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Blood in the Grass

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Blood in the Grass

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Film Production

by

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B.A. University of Memphis, 2007

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Abstract

This paper thoroughly examines the thesis film, *Blood in the Grass*. Each area of the film's production is carefully analyzed, including writing, directing, production design, cinematography, editing, sound, and technology and workflow. In addition to these areas, the background and ideology of the filmmaker provides a context for the choices made in production. This overall analysis discusses the effectiveness of the goals set by the filmmaker for the film to be an emotionally effective commentary on capital punishment, and to be conducive to the short film medium.

Chapter 1

Introduction

As an independent filmmaker, I hope to grow not only artistically but also personally with each film I make. For my MFA thesis film, *Blood in the Grass*, I set out to achieve three goals. First, I wanted to bring to fruition a story that I had been working on in my head and in my graduate classes for years, and which I had once believed was too long and complex to be translated into the short film format. Second, after making several comedies, I wanted to make my most mature, sincere work yet. Third, I wanted to create a visceral, deeply emotional cinematic experience for the audience by crafting an unyieldingly intense and stark film tragedy. At the same time, I wanted to make them question, as I have, the legitimacy of the practice of capital punishment in our modern Western democracy, and to do so by showing a character deal with it in a very personal way.

With these goals clearly set, and with around a dozen short films under my belt, I imagined a challenging shoot, as filmmaking is always a tough process; however, I did not imagine that following this film from start to finish would be the most trying time of my life.

Blood in the Grass was inspired by a late night conversation about capital punishment that I had with friends while I was an undergrad at the University of Memphis. It was particularly a statement by my best friend and college roommate Anna, who would later go on to graduate from law school and work to stop the execution of inmates on death row. She made a drunken statement that, while admittedly not eloquent or even necessarily sincere, nevertheless sparked a story in my mind that would keep building for years: "It's absolutely wrong for the state to calmly condone and enact executions of other people, it's barbaric....but now...if someone kills your husband or child or something, and you want to hunt them down and kill them yourself...I got no problem with that." I thought this was an extraordinary concept, and I immediately slipped off the couch and away from our company to jot the basic idea down on a notepad in my bedroom. I knew immediately that

putting a character in this situation, giving him or her the option to commit a state-sanctioned execution as revenge against a loved one's killer, had the potential to make an amazing, emotionally and intellectually provocative story.

Blood in the Grass, the film that eventually evolved from this idea, is set in a futuristic dystopia where citizens have the option of legally sanctioned revenge. Widower Joseph Burr's teenage son Pinkie is shot and killed by Kraut, a close friend of the boy who Joseph knows well. Kraut claims the shooting was an accident, that the boys' relationship ran deeper than this devolved society would tolerate. In the confusion and turmoil of coming to terms with their feelings in this environment, everything had gone wrong in the most horrific way. Kraut is convicted of murder and sentenced to death. Enraged and feeling that everything has been taken from him, Burr seeks the right to execute the boy himself to personally find "justice" for his son and allow himself closure.

My attraction to this story is largely motivated by own ambivalence about the subject of capital punishment. I consider myself a leftist on most social issues, and I do believe the death penalty is symbolic of a primitive culture. If it ever came to a democratic vote, I would absolutely voice my opinion that it should be abolished. However, I call myself ambivalent on the topic when I imagine how I would react to a situation such as the one Burr faces. If someone brutally murdered my mother or father, my sister, nephew, husband, or other loved one in cold blood, how would I feel? Would I want to see that person suffer, be denied life just as they had done to someone I cared deeply about? Could I even be so hurt, enraged, and hungry for revenge to want to kill this person myself?

I have never been in such a situation, and I cannot imagine how a person who has been could feel toward their loved one's killer. The parents of Matthew Shepherd, a gay college student who was brutally tortured and murdered in Wyoming in the late 1990s, simply because of his sexual orientation, requested that the court spare the lives of their son's convicted killers and show

them the mercy they did not grant Matthew. This personal strength and humanity is something I think we should all hope for in such a horrifying situation.

However, I do not know that I could express such restraint and compassion, and against my moral intellect, I fear my visceral reaction to such a situation might be far less merciful. Much of my motivation in crafting the story and script for *Blood in the Grass* was stirred and inspired by my own sense of loss, my confusion in dealing with the stark reality of impermanence and mortality, and the anger I felt in dealing with several personal matters in my young adulthood.

Because *Blood in the Grass* is such a personal film, and informed by my own life experience, I feel it imperative to expand upon my own personal background before analyzing the specific technical and creative decisions I made during the production. In the following section, I will discuss my personal and artistic background in order to provide a context for how I, as an independent student filmmaker, came to craft my latest work. I will then discuss my influences and choices for the film in the areas of writing, directing, production design, sound, editing, and technology. Finally, I will analyze the effectiveness of these choices in achieving the goals I set for myself in making my latest film.

Artistic and Academic Background

I was born and raised in rural Tennessee, close to the Mississippi and Alabama borders. My parents and sister and I lived in a golfing and country club community in Selmer, the county seat, with a population of fewer than five thousand. I went to elementary school in Bethel Springs, a smaller town with just around a thousand people, and spent a significant amount of my childhood in Finger, Tennessee, population two hundred, where my grandfather was the mayor for most of my first decade of existence. Much of my childhood was spent running around barefoot with neighborhood kids, recklessly playing with fireworks, and exploring the woods behind my house with my golden retriever, Ben. It was a picturesque rural Deep South upbringing.

Film was always an important part of my life, and for whatever reason, my parents did not censor anything from me; this was something I will remain forever thankful for. I feel like almost all of my allowance as a kid was spent at the local independent video stores. Every weekend I brought home stacks of movies, ranging from cartoons as a young kid to horror movies as a young adolescent to artsy foreign films and American indies as a high schooler. Even in tiny Finger, before the days of corporate video stores shutting out all the small mom and pop shops, I could walk down to the old town square and rent movies on VHS.

Cinema took on different and deeper meaning as I grew older. I will never forget in junior high the first time I knew that I wanted to become a filmmaker. After playing in a basketball game before the Thanksgiving holiday, I rented Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* (1997) and Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996), and watched them alone, back-to-back. By this point, I was on the cusp of becoming a typically disaffected and rebellious teenager, dissatisfied with my small town existence. This was an ideal time for these films to transport me as they did, to very different worlds. They gave me a visceral experience, in which I realized the intellectual and emotional power of the movies. Narrative film made me question the narrow points of view in my small town world and awakened ideas of cultural relativity. It provoked new thought, incited deep new feelings, and opened me up to new worlds I did not know existed but was thrilled to learn about.

Film, and media in general, took on a deeper meaning as a vehicle for self-analysis and identification as a teenager when I came to terms with being gay in an extremely homophobic environment. Before the days of Lady Gaga and legalized same-sex marriage, when Ellen DeGeneres and *Will & Grace* were barely on the cultural radar, homosexuality was as foreign a concept in my small town in the early Bush era as I imagine communist affiliation had been in the fifties. Seeing depictions of gay and lesbian characters on screen and in the media let me know that I was not alone. They assured me that I could experience the whole range of human experience as a

gay individual, even if my immediate culture as a teenager tried to make me feel ashamed and less than human.

I made my first film my senior year of high school as part of my senior project. I shot it on my parents' home video camera and edited it between two VCRs. In the fall of 2003, I attended the University of Memphis on full scholarship. It was only a hundred miles away geographically from where I grew up, but culturally it might as well have been a million.

My primary major was sociology, and I concentrated in social theory with particular interest in neo-Marxist and feminist theory. My honors thesis was a radical feminist cultural studies analysis of Stanley Kubrick's films. It challenged the common assumptions about the director's misogyny, and theorized that the absence and abuse of women in his films were instead reflective of the experience of women as second-class citizens and victims of male violence in the real world. I had always dreamed of being a professor, and even went to Chicago to visit graduate schools in anticipation of one day earning a Ph.D. in the social sciences. My love of cinema, however, kept tugging at me until I made a new career decision.

I always took film classes, beginning with my first semester in college. I leaned toward a film major, but also felt that it should just remain a hobby, that it was selfish to try and be an artist. As a minority, I felt it was more imperative to study human behavior and try and bring some enlightened thought to the world by challenging social misconceptions and cultural prejudice. One day early on in my junior year, and very soon after I had decided to major in sociology, I was in the film building computer lab. I overheard some film students geeking out over some subject of cinema. At that moment, I felt I had taken a wrong turn. I left the building almost in tears, and realized on my walk home that I would never be happy without dedicating a large part of my life to cinema. I decided to double major.

I was deeply shaped as an artist by my time in Memphis. Like many Southern cities, it is geographically isolated from other urban areas, serves as a culturally liberal oasis, and is

artistically-inclined in reaction to the thousands of square miles of dull, lifeless, conservative rural land and small towns that surround it. I can only theorize that the artistic attitude of Memphis is still informed by the legend of Sam Phillips turning his garage into a recording studio and later discovering Elvis, Johnny Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis, among others, for the entire world to hear.

The arts community of Memphis was explicitly DIY, not in the Home Depot sense, but in the cultural aesthetic style that originated with punk rock and underground 'zines. DIY meant making art yourself with limited resources and without seeking any help or recognition from an elite establishment. It meant making art for art's sake, not looking over your shoulder to see who is watching in hopes of being discovered and making it big. Collectivist culture also reined supreme, both in the co-habitational sense (my social life in my last six months there revolved around a radical vegan co-op) and in the artistic sense (I rented cameras and auditioned for films at the local digital media co-op).

I worked on several student and independent films there and made several of my own on the burgeoning medium of digital video. I did script reading and research for director Craig Brewer of *Hustle and Flow* (2005) fame. Craig had made his first film, 2000's *The Poor and the Hungry*, in the earliest days of digital video with a small inheritance. His breakout film *Hustle & Flow* was itself a love letter to the DIY spirit of Memphis, telling the story of a pimp who turns his grungy house into a recording studio with egg cartons lining the walls.

I was extremely happy in Memphis, but I felt after graduating college and continuing to make small films with my loose collective of peers, that if I did not leave soon, I would become complacent and never leave. I applied only to the University of New Orleans and was awarded a full scholarship from the graduate school, moving to the city I had loved and visited so many times in college in the fall of 2008.

My first year of film school, I became fast friends with classmates Jon Gunnar Gylfason and Chris Patureau. We simply kept making films together and, in the summer of 2009, decided to

make our ragtag team official and give it a name. We called ourselves the Killer Sheep Film Collective, named after the Icelandic creature that so often adorned JonGunnar's t-shirts and had become the subject of several in-jokes among our classmates. I insisted that we call ourselves a "collective" rather than a production company to avoid feigning any sort of pretentious professionalism and instead embrace a punk rock attitude of making weird satirical films with limited resources simply out of love for the medium. In our first year, we made half a dozen short films ranging from seven to twenty-five minutes in length. The first few months were mainly JonGunnar and myself writing, directing, and producing shorts as a two-man team, with Patureau often on hand for crew assistance. However, in the second half of our first year as a unit, we grew with many more members, notably Kd Amond, a new film student who took an interest in producing for us.

My résumé as a writer/director has mainly consisted of comedies, particularly absurdist comedy with a focus on the camp aesthetic. In college, I made *Hi Honey, I'm Home* (2006) about a guy who cannot stop killing hippies on his way home from work. *Sorority Feud* (2008) was one of a line of scripts I wrote (and the only one I actually shot) in which I put my then-filmmaking partner, the bearded and pudgy gay bear Matt Goad, in a pretty blonde wig surrounded by admirers, mainly because a bearded guy in a wig is always funny. Clearly, I had room to mature as a filmmaker. My first year film at UNO was *Goodbye, Clinton!* (shot in 2008 and completed in 2009), an homage to Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye, Lenin!* (2003). In the film, a liberal high schooler goes into a coma before the 2000 election and wakes up in the late Bush era. Due to his weak heart, he must be slowly and sensitively introduced by his sister to all the cultural changes of the new decade. Though somewhat of a "dumb" comedy, the political satire was clear, and this was perhaps my first step to maturity in content and making a statement with my films.

I was not married to comedy, but I considered it much easier to pull off than drama. Comedy, at least, came more naturally to me as a filmmaker than any other tone or genre. Additionally, I had seen far more low-budget and student films attempt drama and fail miserably. I began to truly move toward more serious work with a film I made for the 48 Hour Film Project, *Shame* (2009). It follows Mabel as she contemplates the request of her best friend Barry to secretly euthanize him so that he may avoid the continued suffering from a debilitating terminal illness. My professor Henry Griffin, after watching it for the first time, told me wide-eyed, "God that film was intense!" He then started comparing me to Lars Von Trier, which I am not entirely sure how I feel about, but I am glad that he liked it. *Shame* is extremely somber and serious until a reveal at the end, when Mabel is about to shoot Barry and make it look like a self-inflicted shot. As it turns out, the gun is not loaded and she is the subject of a *Punk'd*-style hidden camera show. Hilarity ensues.

My next film was based on a script I workshopped intensely and was very proud of called *Straight, No Chaser*. It is a study of the dissolution and moral decay of a character, a drug dealer who is given the chance to advance in his trade by making a hit on the friend that brought him into the drug world. I shot the film for my directing class and have rough cut it more than once, including a full fifteen-minute version. Unfortunately, to this day, it not only stands out as the most large scale film I have ever made, but it is also the only one left unfinished. I have shown it to many peers with mostly thumbs up, and I do believe parts of it are great; but parts of it devolve into melodrama, some technical aspects are just awful, and it remains unfinished.

I then made *Tugboat* (2010), based on a screenplay I wrote with JonGunnar based on his original story. It tells the story of Rose, one of a group of Christian volunteers who come from the Midwest, down to New Orleans, to help free-spirited Nancy fix her aunt's Katrina-damaged home. The events of the story reveal that the church volunteers are actually a group of ex-gays, which proves ironic because Nancy is a proud lesbian. A love triangle develops between Nancy, Rose, and Darrell, the arrogant ex-gay leader of the group who is "dating" Rose. My goal with this film was to

make a comedy, clearly a campy gay one, but one with real heart and emotion. I was inspired by Pedro Almodóvar, one of my favorite directors, and his lack of respect for genres.

Both *Shame* and *Tugboat* blended genres of comedy and drama, the former very abruptly, and the latter more seamlessly. I have watched both films in a theatre with an audience several times and received overwhelmingly positive responses. Jon Gunnar's girlfriend told me after the first screening of *Shame* at New Orleans' Contemporary Arts Center, that a girl next to her started sniffing and tearing up before the film's comedic reveal. I also received loud laughs and applause at the twist ending when it played there and at UNO for the first time. When *Tugboat* premiered at the UNO Film Fest, the audience laughed every time I wanted them to, sometimes over the next lines of dialogue. They cheered loudly at the end, and again over the end credits when Rose and Nancy kissed (which was an extremely encouraging thing to experience as someone who faced a lot of homophobia growing up). Fellow students came up to me wide-eyed afterward and told me they were genuinely shocked by the quality of the film. My friend Chip Hornstein patted me on the shoulder at an afterparty and told me, "Trent, it was great. You could have just gone straight for the comedy, but you didn't, and that was really good." I won the Audience Award for best film of that night and the festival director, David LeBlanc told me, "There was no contest, Trent. You got at least half the votes for *Tugboat* and then several more for *Shame*."

I have definitely made several bad films. Every film serves as a learning experience to become a better filmmaker. But after making and screening *Shame* and *Tugboat*, I have confidence in my ability to get an emotional response from an audience. However, so far, I have mostly gotten laughs.

With *Blood in the Grass*, I sought to create a film in a similar collectivist fashion as I had my previous films, but with a thematic difference. I wanted to make a beautiful but painfully sad and brutal film without irony about a very serious subject. *Shame* has played in a few small film festivals while *Tugboat* has only played locally in theatres and television. I have only tried to

submit the latter to the New Orleans Film Fest, where it was rejected. However, I stopped there, as I knew that clocking in at over twenty-five minutes made the film not-so-festival-friendly. *Blood in the Grass* is extracted from a wide, sprawling story that could easily be a feature. However, I hope for the first time to push this film into festivals, and this would start with getting the right length, form, and pacing for the short film medium.

Chapter 2

Writing

My undergraduate directing professor once told my class that as you make bigger and more complex films, you have to learn to "kill your darlings." You have to let go of attachments, to cut favorite scenes, subplots, even characters, in order to make the film work. Never was this truer in my personal experience than with *Blood in the Grass*.

My initial concept of the story and film were very different from the form it would eventually take. Taking what Anna had said quite literally in our discussion of capital punishment, I imagined a father whose son had been murdered hunting down his son's killer in an almost game-like scenario sanctioned by the government. I also initially focused on the condemned convicted teenager more than the father. My early drafts had the boy as a prison worker, let out into the city to walk around a few hours a day. Here the boy was stalked and taunted by the father, who could at any moment kill the boy without consequence. This uncertainty and constant taunting was meant to be a type of torture, and the circumstances of why this situation was taking place were shrouded in mystery and revealed slowly for the audience, like peeling back layers to understand a shocking and complex narrative.

My earliest concept of the story was also less about the central issue of the death penalty, as it was an exercise in audience perception and emotional response. I wanted the film to largely be a mystery: *Why is this boy being stalked by this crazed older man? Why won't anyone help him? What is this all about?* As the film slowly revealed the details of this arrangement, audience sympathy would shift from the boy to the father, until both were seen as deeply wounded, flawed characters. I therefore envisioned the film to be similar visually and in tone to two films in which characters wander a sad cityscape in search of something sinister: Christopher Nolan's 1998 debut *Following*, and Kieślowski's *A Short Film About Killing*.

When I first began workshopping the story in my graduate screenwriting classes, I focused primarily on the social context of the story. Drawing from my interests in sociology and politics, I began building the details of a world where societal mores had devolved to such a point that vigilante justice had become the norm. I imagined the father as a widower, a state worker who had dedicated his entire life to the system in which he lived, and which was now granting him this right to personal "justice."

Though imagining how the culture changed to become a new world for my story was important in making it feel real, I soon realized from my feedback in class that the general choices I should make in that respect should be to enhance the specific choices relating to the characters and their unique situation in the story. The major conflict of the story is internal to the father, his thirst for revenge against his humanity and aversion to violence, the central question being whether or not he can allow himself to be responsible for the death of another human being. In developing his backstory and character, I chose for him to be a state worker so that his allegiance to the system could intensify the tensions created by his doubts of its effectiveness. I chose for him to be a widower as this made his situation all the more dire, in that losing his only son also meant losing the last surviving member of his family.

A question that I had long considered in developing the story over the years was related to the motive for the murder. What was the boys' relationship? Were they friends, or was it a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time? What could drive a teenager to murder one of his peers? I first considered making it be over drugs, friends sharing an addiction that spirals out of control, with greed and distrust leading to violence. I then imagined it to be over a girl, one boy driven to kill the other out of jealous passion. None of these felt natural, but more like stock scenarios for cinematic conflict. I imagined them as lovers, a tragic death resulting from an accident, set in motion by the homophobic environment the boys would find themselves in.

In my studies of sociology in undergrad, I found that gender is the first and most basic form of social stratification, and one can base their opinion on a society's progressiveness or repressiveness based on how it addresses and perceives gender roles and sexual identity. I decided that casting the boys as forbidden lovers made their situation more empathetic, dire, and complex. When I made the protagonist in *Straight, No Chaser* gay, it did not really change the story. He just happened to be gay. Henry Griffin, my professor for that class, loved that addition. "It adds a layer," he told me. I felt that would have the same effect with *Blood in the Grass*.

In the earliest drafts at UNO, I gave all of the characters J names: Joe, John, and James. It was incredibly confusing, and my screenwriting professor Erik Hansen, along with the rest of the class, told me this had to go. I called the father Burr as it had connotations of burly, masculine, strong-willed. For the boys, I gave them what I considered aesthetically interesting names, and ones that served as an homage to one of my favorite films of all time. Srdjan Dragojevic's 1998 film *The Wounds* is a true story about two Serbian punks that became national celebrities for their teenage crime spree: Pinkie and Kraut.

I now had the basic story in place, set in the future dystopia where vigilante justice is the norm. Burr's teenage son Pinkie is shot and killed by his friend Kraut. Burr is granted the right to execute Kraut himself, but after his initial blind rage and thirst for revenge start to fade as the execution grows closer, he finds himself questioning his ability to carry out the sentence and kill the boy he knows and who claims the whole ordeal was an accident. All while this is happening, Burr slowly learns the details of the depth of the boys' relationship.

My earliest drafts were structured as non-linear. One of the most influential films I have ever seen is Tim Blake Nelson's criminally overlooked *Eye of God* (1997), which tells the story of a small town murder involving three people, told in such a way that many of the circumstances are shrouded in mystery until revealed in full to the audience in an intense, wrenching climax. Many of my favorite films, such as *The Wounds*, *City of God* (2002, Fernando Meirelles), *Memento* (2000,

Christopher Nolan), and *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) are told in a non-linear way so that the presentation of events are not motivated by chronology, but instead by feeling and the filmmaker's choice of when and how to give the audience information for emotional effect.

Trying to follow this model, which was not so much a model as it was a risk that the filmmakers above had taken and succeeded at, was highly impractical. My thesis advisor and screenwriting professor Erik Hansen was instrumental in bringing my sprawling story to a practical form. He encouraged me to find focus, to zero in on the most interesting and clear hook of the story, the father and his journey. Will he follow through with the execution and be responsible for the death of another person himself, or step away from the execution only to see his son's killer go free?

In *Writing Movies: The Practical Guide to Creating Stellar Screenplays*, Daniel Noah writes:

At the center of every good movie there is a single driving force around which all other elements gather.....It's a question.....It's a centrifugal force that propels the story along its path of action, accelerating it steadily and breathlessly toward a climactic conclusion. (35)

Beyond focusing on one plot element of theme, a film is better focused if the audience has one central character and question to concentrate on. Noah further states that most movies have a single protagonist "because it helps the audience to have a single character who they can follow and identify with. To share his burdens. To invest in her dreams" (35). Simplifying things more, this single protagonist "should focus on a single, overarching goal," and that "while the protagonist may act on smaller objectives along the way, that primary goal is the one that keeps him or her pushing forward at all costs" (36).

For me, the name of the game for this project was simplicity. As a DIY filmmaker, I am not only writer, but producer and director as well, so my script was greatly influenced by the practicalities of shooting. Additionally, I wanted simplicity in terms of length, as every film I had made for a class at UNO (except for one experimental short I made as a cinematography project) had been literally twice as long as it was supposed to be. For practical reasons, I knew that my

original concept of Kraut and Burr wandering the dystopian city would be extremely difficult to shoot. Though there were wonderfully dilapidated areas of New Orleans I had already scouted and loved, production of those scenes would have taken lots of planning, scouting, and money to block off city streets and would also have brought along all the uncontrollable and unpredictable factors of shooting outdoors and in public.

Furthermore, many of the same points could be made in much more simple-to-shoot ways. I started thinking of films like *Doubt* (John Patrick Shanley, 2008), which was mostly driven by and composed of dialogue but was absolutely riveting in its portrayal of internal conflict and uncertainty. This is how I came to have the core of the film composed of three dialogue-driven scenes, to show Burr struggle with his mourning, his desire for revenge, and his conscience, as he moves toward his ultimate decision. These dialogues also gave me the potential to keep things focused, and to show this character's struggle through interacting with others so that it felt natural.

Noah writes:

The goal should also be tangible, meaning something external and specific....Though the goal should be simple, there may be a world of complexity beneath it. In fact, there is a deeper desire underlying the goal. Something more abstract and internal.....The internal desire is often the emotional root of the external goal, signaling what is really at stake for the protagonist. (37)

Burr's explicit goal is to execute his son's murderer and find justice. Externally, he is certain, driven to this goal. Internally, however, he is conflicted as to his ability and desire to destroy another human being. What he *wants* is "justice" for his son, but what he truly *needs* is to accept his son's death, which subconsciously he suspects may not be granted by the execution. In fact, taking another life could in all probability make him feel less than human; but Burr needs to deal with his mourning, and so he tries desperately throughout the film to convince himself that killing Kraut will bring him closure, and that he will follow through with this action. The courtroom scene is meant to give exposition and make clear the situation and goal for the protagonist. The scene in the psychiatrist's office is meant to show the doubts and internal conflict that Burr is struggling with.

The radio station scene intensifies this conflict. Henry Griffin suggested that Burr's action should be to go into the dialogue with Mac, full-on with conviction to kill. However, when Mac ups the stakes on the method and severity of the process, Burr's internal struggle is heightened as reality sets in.

Something I have learned as a filmmaker is that subtlety often does not work in the visual medium of cinema. Erik encouraged me to make things explicit and clear with the dialogue. He said something that stuck with me as I tried to make a dense, fast-paced short film: "You don't have time." I did not have time to waste on dialogue that had no function. Screenwriting is about economy. Ideally, every word on the page has a function, and there is as much white space as possible to make it a flowing, well-paced vertical reading experience. I therefore made much of what Burr says explicit so that the very large points are made clearly in the short running time I had to work with. An example is in the courtroom scene in which Burr tells the judge, "I assure you your honor, I have greatly considered this action. I will follow through." Here, the main goal is established, and the internal conflict Burr faces is hinted at, only to be revealed further in the following scene with Dr. Greene. There is some room for subtext, such as when Burr responds to Dr. Greene's first question with a question. Asked how he feels, he responds sarcastically with a question, "I dunno, how do you feel?" The text suggests that he thinks the line of questioning is a waste of time, but the subtext is that he does not want to answer truthfully and reveal his uncertainty. However, for the most part, subtlety is not the name of the game---often not in features but definitely not in short films. I tried to move fast and make things clear without being too on the nose as, in the short film form, "you don't have time" to waste.

I ended up with a shooting draft of eleven pages, which was something rare for me. After much workshopping and meeting with Erik, I felt I had a well-structured script that was compatible with the short film form, put a character in a dire conflict, and presented an emotional core and

central question to grab and hold on to my audience. Writing a short film is about economy, and the more that a scene can function and multi-task, the better.

The opening scene of Kraut on the street, and the following scenes with Burr leaving the house and encountering the protestors, served multiple functions in opening the film. These scenes were meant to orient viewers to this strange hypothetical world, grab the audience's attention and create a sense of mystery, and provide exposition for character and story. This was more successful with the latter of the scenes (which unlike the first, made the final cut). The protestors, décor of Burr's apartment, and his pill-popping begin to show a character who is in a dire situation that puts him at conflict with others over a very public and emotional issue. However, as this orients viewers, it is not explicit, leaving the audience to begin theorizing over the circumstances Burr faces and actively participate in the film. Film is an incredibly passive activity, and I chose to start out the film with some mystery to grab the audience's attention and allow them to participate more actively by first giving information slowly to allow them to put the pieces together.

The heart of the film, dramatizing the central conflict within Burr, plays out mostly in the three main dialogue scenes that follow. As mentioned above, one reason I wrote the core center of the film as somewhat simple dialogue scenes was so they would be practical to shoot. But creatively, since the story itself is so fantasy-based and has such a large-scale, broadly human type of conflict, I felt that I could have gone one of two ways with telling the story. I could make it a large-scale production where information was revealed and conflict was played out in action, or I could keep it a small-scale film where the exposition and conflict play out through dialogue. I chose to go with the latter not only for practical reasons, but because it was the film that I really wanted to make. There would be executions, make-up, and action, but the soul of the film lay in the dialogue and performances of the actors. A screenplay is a blueprint, but the heart, structure, and emotion have to be there once it goes into the director's and department heads' hands for interpretation. I tried to craft a screenplay that I could turn into an acting tour-de-force on screen.

After opening with scenes of ambiguity, I felt that the circumstances should be fully explained and the central conflict firmly established with the courtroom scene. Given the story, a courtroom sentencing seemed a natural place for us to learn the particulars of this world's justice system, and the choice that Burr faces as its subject. As I will discuss in the analysis section, this dialogue scene was among the weakest written parts of the script, and likely due to this early error in the script, was the most poorly directed scene shot. The early part of the dialogue, between Judge White and Burr, does serve its function in a clear and concise manner, and therefore made the final cut with what I considered satisfactory performance, while the arrival of Kraut and his pleading for mercy hit the cutting room floor.

I chose the next scene of dialogue to take place with a psychiatrist for practical reasons, as seeing a counselor would be expected of a character in Burr's situation. It allowed Burr to speak and reveal his inner conflict in a natural way, in confidence, and where his mental state is the central topic of conversation. It also facilitated a deepening and fleshing out of the conflict by showing the opposite view of vigilante justice through the character of Dr. Greene, a professional and benevolent character. Her opinion comes directly into conflict with Burr's decision to follow through with the justice system's typical and brutal protocol.

Listening to a lot of conservative talk radio inspired Mac Mansfield. He was most notably motivated by Rush Limbaugh, as most of the audience will recognize Mac as a fictionalized version of that notorious figure. The talk radio medium is almost exclusively dominated by conservative opinions. Open, even proud bigotry is not uncommon. Talk radio, although simple, is highly popular, highly influential on societal discourse, and has proved to withstand the test of time through my two and a half decades as an American citizen. I therefore found this setting conducive to the story, as I would imagine such a show would address a topic such as Burr's situation. I saw that the scene could function by casting the personal story of Burr into a more societal context, as well as allow Burr to dive more into specifics of the looming execution, making his situation feel

more real to him and building tension toward the climax. Furthermore, the connotations of talk radio and a Rush Limbaugh-type character were consistent with the message I wanted to send against capital punishment, portraying the practice as resulting from primitive, misanthropic ideology.

After arguing strongly with Dr. Greene and mostly standing his ground, Burr is sent deeper into conflict over his ability to execute Kraut by talking with Mansfield. Mac pushes Burr into a corner by suggesting he drown Kraut instead of shoot him. Not only do the specifics of the execution method become more severe and personal, but simply talking about the gory details as the date draws closer puts pressure on Burr. I wrote a cut-away scene to show Burr watching an execution to give an opportunity to show his doubt by his horrified reaction, and to illustrate the increasing reality of his situation and decision as its timing grows closer. The more “real” following through with executing Kraut feels, the more conflicted and doubtful Burr becomes of his ability to follow through.

Obviously, I struggle with brevity and concision. However, as much as I had killed my darlings, indeed slaughtered them in writing only eleven pages, in the end I could not completely let go of the backstory and the tragedy of Pinkie and Kraut. One of my producers, Kd Amond, had fallen in love with an earlier non-linear draft and begged me not to do so. While Erik and my screenwriting classmates encouraged me to focus on Burr and make the short film focused and appropriately *short*, my mates in the collective and my heart told me to not let go of the boys.

I came up with a compromise. I wrote a “thesis script” focusing on Burr that served as a whole, completely intact short film (Appendix A). Separately from this, I wrote several “extra scenes” of backstory with Pinkie and Kraut that could be added to those of Burr, creating a parallel non-linear film like the one I had idealized but seen as impractical in earlier drafts (Appendix B). They could also, if needed, be thrown out the window in postproduction.

The scenes establish that Pinkie and Kraut were secretly lovers in a homophobic environment that drove them apart, and sent them both into emotional devastation and confusion, which spirals their relationship toward a tragic and violent end. I made these scenes simple to shoot, so as not to waste time and resources should they not make the final cut. I knew that in all probability my thesis and festival cuts would be comprised solely of the scenes in the thesis script, but I was in love with the backstory too much to let it go entirely. I also imagined that I could have two cuts: one for my thesis and for festivals that was a practical length for a short film, and a longer version to screen at school and print on DVD that included the boys' backstory and was closer to the non-linear, and admittedly impractically long version I had been dreaming of in my head.

Directing

As director, you are considered the major author of the film. You tie all elements of the film together through working with the department heads, and you make the final decisions of what makes it on set and how it looks while you film. However, for all the complex responsibilities of the director, I like to think of the position in the simplest terms possible. At the most basic level, the director is solely responsible for just two jobs: how the actors perform, and where the camera goes. For me, focusing on these two aspects is the most important thing to do on set, as one's mind tends to wander about a million other things (the next scene, where the costumes are, if anyone has broken anything, etc.). Furthermore, I love making the decisions related to those two responsibilities far more than anything in preproduction or post. If I had to put one title on my resume as a filmmaker, I would choose "director."

Working with actors is my favorite part of filmmaking. I always become very excited when it comes to the casting process. In particular, I have a fondness for open casting calls. Most of the time, you have a lot of untalented yahoos lining up outside; however, occasionally you have someone remarkable come out of nowhere and it feels thrilling and wonderful to stumble across unknown raw talent.

In her book, Changing Direction, Lenore Dekoven writes that in the audition process, a director should:

[t]ry to select the audition material wisely. Prepared monologues...force the actor to relate to an unseen or absent entity, creating a false circumstance.... [it] has perhaps been worked on and over and often coached by another individual so that what one sees is the actor's response to another's direction rather than his/her own creativity. (89-90)

At auditions, I always print out a few pages of the script and allow the talent to try once without any direction, and then once with direction. This allows me to see how well they take direction, reveals their versatility, and gives me an idea of how easily I can get what I want. The less work I have to do and the more responsive they are to my directions, the better.

Dekoven recommends two things that I greatly disagree with: not bringing a camera to the first audition, and not having cold readings (90). I always roll on auditions because I have to know that the talent will be comfortable in front of the camera, and it is very helpful to have footage of the auditions when making tough calls on casting. I understand that some people have a problem with cold readings, as in a way you are only finding out that someone can *read*. However, I think that sending out material ahead of time may cause similar problems to those Dekoven describes with actors reading monologues. An actor may spend a lot of time with the material until he or she becomes boxed into one way, *their* way of delivering a performance.

I go for something in between a cold reading and allowing talent to see the audition material ahead of time. I typically have open auditions without scheduling anyone. Some people may show up that are not right for any role, but their information and audition footage goes into the Killer Sheep's database for future projects, so it is never a waste of time. I give those who come to the audition several minutes to read over the material before coming in to read. That way, they are not doing a full-on *cold* reading, have also not gotten boxed in to one way of doing things, and are allowed to show their creativity by having a short amount of time to work with the material. The

latter of these results is particularly important, as so much of filmmaking relies on being creative and effective under pressure.

All of the supporting roles for *Blood in the Grass* were fairly easy to cast. Veleka Gray, Havilah Malone, and Jason Breau each absolutely knocked out of the park the roles of Judge White, Doctor Greene, and Mac Mansfield, respectively. Havilah felt warm, empathetic, and likable. She had the qualities that I was looking for in Dr. Greene, and her reading played out well in reviewing audition tapes. Veleka had some minor competition, but for the most part I knew she had it early on. I had assistant-directed her in Jon Gunnar's thesis film, *Fingers* (2011). She impressed me then, had a great look on camera even during auditions, and played the mean Judge White with a wicked sincerity. Jason played the arrogance and bombastic delivery reminiscent of Limbaugh, just as I was looking for.

I initially thought that I would have many choices for the role of Burr, and that casting Pinkie and Kraut would be much more difficult with fewer choices. I had this completely wrong. There were only a few actors that I could cast for Burr, but I ended up making a tough decision between around half a dozen young guys to choose for the two roles of Pinkie and Kraut.

Glenn Robin was among three actors I called back for Burr. After the initial auditions, I thought any of the three could work for the role. The film is short, with minimal time for character development, so the audience needed to sympathize and identify with my protagonist immediately and in the simplest way possible. I liked Glenn's accent and casual demeanor. I wanted the actor playing Burr to come across as an everyman, an ordinary dad, in order for the audience to identify with him. I felt Glenn had these qualities.

My best friend Jonathan Butkovic came down from Tennessee to help with auditions, and later came to be my assistant for the duration of the shoot. He was my reader for the male roles in the audition. As part of the callbacks for Burr, Jonathan stood in for Kraut. We let each potential Burr improvise in pouncing and grabbing Jonathan, slamming him against the wall as Burr does

Kraut in the opening scene of the thesis script. Though I had doubts about all the potential actors for Burr, I was leaning toward casting Glenn before the callback. The other candidates were disappointing, and I also just felt comfortable with Glenn. He even reminded me of my own father, who I am as close to as pretty much anyone else in the world, so that was a reassuring quality. When Glenn slammed Jonathan against the chalkboard in the room we were using for the readings, and threatened to gut him like a fish for what he had done to his son, any doubts of his ability evaporated. All of us in the room had chills. Glenn was my Burr.

I knew that the vast majority of those who came to audition for Pinkie and Kraut would be straight actors vying for a gay role. I did not want discomfort with the physical aspects of the role, particularly those in the "extra scenes," to be an issue on set, so I told each candidate that there would be a sex scene and nudity (though separately). This was not entirely a lie, as we envisioned, time permitting, a scene of Pinkie and Kraut being intimate with one another (but of course, we did not shoot it, due to time restraints). I mainly told the actors this to make sure they would be comfortable with playing a gay role and being physical with another male, as one has to ensure on the front end that issues such as these will not arise.

On callbacks, Ben Matheny nailed the part of Pinkie. I initially had doubts, as Ben looks a bit older and seems to be overexposed by playing in every movie made at UNO. However, his charisma at callbacks was undeniable. Kraut came down to Mason Joiner and one other candidate, who for the sake of anonymity, I will call Jim. I had had Mason as a student in the Intro to Film class I taught at UNO. He had inquired about the role the semester before, after simply hearing of the film through word of mouth. He was the first person to show up on the first day of auditions. Mason was good and was my sentimental favorite. Jim, however, came out of nowhere. He saw the posting on Craigslist and came in from Baton Rouge. Kd pulled me aside after his first reading and told me, "He's so pretty." She had a point, as he did have a look that was more attractive to the camera than Mason. It became the single hardest casting decision I have ever made. Kd and I spent more than

one night up to the wee hours of the morning comparing Mason's and Jim's callback footage and not being able to come to a decision.

Finally I showed the footage of both to Chip. He told me to choose Jim over Mason. He asked me of the former, "Would you take him to Steven Spielberg?" I told him I hated Steven Spielberg. "It doesn't matter, which one of these two would you take to Steven Spielberg?" I took a deep sigh. It was Jim.

Jim had also shown a lot of enthusiasm. He showed up to callbacks almost an hour early. When I called and told him he had landed the role, he was ecstatic. I would not normally call or e-mail someone to tell them they *do not* have a role. As someone in theatre once told me: "Don't do that. That shit's awkward." But I had to call Mason and tell him personally for some reason. I told him it was the single hardest decision I had ever made as a filmmaker, I thought he was extremely talented, and that I absolutely wanted to work with him in the future.

The next day I got an apologetic e-mail from Jim telling me that after more consideration he could not accept the role because of the physical aspects of the role. I was angry, after all I had been through with choosing him, and I had to ask which physical aspect of the role did he have a problem with. I hoped it was being slammed against a wall and being drowned in a small pool while handcuffed. Unfortunately, it was the "gay thing." He said he did not want to get on set and be uncomfortable and flake out on us. It was frustrating because I had been so explicit about that requirement upon first audition, but it taught me a lesson about trusting one's intuition in terms of casting. I'm glad he came forth with that concern before we went any deeper into preproduction.

For the most part, the shoot for *Blood in the Grass* went incredibly smoothly. The first day of shooting consisted only of scene five, Burr's visit with Dr. Greene. We had a very small crew and it was an isolated and tightly controlled set, which was a great way to start day one. I had already had an enormous amount of rehearsal time with Glenn and Havilah, so much so that I feared we had over-rehearsed. There was a clear rhythm to the scene, which builds to a climax between the two

characters and their opposite viewpoints on Burr's choice to follow through with the execution. Since it was an emotional scene, I did not want to over-rehearse on set, so that the emotions would not be exhausted while the cameras rolled. However, even when I stepped away, my actors continued to rehearse the lines between themselves. Knowing I would make some adjustments as shooting progressed, I found a polite way to ask them to stop and save it for set.

I realized on this first day that Glenn would improve as the shoot went on. Different actors, of course, require different direction. I have worked with theatre and improv actors to whom I can simply say, "be happier," and they deliver. Some actors need backstory and clear, detailed actions to get the best performance. Glenn worked best in a method sense. He overthought dialogue but delivered fantastic performances when emotions were heightened, especially over multiple takes, when he could let the emotions build. I also realized on day one the value of shooting on multiple cameras. Able to get coverage of both actors at once, we wrapped in just four hours.

Day two was spent on campus to shoot the extra scenes with Kraut and Pinkie. It was another comfortably-paced shoot, but this time with a full crew. Having everyone together with a light schedule allowed the crew to get comfortable before we began shooting the more demanding and intense scenes.

Day three began with the scene of Burr getting ready to leave his house. Directing Glenn for this scene was largely about his movements and pacing. After the basic blocking, we worked on his posture. His formal attire contrasting with the unkempt apartment, as well as the protestors waiting outside, establishing that this was a man who had been thrust into a tense situation and was living under pressure. This needed to be communicated in Burr's movement and posture. I had Glenn stiffen up when he put on his jacket, and struggle for breath until steeling himself before exiting the front door. The breathing exercise that Burr does in the mirror was inspired by one I was taught by a counselor in dealing with my own anxiety, deep breaths in, with slow breaths out, like through a straw. In the dailies of the execution scene, there is a moment where the camera is

rolling before action, and Glenn employed that exercise to psyche himself up for the scene. Though unscripted, I ended up using that footage in my edit.

The protestors scene was one I feared would not work, but I feel that I managed to pull it off, just barely. We had called up Nikki Love, a Killer Sheep regular, to be our head protestor. I feared a limited amount of extras, always a concern for student films, would end up making the film feel *student-y*. Nikki pulled a few people off the street, which helped. I came up with a chant on set, “Mercy, not murder.” It works for the most part, but would later be slightly repetitive in the edit. When Kd and I looked at the dailies later that night, she assured me the scene worked, even with limited extras. My only regret is not coming up with another chant for variety.

Later in the day, we shot the scripted scene of Burr finding Pinkie’s body and holding him in his arms. This was perhaps the most challenging and satisfying exercise in directing that I have ever encountered. There was no dialogue, and the scene was scripted as a transition leading up to the climactic execution scene. I also imagined it might simply be used as a cutaway somewhere in the film. It was all about the visuals, the blocking, the emotion in Glenn’s and Ben’s faces. We blocked the scene, and I showed Glenn how to cradle Ben in his arms and set the pacing for Pinkie fading away while being held in his father’s arms. Glenn was nervous and unsure. He asked me, “What do you want?”

I remembered that Glenn had sons of his own. He had told me about one of his sons coming out as gay, which was one way we had bonded and that had sealed the deal that he was my perfect Burr. I had also realized at this point that Glenn worked best through method and scenes with raw emotion. In response to his question I replied, “This has to be your son.” He froze for a moment, told me he needed to be alone, and that he was not sure how many times he could deliver. He delivered amazingly. The mood on set was extraordinary, and a few of the crew members wiped tears from their eyes.

Leading up to day four, which was the scene with Mansfield, I had done some rewriting and brought it to my screenwriting class. We read it aloud and everyone in class thought it was a vast improvement and worked well. Erik smiled and told me after class, "I had doubts, but wow that played out well."

I had been shooting rehearsals with my 60D and later that night showed Kd my rehearsals with Glenn and Jason in the Avid lab in the Performing Arts Center. Erik walked in, and seeing it, had a grave look on his face. He pulled me into the hallway, and after being thrilled with my writing, expressed major concerns over my direction.

He told me that the comedic, over-the-top performance which I was guiding Jason to play for Mac was playing against the seriousness of the material. Admittedly, I was playing Mac as a cartoon character. That is how I perceive Rush Limbaugh, and I felt that the over-the-top delivery complemented the absurdity of Mac's (and Rush's) rigid and heartless conservative ideology. Erik argued that I had to direct Mac to have conviction, as Rush truly does believe in what he preaches, despite the absurdity.

I felt stuck on my previous vision, and was initially in disagreement over this suggestion. Kd liked the rehearsal footage, but told me, "If you want a cartoon character, you have one." After much consideration, I changed direction. I had Jason tone down his delivery and show conviction over arrogance. I realized that in trying to make a sincere work here, my original plan would have worked against the overall tone I wanted for the film. It was difficult to switch to these new actions on set, but I think Jason succeeded. I think the scene also represents Burr's best performance among the dialogue scenes.

Day five was the courtroom scene. I had limited rehearsal time with Veleka as Judge White, but I had confidence in her ability, as I had worked with her before and knew she had a strong screen presence. I had her play the judge in different ways, ranging from deeply unsympathetic to deeply empathetic, so that I could make the decision in the cutting room. I believe that was the

correct decision to make; however, my indecisiveness was symptomatic of this scene being the weakest one shot. Much of this lies in the writing, with dialogue that was too absurdist.

Additionally, my original casting choice of the bailiff was unable to make it the day of the shoot, sending me into a panic. Theo was huge and middle aged, trumping Mason and a perfect fit for the role. In a panic, we made phone calls to get anyone to stand in, and it ended up being Chip, my young, goofy-looking dear friend. The first part of dialogue in this scene worked well between Judge White and Burr. However, once Kraut enters the scene, it falls apart. This part of the scene would be the first one cut in preproduction.

That day, my producers made a mad dash to save the “breakfast scene” from the extras scenes. We were behind schedule at the courthouse on the Northshore, and Ben was nearly an hour away from the city. All of the extra scenes were lower priority than those in the main thesis script, but this was the one most likely to be incorporated into the final main cut. It is also the only time we see all three characters together, and establishes that Burr knew Kraut during a happier time.

The execution scenes shot on the final day of production were a surreal and intense experience that brought me immense satisfaction as a director. Because the hanging, as originally written in the script, was quite impractical to shoot, we decided to substitute it with two different execution scenarios. We set up a shooting and a poisoning scene. These were simply fun to direct, and mostly consisted of creative blocking and setting the right pace for the action.

The climactic drowning scene, however, presented a much more somber and severe mood on set. Doing several takes, we had to move at a slow pace in order for the talent to build their emotions and not peak too early. This was also a very physically demanding scene, so I took extra steps in observing and caring for my actors' mental and physical states throughout the day. I was initially apprehensive to include Kraut's final line, in which he screams, "I loved him!" Imagining that I would use little of the backstory scenes in the final cut, I wondered if this would simply add confusion to the main thesis cut, due to a lack of context. However, Glenn told me he needed

something to latch on to, and to provoke him to make his final decision in letting Kraut free. This line clearly worked for that action. Glenn delivered once again by bringing a deeply emotional and wrenching performance, and for the second time in the production, several member of my crew had tears in their eyes.

Production Design

Killer Sheep has often found pretty interesting locations for our films. *End of Sweet* was shot entirely in the back room of a strip club on the Westbank area of Metro New Orleans. *Tugboat* was shot at a community center trailer in the Lower Ninth Ward, as well as an abandoned house in the Treme that was once populated by Nigerian squatters. We typically did little to manipulate the sets we found, and often our art department was really only utilized to gather props. However, I felt leading up to *Blood in the Grass* that this was an area that I should improve upon. Good production design helps to tell the story and move it forward, but when utilized well, it can also create mood and reveal character.

I cannot quite remember when I met Sara Bonar, but we became well acquainted during the shoot of *Fingers*, on which she served as a grip. We hit it off well and she was one of the few crewmembers who kept a positive attitude throughout an extremely long and stressful shoot, so I knew I wanted her as crew on my own thesis. We sat together during a production-design AFI workshop at UNO, and just seeing her doodle on her notepad stirred me to say, "Hey, you should be my production designer." This is one of the best decisions I made in terms of crew, so much so that after wrapping the film, I decided to give her a full producer credit.

The choices of production design in Burr's apartment are meant to reveal his character and current situation. The planned visual look for this setting is one that never really changed throughout the many different incarnations of the story over the years. I wanted to show that he

was obviously depressed, through the unkempt quality of his apartment and the clear evidence of substance abuse in the form of pill bottles, beer bottles, and chain-smoked cigarettes in an ashtray.

We started saving all kinds of trash to use for Burr's apartment, including paper, empty boxes, empty beer bottles, and outdated, non-functioning electronics we would otherwise have just thrown out. We looked at many friends' houses for the right structural look, one that would denote that this is the type of apartment for a single man (and in the case of this story, recently childless). The best choice we found was the front part of our friend Jacques Hebert's shotgun house. It was in fact a shotgun with several rooms. However, the front looked like a small one-bedroom or studio apartment due to the layout as one big open area connecting the bedroom and living room. Sara and my art director, Savanna Curtis, worked long and hard to make the set look like the dwelling of an alcoholic too depressed to throw away old newspapers and beer bottles, let alone pick up his clothes and do laundry or vacuum anywhere. The girls yelled "Hot set!" and kicked everyone out besides myself, JonGunnar, and Glenn before shooting, so that no one would mess up the look they had taken so long to create. I think it looks fantastic.

Jacques' house served as a very practical location for numerous scenes. We were able to shoot the protestors scene, in which we follow Burr exiting his house on the way to court, in the front yard of the house. After saving and gathering lots of cardboard, and discussing protest slogans, Sara and Savanna made the homemade protest signs used in this scene, which I saved as big, odd, but unique souvenirs of the shoot. The side of Jacques' house had a little patch of green next to a small utility building so that it looked like a backyard. We used this as the location for Burr's discovery of a dying Pinkie, and for the extra scene between Pinkie and Kraut that leads up to and includes the shooting accident.

Shooting as much as possible at UNO was also helpful and practical. Many scenes that we shot on campus were in settings that did not need a lot of manipulation. We reserved classrooms in the Performing Arts Center for the extra scenes with Pinkie and Kraut. Sara wrote all over the

chalkboards, with specific choices of academic markings, to give the classrooms a high school feel instead of a college environment.

The radio station scene was shot at the studios of WWNO, the on-campus radio station and local NPR affiliate. They rented the studio to us for a deeply discounted student rate. Though it was a tight space and a challenge to shoot with two cameras, the scene with Burr and Mac is mostly comprised of close-ups anyway, so it served us well. Being a real location, we did little in the way of set manipulation. There was some debate on what Mac should be wearing. Sara found video of Rush Limbaugh, and inspired by what we saw, we decided on a semi-casual collared shirt.

For the bathroom scene, in which Burr takes pills before the execution, we wanted a dank, dirty setting that would be appropriate for a structure where people are executed. We asked around UNO where we could find the most dilapidated and run down men's room on campus. We found it in the Liberal Arts building. Sara simply threw trash on the floor and stuck wet paper towels to the wall to make it look even worse.

Dr. Greene's office involved the most intensive production design of any of the locations we shot on campus. Sara and I decided in our location scouting to check out the library on campus, which was currently being gutted and was therefore an aesthetic paradise for my love of structural dilapidation and decay. My dear friend Emmett Luty, who as a favor played the executioner in the poisoning scene, worked in the library at the time and gave us amazing access all over the upper floors and its massive unused spaces. We initially wanted to use the top floor as the execution chamber, but there were issues blocking the way, such as heavy construction and clearly exposed asbestos. Instead, we found a small empty space on the bottom floor that Sara wanted to use as Dr. Greene's office.

There were empty shelves lining the walls, but besides that, the room was barren. Sara and Savanna brought in all the other set dressing and props. We discussed how this should be the only place that felt warm and inviting throughout the entire film, as Dr. Greene is the only voice of

reason and compassion that Burr encounters. The office looks quite the opposite from Burr's apartment, like it belongs to a person whose life is structured and orderly, and who puts care into her surroundings. The use of warm colors, the many books lining the shelves, the art work on the walls, and flowers on her desk all give this scene the feel I wanted.

The only mistake for this scene was Dr. Greene's diploma on the wall. I would later use a cutaway of it and other objects in the office to open the scene over Dr. Greene's first lines. It was only after repeatedly reviewing and fine-cutting this series of shots that I noticed how fake the seal on the diploma looked, like a swatch of silver paint. It is hardly noticeable, but if it is noticed by audiences, it clearly connotes an amateur student feel. However, I kept it in because I loved the rhythm of the shots and it set a tone leading up to the first shot of Dr. Greene, and decided to cover the blotchy painted area with a mask in post.

The most problematic locations to find were the courtroom and the execution chamber. For the former, Kd was trying to secure a huge courthouse in Livingston Parish where we supposedly had free range and any choice of courtroom we wanted. However, the parish officials were slow to return calls for us to come check them out, so as the shooting weekend grew closer, I grew more worried and near-panic. Veleka came to my rescue by referring us to the St. Tammany Parish courthouse, where we were welcomed with open arms. Like the location for the radio scene, the location for the courtroom scene was very much a real location, and required little in the way of art direction or even lighting set-up. The courtroom scene however, as discussed earlier, is one of the weakest scenes I shot for this film for many reasons. The set works in the part of the scene that made the final cut, but I mostly avoided wide shots as the open space of the courtroom floor, the scruff marks left on the carpet from Kraut struggling and kicking in the bailiff's grasp, and the lack of background extras (aside from crew) made it look a bit awkward.

The execution chamber scenes were the ones that depended most heavily on production design. My original vision was to have a frightening and dilapidated room similar to the one in

Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Killing* (1988), which was one of my biggest inspirations for the film in general. We considered different options, including going a completely different route by using the UNO University Center ballroom. I always had one location in mind and luckily landed it.

I had frequented the Ark since I moved to New Orleans, a place I found in my search for the local co-op culture. It was a three-story former sock factory one block outside the top of the Marigny triangle. It housed studios and low rent apartments for local artists, as well as a bike co-op and anarchist book collective where I volunteered my first year in the city. We found a dilapidated area on the second floor that was perfect for a scary execution chamber.

In true DIY fashion, Sara and Savanna constructed the execution set from found items in the Ark. This large building was a treasure trove of any kind of artifact you can imagine. We found a physician's table for the poison victim to be strapped into, and some boards that we could set up for the drowning scene as a type of stage for the viewers. We decided in the days leading up to the shoot to lose the scripted TV cameraman from the execution scene, as the logistics of shooting were highly complicated already. However, I wanted to hold on to the aspect of the script that these executions were for public viewing, like the Romans watching people fed to the lions. Sara found some chairs in the Ark and set them up for us to put extras as a live audience for the executions.

There was one mishap with production design that occurred at the Ark. Sara had constructed the "drowning pool" for Kraut's execution by sealing together four pieces of clear plastic, to create an aquarium-like box for Burr to dunk Kraut into. Upon first seeing it, I imagined it was unstable. The day before we shot the execution scenes was a full day of set construction and planning at the Ark, and we filled Sara's pool with water. It did indeed burst, but it created a moment I will never forget on set, as all of the crew helped to mop up while we sang happy birthday to Sara. Luckily, the building manager of the Ark gave us an old aquarium to use for the scene; it was clear, so that we could get shots of Kraut's head dunked underwater, and it worked just as I had hoped.

Cinematography

The first films I shot in college were three silent black and white shorts on 16mm film. Although it was romantic to cut with razorblades, tape, and an ancient viewfinder, it was nonetheless expensive and inefficient. The first four “real” short films I made in Memphis were shot on Mini-DV. I still have a strong sentimental attachment to this noisy standard-def medium. However, picture quality and video technology have improved exponentially over the past few years and, though it may be superficial, higher definition picture and shallow depth of field alone greatly and instantly improve the general audience member's perception of the overall quality of a film.

At UNO, I shot my first few films on the HVX-200, which captured 720p video on a solid-state recording device, just a memory drive as opposed to the traditional film or videotape. This was a bit strange to me at first. I was used to having a little Mini-DV tape in my hand after shooting, and felt secure having all my master tapes safely stored in a shoebox in my closet. Now, all of my footage was just ones and zeroes on a little card. I became more comfortable with shooting on solid-state media as I continued making films with the HVX and the Sony EX1. My last year at UNO, I felt another bit of cynicism and discomfort as everyone around me in the film department started telling me that the future of independent filmmaking was with DSLRs.

I was very used to making films on cameras about the size of house cat, before and during my time in graduate school. So, I found the idea of shooting on a little still picture camera as counter-intuitive to motion picture production with a “real video camera.” When I assistant directed Kd's directing project the semester before shooting my thesis, it was the first time I had been on set with the school's Canon 5D. It was obnoxious spending the extra time to pull focus as opposed to other video cameras, but then I saw the footage and was amazed at the picture quality. I decided to definitely use the 5D for *Blood in the Grass*.

Kd owned a 7D, so we now had access to two cameras. I had not owned a camera since early in college, and in researching Canon's line, I was amazed at the bang for your buck that you got, compared to the cameras I had been using for years. JonGunnar had purchased a more traditional video camera two years earlier for a large sum of money; the camera body of the 5D was a fraction of the cost with a much larger sensor and better picture quality. I tried out the 5D, 7D, and 60D before deciding to buy the last of the three. It was the least expensive, and I found it the most conducive to filmmaking, with its flip-out screen.

The shallow depth of field is truly what makes a film seem *cinematic*, or at least like a "real film." This was a blessing to have with the Canons, as we decided to use all three on set. However, the depth of field was problematic for moving shots or shots that really had much action. Just being a little off the mark would ruin a shot. However, we dealt with this by getting more takes, using two cameras on set at all times, and using three (mine, Kd's, and the school's 5D) at certain times, particularly during the execution chamber scenes. This allowed us to get far more coverage in much less time. Over the seven days of shooting, we never went over ten hours. The multi-camera set-ups cut our shooting time by at least half.

I employed a naturalistic lighting style for the film; avoiding any kind of surreal lighting style was more appropriate. Initially, I gave JonGunnar a copy of Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Killing* as my main visual inspiration. However, as the script had evolved over time, the scenes of Kraut and Burr wandering the city disappeared and this visual style was no longer applicable. JonGunnar complained about my not giving him a new, updated vision statement. I did hand him a copy of Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1990). In my dialogue scenes, I wanted close-ups that mimicked the way that film used close-ups, with characters looking almost directly into the lens for a confrontational feel. I felt this suited the tense dialogue in *Blood in the Grass*, as well.

Most of the lighting set-ups were simple. We used the available lighting for all three dialogue scenes with some minimal help from "kickers" using an L-kit. The most complex lighting

set up was at the Ark. There was limited availability of electricity access, and so much action taking place in a wide space that many lights on set would prove problematic for framing. During our long day of set construction prior to shooting the execution scenes, JonGunnar and Chris Patureau, who served as my gaffer, hung light bulbs from extension cords from the ceiling. Serving as practical lights, they gave the scene a grungy, dungeon-like feel.

My main interest in cinematography is in lighting rather than in motion. In *Tugboat* and *Shame*, I spent most of the film with the camera on sticks and went handheld for the rest of the film once the stories reached a turning point. For *Blood in the Grass*, I decided not to be so rigid in simply starting on tripod and then moving into handheld at a certain point and sticking with it. I decided to let the mood of the scene dictate how I used motion. I kept the dialogue scenes on sticks with the camera loose on the tripod for minimal movement and to keep the characters properly framed. I went handheld in the opening scene with Burr and the protestors to create a higher energy and disorienting effect. I knew I wanted the drowning scene to be handheld for similar effect.

One of the most beautiful shots in the film takes place during the breakfast scene. The shot of Pinkie and Kraut eating breakfast is bright and happy, a strong contrast to much of the rest of the film. This was actually achieved very simply. JonGunnar set out a large shiny board in the yard, bringing bright light to their background and creating what I have been told is a "heavenly" look.

I think that *Blood in the Grass* looks better than any of my previous work. However, some scenes definitely look better than others. This would later lead me to make major decisions in the cutting room.

Editing

I have cut short films on all three major editing systems: Avid, Final Cut, and Adobe Premiere. I chose to cut *Blood in the Grass* on Avid as it was the only system used on campus, and

because the entire editing system was available for a student discount (with three years of free updates) for under \$300. This was less than a quarter of the cost of Final Cut, which I bought in college and used to cut *Hi Honey, I'm Home!*, *Sorority Feud*, and a few home movies. Purchasing Avid would allow me to edit at home on my own system if needed, and after using Avid to cut all four shorts I had made at UNO prior to my thesis film, I was now more familiar with its interface than Final Cut. As it turns out, I had to edit at home, and purchasing the system for my home system was a lifesaver.

Not including a few short silent films I made on 16mm early on in Memphis, *Blood in the Grass* is my twelfth short film. I had edited every previous film by myself, and I finally became burned out on the process after cutting the nearly twenty-five minute long *Tugboat* in a short two-month period. I had planned for my thesis to be the first film where I allowed someone else to be the primary editor. I thought they could bring more objectivity to the process and also, given my circumstances, I needed some help. I would have preferred to take the summer off after shooting the film in April. However, I was offered my dream job and it depended on my finishing the degree in the summer, so I soldiered on.

I showed Erik my early rough cut toward the end of May. He was excited about the footage, but suggested that I lose the opening scene. I began to rethink my structure and take the first step in “killing my darlings” in post, when I received the news that the job position I had been promised was no longer available. I had gone into even deeper student debt to finish in the summer, and now I was left penniless with no source of income or job prospects. I had been suspicious that the position would not actually pan out, not due to malice but to disorganization and bureaucracy. Nevertheless, when it actually did not pan out, I was devastated. I questioned all the decisions I had made over the years and especially in the months prior, as I had planned the film and most of my life plans around taking the job I wanted more than any other in the world. Depressed, reeling in a philosophical crisis, and desperate for money to eat and pay the rent, I had to shelve cutting the film

while looking for a job. Luckily, within two weeks I landed a development position for a local industrial production company.

It was no longer practical for me to edit on campus, so I began the long process of transcoding and re-synching the footage on my own system at home. As I will discuss in the *Technology and Workflow* section, this initially proved to be a massive waste of time due to a technological error. This was also the first in a long series of events that continued to set me back in editing and completing *Blood in the Grass* and sent my personal life into chaos.

At the end of the summer, I was in a car accident. Working to pay off the resulting bills from that accident, I finally got to a point in early September where I was editing and planning to graduate in the fall. After visiting my professors to discuss my trajectory, I went home to visit family in Tennessee where I experienced a traumatic experience with someone very close to me, which sent me into a deep panic for their mental and physical safety. After returning to New Orleans and experiencing several worry-filled nights of not sleeping, trying to complete a new edit, and working at the office, I suffered a seizure and was hospitalized. The diagnosis was that it was stress-induced and due to insomnia, and the doctor insisted I slow down and try to control my anxiety before anything worse happened. This sent me several thousand dollars deeper into debt.

I then decided to put off graduation. My job at the production company was going well, but it was highly stressful and I was consistently putting in over fifty hours a week. I then decided to hire a private editor to take on *Blood in the Grass*. Bert was a contracting editor at the production company and had cut two of Killer Sheep's 48 Hour Film Project shorts, so I had faith in him and looked forward to a fresh set of eyes cutting the film. His first cut was disappointing. It was lacking in rhythm and just sloppy. We sat down for a very long night of notes after that first cut, but I started to suspect that I should start editing casually on the Avid project that I had left in limbo when hiring Bert.

Bert promised to show me a second cut and did not deliver for three weeks in a row. I finally asked him if he just wanted to stop, to let me know so that I could dedicate more time to cutting myself. He was deeply offended and said that he would finish a new cut soon. My suspicions proved accurate when I received a text message: "I can't do it! I'm sorry! There's too much going on, I have to quit, please don't hate me."

I did not hate Bert, of course, but I was frustrated that he had wasted so much time. I began slowly cutting the film on my own, but I was exhausted from the stress of working overtime and discouraged that this was my third attempt at cutting myself. My life drama, however, was still not over.

Iggy is an abandoned, adorable little German shepherd and dachshund mutt that I picked up on set while shooting at a plantation for another student film soon after *Blood in the Grass*. I loved that dog, and through my depression he pretty much kept me sane. In early November, as I was in the middle of my third trial string-out, Iggy became frighteningly ill. I was cleaning up blood and afraid that if I left him alone, I would come home to find him dead. I rushed him to two vets, four times in twenty-four hours, carrying him in a blanket across the French Quarter.

As I sat in the waiting room at the Mississippi State University vet hospital, devastated, I thought about my film, about finishing school, about the thousands of dollars of debt I already had from my own medical bills and was about to double for Iggy. I felt after making such a visceral film about death and mourning, that I had mental illness and mortality screaming at me in the face. I resolved in that waiting room to take on editing *Blood in the Grass* full-on over the Christmas break. Things were going to keep happening that were out of my control, but I had to stop letting the stress get to me and stop dwelling on events in the past. Life does one thing if it does anything. It goes on.

Luckily, despite a close call with parvovirus, Iggy made it. He became a very expensive dog after that, but it was worth it to have my best buddy as my little assistant editor by my side for the following weeks.

Taking on editing a third time, I had had some distance from the footage. This gave me greater objectivity than when I was cutting in the summer, and after reviewing all the footage again, I started considering the overall style and rhythm of my new cut. There is no doubt that my generation and, I suppose, audiences in general today, absorb information on screen more quickly than ever before. As my editing professor Danny Retz told my class our first year at UNO, the influence of MTV over the past thirty years has changed film editing dramatically compared to more traditional pacing. As opposed to editing being primarily driven by story, it has in recent decades been driven more by mood and feeling.

In my early attempts at cutting over Christmas, I wanted the pace to be slow and moody. To be honest, in part I just wanted to go against the grain, as I see too many modern films in which I feel the fast cutting is simply unnecessary and over-the-top. Additionally, I have always wanted to challenge myself and emulate slow films like *Paradise Now* (Hany Abu-Assad, 2005) and *Forty Shades of Blue* (Ira Sachs, 2005), which are more meditative, staying for long periods of time on the protagonist in such a way that, without giving away much too much information on screen, the audience is drawn into the contemplative thoughts of the main character. I learned quickly that this would not work for *Blood in the Grass*. The story moves too quickly and, with such a large selection of coverage and takes, it simply made sense to speed things up.

My choices in the editing room were greatly influenced by Walter Murch and his rules of the six reasons to make a cut, in order: emotion, story, rhythm, eye trace, preservation of two-dimensional space, then preservation of three-dimensional space (Murch 18). In his book, In the Blink of an Eye, he writes:

Emotion, at the top of the list, is the thing that you should try to preserve at all costs. If you find that you have to sacrifice certain of

those six things to make a cut, sacrifice your way up, item by item,
from the bottom. (18-19)

I have found myself using the close-ups, even the extreme close-ups, far more than I had planned. They simply lent themselves to the intense emotion of the story more than the wide shots. While editing, I watched *Beautiful Boy* (Shawn Ku, 2010), which is the story of a couple dealing with the aftermath of their son going on a shooting spree on a college campus before committing suicide. Despite such visceral material, much of the film feels hollow until the editing goes in for the close-ups and the pace of cutting speeds up.

I used jump-cuts for the opening scene to create a sense of chaos and unease as Burr gets ready for the court hearing and the protestors await his exit from the house. I also used jump cuts in the execution scenes for similar effect. As I had shot some scenes handheld instead of on sticks to create a certain mood, I edited different scenes in different ways for mood and to create interscene contrast. The dialogue scenes edit was guided by temporal and spatial continuity instead of jump cuts to create a clear difference in tone from the more erratically cut scenes.

My choice of takes was first dictated by performance, and then by their contribution to the overall rhythm of the film. The more tense the scene, the more cuts I typically used. More cuts create a greater sense of energy and intensity for the audience. Hence, the dialogue scenes featured fewer fast-paced cuts than the execution scenes, but sped up as the exchanges become more heated, particularly in the dialogue scene with Dr. Greene.

I showed Erik my first cut after Christmas break, and he was extremely encouraged by what he saw. However, he restated his opinion that the opening scene where Burr sees Kraut on the street should be dropped in favor of Burr getting ready for the courtroom scene. After some consideration, I agreed that this was a stronger opening. I also showed Erik footage and some string-out cuts of the extra scenes. He told me to experiment in showing the backstory, but it was clear to both of us that the scenes from the thesis script looked more professional and played out better than the backstory scenes between Pinkie and Kraut.

I immediately lost the later part of the courtroom scene due to the poor performances and visuals. Cutting this and the original opening served as a catalyst for me to “kill my darlings” and keep cutting away. I kept at the dialogue scenes and tackled the execution scenes last, as I had a mountain of coverage of the later scenes. I finally ended up, with the climactic drowning scene at string-out and the other main thesis script scenes past the rough stage, at a twelve-minute cut.

Erik encouraged me to experiment with the backstory scenes, and I began bringing them to show Danny Retz. I finally had them all laid out chronologically in a way that satisfied me and that Danny felt would work. Working and rushing, I needed help. Josh Johnston came in to help cut, do much of the sound work, and generally help clean up after I hit a wall and needed some objectivity in cutting. He also gave me the idea to play out the execution scenes Burr witnesses as a split-screen. This added an intense introduction to the execution chamber by presenting a large amount of information for the audience to digest at one time. I think it also helps to heighten the severity of Burr’s looming decision through fast cuts and more complex imagery.

After much cutting, losing extraneous lines of dialogue and adding in the backstory, I reached a sixteen-minute version of the film that I felt worked. I had always planned to have the thesis version separate from another cut that included the backstory; however, through so much experimentation and “butchering” of my initial thesis cut, I had made room to flash back and forth between the two storylines.

I showed this cut to Erik, and we had a long conversation over the phone following his viewing. He offered the same advice as he had in the script stage: to focus on Burr. He suggested that having two storylines took away from the heart of the story, Burr as the protagonist on his journey to make the decision whether or not to follow through with the execution. Furthermore, the scenes of the main storyline were visually far superior to those in the backstory. Erik suggested that the shorter version would be more focused, professional-looking, and conducive to festival acceptance for its short length. I felt my new sixteen-minute cut worked, and since I had come to

focus on it so much, I feared that the recently more neglected shorter cut would not. We decided to experiment by pulling out all the scenes from the original thesis script to see how they played out.

I did not sleep that night. Finally, I came to the decision that I had to let go of the backstory scenes, at least for my main cut. It was a tighter, more focused and professional-looking film, and going into fine cutting, it seemed I could get close to a ten-minute cut. This was a very difficult decision to make, as I had put an enormous amount of work and cutting into making the sixteen-minute version with both storylines work to my satisfaction and get to a manageable length. However, the scenes focusing on Burr truly were the heart of the story, and leaving the extra scenes out of my cut for festivals had been the original plan. It was a noble effort trying to make it work, but moving to one storyline, following the original script, and simply adding the “breakfast” scene as an addition to the end made the final version the strongest one yet.

Sound

Throughout my education in film, two important things to remember when recording sound on set that have been drilled into my brain, and I have found them to be absolutely true in the editing room. First, record all sounds separately. This is especially true of overlapping dialogue or action taking place during dialogue. You can always mix sounds in post, but you will have a tough time separating them in the cutting room when they are recorded together (if you are able to separate them at all). Second, record each sound as cleanly as possible. Any unwanted noise that is recorded along with desired sound is married to that sound, and again, it will be extremely difficult if not impossible to separate them in postproduction.

Josh Johnston was my soundman for *Tugboat*, and I asked him to work for me again for my thesis film. Our earlier film together was extremely problematic for sound recording. We were shooting only a few houses down from the interstate in the Treme, so traffic noise was almost constantly in the background. Secondly, as a citizen of the Treme, I can attest to the fact that, like the French Quarter that it borders, it is an extremely lively and noisy neighborhood. Literally three

second-lines, which included marching New Orleans brass bands, took place just outside our set during two days of shooting *Tugboat*. I expected the sound to be awful. There were definitely problems in that film, but it really was as good as I could have expected, given the conditions. This is why I asked Josh to return and run sound for my latest film.

The role of the boom operator is one that is often and unfortunately given too little consideration in student films. Booming is an art form all its own. Distance, position, and direction of holding the pole all make a difference in the quality of sound recorded. Even handling the pole far from the microphone incorrectly will create unwanted noise. David "Pandacakes" Parker was my boom operator for *Tugboat*. Josh praised his work and he was a dedicated crew member, so I asked him to return as well.

Shooting Dr. Greene's office in the UNO library and Mac Mansfield's radio show in a real radio station gave us quiet locations that allowed the dialogue to be recorded clean and clear. Almost all of our other locations for *Blood in the Grass*, however, were quite noisy. At the court location on the North Shore, the hallways outside were buzzing with activity off and on throughout our shoot. The exterior of Jacques' house, though we were faking it as a backyard, was really at the end of a short driveway and close to a moderately busy Mid-City street, so those scenes were subject to plenty of neighborhood noise. The bohemian denizens of the Ark moved past the set freely to their studios and apartments and, as I was invading their space, I really had no room to complain. We decided one way to get people to be quiet and stay out of our wide shots was to buy them beer and ask them politely to listen for "action" and "cut." Being independent artists themselves, as well as typical beer-loving New Orleanians, this strategy worked well.

To deal with such noisy conditions, Josh recorded every scene with both a boom and a lavalier microphone, each capturing sound separately on different tracks. The boom would capture the sound and dialogue for every scene, along with room tone. As I learned from my sound class at Memphis, every location, indeed every room, has its own unique ambience created by its

size, layout, and every person and object within it. It is therefore necessary to record "room tone" for every scene, just one minute of "silence" with every person, set dressing, and piece of equipment that is in a room during shooting still in place, remaining still and silent. Room tone allows one to have the basic sound of a location for editing, to fill in any gaps of sound on the timeline when needed. The lavalier microphones have a much shorter range of area where it picks up sound. Therefore, less room tone or ambience, as well as less noise in general, is recorded on these smaller microphones that attach to talent. The boom hovered over each scene, moving to capture the dialogue of each actor as the scene went on. The lavalier, however, was placed selectively in each set-up on the actor whose dialogue was the most important to capture cleanly for the given shot. Having sound recorded on these two different microphones, separately, gave me the sound quality I needed to edit.

While shooting, I had Josh focus primarily on capturing clean dialogue, as this film was so dialogue-focused. There were, of course, scenes with footprints and slamming doors and other non-human voice sounds. However, those everyday noises are much easier to foley and create in postproduction compared to re-recording dialogue. Re-recording dialogue in postproduction is known as ADR, or "automated dialogue replacement," which is something I had to do for an outdoor scene in *Tugboat* because wind noise had ruined the originally recorded dialogue. ADR is also known as "looping," and involves an actor watching a loop of footage from the film and repeating dialogue to replace the unusable original recording from on set. ADR recordings never sound as natural as dialogue recorded on set, and the effect is often noticeable, even to casual film audiences. Luckily, with Josh's clean sound recording, no ADR was necessary with *Blood in the Grass*.

Through most of the editing process, the film was composed of primarily diegetic sound. This refers to sounds that actually occur within the scene and are heard by the characters, rather than heard only by the audience and not existing for the characters on screen. An example of the former would be "source" music, such as music from a radio that a character is listening to within a

scene; an example of the latter would be a musical score that does not actually occur within the world of the film and is only heard by the audience (Holman 185). I only wanted a few moments of non-diegetic sound in *Blood in the Grass*, mostly due to emotionally motivated cutaways, such as the cut to Pinkie dying in Burr's arms during the courtroom scene. As I taught in my introductory film course and learned from mentoring under Professor Steve Hank at UNO, sound is much more psychological and imperceptibly effective than picture. Audiences are much less sophisticated about sound, and therefore less aware of the emotional effects that sound can have in the hands of a filmmaker. I could have gone for a less realistic, more visceral sound design with high-pitched sounds to create a sense of unease in the viewer.

I also originally only planned to use musical score in a few parts of the film to enhance mood. My friend Reid Willis is an electronic musician from Baton Rouge who created the end theme to *Tugboat*. I had only sent him the script to that film and told him the basic feel of the final credits musical score that I was looking for. The first thing he sent me was perfect, and I used it in the final cut of that film. Immediately after getting a trial string-out of *Blood in the Grass* last summer, I posted the scenes on YouTube for Reid to get a feel for the film. He composed half a dozen rough sketches of music he felt suited the tone of the film, and followed my direction to compose a very minimalist, low-toned musical score I could use to accompany a few scenes. I asked for low-pitched tones because they have the opposite psychological effect of high-pitched sounds. Where high-pitched sound creates a sense of unease, which I was sure I could create through imagery and subject matter, low-pitched sound underscores the solemnity of a scene.

At the suggestion of Erik and members of his screenwriting workshop class, to whom I showed a fine cut, I decided in the end to add a full score. I had sent the film to a composer, Joshua Allen, who does work for the industrial production company where I work. Initially, I just to see what he could do with the material. I enjoyed the rawness of having no score for the dialogue scenes; however, after experimenting with the score he conducted, and adding some short pieces

by Reid, I thought the score enhanced the mood of the film and made it seem more professional. I kept the levels of the score primarily low, as to not be distracting, and to simply enhance the mood. I brought up the levels in the montage after the dialogue with Mac, and during the climactic drowning scene. Here, the louder score provided a contrast from the rest of the film's relatively quiet background music. The organs in the montage enhanced the severity of those shots, and I felt the high-pitched score that Josh produced for the final execution scene greatly enhanced the intensity of the drowning. Though I enjoyed the raw feel of the film without music, I decided that adding the score in the end enhanced my goals of giving the film a professional feel and being more festival-friendly.

In terms of diegetic sound in post-production, only one scene was truly problematic. In the courtroom, the boom audio for Burr's best take contained room noise from air conditioning in the building that we had no control over. This forced me to make a call between clean sound and the best performance. I chose the latter, and simply added the room tone to the rest of the scene to avoid its standing out. Fortunately, it is not overly distracting.

Technology and Workflow

Technology greatly enhanced the process of making my film. However, one hiccup early on in the process of cutting caused major setbacks.

A "codec" refers to the type of compression that one uses to "transcode," or compress, large movie files to smaller ones for editing purposes. Different codecs have different advantages in terms of picture quality and file size, and there are various types to choose from. In the initial editing process, I transcoded the original footage to the "35:1 MXF" codec. This codec made small, manageable files that were thirty-five times smaller than the enormous raw video files produced by the Canon DSLR cameras. This would put much less strain on the computer than editing with full-resolution video. 35:1 MXF is also the standard codec we were taught to use in the workflow of UNO's Avid system, so it seemed the natural choice.

I had made my rough cut at school before I had to leave and put editing on hold to work. I was then working full-time out in the suburbs, sometimes up to fifty and sixty hours per week, and both my home and office were inconveniently far away from campus. I therefore decided that it would be more practical and comfortable to edit the film on my own home system. I went through the arduous days-long process of transcoding, then the days-long process of synching footage once again, to avoid the problems of translating my original PC Avid project from school to my Mac at home. I was cutting once again when Kd and I discovered something that no one in the equipment room had bothered to tell us. The 5D changed frame rates every time it was turned off and on. This meant that large chunks of my footage were in thirty frames per second instead of twenty-four. Unfortunately, this also meant that the transcoded footage could not be transcoded back to its full resolution, and all the work I had done was basically for nothing, unless I wanted my picture to look thirty-five times more compressed than it actually was.

In transcoding to start editing again, I chose to use the codec DNxHD, which was versatile and presented great video quality even in compressed form. DNxHD is:

a free 'Open Standard' compressed HD codec.....What set[s] DNxHD apart is lossless 2:1compression and a full HD raster of 1920 horizontal pixels---no horizontal sampling. Avid intends DNxHD to become a mastering compression format for post-production (Ascher & Pincus 31-32).

I specifically chose to edit in DNxHD 36 because it solved the issues with the frame rates that had doomed my earlier cuts. It simply converted all footage to twenty-four frames per second with no issues. It also allowed me to work with footage that was full 1080p and that could run easily on my home computer, without any lagging due to RAM issues. I also employed Apple's Time Machine, which consistently backs up one's work every hour. That way, if any major error occurred with my project, I would be covered.

My workflow was enhanced by advances in high definition video that developed while I was at UNO. Running Avid on my home system, I was able to do so with an extra monitor in the form of

my forty-two inch HDTV with an HDMI video-out cable for the Macbook. HDMI is still a young technology, and occasionally the cables would go out and need tweaking, but for the most part this made editing much more enjoyable. It was also a great advantage, as editing with a big screen in full HD allowed me to see when a good take would have to be substituted due to the shallow depth of field from the Canon DSLRs.

Again, I cannot overemphasize the advantage of shooting with multiple cameras. Not only did this cut our shooting time by at least half for most of the scenes, but the risk of shots being unusable due to lack of focus as mentioned above became less of an issue. The multiple cameras left me with plenty of coverage and takes to choose from.

I composed my script using Final Draft. In the past I had chosen the free software Celtx, but I learned from experience how that application presented formatting issues in creating PDFs and printing. Though not free, Final Draft allowed me to avoid these issues.

Chapter 3

Additional Influences on Story

As discussed in the introduction, much of the basic story of *Blood in the Grass* was created out of my own ambivalence regarding the death penalty and my desire to create what I envisioned as my big tragedy. In the "Writing" section, I described how much of the influence on the final, condensed and Burr-focused version of the film script came from working with my professors and peers while studying the short film form. However, other works of art, philosophical discourse, and my own perception of world events over the past decade all influenced my choices in molding and tweaking the story. Here I will discuss other influences on the larger story as it evolved, in various forms on paper and in classes, and which eventually became my thesis film.

As someone who has studied and taken particular interest in sociology, philosophy, and anthropology, a significant amount of my time working on the story in early treatments and workshops was concentrated on the social world in which the events take place. How could America become a nation in which such a perverse judicial system reigned? The following rant from my favorite comedian Patton Oswalt on his album Werewolves & Lollipops was the direct inspiration for *Goodbye, Clinton!* I feel it will also help explain the social context I experienced as a young adult trying to make sense of the world:

There was this time in 2003 where I felt like I got honest to god panic attacks because I felt like we had fallen into this really creepy alternate earth...like the bad earth where Bush won, and the Towers fell, and we were going to Iraq, and Paris Hilton was successful...like everything was wrong, everything was goddamn evil. And I felt like there was an earth next to ours where Gore won, the Towers still stood and Paris Hilton had been eaten by wolves and everything was just wonderful (Oswalt).

Though clearly a joke, it illustrates the seismic shift in cultural attitudes that likely began with 9/11 and had a profound effect on my generation. Growing up in the nineties with the end of the Cold War and the Internet boom, we had come of age without international conflict and with unprecedented economic prosperity; to experience the opposite in our twenties was hard to grasp

for myself and my peers. We were jolted by a decade of endless war, tense cultural divides, government-sanctioned torture, and an explicitly and deeply religious Christian president who, as governor, paradoxically and unapologetically signed off on the executions of many inmates, including the mentally ill.

I personally blame much of what is wrong with my country today on the ascent of the religious right. I will never understand how people who follow Jesus (who I perceive as having socialist and humanitarian welfare views on societal organization), could be so against social programs that benefit the poor and so opposed to healthcare for everyone; then, at the same time, who could be so passionately for pre-emptive war and the death penalty. I imagine the world in which *Blood in the Grass* takes place as one where the election of Obama never happened and the Arab Spring never began. I conceived of it as a world where evangelical religious extremism and neo-conservatism continued to expand their influence, until we became an Orwellian state in which vigilante justice was not only the norm, but also encouraged.

Chapter 4

Analysis

Time will tell how successful *Blood in the Grass* will be in its acceptance to film festivals and its ability to reach audiences. However, in reflecting on the entire process and final product, I will analyze how I succeeded in achieving the personal goals I set before embarking on this production, what I learned from the choices that worked and failed, and what I took away from the experience personally.

There is a saying that a movie is written three times: first on page, then on set, and finally in the cutting room. This is certainly the case for my thesis film. Admittedly, changing the film in the way I did, so much between the script, the shoot, and in post, may come across as disorganized, but overall I do not regret shooting the film as I did and making all the changes I did along the way. I had learned with *Tugboat* and *Straight, No Chaser* that no matter the amount of planning, things will inevitably go wrong at some point and you will have to make changes to adapt. I therefore felt that I should be more open to suggestions and changes with this film. Filmmaking is an organic process and all art is subject to the conditions in which it is formed.

Most of the areas in which I feel I could have done better are in the dialogue of the script. Erik had told me once that I should tone down some of the more extreme dialogue, particularly with Mac Mansfield and Judge White. I kept rewriting the scene with the former until a few days prior to shooting. I took the final shooting pages into my screenwriting class and received excellent feedback, everyone agreed that they were very improved. As for the dialogue of Judge White, I should have done the same. In my head I had envisioned the scene to be shot in limbo, similar to the intense dialogue with the network executive in *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976). The dialogue ended up being far too absurd, even more so considering that we shot in a real courtroom.

I am happy with the look of the film, and much of that comes from my choices in composition and movement that were realized through JonGunnar's cinematography and Sara's production design. I believe my focus on movement and close-ups were good choices, but I did not

provide JonGunnar with adequate instruction for the lighting design of the film. I feel with more focus and development, the film could have been improved visually.

The courtroom scene is poorly directed. Some things could not be avoided, such as my bailiff having to opt out at the last minute because his son was sick. However, even with Chip playing the bailiff, looking way too young and honestly kind of silly, my direction was off. Mason's performance is lacking and the entire exchange with the judge simply does not work. It may have been a blessing in disguise, however, as cutting this section of the scene shortens and speeds up the film considerably.

I believe my original plan in having a self-contained script, along with extra scenes, was a good decision. Though most of the “extra scenes” of backstory did not make the final cut, they were a fantastic learning experience in directing. I made sure that the main storyline with Burr would function independently to cover myself, for safety, but in a way I think it was shooting the extra material that provided a safety net for me. The opening and closing scenes from the original script did not work. However, I believe that the inclusion of the breakfast scene at the end, which was not in the original script, provides a beautiful, sad ending. In such a brief scene, the exchange gives so much information about three souls who were once happy, and became entangled in a great tragedy. Furthermore, I feel the chemistry and natural interaction between the actors in that scene was achievable because of our shooting and rehearsing so much other material.

It was extraordinarily difficult to cut most of all the backstory after the sixteen-minute cut. I felt that I had come close to a successful version of the sprawling, dual storyline I had always wanted to make. However, I am sure that cutting down to the heart of the story and remaining on Burr's storyline makes the film more focused, accessible, of higher production quality, and more festival-friendly. Through years of development, months of screenwriting rewrites, and almost a year of experimenting with various cuts, I feel this final version is the best incarnation of the material to fit the short film form.

I believe my greatest successes in the film are directing the dialogue between Burr and Mac and the execution scenes. The radio station scene provides a heightening of conflict, and I think that Glenn's reactions show the intense ping-pong conflict that is playing out in Burr's mind. As for the execution scenes, I felt that I had a good command of the set and was successful.

Personally, I took away more from *Blood in the Grass* in the final months of editing than I ever could have expected. My studies of postmodern social theory in college left me with a strong feeling that the author of the work does not have final authority on the meaning of the work. Meaning will be created through each individual's own interaction with the work. Once in rehearsal, one of my actors asked (from an earlier draft) why Kraut was talking to a girl instead of a boy in the opening scene when Burr sees him on the street. I was asked if he was bisexual, which puzzled me. "Well, everything means something." To this I thought, *God, no it doesn't*.

I changed that aspect in the script after that conversation. The author does not have *final* authority, but I am also of the opinion that the author is not dead. The choices he or she makes in whatever artistic medium, as well as the context in which a work of art is created, greatly influence its form and how audiences will interpret its meaning. One must be mindful of this.

My story was originally about the issue of the death penalty, but by the time I came to a final version in editing, I myself had a new interpretation of the film and saw it take on new meaning. The off and on, tumultuous postproduction process of this film was the most difficult and trying time of my entire life. I was consumed by stress, severe depression, anxiety, and a lot of bitterness, disappointment, and anger. I had no choice but to let go of that anger and bitterness if I wanted to move on in my life and career. It took a lot of time, meditation, and pushing myself when I wanted to quit, but I have ended in a much better place.

There is a saying that every author's work is autobiographical. I have acknowledged the inspiration for this story from my own ambivalence regarding capital punishment. However, in reflecting over it now, the film is mostly about letting go. I suspect I crafted this film subconsciously,

influenced by own struggles to let go of the anger I have felt through loss and life's disappointments. Forgiveness is the ultimate action that Burr takes in the climax of the film, and it reflects a life lesson I have been grappling with in my adulthood. Life is painful, it can be gravely unjust, and we all have the potential to make mistakes that can seem to eat away at our lives. You have to let go of anger, regret, and bitterness or you will remain in a miserable state. When Burr lets Pinkie go during the drowning, it is meant to be a metaphor for stopping the cycle of violence. This describes my main philosophical opposition to the death penalty, how an eye for an eye leaves the world blind. However, now, I also see it as a more general metaphor for forgiveness and letting go of hatred and anger. Burr is left in mourning and denied the closure he wished for; however, I like to think his letting Kraut go free instead of following through with revenge was the first step in the healing process for this character.

I probably could not have made *Blood in the Grass* had I not gone through a tumultuous time in my life surrounding its production, where I myself dealt with loss in deeper ways than I ever had before. In the end, I feel that I said something very personal, but I am not terribly concerned that people take away my own exact interpretation and intention with the film. This film is my gift to the audiences that will see it, and they will have various opinions of what works and what does not, as well as what the actions of the characters say about the world. Whatever interpretation people have of it, I hope it makes them think about humanity and forgiveness, and that they take away a visceral experience. Danny Retz has often said that "movies are emotion." *Blood in the Grass* is, at its simplest, my great tragedy. If only a few people are deeply moved by the film and caused to think about issues of human rights and the trials of dealing with loss and forgiveness, then that is all the success I can ask for.

In dealing with my depression in the months following production and leading up to completing the film, I took several steps to overcome my negative mental state. I started running and meditating, and I also started listening to and reading a lot of comedy. Though this film was

pretty much my first complete departure from comedy, in the end comedy kept me sane. Sara Silverman, in her book The Bedwetter: Stories of Courage, Redemption and Pee, said something about comedy that I think can be applied to all artists and their respective medium or talent. It also articulates an important lesson I took away from the experience of making this film:

A lot of comics think the real threat of mental blockage lies in becoming happy. They fear that happiness or even just dealing with their shit might make them not funny anymore. To me, that's a bunch of romanticized bullshit. I don't know. I guess if you write your best stuff when you're miserable, maybe, but I don't. I'm paralyzed when I'm miserable....I will always try to be happy. I don't think people really understand the value of happiness until they know what it's like to be in that very, very dark place. It's not romantic. Not even a little. (155)

Chapter 5

Conclusion

I learned a lot in the process of filming and editing *Blood in the Grass*. One should always trust one's intuition when it comes to casting. When it comes to choosing your actors, and perhaps even more so with your crew, it really is as much about your ability to communicate and get along as it about their talent.

I learned that you cannot be afraid to experiment. Making art is really about trial and error. I still believe strongly in my DIY philosophy, and I believe the production was a great success through using limited resources to their greatest potential and by maintaining a strong collaborative spirit. I regret that the postproduction process was so drawn out, and far longer than any of my other works. However, I am satisfied with this final version, and it would not have been produced under different circumstances.

I believe that *Blood in the Grass* is the best work I have ever done. One of the greatest pieces of creative advice I ever received was from an undergrad professor. He said that if you have an idea, get it out, even if it means suggesting it to someone else to use and take credit for. Another idea will pop up later for you to use. On the other hand, letting ideas just bottle up and never come out will likely make them stop flowing. *Blood in the Grass* had been playing in my head for years, and I honestly thought it would never be realized on the big screen. No matter how the film plays at festivals, I will take away an enormous sense of satisfaction that it came to life.

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Beautiful Boy (2010)
City of God (2001)
Doubt (2008)
The End of Sweet (2009)
Eye of God (1997)
Following (1998)
Forty Shades of Blue (2005)
Goodbye, Lenin! (2003)
Hi Honey, I'm Home! (2006)
The Ice Storm (1997)
Memento (2000)
Paradise Now (2005)
Pleasantville (1997)
Pulp Fiction (1994)
The Recordist (2008)
Shame (2009)
A Short Film About Killing (1988)
Silence of the Lambs (1991)
Sorority Feud (2008)
Trainspotting (1996)
Tugboat (2010)
The Wounds (1999)

Appendices

Appendix A : Shooting Script

BLOOD IN THE GRASS

Written by
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(Version 5 Draft 3/21/11)

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1 EXT. STREET - STOREFRONT - DAY - B & W

Only this scene appears in black and white. Following this, scenes of a past and present juxtapose, the former in saturated colors and the latter with a saturation of color.

BURR, 50s, large stature, tired and stressed beyond his years, exits a store with a bag. As he starts down the street, something catches his stare in the distance.

KRAUT, late teens, grungey streetkid, timid and scrawny with hunched soldiers, talks to a girl against a brick wall. Burr pounces onto the boy, grabbing his collar and slamming him against the wall.

BURR
You fuck. Why did you do it?!? Why
did you do it?!?

CUT TO:

Burr standing on the sidewalk gazing in the distance. It was all in his head.

CUT TO BLACK.

2 INT. BURR'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY - DESATURATED

A cramped efficiency apartment littered with trash, pill bottles, personal items strewn about.

Burr straightens his tie in his fine brown suit in front of a full-length mirror.

Two pictures sit on a nearby table: One of a slightly younger Burr, his arm around son PINKIE, late teens, athletic smiling boy. The other a much younger Burr with a woman and a baby.

3 EXT. BURR'S HOUSE - DAY - DESATURATED

Burr exits his house, encounters protestors on his lawn on the way to his car.

Around two dozen PROTESTERS of various ages and races chant and hold anti-death penalty signs.

PROTESTER (O.S.)
We cannot stop violence and hate
through perpetuating more violence
and hate! Choose mercy!

Burr pushes through them, gets into his car to drive away.

4

INT. COURTROOM - DAY - DESATURATED

BURR stands at a podium in a dimly lit courtroom several feet away from the daunting, quick-tempered JUDGE WHITE, 50s.

JUDGE WHITE

Mister Joseph Burr, you are allowed to make your final case for personal execution.

BURR

Thank you, your honor. Pinkie was a healthy, happy boy. He was more than just my son, he was my world.

He pauses and takes a drink of water.

JUDGE WHITE

Take your time, Mister Burr.

BURR

His mother passed away from cancer when he was four. We called him Pinkie because he was so quick to get burned in the sun. He never cared though, loved the outdoors.

JUDGE WHITE

He sounds like he was a wonderful person, Mister Burr.

BURR

I feel that it is my duty, my right, to serve him justice-

JUDGE WHITE

Mister Burr, I feel for your situation, but I'm not sure you grasp the severity of your request.

BURR

I assure you, your honor, I have greatly considered this action.

JUDGE WHITE

So you realize you will be solely responsible for the execution? And if you cannot follow through, he will be free from state custody. You get one chance at this!

BURR

I understand. I want nothing more
than justice for my son. I will
follow through.

The judge sits back in her chair, peers at him doubtfully.

JUDGE WHITE

Bring in the prisoner!

White shuffles papers as Kraut, paler and scrawnier than
before, shirtless, shoeless and dirty, is brought into the
courtroom by a young male BAILIFF.

BAILIFF

Kraut Dragojevic, your honor.

JUDGE WHITE

Dragojevic, what is that French?...
Look, before handing down my
sentence, I will spare you the
opportunity to speak and embarrass
yourself.

The judge leans forward, peers at boy.

JUDGE WHITE (CONT'D)

I've doubted Mr. Burr's confidence
in his ability to execute a child
but I must admit...my blood runs
cold from the sight of you. Cases
like this remind me I'm doing my
job for God and country.

KRAUT

This was all an accident-

JUDGE WHITE

Silence! One week in the hole!

KRAUT

Please-

JUDGE WHITE

Bailiff!

The bailiff beats a club against the back of Kraut's leg, the
boy falls to the ground.

JUDGE WHITE (CONT'D)

Shut the fuck up, you lying, sick
mistake of nature!

(MORE)

JUDGE WHITE (CONT'D)
 You took away the son of a patriot
 who showed more promise for his
 adulthood than you ever could. I
 approve Mr. Burr's petition for
 personal execution by method
 of...aquatic suffocation! Next
 case!

Kraut is drug away.

A look of restrained satisfaction grows on Burr's face.

5 INT. PSYCHIATRIST'S OFFICE - DAY - DESATURATED

A small plain office, attempted to feel homey by DR. GREENE,
 30s female, professional but warm demeanor. She sits at a
 desk across from Burr.

GREENE
 How do you feel now, that the
 execution is only a few days away?

BURR
 How do you feel about it, Dr.
 Greene?

GREENE
 We've been through this. My job is
 to check a box. How do you feel-

BURR
 I feel like cutting the bullshit.

Dr. Greene sets down her notepad.

GREENE
 Fine. I think you're grieving, and
 understandably enraged. But nothing
 will bring back your son, Joseph.
 And this boy is a human being-

BURR
 No, he's a dog! And dogs deserve to
 be put down! I want him to suffer
 the way he made my boy suffer, is
 there something so unnatural about
 that? Do you have children, Linda?

GREENE
 I know you're under a lot of
 pressure from the media, from a lot
 of people, but it's not too late
 to...retract from this.

(MORE)

GREENE (CONT'D)
It's ok to have doubts. Think of
how you'll feel-

BURR
I'll feel a lot better after I
strangle that little faggot fuck to
death with my bare hands.

Greene sighs, defeated.

GREENE
Sleeping schedule? How is your
depression?

BURR
I take pills to wake up, I take
pills to go to sleep. Staying
active, I'm doing a radio thing
later today.

MANSFIELD (V.O.)
Welcome back to the Mack Mansfield
program, truth for America, the
voice of God's country.

6 INT. RADIO STUDIO - DAY - DESATURATED

MANSFIELD sits at his microphone, a large, sweating
televangelist-esque bohemoth. Opposite him is guest Burr.

MANSFIELD
Now, the congresswoman, I'm sorry,
congressperson, from
Massachusetts...Is it just me or is
she looking more and more like one
of those old American Indians?

He leans back, mimics racist Native American mannerisms.

MANSFIELD (CONT'D)
Ha-ya-ha-ya-ha-ya. Me big chief
white lady want give poor people
health care and tax working
families!

Mansfield sits back up in his seat.

MANSFIELD (CONT'D)

Now speaking of whiny liberals, there's this increasing hubbub about the new death execution program, a program we've talked a lot about on this program as it lets murderers and rapists get what they deserve! In our studio today, we have a real American hero participating in this program, Joseph Burr, welcome to the Mack Mansfield program.

BURR

Glad to be here, Mack.

MANSFIELD

Now just a heinous, heinous crime against your family. I'm so sorry. Your son shot and murdered by one of his peers, a boy you knew, in cold blood. And you have been granted the ability to execute him yourself, congratulations. Your method?

BURR

Thanks, Mack. I chose drowning.

MANSFIELD

And why is that?

BURR

I want him to suffer. I watched my son die slowly, in pain. I felt his last gasps of breath. Now I want to feel this animal's last breath by my own hand.

MANSFIELD

Yes, I think that's appropriate. You are a brave man, sir. So just to give us a little insight into this program, you have an orientation period, you've witnessed a few executions, must be very exciting up close.

7

EXT. OPEN FIELD - DAY - DESATURATED

Burr and a small group of witnesses stand before a GUARD, a blindfolded PRISONER, a middle aged EXECUTIONER.

The executioner pulls out a handgun and shoots the prisoner point blank in the head. He falls hard to the ground.

Burr looks on, shaken, tries to hold his composure.

8

INT. RADIO STUDIO - DAY - SATURATED - CONTINUED

BURR

It's odd. I know that...there'll be this catharsis. Just seems my whole life has revolved around death-

MANSFIELD

So your execution will air on our sister television network LBS, this Saturday, check your local listings. Now, Mr. Burr, I understand the defense, pathetic defense, that it was an accident. This uh-

BURR

Kraut.

MANSFIELD

Yes, this Kraut character claims he and your son were engaged in some sort of perverted affair? Now ladies and gentleman, this is just typically violent sodomite behavior.

BURR

I knew my son. I loved him no matter what, but what kills me Mack, is that...that this little fuck wants me to think that I didn't know my son. And he took everything from me.

MANSFIELD

You are striking a fine blow for freedom, Mr. Burr. You are a hero.

BURR

No, Mack. I just believe in this country. I am a member of this great society. And I have a duty. Eye for an eye.

9 INT. PRISON - KRAUT'S CELL - DAY - DESATURATED

Kraut lies dirty in the floor, shivering from every sound he hears.

MANSFIELD (V.O.)
Again, Mr. Burr's will be part of
two executions airing this Saturday
night on LBS, thank you so much
Joseph.

A priest enters the cell, kneels down next to the boy.

BURR (V.O.)
Thank you.

10 INT. PRISON - EXECUTION CHAMBER - DAY - DESATURATED

Crumbling walls and cracked windows, the room is mostly bare except for spectators, guards, a hanging noose.

Burr, in a blue suit, stands in a corner with one guard and a handful of spectators.

A TV CAMERAMAN, 30s, and his ASSISTANT set up in the other corner, another guard close to their side. The cameraman fidgets with his lens, wrestles with a tripod.

A SECOND EXECUTIONER, dressed in all black contrasting a pale reflection, stares intensely.

One of the guards pulls and tests the noose. He places a stepping stool beneath it, moves to the wall to a lever.

A CONDEMNED INMATE, twenty-something shaved-bald in chains is brought in and led to the center of the room.

The noose lowers, the guard ties it around the inmate's neck.

The cameraman rolls, his assistant holds a boom microphone.

The executioner stares on sternly as Burr alternates his glare from the executioner to the inmate.

The guard partially cover's the inmate's face with a veil right above his eye. The guard places it in his mouth. The inmate gives way of his stiff demeanor and begins to quake.

GUARD
Your last words?

INMATE

Please God. I'm innocent. I swear
to God, I swear to God.

The guard looks to the executioner, who then walks toward a crane.

The hood is pulled completely over the inmate's head.

Restricted hands and feet, the inmate starts to resist, convulse. The guards grab at his sides.

GUARD

Ready!

The executioner cranks the lever, tightens the noose.

The inmate screams as the guards release him, jerks violently.

The executioner moves forward and kicks the stool barely supporting the inmate's feet.

Burr looks on, horrified.

Hanging lifeless from the rope, the inmate's bowels release and drip into the ground below.

11 INT. PRISON - BATHROOM - DAY - DESATURATED - MONTAGE

Burr, still in his blue suit, shakes as he removes a pill from a bottle and places it in his mouth.

He grabs hold of the paper dispenser in a stall to keep himself from falling.

He stares at himself in the mirror, practices his breathing.

INTERCUT WITH:

12 INT. BURR'S HOUSE - FRONT ROOM - NIGHT - SATURATED

Pinkie bleeds in Burr's arms, only the faintest sign of consciousness in his eyes.

Burr tries to dial a cell phone, covered in blood hemorrhaged from his son.

BURR

Please hurry.

Burr drops the phone, slowly raises his son off the floor.

911 OPERATOR (O.S.)
 Sir, don't move him! Are you there
 Joseph?

13 INT. PRISON - KRAUT'S CELL - DAY - DESATURATED - CONTINUED

Kraut sits dirty, shirtless on the dank, dirty floor with the priest.

He looks up at the sound of the doors opening, the silhouette of a guard appears on the wall.

14 EXT. BURR'S HOUSE - DAY - SATURATED - CONTINUED

Burr stumbles, carries his son outside, tries to tourniquet the boy's shotgun wound to the stomach.

Pinkie's face is expressionless, he is limp, lifeless in his father's arms, blood dripping to the ground below.

15 INT. PRISON - EXECUTION CHAMBER - DAY - DESATURATED

Burr stands in the center of the room with a guard, near a shallow pool of water.

Kraut is brought in chains by two other guards, panicking and hyperventilating.

One guard walks up to him. Takes out a pack of cigarettes.

GUARD
 Cigarette?

KRAUT
 No.

The guard returns it to his pocket, readies a hood from his side pocket.

GUARD
 Last words?

KRAUT
 I-

Kraut struggles. Burr stares hard, ready to pounce like an animal. Kraut looks at him in the eye.

KRAUT (CONT'D)
 I loved him.

The guard begins to cover the boy with a hood, when Burr grabs him in a rage, begins choking him and dunking him into the pool.

Burr lifts him up and down, Kraut gasps for breath.

The cameraman hovers above.

CAMERAMAN

That's good, just hold him up for a moment!

Burr sobs, loosens his grip, tries to dunk him again.

Kraut's hood comes loose, revealing a terrified expression.

Burr drops Kraut from his grasp, falls backward across the floor.

Kraut, still chained, convulses in the pool, trying to lift himself up for breath.

GUARD

Do you wish to stop the execution?!?

Burr stares grasps for breath.

GUARD (CONT'D)

Do you wish to stop the execution?!?

BURR

Yes! Yes stop it!

Swiftly, two of the guards swiftly lift Kraut from the water and carry the soaked shaking boy back into the darkness and out of the room.

The chambers move toward silence as Kraut is taken further away off screen. The only sounds are the gasps of Burr as he lies in the floor.

The remaining guard stands silent. Burr huddles into the fetal position in the floor and sobs.

16

EXT. STREET - STOREFRONT - DAY - B & W

Returning to the opening scene. Burr stares across the street to see Kraut talking to a girl. Still gloomy, he manages a laugh, does not notice Burr.

Burr stares a moment, starts to walk away in the opposite direction.

FADE OUT.

"BLOOD IN THE GRASS" ADDITIONAL SCENES

Written by

Trent Davis

(From Version 5, Draft 3/21/11)

1110 Saint Claude Ave.
New Orleans, LA

INT. SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY - SATURATED

Kraut sits half-listening to his teacher.

Through the open door, Pinkie appears in the hallway and motions for Kraut to step out.

Pinkie disappears down the hallway as Kraut raises his hand.

KRAUT
May I be excused?

INT. SCHOOL - BOY'S BATHROOM - DAY - SATURATED

Inside one of the stalls, Pinkie and Kraut kiss, hold each other close, laugh.

The restroom door opens, and Kraut jumps to stand on the toilet seat.

Initially trying not to laugh, the boys' smiles fade as they hear footsteps coming close to the stall.

The stall door opens to a TEACHER, 40s, who looks at the boys in shock.

INT. SCHOOL - EMPTY CLASSROOM - DAY - SATURATED

The Teacher rants as Kraut and Pinkie sit in chairs facing him at the front of the classroom.

TEACHER
You two have put me in a very
awkward position. What you're doing
isn't only sick, it's illegal. Your
fathers would beat you. I don't
want to see the two of you
together, I don't want the two of
you to even look at one another, or
I will report this, do you
understand?

Kraut slumps in his chair, half-listening, looking and studying Pinkie. Pinkie listens intensely to the teacher, nods.

INT. SCHOOL - EMPTY CLASSROOM - DAY

Kraut pulls Pinkie into a dark, empty classroom.

PINKIE
Really no reason for all that.

KRAUT
What did I do? Why aren't you
talking to me?

PINKIE
I've been busy.

KRAUT
Bullshit, I've tried calling so
many times that your dad is
probably suspicious now.

PINKIE
I've just been thinking, since the
other day. Alright? Just let me
think.

Pause.

KRAUT
Why don't you wanna touch me?

PINKIE
Look, you need to leave me alone
for a while.

Pause.

KRAUT
You love me.

PINKIE
Stop it.

Pinkie starts to walk out.

KRAUT
You are fucked up...you're a
coward.....Faggot.

Pinkie swings back around before he exits, puts a finger in
Kraut's face.

PINKIE
I'm serious Kraut, don't talk to
me, don't look at me, I will rip
your fucking face off.

EXT. BURR'S HOUSE - FRONT DOOR - NIGHT

Kraut BANGS on the door from the outside.

KRAUT
Pinkie! Answer the goddamn door,
Joey!

INT. BURR'S HOUSE - FRONT ROOM - NIGHT

Pinkie opens it. Kraut barrels inside.

PINKIE
Are you out of your fucking-

KRAUT
You are going to talk to me.

PINKIE
Yes I'm going to talk to you.

KRAUT
I don't want to live anymore, I
don't.

PINKIE
I'm sorry, but don't ever say that.

Kraut pulls out a gun.

PINKIE (CONT'D)
Oh, fuck you. You threatening me?

KRAUT
I don't know.

PINKIE
How the fuck do you think I feel
huh? Why don't you just put a
bullet in me?

They wrestle.

BANG as the gun goes off. Pinkie steps back, stumbles,
bleeding from his stomach.

Kraut grabs him, tries to cradle him in his arms.

PINKIE (CONT'D)
Run...

INT. BURR'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY - SATURATED

Burr, Kraut, and Pinkie sit at the table eating breakfast.

BURR

Where are you boys going swimming
at? Is it safe?

KRAUT

Yeah, are there snakes?

PINKIE

Kraut is still getting over his
fear of water. He's a pussycat.

BURR

Hey, go easy on him boy, not
everyone's like you and not afraid
of nothin'.

EXT. NEW ORLEANS STREET - DAY - DESATURATED

Burr's beat-up sedan passes dilapidated houses and unwashed
pedestrians roaming the streets in tattered clothes.

Buildings are damaged and gutted. Old stores stand barren.

A mother and her young son sit bundled together on a stoop of
a crumbling shotgun house.

Appendix C: Production Stills

















Vita

James Trent Davis was born in Jackson, Tennessee on July 31, 1984. He graduated from McNairy Central High School in May of 2003. He attended the University of Memphis, graduating summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology with a concentration in social theory, and in Communication with a concentration in Film and Video Production. He enrolled at the University of New Orleans in 2008 to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in Film Production. He graduates in May 2012.