting and Fawn standing throughout the final scene.

Because my cast is made up almost entirely of women, an interesting side effect of this choice was that we ended up filming women from a low angle throughout. The general rule amongst cinematographers is that women should never be filmed from a low angle because it is "unattractive". This has always deeply bothered me because placing the camera at a low angle is how filmmakers signal that a character is in a position of power, because we are quite literally looking up at them. If filmmakers prioritize what framing women look most attractive in above what framing best suits the scene, that means that even if a female character is written to be in a position of power (which is already rare), she isn't framed as such. Small decisions such as this affects the audience's ~~psyche~~interpretation and experience of characters. If we literally look down on women in film, the masses will do the same. That is why film language is so important. ~~My point being, I'd be lying if I said I didn't write~~ this film just so that I could film women in a position of power, but when given the opportunity I was glad we could take it.

Another tool I tried to utilize in telling this film from the perspective of a child was the color palette of the production design. I have a background in art direction and production design so creating the right mis-en-scène was ~~of high importance~~important. I chose a color palette of pastels (and a lot of pinks) because those are the colors I associate with childhood and the Upper East Side. My hope was that the audience would experience the same connection. For her bedroom in particular I wanted to place her in a pink little world, with her blue stuffed animal being the only stand out color. During the last two scenes, I attempted to seep out the colors (with the exception of blues) to suggest that Fawn is now maturing.

As previously stated, I felt it was important to hint at this film being a product of my own experience as the writer/ director by telling this story from the perspective of my own cinematic equivalent- Fawn. We attempted to accomplish this in a few ways. First, whenever possible, we tried to treat the camera as if it were Fawn, so that - By this I mean to say that the camera sees nothing more and nothing less than what Fawn sees. In some scenarios, this meant having the camera occupy the same physical space as Fawn, thereby taking on Fawn's point of view. In others, this meant that even if the camera wasn't standing where Fawn stood, it was placed in close proximity to her and at her eye level. Unfortunately, we were not able to do this nearly as often as I would have liked due to time constraints. Ideally, I would have liked for the camera to always either take on Fawn's POV or be in close proximity to her, but because the shooting schedule had to be kept so tight, we ended up having to combine entire shot lists into single takes. Those takes had to be shot at a distance from Fawn so we could see the scene play out in its entirety. In some cases, like the mansion, this was planned for because we knew we had two hours to get in, get rolling and get out. In other cases, such as the bedroom scene, this decision had to be made at the very last second. T~~a~~t~~h~~i~~s~~ scene is my least favorite of the film for that exact reason. We were going on 16 hours of filming with little to no sleep so we ended up having to take all the shots planned and combine them into a single take. The camera's placement within that scene is in the only spot from which we could watch the entire scene play out, but because we could only see the side of Fawn's face and she was out of focus for most the scene, I fear we lose our connection to her. I feel the playground scene on the other hand, which was shot as storyboarded, was highly successful in accomplishing the cinematic style I was going for. The very first shot is from Fawn's POV, in the second shot we replicate the feeling of running down the path as Fawn is experiencing it, and in the third shot we once again take on her POV. I won't

continue going through the scene shot by shot, but I will say that by the end of the scene we will have taken on Fawn's POV six times. This includes instances in which we take on a perspective that could be Fawn's POV, until the camera pulls back to reveal Fawn's placement in the scene. In shots such as these (which you will also find sprinkled throughout the film) I attempted to show the audience what the world looks like from Fawn's eyes, and then portray her existence within that world.

Similarly to keeping the camera within close proximity to Fawn, I also attempted to record sound entirely from Fawn's placement within the scene. I spoke to my sound mixers before each shoot and told them to always keep the mic as close to Fawn as possible, even if another character was speaking, because I wanted ~~to~~ the audience to hear everything at the distance from which Fawn was hearing things. For example, in the scene in which Fawn overhears her mom while she is in bed, drawing, I manipulated the first part of the mom's recording to sound as if we were hearing it from another room. I just as easily could have started that scene in the living room with Fawn's mMom and then had Fawn walk in, but portraying Fawn's experience of overhearing her mom and then following the sound of her mMom's voice felt truer to her experience. Even while adjusting sound in post, for the scenes where the actors wore LAVs, I attempted to lower the volume on the other actor's mics and raise the volume on Fawn's so that we could better focus on her experience within the scene.

~~Another way in which I also strived-attempted~~ to view the world through Fawn's eyes, ~~was~~ by paying attention to the same things in each scene that she would be paying attention to, such as her friend giggling ~~at her~~ when she screws up a routine or a gesture such as her teacher placing her hand over her mouth. Other examples might include her mom's suspicious glance towards Victoria's mom, her drawing of a dragon, her stuffed animal blowing in the wind, her

hand stroking her mom's hair, etc. In the same vein, not only did we try to portray everything that Fawn was seeing, we also made a point of almost never presenting something to the audience that Fawn didn't see with her own eyes. This was accomplished at both a scriptwriting level and during principal photography. While writing the screen play, I tried to be careful about never allowing the scene to get away from Fawn. It was very funny during casting because I would have the mom's of actresses trying out for the role of Fawn asking me how many scenes of the film ~~would their~~-daughters would be in and I had to tell them every single one. Not only was her presence necessary in every scene, but also in nearly every shot.

The only two shots of the film in which the camera gets away from Fawn is in the shot of the stuffed animal falling from the car and landing on the ground. As long as Fawn is present, we always stand by her, so in having the camera finally leave her we wanted the audience to question if Fawn herself was still with us, by which I mean still alive. Upon being reassured that she is in fact alive, we hope that the audience will look back and see that shot for what it is:- Fawn's temporary loss of consciousness.

## Chapter 5- Perspective as a Storytelling Device

In this film, I ~~am attempting to~~ tell the story of a young girl trying to figure out what is happening in the wake of a disaster, despite those around her trying to keep the truth from her at every turn. ~~So, another reason it was important that~~ I told this story from Fawn's perspective, ~~was~~ because I wanted to take the audience on the same ride she was on. This meant that every word spoken and image shown is being heard and seen by Fawn and the audience simultaneously. Part of the reason I wanted to tell the story in this manner, was because even though the audience isn't provided any more information than Fawn is, the audience is able to apply their knowledge of real world history to figure out what is happening long before Fawn does. If this were a murder mystery, the first scene of the film would have been of the murder and throughout the rest of the film we would have watched the other characters as they learn who the murderer is. My film didn't require that first exhibitionary scene because we already experienced it in real life. Essentially, I attempted to provide the same clues to the audience of what was going on as I provided Fawn, but unlike Fawn, the audience is able to understand the clues significance early on because of their previous knowledge of its content. Technically there is never a point at which the words "September 11<sup>th</sup>", "Twin Towers" or "World Trade Center" are uttered, but enough information is provided that stating it outright would be unnecessary. As for Fawn, even if she did hear any of those phrases, she wouldn't understand what importance they hold. Throughout the film she hears about some kind of attacks, but she isn't provided any context for them until the very end. It is only when she sees the missing person~~s~~ posters on the wall of a Manhattan hospital that she comprehends how large scale the attacks were and realizes that they occurred within her own city. That information was technically given to her by her friend Ashley in the park, but because she thinks her friend is playing a game she never connects Ashley's words to the reports on TV.



Over all, perspective was a key aspect of The Imaginary Dragons. First, I went through the process of taking my own experiences and making it into an entertaining and thought provoking story. Part of that process involved telling this story from the perspective of privilege to add depth and kindling the tension of the mother/daughter relationship to add conflict. Then came the process of translating the script to screen. This meant taking creative and technical steps to tell this story singularly from the perspective of a child. This was important to me for three ~~big~~ reasons. First~~ly~~, because this story is from my perspective as the writer/director, ~~so~~ I ~~wanted to convey~~ ed that my point of view by telling this story from my cinematic equivalent. Second~~ly~~, because the subjects I'm addressing in this film are so dark, ~~and heavily discussed~~ I ~~wanted to tell~~ told this story from the perspective of an innocent child for a fresh perspective. Third~~ly~~, I ~~wanted~~ structured the camera angles, sound, and story so that the audience ~~to see~~ everything exactly as Fawn sees it, ~~but nothing more and nothing less~~ because I wanted the audience to ~~have~~ e having the same experience in trying to figure out what's happening as Fawn is.

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