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"Us Against The World"- The Production of a Short Film

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“Us Against The World”-
The Production of a Short Film

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
Film Production

by

Andrea Kuehnel

B.A. University of Applied Sciences Leipzig, 2012

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List of Abbreviations

AD	Assistant Director
ADR	Automatic Dialogue Replacement
Avid	Avid Media Composer
Cal Arts	California Institute of the Arts
DP	Director of Photography
L.A.	Los Angeles
UNO	University of New Orleans
U.S.	United States
Scratch	Assimilate Scratch

Abstract

In this paper I will recount the main stages of the process of making my thesis film *Us Against The World*, a narrative short film. In particular, I will focus on the authenticity and verisimilitude that I tried to achieve, as well as the limitations I worked under as a student filmmaker with a limited budget and how we consistently tried to use these limitations to our advantage. Starting from the beginning, I will first discuss my main inspirations and the writing process of the script. Secondly, I will explain how my team of creative collaborators and I prepared the project during pre-production. I will furthermore address all key creative aspects, such as directing, cinematography and production design, and describe how we used these to visually translate my story onto screen. After summarizing the post-production process, I will draw a conclusion to evaluate the final film.

Keywords: short film, Us Against The World, death penalty, execution, Andrea Kuehnel

1. INTRODUCTION

My decision to become a filmmaker and pursue an MFA degree in Film Production can be traced back to two motivations: a love of storytelling and my interest in social and political topics.

From early childhood I have loved to immerse into story worlds and follow fictional characters on their journeys. Listening to the often fantastic tales that my parents told me sparked my interest in coming up with stories myself and I became an avid storyteller. At first I told my sister goodnight stories; once I knew how to write I started putting my ideas on paper and when I discovered my affection for drawing and the visual arts I went on to create little comic strips to visualize my stories. Ever since watching my first movie, *The Lion King* (Roger Allers, Rob Minkoff, 1994), in the movie theater I had been fascinated by the magic of the moving images projected on a screen. These images seemed so real, so alive, and I knew that this was what I wanted to do. Little did I know at that time that movie making was an actual profession one could pursue. I only found out much later. But once I did, I knew this is what I wanted to do: tell stories through film.

Not only do stories have the power to open up other worlds for us and therefore help us better understand ourselves and the world we live in, in my opinion, they can do much more: stories have the ability to make us empathize with other human beings, and I agree with Jonathan Gottschall that they in fact “make us more human” (Gottschall, title) overall. Stories provide us with unique insights into other people’s lives by letting us experience the world from their perspectives. Stories, whether on the page or the screen, tell us about their beliefs, their dreams and goals, but also about the challenges they face, what scares them or why they cry—aspects of others’ lives that may not impact our daily routine but are very important when it comes to

preventing misunderstandings and conflicts. Stories can help further a mutual understanding and with it the peaceful existence of us all. By deciding whose life and environment to focus on, by making them the fulcrums of the story, we as filmmakers can choose the topics we want the audience to engage with. Since the time with the audience is limited, I feel that those topics should be as compelling as possible.

The second reason why I decided to become a filmmaker is related to this ‘what’ of storytelling: what kind of issues the narrative focuses on. In general, I prefer stories that are not just hollow shells, beautiful images with little substance, but that focus on socially relevant topics. My preference for such content can be traced back to my general interest in various social, cultural, historical, and political issues, as well as to my belief that films can, in a way, change our world for the better. I feel that as a society we often tend to forget what is not a part of our personal experience. In fact, we prefer to shut our eyes to the messy, uncomfortable reality that results from our modern Western society, happy to let others struggle for our convenience, unseen by us. Our lives offer countless examples: our trash is conveniently removed by garbage collectors while we sleep; we pick up a sanitized, neatly wrapped pound of beef from the grocery, blissfully detached from its bloody origins; our soldiers use deadly force to “defend our freedoms” far abroad; our police imprison criminals and lock them up, hidden from polite society – all so that we can ignore the unsavory but necessary aspects of our modern society and can enjoy a ‘carefree’ life where we can focus on issues that are seemingly more important, such as the next celebrity scandal or where to eat. The real problems get ignored, because they are uncomfortable, and because there are no easy answers.

I believe that cinema has the power to highlight these problems in a dramatic way, furthering our awareness of the world we live in. Of course, I am not naive. I know there may not

be any direct effects from viewing a movie, except for perhaps getting people to think about what they watched and talk about a depicted issue. But as long as a film can do this simple thing, to get someone interested, maybe even invested, I think it already achieves a lot.

With the goal in mind to make the audience think, I set out to make a thesis film that would satisfy my personal criteria. In the beginning of the process I did not know what my film would be about thematically, but I wanted to make a film that I would not only be interested in watching myself but that would also focus on a topical, urgent issue.

After considering several ideas, I decided to focus on an issue that I had been interested in for quite some time and that had recently resurfaced in the public awareness: the death penalty in the U.S. My film *Us Against The World* tells the story of John, a prison guard on death row and member of the execution team, who is horrified to discover that the next prisoner to be executed is his old childhood friend, Frank.

In addition to telling a story about an issue that concerns me, it was my goal to grow as a visual storyteller and to explore my own voice as a filmmaker. During my education at the University of New Orleans, I learned a lot about each step in the process of filmmaking from a theoretical standpoint. Yet, after having worked on many other student films, I realized that practical experience in particular teaches the most valuable lessons. Hence, I saw my thesis as an important milestone on my way to becoming a more well-rounded filmmaker.

This paper will recount the steps I took to bring my story to life, from the initial idea to the finished film. I want to focus particularly on the verisimilitude and authenticity that I tried to achieve, as well as the limitations I worked under as a student filmmaker and how we consistently tried to use these limitations to our advantage. I hope these insights will be helpful for other students and filmmakers.

2. INSPIRATION

Determining what my primary inspiration was for a project is always a difficult task for me. Being creative is an abstract process where we are influenced by many factors, from our own experiences and feelings, to things that we see on the news or in a book or movie, to a conversation that we overhear.

I would trace the inspiration for the idea of *Us Against The World* back to my interest in social justice issues. I have always viewed the death penalty and its implementation in the U.S. in a critical light and have been interested in the subject matter ever since talking about the issue in my high school English class. I had read a few books on the subject but became newly aware of its topicality when several botched executions made the headlines of newspapers in early 2014.

Ultimately, it was Werner Herzog's documentary *Into the Abyss* (2011) that provided me with the most essential element of my idea: my protagonist and the situation he finds himself in. I had seen Herzog's film already, about a year ago, while researching for my Advanced Documentary Production class with Laszlo Fulop. Ever since I saw the film's careful account of a triple murder in Texas, I've found it impossible to forget. This was largely due to Herzog's approach of interviewing all of the parties involved and telling all sides. His masterful ability to ask the right questions at the right time gives the viewer a unique insight into all his interview subjects; we can truly understand all of their various perspectives.

One interview in particular stuck with me. It was with Fred Allen, a former member of the tie-down team in the execution chamber in Huntsville, Texas. Allen talks about how he suffered a mental breakdown after fully realizing the nature of his job and examining the results of his actions. He had participated in about 120 executions; this number seemed so incredibly

large that at first I could not believe it. Seeing the tears form in this strong man's eyes and how Allen, who we would never expect to cry, grapples with the enormous guilt he carries with him, touched me deeply. During this interview, Allen makes a statement that summarizes my position on the death penalty in a simple, yet profound, way and that served as a guiding inspiration throughout the process of making *Us Against The World*:

“Nobody has the right to take another life. I don’t care if it is the law and it is so easy to change the law.” (Fred Allen in *Into the Abyss*)

Until watching *Into The Abyss*, I had never really thought about how a prison guard must feel, participating in one execution of human beings after another. Can they simply turn their emotions off? How do they protect themselves from this reality? What does this do to them? These questions stayed with me and I could not stop thinking about them. Instead I wrote a script.

3. THE WRITING OF *US AGAINST THE WORLD*

Initially I had wanted to collaborate with a screenwriter on my thesis film script. However, I wasn't able to find someone with material that I found appealing and suitable for a thesis film in time. So I was pressured to come up with my own idea in order to be able to start production according to the timetable set out by the department.

Luckily, we were offered a class, Writing the Thesis Script, taught by Erik Hansen, which not only helped me develop my own idea for a script for my thesis film but also sparked my interest in screenwriting in general. After having taken Hansen's Advanced Screenwriting class in my first semester, I had been interested in the craft of writing for film but had always struggled with the language barrier due to not being a native speaker of English. Yet, the Writing the Thesis Script class and Erik Hansen's enthusiasm for the craft of screenwriting and storytelling gave me the confidence to pursue developing my ideas into a script. I very much enjoyed the workshop environment of the class, where we were given the opportunity to present our own ideas and to discuss other students' script submissions as a group. This direct and unadorned feedback pushed us to develop our ideas to make them the best they could be. I found the workshop style extremely helpful because I tend to be most creative when I can talk through my ideas and usually come up with new ones while engaging in discussions about the plausibility, content, and structure of a script.

Prior to the first class I had already brainstormed a few ideas that I thought would be feasible to realize as a short film. Erik Hansen asked me to pitch them in class and, after I received constructive feedback from my fellow students as well as from him, I decided to focus on my personal favorite idea: the story of a death row prison guard, who had successfully avoided thinking about the nature of his job until an event triggers something inside of him and

makes him confront the considerable number of people he helped to execute. When presenting my idea in class and pitching it to other people, I realized how little most of my listeners had ever thought about this issue and how almost none of them were aware of what a prison guard on death row goes through. This feedback convinced me that I had to address this issue by making a movie about it.

The Writing Process

The idea for my script was born in the beginning of the spring semester of 2014. It went through several stages, and I slowly developed it from an outline to a treatment and then to a full script that I revised several times after receiving feedback in the workshop and from my thesis committee members.

Throughout the writing process I tried to keep in mind that the script should be of a feasible scope, which means I would be able to shoot it within six days, without high production costs or complicated special or visual effects, and with only a limited number of cast and crew members. In order to achieve this, I tried to focus my creative energies on developing the two main characters and their relationship. Most important to me was the central conflict between two human beings who used to be friends but now face each other from opposite sides of prison bars. Instead of overloading my story with additional characters, subplots, and actions outside the prison, I intentionally decided to stay in this confined environment and lock us – the audience – inside with John and Frank. The only time we are able to escape the prison complex, I thought, should be through John's memories. We follow his thoughts back into a happier time of childhood innocence and freedom. The flashbacks I created give us an insight into John's thoughts and feelings but they also help visualize the change that both of the characters have undergone over the years.

I would like to point out that it was never my intention to turn this film into some sort of moral lecture that proves that the death penalty is unjust or inhumane. Although it is my personal belief that the death penalty is not an appropriate punishment in the 21st century, I did not want to make this film a simple declaration of my personal view. Instead, I wanted to raise awareness about the topic and, as I explained earlier, make people think. The best way to do so was to place my protagonist John in some kind of moral predicament; having to take part in the execution of his childhood friend certainly qualifies. In this regard, I deemed it important that the guilt of the prisoner, Frank, should never be in doubt and, theoretically speaking, it should not matter what exactly it was that Frank did to determine if he should or should not be executed. Of course this story could have easily become a dramatically exaggerated moral tale about the innocent convict on death row and his best friend, who is the only one able to save him. Yet, I felt that such a story would not reflect reality and therefore could easily be dismissed as too fanciful by an audience. Creating a sense of authenticity was one of my main goals when approaching *Us Against The World*, so I tried to avoid using such an overly dramatized narrative and relying on clichés.

Research

Instead of relying on easy drama, I invested a lot of my time and effort into researching the facts and conditions of execution procedures. One of the most valuable sources was by far the radio documentary *Witness to an Execution* (Abramson, Stacy and David Isay, 2000), in which several people involved in executions at the Walls Unit in Texas share their experiences. The documentary offered an insightful and authentic look into the world of capital punishment.

In addition to the radio documentary and to Herzog's previously mentioned filmic treatment of capital punishment, I consulted a large number of online sources, such as the

websites of several anti- death-penalty organizations, information portals about the death penalty, blogs of convicts and their relatives, as well as the websites of legal authorities, such as the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Through extensive Internet research I was able to find a number of official protocols that specify the exact steps of the procedures prior, during, and after the execution in different states. I also referred to other works of fiction, such as James Patterson's novel *Conviction* (Patterson) and the films *Dead Man Walking* (Tim Robbins, 1995), *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999) and *The Life of David Gale* (Alan Parker, 2003).

4. PRODUCTION

Besides directing, producing is the area of filmmaking that I find most interesting. In the fall semester of 2013, one year before my own thesis film went into production, I had the chance to be the main producer on my friend Maja Holzinger's thesis film, *Call Me Cappy*. This experience taught me a lot about being a producer, in particular because I held myself to high standards and tried to set up the production process on a professional level while working within the limitations of a student budget. We held weekly production meetings, created a detailed time schedule for the process of preproduction, and calculated a budget that I updated, when necessary, throughout the entire production process.

My goal for the production of *Us Against The World* was to establish a similar professional producing workflow. Working on Maja's film was an incredibly helpful experience, and I wanted my film to benefit from the lessons I had learned on that project. Yet, when it came to getting started with preproduction, it turned out to be a challenge to find a suitable producer and I wasn't sure if I could find someone as enthusiastic and interested in my project as I had been in Maja's film.

Finding a Good Producer

I am very much a perfectionist and expected a similar work attitude from my team members. At first, it proved rather difficult for me to find someone who could meet the high expectations I had for the perfect producer. I approached students that I trusted and wanted to work with, but many of them had already committed to work on other thesis films by the beginning of the spring semester in 2014. After reaching out to several current and former UNO students, I was able to assemble a group of three producers who all seemed very interested and eager to help out. In May 2014, we held our first production meeting to discuss the preproduction

time schedule and everything that needed to be done over the summer. Although the meeting went well and we gathered some great ideas in terms of fundraising and locations, only one of my original three producers ended up staying on the project and working as a producer for my film.

Over the summer months, which I spent at home in Germany, it turned out to be more difficult than I had expected, due to the great distance and time difference, to stay in touch with my producers and get things done. I kept working on the script but also realized how much harder it was for me to write in English while living in a non-English speaking environment. I missed being able to ask for advice and to talk to someone about my project. In retrospect, I accomplished much more in terms of preproduction and refining my script when I was back in the U.S., where I was able to seek direct and personal advice from my friends and professors.

When I did get back to the States, I was unable to meet with my producers because they were constantly unavailable. After unsuccessfully trying to schedule a meeting for quite some time, and with my shoot dates drawing ever closer, I decided that I needed to have a conversation with them and ask if they still felt passionately about the project and whether they were still willing to invest time on my film. In the end, one of them, a former UNO student, had to drop out because she had a new job and was too busy to work on a student film and the other, a current UNO student, kept insisting that he wanted to be a part of the project but did not show any initiative when it came to taking on the tasks of a producer. I eventually asked him to leave the project. The one producer who remained was my friend Maja Holzinger, who is not the most organized of people, but who felt passionately about the project and wanted to help me in whatever way possible. Unfortunately, Maja had planned a trip to her home country for most of my preproduction and was scheduled to return back to New Orleans only a few weeks before my

shooting dates.

At this point, in August 2014, I felt desperate and uncertain that I would get my preproduction done before my desired shooting dates, which I had scheduled for the end of October 2014. Luckily, just when I was about to reconsider my production and graduation timeline, I found another person who proved to be a lifesaver. Anastasiya Rul, a former UNO business major, whom I had met on another thesis film, showed great interest in helping me on my film when I talked to her in August. She seemed extremely enthusiastic and interested in the script. She possessed the enthusiasm that I felt was lacking from my two previous producers. Although inexperienced when it came to producing a film, Anastasiya was very eager to learn what it takes to be a good producer. Over the course of the next few months, Anastasiya became not only a wonderful collaborator on my film but also a trusted friend and someone that I could always talk to about my doubts, script issues, or important decisions I faced during preproduction, such as casting.

Fundraising

Coming up with a fundraising strategy and an estimate of how much money we would have to acquire was one of the first things Anastasiya and I focused on. When preparing my thesis prospectus, I had already created a first estimate of the budget, which we now refined. The enormous amount of money necessary to make even a small film already seemed overwhelming, particularly from my perspective as an international student. I did not have the privilege of being able to work off campus during the academic year to make extra money, and I also come from Germany, where people tend to deal very conservatively with money. Getting the funds necessary to make *Us Against the World* would not be easy.

I had already considered this during the writing process and developed my script so that it

would be possible to shoot it with a low budget, which I had not precisely defined at this stage but hoped to be no more than \$7,500. My idea was well suited to be shot with only limited resources: two main characters in one confined space.

While researching fundraising ideas, I had discovered a very helpful article in the *MovieMaker – Guide to Making Movies 2014* about crowdfunding and kept referring back to it throughout the process. In the article, filmmaker and crowdfunding expert Emily Best gives valuable insights and advice on how to approach online crowdsourcing. The most important thing I learned from her article is that it is the crowd that matters. As a filmmaker one has to learn to find and build up an audience that is interested in the work one does. “A great crowdfunding campaign connects the ideas of the project with the people to whom those ideas matter. This is *your* audience” (Best). Gathering and maintaining such a crowd takes time and effort. Best recommends to have at least a full six weeks to prepare and execute the campaign. We tried to implement this approach, as best we could, in our own fundraising campaign. Yet, it proved much more difficult than I thought.

I followed Best’s advice and tried to reach out to people in different ways: through social media and direct outreach. Since my film was about a specific topic, the death penalty, I already knew that I had a very specific audience that I could reach out to for support: opponents of the death penalty. Over the summer months, I started to make a list of organizations and online resources about the death penalty that I used not only for research for my writing but also considered contacting for support. It was my intention to use this database to spread the word about my film and to get people interested in my project early on. I hoped that once I had their interest and attention, they might be willing to contribute a few dollars to my online crowdfunding campaign.

From other UNO student films and the department's 2013 spring film production *Brokedown Paradise* (Laura Medina, 2014), I knew that it was possible to raise a certain level of funding for student projects through an online crowdfunding site and, though the result of these depended on how much effort one put into these campaigns, it was mostly friends and family members that donated. We had created this sort of online campaign, on the website Indiegogo, for Maja's film *Call Me Cappy*. The campaign took a lot more effort than we had initially thought, but since the funding of her project was secured after winning the Jeri Nims Scholarship, we did not put as much work into it as would have been necessary to reach the campaign goal.

This time, with *Us Against The World*, we were eager to make our campaign a success. We created a time schedule for the campaign, knowing that we would need to receive the funds from the website prior to shooting. We started brainstorming ideas for effective marketing tools, that would not be too time-consuming, to advertise our crowdfunding campaign.

Since I do not have a very large network of people I know in the U.S., I already expected that my campaign would probably not turn out as successful as others. From the beginning, it was clear to me that one of my main goals would be to build and maintain an audience of strangers and keep them interested, with the hope that they would eventually contribute to my campaign.

The Indiegogo Campaign

In preparation for our campaign we were faced with the question of which of the crowdfunding portals to use. After researching the terms and conditions of the two most popular sites Indiegogo and Kickstarter, we decided to use Indiegogo because they would allow us to keep any funds raised, even if we would not reach our initial campaign goal. Since it was rather

difficult to predict how much money we would be able to raise through the online crowdfunding campaign, we tried to keep our expectations realistic and assumed that we might not reach even our most pessimistic goal of \$2,000. Hence, we decided to set our goal rather high at \$7,500 with the idea that if we could attract a larger outside sponsor they might be willing to donate more, especially if our campaign goal had not been met before the deadline.

The first step to set up our campaign was to shoot a video introducing our project. I had organized the shoot for the campaign video two weeks prior to the fundraising party, which gave us enough time to edit the video and set up the campaign online. Since we did not have any locations secured nor any actors cast at this time, one of the biggest creative challenges for the video was how to translate the story of my film visually to screen. Having watched a lot of successful fundraising videos in preparation for my own campaign, I came to the conclusion that most successful were such that managed to show some of the visual potential the film offered and incorporated certain elements of the film idea into the fundraising video.

From reviewing other videos, I knew that humorous videos did very well. But since the topic of my film was rather serious, I felt torn between making the video funny and potentially attracting a larger crowd of followers and staying true to the material and treating it in a more sober and professional fashion. I decided to go with the latter because I did not want to risk not being taken seriously.

I came up with the idea to create an abstract representation of my film idea by showing silhouettes of the two main characters in a black and white world. Since I had not made any casting decision at this time and did not want to show the faces of the stand-ins I used for the fundraising video because I was afraid some viewers might mistake them for the actual cast; this idea proved perfect. Also, the reduction to black and white created the minimalistic look I

wanted to achieve for my film and managed to visually represent the overarching conflict: the assumption that the world is black and white, hence that all people are either good or bad. In addition to these images, we shot interviews with all of the key creative collaborators. Our goal was to make these interviews informative yet interesting. I hoped that showing our crew as knowledgeable and likable young professionals would be the best way to attract an audience and convince them that we deserve their trust and donations.

Although we were rather limited when it came to time and locations to shoot the video, since we did not have a prison cell at our disposal then, I am very content with how the end result turned out. In my opinion, we managed to create a visually interesting and professional looking video.

The “Us Against The World”-Fund-Raiser

During my first meetings with my producer Anastasiya, we also discussed alternatives to the online crowdfunding campaign and decided to host a fund-raiser party in addition to our online efforts. Although this meant prospectively more donations and more funds, I was concerned that we might get so caught up in our efforts of marketing and organizing the fund-raising event that we would neglect the actual preproduction of my film. Anastasiya proved to be a very helpful collaborator in this regard and took on many responsibilities herself. She focused on organizing and promoting the party which allowed me to focus on writing and my prep work as director.

Thanks to Anastasiya’s efforts, we were able to secure a location for the party for free and decided it would be best to use the event to launch our online campaign. Furthermore, we agreed to charge a small cover fee of five dollars for the party and not solely rely on donations. Our goal was to attract as many guests, and possible donors, as possible. Since we expected our

friends to donate through the online campaign anyway, we hoped to be able to reach other local film enthusiasts and industry professionals through this event. The best way to attract this crowd, we thought, was to screen movies during the party. Through social media and personal outreach, we started a call for local filmmakers to submit their short films to us with the chance of getting screened in front of an audience. Although we did not receive a large number of submissions, we had enough films to make a selection and to fill a night with interesting shorts.

In conclusion, I can say that although we only raised about \$500, less than we had hoped for, the event proved to be a great success and gave us a certain amount of financial security for the beginning of the production of my film. Furthermore, it was also a great promotion for my film.

Pitch Competition

Another funding opportunity that presented itself before my film began shooting was the Pitch Perfect Competition at the New Orleans Film Festival. Unfortunately, I was not selected to pitch as part of the student competition, and I was at first very disappointed to have missed such an opportunity. Through social media, I heard about a new category in the competition that allowed local filmmakers from Louisiana to present their idea in a three-minute pitch to a professional jury and audience. The first step of the application process for the competition was to submit a one-minute video pitch. Luckily, my project was selected as one of the finalists, and I was invited to pitch at the New Orleans Film Festival.

In preparation for the big day I modified my pitch numerous times in order to make it as precise and engaging as possible. I rehearsed the final text several times and pitched in front of friends. Before the event I was extremely nervous, since it is always a big challenge for me to speak in front of a large audience, especially in a second language. My pitch went fairly well, but

my nervousness made me rattle off my pitch too quickly, and the jury later criticized that I did not address them but just the audience. Even though I did not win any of the hoped for prize money, the competition was a very helpful experience. I feel much more prepared when it comes to pitching an idea in front of possible producers now.

Fundraising Summary

Overall, I can say that our fundraising went very well and we were able to raise enough money to finance most of our production costs. Despite missing our deliberately high Indiegogo campaign goal by 74% and raising only \$1,995 online, we were able to acquire enough donations from other sources and through our fundraising party to cover most our expenses. In total we raised about \$3,000 in donations and through the fundraiser. In addition to that I was awarded a grant of \$3,000 by my Visa sponsor, the Fulbright society, for my final year of graduate school, which I decided to completely put towards the production of my thesis film.

5. CASTING – FINDING JOHN AND FRANK

One of the biggest challenges of my film, and the one that I placed the most emphasis on, was the casting process. My film is a character-driven story set in a single location, and I wanted to find the two most suitable actors to portray the characters of John and Frank in a truthful way. An additional challenge arose from the fact that John and Frank were supposed to be childhood friends. Thus not only did both actors need to feel like they were approximately the same age, but I also had to find their younger versions in the form of child actors, who could believably portray the same characters during the flashback scenes. Since the storyline set in the present is the main plot and most important, I decided to find the old versions of John and Frank first before starting to look for their younger counterparts.

The Initial Inspiration

Early in the writing stage, I already had a rather intuitive idea of who would be a great fit for the role of John: Lance Nichols, a highly professional and very successful local actor that I had the pleasure of working with on my previous short film *The Good Guys*. On the previous project I was only able to offer Lance a small part and ended up cutting a lot of his performance out for story reason. Despite this, I was very impressed with Lance's professionalism and skills and was hoping to be able to work with him on another project. Lance also expressed interest in collaborating again in the future. From thereon I kept refining my script with the idea in mind that Lance would be playing the role of John and basically tailored the role to his personality. I also had an actor in mind for the role of Frank: Ritchie Montgomery, who played the protagonist in Maja Holzinger's thesis film, *Call Me Cappy*. Once I had a solid draft of my script I approached both actors about the project. Both expressed interest and Lance immediately confirmed his commitment. At this point, I thought that the casting process might not turn out to

be as difficult as I originally expected it to be.

Unfortunately, things turned out differently. After talking to his agent, Ritchie informed me that he was already committed to another project during my scheduled shooting dates. Since these dates were still tentative, I suggested that I could push my shoot back. I told him that I was very flexible and would like to make the scheduling work, if at all possible, because he would be ideal for the part. Sadly, he remained unavailable for all other possible shooting dates. Of course, such continuous denial made me wonder if maybe he didn't like the script and the role as much as I hoped he would and perhaps he was just trying to find a polite way to turn me down. After being unsuccessful in trying to find a replacement for him, I decided to approach Ritchie again, but this time with Maja Holzinger's help. Nevertheless, Ritchie remained unavailable because he was working on a feature from the end of October to the end of November. Yet our second outreach to him made me feel more confident that it was not my script that made him turn down the role but in fact his actual limited availability.

Finding the Perfect Actors

Due to Ritchie's schedule I was on the search for the perfect Frank again. In my opinion, this had to be a great actor in order to be able to play opposite Lance Nichols. I consulted my professor and thesis committee chair Henry Griffin, who knows many local actors, and asked him for suggestions. He suggested another local actor he found well suited for the role and who he connected me with: David Jensen. After sending David my script, and a short phone conversation during which we talked about the role and the project, he expressed interest and quickly committed to the role. Unfortunately, a few weeks later David also became unavailable because he was cast for a feature film. Again, I offered to rearrange my schedule and the shoot dates but he was unable to commit. But it got worse: only a few days later Lance Nichols

informed me that he was selected to play a part in a film shooting out of state over the whole period of my possible shooting dates.

This left me with no actors and no suitable alternatives for any of the roles at the beginning of October, only weeks away from my tentative shooting dates. Fortunately, as a precaution, I had organized open call casting sessions parallel to talking to my first choice actors, since they had informed me that they could not turn down paid work for a student film. With the assistance of my casting director Francesca Caruso, we auditioned several actors for the role of both old and young John and Frank. But the results were rather disappointing. Although we saw some very talented child actors and definitely had options for the younger parts, I was not able to find anyone who I thought would make a great John. This was largely because we only had one African American actor of the desired age range submitting for the role. Yet, he did not even make it to our audition. Eventually, I reconsidered John's role and was ready to make changes to it because time was pressing. Since I knew how important it was to find the right actors for the parts, my producers and I decided to move my shooting dates back two weeks to allow us more time in the casting process.

After initiating another casting call, where we looked for actors of a broader age range and of all ethnicities, we still were not able to find a good option for John. At the same time I started reaching out to all actor friends, other filmmakers, and fellow UNO students and professors asking for suggestions. I even contacted people from acting groups on *Facebook*, if their profile picture resembled the approximate age and look I had in mind for John. This intensive outreach finally proved successful. We were able to invite a handful of actors to read for the role of John. One of them was Escalante Lundy, an actor I had remembered from a film that we screened at our fundraising party and that I had coincidentally found on *Facebook* and

contacted online. His physicality – Escalante is very tall – and his natural demeanor immediately evoked the feeling of a solemn prison guard. Escalante’s sincere audition convinced me that he was the best choice for the role so I cast him.

Once we had seen all the additional actors, we held call backs in the form of chemistry readings. These were extremely important because I felt I needed to see how well the actors could play off each other. I needed to see that there was a connection between both actors and that they actually could have been friends when they were younger. Unfortunately, the chemistry readings left me with more doubt than clarity. A lot of the actors we saw were too different in age and character, and only a few combinations would have made sense. I was especially unhappy with the options I had for the role of Frank. But there was one actor, John Bostic, who was unavailable for the callbacks and I placed all my hopes on him. Luckily, he turned out to be the best choice. After he came in to read a second time – unfortunately by himself since we did not have the time to schedule another callback session – I was very impressed with his performance and felt that his character naturally had a lot in common with Frank. I cast him and decided to cast Escalante Lundy as John without being able to see them together. But I sensed that the two of them both had a lot in common with the characters I had created on the page.

Casting the Children

Once I had made my decision about the adult actors, I organized a callback session for the young actors. Besides seeing possible options for the roles of young John and Frank together, I also wanted to find three children who could act as the teenage bullies. The challenge was to find children of approximately the same age and height so that they could believably portray two different groups of friends that would naturally spend time together. In the case of young John and Frank, I was very fortunate that I was able to find two young actors that were both talented

and also closely resembled their grown up counterparts.

Casting the bullies proved difficult because most of the older children I had seen for the part were either not very talented actors or did not live in close enough proximity that would justify calling them in for half a day of filming. Since we were less than two weeks away from shooting I didn't have enough time to reach out to actors again and hold another casting session. With the time pressure and because the roles were secondary and did not require very experienced actors, I decided to cast two boys, who did not convince me in the casting session, for the non-speaking parts and a third boy who I auditioned over Skype for the speaking role.

The biggest lesson I learned from the casting process was that finding the right actors deserves all the time and effort one can give. In hindsight, I am extremely glad that I took the time, pushed my shooting dates back and, so to say, went the extra mile to find actors that could bring the characters to life on screen.

6. DIRECTING *US AGAINST THE WORLD*

What concerns me most, when approaching a project, is truthfulness. If an actor is not being truthful in their performance you can recognize it in their eyes. As a director, I have to be able to look in the eyes of my actors and see that they truly have become the characters and are not just pretending; they must live and breathe as the character. I believe that this is particularly important in film due to the actor's face being enlarged when it's projected onto the cinema screen.

Advantages of Being a Writer-Director

Since I had come up with the story and written the script myself, I had a big advantage when it came to preparing to direct *Us Against The World*. I already knew a lot of the things a director would normally have to extract through careful analysis of a script she is unfamiliar with. I carefully crafted my two main characters on the page, envisioned them in detail even before writing the first script draft, and explored their personalities in depth through the writing process. Once it was time to direct, I felt that I had a very good grasp on the characters and their relationship.

Another advantage was that I had done extensive research throughout the writing process. I knew the setting, the jail procedures, and was familiar with the protocol of how the death penalty is carried out in several states. This knowledge helped me greatly when talking to my actors and creative collaborators. It also helped me to be taken seriously; the film is about difficult subject matter and it was crucial that I came across as someone who understood the subject, and its gravity, thoroughly. I often felt that I was being judged critically for choosing such a controversial subject, especially during casting, as if people were asking 'What makes her think she can make a film about the death penalty?' Being able to readily answer questions about

the material gave me confidence whenever I encountered skepticism.

Although wearing the director's and the writer's hat at the same time had many advantages, it also brought a few negative aspects with it. Primarily, the lack of having another creative partner, a partner-in-crime, so to say, was difficult. I think it could have proven extremely helpful to have someone working with me during the often long and frustrating hours of rewriting. Being a non-native speaker of English, I often felt that I needed a second opinion, especially when it came to writing believable dialog but also when shaping the general structure of my plot. Was this really the best way to tell the story? To reveal the character? How should the character's arc be expressed? How should the film end? All these questions were questions I had to answer myself and sometimes I was just not quite sure which of my own ideas I preferred, especially once the *Writing The Thesis Script* class was over. I was extremely lucky that my screenwriting professor, Erik Hansen, remained an approachable and eager adviser. In addition, I received plenty of notes from my fellow students who I trusted to give me constructive and, if needed, harsh feedback. I also received help from my other two thesis committee members Laura Medina and Henry Griffin.

Directorial Prep Work

Although all the effort I had put into my film during the writing stage minimized my preparation that I had to do as the director, I still wanted to approach the project, so to say, with a fresh pair of eyes. When starting my work as a director I tried to read and analyze the script as if I had no involvement in the writing process. I believe that stepping back from a project that one has spent countless hours working on, although difficult, can often be very important in objectively evaluating one's work.

The first step of my preparation as the director was to come up with a "throughline" for

my film. This proved rather difficult at first since I was still in the process of rewriting. At this point I was not completely certain what I wanted to use as the main spine for my film. I was debating whether the death penalty should be my major focus or if the friendship between my two main characters should be the overarching hook.

The pitch competition of the New Orleans Film Festival and the limited time I had to present my idea forced me to formulate a clear statement. In preparation for the pitch I came up with the following throughline: *A job that demands the denial of the innate humanity of another person and one's own past is a job in an unjust system.*

Although my film references the justice system and the practice of capital punishment, I did not intend to put myself in the position of some kind of moral arbiter. Instead, I wanted to create a story that will make people think about the system and that will challenge them to find their own answers. In my opinion, having a story that is relatable, a story about two human beings, was crucial to creating characters that audience members could identify with. As mentioned earlier, I believe that life never offers easy answers, and I did not intend to offer answers with my film either.

The next step, I did in preparation to direct, was to break down my script into performance beats and dramatic blocks. While writing I tried to include small tracking beats for the characters' change that would allow us to clearly see John's arc unfold throughout the story. Following the suggestions of Melissa Hickey, an AFI graduate who taught the AFI Directing Workshop in the Fall semester of 2013, I came up with an objective for each of my characters for every scene. In addition, I tried to formulate everything the characters do in the form of active verbs that I could later use to direct my actors. Judith Weston's book *Directing Actors* proved immensely helpful in this process. In particular her long list of active verbs in the book's

appendix was a valuable tool that I kept referring back to throughout my process of preparation and even later while filming.

Rehearsals

When I started rehearsing with my actors, being both the writer and the director proved immensely helpful once again. It had always been my intention to refine the dialogue once I was able to get together with the actors. I planned to officially lock the shooting script only after a table read. During this first read, which was also the first time the actors who would play John and Frank met, we read through the complete script and I answered all the questions they had. I also explained my personal motivation, why I was making this movie and how I became interested in the topic. I felt that my own enthusiasm for the subject matter sparked a similar enthusiasm in my actors, who seemed eager to live up to my expectations. Showing my actors that I was determined to make a film at a professional level helped erase any doubts they might have had when committing to work on a student film. At the table read, I felt that a trust and understanding quickly arose between us. I felt confident asking if they had any issues with their lines or actions. I gladly listened to their suggestions and changed the script if I felt it would help the film.

Once we were done with the initial read through and a first round of questions, I dismissed the other actors except for Escalante (John) and John (Frank) because I wanted to have some more time with just the lead performers. The intimate atmosphere helped my actors open up even more and talk about their own personal connections to the script. I was glad to hear that Escalante could relate to the character of John extremely well. Not only did he once toy with the idea of becoming a law enforcement officer but some of his own childhood friends took the wrong path and he believes they are most likely incarcerated today.

Before I knew that casting would prove to be such a protracted process, I had planned to let my actors spend time together privately so that they would, in some way, become friends or at least get to know each other well enough to play friends. Then I wanted to ask them to suspend their contact at least a few weeks prior to shooting so that once we were on set they would have the urge to talk to each other and find out what happened during the time they were apart. However, with the delay in casting I had only limited time to rehearse and had to make the most out of it. I scheduled three rehearsals in total. I also asked my actors to meet at least once on their own and go out for pancakes together.

The rehearsal schedule was largely determined by the availability of my two main actors and the secondary cast. It turned out to be a great advantage to have the set constructed on the sound stage so it was then available to us during preproduction. This allowed all rehearsals to take place on the actual set. I was able to go through the full blocking of the interior prison scenes and recognize any problems in advance and resolve them.

Knowing the blocking and having rehearsed on the actual set allowed me to create a very accurate shot list. It was also a great advantage that my director of photography Trenton Mynatt was able to attend one of the rehearsals and watch the blocking. This enabled us to have an informed conversation about the placement of the camera and the shots we wanted to film. Furthermore, Trenton was able to plan the lighting in advance and already knew how much he would have to change from one camera setup to the next. We were able to plan our shoot much more efficiently and as a result I felt a sense of security that I would be able to concentrate on my actors during the shoot rather than having to worry about the more technical aspects of the process.

Directing on Set

Going from the rehearsal stage to filming is always a big step and I am usually very nervous before filming. Yet, being able to rehearse on the actual set took some pressure off of me and gave me more confidence. Generally, I tend to worry a lot about other production issues and knew in advance that I would have to force myself to focus on just being director on set and not 1st Assistant Director and Producer as well. Thanks to having a wonderful crew, and in particular Rashada Fortier as my 1st AD and Anastasiya Rul as my producer, I was able to focus on directing.

Originally, I had planned to shoot my film as close to script order as possible. Yet, due to the restricted availability of one of the supporting actors, we were not able to stick to this plan. Instead, we had to film the third scene after the opening scene and planned to pick up the middle scene, during which Frank gets transported to his cell, on the second weekend of production.

Working with my two lead actors, Escalante Lundy and John Bostic, proved to be very informative, particularly because both actors employed different acting techniques due to their differing experience. Escalante's background is mainly in film whereas John had performed more often on stage. The differences showed on screen: Escalante was able to deliver small emotional changes through his eyes alone. His facial expressiveness and the truthfulness that he was able to convey was what had convinced me to cast him for the part. But Escalante had problems employing his body as part of his performance and always came across as rather stiff. Although I would generally consider this a weakness of an actor and a disadvantage, his stiffness worked well for John's character because he was supposed to come across as disciplined and completely in control of his physical movement, to the point that he was cautious about every small move of his body. John, on the other hand side, as a typical theater actor, was very

expressive with his body language. Yet, I felt that he sometimes lacked the internalization of the character. He tended to overact, and when I looked into his eyes I sometimes had trouble seeing the character there. From their auditions and our first rehearsals, I had already been aware of Escalante and John's different acting styles and had brainstormed ideas how to direct them in the best possible way. Planning whose coverage to shoot first was an important decision I faced. I quickly realized that John burnt out quickly and lacked energy after the first two takes. I tried to shoot John's coverage first and then move to Escalante, who was able to focus better and bring the character to life even after several repetitions of the scene. My plan to shoot the film completely from the prison guard John's perspective luckily proved to work well with the strengths and weaknesses of my actors. I knew that I would often need John in a close up shot to show his inner struggle, and Escalante excelled in such shots, and that I mainly wanted to show Frank from John's point of view, which we primarily captured in wide and medium shot sizes where John's physical expressiveness worked well.

Directing a film so dependent on the actors' performances was a challenge that I had deliberately chosen and looked forward to because I wanted to improve my skills in this area. While directing on set, I tried to follow the advice that I had learned from my directing classes as well as books that I had read prior to shooting, such as *On Directing* by Elia Kazan and *I'll Be In My Trailer* by John Badham and Craig Modderno. My main objective was to create an intimate atmosphere and establish trust between the actors and myself that would allow them to open up and bring truth to their performances. This was especially important for the emotional scenes at the end of the film because they could easily go over the top and become melodramatic. I knew that in order to encourage my actors to bring vulnerability to their performances I had to open up and reveal myself in a way, too. In rehearsals, and later on set, I spoke about my personal

motivation and talked about my own experiences and intentions with the subject matter, which I believe, helped my actors to do the same in return.

On set, I made it my priority to talk to my actors after each take. Although I tried to watch their performances from behind the camera, I sometimes thought it necessary to double check the framing, focus, and eye lines with my DP Trenton at video village; however, I always made sure to go to my actors and check in with them after every single take. In particular, Escalante responded well to my feedback, and I felt that he was looking for me to give him validation. In contrast, I was sometimes unsure what to say to John because he did not seem to be looking for as much guidance and I felt that my feedback, although well intentioned, confused him from time to time. Though I know it's not recommended to say "Do it exactly like before" without giving any adjustments, I felt that was often a good tactic with John, if I liked his performance from a previous take. When I gave him other directions he tended to start 'acting' too much and his performance lacked credibility.

Overall, I have to say that directing a film with only two main characters in one location proved to be exceptionally challenging but also extremely rewarding. I learned a lot in terms of working with the different personalities and techniques of actors, how to communicate with them, and how to use their approaches to my advantage.

Directing Children

In addition to working with my two adult lead actors, my film provided another challenge: directing child actors. A crucial element of my script is that the children had to believably portray the same characters as the adult actors, just at a younger age. I was fortunate that I found two child actors whose personality was already close to how I had envisioned the kids in my script and also resembled the adult actors enough to pass as their young counterparts.

Unfortunately, I was not able to schedule a rehearsal with my child actors prior to the shoot because both actors were not local and had a long commute to set. Therefore, my 1st AD and I determined that we would need additional time to rehearse on set prior to filming. I suggested allocating some time in the morning where the kids could get to know each other and just play around for a few minutes while camera and sound were still setting up. I believe this time during which they are able to grow accustomed to the other cast members, the crew, and the set is exceptionally important for child actors because they can easily become overwhelmed and closed off due to fear. I wanted to avoid this at all costs.

I planned to make the shoot for the children as much of a fun exploration of possibilities as I could within the limited amount of time we had. Luckily, Grayson Kilpatrick, who played Young Frank, turned out to be a very experienced and well trained young actor. His professional attitude helped the other child actors, in particular, Demarcus Britten, who plays Young John, focus and strive for the same confidence and enthusiasm that Grayson demonstrated in front of the lens. Grayson's familiarity with set routine also helped put Demarcus at ease and reduced his nervousness. I believe Grayson's coolness was a very positive factor that helped me get the performances I wanted and helped us get through the day effectively.

Another aspect that helped me with directing children was my past experience as a nanny, as well as having directed a child actor on my short film *The Good Guys*. I truly enjoy working with kids and have learned that it is usually best to treat them with the same respect afforded adults. They tend to listen and follow directions best if they feel that they are taken seriously and someone is paying attention to what they have to say. I tried to become this person for my child actors on set. Judging from how well the shoot went, I think I can say that I succeeded with my approach.

7. LOCATION AND SET CONSTRUCTION

Finding a location that could believably double as the interior of a prison and that was affordable for us was another important task during preproduction. When writing the film I was already aware that it might be problematic to find a real prison cell that we could use for the purpose of our shoot. In fact, the availability of a location was a main criteria for me during the development phase, and I only decided to pursue my idea once I determined that I could utilize the UNO sound stage and build a set if necessary.

Verisimilitude played a big role in my decision to go with the sound stage as our location. In the beginning I was rather doubtful whether we would be able to construct a realistic looking cell. Yet, the expertise of UNO set design professor Kevin Griffith and his advice gave me confidence that we would be able to translate my vision into reality. I was lucky enough to find an extremely enthusiastic set construction manager: Jake Hoyson, a fellow UNO graduate student and a friend of mine, who took over the tasks of planning and overseeing the construction of the set. I had collaborated with Jake on two of his previous films, and he was eager to repay the favor by taking over this rather large project in return. Although Jake had never constructed a set or anything on such a large scale before, he exhibited the basic mechanical skills necessary and was very enthusiastic to acquire the knowledge and skills required to complete this assignment.

Before making the final decision to construct the set I asked Jake to prepare a budget of the estimated construction costs while we continued looking for alternative locations. Since I considered shooting at least part of the opening scene in a real death row prison tract, I reached out to the Louisiana State Penitentiary to find out if this was possible at their facility. Unfortunately, my request was turned down with the explanation that a shoot would not be

possible as long as ongoing cases were in court. I tried to contact the prison again a few months later but received another negative reply.

On the Search for a Prison

At the same time, Anastasiya contacted all other prisons in the greater New Orleans area to ask whether they had a location we could use for our shoot. My script required a single, separated cell or a small empty tract of cells that is connected to a closed off room or hallway. It was difficult to find a suitable location. Although we managed to find a real prison that was accessible, shooting there would have been almost impossible. Not only would we have to have a prison guard with us at all times but anyone who left set, for any reason, would have to be accompanied by a guard as well. Since these guards would need to be compensated, the shoot would have far exceeded our budget. Another possible location Anastasiya found was a cell that was constructed for the TV show *NCIS: New Orleans* (Gary Glasberg, 2014-) and was not in use anymore. Thanks to Anastasiya's large network in the local film industry, she was able to get in touch with the person in charge of the location: Ryan Fink, the director of the St. Bernard Parish Film & Television Office. After contacting the office, we were able to arrange a meeting and a location scout. However, when seeing the cell, which was constructed in the cellar of a public library, I quickly realized that it was not an ideal location. Although the cell was rather large and had real metal bars, it was not suited for the shoot the way I had planned it because it was enclosed by two walls and there was almost no space between the bars and the third wall. Furthermore, the space had a very low ceiling and offered almost no space to set up lights or other equipment. Another disadvantage of the cell was its bad acoustic qualities. Since the cell was located in an empty cellar, every noise caused reverberations and footsteps from upstairs were clearly audible. It seemed impossible to make the cell soundproof and hence I would have

been forced to ADR most of my film. For a character driven and performance heavy film like mine, this would have been an absolute disaster. This is why I decided not to shoot in the cell, even though we would have been able to use it at a very low rate.

Constructing the Set

Once this decision was made and we had no other ideas for possible location, I decided to go through with my initial plan and construct the prison set on the UNO sound stage. This option also gave us many other advantages. Since no one else had reserved the space prior to my shoot we were able to access the sound stage twenty-four-seven, which provided us with a great level of flexibility and enough time to complete set construction. Shooting on campus was not only very easy to arrange, since most of my crew was familiar with the space, but also much cheaper, since we did not have to allow for additional travel time and gas expenses. In addition, I was able to rehearse with my actors on the actual set.

The construction itself went very smoothly, despite our lack of experience. Jake, my production designer Alaina Boyett, and I came up with a plan that would offer us flexibility in terms of the layout of the set. We decided to create some movable elements, while trying to incorporate as much of the already existing structure on the sound stage as possible. Prior to my film, another graduate student, Thomas Baumgardner, had built a large room to serve as the interior of a 19th century meeting room, which we tried to reuse for our purposes. We decided to keep the general structure of this room and replace parts of the walls with a door and our prison bars. The attached cell was constructed out of flats we got from the theater department's scene shop. Initially, I had planned for all but two walls to be movable so that we would have more flexibility. However, my set construction manager Jake and my director of photography Trenton convinced me that it would be too difficult and time consuming to move the larger wall elements

and that the connections between the separate wall pieces would be visible on screen. Therefore, we decided to only make three of the cell walls movable.

Overall, we tried to keep the construction costs as low as possible while still striving for high quality and an authentic look. Another lucky development simplified our set construction enormously: after talking to his father, who owns a welding business, my DP Trenton Mynatt was able to secure specially made metal prison bars for free. In combination with the other production design elements, we achieved a very authentic look for the set, and I am more than happy with how the construction turned out.

Additional Locations

The two other locations we needed for the film were a living room and a baseball field which needed to appear as if they were from the 1960s. I already had an idea for the living room; there was a great one used in Maja's thesis film and I thought the wood paneled room would work perfectly for Frank's childhood home. The baseball field took some more time and effort to find. After scouting several location options without being able to find a field that was suitably period, I reassessed my initial presumption of the location. I realized that it might not be necessary to shoot the kids' scenes on an actual baseball field. In fact, I thought it was more time appropriate, if they were playing on an open field in the countryside or a rural neighborhood. Thus, I started scouting for locations that fit this description. I found a beautiful spot in City Park with a single tree in a wide open space that I thought would provide perfect scenery for the flashback scenes. Upon consulting with my DP and my producer, I decided to use this location.

8. THE LOOK OF *US AGAINST THE WORLD*

Personally, I tend to prefer realistic-looking films that are shot on real locations and utilize available lighting as much as possible, such as *Blue Valentine* (Derek Cianfrance, 2010), the films by Alejandro González Iñárritu, for example *Amores Perros* (2000) or *Biutiful* (2010), as well as Fatih Akin's *Head-On* (Gegen die Wand, 2004), and *The Edge of Heaven* (Auf der anderen Seite, 2007). In my eyes, these films are able to capture a sense of reality in a way that more stylized films often fail to convey. By creating such a highly authentic and realistic look, they never let the viewer question the film's believability.

Since one of my main concerns when making *Us Against The World* was to create a sense of verisimilitude and authenticity, I decided to employ a similarly realistic style for my film. Creating the look for *Us Against The World* was a process that took many months and came to its final fruition with the shooting of the film. As early as the writing process, I started to come up with ideas how to visualize the story. When writing, I usually 'see' the story happening in my mind's eye. Although my ideas at this stage were rather abstract and without clear contours or details, I already tried to convey my vision and my ideas for the look through my writing.

A major concern when it came to creating the overall aesthetic for my film was that I basically had to create two different and clearly distinguishable looks: one for the scenes in the present and one for the flashbacks set in the past. I intended to use the creative tools of both production design and cinematography to achieve this. Furthermore, I was hoping to capture the emotional tone of the scenes in a visual way. The flashbacks are happy childhood memories; I felt that the best visual way to convey the sense of freedom and lightheartedness would be through images that are bright and vibrant in color, as well as free-flowing and dynamic. In contrast to this, the scenes set in the prison in the present day demanded a completely different

approach. The setting itself already suggested a certain visual style with its cool and muted gray tones and the metallic prison bars. I knew immediately that this part of the film could not be photographed in a colorful or dynamic fashion. Instead, I wanted to create images that make the audience feel like they are locked in with these two characters, like they cannot escape. In a way, I wanted to put the viewer in John's position and force them to face the situation he is in. I will further elaborate on how I tried to achieve these two looks in the cinematography and production design sections.

Once I started preproduction I reassessed my initial ideas for the look and created a visual 'road map' for the film, which consisted of inspirational images and visual references. These were screenshots, mostly from movies set in a similar environment, such as *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008), *The Green Mile*, *Dead Man Walking* and *Into The Abyss*, photographs from real prison cells and death row buildings, as well as any other visuals that I felt captured the look I was trying to create. This collection of visuals proved very helpful when it came to communicating my vision to my key creative collaborators because we had examples to reference in terms of the color palette and lighting scheme.

8.1. CINEMATOGRAPHY

My main objective for the cinematography of *Us Against The World* was to visually support the characters' emotional journey while providing sufficient space for my actors to freely move. Although I highly value the creative possibilities that cinematography offers, I generally prefer films where the cinematography steps behind the performance of actors and merely provides the space for the actors to work in. Since I was planning to tell a realistic story inspired by real circumstances, verisimilitude was a major concern when approaching cinematography. I

was worried that a highly stylized look might distract from, or even worse, overpower what was most important to me: the inner emotional struggles of my characters. I was also afraid that the more artificial the look of my film was, the less impact it would have on the audience. The more I relied on cinematographic expressions instead of my actors' expressions, the more, I thought, a viewer would get the sense that I was manipulating the events happening on screen. A stylized look would make the story seem purely fictional with no relation to real life. Hence, I felt that a realistic and minimalistic look would best serve my purpose.

Since we had already collaborated on several other projects prior to working on *Us Against The World*, including my second year short film *The Good Guys*, my cinematographer Trenton Mynatt and I knew each other well and were able to quickly agree on the overall look and a general approach for the cinematography. During the writing stage of my script, I had talked to Trenton about my inspirations and used my collection of visual references to discuss my ideas. We also looked at various films set in prisons, such as the ones mentioned earlier, to see how other filmmakers had approached filming in a confined prison space. Throughout our initial conversations I quickly realized that we both had a similar feeling of how we could best translate the story into images.

Almost immediately, Trenton and I agreed that the scenes set in the prison would have to be static compositions that emphasize the confined space the two characters inhabit. We wanted to create images that, so to say, lock us in with the characters and never provide an opportunity to visually escape the prison building. To achieve this we decided to film a lot of closer shots and only a limited number of wide shots. We also wanted to include the prison bars or their shadows in the frame whenever possible so that we would never be able to forget the nature of John's job and Frank's inescapable fate. The only time that I wanted to break this rule was for the scene

when John finally acknowledges Frank and starts opening up to him by accepting a piece of pancake. The sharing of the food is supposed to take both of the characters back in time and, for a fleeting moment, transform them into their younger selves. I wanted to visually suggest this feeling by excluding the prison bars from the shots in this scene so that the separation between the two old friends is completely removed.

The flashback scenes present a stark contrast to the present; they represent freedom and the lightheartedness of youth. I hoped to create the feeling that everything is possible, that we are in a world of childish innocence. To accomplish this I planned to use extreme wide shots and a free-flowing, moving camera that would be in direct contrast to the static compositions of the present day scenes. We decided that the Steadicam would be the best tool to accomplish this.

Once my script was in its final stages, Trenton and I started to work on the shot list. I brought in my own ideas and we talked through every scene and which shots we were planning. We also discussed how we would transition from the present to the flashback scenes. When it came to planning out the shots, I placed great emphasis on the idea that the whole film should be told from John's perspective. I was hoping that this would help the audience to get a better sense of his character, particularly since he is a somewhat passive protagonist. This meant, for example, that we planned to shoot a lot of close ups of John's face to get a look at the struggle inside of him and that we wanted to try to shoot all of Frank's coverage as much from John's perspective as possible.

Our decision to film the vast majority of *Us Against The World* on the sound stage of the Performing Arts Center at UNO proved to be a great advantage for the cinematography. Trenton was able to carefully plan his lighting scheme in advance and prelight the set before we started shooting. The changes to lighting that had to be done during production were minimal. This

saved us a lot of valuable time. Compared to a normal-sized prison cell and corridor, we also had more space at our disposal and were able to set up lights outside of the set as well as above from the ceiling, which would not have been possible on a real location. Additionally, we were guarded from interruptions and were able to freely move around the set without any security concerns.

Unfortunately, there were also a few disadvantages that came with shooting in a prison set. The biggest issue were the prison bars. When the actors were standing close to the bars, it was often extremely difficult and took several takes to frame them up so that the bars did not cover their eyes. This problem turned out to be a rather frustrating experience for my actors. Sometimes they were covered by the bars even if they perfectly hit their mark because they slightly leaned too much in the wrong direction. John, in particular, became very frustrated with this problem and suggested that he could try to avoid being covered by the bars. On set I thought whatever he did worked well, but once I reviewed the takes on a bigger screen after we wrapped I realized that he briefly looked into the camera to position himself.

Another problem we experienced, but which we were already aware of when constructing the set, was that we were not able to shoot a full wide shot on eye level due to the size limitations of the set and our limited array of lenses we were provided by UNO. Of course we could have rented additional lenses for the shoot but since we also had a very limited budget, we decided to use only what we were able to get for free and instead compromised our shot list.

8.2. PRODUCTION DESIGN

Production Design is one of the elements of a film that often distinguishes professional productions from the more amateurish. By hiring Alaina Boyett, who I trusted and had

collaborated with on my previous film, as my production designer I made the decision to treat the production design as a key element of my project rather than sideline it. I knew that production design would make or break my film because of the importance of authenticity. The story would not convince unless we managed to recreate a death row tract in a realistic fashion. I did not want the audience to start questioning or doubting that what is depicted on screen is set on a sound stage and not in a real prison. Consequently, my main goal in terms of production design was to achieve verisimilitude and to add to the story and never to distract from it. Since the main location of the prison cell and hallway did not require any overly decorative elements, I wanted to utilize a minimalist aesthetic that would also give the actors a great amount of freedom to interact with each other.

Set Dressing

Alaina and I researched how real death row prison tracts looked and reviewed other films that were set in a similar space. Again, Herzog's *Into The Abyss* proved to be a helpful reference. Especially the opening scene where the camera sweeps through a death row prison tract until it ends in the execution chamber was a major inspiration for the set dressing of the hallway and the cell. The room depicted in the documentary is sparsely furnished and provided us with ideas how such a cold and inhuman place could be dressed. I liked the small elements of comfort that are neatly placed on a table in the film: a bible, other religious scriptures, a picture of the Virgin Mary and some tissues. These everyday objects are injected with a new significance when seen in this somber place. We decided to incorporate similar elements in our set.

Alaina brought the set dressing to perfection by picking additional small decorative elements that added a sense of realism to our otherwise artificial prison set, such as a fire extinguisher, a telephone, an exit sign, a red lamp we placed next to the doorway that leads to the

execution chamber, and more. In addition, we were extremely lucky to secure a real prison toilet-sink-combination that heightened the sense of authenticity. Ultimately, what was most important to me when it came to deciding on these decorative elements was that they should not be too distracting or call too much attention to themselves.

Props

Another aspect of the production design that was crucial to achieve a sense of realism were props. One of the biggest decisions we faced in terms of the props was how Frank's last meal would be served. At first, I wanted to have a large plastic food tray. Alaina and I researched the real food trays that are used in prisons and we found some options that were purchasable online. I did not favor them since they were expensive and did not look in any way special or identifiable as prison food trays. Once the cell bars were constructed we also realized that the meal slot was too narrow for these food trays to fit through. Therefore, we decided to go with a much cheaper alternative that I thought would work equally well: a Styrofoam food container. In addition to the food tray, we needed period-appropriate baseball equipment for the children in the flashback scene, a Whiskey bottle with the invented 'Mc-Allister' brand label, and some other smaller items.

Wardrobe

The third production design element that was equally important was wardrobe. With the help of my costume designer Katie Hanzalik, we were able to find affordable and realistic costume options for the prison guards, the prisoner, as well as the children. My second year project *The Good Guys* also incorporated a uniformed protagonist for whom I was able to borrow a police uniform from the Campus Police Department of the University of New Orleans; I knew that we could always do the same for *Us Against The World*. But I was also open to the idea of

using custom prison uniforms, if we could find affordable alternatives. We researched the different styles and colors of uniforms worn by real correction officers. But all realistic prison costumes that we found in rental stores turned out to be very expensive. Since we needed at least four sets of the same uniforms, we decided to use the ones from Campus Police. We found out that there is no one homogenous prison uniform type and decided that we could alter the police uniforms by adding correction officer patches to them. Although the uniforms might not resemble real uniforms perfectly, they looked realistic enough.

For the prisoner's costume we decided to order a real jumpsuit from an online prison supplier. Unfortunately, we ordered a size too small and my actor was barely able to fit. Since the jumpsuit arrived only days before the start of production we did not have enough time to order a larger option but had to use the one we had. John was barely able to button up the jumpsuit and kept having problems when sitting down with the tight-fitting overalls. What mattered most to me was that John felt comfortable and would not get distracted by an ill-fitting costume so we eventually decided to leave the buttons open and have him wear a white undershirt.

Outcome

Overall, I am very happy with the look that my cinematographer, in collaboration with my production designer and set construction manager, created for my film. The styles of past and present are distinguishable and successfully relate the tone of the scenes in a visual way.

9. EDITING

The renowned film editor Carol Littleton once said: “You have a script but you are rewriting a script with a film” (Littleton). So much can still be altered in the editing process that it is almost like writing the story of a movie a second time. Nothing is set in stone, neither the order of events, nor the dialogue that has been spoken and recorded on set, or even the actors’ performances on screen. The raw footage is literally the raw material of the film and it can be tailored together however one chooses in the editing process. Almost everything can be modified: Scenes can be lengthened, shortened, or cut completely, lines of dialogue can be reordered, taken out, or even brought into a completely different context. Sound effects and music, which I will discuss in later chapters, can change the tone of a scene and give a different meaning.

Finding an Editor

On the one hand, I highly value the great amount of creative liberty and flexibility the editing process offers and how much can still be changed, shaped and pointed to meet my vision. Yet, on the other hand, editing demands a great deal of willingness and fearlessness to engage creatively with the material in order to cut the best possible film out of the existing raw material. This usually requires being willing to let go and make drastic changes. The director may have to get rid of beats, takes, or entire scenes, if they do not serve the overall structure of the film; in other words: one has to kill one’s darlings. Editing previous projects, I often felt that I’m not a very objective judge in this process and that I have problems doing what is best for my films. This is why I knew from the beginning that I wanted to work with an editor on *Us Against The World*, instead of editing the film myself. Although I would have preferred to work with a professional and experienced editor, I did not have any money available and therefore only had a

limited choice of who to hire for the position. I decided to ask a friend of mine, Daniel Wulf, who I knew was very interested in post-production and who had been able to gain some editing experience on student projects over the last few years. Although Daniel is not a professional editor, he was very enthusiastic to take on the task and I felt confident that he would do his best to meet my expectations. From previous projects I knew that experience is not everything and that enthusiasm and passion are often more valuable. The one big problem that came with hiring Daniel as my editor, was that he lives in Germany and we would have to work on the cut long distance. I knew how difficult working over such a distance could become because Maja Holzinger had tried the same approach while editing her thesis film, *Call Me Cappy*. She had asked a friend of hers in Poland to take a pass at her cut, yet their collaboration did not result in the desired outcome because of the complications of the time difference and physical distance. I certainly would have preferred to work with someone local who I could sit together on the cut, but since I was not able to find anyone who I trusted enough to take on this important task and who was as passionate about the project as Daniel, I decided to give him a try.

Collaborating Over a Long Distance

Having an editor abroad meant I had to deal with the problem of delivering the material to him as quickly and efficiently as possible. Luckily, Daniel was doing an internship for a post-production house in Germany at the time when I finished principal photography and we were able to use the company's server to transfer all my material. Although the upload and download of all the transcoded video files took several days, it was much faster and safer than sending an external hard drive across the Atlantic. In the meantime, I set up a project in Avid Media Composer and started sorting the clips for Daniel so that he would have a better overview of everything and could start working right away. The process of exchanging drafts of the cut went

very smoothly once Daniel was in possession of all the footage.

The first thing I asked Daniel to do was to take a stab at a first cut on his own without any input from me. I gave him full creative freedom and told him that I did not mind if he deviated from the script order. It was my hope that he would be able to judge the footage with a more objective eye than me since he had not been on set during the shoot and did not know any of my actors in person. This, I thought, would enable him to view the footage almost like an audience member. Considering his fresh perspective, I also asked Daniel whether he thought the footage we shot, and the cut he created from it, seemed logical to him or if he felt that some performances, actions, or the plot in general lacked believability. It was great to get this additional input from someone who had not been involved in the pre-production and production of the film. His positive feedback reassured me that what we had shot would eventually make a comprehensible and complete film.

The Editing Process

However, after watching the first cut that Daniel created, I knew that it would still be a long process to get the film to where I wanted it to be. Watching the very first version of *Us Against The World* was one of the worst experiences I had through the whole production process. I experienced a brief moment of desperation. Luckily, I knew that watching a first cut can often be rather painful for a director because it is the moment where one has to completely let go of one's initial vision of the script and face reality by accepting and working with what you have. Although I was aware that the characters that I had envisioned and described on the page now had real faces lent by the actors – after all, I had cast them and directed them on set – seeing the full story play out on screen did not exactly match what I had imagined in my head prior to filming. This realization is necessary but often rather brutal. No matter how much I like my

actors' performances and the beautiful images, it usually takes me some time to get used to the actual results and to adjust my vision. A first cut also makes one aware of all the shortcomings, of every small mistake. When watching the first cut of *Us Against The World*, I felt like I had not truly exploited the potential of my story visually. I wished I would have shot scenes differently, that we would have done additional shots or at least gotten one more take. Although I knew that this was merely the first step in the long process of editing, and that everything that Daniel would cut together afterward would improve my film more and more, it was still difficult to motivate myself again.

Daniel immediately started working on a second cut after I had told him most of the issues I had with the first version, while trying not to sound too discouraged. The finished second cut of my film immediately lifted my spirits, and I realized that what we had may work after all. Once I had a presentable second cut, I met with all my thesis committee members to get feedback and showed the cut to a few other trusted friends as well. In addition to their notes, I had a lot of ideas myself on how to make the film work better. Communicating all these notes to my editor in Germany was a rather difficult and long process since we could not look at the cut on one monitor but instead had to reference time code and scene and take numbers. Especially when it came to selecting individual takes that I preferred over others, I realized how tedious it was to describe everything and that it would be much easier and faster to just do a pass myself. After consulting with Daniel, I decided to work on a third cut by myself and asked him to simultaneously keep working on his own version. Again, I gave him as much creative freedom as possible and encouraged him to do whatever he felt worked best for the film. However, after sending back and forth several drafts, I came to the conclusion that he was not an experienced enough editor or brave enough to jettison everything that we had edited so far and take a

completely fresh approach to the material, which I felt was necessary for parts of my film. In addition to me not being fully satisfied with his work, the time difference made it difficult to find opportunities to talk to each other via Skype. The whole experience turned out to be rather frustrating for both of us, and it would have been a great help, if we could have just sat down and worked on the cut together. After cutting several different versions through our transatlantic workflow, I decided to take over the editing myself completely, in particular since I was getting close to a fine cut and all changes that had to be made from here would be minor; at least, that was what I thought at the time.

After completing a first fine cut myself, I approached my editing professor Danny Retz, whose opinion I highly value, to see if he could take a look at my cut and give me feedback. Although being rather busy at this time, Danny made himself available to sit down with me and take a look. He helped me shape the opening scene of my film and fix many issues I had. Together, we improved the flashback scene where the bullies push around Little John, which I had always felt needed to be quicker paced. After three sessions with Danny, during which we reviewed and improved my entire cut, I had an almost finalized version. Yet, there were still a few parts that needed more work and that I knew I would have to approach by myself again. One of these scenes was the beginning of the baseball flashback scene that did not flow smoothly, another one was Frank's confession, which I was not sure really needed to be in the film at all, and the third was the ending of the film when John puts himself back together and leaves the room. The work on these scenes took almost as much time as I had spent with Daniel on the entire cut before. But I felt that my film would only work perfectly once I fixed the issues I had with these parts. Whenever I felt uncertain if a scene was edited in the best way possible, I tried to recall my initial vision and remind myself why I was making this film and whose story I was

trying to tell. After many hours of editing and a lot of feedback that I received from both my committee members and friends, who gave me unadorned feedback, I was eventually able to find a solution for all of the problematic parts and finish a cut that I am happy with.

The editing process of *Us Against The World* was the longest and most difficult experience I have had with editing up until now. Reviewing my footage and my cuts over and over, as well as rethinking my story completely and trying to figure out the best way to convey my vision, taught me a lot. I know that I will make smarter choices on set when filming next time and that I will more often do an additional take, if time permits, so I will have more flexibility in editing. With every film I make and edit, I feel that my understanding of filmmaking improves. Most of all, I realize that perseverance, pushing even further, and putting in more time and effort always eventually results in a better film.

10. SOUND AND MUSIC

Film is a visual medium. But with their primary focus on the visuals, filmmakers often forget how important the sound and acoustic design of a film is. Bad sound, especially dialogue that is inaudible or difficult to understand, can ruin a film, because the audience will lose interest and judge the film as a product of poor quality. Professional sound and an apposite score elevate a film to a high level. This is why I placed special importance on the sound of my film.

Production Sound

Having taken the Production Sound class at UNO, I knew that the first step to achieve high quality audio was to record the best possible sound on location. If a sound mixer on set works diligently and records clear dialogue and room tone a lot less work will be necessary in post-production. This is why I tried to find a production sound mixer who I trusted and who had experience with recording sound on location. I asked my fellow students and other recent graduates for recommendations. Beal Locke, who I knew from collaborating with on other projects in the past and whose positive work attitude I valued, came highly recommended, and I felt that he would be the right choice to record the sound on *Us Against The World*. Beal proved to be a very reliable and diligent sound mixer, who paid great attention to details and, what I deem extremely important, informed my 1st AD Rashada whenever he felt the recorded sound was bad and he needed to get an additional take or record wild lines. On set, we tried to allow enough time to adjust the microphone placement, or the lavalier microphones if they came loose, as well as to run wild lines and record room tone in order to be as thorough as possible and achieve the uppermost sound quality.

Post Sound

After the shoot, it was time to find a dialogue editor and post sound mixer that would take

the location sound to the next level. My thesis committee chair, Henry Griffin, recommended an excellent post sound mixer, Matt Coby, who seemed eager to join the production after I talked to him about my film. Matt Coby is a professional post sound mixer and dialogue editor with many years of experiences in the industry and whose credits include such top-notch productions as *Magic Mike* (Steven Soderbergh, 2012), *The Informant!* (Steven Soderbergh, 2009) and the *Ocean's Eleven movies* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001-2007). Since Matt lives in Seattle, most of our communication took place via phone and e-mail. Matt seemed very experienced with working over such a long distance and the workflow we established worked very well, except for some minor misunderstandings. I provided Matt with several different versions of my cut to give him enough time to evaluate how much work needed to be done sound-wise. Matt praised the work that my location sound mixer had done and told me that what he needed to do would be rather quick and uncomplicated. After I picture locked my final cut, Matt started to work on editing and adjusting the dialogue. He sent me his mixed cut for review and advised me to re-record a few lines of Young and Old Frank. I then scheduled an ADR-session with both actors in the audio suite at UNO. Unfortunately, no one at the university knows how to properly operate the set-up in the audio suite ever since the former professor for sound and digital technology, Robert Racine, left. This is why I was not able to record the additional sound under professional conditions and instead had to improvise the ADR-session. I checked out a separate sound recorder and a microphone and only used the sound-proof booth in the audio suite. Yet, I was not able to utilize the complete set-up that includes a microphone and a mixing board, as well as a screen to playback a loop of the video, like in professional ADR-sessions. In addition to the ADR sessions with my actors, I did another session with two of my friends to record additional whistling of the song that my characters used as a secret call, *Take Me Out To The Ball Game*.

Before deciding that this would be the melody they whistle, I made sure that the song was in the public domain and I could use it without having to worry about acquiring the rights for the composition. My sound mixer then put together the whistling takes with the video and matched it so that it seemed as if my actors were whistling perfectly. We used the whistling for a sound transition into and out of the first flashback scene and it helped connect these two scenes in a much smoother way and added a greater sense of unity to my film. For all the other transitions from the present to the past and back, we decided to incorporate sound bridges so that the story would always feel connected.

Score

Besides the melody of *Take Me Out To The Ball Game*, I felt that my film would benefit from a score that could heighten the emotions that my protagonist John experiences, as well as strengthen certain moments in the film, such as the confrontation where Frank desperately wants John to eat a pancake with him. I also thought that a continuous musical theme could unify the whole project. Originally I had planned to work with a friend of mine, who works as a composer in L.A. However, since the editing workflow from Germany to New Orleans did not work out as well as I had hoped, I was hesitant to hire another collaborator from far away. I preferred to work with someone local on the score because I felt that it was necessary to be able to sit together and talk through the score. I approached my committee members, as well as other students, for suggestions for a local composer, and again Henry Griffin recommended the person I ended up working with: Jonathan Freilich.

Working with Jonathan, who studied Film Composing at Cal Arts and who is a well-known local musician himself, turned out to be a challenge. I had never worked with a composer on any of my previous projects before and was rather uncertain how to approach this. I decided it

would be best to sit together with Jonathan first to show him the film and tell him about my inspirations and what I had imagined for the score. At this time, my cut included some temp music that I liked but that I thought was not the perfect fit for my story since it did not reflect certain changes in the tone. Jonathan came across as very professional and asked the right questions to find out what kind of music I wanted. However, when asked about specific references and ideas for the score, I was hesitant because I did not want to steer my composer's ideas into a certain, predetermined direction. Instead I wanted to give him a great amount of creative freedom and flexibility and hoped that he might come up with a concept that I had not considered myself. What made our conversation even more complicated was the fact that I am not a very musical person and found it difficult to communicate about music in English. Jonathan was very helpful in this regard and tried his best to understand what I meant. After our first meeting, he started working on a first composition and we arranged to meet up again once he had something that he could show me. Unfortunately, his first approach was not what I had imagined at all and I felt that it did not fit with the story, partly because it incorporated instruments that sounded either too modern or from a different culture. Hence, I asked Jonathan to stick to very simplistic elements with his next draft. Although I initially thought it might be a good idea to have a change of instruments from the present to the past to emphasize the different times, I did not feel that this worked well and instead suggested to stick with a rather minimalistic instrumentation that would use only piano and strings. The second composition that Jonathan delivered, although closer what I had envisioned for the score, again did not completely meet my expectations and satisfy me. Since Jonathan was rather busy at this time and had other commitments, he told me that he would not be able to make any major changes to the score anymore and that all he could do was take out or reduce the parts I did not like. I felt rather

disappointed that the score did not turn out the way I had imagined. After talking to several filmmaker friends and my thesis committee, I had to face the fact that my collaboration with Jonathan would not result in a satisfactory score. I realized that it was best to end the work relationship with Jonathan on good terms and use the parts he composed that I thought worked well with the film while omitting other parts, such as the music for the opening and closing sequence. Since I liked the temp music that I had used for these parts better than what Jonathan had composed, I decided to use it instead. Luckily, the music was available under a Creative Common License, which merely required me to attribute the creator of the work properly without having to pay any licensing fees.

Finishing the Post-Sound-Mix

Once Jonathan was done with composing the score, I sent the tracks to Matt, who started premixing a final sound mix for the film. Luckily, Matt was planning to come to New Orleans for a job at the same time that I planned to finish my film, and we were able to finalize the sound mix together on site. This session was a very interesting experience and I think it was a great benefit to finally be able to sit together and go over the film together.

The whole post-sound workflow gave me a much better understanding of how this process works on feature films and how important each element is to create a perfect final product. Although I am not perfectly happy with the score of my film, I know that I always have the option to approach another composer to write a new score in the future. Despite having to invest additional time and money, I am considering this option, if I can find a composer who is interested in working with me and whose repertoire fits my ideas for the score. I definitely learned a very valuable lesson for the next time I will be working with a composer: I will put in a greater effort to make sure that a composer is the most suited candidate.

11. FINISHING THE FILM: COLOR CORRECTION

All that was left to do now was to marry the final sound mix together with my picture and then color correct. This process turned out to be easier than I had imagined. From my experience with helping other graduate students on their thesis films in the finishing stage, which is part of my job duty as a Graduate Assistant at UNO, I knew that Assimilate Scratch, the program we use for this process, sometimes causes problems. I had experienced instances where finishing a film was delayed by several days or even weeks because of a problem that arose while working in Scratch. My experience with troubleshooting these projects helped me greatly when it came to finishing my own film. Unfortunately, I was one of the first students to use the updated version of Scratch, which was significantly different than the previous versions I had worked with before. I kept referring to online tutorials to familiarize myself with the new version, which was a time consuming process but eventually helped me troubleshoot all problems myself.

Since the Film and Theatre department of the university currently does not have an employee who is mainly responsible for all the digital equipment, I did not have anyone who I could ask for help at UNO while going through the finishing process. My network of filmmakers, many of them recent UNO film graduate students, proved very helpful. I was able to contact two people, who are both working in the film industry as digital imaging technicians (DIT) and work on a day-to-day basis with Scratch, when I experienced a problem and could not figure out a solution myself.

The color grading itself went smoothly since this component of Scratch had not changed much from the previous version I had used to color grade my previous film *The Good Guys* with, as well as *Turtle Beach* (Weizhong Huang, 2014), a thesis film that I had worked on as the director of photography the year before.

The grading I applied was rather minimal and it's purpose was mainly to achieve consistency between various shots. I was already very happy with the way the footage was shot and the grading I used merely emphasized the differences between the two different visual looks of the past and present, by desaturating the scenes in the prison and making the flashbacks more vibrant in color.

12. AN ATTEMPT OF A FIRST ANALYSIS OF *US AGAINST THE WORLD*

Since I am finishing this paper at the same time as my film, it is rather difficult to judge the production objectively and it would definitely be better to do so after having a longer break in between finishing post production and writing this chapter. However, I will attempt to judge the success and outcome of my thesis film as best as I can at this moment.

One aspect that will help me evaluate my film more objectively is the feedback that I received during multiple screenings in different UNO classes. At the beginning of the spring semester, Erik Hansen approached me and asked if I would be interested in showing my film in his Writing the Thesis Script class. Over the next couple of weeks I screened different versions of my cut not only in Erik's class but in four more classes and asked the students to fill out a feedback questionnaire. The notes I received during these sessions helped me recognize and address logical problems in my film. Furthermore, they helped me decide which parts of my film I could condense more and which should be expanded. In addition to providing written feedback, I also asked the students additional questions about the film and to tell me whatever they did not understand and felt was unclear.

One of the main points I felt uncertain about was Frank's confession, and how much I should reveal about his back-story. I received mixed feedback in this regard: some students wanted to know more about Frank's past, such as how John and he had separated and what exactly he did to end up on death row; others felt that they did not need as much information and that they could fill in the blanks themselves. Since I did not like the performance of my actor during the confession scene, because it seemed a bit too dramatic and theatrical, I leaned towards the second option of condensing the scene as much as possible. To me, it was never important to let the audience know what exactly Frank had done and how he ended up on death row. This

story was never meant to be about Frank's crime. The only thing that mattered to me in this regard was that Frank's guilt should never be doubted because it would change the whole situation. In fact, I was worried that too much back-story and letting Frank's monologue about his confession go on for too long might disrupt the intimate connection that had developed between John and Frank. After receiving the contradictory feedback, I decided to follow my instincts and do what I felt would be best for the film. I cut out most of the confession and was able to do so without interrupting the flow of the story by incorporating a "stolen" take from a previous scene. Looking back at this part of the film now, I think that this was the right decision; I do not miss Frank's confession at all and think seeing his breakdown explains why John, out of consideration, would not probe him further about the crime.

Another part of the film I was struggling with was the opening and the closing. Initially, I wanted to start the film with a montage of John's preparation of the death row building to slowly reveal to the audience where we are and who the protagonist is. However, when I was finished with my second cut and got my first notes from friends and committee members, I thought that this opening might not be strong enough to really engage the audience's attention. This is why I followed one suggestion and added a shot of John, sitting on the cot in the cell, contemplating what had happened, at the beginning of the film. The idea was that John, after participating in the execution, went back to the cell, agonizing over what had occurred. We then follow his thoughts back and relive with him what happened, going back to the scripted beginning when John enters the prison tract. Since the shot of John on the cot seemed a bit confusing because it was not clear why he would be in there and when this scene takes place, I later replaced this shot with John pausing at the prison bars and staring into space, before he walks through the curtain to participate in the execution. I tried to use this shot as a framing device and cut back to the same

shot later on in the film when John is faced with the decision whether to walk through and help execute his friend or not. However, since I had initially planned and shot an interaction with another prison guard before John walks through the curtain, I did not have the footage to really make this scene work. I tried different versions and added a shot of the curtain on which I overlaid the beautiful tree shot from one of the flashback scenes, in order to give us a better insight into John's thinking, but I was never completely satisfied with the way this cut together. In the end, I decided to go back to my original idea and start the film the way I had described it in the script: with John entering the execution complex. Looking back, especially after having received mixed feedback on my decision, I am still not a hundred percent certain, whether this was the right choice or if it would have been better to keep working on the tree-and-curtain-shot. However, I believe that this more minimal aesthetic works better than a cut to an effect shot which did not cut together as smoothly and therefore might have called too much attention to the editing.

Overall, I am rather satisfied with the outcome of *Us Against The World*. However, if I had the chance to make the film again, I would change a lot, starting from the script to the way we shot it and then assembled it in editing. After cutting out two characters and condensing a lot of the dialogue, I now know that my script could have benefited from even more fine-tuning before shooting. Despite trying to avoid on-the-nose dialogue and too much exposition, I still feel that a lot of lines written in the script could have been left unsaid, especially when looking at how much my actor Escalante was able to say with just his eyes. I remember that I felt rather uncertain during the writing process about whether my actors would be able to lend a deep insight into the characters and decided to keep a few more lines in the script, just in case we would not be able to visually relate these emotions.

Speaking of the cast, although both actors that I ended up casting were not my first choice, I am very happy with my casting decision, in particular Escalante. I believe that Escalante was the perfect choice for the role of John. If I had to cast the film again, I would prefer him over any other actor. Although I think John Bostic did well, too, and was by far the best actor that auditioned for the role of Frank, I was not always fully satisfied with his performance. This is clearly not only John's fault but also due to my shortcomings as the director of the project. Luckily, I was able to fix most of the issues I found in John's performance by cutting around his weaker takes and only using his stronger performances in editing.

The same was true for the kids; they all did a good job at acting but sometimes lacked believability or looked into the camera which forced me to cut around these moments, as well. The film would have definitely benefited from more time on our exterior day when we shot two of the flashback scenes. This day was our most hectic production day and the fact that we did not have a monitor available to review the footage shot on the Steadicam complicated the process even more. Being unable to watch and review the takes, made it very difficult for me to address issues that I later noticed in the kids' performances, especially for our continuous master shot when the bullies attack little John during which I was not even able to be close to the camera. It was not my team's fault that the necessary equipment was unavailable but an unfortunate coincidence: the monitor broke in the equipment room right before my shoot and the local production company whose monitor we'd borrowed as a replacement needed it back sooner than expected. I know that there was nothing we could have done to improve the situation. However, the most important lesson that I can draw from this rather difficult day and the rest of the shoot, is that we made it work through teamwork and perseverance.

Besides these minor technical difficulties, I am very happy with the cinematography of

my film. Although I wish I would have gotten more coverage for some of the scenes, such as from a different angle or an additional wider shot, we shot enough coverage so that I was able to work with the footage creatively in editing and most of the times select the best takes for performance reasons and not because technical problems forced me to. The overall look of the film and, in particular, how authentic the prison set looks is one of the aspects of *Us Against The World* that I feel most accomplished about. I was asked many times during the feedback screenings in which prison we shot the film and always received a puzzled look when I told the viewers that we in fact shot on a sound stage and had built the set ourselves. The prison cell and the set dressing as well as the costumes lend a realistic atmosphere to my production. Another aspect that helped make our set feel like a real prison was the soundscape my post sound mixer added. The reverberation and the sound effects of heavy metal doors and footsteps on concrete floor make the audience believe that the room and cell we see on screen are just a small part in a big institutional prison complex. The combination of the look of the set and the way it was lit and photographed with these sound effects lend to the whole film what I was hoping for: authenticity and verisimilitude.

Looking back, I have to say that I am most proud of the combined effort my crew and cast put into my project, not only during the six days of production but also in preparation, as we were building the set and preparing for the film. I feel truly humbled by how much heart and soul everyone put towards *Us Against The World* and can say that I am proud of finishing my time at UNO with this film.

13. CONCLUSION

I set out to make a thesis film that addresses a socially relevant topic and that would get people interested and invested in the depicted issue. From the feedback I received during the screenings for film classes at UNO, and for friends and faculty, I think I can say that I achieved this goal. Despite the limited number of people who have seen *Us Against The World* so far, their feedback lined up in one main point: they all seemed interested in the nature of John's job and, as far as I can tell from my personal observations, were intrigued by the different perspective on the issue of the death penalty. Although I prefer films that address an issue in a subtle way and tried to use this approach for *Us Against The World*, instead of becoming preachy or moralizing as a storyteller, in retrospect I wonder if my film would be even more impactful, if it had been slightly more direct and dramatic. It is very difficult to judge this aspect objectively without having the luxury of having had a lot of public screenings and a longer break between finishing the film and reviewing it.

My second major challenge while making this film was to work on a very limited budget. In this regard I can say that we succeeded, as well, because not only did we come in "on time" and "on budget" but we also made the financial restraints work to our advantage as best as we could. My producer Anastasiya Rul was a great help in managing the expenses of my film. Our similar cultural background – Anastasiya is from Belarus, I am from former East Germany – equipped us both with a very conservative way of dealing with money, which turned out to be a great advantage when working on a shoestring budget. We carefully chose how much we could spend on what and tried to get as many necessary elements for the production for cheap or free. Our careful management of the budget often resulted in more creativity as we were forced to

solve problems by coming up with creative solutions rather than throwing money at them. Although I wish I would have been able to compensate my hardworking crew and my wonderful actors, who all put so much effort and time towards the production of my film, I know that it was just not possible due to the financial limitations of this film. However, knowing that favors will not remain free forever, I am looking forward to working on productions with a bigger budget on which I can compensate everyone working on it fairly.

Finally, I want to point out what an amazing and informative journey the making of *Us Against The World* has been. I greatly believe that we only learn by doing and by making as many mistakes as possible. I surely made many mistakes during the process of bringing *Us Against The World* to the screen. However, I feel that this experience has taught me so much about filmmaking that no class at a university could ever teach me. It really is the practical experience, the moments where you can get your hands dirty that matter most. I feel that I have grown as a visual storyteller over the course of this production. A lot of the lessons I have learned might not be visible in the final film since I realized many things along the way, such as about working with actors, which coverage to shoot to best tell your story and to be more flexible in editing. But I feel much better equipped for my next projects and am confident that each film that I will make over the course of my career will be better and better and will help me grow as a filmmaker, just as *Us Against The World* did.

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Appendix J: Film Reference

The DVD copy of the thesis film *Us Against The World* is located in the Earl K. Long Library.

Vita

The author was born and raised in Zwickau, Germany. She earned a Bachelor's degree in TV production with a focus on TV camera at the University of Applied Sciences in Leipzig, Germany (HTWK Leipzig) in 2012. She was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to start a Master's program in Film Production at the University of New Orleans. During her studies Andrea Kuehnelt has made three short films, one of them a short documentary, *Signs of Life*, which won the prize for Best Documentary at the University of New Orleans Film Fest and screened at the 2013 New Orleans Film Fest. Andrea has worked on multiple student films in various positions with her main focus on directing, cinematography and producing.