

ABSTRACT

Writing and Directing the Short Film, *Stray*

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This thesis outlines the process of writing and directing the short film, *Stray*. It will also examine many of the underlying theoretical and filmic influences that have informed the director's creative decisions and methodological approach. Personal goals and thematic content is discussed, and a full script analysis is also provided.

Writing and Directing the Short Film, *Stray*

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| LIST OF FIGURES | v |
| CHAPTER ONE | 1 |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Personal and Professional Goals | 1 |
| Message and Theme | 2 |
| CHAPTER TWO | 8 |
| Literature Review | 8 |
| Theoretical Influences | 10 |
| Filmic Influences | 21 |
| CHAPTER THREE | 32 |
| Methodology | 32 |
| Script Analysis | 35 |
| CHAPTER FOUR | 47 |
| <i>Stray</i> Screenplay | 47 |
| CHAPTER FIVE | 66 |
| <i>Stray</i> | 66 |
| CHAPTER SIX | 67 |
| Self-Critique and Analysis | 67 |
| Pre-Production and Production | 67 |
| Post-Production | 81 |
| Conclusion | 87 |
| WORKS CITED | 89 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1 - Stray Rides Home from the Basketball Court..... | 59 |
| Figure 2 - Warm vs. Cold Color Temperatures..... | 69 |

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The following is a theoretical and methodological overview of the fictional short film *Stray*, which I both wrote and directed. In addition to serving as the subject of my thesis, *Stray* is a very personal project for me for a number of reasons, many of which will be explored in this paper. On a grand scale, this film serves as the platform for my exploration of many of the thematic concepts that have been occupying my thoughts throughout my time in graduate school. In this paper I will dissect and examine the influences, motivations, themes, and methodological approaches to the creation of this film for the dual purpose of exposing myself to academic review and simultaneously conducting an exercise of self-examination and critique.

Personal and Professional Goals

Although I have been gainfully employed in the fields of film, video, and television production in a wide range of capacities for well over a decade now, the majority of my occupational responsibilities have been in the cinematography and editing departments. While it could certainly be argued that both of these roles are significantly participatory in the crafting of a story or message, *Stray* represents my first serious foray into the realm of writing and directing a fictional narrative film.

Like a number of my fellow students, after graduating with my bachelor's degree I spent a number of years working in my chosen field of study before returning to academia. I make note of this because it has been a significant motivating factor in my

approach to graduate studies, particularly in the production of my short film, *Stray*.

Having spent some time in the world of professional production, I have come to learn that opportunities to conceptualize and execute creative projects free from the demands of commercial interest are few and far between. As such, one of the most significant motivations in my approach to *Stray* has been to maximize and wholeheartedly embrace the rare opportunity to create a film exactly the way I want to. This is certainly not to suggest that I think I know exactly how a film should be made. Rather, I want to put my cinematic sensibilities to the test by expressing them fully in the freedom of an academic environment where I can receive critical review and feedback in a forum that concerns itself primarily with the artistic and academic integrity of my craft, rather than its commercial viability.

On a professional level, my desire is that my graduate studies, and in particular my short film *Stray*, will open doors to professional opportunities that I previously lacked the qualifications or experience to be considered for. In particular, I hope this experience will serve to deepen my understanding and proficiency in both screenwriting and directing. My intent is for *Stray* to compete on the film festival circuit, and while making the film “festival friendly” by keeping it’s length within the commonly expected ten to fifteen minute range is of secondary concern to the artistic freedom mentioned above, I do hope to see some success on the festival circuit which will act as a springboard for other opportunities in fictional narrative filmmaking.

Message and Theme

In broad terms, *Stray* is a contemporary drama about a relationship between two people who live in the same city but come from fundamentally different walks of life.

While the film tackles some rather difficult and heavy topics, it has never been my intention to use *Stray* for the purpose of conveying an ideological viewpoint or political message. In writing *Stray*, I did not set out to pontificate or philosophize. Rather, I set out to tell a story that would encourage audiences to reflect on, and perhaps even question, their own proclivities and biases, without attempting to influence that process by providing my version of an answer. As Stanley Kubrick said, “The essence of the dramatic form... is to let an idea come over people without its being plainly stated. When you say something directly, it is simply not as potent as when you allow people to discover it for themselves” (Phillips 160). While it is inevitable (since it is a product of my psyche) that the film will reflect my way of understanding the world, *Stray* is simply an exploration of the concepts that have been occupying my mind for the past few years, rather than an attempt on my part to moralize or draw conclusions on the way I think things should be.

The foremost theme of *Stray*, and the concept I was most interested to explore in the film, is that of otherness, and the way we relate to those who are “other” or “alien” to us across the inherent boundaries of our social and cultural structures. The main character of the film, who remains unnamed throughout the film (identified in the script as Stray), is the most apparent personification of this idea. As the title suggests, the character of Stray is an expression of what life might look like for someone raised with little of the guidance afforded most members of society through their upbringing. With nobody to lead him in the ways of living a "normal" life, Stray is forced by physical necessity to eke out an existence within the same physical space as the society which, in many ways, he is not a part of. As such, much like a stray animal, Stray's existence is focused primarily on

survival. However while Stray is undoubtedly "other" than the society whose space he occupies, his otherness is little more than a construct of the societal ideology to which he does not subscribe. While Stray can certainly appreciate that there are significant differences between his life and that of those around him, without the ideological framework inherited from a popular societal upbringing, he is incapable of fully comprehending the meaning and extent of his otherness. This serves simultaneously (and paradoxically) to both nullify and compound his sense of otherness, an inner conflict that gives rise to his unusual way of relating to those with whom he interacts.

In some ways, *Stray* exists as a precautionary tale against the human tendency to view others only through the lens of our own circumstances by exploring some of the factors that inhibit empathy with those who are different from us. Much like many of the themes in *Stray*, my desire to explore this issue was born out of an awareness of this proclivity in myself, and my wish to understand what it is in my worldview that makes it difficult for me to connect or empathize with people that I don't feel some connection with. In the film, Skye is able to relate to Stray as one of her own as long as she is unaware of his socio-economic situation. While there are clear differences in the way each character goes through life, there is on Skye's part an optimism and sense of adventure that enables her assumption that Stray is at least on the same general ideological curve as she is. However, once Skye comes to learn the extent of Stray's circumstance (a realization that comes to fruition when she drives him home), the walls go up and she begins to shut him out. In the closing scene of the film, after Stray has been shot, Skye has a moment of realization:

COP

What are you doing? Do you know who this is?

Skye isn't responding. He grabs her by the shoulders, trying to force her to look at him.

COP (CONT'D)

Do you know who this is?

SKYE

(vacantly, still staring at the body)

Yes.

COP

Who is he?

Skye turns her gaze to her father. It's a moment of realization.

SKYE

I don't know.

Skye is deep in shock now. She breaks away from her father's grasp and runs into the street.

In death, Stray is finally freed from the social structures that caged him in life. When Skye's gaze is directed at Stray's body on the ground, she identifies with him as a person. When her eyes return to her father, she identifies with the institution—the ideology of her upbringing. Skye's realization of both the dehumanizing aspect of her own way of looking at life and those around her, and the animalistic purity of Stray's perspective on life, is what prompts her to break away from her father and run out into the street, a feeble attempt to free herself from her own cage by running from that which represents her captivity.

In the process of watching the film, my intent is to take the audience on a similar journey as that of Skye: by connecting with Stray on relational level as they watch him go about his life and develop the beginnings of a relationship with Skye, my hope is that

audiences will be able to reach state of emotional transcendence that creates the opportunity to connect with the tragedy of the ending in a much more powerful way than if they had seen the same story on their local TV news. Essentially, my aim is to defamiliarize the character of Stray through his actions, speech, and appearance, and simultaneously humanize him by making him an object of empathy. Aside from his budding relationship with Skye, this is fortified by the fact that, even though Stray receives very little empathy from others in the film, he is himself an empathetic being. On multiple occasions, Stray chooses to sacrifice for the benefit of others. This can be seen in the way he takes care of the dog (a relationship that is not developed, but implied), as well as when he gives his leftover jerky to one of his fellow squatters. Despite the fact that Stray will inevitably need to find more food in the near future, he chooses to share what he could otherwise fulfill his own need with. My hope is that the audience will come to care about Stray because they can see that he cares about others.

Another of the primary themes of *Stray*, closely related to the one just discussed, is that of relational superficiality, especially as it pertains to how we relate to others across social and cultural boundaries. Being a foreigner in the USA myself, I have personally experienced this to a small degree. Of particular interest to me is the proclivity of people to be attracted to something that they know very little about, when that thing is considered “cool” in some way. In my case, it is the “coolness” of being an Australian in America, made desirable in large part by the fact that people generally have a fantastical view of what life in Australia must be like. In the case of Stray, Skye is attracted by his sense of freedom, and her imagination of what that must be like.

In the park, Skye demonstrates this superficiality in her conversation with Stray about dancing. At the end of the conversation, Stray says, “nobody tells me what to do,” and Skye responds by staring into his eyes and saying, “I can imagine.” Her attraction to his otherness is based on the adventure of the unknown. In Skye’s imagination, Stray’s life is an adventure that she wants for herself. While she hasn’t come to resent it yet, Skye is at least aware of some of the ways that societal expectations hinder and restrict the way she lives life and the decisions she makes. Later in the film, when Skye is driving Stray home, Stray compliments Skye on her nice car. Skye responds by saying, “Thanks. Apparently it has a great safety rating.” While Skye dreams of adventure, she is frustrated by the way her lifestyle is restricted by some external factor (presumably her parents) that values safety over the adventure that comes with taking risks.

Finally, with the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin by a neighborhood watch coordinator, and the more recent shooting of Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (and a whole host of similar incidents), the unnecessary use of deadly force by figures of authority in racially charged situations has become a very hot topic of debate. While this issue and its accompanying fervor is not one that I set out to explore or capitalize on, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that this social corollary will almost certainly have an impact on the way audiences understand and respond to the film. My hope is that viewers will come away from the film not with a sense of political vindication, but a deeper understanding and connection with the tragedy of a misunderstood life unnecessarily snuffed out.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

While the creative process of *Stray* has been a very personal one, it has also been deeply influenced and shaped by a number of external sources, both in film and scholarly literature. Beyond inspiring many of the formal elements of the film for the purpose of shaping style and tone (such as shooting style, color grade, and musical score), many of the external sources I have referenced throughout the process of writing this film have served both to inform the creation of ideological layers in the film, and help me better understand the ways that meaning can be extracted from formal elements by the audience. Additionally, given that the character of Stray exists in a psychological state and socio-economic position with which I have no personal experience, it was important that I consult scholarly psychological research to ensure that I had some understanding of how to develop the character in a believable way.

David Bordwell, a strong proponent of formalist film analysis and historical poetics, breaks the poetic analysis of a film into three separate studies. The first of these, the study of precompositional factors, attempts to examine the factors that influenced the creation of the text prior to production by looking at “sources, influences, clichés, [and] received forms” (Bordwell, “Historical Poetics of Cinema” 376) in order to consider the way a film was brought into being, and “what forces have mobilized it for various purposes” (Bordwell, *Making Meaning* 265). Some of the precompositional elements of *Stray*, such as thematic influences and motivations, have been outlined and briefly

discussed in Chapter One of this paper. Bordwell goes on to add both compositional and postcompositional factors as the second and third areas of analysis. Compositional factors are the “normalized principles of combination and transformation within works” (Bordwell, “Historical Poetics of Cinema” 376), or in other words, the use of convention and form to tell the story. Postcompositional factors deal with the way a film is received by audiences, and the varying ways that context can shape the way a film is understood (“Historical Poetics of Cinema” 376).

According to Bordwell, the study of compositional factors offers the most promising approach to understanding a film and the way it was made (Bordwell, *Making Meaning* 270–71), as the formal elements of a film offer the most readily identifiable material for analysis. In a formal approach to film analysis, the critic seeks to identify the formal cues assembled in the film by the director, extrapolating meaning and motivation through the lens of historical context. As Warren Buckland states, “the study of composition is central to film poetics because it entails examining both the concrete activities involved in filmmaking and the fundamental principles and conventions which guide that activity” (41). It could be said that with *Stray*, what matters most is not what I intended to put into the film (or why I put it there), but what actually made it onto the screen in the final cut. This is the practical evidence of my intentions, and the yardstick with which my accomplishment may be measured. In this chapter I will seek to outline a number of the most significant compositional elements of the film, especially as they pertain to the construction of style and theme, and illuminate many of the key precompositional influences from both theoretical and filmic sources that informed these decisions.

Theoretical Influences

Many of the influences and inspirations for *Stray*, as well as my artistic approach to both writing and directing the film, have been significantly shaped and grounded by a wide range of theoretical approaches to film, from neoformalism to psychoanalysis. In particular, the neoformalism and historical poetics espoused by film theoreticians Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell have been useful for their practicality in understanding and deconstructing film to reveal motivation and meaning. Thompson's book *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, elucidates her neoformalist approach in great detail, and has been a key resource. Neoformalism approaches film in a way that makes it particularly useful for informing precompositional decisions related to style and form while in the process of making a film, as it provides a means for assessing how the interplay of formal elements might impact the way a film is received. Studying the ways in which formal elements are employed to make meaning, without the rigid framework of a methodological approach, has been paramount to many of my creative decisions and instincts.

However while a formalist approach is helpful for understanding and informing the making of meaning through the alignment of formal elements, there is value to be found in some methodological approaches in understanding aspects of a film that are not so easily identified and explored in formalist terms. Anne Friedberg's psychoanalytic theories on cinematic identification were particularly helpful in seeking to understand how viewers might relate and respond to the characters on screen. The character of Stray is an interesting juxtaposition of otherness and sameness, a complex balance that I wanted to treat with the utmost care, and Friedberg's ideas on the relationship between

audience and screen were particularly informative. Additionally, some specific and important elements of the film (in particular the casting of the main character with a non-professional actor, or “model”), were influenced by the work and writing of Robert Bresson. Beyond Bresson’s own writing, Paul Schrader’s book *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* was an important reference in understanding the techniques and effects of Bresson’s directorial approach to film.

Defamiliarization

As described in Chapter One of this paper, the primary theme of *Stray* is that of otherness. The film exists primarily to explore and examine the difficulties that otherness presents in relationships, and the ways that social structure and ideology work to inhibit relational connections with the unknown. Stray is a character set apart from the society whose physical space he occupies. He operates through a different set of rules, and his priorities are not the same as many of those around him. As such, it is important for the formal cues of the film to distance Stray from the audience in a way that establishes his existence outside of the viewer’s normative experience. This need for distancing lends itself to a study of the formalist concept of defamiliarization.

Defamiliarization, in broad terms, is the aesthetic play that liberates an object from automatization, a state in which the viewer has become so familiar with the object through everyday experience that they may no longer consider it meaningful as they did when they first experienced it. Automatization, according to Victor Shklovsky, works to strip life of its meaning by relegating everyday experience to the unconscious level through the force of habit: “If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been” (778). To the Russian

Formalists, defamiliarization was fundamental to the very existence of art, because the primary purpose of art was to recover the sensation of life:

It exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important* [sic]. (Shklovsky 778).

Defamiliarization is the aesthetic play through which familiar objects may once again be experienced as art.

Kristin Thompson borrows heavily from Russian Formalist thought in her neoformalist approach to film analysis, defining defamiliarization as “the general neoformalist term for the basic purpose of art in our lives” (11). The assumptions of defamiliarization and automatization distinguish neoformalism from most other aesthetic theories by eschewing the form-content split that treats meaning as a product of the artwork. Rather, in neoformalism, “meaning is not the end result of an artwork, but one of its formal components” (Thompson 12). The term “meaning,” in the context of neoformalism, is not used to denote the product of a work of art, but “the work’s system of cues for denotation and connotation,” which may include preexisting meanings such as clichés and stereotypes (Thompson 12). This distinction is especially important to my approach to *Stray*, as my attempts to initiate defamiliarization through the employment of formal elements often rely heavily on my presupposition of what the audience will be thinking and feeling about the characters on screen. Many of these presuppositions are themselves based on my estimation of the preexisting information that audiences will bring into the spectatorial experience. In order to effectively use defamiliarization in a

work of art, the artist must first attempt to understand what it is about an object that has allowed it to become automatized in the first place.

One of the most identifiable attempts to defamiliarize the character of Stray in the film is the withholding of information normally considered fundamental to everyday relational development. Viewers learn very little about Stray throughout the course of the film. In normal conversation, it is common for people to ask one another for two pieces of information considered fundamental for identification and understanding of the other party: name and occupation. In *Stray*, I deliberately withhold this information for the purpose of making the viewer uncomfortable. Not only is the audience never told his name and occupation, but there are also very few clues as to the state of Stray's family, his ethnicity, or his relationships, and what few clues there are may only serve to confuse the viewer rather than bring clarity. Viewers are forced to make broad assumptions about the character based on their own experience of the world. My intention is that this lack of information, which prevents the viewer from placing the character solidly within any kind of ideological framework, will serve to defamiliarize him from the audience. This lack of information on Stray is contrasted and exacerbated by an abundance of information on Skye. The audience is made aware of her name, occupation (college student studying dance), the status of her social integration (through her on-screen friendship), her living situation, and ethnicity. Skye represents the epitome of the familiar, with the intention that her familiarity with the audience will serve to deepen the sense of otherness that the audience attributes to Stray.

Defamiliarization was also a key consideration in casting the character of Stray, who will be played by Peter Kraus, a 21-year old Chinese American. Peter's ethnic origin

is Uyghur, a minority people group that populates areas of far western China and Central Asia. Abandoned as a toddler, Peter spent the majority of his childhood in an orphanage run by Han Chinese, the dominant ethnic group in China and a people with whom the Uyghurs share a long history of violence and intolerance. Peter was adopted by an American family at the age of ten and brought to America with very little education and no English skills, and was required by the American education system to begin his schooling in kindergarten with children half his age. From the time he was abandoned by his biological parents, Peter has spent his life in a state of alienation, both within China and America. Peter's physical appearance, which is not recognizably Chinese, serves to alienate him no matter where he goes. To the vast majority of people he interacts with in both Chinese and American circles, his ethnicity is unrecognizable, and he is frequently mislabeled and misunderstood. Despite these difficulties, Peter has adapted to life in America remarkably well, and in many ways personifies what the character of Stray could have become had he been loved and understood for who he is, rather than ignored or discarded because of his otherness. However, the depth of Peter's Chinese roots and his personal experiences of alienation in both China and America have served to endow him with an interesting way of relating and communicating that has an indelible sense of otherness to it. Attempting to bring this characteristic to the screen was one of my greatest challenges as director.

While the aforementioned defamiliarization is paramount to the success of the film's thematic intentions, this is only one aspect of my approach to the characterization of Stray. As mentioned in the first chapter of this paper, my treatment of Stray is deliberately paradoxical, with the intention of coaxing audiences into a dichotomous and

unsettling push-pull relationship with the character. My hope is that audiences will feel the urge, on one hand, to push away from *Stray* because of the difficulty of situating him on a familiar ideological curve, and on the other hand feel a tenderness towards the character's empathetic qualities that creates a desire to draw him closer and connect on a more human level that transcends ideology.

Cinematic Identification

The desire to forge an emotional connection between the audience and the characters on the screen begs for a deeper understanding of the way an audience might relate to the screen. While there may be no theory that can offer a complete understanding of this dynamic, Anne Friedberg's thoughts on cinematic identification, based on psychoanalytic theory, offer some interesting points for consideration. Many of Friedberg's thoughts on cinematic identification expand on the work of Christian Metz, whose essay, "The Imaginary Signifier," remains a key text for the foundation of a psychoanalytic understanding of cinematic identification. Metz breaks cinematic identification into two streams: primary identification, an identification with the "look" of the camera; and secondary identification, which occurs between the spectator and an actor, character, or star (Friedberg 40–41). Secondary identification is of primary concern in my approach to the characterization of *Stray*, and interestingly, this identification acts as both a precursor to defamiliarization, and the force that works against it to facilitate a connection between audience and character or actor. As Friedberg explains, "All cinematic representation of the body has a complex function in this regard. The screen is not a mirror. (As even Metz points out, there is one thing that is never reflected in it—the spectator's body). Yet identification requires recognition before it functions as

misrecognition” (41). Audiences must first be able to identify with the character before defamiliarization can take place. I will further examine this relationship between identification and defamiliarization, and how it applies to *Stray*, in my discussion on Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* in the latter part of this chapter.

It is important to note that cinematic identification is a personal transaction that takes place through the lens of the individual, not a theoretical formula that can be used to extract objective understanding. As Friedberg explains, “Identification demands sameness, necessitates similarity, disallows difference. Identification is a process with its own ideology” (36). As such, any attempt to assemble formal devices for the purpose of identification must be accompanied with a set of assumptions as to how the audience might respond to those cues, as “sameness” may be different from one viewer to the next. In writing *Stray* and attempting to understand how I might make the titular character an object of both identification and defamiliarization, two primary assumptions informed my approach, and it is here that my personal ideology has most apparently influenced the film.

The first of these assumptions is that, although audiences will likely not connect with *Stray*’s socio-cultural otherness (in fact, this is the primary element of defamiliarization), I think they will make an emotional connection with the aspects of his character that they see as being desirable qualities of human nature. Namely, these attributes would include his empathy (shown in the way that *Stray* relates to other characters and the dog) and his basic human desire for companionship. While the portrayal of these characteristics is generally quite subtle, my expectation is that the audience will take these cues and extrapolate other elements of *Stray*’s character based on

the sense that he has an inherent purity of spirit, despite the fact that his living situation and many of his daily activities are illegal. A sensitivity towards the inherent “humanness” of his character forms the first layer of identification between *Stray* and the audience.

The second assumption is one that is born out of my professional experience in documentary production, working with and documenting people from all over the world for a largely American audience. Through this experience, I have come to believe that “people connect with people connecting with people”—or in other words, that audiences most easily overcome their differences with the character on the screen when they are able to observe that person making a connection with another person. While this conclusion is certainly not based on empirical research or verifiable fact, it has nevertheless become instinctive to the way I approach story and, for *Stray*, provides at least part of the motivation for my desire to make a film about a relationship that attempts to cross social boundaries. It is my assumption that as audiences watch *Stray* and Skye making a connection in their “night on the town,” this will serve as a vehicle for the audience to further abandon their pretenses and identify with *Stray* as a person rather than a social position.

Bressonian Thought

From a theoretical perspective, the writing and directorial approach of Robert Bresson has been especially informative to my own approach to writing and directing *Stray*. Bresson is a true formalist, stating that he is “more occupied with the special language of the cinema than with the subject of my films” (qtd. in Schrader 61). As a formalist, Bresson treats the audience as active participants in the creation of meaning, a

decidedly constructivist approach to which Kristin Thompson's neoformalism also subscribes. Thus, in a Bressonian approach to directing, an exceptional understanding of the most effective ways to utilize form is called for, which in turn "demands a precise knowledge of audience psychology; the film-maker must know, shot for shot, how the spectator will react" (Schrader 61). To Bresson, content is subservient to form, and access to the audience is not predicated on meaning, but precisely constructed formal rhythm.

Bresson's perspective on the purpose of creating films is of particular interest to me. Similar to my own desire to utilize cinematic form for the exploration of ideas and relationships rather than moralizing or philosophizing, Bresson states in his *Notes on the Cinematographer* ("cinematographer" here denoting the filmmaker, not the director of photography):

Not to shoot a film in order to illustrate a thesis, or to display men and women confined to their external aspect, but to discover the matter they are made of. To attain that "heart of the heart" which does not let itself be caught either by poetry, or by philosophy, or by drama. (Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer* 47).

While I certainly cannot pretend to have ascended to a mastery of form in any way reminiscent of that of Bresson, this thought perfectly elucidates the way I aspire to approach the films I create. I will discuss some of the more practical Bressonian influences on *Stray* in Chapter Three of this paper.

Psychology and the Social Sciences

Given the primary themes of *Stray*, and the way it explores the effects of social structures and ideology on personal relationships, it was important to spend some time examining scholarly research from the fields of psychology and the social sciences to glean some understand as to how I might approach such a complex and politically loaded

issue with sensitivity. Suzanne Wenzel states that “Ecological theories highlight the importance of understanding individuals’ behaviors and health as a function of their social environment” (2). Hence an understanding of the way a social situation may impact one’s behavior is key to approaching a story about crossing social boundaries. While I came into this project with very little personal experience or academic expertise in either psychology or sociology, I considered it paramount that the story not be predicated on my personal opinions or assumptions. Rather, it was important that it be based on expert, politically agnostic insight, to the degree that this may exist and insofar as my limited research may inform it. I have no desire to push my ideals onto the audience, but more importantly than that, I want the story to be accessible to audiences of a variety of ideological persuasions—an approach to which informed impartiality is key.

My research began in the social sciences with an examination of some key sources on the nature and function of ideological and social boundaries. Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, leading experts in sociology, delineate the concept of boundaries into two streams of inquiry: symbolic boundaries and social boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are defined as:

Conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality... Symbolic boundaries also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership (Epstein 1992, p. 232). They are an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources.

In the context of *Stray*, symbolic boundaries largely represent the ideological differences between Stray and Skye. Interestingly, Lamont and Molnár add that symbolic boundaries may only take on constraining characteristics and shape social interaction in meaningful

ways when they are widely agreed upon. As such, although Stray exists in the same physical space as the society that Skye is a part of (albeit on the fringes, so to speak), his understanding of symbolic boundaries is fundamentally different. While it may be apparent to Stray that there are differences between Skye's symbolic boundaries and his own, since these boundaries are not tangible, his understanding of the discrepancy is largely filtered through his own worldview. At the same time, Skye's interpretation of Stray's circumstances are filtered through her own understanding of symbolic boundaries.

Social boundaries, on the other hand, are "objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities" (Lamont and Molnár). Social boundaries are more apparent, and are not subservient to ideological subjectivity in the same way that symbolic boundaries are. In *Stray*, these social boundaries are manifested in a variety of ways, perhaps most evident in that Skye has access to a significantly higher level of transportation, housing, and education than Stray does. Unlike symbolic boundaries, these social boundaries are recognizable to both Stray and Skye, although their significance is interpreted differently by each party. Indeed, Skye pulls away from Stray when she comes to the realization that she had unknowingly been crossing these social boundaries by spending her time with a vagabond, but the significance of this revelation does not carry the same weight for Stray, and he has difficulties coming to terms with her withdrawal.

Developmentally, Stray is in a period of life psychologists refer to as a "time of ascendency," in which time the main challenge is "the integration of past identifications,

present drives, and social roles” (Kahn et al. 1316). He is, essentially, trying to understand his place in the world. Much of Stray’s understanding on how to navigate this process is based on the way he has learned to view the world around him.

In looking at the variables of childhood development and the way adversity within a child’s environment affects their ability to develop normal behavioral patterns, psychologists look at “competence” and “resilience” as important factors in gauging successful development. Competence is “broadly defined in terms of reasonable success with major developmental tasks expected for a person of a given age and gender in the context of his or her culture, society, and time” (Masten and Coatsworth 206), while resilience “generally refers to manifested competence in the context of significant challenges to adaptation of development” (Masten and Coatsworth 206). Clearly the character of Stray has faced great adversity, but the ambiguous nature of his symbolic boundaries poses difficulties for placing him on a continuum of competence:

Deciding whether a child is competent can be difficult when a child lives in a culture or community context that differs markedly from the larger society in which the community or cultural group is embedded. Children may live in highly dangerous inner-city neighborhoods where survival could depend on behavior viewed as inappropriate in mainstream society. (Coll et al. in Masten and Coatsworth 207).

Within his own symbolic boundaries, it could be argued, Stray has shown remarkable resilience, a point that I hope audiences will be able to recognize and appreciate.

Filmic Influences

A neoformalist approach, as described previously in my discussion on defamiliarization, encourages a working knowledge of a broad range of filmic references in order to develop an understanding of how form may be used effectively, especially for

the purpose of defamiliarization. Neoformalist analysis relies heavily on historical context, working in part on the assumption that an audience's response to a film will be heavily influenced by their experience with other films. As such, I have tried to study a broad range of films in my research for *Stray*. Many of these films explore similar themes to *Stray*, but were made by a number of stylistically and culturally disparate directors over more than a 50 year time span ranging from the late 1950's to the present. From a research perspective, it was important to develop an understanding of the many ways that directors before me have approached these themes, both formally and ideologically. Much of this research has significantly impacted my approach to *Stray*, not just in the treatment of theme, but also in terms of formal style and process.

The character of Stray shares a lot of similarities with the characters of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's films, most notably *Rosetta* (1999) and *The Kid with a Bike* (2011). In *The Kid with a Bike*, Cyril, a pre-teen boy who spends much of the film seeking relational restitution with his father, suffers deeply from his lack of parental guidance. Cyril is single-minded in his mission to find and reconnect with his father, but his social ineptitude and desperate longing for a family prevent him from grasping the gravity of both the positive and negative elements of his circumstances, such as his susceptibility to abuse by a local gang member or the gift of love bestowed on him by a temporary foster parent. In many ways, Cyril inspired the backstory of *Stray* in helping me consider the perspective of an abandoned child, and the ways that such an abandonment might influence behavior. In a self-protective way, Cyril views the world through the lens of his desires rather than his experiences. He wants a father, and therefore he refuses for as long as possible to accept the notion that his father does not

want to be a part of his life. Cyril's naivety allows others to take advantage of him in ways that an older, more experienced person simply would not allow, and Stray represents something of a maturation of this perspective given that he is a number of years older than Cyril and has a lot more life experience under his belt. Stray's focus is primarily on his practical needs, but he is still able to recognize the opportunity to fulfill an emotional need when it arises.

In a different fashion, the titular character of *Rosetta* can also be seen in the characterization of Stray. *Rosetta* is a film about a young lady who lives with her promiscuous and alcoholic mother in a trailer park that is separated from town by marshlands. Rosetta lives in perpetual motion, and her will to survive in the midst of tumultuous circumstances (both at home and in her unstable employment) causes her to behave on many occasions in an animalistic fashion, making decisions that prioritize survival over a just or lawful outcome. While this behavior might be expected to alienate Rosetta from the audience, in fact it works to the opposite effect, as the audience is able to see that her behavior is not borne of the desire to be evil, but the need to survive. Elements of Rosetta's character can be found in Stray, who also must act in a way that is socially unacceptable in order to meet his basic daily needs. Just as the Dardennes have done with Cyril and Rosetta, I am hoping that the audience will interpret Stray's behavior in a way that makes him a sympathetic character rather than a villain. Stray, like many of the Dardenne's characters, is just a normal person born into unusually difficult circumstances.

An important element of the Dardenne brother's films, and one that has been particularly influential in my approach to *Stray*, is their insistence on treating their

characters with dignity and respect, regardless of their position on the social scale. Rather than portraying their characters as objects of pity, as would have been so easy to do with Cyril and Rosetta, these characters are instead portrayed as admirable examples of the tenacity of the human spirit. In a different way, a character like Igor from *La Promesse* (1996), one of the Dardenne's earlier fictional films, spends the first half of the film as the transgressor of a variety of evils against people more vulnerable than he is. Despite the abhorrent nature of his business, however, Igor is treated with dignity not because of what he does, but for who he has the potential to become—a respect that pays off over the course of the film as Igor comes to appreciate the plight of those he has been taking advantage of. Ultimately, the Dardenne's approach their films with the assumption that even the lowest of the low, forced into difficult circumstances, is worthy of respect and dignity—something I hope audiences will also take away from *Stray*.

While the films of the Dardenne brothers may be one of the more significant thematic and ideological inspirations for *Stray*, especially in terms of characterization, a number of other films that explore similar themes of otherness have informed my approach in a variety of ways. Perhaps one of the most interesting of these is Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), which exposes social prejudices openly but reservedly in a dialectical struggle between identification and defamiliarization that has some interesting implications for the character of Stray.

In *Fear Eats the Soul*, Fassbinder takes social norms and turns them upside down to expose the irony of the prevailing social prejudices of 1970s Germany. Through his characterization of Ali, a Moroccan immigrant worker, Fassbinder subverts expectation by attributing Ali with many of the desirable traits that audiences might be expecting of

the German characters, while depicting many of the Germans in a way that audiences may have expected of Ali. Ali (which is not his real name, but a colloquial name applied generically to Moroccan workers in Germany) is courteous, smartly dressed, and hard working. On a number of occasions in the film, he is described as “beautiful,” a perfectly crafted physical being. Indeed, at one point in the film, Emmi (Ali’s wife, a 60-something year old German widow) invites her friends to feel Ali’s muscles and examine his sculpted body, objectifying him in no uncertain terms, but at the same time reinforcing his physical superiority. Ali values community and family in a way that Emmi’s family clearly does not, and he appears to subscribe to a higher moral standard when it comes to his sexual loyalty to his wife. When Ali does falter and engages in adulterous sex with a former partner, his response is one of anguish and regret. Emmi, however, brushes his transgression off as inconsequential.

While Ali, the dark-skinned foreigner, represents much of what is valued and considered “proper” in Western society, the Germans depicted in the film are largely the opposite. Emmi’s son-in-law in particular (played by Fassbinder himself) is a selfish, misogynistic pig of a man who has no respect for his wife, hates his mother-in-law, and is too lazy to go to work when he feels slightly under the weather. He describes the foreign workers at his place of employment as “swine,” and describes Emmi as having a “screw loose” when he learns of her burgeoning relationship with Ali. This sentiment is echoed in many other characters in the film, including Emmi’s children and coworkers who refuse to accept Ali until they need to use him for some physical task that they are unable to complete on their own. Despite the incessant slander against his person and his culture,

Ali remains admirably calm, refusing to engage in the vitriol that he is caught in the midst of.

What is perhaps the most remarkable accomplishment of *Fear Eats the Soul* is the delicacy with which Fassbinder is able to apply his social criticism. Fassbinder makes no attempt to encrypt his opinions of the contemporary social prejudices and the way they affect the treatment of people who fall outside the boundaries of the bourgeois class, regardless of how well those people typify the desirable traits of that class. However, despite its obvious thematic bent, the film is anything but preachy, and Fassbinder is able to attack the thematic content in a way that makes it accessible to virtually any viewer. Similarly, although I am perhaps not approaching *Stray* with the same level of ideological conviction as Fassbinder (although I'm sure that one could argue against me on this), my hope has been to employ some of the same deftness in my treatment of thematic content to allow *Stray* to be accessible to viewers from a wide range of backgrounds.

As I have already discussed in some detail, Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959) has provided significant inspiration to my approach to *Stray* on both a practical and an ideological level. *Pickpocket* is the story of a very normal, forgettable man who lives surrounded by people but rarely engages with any of them due to his own sense of superiority—the same sense of superiority that he uses as justification for his life of crime (Ebert). Central to the impact of Bresson's films is his approach to form, in particular the way he directs his actors. Bresson is renowned for his aversion to anything that resembles artificiality, and as such chose to cast his films primarily with non-professional actors, which he referred to as “models.” Bresson hated acting, describing it as a “bastard art” useful only to the theater (Schrader 65). Rather than the psychological approach to

characterization that an actor might adopt, Bresson was far more interested in the “physiology of existence” (Schrader 66) and sensation, prescribing for his models precise actions and movements that were not to be deviated from: “Stick exclusively to impressions, to sensations. No intervention of intelligence which is foreign to these impressions and sensations” (Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer* 42). While my approach to acting is not the same as Bresson’s—for example, I did not prescribe every minute movement for each actor—there are elements of Bresson’s approach that significantly influenced my approach to casting and directing *Stray*.

Perhaps the most important similarity between Bresson’s approach and my own is in my decision to cast Peter Kraus, a non-actor with no notable experience in film acting, against Devin Perry (playing Skye), a theater actress. Such a decision may seem dichotomous and counter-productive given what will undoubtedly be two vastly different acting styles, but my intention was that the juxtaposition of the two would elicit some almost-indiscernible sense of otherness between the two characters, further enriching the defamiliarization that is already taking place. As Bresson wrote, models are “capable of eluding their own vigilance, capable of being divinely “themselves”” (Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer* 77), and this was precisely my intention with Peter. Just as essayist and film critic James Baldwin wrote, “One does not go to see them act; one goes to watch them *be*” (Baldwin 34), my hope is that audiences will respond to Peter’s performance in this way. While I tried to portray Peter acting as he would in everyday life, I approached this by coaching him to explicitly avoid attempting to act in this manner. Like any other person, Peter is incapable of knowing precisely what his “real life” looks like to an observer, and any attempt on his part to portray this through acting would have invariably

resulted in the very artificiality that I was trying to avoid. Rather, in rehearsals with Peter I coached him to recognize and acknowledge his instinct to act, and attempt to hide that expression from the camera. This is based on a distinctly Bressonian approach:

Psychological acting is the easiest and most appealing of all three screens... if not properly restrained an actor will exert a creative force in a film... In order to reduce acting to physiology, Bresson carefully instructs his actors in nonexpressiveness. He forces the actor to sublimate his personality, to act in an automatic manner: "It is not so much a question of doing 'nothing' as some people have said. It is rather a question of performing without being aware of oneself, of not controlling oneself". (Bresson qtd. in Schrader 66)

Like Bresson, I believe that in attempting to suppress any desire or instinct to act, Peter will have created a space for his "pure essence" to come through (Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer* 54).

Of the many other films that have influenced my approach to *Stray*, the more notable ones include Derek Cianfrance's *The Place Beyond the Pines* (2012) and *Blue Valentine* (2010), David Gordon Green's *George Washington* (2000), and Destin Daniel Cretton's *Short Term 12* (2013). My interest in these films has primarily been in what I can best describe as a sense of honesty in their approach to character and theme. Each of the films deals with heavy topics (from sexual abuse of minors to the breakdown of marital relationships) explored by characters in difficult circumstances, and they strike me as being very personal projects for their respective directors, much like *Stray* has been for me.

Derek Cianfrance has been a favorite director of mine since *Blue Valentine*, not because I loved the story or his ideological approach to the film, but because of the emotional clout that he is able to wield through his use of content and form. Cianfrance excels in his exploration of relational struggles, and reading his screenplays was

especially helpful in navigating my own approach to dialog and conversational rhythm, which I constantly stripped and refined through every draft of the script.

Additionally, Cianfrance's employment of cinematography, especially in *Place Beyond the Pines* (which was lensed by a favorite cinematographer of mine, Sean Bobbitt), has had perhaps the greatest influence on my approach to the cinematography of *Stray*. Shot primarily handheld, the cinematography of *Place Beyond the Pines* achieves a beautiful verisimilitude without embracing a documentary aesthetic like the Dardenne brothers tend to lean towards. Cianfrance demonstrates his comfort with the camera by pushing the boundaries in the way he utilizes its power to effect the creation of meaning, but he does so without allowing the apparatus to interfere with the story. Given that the bulk of my professional experience and interest has been in the camera department, my process in developing *Stray* has been a very visual one. Generally speaking, no scene in *Stray* came to exist on paper before I had completely constructed it visually in my mind, playing through all the camera angles and timing the action, and Cianfrance's visual style played an important role in informing this process.

Some of the same may be said of Destin Daniel Cretton's *Short Term 12*, a beautiful film that follows the lives of a number of staff and residents at a juvenile group home in California. The film's subject matter is heavy and often gut wrenching, but Cretton's camera respects the privacy of each individual while also conveying a sense of intimacy, largely through its use of shallow focus, that endears the viewer to the characters on screen. Similar to the Dardenne brothers, Cretton approaches his characters with the assumption that, regardless of their background or current circumstances, each possesses an inherent goodness that speaks to the potential of the human spirit for love

and freedom. As such, each character is treated with a dignity befitting their potential, building the possibility for a strong bond to form between the audience and the characters on screen despite their defamiliarization through circumstance.

One of my favorite formal elements of *Short Term 12* is the musical score, composed by Joel P. West. Cretton's approach to music, predicated on simplicity and minimalism, has provided the basis for my own approach to the music of *Stray*. Cretton uses music sparingly in *Short Term 12*, but when he does, its effect is both subtle and powerful, a quiet and reserved emotional force that gently but forcibly effects the tone of the scene. In a behind the scenes featurette called "Making the Music," West and Cretton discuss their process for creating the music, which at its core involved starting with a complex composition and slowly stripping it down to its absolute minimum. It is this simplicity that makes the music of *Short Term 12* so effective, and I employed a similar approach (although perhaps with more musically complex result), in collaboration with my composer, to the music of *Stray*.

Finally, the most recent addition to my list of filmic references is David Gordon Green's *George Washington*, a phenomenological experience that invites the viewer to return to the innocent days of their youth before the harsh reality of the world bared its fangs, and then, through the accidental death of a friend, reminisces about what it was like to be forced to grow up and leave childhood behind. In the context of *Stray*, *George Washington* is interesting for its willingness to simply stand back and observe the idle behavior of its characters without succumbing to the urge to rush them into action for the purpose of developing a plot. In my film, *Stray* finds himself in a similar situation. While the film certainly follows a plot line, *Stray*'s life is relatively idle, and developments in

the plot tend to happen *to* him, rather than as a result of his actions. In *George Washington*, Green provides a compelling exploration of what it is like to be thrust into adulthood before the appropriate time has come, the consideration of which has served to add a new layer of depth and complexity to my approach to *Stray*.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Now that I have elucidated many of the theoretical and filmic influences that have informed the development of *Stray*, I will attempt to break down some of the more practical elements of developing and creating the film, looking at the collection and use of specific resources important to the success of the project. As the writer and director, there were a wide variety of considerations that needed to be factored into my strategic approach to the production if I was to successfully bring my vision to the screen.

Knowing what I know about my own weaknesses in all things administrative, the first priority for me was to find a producer who appreciated the project and was trustworthy and proactive enough to take on the role of producer and run with it. Fortunately one of my fellow graduate students, Kristina Beevers, had some notable experience as a producer and was excited to jump on board and begin attacking the project head on. Kristina was tasked with scheduling, finding options for locations (in which she immediately proved her worth by quickly finding and securing a number of key locations), securing crew, managing paperwork, and making sure that the cast and crew were kept informed of developments. Generally speaking, the logistics of *Stray* are relatively straightforward. Most of the film takes place outside in locations that are easy to access (with a few notable exceptions, such as the grocery store), the cast and crew are both relatively small given that the film was shot primarily with available and/or practical light sources, and the script itself is less than twenty pages long. Nonetheless there were a

number of significant challenges to overcome in securing some of the more difficult locations and props, like the grocery store and a police car. Additionally, with Peter living a four-hour drive away from Waco, our schedule needed to be somewhat flexible to accommodate for his needs, with the added consideration of ensuring his safety on the road by allowing sufficient time in the schedule for him to rest before making the drive back home every weekend.

While I have discussed casting for *Stray* at length on multiple occasions in this paper, much of this conversation has been focused on the casting of the main character, Stray. While casting this character well was clearly the highest priority for the success of the film, the character of Skye is also extremely important for a number of reasons. While Skye does not have anywhere near as much screen time as Stray does, hers is the most challenging role from a dramatic standpoint. Skye is in many ways the emotional barometer of the film. Her emotional journey, if I succeeded as a director, is similar to that of the audience. When Skye is on an emotional high, the audience will be right there with her, and when she plunges to the depths of grief and despair in the closing scene, my hope is that the audience will experience something similar, even if not as dramatic. Additionally, given that Peter, who is playing Stray, is a non-professional actor with no significant experience in acting for the screen, it was important that I cast Skye with an actress who could not only play the part well, but also possessed an easy-going temperament that would help Peter to feel comfortable on set doing something that he is not accustomed to. Finally, it was important to me as a first-time director to make sure that the role was cast with an actress whose instincts I trusted and with whom I was comfortable on a personal level. As I was writing the script, I had Devin Perry in mind

for the role long before I ever approached her, and I was relieved to discover that when I finally did ask her to get involved, she was excited to do so.

I was also very fortunate to secure a remarkable musician by the name of Jessy Ribordy to write the score for the film. I have been acquainted with Jessy for some time as a follower of his music, and a lot of the music I was listening to when writing the script was from one of his bands, The River Empires. I approached Jessy in June to see if he would be interested in scoring my film, and was thrilled when he quickly jumped on board. In the months that followed, we worked together to develop a sound based on a large collection of reference cues and inspirations that I had collected for this project over the last few years.

Given that I had such a specific vision for the film, there were been a number of tasks usually performed by other crew members that I decided to take on myself. One of the most significant of these, given my primary role as director, was that of cinematography. There are a number of factors that contributed to this decision, and it is one that I felt would ultimately be best for the film. My directorial approach to *Stray* was as organic as I could practically achieve, meaning that very little was rigidly prescribed apart from the script and some basic blocking on set. Beyond that, my desire was for the action to take on a somewhat spontaneous flow, with the camera reacting to the action rather than anticipating it, an approach concerned more with verisimilitude than dramatic precision. While putting myself behind the camera put me at risk of getting distracted with the technical aspects of operating and thereby taking my attention away from the actors' performances, I felt confident that, given my high level of comfort and experience behind the camera, there was more to be gained from this approach than potentially lost. I

also place a very high value on efficiency on set, and being behind the camera allowed me an intimacy with the action that provided the opportunity to adapt to changes or prompt actors to redo specific lines quickly and without the need to stop and start the camera rolling again.

Script Analysis

Stray is a linear narrative that follows the life of the titular character over the period of a few days. As the writer and director, it was my goal (as much as possible) to immerse the viewer in the world of *Stray* in a way that encourages them to disengage from their preconceived notions of the characters on screen and connect with them on a human level.

The film opens with a shot of a stray dog trotting down the street, which I shot on a Steadicam with the camera at eye level, arcing around the dog as it moved down the street and eating garbage. The opening serves a number of purposes, but perhaps the most important is the way it functions to establish the camera's relationship with the subject matter and the overall tone of the film. Temporally speaking, the opening shot is quite long (almost a full minute), lingering on the dog and studying it—the rhythm of its gait, the texture of its fur, and the look in its eyes. The score, at this point a mellow drone, fades up slowly over the duration of the shot. The shot establishes the pensive tone of the film and also establishes with the audience that the camera is going to take on the role of the interested but impartial observer.

Additionally, opening the film with the dog serves to initiate the process of defamiliarizing the main character, *Stray*. Following the Steadicam shot of the dog comes the exterior of *Stray*'s house, over which the title card reading “*Stray*” appears, then

cutting to an interior shot of Stray watching TV. The intended purpose of this sequence is for the audience to identify the ontological otherness of the dog, which is fortified when the title card appears on screen, and then adapt that identification to the character of Stray. In the opening shot, audiences might expect that the film is going to be a story about a stray dog. However, when the camera cuts inside the house to Stray, the ontological otherness of the dog transforms into an ideological otherness. The sense of otherness established by the dog is bestowed onto Stray, but Stray's ontological affinity with the audience requires that his otherness be interpreted in an ideological sense. Hence this sequence acts to both allow the audience to connect with Stray's ontological sameness, and to establish an ideological otherness, defamiliarizing his character and setting up the barrier that the film will then attempt to dismantle.

Finally, the opening Steadicam shot of the dog is one of the only two shots in which any type of stabilizing platform is used. The other is the closing shot, in which the camera performs a similar arc around Skye as she runs down the street away from her house. I will discuss the implications of the closing shot at the end of this script analysis, but practically speaking, these two shots serve to stylistically bookend the film.

Inside the house, Stray is flipping channels on the television, where he stumbles across the dancing that so entrances him. The television is one of Stray's few points of contact with society that is not somehow affected by his otherness. The television speaks the same words to Stray as it does to Skye; that they may understand them differently is of no concern to Stray. Hence the television is a place of safety and acceptance unlike anything Stray experiences out in the real world, and is the medium that fosters his initial connection with Skye.

When Stray leaves the house and is riding his BMX bike to the basketball court, a sense of idleness and independence is apparent in his behavior. In general, Stray operates on nobody's schedule but his own, and he does not ride in a straight line along the pathway like he might be expected to, instead following his own path. The shot of Stray riding across the bridge is included in this sequence to foreshadow the shot later in the film when Skye is driving Stray home and they cross back over the bridge and into the lower income area of town. When Stray arrives at the basketball game, it is apparent that he has missed the start of the game, but it is of no concern to him, and he joins the game as though it were perfectly natural to do so, again reinforcing that he operates on his schedule alone.

Stray's first contact with Skye is motivated through his identification with Skye's dance, which is similar to the one he had just been watching on the TV. While the two share a moment of visual connection, the chain-link fence of the basketball court stands between them and is always in shot, representing the socio-cultural barrier that remains between the two of them. Back at the house, Stray attempts to revisit the moment by flicking through the channels to find more dancing, but instead lands on a Western movie that recalls another, darker memory—that of the death of his brother.

The scene from the Western that plays on the television is from the 1938 film *Billy the Kid Returns*, and it depicts a posse chasing Billy the Kid on horseback (with lots of guns being fired) until they have him cornered on the edge of a cliff that overhangs the river. Billy, knowing there is no other way, plunges off the cliff and into the river with his horse, making his escape. The scene bears a number of similarities to the story that Stray will later relate to Skye about his brother, although instead of a heroic ending, Stray's

story ends in tragedy. This is also where Stray's toy gun is introduced—the gun which will later be revealed as the one that got his brother shot. Both the scene from the film and the introduction of the gun serve to build tension in the film through their implicit foreshadowing of what is to come. While it is just a toy and will never actually be fired, Stray's gun acts as a "Chekhov's gun" of sorts, and I anticipate that audiences will subconsciously begin to expect that it is going to play a significant role in the way the story unfolds.

The use of the Western film in this scene, if one considers the historical role of the Western in American society, adds an interesting social commentary. Generally speaking, throughout the history of American cinema the Western has played the role of social yardstick, "the vehicle which America uses to explain itself to itself" (Langford 26). In a typical Western, the socially responsible hero rids society of the outsiders, whether they be outlaws, "savages," or otherwise. As Barry Langford explains, the Western has been significantly influential in shaping the national social ideology:

The Western's imaginative reinscription of history has played an important part in helping constitute what is sometimes called the American "social imaginary;" or, in a different disciplinary vocabulary, that Westerns have provided American audiences with, in Jurgen Habermas' phrase, "interpretive systems that guarantee social identity". (Habermas qtd. in Langford 26).

Among many of the possible interpretations of the *Billy the Kid* scene used in *Stray*, is one that reinforces Stray's social position as the savage alien who must be expelled from society by some brave and virtuous hero. This adds some interesting context for the way this process plays out in *Stray*.

After Stray wakes and finds no food in his house, he rides to the gas station to eat and bathe. Obviously this scene serves as the vehicle for connecting Stray and Skye in a

setting that is natural for them both to appear in, but in terms of character development it also establishes an important rhythm of Stray's life—namely that he systematically fulfills his basic daily needs in a way that is societally unacceptable, but seemingly necessary. Stray's apparent level of comfort and efficiency in the gas station theft establishes that he has done this many times before. This also acts as a precursor for Stray and Skye's night on the town, to some degree normalizing his behavior to make it more acceptable to the audience and thereby lowering the barrier for an emotional connection to take place between the character and the audience as the film progresses. This is also the point in the script where the theme of relational superficiality is most noticeably introduced. Stray's efficacy in dealing with his confrontation with the attendant plays to Skye's fascination with street smarts and tough looks, and her imagination of how adventurous Stray's life must be. To Stray, the encounter offers the opportunity to relate to someone who normally wouldn't acknowledge him, and to find out more about the dancing that so interests him; to Skye it offers the thrill of pushing the boundaries and exploring some unknown, fantastical territory. Despite their differing intentions, it is a connection that gratifies something in both of them. Thus, they want more.

When Stray returns to his house, a short but very important sequence of events unfolds. First, the dog from the opening sequence is reintroduced, upon which the audience may begin to wonder if the dog is actually going to play a part in the story after all—which of course it does not. Rather, as I discussed in an earlier chapter, the dog exists as an object of Stray's empathy, the demonstration of which may also begin to allow the audience to strengthen their own sense of empathy toward Stray. Second, just as the audience is thinking about what a nice guy Stray is to feed the poor, stray dog, he delivers

his line in Mandarin. This is intended to throw the audience off balance and force them to completely reassess what they were thinking of Stray. This tactic is based on my assumption that most audiences will not be able to identify Peter (who plays Stray) as Chinese, and will likely have reached an unconscious conclusion that he is of Latino origin, just as most people do in Peter's everyday life. The Mandarin also suggests that the dog is the only character in the film with whom Stray feels enough affinity to share the truth of his identity, as this is not revealed to Skye or any other character in the film.

Moving into the house, the third cue in the sequence is the exposition of Stray's living situation to a greater degree than has thus far been revealed in the script. Prior to this point, the audience has seen only the room that Stray sleeps in, and the empty kitchen. This visual exposition serves to elucidate the depth of Stray's poverty, as well as to cue the audience to the absence of Stray's family. Finally, Stray gives his remaining jerky to a fellow squatter—an additional act of empathy, this time directed at a person.

Now that Stray has made a tangible connection with Skye (at the gas station), when he returns to the park to watch her practice again, the fence is no longer between them. My intention with the dancing scene here is to imbue a feeling of transcendence. This is the first time that Stray and Skye have made the choice to spend time together, and the walls between them are coming down (signified in part by the absence of the fence between them). The pre-lap audio edit is intended to carry some of that transcendence into the conversation that follows, as I want the audience to feel that the moment hasn't completely passed. The conversation is important for a number of reasons, the most notable being that it reinforces Skye's fantastical view of Stray's world to the point that she wants to join him for an evening and explore his world. Additionally,

it gives a glimpse into Skye's perspective on socio-cultural roles, and her frustration with the expectations that society puts on her.

The montage scene that follows the conversation in the park (riding in the streets, and playing around and stealing things from the stores) provides a change of pace for the audience. Formally speaking, the style of this sequence differs significantly from the rest of the film, with faster paced editing and a more predominant musical score. The playful tone of the action and dialog serve to provide a moment of respite from the seriousness of the film thus far, and gives the audience an opportunity to step back and simply enjoy watching these two young people having fun and connecting with each other. As I mentioned previously, my intention with this scene is that as the audience watches Stray and Skye connecting, their own affinity with the characters will deepen.

The scene in the Goodwill, when Stray steals a shirt off the rack and hangs his old one in its place, offers an opportunity to highlight each character's wardrobe and color palette. To this point in the film, Stray has been wearing a plain gray tank top, denoting his lack of emotion and social detachment, as well as the coldness of his existence. In the mind of the audience, the moral acceptability of Stray's lifestyle may also fall into a somewhat gray area, just as in the example of *Rosetta* discussed in Chapter Two. Stray's behavior, while illegal, is based on his need to survive rather than a desire to be malicious or rebellious. The shirt that Stray chooses off the rack and changes into is a light green color, denoting a newfound freshness in how he looks at the world. Green also sits opposite on the color wheel to red—the color that will soak his shirt in the closing scene. While Stray's wardrobe consists of largely muted tones, Skye's is made up primarily of white and other bright colors; white suggesting a perceived purity in her ideology and a

higher plane of socio-cultural standing, and the bright colors connoting both a vitality and naivety in her outlook on life.

The energy of the montage scene shifts abruptly into perhaps the most melancholy scene of the film (apart from the closing scene), the conversation between Stray and Skye at the overlook. The location for this scene is an elevated platform built on an old bridge support beside the river in downtown Waco, which, ironically, is painted with a large mural of Martin Luther King Jr.—although the mural is not included in the *mise en scène*. While the earlier conversation in the park was largely about Skye, this conversation focuses much more on Stray. Stray has to this point been somewhat hesitant to share anything of depth with Skye, but his inhibitions have been lowered by his sense that they are making a genuine connection, false as that may be. It is in this scene that the significance of the toy gun is revealed, and Stray tells the story of the death of his brother, which will eventually share a number of commonalities with Stray's own death. The status of the toy gun at this point moves from prop to symbol. While previously its connection with the story was incidental, it now represents a tragedy of misunderstanding—one that may have played out differently under different cultural circumstances. This serves to foreshadow the tragedy of the closing scene and postures the audience to respond to Stray's death in this context.

While Stray and Skye had a lot of fun together in their night on the town, the strength of their connection is put to the test when Skye drives Stray home. It doesn't take long for Skye to begin realizing that her visions of adventure and freedom were little more than a grand illusion. It is during this sequence that they drive back over the bridge into Stray's part of town. The river acts as both a symbol of their impending relational

separation and as a reference to the common idiom, “the other side of the tracks,” which refers to a physical boundary between socio-economic classes. Skye also makes the mistake of showing Stray where she lives, a decision she will soon regret.

Later that day, the camera takes its leave from Stray and focuses solely on Skye in the classroom, the only time in the film that Stray is not in the proximity of the action. Skye is back in the system now, engulfed by the institution, being lectured about something that she doesn’t care about. Her mind is occupied with the conflict between her heart and her head. When she leaves the classroom and is joined by her friend, Skye’s inner conflict is given voice, but her friend simply laughs it off dismissively, saying “of course that would happen to you,” as though she has been characteristically struck by misfortune. Skye feels stuck between a rock and a hard place, and as such her mechanism of defense is to blow Stray off and hope to simply move on with life as though their encounter had never happened.

At this point in the film, everything begins to unravel for Stray. Back at his house, Stray finds that the power cord he was using to leech from the neighbor has been cut, which motivates the arrival of the police but also represents the severing of Stray’s only non-judgmental connection with the society that he longs to understand. When the police arrive, instead of getting on his bike and leaving immediately, he goes back into the house to warn the others and retrieve his gun, which further reinforces its sentimental value to him. When Stray flees the house, his struggle with the cop serves to bring the gun into play again, but more importantly, he loses his bicycle. Piece by piece, everything that Stray has is being stripped from him. He is now alone, fleeing on foot with nothing but a plastic gun and nowhere to go.

After fleeing the house, there is a brief shot of Stray walking through an empty lot with a flock of black birds rising into the air ahead him. This shot is important to growing the tension of the sequence. As Stray walks through the empty lot, the score swells with a foreboding tone, and Stray's gait exhibits a determination and purpose as yet unseen in his character. He has made up his mind about something, but the audience does not yet know what. The birds represent the aforementioned stripping away of what little Stray has, but also the swell of his anger and renewed determination. My hope is that the visuals in this shot, combined with the score, will work to generate an intense feeling of tension and suspense akin to the scene in *Short Term 12* when Grace rides her bicycle to Jayden's house after she finds out that Jayden's father has come to take her home and will almost certainly abuse her.

The final (and most important) scene of the film takes place at Skye's house. This scene attempts to bring many of the thematic elements of the film together in a dramatic and shocking way. The tension has been built in the preceding scene with Stray's confrontation with the police followed by the parking lot shot, so when Stray's hand raps on Skye's front door, my expectation is that the audience will be getting a little nervous about what is going to happen. When Skye's father, the same police officer from earlier in the film, shows up at the house while Stray is waiting outside, Stray's response is both a product of, and a rebellion against, all that his experience in life has taught him. Stray's initial response is to cower in the corner, much like a cornered stray would do. However, when Stray is called out of hiding by the officer, he decides that running can no longer be an option. His life has been spent in perpetual motion, always running, hoping to stay one step ahead of the catcher—and enough is enough. When Stray steps out to face the

policeman, my intention is for this action to represent a moment of defiance rather than surrender. The shooting itself may be interpreted any number of ways, from a tragic mistake to an act of deliberate and egregious institutionalized violence. At it's most basic, however, it represents the final and most tragic misunderstanding of all—one that perhaps would not have happened had Stray's socio-cultural status been different.

An important aspect of this scene, as I have discussed in this paper already, is the inner conflict that Skye experiences after Stray's death. When Skye's father is asking her if she knows Stray, her answer is "yes" as long as her gaze is directed at Stray's body on the ground. However, when Skye's eyes are directed back at her father, who symbolizes the ideology of the societal institution to which Skye belongs, she is no longer able to answer. It is in part Skye's realization of her own proclivity to look at the person as a social position rather than a fellow human that motivates her to break away from her father and run down the street in a state of shock. As Skye stumbles down the street, the camera at this point perform the same action as it did in the opening shot, mounted on a Steadicam and arcing slowly around Skye from back to front as she moves down the street. This shot bookends the film in a formal sense through the mirroring of technique, but also thematically serves to connect Skye with the central themes of the film in a way that, to this point, has been reserved for Stray. My intention here is not necessarily to suggest that Skye is in fact the stray after all; rather, much like I have tried to do with the film in its entirety, the closing shot throws Skye's standing into question, prodding the audience to consider how the events they have just witnessed change the way they understand the actions of each character in the film. Finally, the arc of the camera may subtly hint at the potential for the cyclical nature of the story, suggesting that even though

Stray's life is now over, the same story is played out repeatedly in the lives of thousands of others just like him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stray Screenplay

STRAY

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Scene 1 - Opening

EXT. URBAN STREETS. DAY

A scruffy looking DOG trots down the street.

The dog runs past a dilapidated house. The yard is badly overgrown and looks like it hasn't been cared for in a long time. The front door is boarded shut, and the windows are either boarded up or broken.

TITLE OVER: STRAY

CUT TO:

INT. HOUSE. DAY

STRAY, early twenties, sits leaning against the wall in an empty room. He faces an old TV, a cheap knock-off brand. He is flipping through channels - news, sports, weather. Nothing interests him. He flips some more. Dancing. This perks his interest. There is something entrancing about the movements of the dancers, and Stray is transfixed, drawn into a fantasy. He soaks himself in the images.

Off-screen, shouts shatter the moment. Two drunk guys stumble into the room, fighting and yelling about something. Stray quickly shuts off the TV. The fighting drunks have fallen over and are wrestling on the floor. Deciding it's best to leave, Stray steps over them and heads for the back door.

Scene 2 - First eyes on Skye

EXT. URBAN STREETS. DAY

Stray rides his BMX bike casually down the street, hopping curbs and looking like he's in no hurry. Judging by his surroundings, it seems clear that Stray lives in a pretty rough part of town. He rides over a bridge.

EXT. BALL COURT. DUSK

Arriving at an urban basketball court, Stray joins in a game. He seems pretty comfortable with the other guys on the court, but they exchange little more than a casual greeting before getting on with the game.

While playing, Stray's eye is caught by activity off the court. Nearby, a group of college students practicing a ballet performance in the park. It's similar to the scene Stray was watching on TV earlier, and he stops for a closer look. The girl in the center, SKYE, performs with particular grace, and Stray is taken with her.

Skye notices Stray's unwavering gaze, and they share a brief moment before the performance continues. Stray is struck in the back with a basketball - the boys are willing him back into the game. He concedes.

Scene 3 - Back at the house

EXT. URBAN STREETS. NIGHT

Stray rides home, all alone on empty streets.

INT. HOUSE. NIGHT

Arriving at his house, Stray sneaks quietly inside, going back to the empty room with the TV. He turns the TV back on and starts flipping channels again, but the dancing is over. He lands on a movie channel, and an old western is playing. It's a scene from *Billy the Kid Returns*. A posse is chasing Billy on horseback. There's lots of shooting.

Stray reaches under his bedding and pulls out a toy pistol. It's been well used, the plastic cracking and dirt lining every crevice. Stray turns the gun over slowly in his hands, examining every contour. On the TV screen, Billy is cornered on top of a cliff that overhangs the river, the posse closing in. With nowhere to go, Billy jumps his horse off the cliff and into the river. Stray raises the pistol, taking aim at the screen and pulling the trigger. CLICK. The movie keeps playing. It's almost as if Stray had expected to be able to shoot the posse through the screen. Lowering the gun, he stuffs it back in his bedding. He turns off the TV, lays back, and closes his eyes...

CUT TO:

INT. HOUSE. DAY

Stray wakes with a start. It's light outside now. Picking himself up, he heads to the kitchen to find some food, but there's nothing to be found. Without bothering to close the pantry door, he heads for the street.

Scene 4 - Gas station

EXT. GAS STATION. DAY

Stray rides up to a gas station, drops his bike in the gutter, and heads inside.

INT. GAS STATION. DAY - CONTINUOUS

Surveying the aisles, Stray grabs a few snacks and pockets them slyly. He heads for the bathroom, grabbing a disposable razor off the shelf on his way.

Inside the bathroom, he scoffs a couple of twinkies, throwing the wrappers in an open trash can. Splashing water on his face, he opens the razor and straightens his hair. This is clearly a routine he's familiar with. When he's done, Stray heads back out, where the gas station attendant is waiting to use the bathroom. Stray avoids his gaze as they pass. Heading for the door, Stray is stopped in his tracks by Skye, the girl from the park. She's in conversation with a FRIEND, but quickly recognizes Stray.

SKYE

I know you. From the park. You were checking me out.

Stray is caught off guard. He knows he needs to leave, but it's not often that strangers address him with anything but disdain.

STRAY

Yeah. You were doing that chicken dance.

SKYE

(Laughs)

Close enough. Are you from around here?

STRAY

Not really.

He is interrupted by the gas station attendant, who has come out of the bathroom holding Stray's discarded wrappers.

ATTENDANT

Were you planning on paying for this?

A moment of hesitation, but Stray plays it cool. Skye is interested to see where this goes.

STRAY

It's not mine, why would I?

The attendant doesn't like his attitude.

ATTENDANT

What's in your pockets?

Stray smugly turns his pockets out. They are empty. The attendant is pissed, but there's not much he can do.

ATTENDANT (CONT'D)

Piss off, man.

Stray grins smugly and walks outside. Skye is intrigued.

EXT. GAS STATION. DAY (LATER)

Skye and her friend are leaving the gas station, laughing and chatting about something inconsequential. As Skye walks around to her side of the SUV, she is surprised by Stray, who is leaning coolly against his bike eating from a bag of beef jerky. Skye notices and thinks it's kind of funny.

SKYE
(Playfully)
Are you a criminal? Should I call
the cops?

STRAY
(shrugs)
If you want to.

SKYE
(laughs)
OK.

STRAY
(offering the jerky)
Want some?

She does.

SKYE
Doesn't accepting stolen goods make
me complicit in the crime?

Stray just shrugs.

STRAY
That dance you were doing - where'd
you learn to do that?

SKYE
That's what I do, I'm a dancer. At
least I'm studying to be one,
anyway.

Skye's friend gives her the come-along.

STRAY
At school?

SKYE
Yeah... I've gotta run, but we're
practicing in the park all week.
You could swing by again, if you
want.

Stray doesn't respond. Skye gives him an awkward smile and takes off. Stray can't help but stick around long enough to watch her drive away.

Scene 5 - Meet the housemates

EXT. HOUSE. DAY

In the back yard of Stray's house, a scruffy dog (perhaps the same one from the opening) lays in the shade. His ears prick up as Stray rides his bike around the side of the house into the yard. Stray sits beside the dog and pulls the packet of jerky from his pocket and offers some to the dog, who accepts it eagerly.

STRAY

(Speaking in mandarin)

I'm going to have to move on soon,
friend. You'll be on your own
again, but I think you'll be ok.

INT. HOUSE. DAY - CONTINUOUS

Stray enters the house. As he makes his way through, we can see that it's pretty bare. Nothing on the walls, no appliances, no furniture. But for what it lacks in decor, it makes up for in squalor. Piles of trash occupy the corners, and old renovation supplies lay around in various places - remnants of a time when someone actually cared. In one of the rooms, a young man lays asleep on the floor, dressed in filthy clothes and surrounded by trash and beer cans. A girl lays draped over him. Stray tosses the bag of jerky at them. It hits him in the chest, but he doesn't move.

Scene 6 - Conversation in the park

EXT. PARK. DAY

It's late afternoon. Stray rides back to the park, this time going past the ball court where the same group of guys are playing. Skye's practice is already underway. Stray hangs back, watching from a distance as Skye dances gracefully in the golden light of the setting sun. It's a magical moment.

SKYE (PRE-LAP)

I've always loved dance.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARK. NIGHT (LATER)

The performance is over. It's dark now, and Stray and Skye sit alone in the park.

SKYE (CONT'D)
It's the only thing I've ever
really cared about, you know?

Actually, Stray doesn't know.

SKYE (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
It's kind of like music... it has
this amazing quality about it that
just sort of transcends life, you
know?

STRAY
Yeah, that's cool.

SKYE
When we dance, we're all the same.

A moment of silence. It's a peaceful evening, and they take
it in.

SKYE (CONT'D)
What about you? What do you like to
do?

STRAY
(shrugs playfully)
I dance a little bit.

SKYE
Yeah? Show me what you've got!

STRAY
(laughs)
Only when the moment's right.

SKYE
(playfully gesturing to an
imaginary stage on the
ground)
C'mon! Go!

STRAY
I don't perform on demand.

Skye pauses, looks off into the distance.

SKYE
That must be kinda nice.

STRAY
What?

SKYE
To get to say no sometimes.

STRAY
(scoffs)
Nobody tells me what to do.

Skye stares deep into Stray's eyes. They seem to pierce his facade and reach down into his soul.

SKYE
I can imagine.

For the first time in the conversation, Stray allows his eyes to lock with Skye's.

MUSIC UP: Happy, energetic music starts building.

CUT TO:

Scene 7 - The Night is Young

EXT. URBAN STREETS. NIGHT

Stray rides down the street, Skye standing behind him on the peds, holding on tight, the wind in her hair. Skye is exhilarated. She's never really stepped out like this before. To Stray, the fact that someone wants to see his life is a completely foreign feeling, but it's one that he could get used to. Especially if it means having a beautiful girl's arms around his neck.

Skye throws her hands in the air and howls with glee into the night.

INT. GOODWILL. NIGHT

Stray and Skye stride into a goodwill. Skye is high on adrenaline and Stray is warming up a bit.

They're having fun, trying on different outfits and goofing off. They dance together. Turns out Stray has some moves after all.

Stray looks around to make sure nobody is watching and that he's out of sight of the security cameras, then discreetly slips his shirt off, pulling on another one that he got from the rack. He puts his old shirt on the hanger and hangs it back on the rack where the other one was.

They head for the street.

INT. GROCERY STORE. NIGHT

They're cruising the aisles again. Stray enjoys feeling like an alpha dog, and he's strutting his stuff.

They pass through the toiletries. Stray grabs a toothbrush and toothpaste off the shelf, cracking it open and brushing his teeth as they walk. Skye thinks it's hilarious. He tops it off by grabbing a deodorant stick, applying some to his armpits, and putting the bottle back on the shelf.

In the grocery aisle, Stray grabs some packets of jerky off the shelf.

STRAY

I practically live on this stuff.

SKYE

Get the peppered, I love that stuff!

Stray folds the jerky packets up and stuffs them in his pocket.

STRAY

(grabs a bag of chips,
hands them to Skye)

These are my favorite.

They walk out of the brightly lit grocery store into the dark of the night.

END MUSIC

Scene 8 - At the overlook

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTLOOK. NIGHT

Stray and Skye sit up on an overlook, eating their jerky and chips and looking out over the city.

SKYE

It's nice up here.

STRAY

I used to come up here all the time with my brother.

SKYE

You have a brother? Where is he now?

STRAY
(pausing)
He's dead.

Skye wasn't expecting that. She tries to think of something to say, but can't find the words. But Stray is ready to talk.

STRAY (CONT'D)
He was messing with some friends,
playing with a toy gun. The cops
showed up and thought it was a real
gun so they started shooting at
him. Chased him to the river right
over there. They got him cornered
on the bank and he tried to swim
across, but he was shot in the leg
so he couldn't swim real well.

Stray pauses for a moment, remembering.

STRAY (CONT'D)
I stopped coming here after that.

SKYE
Why'd you come back now?

Stray gives Skye a meaningful look, but just shrugs. They both take a moment to contemplate.

STRAY
I dove in the river every day for
three weeks before I found his gun.
It's the only thing I have left
from my family.

It's a powerful moment, and Skye knows it.

SKYE
Thanks for bringing me.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARK. NIGHT

Skye's SUV sits alone in the parking lot. The sky is just starting to lighten. Morning is coming. Stray and Skye ride up.

SKYE
(gesturing at the bike)
Throw that in the back, I'll drive
you home.

STRAY
Nah it's cool, I'll ride.

SKYE
No, I mean it. It's been a long
night. Let me drive you.

Stray concedes, but he's a little uncomfortable.

Scene 9 - The drive home

INT. SKYE'S CAR. DAWN

Skye is driving, Stray in the passenger seat. Riding in a nice car isn't something Stray is accustomed to..

STRAY
Sweet ride.

SKYE
(scoffs)
Thanks. Apparently it has a great
safety rating.

Stray plays with the power windows.

STRAY
Take a left up here.

SKYE
Really? That's my street! Do you
live here?

STRAY
No, further down.

They drive by a nice looking suburban home.

SKYE
(pointing)
That's my place right there.

Stray looks, but doesn't speak.

They drive over a bridge, and the neighborhood starts to look a little different. Run down houses, bars on windows. A scruffy looking stray dog, the same one from earlier, crosses the street in front of them. This is nothing like Skye's neighborhood, and she's a little uncomfortable. She wasn't expecting to be coming over here.

STRAY
Turn left up here.

She does so hesitantly. It doesn't look like a great street.

STRAY (CONT'D)
(pointing)
This one.

SKYE
This is your house?

She's not impressed.

STRAY
It's not mine, I just live there.

SKYE
Whose is it?

STRAY
(shrugs)
Dunno. It's empty. We just stay there.

SKYE
Who is "We"?

STRAY
Me. And whoever else decides to stay there.

It dawns on Skye that Stray is a squatter. That puts a bit of a different spin on her night of fun.

SKYE
Whoever decides to stay there?

STRAY
Yeah.

Silence. She's done talking now. She's ready to go.

SKYE
OK. Well I better get home. I guess I'll see ya later.

STRAY
(getting out)
Yeah. Thanks for the ride.

Scene 10 - Skye's College

INT. CLASSROOM. DAY

Skye is sitting in class, exhausted from a long night with Stray. The professor is talking, but she's not listening.

EXT. UNIVERSITY. DAY

Skye is walking back to her car. Behind her is a sprawling, beautiful campus.

FREIND (O.S.)

Hey!

Skye turns to see her friend from the gas station running to catch up.

FRIEND (CONT'D)

What happened to you last night?

SKYE

Not much. Went around with that guy from the park for a while.

FRIEND

(cheekily)

Oh yeah? How was it?

SKYE

It was fun. Turns out he's homeless though.

FRIEND

(laughs)

Are you serious? Of course that would happen to you.

SKYE

I know, right? He was so nice though.

FRIEND

Oh my god, you can't be serious! Really?

They round a corner. Stray is leaning coolly against his bike, waiting by the footpath. He sees them and starts riding over.

SKYE

Oh, man...

FRIEND

What?

Friend follows Skye's gaze and sees Stray.

FRIEND (CONT'D)

Damn. Have fun with that.

Friend peaces out. Stray reaches Skye, noticing that the friend took off.

STRAY
What's up?

SKYE
Not much. What are you doing here?

STRAY
Just hanging out. Been waiting for you.

SKYE
Why?

Stray has come to a stop in front of her now.

STRAY
(shrugs)
Why not?

Skye is stuck. She really doesn't want to hang out with a homeless man, but she's seen a side of him that goes beyond his circumstances.

SKYE
I had fun last night.

STRAY
Me too.

An awkward silence.

SKYE
OK, well... gotta get to another class. Bye.

STRAY
Bye.

Skye begins to walk away, then stops. She's kind of pissed.

SKYE
Hey do me a favor, will you? Don't do this again. It's creepy.

STRAY
(surprised)
OK.

Stray is not sure what else to say. He sits on his bike and watches Skye walk away.

Scene 11 - Cops!

EXT/INT. HOUSE. DAY

The dog lays in the shade again. Stray rides into the yard, but there's no treat this time.

Stray sits on the floor of his empty room, back against the wall. The TV is off. He reaches out to switch it on, but it's not working. He tries a few more times, and checks the power cable. It's connected to an extension cord that runs out the window.

Stray jumps up and heads down the hall, stopping at one of the doorways to ask another SQUATTER what happened.

STRAY

What happened to the power?

The squatter just shrugs. Even if he knows, he doesn't care.

Stray heads outside and follows the extension cord away from the house and under the fence to the neighbor's house. The cord has been cut at the fence line. Right as he turns to go back inside, he hears tires on the gravel out front. Peeking around the corner of the house, he sees the front of a car. Cops. He races back into the house to get his stuff and warn the others.

Heading to his room, he whispers urgently to the others to get out.

STRAY (CONT'D)

(whispering)

Cops!

There's a bang on the door. Everyone starts to scatter in a panic. A COP at the door is announcing something, but nobody is listening. The door has a large glass panel, and the cop is peering in. Stray can't get to his stuff without being seen, but he's not leaving without it. The cop sees him.

COP

Hey! Come on out! This is private property, and you're trespassing!

Stray races over to his stuff, pulling the pistol out and stuffing it in the back of his pants. He rushes out the back of the house and jumps on his bike, heading for the street. As he comes around to the front of the house, he is confronted by the cop, who knocks him off the bike and tries to grab him. Stray's gun falls to the ground, and the cop sees it. Stray lashes out, kicking and wriggling out of the cops grasp.

Grabbing the gun, he takes off running through the neighboring yard to get away.

EXT. PARKING LOT. DAY

Stray is walking briskly into the sunset, determination in his stride. The parking lot is full of noisy, black birds. As Stray walks through them the birds take to the air, darkening the sky and filling the air with a deafening rush of flapping wings.

Scene 12 - Closing

EXT. SKYE'S HOUSE. DAY

A hand beats on a door. It's Stray, and he's standing out front of Skye's house. It's the last light of day.

A woman, Sky's MOTHER, answers the door. She doesn't say anything, just looks at Stray suspiciously. He doesn't look to be in great shape.

STRAY
Is Skye here?

MOTHER
What do you want?

STRAY
I need to speak with her.

Mother hesitates for a moment.

MOTHER
Wait here.

She closes the door.

INT. SKYE'S HOUSE. DAY

Mother walks through the house.

MOTHER
(calling)
Skye!

EXT. SKYE'S HOUSE. DAY

Stray is waiting uncomfortably on the front porch. He hears a car coming up the driveway, and the garage door opens. Stray turns to look. It's a cop car. He panics and looks for a place to hide, but there's nowhere to go. He sinks into the shadows of the recessed doorway.

The cop has noticed Stray on the front porch, and gets slowly out of the car, looking suspiciously in the direction of the front door. It's the same cop that chased Stray from his home earlier. He can't see Stray, who is still hiding in the entryway, but he knows he's there.

COP

Can I help you?

Stray doesn't respond. The cop is suspicious, and rests his hand on his gun.

COP (CONT'D)

Hey!

Stray knows he's been outed, and steps out and into the light, turning to face the cop, standing tall. A look of recognition dawns on the cop's face. A look of determination comes over Stray's face. The cop remembers the struggle they had at Stray's house, and pulls his gun.

COP

Get your hands up and step away
from the door.

Stray steps down onto the footpath, but doesn't raise his hands. He turns to face the cop, hands hanging by his side. The toy gun can be seen bulging under his shirt.

COP (CONT'D)

(forcefully)

Hands in the air!

INT. SKYE'S HOUSE. DAY

MOTHER

Skye, someone's at the door for you.

Skye appears from the bathroom, where she's been working on her hair.

SKYE

Who?

MOTHER

(Disapprovingly)

You tell me.

Skye knows exactly who it is. She's not impressed that he is now showing up at her house, but she goes to the door anyway.

EXT. SKYE'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Skye opens the door to see Stray facing off with the cop, his gun pointing right at Stray's chest.

SKYE

Dad! What --

COP

(cutting her off)

Skye, get back in the house!

He turns his attention back to Stray. He's losing his cool.

COP (CONT'D)

(screaming)

Get your hands in the air!

Stray stands tall, looking the cop right in the eye, his hand hanging right by the pistol. After a few painful moments, he starts raising his hands. The cop thinks he's going for the gun. BANG. Stray's body shudders with the shock of the bullet striking him in the chest. He takes a step back, a look of surprise on his face, and looks down at his chest. Blood starts pouring out of a bullet hole right over his heart, soaking his shirt. His hands are partially raised in surrender. He never got them all the way up. Skye screams and runs towards Stray. A look of shock comes over the cop's face. He just made a big mistake.

Stray looks at Skye, and turns to run to the street. He takes a couple of weak steps before his legs buckle underneath him. He lands face-down on the footpath, a bloody exit wound in his back. A pool of blood starts forming underneath him.

Skye has reached Stray now, and she drops to her knees. The cop snaps out of his moment of shock. Skye reaches out to touch Stray's dying face.

SKYE

Oh my god.

COP

Skye, get back!

Skye ignores him. Her father grabs her and starts pulling her away.

COP (CONT'D)

Get away from him!!

SKYE
(struggling, starting to
cry)
What the fuck is wrong with you?!

He lets go of her. She stumbles back from him, eyes fixed on Stray's body.

COP
What are you doing? Do you know who
this is?

Skye isn't responding. He grabs her by the shoulders, trying to force her to look at him.

COP (CONT'D)
Do you know who this is?

SKYE
(vacantly, still staring
at the body)
Yes.

COP
Who is he?

Skye turns her gaze to her father. It's a moment of realization.

SKYE
I don't know.

Skye is deep in shock now. She breaks away from her father's grasp, and runs into the street. Behind her, Skye's mother has also come outside. They are both calling for her to come back, but she can't hear them. She stumbles down the street away from her house, completely overcome with emotion. All she wants to do is get away. As she starts to run, she touches her hand to her face, smearing blood down her cheek.

THE END

CHAPTER FIVE

Stray

Below is an online link for the film *Stray*.

<https://vimeo.com/126416075>

Password: STRAY

Brynn Sankey. *Stray*. 2015.

CHAPTER SIX

Self-Critique and Analysis

Pre-Production and Production

Principal photography for *Stray* took place on weekends between October 4, 2015, and November 9, 2015. Thanks in large part to the efforts of my producer Kristina Beevers, this was a relatively smooth process. As with all film production, however, there were issues and obstacles encountered along the way that influenced the film in unexpected and often positive ways, and I will attempt to outline and discuss the most pertinent of these later in the chapter.

Once locations and crew were secured (a process for which I provided guidelines and feedback, but was largely taken care of by Kristina), pre-production for me consisted mostly of planning performances, blocking, and camera placement. Given that I was also going to be operating the camera, I forwent some of the usual steps in the process such as storyboarding and creating lighting diagrams as I already knew very specifically what I wanted to see, and felt confident with my own mental visualizations. One of the purposes of storyboards is to visually communicate to other members of the crew what a scene should look like, but since I didn't have this need, I felt the activity was in many ways redundant. Beyond this, however, it was important for thematic reasons that the camera always be reactive rather than proactive. Without the luxury of multiple rehearsals on location, it was very difficult to know exactly how a scene was going to play out, and as such, storyboards would have been somewhat limited in their usefulness. I had a general

sense of how the action would flow and how each actor would respond to it, and planned how I would make the camera respond to those cues accordingly; but it was impossible to know with any precision ahead of time. I welcomed this ambiguity with the knowledge that it would only enhance the verisimilitude of the action and allow the camera to respond just as the eye of a bystander with no foreknowledge of the scene would respond.

As I discussed earlier in this paper, we had planned to shoot the film with as much narrative linearity as possible, and for the most part were successful in scheduling it this way. While the need to be flexible in responding to logistical challenges forced us to move things around more than we had hoped to, the linear approach was nevertheless an extremely helpful one. Not only did it allow Peter, the least experienced member of the cast, the chance to grow into his character as he became more comfortable with it (a conveniently similar journey to that of the character he was portraying), it also allowed me to take a more reactive approach to the entire film as we progressed through the scenes. There were a number of occasions where I made subtle changes or additions to the script based on something I noticed about the preceding scene that we had just shot, and I think this served to significantly improve the film as a whole. While the film is certainly far from perfect, had we adopted a more typical approach to principal photography and made the shooting order entirely subservient to logistics, I have no doubt that many of these small issues simply would not have been resolved, nor the improvements made.

I was very fortunate to have an excellent crew to work with, and while we contended with all of the usual issues associated with field production (such as waiting for intrusive noises to pass), all of our shoots were executed in an efficient and timely

manner. Fortunately Kristina and I had decided to schedule each shoot for longer than I really thought it would take, and this was beneficial in that it gave us some extra time when needed, but also on the many occasions that we didn't need the extra time, the crew were always happy to get off early. The overall sense of efficiency made it all the easier to respond to logistical issues as the crew felt satisfied that we were respecting and valuing their time as much as we were able to, and as a result were willing to be flexible in return.

Directing

Directing *Stray* was both a challenging and rewarding experience. Given that this was my first foray into the realm of directing, it was an irreplaceable learning experience, and one that I have no doubt will serve as an excellent foundation for future projects. Admittedly, it took me a little while to find my rhythm as a director and get comfortable with the process once production actually began. The very first dialog scene we shot was the one at the park, right after Stray has returned to watch Skye dance again. All of the cast and crew (myself in particular) were still trying to get settled into our roles at this point, and the result was stilted and awkward. I eventually decided to re-shoot this scene at a later date when we had an opening in the schedule, but our first attempt acted as a helpful dry run, and once we got past that first scene I felt somewhat more settled in the role of director.

However my greatest weakness as a director, which a practice run in the park was not going to be able to fix, was my lack of experience in dealing with actors (and, perhaps more importantly, non-actors). This became apparent in a couple of ways: first, in my ability (or lack thereof) to elicit compelling and effective performances from the

actors; and second, in the way I dealt with issues that arose from occasional unprofessional behavior from the cast.

The first and most important of these shortcomings was my failure to consistently elicit strong performances from the cast. I should note that on the whole, I am very pleased with the performances that both Peter and Devin brought to the screen, and I feel that I was generally on the right track in my approach to directing them. Now that the film is complete, however, there are a couple of scenes in which I find the acting particularly bothersome, especially that of Peter. Namely, these are the gas station scene and the river outlook scene where Stray and Skye talk about the death of Stray's brother. Unfortunately, these are two key scenes for the character of Stray, and the weaknesses in these scenes drag the film down in a way that I was hoping to avoid.

It is difficult for me to pinpoint exactly what went wrong with these two scenes, but a few things are clear. At the root of all of these issues is the writing; in the gas station scene, for example, Stray's line "Yeah, you were doing that chicken dance," should never have made the final draft of the script, and unfortunately I was not able to edit it out seamlessly (otherwise it would not be in the final cut of the film). Peter came into this project already inexperienced and uncomfortable, and lines like that simply set him up for failure. Beyond the writing, however, these scenes blatantly highlight Peter's lack of training as an actor, and in hindsight I can see how elements of my directorial approach perpetuated and exacerbated these issues.

The issues with Peter's acting and the ways that I compounded them are perhaps best illustrated by contrasting the above-mentioned scenes with my favorite dialog scene in the whole film: the driving scene, or more specifically, the long take at the end of the

drive when Skye pulls into Stray's driveway to let him out of the car. Of all the dialog scenes in the film, this one is by far my favorite. The dialog flows naturally and easily, but is performed by both Peter and Devin with a beautiful subtlety that belies the mounting tension in the narrative. Interestingly, however, the take used in the final cut was the very first take of that scene, and was recorded almost unintentionally. I had asked Devin to drive around the block and head towards Stray's house, but I was just shooting it for the visuals of them driving, and was going to cut into a typical shot-reverse-shot arrangement for the dialog. I got the driving b-roll I needed and was about to cut the take when Peter started talking, so I decided to keep the camera rolling and see what happened. As it turned out, it was amazing. We moved on to shoot the shot-reverse-shot dialog section of the scene, in which I was giving specific directions for timing, positioning of each actor, making suggestions as to how they might modify their intonation to get the most appropriate tone, and so on. In comparison to the first take, the results were awful, especially from Peter. At this point I began to realize that the less I could distract Peter with my direction, the more natural his performance was going to be, as he seemed to really get thrown off by trying to remember everything I had asked him to do (like hit specific marks or say a certain word a certain way) while also trying to perform. These are all things that would have been second nature to a trained actor and would not have been a distraction at all, and thus I think my biggest failure in directing Peter was not grasping this soon enough.

However while there were occasions where I could have taken this understanding and applied it more appropriately to our shoots, there were also a number of occasions where the provision of specific directing cues was unavoidable. In these instances Peter

simply lacked the training and experience to simultaneously manage these expectations and fully maintain his character. Had I been able to spend more time and money preparing Peter for his role by sending him to some appropriate acting classes and devoting one-on-one time to developing his character together so that he would be able to slip in and out of his role more easily, even when distractions made it difficult, I have no doubt that the film would have been better for it. Given my timeframe and budget, however, this simply wasn't a possibility.

Nonetheless, despite the issues with Peter's acting, if I were starting this project again from the beginning on the same minimal budget, I would not hesitate to cast him for the role again—although, knowing what I now know (as discussed above), I would approach it quite differently. That Peter's lack of acting experience is a limitation, there is no doubt, but in every other way I think he was perfect for the role, and as such he adds much more depth to the character than any of the other people who were at my disposal at the time of casting. While I wish I could have another stab at preparing Peter for the role and directing him through some of the more difficult scenes, I certainly do not regret casting him for the role.

The second issue I experienced as director, as mentioned above, was some occasional unprofessional behavior from certain members of the cast—especially Devin. As a theater student who was involved in a number of stage productions before and after principal photography for *Stray*, Devin's schedule was understandably very busy, and she was incredibly gracious to devote as much time to the project as she did. On a couple of occasions, however, Devin showed up late and making it quite clear that she needed (or wanted) to be somewhere else at that particular time. One occasion that was especially

problematic was when we shot the river outlook scene, which was a particularly difficult scene for Peter. When Devin showed up to film this scene, she came straight to me and asked if she could leave early that night because a friend was in town and they wanted to catch a movie together. We were scheduled to film until around 10:00pm, but the movie started around 8:30pm, so Devin was effectively asking if we could shoot the scene in half the time we had allotted to it. This would have been a tall order for any actor, but it was extremely difficult for Peter to act under that kind of pressure. I told Devin that we would “see how it goes,” and did not allow her to leave until I was satisfied that we had done everything we could do with the scene, but unfortunately the damage had been done before we even started. After we wrapped that night, Peter shared with me that he had felt an immense amount of pressure to get through his lines perfectly and without too many takes, because he didn’t want to be responsible for Devin missing her movie. In hindsight, I should have been much more direct with Devin and flatly denied her request. Since I wasn’t paying my actors to be in the film, I wasn’t completely comfortable with dictating their schedules and denying special requests, but this was a mistake on my part. Had I not been so concerned with making everybody happy by attempting to accommodate special requests like Devin’s, I could have alleviated a lot of pressure for the other members of the cast who were affected.

While there are plenty of issues with *Stray* that point to my inexperience as a director, going into the project I was fully expectant that this would be the case. The process of authoring a work with complete creative control was thoroughly enjoyable, and I relished the opportunity to find practical ways to implement and explore the theoretical aspects of filmmaking that I have been studying throughout my time in

graduate school. My hope is that, despite whatever issues they may find in the film, audiences will be able to see at least little of the depth of thought and theory that I poured into this project.

Cinematography

The dialog in *Stray* is relatively sparse, and as such it relies quite heavily on the cinematography to provide both narrative impetus and thematic cues. I adopted this approach to the film in part because of the fact that it played to my strengths as a cinematographer. I was fully aware of my inexperience as both a writer and director, and my natural preference (both as a film viewer and in other productions in which I have had an authorial role) has always been for visual storytelling over dialog. Operating as both the director and cinematographer offered the opportunity to fully explore the breadth of possibilities for visual storytelling without being subservient to the creative control of a director whose vision might not be in alignment with my own. Performing both of these roles on *Stray* was an illuminating experience that will serve to better inform future collaborations with other directors as it has given me a new and deeper understanding of how the two roles can better complement each other.

While performing the roles of both director and cinematographer at the same time was not always without issue, I found that, at least for this film, the benefits far outweighed any disadvantages. Fortunately I have significant experience behind the camera, so the technical distractions of operating a camera were rarely an issue. The camera simply became the directorial eye with which I was able to study the performances, an on-set perspective I was already very comfortable with. So in a way, the camera helped to bridge the gap between the two roles.

Beyond the established role of the camera already discussed (that of passive observer), there are a few important things to note about the way the camera is used to convey meaning in *Stray*. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the handheld aesthetic seen throughout the entire film, with the only exceptions being the opening and closing shots. The inspiration for this handheld technique was taken largely from Derek Cianfrance's *The Place Beyond the Pines* and the films of the Dardenne brothers discussed in Chapter Two. All of these films deal primarily with characters in positions of significant instability, whether emotionally, socially, legally, or otherwise. My intention with *Stray* was to destabilize the camera for the purpose of subtly conveying an overall sense of instability to both the narrative and the character of Stray. In an early draft of the script I had written a scene inside Skye's house to develop her character and backstory further, and had intended to shoot this scene entirely on a tripod in order to contrast the perceived stability of Skye's life with the instability of Stray's life. Cutting the scene was ultimately for the best, but in doing so I relinquished the opportunity to further underscore the meaning behind the handheld aesthetic of the film. Shooting the film handheld also allowed me to be a lot more flexible and reactive with the camera, changing perspective and following the action with an urgency that simply isn't possible when fixed to a tripod.

One of the most significant ways that I built tension throughout the film was by strategically sequencing unexpected events. This is most apparent in the final act: the cop shows up at the squatter house; Stray goes to Skye's house; the cop shows up at the same place and it is revealed that he is also Skye's father; Stray is shot. However, while these are all largely unexpected events that take place in the action, I wanted to begin subtly

foreshadowing these unexpected events from as early in the film as possible. One of the earliest times I began to do this with the camera was in the basketball scene, where the camera is very tight on the fast-paced action of the game. I deliberately eschewed the expected establishing shot of the basketball court and its surroundings with the hope that the audience would feel slightly unsettled by its absence (interestingly, I have already received unprompted feedback from some viewers that this was successful). Instead, the camera enters straight into the action, barely keeping up with the pace of the game. Through the motion of the camera, combined with the fast editing of the scene, I was able to reduce the available spatial cues and thrust the viewer into the game in a somewhat disorienting way. Combined with the seemingly random shot of the dog running by the basketball court, a brief moment of phenomenological intrigue that also happens to tie in rather nicely to some of the primary thematic elements of the film, I think this scene contrasts nicely with the rest of the opening act which is primarily focused on establishing the rhythms of Stray's life. While very subtle, I hope the juxtaposition will effectively begin to foreshadow the violent ways in which Stray's life is later interrupted.

Finally, on a few occasions throughout the film I used the camera to subjugate Stray to his surroundings, as in the shot of Stray riding home from the basketball court (Figure 1). This was an attempt on my part to subtly underscore the defamiliarization of Stray and reinforce his socio-cultural otherness. Stray's environment is largely a construct of a society with which he shares little connection, and hinting at his socio-cultural inferiority with the camera is intended to reinforce this understanding in the audience.



Fig. 1. Stray Rides Home from the Basketball Court.

Issues and Challenges

One of our biggest logistical challenges in production was that Peter, who played Stray, lived four hours from Waco in Longview, TX. Since Peter is also a full-time student in Longview, our weekends were significantly shortened by the fact that Peter often could not arrive in Waco before noon on Saturday and needed to leave for Longview again on Sunday afternoon. While this made scheduling a challenge, particularly for night scenes (since we only had Peter for one evening each weekend), I found that this helped to imbue a healthy sense of urgency to our schedule without creating undue pressure or cramping any of our shoots.

Stretching the shoot out over the course of six weeks as we did served to introduce some small continuity issues that needed to be dealt with during production. Perhaps the most noticeable of these within the film itself is the subtle differences in Stray's haircut through many of the scenes. While the film never establishes a determinate timeframe within which the events occur, it is clear that the action on screen

takes place within a much shorter timespan than the six weeks it took us to shoot it. Since Peter's hair was naturally changing and growing throughout principal photography, we had to send him back to the hairdresser on multiple occasions to have his hair "reset" to maintain continuity throughout the film. This was largely successful, and changes in Stray's hair throughout the film are generally subtle at worst. There was one occasion, however, when the hairdresser cut Peter's hair significantly shorter than on other occasions, and we had to cancel the entire weekend's filming as a result. While this was a significant setback to our overall schedule (we were forced to add an extra weekend), this gave me the ability to regroup after a very busy few weeks and put a lot more time into planning our upcoming shoots than I would have otherwise been able to. We were originally scheduled to film the "cop scene" at the abandoned house as well as the closing scene on that weekend, and each of those scenes ended up being much better for the extra planning I was able to put into them.

Despite the extra planning, the closing scene was a particularly challenging one to direct and shoot. While it is now one of my favorite scenes in the film, I was not sure this would be the case after we wrapped production that day. The most significant challenge for this scene was the length of time within which it had to be filmed. Because of our tight shoot schedule and the setback of the previous weekend, we had only one afternoon to film the scene. I had written the scene for dusk, and had already filmed the other scenes leading up to the closing with that intention, which meant that on the evening of the shoot we had approximately one hour of light (the last light of the day) that was appropriate to the scene. As such, the entire outdoor section of the scene (with the exception of the closing shot, which was filmed much later) had to be filmed within that

exceptionally tight window. The closing scene is not long, but it is the most complex and dramatic of the film, and I knew the film had to finish on a very strong note if I were to achieve what I was hoping to. Fortunately we finished our previous shoot early and were able to spend some time rehearsing the scene on location while we were waiting for the light to fade sufficiently, which meant that we were prepared to execute as soon as the light was right.

It is important to note that in the closing scene, there are some significant differences in the way the shooting is depicted in the final cut as compared to how it was written in the script. According to the script:

Stray stands tall, looking the cop right in the eye, his hand hanging right by the pistol. After a few painful moments, he starts raising his hands. The cop thinks he's going for the gun. BANG. Stray's body shudders with the shock of the bullet striking him in the chest. He takes a step back, a look of surprise on his face, and looks down at his chest. Blood starts pouring out of a bullet hole right over his heart, soaking his shirt. His hands are partially raised in surrender. He never got them all the way up.

There are two significant deviations from the script in this section of the scene. The first is that I decided while on location to change the motivation for the police officer to shoot. Instead of shooting when Stray begins to raise his hands, I instead had Peter start turning towards Skye, at which point the police officer shoots out of uncertainty and his desire to protect his daughter. This was mostly an instinctual change on my part because I felt in rehearsal that the way the script was written felt a little too weak in actuality, and while it is definitely not perfect, it is an improvement.

The second and most important deviation from the script in the closing scene was the way I edited the shooting itself, and most specifically the way Stray reacts to it. After a lot of experimentation I simply wasn't able to figure out a way to practically rig Peter's

shirt so that the blood would flow out from his wound naturally. I have always been bothered by the artifice in many shooting scenes in movies, and it was important to me that this effect play out as realistically as possible. Since I was not satisfied with the practical effect, I decided to approach the shot differently by compositing a bullet impact onto Stray's shirt and cutting away before the audience has a chance to look at it too closely. Bullet impacts in reality are a lot less graphic than audiences are accustomed to seeing (certainly, there is no forward spurt of blood) which presented an interesting challenge for the scene, as a realistic approach may be seen as artificial simply because it doesn't align with what audiences are accustomed to. I decided to throw audience expectation to the wind, and accomplished the effect by taking a large chunk of bloody meat to a shooting range, fixing Stray's shirt over the top of it, and shooting it with a 9mm handgun (the same as used by the police officer). I filmed this in close-up and composited the result onto Stray when he is struck by the bullet. I expect there will be some who take issue with this approach (as while it is real, it may not "seem" real), but I am personally satisfied with the result.

An unexpected bonus of this modified approach to the shooting was that it allowed me to turn the focus away from Stray's face after impact and shift more quickly to the conflict between Skye and her father, the police officer. This scene was written well before any rehearsals began, and in hindsight I know that Peter simply would not have been able to pull off his reaction in a believable and impactful way, and had I insisted on this approach, the scene would be significantly weaker for it.

As with any low budget independent film production, we experienced our fair share of unexpected and unavoidable delays. Most of these were directly related to the

locations we were filming in, such as having to wait for noisy traffic to pass before each take while shooting the park conversation scene, or needing to work around customers in the Goodwill since we were only able to film there during open hours. The most problematic of these issues was at the gas station, where the A/C system was stuck on its maximum setting and couldn't be turned off. It was so noisy inside the gas station that it made it difficult to even hear the performances clearly, especially since I was also tied to the camera some distance away. This made it difficult to direct the scene well (and was one of the few occasions where I wished I had a camera operator), and also dictated that I do some Automatic Dialog Replacement (ADR) to both the interior and exterior portions of this scene, a technique I was hoping to avoid altogether.

There were a few shots that we were unable to schedule during our window of principal photography, such as the shots with the dog (since we still hadn't found a suitable dog by then) and the closing shot of Skye running down the street, so these shots had to be postponed for a later time and were picked up as schedules allowed through January and February of 2015

Post-Production

Process

For a project of this magnitude, the post-production process on *Stray* was relatively straightforward. Given that I played the roles of writer, director, cinematographer, and editor, I had already made a large number of editorial decisions before production even began, and we shot no more than I intended to use. Almost every shot that was taken (or rather, the best take of each shot) made it into the final cut, so there was very little wasted time on set and also very little unneeded content to sort

through in post. All told, the post-production process for *Stray* took approximately three months, during which time I worked on the film primarily during the evenings and on some weekends.

After principal photography wrapped in early November, it was a little over a month before I really got started on post-production. In part, this was because I was quite anxious about whether I had adequate coverage of each scene, and I needed a little space before I could be objective enough to resume. Throughout production, I had primarily relied on instinct to determine how many shots I needed to make each scene effective. After principal photography wrapped, however, I worried that I may have miscalculated somewhere along the way. I was particularly concerned about both the driving scene and the closing scene (the circumstances of which I have already discussed) because I simply wasn't sure that I had shot enough to make the scenes as effective as they needed to be. Fortunately my concerns proved largely unfounded.

Once I began editing, I was able to start sending materials to the composer, Jessy Ribordy, so that he could begin working on specific cues. Jessy and I had talked at length about the score prior to production even beginning, and I had provided a lot of specific input as to what I was hoping to get back from him, but it wasn't until I started sending him rough-cut scenes that he was able to start really making progress on crafting a sound that interpreted each scene as we shot it. I will discuss the score in more detail later in this chapter.

Editing

Just as with the cinematography, the editing of *Stray* is crucial to establishing the rhythms of *Stray*'s life and building both the excitement and tension that comes with his

relationship with Skye. In the first act of the film, when the audience is being introduced to Stray and his life, the editing pace is quite slow. Shots are held for longer, and edits generally aren't as "tight" (meaning that the edits don't actively work to intensify the action) as they are later in the film. Rather, the editing pace in the first act speaks to the loneliness and emptiness of Stray's existence. The repeated use of the television and the multiple shots of Stray riding his bicycle add a subtle sense of rhythm to Stray's life, suggesting that even though the audience only spends a few minutes getting to know Stray before Skye comes onto the scene, there is a cyclical nature to his life that unconsciously extends the diegetic action beyond what the audience actually sees.

While the editing of *Stray* generally follows a typical temporal trajectory (all events happen in sequence), there are a few scenes in the film that deliberately break into more of a montage approach in the way they treat temporal and spatial cues. The first of these is the basketball scene, which has already been discussed in some detail, and the other is the "night on the town," during which Stray and Skye traipse around town having fun together. There are a number of reasons why I adopted this approach to these scenes. First, the shift in pace helps keep viewers engaged in the first act when they otherwise might start to drift. The slow pace of the first act is important to the narrative and to the tension that slowly builds throughout the film, but it was crucial to give some relief in the early stages in order to keep viewers interested. Second, the energy of these scenes provides an outlet for the emotions of the characters without needing to rely on dialog to convey those feelings. In the basketball scene, the game is an outlet for Stray to step outside of the mundanity of his life, a momentary escape. The edit helps to underscore this reading in the way it contrasts with the rest of the first act. Similarly, when Stray and

Skye are running about town, the fast cutting visuals and swelling music work to intensify the connection happening between the characters on screen. Finally, these scenes also work to further condition the audience to expect the unexpected by changing the pace of the narrative without warning.

As the film progresses, the editing pace slowly speeds up, congruent with the action and mounting conflict. While audiences may not notice this, the incremental acceleration of the editing pace is intended to work as an undercurrent of sorts, compounding the drama without calling it out. In the first act the editing pace works to slow the film down, but by the end of the film the edit is taking its lead from the action.

While the editing process was key to establishing rhythm and building tension in the film, it was also useful in that it allowed me a certain degree of flexibility to work around some of the more problematic areas in the film. I have already discussed this as it relates to the closing scene (most specifically when Stray is shot), but there were a number of other instances where I was able to make improvements by either removing or reworking specific issues. Unsurprisingly, most of these issues arose in the dialog scenes. In the conversation by the river, for example, a number of Peter's lines came across quite flat and unfeeling. One line in particular—when Stray says of his brother, "He's dead"—was dragging the rest of the scene down. I had shot this entire conversation from a number of angles and had a lot of coverage and a good number of takes with clean audio, so I was able to pick through every take and pull out what I thought was the best line delivery for each of both Stray and Skye's lines. I pieced all of these lines together seamlessly, masking the most obtrusive edits with shots where the movement of the actors' mouths was not visible. I removed the "He's dead" line entirely, and found that

the scene had improved markedly without losing any of the necessary expositional information. This is certainly not to say that the scene is now perfect, but it is undoubtedly improved.

Musical Score

I had originally intended to be much more conservative with the score in *Stray* than I was in the final cut. My initial thought process was that a minimalistic score would be the most effective approach, simply because it would interfere the least with the verisimilitude of the *mise en scène*. In the edit, however, the film was feeling much too dry. While I would probably not describe *Stray* as an “emotional” film, the emotional ups and downs are undeniably crucial to engaging the audience and connecting the characters. It should have come as no surprise to me that I would lean on the score more heavily than I had intended to, because I listened to a lot of music while writing the script—to the point that I could say that some of the scenes were written in response to the music I was listening to at the time. Once these scenes were finally put on the screen, many of them felt naked and underdeveloped without a score.

Collaborating with Jessy Ribordy on the score was a dream come true for me. I was very familiar with Jessy’s work before contacting him about *Stray*, and a significant amount of the music I listened to while writing *Stray* came from the albums he has in publication. I provided Jessy with a lot of guidance on what I was hoping to hear in the score (mostly how I wanted it to “feel”) along with a number of reference cues collected from various sources over the past few years. This was intended purely as a means of effectively communicating the types of sounds I was looking for, since I really don’t speak the language of musicians, and I impressed upon Jessy that my input was only

intended as a guide to get him started on the right track. Had I not felt so comfortable that Jessy was going to do his job well I may not have been so releasing, but fortunately my trust was well placed. To say that I am pleased with Jessy's score is an understatement, and he was eager for feedback and responded to any criticisms I had (which were very few) like a true professional.

Color Grade

The color palette of *Stray* is decidedly bland. I have discussed this already as it relates to costume, but some discussion on how the color grade plays into the equation is also warranted. Generally speaking, I wanted the color grade to present as few distractions as possible while subtly underscoring the changing moods of each scene, achieved primarily through subtle variations in color temperature (Figure 2). While I did modify the color balance and reduce the saturation of some shots in post, I knew before the shoot how I wanted each scene to look and balanced the camera accordingly before shooting each scene. As a result, much of the footage was already in the right ballpark before it was even ingested, and the color grade was focused primarily on dialing in the color balance and luminance levels where appropriate to make the scene appear more natural. Finally, the film was shot in 4K, which can sometimes yield a distractingly sharp 1080p master, so as the last step in the grading process I added a layer of grain over the entire film to take the edge off the sharpness without losing detail.



Fig. 2. Warm vs. Cold Color Temperatures to Subtly Interpret the Mood of the Scene

Conclusion

Given that *Stray* was my first foray into the realm of fictional narrative filmmaking, I am exceedingly pleased with the result. Certainly in hindsight there are a number of things I would love to have approached differently, but having never done anything like this before I recognize that there was no way for me to have foreseen and avoided many of these issues, and as such I consider them a valuable part of the learning experience. My goal through this process was to put my cinematic sensibilities to the test

by exploring the theoretical underpinnings of my craft and attempting to apply those considerations to a work of my own, and while the product may not be a masterwork, I am satisfied that I did my script justice and made the film as well as I possibly could have at this point in my career. Perhaps the most valuable takeaway from the experience is that I now know what I will do differently when I go through this process again.

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