

# Young Love can be Torture: An Autoethnography Exploring the Making of *High School Sweethearts*

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YOUNG LOVE CAN BE TORTURE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY EXPLORING  
THE MAKING OF HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEARTS

by

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ABSTRACT  
YOUNG LOVE CAN BE TORTURE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY EXPLORING  
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We experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, and these narratives are heavily reliant upon the frames we consciously and unconsciously use to define ourselves within them. Though previous research indicates that the consumption of violent media either increase aggressive constructs in viewers (Bushman, 1998), desensitize viewers to domestic and sexual violence (e. g., Donnerstein & Penrod, 1988; Mullin & Linz, 1995) or prime individuals to make hostile attributions about the behavior of others (e.g., Thomas & Drabman, 1978; Bargh and Pietromonaco, 1982; Wann and Branscombe, 1990; Zelli, Huesmann, & Cervone, 1995), my own experiences as a consumer and producer of graphically violent horror films suggest otherwise. Consequently, my thesis is an autoethnography that details my own emotional, psychological and social factors as they relate to the scripting and shooting of my latest horror film *High School Sweethearts*.

This autoethnography presents a self-reflexive personal narrative about what it means to create violence as a form of entertainment, and it combines making-of-the-film vignettes with this self-analysis to better understand why I willingly consume and create violent imagery, which in turn contributes to the culture of violence. Furthermore, this thesis implicitly challenges the orthodox transmission view of communication by arguing that certain forms of communication, such as horror films, are best understood through the ritual model of communication.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction and Justification

#### Introduction

It's a little past 8:30 p.m., and I'm standing outside Johnston Hall on the Marquette University campus talking with my friend Brian and one of his female acquaintances whom I am meeting for the first time and whose name escapes me, though I swear she mentioned it when Brian introduced me moments ago. Graduate classes just let out for the evening, and I ran into the two of them because they decided to enjoy a cigarette before heading off to wherever it is they are each going for the rest of the night. In-between puffs of smoke Brian's friend asks me what I do.

"You mean besides schoolwork?" I reply. "I watch and make horror movies."

Brian uses his shoe to smother what little remains of his cigarette on the sidewalk. "See you guys later," he says. "Will, call me. Let's hang out soon."

"Definitely," I say with a wave of my hand. As Brian walks away down Wisconsin Ave., I feel nervous. What is this woman's name? Eventually, she takes a long drag on her cigarette and blows the smoke out from one side of her mouth to kindly avoid hitting me in the face. "I used to love horror movies," she chuckles, "when I was twelve."

"You don't like them anymore?"

"I just outgrew them. Horror movies just seem so childish, you know? Anyway, it was nice meeting you, Will." And with that, Jane Doe extinguishes the burning embers of her cigarette on the cold cement below her feet and walks away.

I head home wondering why so many people, including academics, regard the horror genre with an air of disdain. According to Tudor (2002), many scholars believe the audience for horror films is either comprised of sick, disturbed people indulging in nasty, perverse desires or jaded individuals addicted to ever-increasing doses of violence (p. 47). Mainstream film and media critics echo this contempt for the horror genre as well and are generally perplexed by its continued success. *Entertainment Weekly's* Lisa Schwarzbaum (2007), for example, states, "It's quite simple: I hate these movies. I won't see these movies ... I'm not impressed with the 'quality' of the gore or the 'wit' of the filmmaking. I'm not enjoyably scared; I'm horrified, and not in the way horror fans get off on, groaning and screaming with pack-mentality excitement. Instead, my horror is one of disturbance and anger: Who makes this vile crap?" (p. 01). Scholarly research into and about horror films typically focuses on their potential effects on viewers and the audiences that consume them. There are few scholarly articles about the people who create these films and why they do so to begin with. Am I sick and disturbed? I certainly don't feel like it.

I am both a producer and consumer of horror films, and this thesis is my autoethnography. It explores my own emotional, psychological and social factors as they relate to the scripting and shooting of my latest horror movie *High School Sweethearts*. The autoethnography wrestles with and addresses the following questions as they relate to my own personal decisions throughout the moviemaking process: Of all the film genres, why am I so captivated by Horror? What draws me to horror films in the first place? What motivates me, as an avid movie watcher and independent filmmaker, to



willingly consume and create violent media? More specifically, what motivated me to create *High School Sweethearts*, which belongs to the torture-porn sub-genre of horror?

The premise of *High School Sweethearts* is simple: Take an otherwise happy-go-lucky, everybody-feels-good-about-themselves teenage romantic comedy and combine it with the protracted instances of murder, mayhem and downright torture popular in mainstream horror films. Think *John Tucker Must Die* (Thomas, 2006) meets *Hostel* (Roth, 2006), wherein the John Tucker-like character is in danger of actually being killed and probably will be. It is this script – which I wrote – and the subsequent movie – which I produced, directed and am currently editing – that is the subject of this thesis.

My autoethnography is a self-reflexive personal narrative that combines making-of-the-film vignettes with self-analysis to better understand why I willingly consume and create violent imagery, which in turn contributes to the culture of violence. In addition, my autoethnography offers a narrative about what it means to me to create fictional violence as a form of entertainment in a world teeming with very real manifestations of it. By exploring this particular aspect of my life, I hope to better understand myself and provide you with a glimpse into a particular film genre. The purpose is to help you understand why I make these films by showing you how, at various stages of the process, my creation of violence as a form of entertainment is a negotiation between my psychological motivations, audience expectations and my subversion of those expectations.

## **Justification**

Previous media effects research indicates that violent media either increase aggressive constructs in viewers (Bushman, 1998), desensitize viewers to domestic and sexual violence (e. g., Donnerstein & Penrod, 1988; Mullin & Linz, 1995) or prime individuals to make hostile attributions about the behavior of others (e.g., Thomas & Drabman, 1978; Bargh & Pietromonaco, 1982; Wann & Branscombe, 1990; Zelli, Huesmann, & Cervone, 1995). However, at least as far as I can discern, that hasn't been my experience, and "before messages can have 'effects' on audiences, they must emanate outward from message-producers and then into the audience's minds, there to be interpreted ... Since the media aim at least to influence, condition, and reproduce the activity of audiences by reaching into the symbolic organization of thought, the student of mass media must pay attention to the symbolic content of media messages before the question of effects can even be sensibly posed" (Gitlin, 1980 p. 14). Furthermore, media effects studies predominantly adhere to the orthodox transmission view of communication, "whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people" (Carey, 1989 p. 15). This model of communication cannot alone explain my creation and consumption of violent media, which is why I argue that my creation and consumption of violent media as a form of entertainment is best understood through a ritual view of communication. A ritual model of communication is "directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (Carey, 1989 p. 18). By combining these two models of

communication, I argue that the medium of film with respect to the horror genre is a process that reinforces and/or subverts culturally accepted messages.

Human beings experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, each with their own conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles and ends. “We live our narratives ... The roles in narratives that you understand yourself as fitting give meaning to your life, including the emotional color that is inherent in narrative structures” (Lakoff, 2008 p. 33). The narrative within *High School Sweethearts* was drawn from my real-life experiences of heartbreak, and the narrative about my film’s construction exists separately from the one about its realization from script to screen. In other words, the interweaving tapestry of narratives that spawned *High School Sweethearts* is very different from the story told within *High School Sweethearts*, which is very different from the story I am about to tell about its production. Yet all three narratives are necessary to appreciate the scope of the creative process and to fully understand my shifting roles as a consumer of violent media, as a creator of violent media and as a human being living in a world chock full of real violence.

As a filmmaker, I have a responsibility to create the best possible version of the script I have in front of me at the time of production. As a special effects artist, I have a responsibility to create the most believable effects possible given the resources I have at my disposal. As a horror writer, my responsibility is to present familiar material in an interesting way and to create new material that will captivate and shock my audience. And as a human being, I have to consider the ethical implications of my actions at every turn of the process. For example, in terms of *High School Sweethearts*, I have to ask myself if I am comfortable with how my movie presents images of women, men and

relationships between the two, and I must reconcile the fact that my movie, while clearly intended for an adult audience, will probably be seen by children too young to fully understand its connotations, which could potentially de-sensitize them in myriad ways.

According to Pauly (1991), “Qualitative researchers recognize the value of separating producers and audiences for some forms of analysis, but emphasize that senders and receivers compete and collaborate in constructing reality” (p. 3). This autoethnography provides an example of communication as a product, as a practice and as a commentary. Said another way, this thesis presents my own acts of meaning-making and meaning-creation to provide insight into how my conscious and perhaps unconscious decisions impacted the creation of the script for *High School Sweethearts* and its filmed counterpart. This experiential research is “generalizable to the extent that some community of readers considers a particular study representative of a wider set of concerns” (Pauly, 1991 p. 11), and “Qualitative researchers ... argue less about whether a study mirrors ‘reality’ than about whose reality their narrative captures” (Pauly, 1991 p. 23). I am not writing this thesis from the position of an outsider looking in, as someone studying a culture I am unfamiliar with. Rather, I am immersed within the culture I am studying—the horror genre—and as a producer and consumer of horror films, I occupy a unique position to examine an oft vilified genre as an insider and researcher to offer an insight into how my consumption and creation of fictional ultra-violence have affected me in both positive and negative ways. According to Williams (1974), even though society discourages violence, media organizations constantly produce content that includes violent behavior. Mass communications scholars, in turn, typically focus their attention on studying the effects of watching the media. Yet “this does not explain the

odd relationship between ‘discouragement by the society’ and constant representation by a major social communications system” (Williams, 1974 p. 126). By explaining, in great detail, why it is I enjoy creating and consuming violent media, I am providing an answer to Lisa Schwarzbaum’s question while simultaneously addressing Williams’ concern. Who makes this vile crap? I do, and my autoethnography stands as an example of how real-life experiences both directly and indirectly influence the creation of violent media and challenges the academic and journalistic discourse which presents the consumption of fictional violence as a potentially harmful activity.

I begin Chapter 2 with a brief examination of American *slasher* films. Because these films essentially laid the groundwork for the rise of torture-porn in Hollywood, it is necessary to place them in the foreground of any discussion about torture-porn. From here, I wrestle with the mainstream’s current understanding of the term *torture-porn* and propose a more nuanced definition of it. I conclude this chapter with a scholarly criticism of the journalistic discourse about torture-porn as well as the extant literature surrounding academic studies about horror films and their audiences. Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of narrative theory and framing theory, both of which ground my methodology. Next, I define the term *autoethnography* and present my methodology for the autoethnographic chapters that constitute the bulk of this thesis. Chapter 4 is an annotated version of the shooting script for *High School Sweethearts*, which includes footnotes detailing various aspects of production and spur-of-the-moment revisions I made while on the set. Chapters 5 thru 7 make up my autoethnographic novella, and each one focuses on specific flashpoints of the filmmaking process. Chapter 5 details the origins of *High School Sweethearts*. Chapter 6 examines the creation and execution of

the first major special effects sequence in the film. And in Chapter 7 I discuss my movie's climactic set-piece—a lengthy torture sequence that revolves around a game of trivia. Within this chapter, I analyze my own decision-making processes as they relate to the climax's final night of shooting and illustrate how I directed first-time actor Ben Wilson to give me the emotionally wrenching performance the scene demanded. Finally, in Chapter 8 I look back over the entire movie-making process and present my concluding thoughts regarding my research questions.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Rise of Torture Porn

Because my autoethnography is about the making of a movie best described as a torture porn film, this chapter begins with a concise description of the American **slasher** film, a sub-genre of horror that directly influenced the rise of torture porn in the United States. Once this groundwork is set, I discuss the term **torture porn** and present my own definition of it. From here, I examine the academic discourse surrounding horror films and their audiences and juxtapose these writings with the journalistic rhetoric about torture-porn.

#### The American Slasher Film

The After Dark Horrorfest advertised its 2007 line-up by defining horror as a “genre of motion pictures intended to thrill viewers by provoking fear or revulsion through the depiction of grotesque, violent or supernatural events.” This definition demonstrates rather nicely that the current state of Hollywood horror is not only violent, it is bloody violent. Prince (2000) explains, “Graphic violence is an inescapable and ubiquitous characteristic of contemporary cinema” (p. 01). But even that only scratches the surface. The perfection of computer-generated special effects, as well as the ever-improving craftsmanship of make-up artists like Tom Savini, Rick Baker, Rob Bottin and Robert Kurtzman – co-founder of KNB EFX Group – has made it possible for filmmakers to showcase the aesthetic mutilation and ruin of the human body with staggering realism. Want to see a person blow a hole through their head and then follow

with the camera as it swoops through the entrance wound and out its exit?<sup>1</sup> How about watching a person get their head chopped off in a series of unbroken axe whacks to the neck?<sup>2</sup> The human body has essentially become an endless canvas of latex skin that can be lacerated and mutilated for audiences who, according to Dika (1987), “greet the gruesome events on screen with open enthusiasm, cheering and laughing” (p. 88).

Personally, I applaud imaginative, well-crafted gore, so I’m not necessarily complaining.<sup>3</sup> However, the level of permissible violence within R-rated, theatrically-released horror films in the United States has become so extreme I doubt it is possible for one to receive an NC-17 rating for violence alone. Furthermore, there seems to be a much greater acceptance of physical and sexual violence within mainstream horror films than there is of realistic, pleasurable and consensual sexuality for both men and women. When and how exactly did this happen?

One successful sub-genre of horror, the aptly named slasher (or stalker) film revels in staging “the threat of violence and the spectacle of the creative death” (Pinedo, 1997 p. 109). To dismiss slasher films as unmitigated acts of aggression against the human form, however, ignores the cultural and theoretical forces that impacted the horror genre during the 1970s and ‘80s and underestimates the symbolic complexity of the narratives themselves. According to Benhsoff (1997), “The rise of a new era of political conservatism, the AIDS crisis, [and] the politicization and continued mainstreaming of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Nispel, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> *30 Days of Night* (Slade, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> And I’m not the only one. In his book “Grande Illusions: A Learn-by-example Guide to Special Make-up Effects” (1983), Tom Savini writes, “When I see something gory on the screen—a cut throat, a head being blown off or something like that—and I say, ‘Ahhh...beautiful!’, I’m not saying ‘beautiful’ because it was gory; I’m saying it because it *worked*, it was a technical achievement that worked, it fooled me or the person sitting next to me who screamed out loud. It was an *illusion*” (p. 10).



gay and lesbian culture” (p. 230) clearly influenced these films in concrete and often contradictory ways. John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) effectively marks the beginning of the American slasher film, a sub-genre that drew inspiration from giallo films,<sup>4</sup> exploitation cinema and movies like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960),<sup>5</sup> Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (1960), Bob Clark’s *Black Christmas* (1974) and Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Where filmmakers like Hitchcock built suspense, slasher directors sought to instill a lasting terror in their audiences through sustained periods of shocking violence. While “Hitchcock inserted expository sequences between shock moments so his audience could catch its breath” (Peary, 1981 p. 350), filmmakers like Hooper and Carpenter preferred giving people their proverbial moneys’ worth, presenting one jolt after another.<sup>6</sup> Clover (2000) explains, “Where once there was one victim – Marion Crane – there are now many ... the only thing better than one beautiful woman being gruesomely murdered was a whole series of beautiful women being gruesomely murdered” (p. 139).

With *Halloween* Carpenter presented what would definitively become the slasher formula: a largely off-screen masked or hidden killer motivated by psycho-sexual rage (usually derived from a traumatic childhood experience), stalks and kills a sizable

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<sup>4</sup> The Grindhouse Cinema Database uses the term “giallo” to describe the Italian sub-genre of horror that became popular in the late 1960s and ‘70s. According to the database, “Giallo films usually involved an unknown killer who preyed on beautiful women. The killer would only be seen in quick shots and the dark mysterious figure would often wear black clothing and gloves. The killer would use sharp razor blades, butcher knives, ropes and other torturous methods instead of guns to murder his victims.”

<sup>5</sup> Hitchcock’s desire to direct *Psycho* stemmed from the story’s violence. According to Francois Truffaut (1983), Hitchcock said, “I think that the thing that appealed to me and made me decide to do the picture was the suddenness of the murder in the shower, coming, as it were, out of the blue. That was about all” (pp. 268-9).

<sup>6</sup> For example, as cited in David Grove’s “Making Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>: The Legend of Camp Blood” (2005), director Sean Cunningham says, “I wanted to make a real scary movie, the kind of thing where people would have fun, where they would scream and then laugh because they were having so much fun” (pp. 15-6).

number of youngsters, usually teenagers. “Although both men and women are killed, the stalking and killing of women is stressed. After a protracted struggle, a resourceful female usually subdues the killer, sometimes kills him and survives” (Pinedo, 1997 p. 72). Clover (1992) calls this character the final girl, whom she describes as the survivor, the person who not only discovers the bodies of her friends but faces the monstrous threat that terrorizes her and “finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B)” (p. 35). The final girl – perhaps the most recognizable trope of the sub-genre – first appeared in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, with Sally’s harrowing self-defense and eventual rescue.

Sally survives long enough to see what has become of her fellows and is in store for her, long enough to meet and even dine with the whole slaughterhouse family, long enough to undergo all manner of torture ... and long enough to bolt and re-bolt, be caught and re-caught, plead and re-plead for her life, and eventually escape to the highway. For nearly thirty minutes of screen time – a third of the film – we watch her shriek, run, flinch, jump or fall through windows, sustain injury and mutilation. Her will to survive is astonishing; in the end, bloody and staggering, she finds the highway. (Clover, 1992 p. 36)

While Laurie Strode, *Halloween*’s final girl trope, initially runs from her assailant, she (unlike Sally in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) actively fights back when cornered. In this way, Carpenter’s conception of the final girl is emblematic of the revenging female within the rape and revenge films of the 1970s, wherein “a beautiful woman hunts down the men who raped her and kills them one by one, frequently reveling in the pleasure of the man’s agony when he realizes who she is and what she is about to do” (Lehman, 1993

p. 103). Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and Meir Zarchi's *Day of the Woman* (1978)<sup>7</sup> are two notable examples.

Some academics argue this shift from passive to active defense mimicked the seething national mood of outrage and impotence following Vietnam, and that the inauguration of Ronald Reagan in 1980 encouraged a reversal of the ideals of the 1960s. "To the stalker film's young audience, on the brink of adulthood and ready to formulate ideas on careers, politics and family, these films demonstrate the inefficacy of sexual freedom, of casual, non-goal oriented activity and of a non-violent attitude" (Dika, 1987 p. 98). Slasher films, after all, are littered with couples sneaking off to have unprotected sex, getting killed near the point of climax or immediately afterwards, and oftentimes gurgling orgasmically as they die.<sup>8</sup> America's return to the traditional values of family, home and religion in the '80s encouraged conservative personal conduct, and *Halloween* and its imitators have often been chastised for their Puritanical morality. In one respect, slasher films assert that any deviation from such behavior is fatal, with the killer acting as a manifestation of the conservative mindset gone unchecked. For example, Benshoff (1997) insists *A Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 2: Freddy's Revenge* (Sholder, 1985) demonizes the gay lifestyle and showcases male homosexual panic. As the embodiment of the protagonist's internalized homophobia, Freddy Krueger emerges within the hero at the moment of homosexual cognizance, keeping him from indulging in homosexual acts, even if it means by murdering the prospective partner. Benshoff states, the titillating sequences of homosexual foreplay are ultimately meant to disgust the viewer, "much as

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<sup>7</sup> This film is more commonly known as *I Spit on Your Grave*.

<sup>8</sup> For example: In *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1974) Lynda dials Laurie's phone number prior to being strangled with the telephone cord by masked killer Michael Myers. When Laurie picks up the phone on her end, she mistakes Lynda's gasps and squeals to be orgasmic and hangs up in disgust.

the rare homosexual kiss on-screen invariably produces an audible response of revulsion from homophobic audiences” (p. 262). Indeed, as homosexuality was increasingly argued against in biblical terms by the religious right, the equation “homosexual = monster” became a hyperbolic element of many ‘80s slasher films. Benschhoff further argues it is of little surprise that movies like *Fear No Evil* (LaLoggia, 1981) and *Freddy’s Revenge* feminize their male leads and associate homoerotic feelings with monstrous outbursts of bloody violence (p. 249). Moreover, the onslaught of AIDS throughout the 1980s created a useful metaphor for religious conservatives to link homosexuality with a spreading disease and also symbolized the dangers of unsafe sex out of wedlock. According to Benschhoff, slasher films “can easily be read as AIDS-era warnings about the dangers of unsanctioned sex and sexuality, even as their first instances predate 1980s AIDS culture” (p. 231).

Benschhoff’s theory that moviegoers recognize none-too-subtle clues linking casual sex with the acquisition of a venereal disease is supported by Greenberg and Gantz (2001), who discovered that viewers of the 1970s public access television show *VD Blues* “were younger, more educated, and tended to have more prior media-based information about VD (venereal disease)” (p. 270). This finding suggests that there was a collective understanding and knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases within popular culture prior to the emergence of the slasher film. Consequently, Benschhoff’s assertion that this sub-genre of horror sought to prime viewers’ fears of contracting a sexually transmitted disease is at least tangentially linked to prior research.

The “sex as death” motif inherent within slasher films calls into question the killing of the male, generally shown from a distance, versus the up-close killing of the

female, typically shown after a lengthy stalking sequence that ends “with her wound made visible to the spectator” (Dika, 1987 p. 97). A psychoanalytic interpretation of this bleeding wound caused by the penetration of a phallic object – such as a knife – shows it to be a reenactment of a young boy’s first viewing of female genitalia. According to Dika, the slasher film dramatizes the compulsion to look at female genitalia through a series of murders that are “symbolic reenactments of the fantasized act of castration” (p. 97). This is due to the traditional belief that the female body is viewed as a deviation from the norm. Creed (1993) explains, “Whenever male bodies are represented as monstrous in the horror film they assume characteristics usually associated with the female body: they experience a blood cycle, change shape, bleed, give birth, become penetrable, are castrated” (p. 118).

To say slasher films are altogether chauvinistic, however, proclaims the sub-genre affords female viewers no room for pleasure. Authors like Pinedo (1997) argue that slasher films, through their exultation of the final girl trope, consistently show women using self defense effectively. She states, “Not only does she fashion weapons, the surviving female runs, screams, cries out for help, dodges blows, negotiates and fights back with everything at her disposal” (p. 77). If we stress a psychoanalytic interpretation of the material, we can say these actions strike terror in male viewers, because they perceive the women as castrating. In fact, the dual nature of woman as castrated victim and castrating heroine reveals the inherent gender paradox of the slasher formula. Although the killer is presented as *masculine*, his masculinity is stripped in an act of castration by the surviving female, who, through newfound masculinity, subdues her attacker through the creation of a bleeding wound. According to Creed (1993), such

gender confusion within slasher films recognizes the medieval idea that “women were men turned inside out” (p. 118).

Rather than slavishly follow the formula established by Carpenter in *Halloween*, savvy genre filmmakers of the late ‘80s and ‘90s cleverly subverted conventionality with postmodern sensibilities. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (Hooper, 1986), *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (Craven, 1994), *Scream* (Craven, 1996) and its sequels were self-referential and satirical, acknowledging formula conventions with a knowing “wink” to the audience. In *Cherry Falls* (Wright, 2000), for instance, the publicity surrounding a series of murders at a high school, “sets off a predictable explosion of libidinal activity among teens, with even the school’s geekiest boys ... suddenly in demand for their sexual services. This intriguing twist subverts the sex-is-death equation of both the AIDS era and the slasher genre by explicitly linking sex with safety and abstinence with death” (Rabin 2002).

The self-reflexive trend within Hollywood slashers quickly became old hat, and the turn of the century, along with the invention and acceptance of DVDs, introduced American audiences to a new sub-genre of horror exemplified by Japanese auteur Takashi Miike’s psychotropic nightmare *Audition* (2000). Though Miike’s slow-burning, psychological assault to the senses never received a stateside theatrical release, it became a worldwide festival and art-house favorite (Mes, 2001) and received a handsome Region 1 DVD release on June 04, 2002 thanks to the USA-based distributor Chimera/Ventura. Word of mouth quickly spread both online and in print about *Audition*’s torturous finale, and the movie soon achieved cult status as a “you’ve got to see it to believe it” kind of

experience that unwittingly paved the way for a new sub-genre of horror to emerge in Hollywood.

*Audition*'s DVD release was soon followed by a remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Nispel, 2003), *Saw* (Wann, 2004), *The Passion of the Christ*<sup>9</sup> (Gibson, 2004), *Saw II* (Bousman, 2005), *Wolf Creek* (McLean, 2005), *Hostel* (Roth, 2006), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Aja, 2006), *Saw III* (Bousman, 2006), *Broken* (Mason & Boyes, 2006), *Imprint* (Miike, 2006), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (Liebesman, 2006), *Live Feed* (Nicholson, 2006), *Turistas* (Stockwell, 2006), *Hostel Part II* (Roth, 2007), *The Hills Have Eyes 2* (Weisz, 2007), *Captivity* (Joffé, 2007), *Funny Games*<sup>10</sup> (Haneke, 2007), *Saw IV* (Bousman, 2007), *Inside* (Bustillo & Maurey, 2007), *The Strangers* (Bertino, 2008), *Saw V* (Hackl, 2008) and *Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008). Though this list is not exhaustive, it is worth noting that each of these films can be purchased at Best Buy or rented through Netflix and at Blockbuster Video.<sup>11</sup> While these types of films were not new to the horror genre – *The Wizard of Gore* (Lewis, 1970), *Snuff* (Findlay, Findlay & Fredriksson 1976), *Flowers of Flesh and Blood* (Hino, 1985) and *The Devil's Experiment* (Ogura, 1985), among others, essentially operated under the

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<sup>9</sup> I consider this a torture-porn film because of its focused determination to show Jesus' arrest and crucifixion in sustained, ultra-violent fashion. If one removes the movie's religious implications, all that remains is a stunningly violent picture that unflinchingly portrays the horrors of crucifixion.

<sup>10</sup> Though Michael Haneke has said he does not believe his film is "part of this violence pornography of the mass media" (Collis, 2008 p. 2), it is nevertheless "an experience of torture. It concerns two homicidal men, dressed in their Sunday whites, who move machine-like through a series of lakefront weekend homes ... The duration of the film is spent on the torture and eventual murder of one particular family" (Price, 2006 p. 23). The American-produced 2007 version is a nearly identical remake of director's 1997 German-language film of the same name. I did not include the '97 version in my list of torture porn movies, because it was not widely seen here in the United States. In fact, Haneke remade *Funny Games*, because "The German version did not find the English language audience for which the film was originally meant" (Collis, 2008 p. 1). Haneke would likely disagree with my decision to place his film within the torture porn sub-genre of horror. However, as he himself admits, the film is an assault on the audience.

<sup>11</sup> Blockbuster Video does not always carry unedited versions of movies. For example, the rental chain only carries truncated R-rated versions of *Inside* and *Martyrs*.

same premises – they did something their precursors could not: achieve mainstream acceptance.

With minor exceptions, these films have been extremely successful at the Box Office. *Hostel*, for instance, knocked *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Adamson, 2005) from both its perch atop the Box Office and DVD sales charts. According to IMDB.com, the budget for *Narnia* was “nearly 50 times the \$4 million dollar production budget of *Hostel*, which earned \$20 million dollars in its opening weekend alone.” Recently, according to Boxofficemojo.com, *Saw V* had an opening weekend gross of a little over \$30 million dollars, falling just shy of its predecessor’s \$32.1 million dollar opening weekend, and it went on to gross \$56.7 million dollars domestically. Bear in mind, the film’s production budget was only \$10.8 million dollars. Interestingly enough, *Saw IV* had the second highest first weekend gross for a movie opening around Halloween. In fact, according to Adler (2007), “the only movie ever to open bigger during the same time frame was *Saw III* (slightly better at \$33.6 million).” Obviously, violence and sex sells, and the horror genre is largely defined by its inclusion and juxtaposition of the two. In addition, the combination of violence and sex is relatively easy to market across cultures as the two are almost universally accepted as a language in and of themselves. Is this necessarily a positive thing?

### **Defining Torture Porn**

These films, generally referred to as *torture-porn* or *gorno* (a combination of the terms *gore* and *porno*), revel in protracted sequences of intense, graphic displays of



violence and viscera, hence my inclusion of *The Passion of the Christ*. Film critic David Edelstein coined the term *torture-porn* in his article, “Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn,” which appeared in the February 06, 2006 issue of the *New York Magazine*. According to metroactive.com’s Hannah Strom-Martin, “Gorno is, like porn, an extreme depiction, in film or photography, of parts of the body—in this case, a body that is being tortured to death. It is characterized by intimate, lingering shots of blood, and often inspires the same sort of chemical reaction in the body that one gets, far more pleasantly, from watching or engaging in sex.” UrbanDictionary.com asserts the word *gorno* as “a cinematic horror sub-genre that depicts torture, suffering and drawn-out death that tests the staying power of audiences as much as the victims. Sex has nothing to do with it, but, like porn, it’s all about visual thrills. It’s all about the gore – the more grueling the better.” If sex truly “has nothing to do with it,” why equate the violence in these films with *porn* in the first place? Why not simply classify them under the rubric *new brutalism*<sup>12</sup> – a term originally used to describe films like *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992) and *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994)?

The truth is that many torture porn films contain violence that is sexually charged and/or motivated. Consider *Hostel Part II*’s most notorious sequence, its first (and only) unbroken torture/murder, which I feel is both emblematic of the amount of violence expected by horror fans like me and typical of the style of violence permitted by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) in theatrical released, R-rated films. I created a detailed shot breakdown of this sequence, which begins on page 21 of this

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<sup>12</sup> According to Hill (1999), the term *new brutalism* usefully encapsulates social perceptions of film violence as a risk-taking activity: it is new, and therefore part of a specifically modern development within the entertainment industry that is seen by some as immoral and unethical; and it is brutal, implying that such new forms of entertainment brutalize innocent viewers” (p. 179).

thesis. My breakdown illustrates torture porn's emphasis and reliance on vivid depictions of brutality against the human body while presenting an extreme example of the sub-genre's inclusion of sexualized violence. I created this breakdown during repeated viewings of the Region 1 unrated DVD edition, paying careful attention to the length of time spent on each shot and the number of cuts contained therein. Bear in mind, the unrated version of this sequence is slightly more violent than its theatrical counterpart.<sup>13</sup> This is the only version of *Hostel Part II* available for rental from Netflix and Blockbuster Video or purchase from Best Buy or Amazon.com. In the original *Hostel* three male backpackers traveled to a Slovakian city that promised to fulfill their wildest hedonistic pleasures, but in reality delivered the naïve tourists to wealthy businessmen who purchased the rights to torture and kill them. *Hostel Part II* deviates from this formula in two notable ways. First, the plot follows three *female* college students who are likewise lured to the very same Slovakian city under false pretenses. Second, whereas the first (male) victim in the original *Hostel* was tortured before being killed off-screen, the first (female) victim in part two is tortured and killed during a long, drawn out and intensely graphic sequence that runs for nearly six minutes.

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<sup>13</sup> The Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com) lists the runtime of the theatrical release of *Hostel Part II* (Roth, 2007) as 93 minutes. The Region 1 DVD release of the unrated director's cut of the film lists its runtime as 95 minutes. According to Bill Gibron (2007) of DVDTalk.com, the difference between the R-rated and unrated versions of this sequence are as follows: "When Heather Matarazzo falls under the scythe, there are more obvious and frequent cuts to her back, and when her throat is finally cut, the flow of vein juice is very intense."

## Hostel Part II Scene Breakdown

Shot #	Shot Duration	Transition	Shot Scale/Shot Description	Camera Movement	Lighting Description	Editing Convention
1	32 sec.		We're in a low angle, tight <b>close-up</b> (CU) on Lorna (Heather Matarazzo). We can see up her nostrils. The muscles in her shoulders are tensed, as are the veins in her neck. She is whimpering, though her cries are muffled by the thick, maroon-colored cloth gag tied across her mouth. Her gaze is fixed upwards, off-screen and – for some reason – her ponytail is standing straight up. Though she appears to be in a hallway, hemmed in on either side by brick walls, we can see a well lit open space behind her. Unable to turn around, Lorna presumably does not know this space even exists.	The camera begins a slow, counter-clockwise turn that reveals Lorna is actually hanging upside-down.	Key lighting from behind.	
<b>CU = Close-up</b> <b>MCU = Medium close-up</b> <b>WS = Wide shot</b> <b>MLS = Medium long shot</b> <b>POV = Point of view</b>			<p>Lorna continues to whimper. We hear a metallic clang, the sound of gears turning. Lorna begins to move out of the hallway towards the open space. Behind her (out of focus), Roman (Roman Janecka), the long-haired gentleman who kidnapped her earlier, enters from the right side of the screen. He places his left leg up on a step and beckons her forward with his left hand while speaking un-subtitled Slovakian. He is dressed entirely in black</p> <p>We see that Lorna is actually naked, and the darkened hallway opens up into a large room adorned with unit candles.</p>	<p>The camera tracks with Lorna, staying in tight on her face.</p> <p>The camera pans out slightly.</p>		

2	5 sec.	Cut	<p>Our gaze shifts so we are at a skewed angle, looking partially through the iron spokes of a wheel that is being turned clockwise and partially over the shoulder of the bald-headed man (also dressed entirely in black) turning it. We remain fixed on him in <b>medium close-up</b> (MCU). Behind him we see Lorna – hanging upside down from a chain like a slab of meat – move from the darkened hallway into the chamber. Her body sways from side to side; her hands are chained behind her back. She continues to whimper. In the far background, slightly out of focus, we see another man, also dressed entirely in black, lighting some of the candles with a butane torch.</p>		Key lighting from above and behind.	Shot/reverse shot.
3	7 sec.	Cut	<p>Low angle, MCU on Roman as he beckons Lorna (off-screen) towards him. He motions for the man operating the iron wheel (off-screen) to stop.</p>		Key lighting from above and behind.	
4	3 sec.	Cut	<p>Side view, MCU on Lorna, who is framed in the center of the shot. Her ponytail is on the left-hand side of the screen; her gaze is looking right. She sways from left to right as the gears come to a clanging halt. She continues to whimper.</p>		Key lighting from behind.	Match on action.
5	7 sec.	Cut	<p>Back to the low angle, MCU on Roman, who turns to his right and picks up a butane torch. Over his shoulder, on the right-hand side of the screen, we see the man in the background of Shot #2 continuing to light candles. Roman ignites his torch and hunches down to light a candle off-screen.</p>	The camera tilts down slightly.	Key lighting from above and behind.	
6	33 sec.	Cut	<p>Low angle WS. Lorna, visible from her belly button to her head, dangles helplessly in the middle of the screen. Because she is in the middle-ground of the shot, she appears diminutive. Lorna is hanging above what appears to be a large tiled bathtub surrounded by candles. An ornately decorated, red pillow and a scythe rest inside it. Behind Lorna we see a staircase which is adorned on either side with unlit candles. We hear</p>		Key lighting from above and behind. Peripheral lighting from the candles.	

7	22 sec.	Cut	Lorna's whimpering as well as the constant, rhythmic hum of the three men's butane torches. Roman and the wheel operator slowly make their way into the foreground. Roman eventually steps in to the bathtub. Side shot, MCU of Lorna and Roman, matching each other's gaze. Lorna is looking right, while Roman is looking left. While Roman stares at Lorna, we hear the hum of his butane torch (which is off-screen). He raises and lowers his eyebrows. Lorna begins to cry louder now, presumably because she realizes this man – whom she trusted – brought her here. Roman kisses Lorna's forehead and steps out of the bathtub and into the background, exiting off the left side of the screen. We hear the clomping of his boots. Lorna lets loose a very high-pitched squeal.	The camera drops ever so slightly.	Key lighting from above and behind.	Match on action.
8	8 sec.	Cut	MCU on Lorna. We're looking at her face, pained and tense. She bisects the staircase in this shot. Behind her we see the three men light the remaining candles and watch as each of them exits the chamber. Roman tromps up the stairs and walks into darkness.		Key lighting from above and behind.	Match on action.
9	5 sec.	Cut	Low angle, MCU of Roman as shuts off the lights in the chamber with his right hand and proceeds to exit the room, shutting the large metal door behind him.		Key lighting from above and behind. Peripheral lighting from the candles. Once the lights go off, key lighting is from candlelight.	
10	12 sec.	Cut	CU of chains. We're tracking from the chains that suspend Lorna from the ceiling. Our gaze fixes on Lorna's ankles, which are bound and slicked with sweat.	Tracking shot from the ceiling to Lorna's ankles.	Candlelight.	



11	15 sec.	Cut	We're back in a MCU on Lorna, who continues to cry. We simply watch her hanging helplessly for a while. Eventually, we hear the large metal door unlock. Lorna grows quiet as the door opens behind her.		Candlelight.	
12	4 sec.	Cut	Low angle, <b>medium long shot</b> (MLS) looking up at the door. A middle-aged woman, Mrs. Bathory (Monika Malacova), enters wearing a hooded cloak and high heels. We know she is wearing high heels because we can hear the sound they make on the concrete floor.		Candlelight.	
13	8 sec.	Cut	Mrs. Bathory's <b>point of view</b> (POV) as she slowly approaches the stairs. Lorna's entire body is on display in a WS. She is facing away from us. We hear the click-clack, click-clacking of high heels on the concrete as well as Lorna's whimpers. Ominous music plays over the action	The camera slowly moves forward.	Candlelight.	Shot/reverse shot and possible eye-line match.
14	11 sec.	Cut	Low angle on Mrs. Bathory as she walks down the stairs. We see her cloak is a deep crimson. The door closes behind her with a metallic thud. Our gaze fixes on Mrs. Bathory's be-speckled high-heeled shoes.	The camera tracks backwards and tilts to focus on Mrs. Bathory's shoes.	Candlelight.	
15	8 sec.	Cut	We're back in MCU on Lorna. Behind her we see Mrs. Bathory throw off her cloak to reveal she is naked underneath. From this perspective, her outstretched arms look like they're protruding from Lorna's ears, and Lorna's ponytail covers Mrs. Bathory's pubic region. Mrs. Bathory's left breast is in frame, and she drops her arms before proceeding to move into the bathtub. We watch Mrs. Bathory's naked body exit out of frame. She is wearing a jeweled necklace.		Candlelight.	
16	10 sec.	Cut	Canted side shot: inside the bathtub. Mrs. Bathory lies down and rests her head against the pillow that sits in the left-hand portion of the screen. Her hair is a deep crimson. The necklace dangles between her breasts and down to her belly button. Mrs. Bathory hungrily eyes	The camera pans left to follow Mrs. Bathory.	Candlelight.	Match on action.

17	16 sec.	Cut	Lorna off-screen. The sharpened, curved blade of the scythe is in full view a well. Candles occupy the foreground and the background. Mrs. Bathory takes a deep breath and glances at the weapon to her left. Canted, high angle CU on Mrs. Bathory. We hear the sound of metal scraping tile as she picks up the scythe off-screen with her left hand. Mrs. Bathory moves the weapon's wooden handle (out of focus) into the foreground from the right side of the screen, to the left, and back again while slowly moving her tongue between her parted red lips. Her eyebrows are sharp, and her eyes are decorated with dark, black eyeliner. Lorna's whimpers give way to a fit of coughing.		Candlelight.	Match on action.
18	12 sec	Cut	MCU of the back of Lorna's head. Mrs. Bathory (off-screen) uses the scythe to play with Lorna's ponytail. Its blade makes a metallic sound as it "combs" her hair. Suddenly, the blade moves passed Lorna's buttocks and begins to scrape down her left thigh and butt cheek.	The camera follows the blade.	Candlelight.	Match on action.
19	2 sec.	Cut	CU on Lorna's painful reaction. In the background we see the scythe's wooden handle moving back and forth.		Candlelight.	Match on action.
20	4 sec.	Cut	CU on the blade as it moves down Lorna's left butt cheek. The blade is not cutting the skin, though it does occasionally gets caught as the skin bunches up.	The camera follows the blade.	Candlelight.	Match on action.
21	3 sec.	Cut	High angle CU on Mrs. Bathory's face. She is taking great pleasure in this. The scythe's handle sways from side to side in the foreground (out of focus)		Candlelight.	Shot/reverse shot and possible match on action.
22	8 sec.	Cut	CU on the scythe's blade as it scrapes down Lorna's back, which is covered with beads of sweat. The blade gets caught up on Lorna's shoulder blades.	The camera follows the blade.	Candlelight.	Match on action.
23	23 sec.	Cut	Angled CU on Lorna, who is crying uncontrollably now. The scythe moves out of frame for a moment before reappearing to cut the gag free from her mouth. Lorna		Candlelight.	Match on action.

24	4 sec.	Cut	coughs and begs, "Please, please, stop, stop!" Her breasts sporadically bounce in and out of frame. We're back to the high angled CU of Mrs. Bathory. We hear Lorna continuing to beg, "Please, please" off-screen. Mrs. Bathory's muscles tense as she swings the scythe off the left side of the screen, presumably to strike,		Candlelight.	Match on action.
25	3 sec.	Cut	Angled CU on Lorna (same as shot #23). She continues to beg, "Please, please, no no!"		Candlelight.	
26	2 sec.	Cut	We're back to the high angled CU of Mrs. Bathory. Her mouth opens, and her tongue moves behind her upper teeth. She swings the scythe from left to right. We hear the slicing of flesh (off-screen).		Candlelight.	Match on action.
27	3 sec.	Cut	Extreme CU on Lorna. We hear the blade rake across her flesh, and she screams painfully. Her head (and body) flail around wildly. The camera follows to keep her in frame.	The camera follows Lorna's movements to keep her in frame.	Candlelight.	
28	12 sec.	Cut	MCU of Lorna. We're looking at her face as she limply flops around. Her breasts are almost fully in frame and the pain on her face evident. Blood cascades off her back. Candles flicker out of focus in the background. We see the scythe moving behind Lorna and hear additional swishes of its blade rendering her flesh. Her head tenses and jerks towards the left side of the screen. Lorna's screams grow hoarse as the crimson blood pours down her neck and pools by her earlobe.	The camera follows to keep Lorna's pained face in frame.	Candlelight.	
29	5 sec.	Cut	We're back to the high angled CU of Mrs. Bathory. She slices left to right and right to left, as Lorna's blood splatters across her chest and face. Mrs. Bathory licks at the droplets of blood that dribble on her mouth.		Candlelight.	
30	2 sec.	Cut	CU on one of the candles. Drops of Lorna's blood fall onto the flame, threatening to extinguish it. In the background, other candles flicker out of focus.		Candlelight.	
31	1 sec.	Cut	CU of the scythe cutting a deep gash across Lorna's very bloody back.		Candlelight.	



32	2 sec.	Cut	Frontal MCU of Lorna as she reacts to the sizable wound. Her body is covered in dripping blood, and she screams in agony.			Candlelight.	Match on action.
33	2 sec.	Cut	Back to the high angled CU of Mrs. Bathory. She continues to slice and dice with the scythe and is in absolute ecstasy. Mrs. Bathory opens her mouth to catch the Lorna's blood. Her face, shoulders and chest are almost completely covered in blood now.			Candlelight.	
34	1 sec.	Cut	Medium CU of Lorna's back, which is covered with gashes. The scythe slices across it again.			Candlelight.	
35	5 sec.	Cut	CU of Lorna flailing around again (same as shot #28). Her face is covered in blood.		The camera moves to keep Lorna in frame.	Candlelight.	Match on action.
36	2 sec.	Cut	A lingering CU of a fresh slice across Lorna's back.			Candlelight.	
37	4 sec.	Cut	Back to the high angled CU on Mrs. Bathory, whose face, neck and shoulders are now completely covered with Lorna's blood.			Candlelight.	
38	3 sec.	Cut	CU of Lorna's face. Her flailing head whisks blood around. Blood pours off her like a waterfall.		The camera moves to keep Lorna in frame.	Candlelight.	
39	3 sec.	Cut	Almost full body Side Shot of Mrs. Bathory in the bathtub. She is no longer holding the scythe. Instead, she is rubbing the cascading blood over her entire body, moaning in ecstasy as she does so.			Candlelight.	
40	2 sec.	Cut	High angle <b>wide shot</b> (WS) looking down from Lorna's bloody body at Mrs. Bathory in the bathtub. Mrs. Bathory sensuously rubs the blood over herself. Her right leg is positioned so viewers cannot see her pubic region, though her breasts are fully in frame. Lorna's body, a slab of rendered tissue, is essentially ruined flesh.			Candlelight.	
41	9 sec.	Cut	Almost full body side shot of Mrs. Bathory (same as shot #39). She continues to cover herself in Lorna's blood and reaches off-screen with her right hand.			Candlelight.	

42	4 sec.	Cut	Mrs. Bathory's bloodied right hand reaches outside the tub and grabs hold of a sickle.		Candlelight.	Match on action.
43	2 sec.	Cut	Almost full body side shot of Mrs. Bathory (same as shot #41). She brings the weapon into frame and raises it off-screen towards Lorna' coughing form.		Candlelight.	Match on action.
44	2 sec.	Cut	CU of Lorna from the neck down. We see the weapon's blade approach her throat.		Candlelight.	Match on action.
45	1 sec.	Cut	Almost full body side shot of Mrs. Bathory (same as shot #43). She eagerly prepares to make the final slice.		Candlelight.	
46	1 sec.	Cut	CU of Lorna from the neck down (same as shot #44). The blade slices across her neck		Candlelight.	Match on action.
47	1 sec.	Cut	Extreme CU of the throat wound. Blood pours out of Lorna's neck like a geyser. Her body convulses spastically.	The camera moves to keep Lorna in frame.	Candlelight.	Match on action.
48	3 sec.	Cut	Almost full body side shot of Mrs. Bathory (same as shot #45). Lorna's blood flows over Mrs. Bathory's ecstatic face.		Candlelight.	
49	4 sec.	Cut	CU of Lorna's slit throat. Lorna's head jerks as the last bits of life leave her body. Off-screen we can hear Mrs. Bathory's continued moans of ecstasy.		Candlelight.	
50	4 sec.	Cut	CU of the candle being doused with Lorna's blood. The flame is extinguished. In the background, out of focus, we can see other candles being splattered with blood too. Mrs. Bathory's moan plays over this as well.		Candlelight.	

Length of scene: 5 minutes, 49 seconds.

Average shot length: 6.98 seconds.

As the preceding scene breakdown illustrates, this distended first torture sequence of *Hostel Part II* seems to support Clover's (2000) assessment that women in horror films suffer on-screen far longer than their male counter-parts. Clover writes,

Even in films which males and females are killed in roughly even numbers, the lingering images are inevitably female. The death of a male is always swift ... [and is] more likely than the death of a female to be viewed from a distance, or viewed only dimly (because of the darkness or fog, for example), or indeed to happen off-screen and not be viewed at all. The murders of women, on the other hand, are filmed at closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length. (p. 142)

Eli Roth uses this genre convention, typical within slasher films, to seemingly frame women in three negative ways: as helpless victims, as objectified pieces of meat and as monstrous, deviant sexual predators. During an interview with Sheila Roberts posted on [Moviesonline.ca](http://Moviesonline.ca), Roth said, "anytime people see women in a horror film, all they say is that all these girls are just pieces of meat and literally in *Hostel Part II*, they are."

In the scene, Lorna (played by Heather Matarazzo) has no chance of escaping her grisly demise and, because horror films are heavily reliant upon audience expectations, viewers are never directed or expected to believe that she does. Consequently, the only narrative function of the sequence is to tell the viewer that Lorna's character gets murdered. Its primary purpose is to linger on the grueling display of violence. Mrs. Bathory (played by Monika Malacova) clearly derives sexual pleasure from her actions, and her phallic weapon of choice, a long, curved scythe, is perhaps meant to invoke Freudian notions of woman as both castrated male and the agent of castration. I find this

variation on the previously mentioned “monster = homosexual” motif irresponsible in that it equates lesbian predilections with butchery.<sup>14</sup> Even so, the sexualized violence is clearly not meant to sexually excite the audience; it is meant to disgust, disturb and unsettle. So, how is this violence pornographic?

Though the term *pornography* has no universally accepted meaning, it typically refers to any sexually explicit material across media designed to sexually arouse or provide sexual gratification to its audience. Moreover, the term itself can be used to describe materials either considered indecent (and protected by the First Amendment) or obscene (speech that is not protected by the First Amendment and deemed illegal). According to Horrocks (1995), “Porn is the pit of contemporary culture, a reservoir of shameful desires, hidden masturbatory fantasies, and great loneliness. Porn seems irrevocably associated with sleaze, perversity and even criminality” (p. 101). West (2004) takes this a step further, observing that people often use the term *pornography* with a normative force.

When many people describe something ... as *pornographic*, they seem to be doing more than simply dispassionately pointing to its sexually explicit content or

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<sup>14</sup> The “homosexual=monster” motif was present in the original *Hostel* as well, though it was more muted. In that film, possibly closeted homosexual Josh (Derek Richardson) offers to purchase a beer for a Dutch businessman (Jan Vlasák) whom he insulted earlier in the film. Despite having a wife and child back home, the Dutchman clearly harbors repressed homosexual tendencies, as evidenced when he says, “It’s not easy, but from my experience choosing to have a family was the right choice for me. Now I have my little girl who means more to me than anything in the world. But you should do whatever’s right for you.” Unbeknownst to Josh, this is his eventual murderer. Interestingly enough, the scene showcasing Josh’s torture and demise is not as lengthy as its *Hostel Part II* analogue (the unrated version of the scene clocks in at five minutes, nine seconds), and most of its violence occurs off-screen. The Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com) lists the runtime of the theatrical release of *Hostel* (Roth, 2005) as 94 minutes. The Region 1 DVD release of the unrated director’s cut of the film lists its runtime as Approx. 94 minutes. According to Bill Gibron (2006) of DVDTalk.com, the difference between the R-rated and unrated versions are minimal: “While the version of the film here is called ‘uncut’ Roth reveals (in his numerous commentaries) that there is very little added gore. A bit more eye spew, a tad more severed leg fluid, but that’s it. There are not missing scenes of carnage or added moments of nastiness inserted here.”

the intentions of its producers – indeed, in these debates, the intentions of producers are sometimes treated as irrelevant to the work's status as *pornography*. They seem to be saying in addition, that it is *bad* – and perhaps also that its badness is not redeemed by other artistic, literary, or political merit the work may possess. (p. 04)

When Edelstein first juxtaposed the terms *torture* and *porn* he accomplished two things. First, given the negative connotations behind the word *pornography*, he effectively rendered a judgment on these films that not only revealed his bias against them but pointed to their badness. Second, he none-too-subtly suggested people who willingly consume them are deviant and get off on the violence.

I don't agree and propose the term *pornography* need not refer only to those representations that are sexually explicit or designed to provide sexual gratification to its audience. Rather, I define pornography as any representation created solely to arouse a visceral response from its audience. Consequently, horror films that eschew character development and suspense in favor of showcasing lingering shots of the ruination of the human body (such as *The Passion of the Christ* or *Martyrs*) could then be accurately described as being pornographically violent or part of the *pornography of violence* some say permeates American culture. Dentan (2000) describes this *pornography of violence* as “emotionally arousing material that focuses on doing harm to people in a way that, perhaps tacitly, seems to condone that behavior in order to gratify the author or reader” (p. 01). To be clear, I am not suggesting that sex has nothing to do with torture porn, as many of the films relegated to its ranks contain no small amount of sexualized violence against women or the looming threat of it. Consequently, I (re)define *torture-porn* as a

cinematic sub-genre of horror characterized by sustained and extreme, realistic displays of violence against the human form that are often (but not always) sexually charged or motivated. My more nuanced definition of torture porn allows for the inclusion of films like *The Passion of the Christ* to be placed alongside the more representative examples of the genre like *Saw* and *Hostel Part II*. Most importantly, my definition attempts to define the sub-genre without making a judgment against its audience.<sup>15</sup>

Even redefined, the *torture-porn* moniker remains a loaded term, one laced with negative connotations that not only presuppose the artlessness of the text itself, but also the perverted sexual predilections of both its producers and consumers. The label still points an accusatory, judgmental finger at those who produce and/or consume content that falls under its blood soaked umbrella as a form of entertainment. Furthermore, Hilden (2007) argues the “label is damaging, unfair, and misguided. It attempts to trivialize certain movies by suggesting that their only purpose is to titillate - short-circuiting the brain to go straight to the pulse or groin.”

Scholarly writing on the subject of horror tends to focus on media effects studies that examine if a correlation exists between watching fictional violence and committing acts of aggression and analytical essays that, from the outset, generally contain negative biases against consumers of horror movies. Journalistic writing about R-rated horror films and the prevalence and impact of violence within the entertainment industry typically employ a castigating tone that sometimes irresponsibly and erroneously links violent entertainment to its real life manifestations. What follows is my review of

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<sup>15</sup> In his article “The Right Snuff” posted on MSN.com, Don Kaye failed to define torture porn without attributing a negative bias to its audience. He states that torture porn “expresses the idea that its viewers are intensely, pruriently aroused by the sight of human bodies — usually young, nubile ones, and quite often female — getting torn into bloody chunks in the most awful ways imaginable.”

pertinent academic studies about mediated forms of violence, centering on horror films and their audiences and the journalistic discourse surrounding violence within the entertainment industry.

### **Scholarly Discourse Surrounding Torture Porn**

Violence is an inescapable characteristic of American culture, especially within its entertainment industry. “Violence enlivens stories and is a part of stories that need telling. Excitement comes from the anticipation and experience of vicarious violence ... the industry may capitalize on the human appetite for violence, but it doesn’t create the hunger” (Trend, 2007, p. 119). Nor does it necessarily condone it. According to Prince (2006):

The biggest change that occurred in screen violence after 1968 was an increase in its stylistic amplitude, that is, filmmakers continued to depict the same kinds of violent acts as before but now gave them more stylistically elaborate treatment. By detailing wounds to the body, and using camerawork and editing to extend the screen time of violent episodes, film violence has become more insistent and expansive, and this change has occurred predominantly in the domain of style rather than behavior. (p. 20)

In other words, violent behavior has always been part of the movies. According to Arnheim (1985), people “tolerate most often and for the longest time a certain medium degree of arousal, which makes them feel neither over-stimulated nor dissatisfied by a lack of sufficient occupation” (p. 862). Cupchik (2001) clarifies this by saying, “from a behavioral perspective, respondents prefer moderate levels of arousal because excessive

uncertainty produces too much arousal, and they would want to avoid the aversive stimulus” (pp. 73-4). This evaluation, however, doesn’t mesh with the over-saturation of violent content within R-rated horror films and their immense popularity.

If people prefer medium degrees of arousal, why would they actively watch movies designed to over-stimulate, thus generating huge profits for the movie industry? Brophy (1986) asserts, “Gratification of the contemporary horror film is based upon tension, fear, anxiety, sadism and masochism – a disposition that is both tasteless and morbid. The pleasure of the text is, in fact, getting the shit scared out of you – and loving it; an exchange mediated by adrenaline” (p. 5). Bellin (2005) suggests the gruesome slaughters inherent in contemporary horror films constitute “their principal, if perplexing, allure” (p. 137), a sentiment that recalls Brophy’s adrenaline-exchange hypothesis. Tamborini, Stiff & Heidel (1990) conclude viewers’ enjoyment of graphic horror stems from the level of empathy audience members feel for the people on-screen, where they define empathy as “the reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another” (p. 617). Sociologist Karen Cerulo (1998) called this a **victim sequence**, wherein “an early link between victims of violence and the heinous nature of the acts that befall them” (p. 40) is established. Stephen Prince (2006) explains, in a victim sequence, “The structure promotes an alliance with the offended, and emphasizes the gross and unacceptable nature of violence” (p. 15).

Horror films are, of course, fiction films, and in fiction films, the violence is not real. Such violence is a staged representation of reality that is deliberately directed through the use of lighting, special effects, camera placement and movement, editing, sound and musical cues. Audience perception is essentially directed towards specific



emotional responses – to jump, gasp, laugh, cry, etc. at key moments. As Prince (2006) notes, real death would take viewers out of the fictional realm. Audiences “have no real-world frame of reference to measure the violence by ... The crux of the matter is that the wounding appears credible, especially in the absence of these other frames of reference, provided viewers suspend their disbelief” (p. 17). Part of one’s enjoyment of horror, then, is that they know what they are seeing is not real.

One study, done by Haidt, McCauley & Rozin (1994), examined the reactions of college students while watching three documentary-style videos involving extreme scenarios of violence and gore. McCauley (1998) writes:

The first film shows a dinner party at a large table in which the centerpiece is a live monkey; the monkey is hammered unconscious on camera, its skull opened, and its still-pulsing brains served onto platters for the epicure diners. The second film shows a slaughterhouse; the camera follows steers as they are stunned, have their throats cut, and are hung up to be butchered. The third film shows head surgery conducted on a young girl; surgeons pull the child’s face inside out away from her skull. (pp. 144-5)

The students were given the option to shut off the tapes whenever they deemed it necessary to do so, and, on average, they turned them off about halfway through. The experiment assumed each student had, at one time or another, watched graphic depictions of fictional violence in a Hollywood film. The researchers ultimately concluded that their documentary-style violence was deemed unattractive and repulsive, because it was not within a fictional framework. McCauley (1998) states, “[These films] were disgusting rather than enjoyable, because they were loaded with cues for reality and were lacking

the frame of dramatic fiction” (p. 161). A filmed sequence of violence may re-create the real world in a convincing manner, but, at the end of the day, when the credits roll and the lights come up and the audience begins filing out of their seats to the theatre lobby, the individual and collective experiences of all involved were based entirely on a fictional event.

Do audiences enjoy watching violent films because of their violent content or in spite of it? Krcmar & Kean (2005) argue that “by choosing to watch certain programs, audiences indirectly indicated their needs” (p. 415) and “sought to understand not only who watches violent programs, but who enjoys them” (p. 400). Their study focused on how four major personality factors (neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience and agreeableness) contributed to viewers’ decisions to seek out violent entertainment and found, in part, “those who are excitement seekers, but who are less likely to be active themselves, enjoy the mediated excitement found in violent programming” and “it may be that the aesthetic challenges of violent media lend themselves to positive evaluations from those interested in images that are attractive to the senses” (p. 416-7).

Clearly, many of the stand-alone studies paint an incomplete picture, which is no doubt the result of the problems inherent in trying to scientifically study media violence. According to Trend (2007), such problems have to do with the complexity of human behavior and logic. He states,

A researcher first needs to figure out how to isolate the behavior and then to establish whether one thing or many things cause it. Human violence is influenced by many elements: brain chemistry, environment, upbringing, culture and the immediate circumstances around it ... People do not simply view a TV

show or a deodorant advertisement and then robotically go out and act upon this experience. They enjoy, transform, reject, ignore, remember or forget the messages they receive ... just because there happens to be a correlation between someone having watched a particular movie and a later act of aggression, that doesn't mean that the action was caused by the program" (p. 39).

A meta-analysis of the literature, however, weaves an interesting, if disturbing, tapestry, partly because the rise of torture porn in the United States seems to coincide, strangely enough, with the re-emergence of the puritanical view that graphic, realistic, consensual sex has no place in mainstream films. Torture porn films, like their puritanical brethren the slashers, have been criticized for being like community-level campaigns to desensitize particularly male audiences to highly sexualized violence against the body. The violence in torture porn (and slashers in general) often occurs during sexually arousing scenes or is juxtaposed against them. Much of the criticism against the juxtaposition of sex and violence assumes the intent is to prime viewers to be sexually stimulated by the violence, rather than confused by it. Janet Maslin (1982) suggests this heightened sensuality lowers audience defenses to heighten the film's physical effectiveness. She writes, "The speed and ease with which one's feelings can be transformed from sensuality into viciousness may surprise even those quite conversant with the links between sexual and violent urges" (p. 2). However, isn't it also possible (and plausible) that the heightened state of sexual arousal prior to outbursts of violence is intended to confuse the two emotions, to make viewers feel uncomfortable with equating sex with violence? As Hilden (2007) asserts, "many of the visceral depictions of

violence in these movies conveyed strong messages that no viewer could miss. Ironically, these messages, especially in the *Hostel* films, are typically anti-violence.”

My question notwithstanding, mainstream levels of “acceptable” violence as determined by the MPAA are at a staggering high in R-rated films, while the permissive levels of pleasurable sexuality are restricted (at least theatrically) within popular culture, despite a general consensus among the scientific community that violent media stimulates aggressive behavior. In his book “More than a Movie: Ethics in Entertainment,” F. Miguel Valenti (2000) states, “Sex is life-affirming. Violence, by definition, destroys life. When it comes to these issues, most industrialized nations in the world are exactly the opposite of the United States. They see no problem with nudity or lovemaking but abhor the violence we embrace” (p. 161). One particularly troubling aspect of torture porn (and horror in general) stems from Dyer’s (2002) assertion that we look at the world through ideas of male sexuality. He writes, “Even when not looking *at* male sexuality, we are looking at the world within its terms of reference” (p. 88). Dyer examines, in part, the visual symbols for male sexuality and the way it informs our construction of narratives and raises an interesting point: “What is significant is how sexuality is symbolized, how these devices evoke a sense of what sexuality is like, how they contribute to a particular definition of sexuality” (p. 90). For instance, penises are not shown, though their evocation is oftentimes asserted, because there is no other accepted symbol of male arousal. Furthermore, Dyer suggests we are “invited to enter the fictional world of the story from scene to scene so as to see things from the male point of view, and moreover to see things through a particular sexual sensibility, that of the dominant notion of male

sexuality” (pp. 95-6). It is worth noting that all of the films previously mentioned as torture porn (including my own film, *High School Sweethearts*) were directed by men.

Most scholars accept there is some sort of connection between watching violence and aggressive behavior, whether it involves increasing aggressive constructs in viewers or desensitizing them to the severity of real-life occurrences of violence. Communication scholar George Gerbner termed most of the violence we see in films and on television *happy violence*. As cited in Scott Stossel’s (1997) “The Man Who Counts the Killings,” Gerbner explains, “we are dealing with the formula-driven mass production of violence for entertainment—what I call ‘happy violence.’ It’s swift, painless, effective ... and always leads to a happy ending” (p. 96). Happy violence results when violence is used in a humorous fashion, solves problems or occurs without serious consequences. Some scholars worry that people who routinely watch horror films with sexual violence (or sexually charged violence) may be more likely to exhibit aggressive sexual behavior than those who do not. Bushman (1998) reports, “violent media increase the accessibility of aggressive constructs in viewers” (p. 544), and several studies have demonstrated that priming by aggressive stimuli can influence individuals to make hostile attributions about the behavior of other people (e.g., Thomas & Drabman, 1978; Bargh & Pietromonaco, 1982; Wann & Branscombe, 1990; Zelli, Huesmann & Cervone, 1995). Studies have also demonstrated that repeated exposure to sexually violent films (like slasher films) desensitize viewers to domestic and sexual violence (e.g., Donnerstein & Penrod, 1988; Mullin & Linz, 1995). Yet these correlations do not prove causality, which is oftentimes assumed by film critics and journalists when they review ultra-violent horror films or

seek to explain acts of real-life violence by haphazardly linking them to violent movies, music and video games.

### **Journalistic Discourse Surrounding Violence in Entertainment**

It certainly seems like entertainment and media critics are pre-disposed to link the consumption of violent art forms with behavioral maladies or real-life acts of violence. Alarming, many of these writers either fail to link their assertions to prior research, or they fail to situate research findings within their proper context. LaVigne (2009) writes, “It’s common practice for psychologists to identify the problems, limitations and possible errors of their own research in a discussion section at the end of a published study ... While this section is an important part of the scientific process, it is rarely addressed in newspaper articles” (p. 2). So when Roger Ebert (2005), in his review of *Wolf Creek*, says, “There is a line and this movie crosses it ... The theaters are crowded right now with wonderful, thrilling, funny, warm-hearted, dramatic, artistic, inspiring, entertaining movies. If anyone you know says this is the one they want to see, my advice is: Don’t know that person anymore,” he is assuming people who want to see the film are sick in the head, even though his assessment is based entirely on a hunch. And when L. Brent Bozell III (2001), president of the Media Research Center, argues that the entertainment industry influences people to behave violently by citing nine instances wherein horrendous acts of violence occurred because transgressive movies and songs seemingly forced viewers and listeners to commit them, he fails to include any factors that contradict his conclusion. According to Gartside (2003), Bozell’s examples are “rife with inaccuracies, and the conclusion he draws from them is tainted by his unwillingness

to tell the entire story.” In the wake of the 2007 tragedy at Virginia Tech, some commentators even tried to connect the gunman’s posturing and visage with onscreen acts of brutality he *may* have seen. *Washington Post* staff writer Steven Hunter (2007) committed an egregious projection of blame when he wrote,

...it is not certain that Cho saw [John] Woo's films, though any kid taken by violent popular culture in the past 15 or 20 years almost certainly would have, on DVD, alone in the dark, in his bedroom or downstairs after the family's gone to bed. They're not family fare; they're dreamy, angry adolescent fare. They were gun-crazed ballets, full of whirling imagery, grace, masculine power and a strange but perhaps not irrelevant religiosity. They were close to outlaw works of art: They celebrated violence even as they ... streamlined it and made it seem fabulous fun. Their possible influence on Cho can be clearly seen in 11 of the photos that feature handguns.

Hunter’s assumption, without evidence to support it, that Cho even saw such films is an example of Asian stereotyping and points to a stunning lack of understanding concerning Woo’s films and motives. All of these examples reveal the authors’ inherent biases against specific types of media. Furthermore, while they are all audience-centric in that they assume a great many things about the state of mind of the consumers, they ignore the roles of the creators of the violent entertainment in question.

Though there are exceptions, creators of violent entertainment tend to be either fairly tight-lipped, vague or frustratingly evasive about answering what exactly it is they

find so fascinating about creating graphic depictions of violence.<sup>16</sup> And while genre publications like “Fangoria” and “Rue Morgue” typically include interviews with horror filmmakers, these interviews rarely delve beneath stories about such and such film’s production or broad explanations of why said filmmakers actively enjoy producing and consuming violent material. When “Rue Morgue’s” editor-in-chief Jovanka Vuckovic (2005) asked director Takashi Miike why it was important for *Audition*’s antagonist Asami to torture that film’s hero so severely, he jovially responded, “Well, because the script said so. I mean that’s Asami’s will. Though I tried to stop her, she doesn’t hear me” (p. 18). When interviewer Kier-La Janisse (2009) asked *Martyrs* director Pascaul Laugier to describe why he hates his own movie, the filmmaker explained,

Well, *Martyrs* is not a likable movie. You can’t love your own depression ... I was feeling like shit when I first started to write the film. I hated the world I was living in, feeling everything from society was so brutal, so unfair, so driven by the power of the winners ... I really wanted to use my own personal state as a way to express things I would never have dared to show to an audience if I had been in a quieter moment of my life. (pp. 17-8)

Yes, Laugier clearly acknowledged that his own emotional state of mind directly influenced his film’s content, but he failed to exactly disclose why. Why was he so depressed? And though Michael McCarty (2007) asks why it is he chooses to write in the horror genre, his answer is entirely comprised of the anecdotes of other authors. For instance, he cites Gerard Houarner, who says, “I’d like to write about nice things, but the dark won’t let me (p. 14).” McCarty also cites Harry Shannon, who cryptically explains,

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<sup>16</sup> For examples see Tom Savini’s (1994) excellent book “Grande Illusions: A Learn-by-Example Guide to the Art and Technique of Special Make-up Effects” and Stephen King’s (1981) “Danse Macabre.”



“To paraphrase Carl Jung: I had to try to gain power over my fantasies, for I realized that, if I did not do so, I ran the risk of their gaining power over me ... For me, reading and writing horror is about eating my own shadow so it won’t eat me” (p. 15). Here again, I ask the question, “Why?” To Houarner: Why won’t the dark let you? To Shannon: Why are your fantasies so frightful?

In the short educational documentary *The Killing Screens: Media and the Culture of Violence* (Jhally, 1997), George Gerbner asserts that a small group of global conglomerates utilize violence to propagate narratives showcasing white male power. This means, of course, that the creators of violence within the Hollywood system (i.e., the filmmakers) operate under a series of rules, conditions and guidelines imposed by a small group of higher-ups. This helps to explain, in part, why writers, directors, special effects personnel and the like tap-dance around questions about their motivations for creating violence as a form of entertainment. However, Gerbner’s argument fails to acknowledge the role of people such as myself, people who create violent entertainment outside the Hollywood system for their own enjoyment. I made *High School Sweethearts*, because I wanted to. There were no studio heads telling me what to add and what to retract. Every act of violence in the film, every camera angle and every spoken word are there because I wanted them to be, and my film will likely be seen by tens of hundreds of people. In other words, I willingly created violence as a form of entertainment for myself and others, despite the fact that I was not being paid to do so. In this thesis I explain my own motivations during the creation of *High School Sweethearts* in an attempt to provide a heretofore unseen glimpse into a sub-culture that is routinely vilified by the media and confounding to scholars. Through my autoethnography I explain why I consume and

enjoy dark, violent films and actively work in a sub-genre that some feel makes a profit off the abuse of women (Skenazy, 2007). The following chapter presents an overview of framing theory and narrative theory, both of which ground my chosen methodology, which is explained in tandem.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **Methodology**

An autoethnographic exploration of torture porn needs to be situated within a larger theoretical and methodological framework. To do so I will draw on framing and narrative theories which focus on narratives for storytellers – an important aspect for both the story being told within *High School Sweethearts* and the story I am telling about its creation. As previously stated, my autoethnography is a self-reflexive personal narrative about the making of *High School Sweethearts*. The first part of this chapter provides stand-alone descriptions of Walter Fisher’s narrative theory and Robert Entman’s conception of framing theory. Next, I situate autoethnography within both theories and explain its methodology. Finally, I conclude this section with a description of the methodology I used to write the autoethnographic chapters that comprise the rest of this thesis.

#### **Walter Fisher’s Narrative Theory**

As a rhetorical scholar, Walter Fisher conceived of the narrative paradigm, because he believed social scientific theories either ignored the role of values or denied the possibility of their rational assessment. Consequently, his narrative paradigm called for the utmost attention to human values, and the primary function of his paradigm is to offer a way of interpreting and assessing human communication that leads to critique. For Fisher (1984), narration refers “to a theory of symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. The narrative perspective, therefore, has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to

stories of living and to stories of the imagination” (p. 2). So, the narrative paradigm is a mode of social influence that approaches narrative rhetorically and “synthesizes two strands in rhetorical theory: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme” (Fisher, 1984, p. 1).

According to Fisher, the narrative paradigm is related to E. G. Bormann’s conception of “fantasy themes,” and “rhetorical visions” (1984, p. 7). Fantasy, for Bormann, consisted of those creative and imaginative interpretations of past happenings or predictions of future events.<sup>17</sup> When these interpretations are known collectively, they become rhetorical visions. Fisher takes this idea one step further and calls these rhetorical visions, “rhetorical fictions.” Fisher (1980) explains,

Fictions are symbolic forms that range from fragments and fabrications of the mind to invented constructs that cannot in and of themselves be verified but which do provide meaningful interpretations of how people and things exist and behave in the world. The range is from fictions that demand a “willing suspension of disbelief” to those that command their assent by their appearance as truths. The range is from poetic fictions to dialectical fictions; rhetorical fictions occupy the ground between poetic and dialectical fictions ... What we call facts are a consistent component of rhetorical fictions – they are, as I have said, real-fictions, combining matters of fact and faith. (pp. 120-1).

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<sup>17</sup> Bormann (1985) explains, “*Fantasy* is a technical term in the symbolic convergence theory and does not mean what it often does in ordinary usage, that is, something imaginary, not grounded in reality. The technical meaning for fantasy is the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need ... Rhetorical fantasies may include fanciful and fictitious scripts of imaginary characters, but they often deal with things that have actually happened to members of the community or that are reported in authenticated works of history, in the news media, or in the oral history and folklore of the group. The content of the dramatizing message that sparks the fantasy chain is called a *fantasy theme*” (p. 5).

Fisher's narrative paradigm – in addition to being influenced by Bormann – was also shaped by Frentz and Farrell's (1976) language action paradigm and Kenneth Burke's dramatism. Unlike Burke's dramatism, however, Fisher's paradigm concerns the precise part played by people in their interpretation and assessment of meanings in the world and in their choice of behavior in given situations (Fisher, 1985b, p. 87). People are not actors; their parts and participation are not scripted.

Fisher conceived of the narrative paradigm largely because he was displeased with the prominence of experts within society. Within the traditional paradigm of the rational world humans are essentially thinking beings, and they base their decisions on evidence and reason. In doing so, humans rely on technical expertise and formal logic, and that fact alone excludes the general public from actively participating in the decision-making process. Traditional rationality implies a hierarchical system, whereas the narrative rationality proposed by Fisher captures the role of the general public in making and assessing public moral arguments without formal training in logic or relying on technical experts. Fisher (1984),

was concerned with the concept of technical reason and the way it rendered the public unreasonable; with the idea of rationality being a matter of argumentative competence in specialized fields, leaving the public and its discourse irrational; with the apparent impossibility of bridging the gaps between experts and the public and between segments of the public; and with the necessity to learn what was supposed to be of the essence of persons—rationality—so that one class of citizens can always be superior to another. (p. 15)

While Perelman (1969) views human beings as arguers, and Burke's dramatism refers to human beings as actors, Fisher's narrative paradigm classifies human beings as homo-narrans: humans as storytellers.<sup>18</sup> Fisher (1984) explains, "The idea of human beings as storytellers indicates the generic form of all symbol composition; it holds that symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common, in communities in which there is sanction for the story that constitutes one's life" (p. 6). Furthermore, Fisher (1985b) asserts that human communication is full of ideas that cannot be verified or proven in any absolute way, "including metaphors, gestures, and values (p. 87)," and he wants human communication to include all forms of human expression. Accepting Bormann's conception of fantasy – which acknowledges that everyone possesses the ability to draw on past happenings to provide creative and imaginative interpretations of events – the narrative paradigm provides "logic to assess the stories constructed by humans" (Fisher, 1985a., p. 347), wherein Fisher defines logic as "a systematic set of procedures designed to add in the analysis and the assessment of elements of reasoning in rhetorical interactions" (1978, p. 377). Here, humans decide how they should live and construct their worldview according to their own values. Fisher's (1984) development of the "logic of good reasons" became a first step toward the development of his narrative paradigm. Unlike Perelman (1979), who evaluates the goodness of an argument based on whether or not an audience adheres to it, Fisher (1985a) proposes to evaluate the goodness of the argument based on how well it "can withstand the test of narrative rationality" (p. 357).

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<sup>18</sup> According to Fisher (1984), the *homo narrans* metaphor is an extension of Burke's definition of "man" as the symbol-making, symbol-misusing animal (p. 6).

The stories people tell are evaluated based on how well they relate to an audience's own individual and collective values. As stated earlier, human beings experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, each with their own conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends. Fisher (1984) explains, the world is a set of stories which must be chosen from to live the good life in a process of continual re-creation, and that the production and practice of “good reasons” is ruled by matters of history, biography, culture and character (p. 7). “Good reasons” represent the paradigmatic mode of human decision-making and communication. Though Fisher (1985b) admits they may be subjective and incompletely understood, he explains the production of good reasons is ruled by matters of history, biography, culture, and those perceptions about the status and character of the other people involved (p. 75). Essentially, good reasons are “those elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered by any form of communication that can be considered rhetorical [where *warrant* is defined as something that ‘authorizes, sanctions, or justifies belief, attitude, or action’]” (Fisher, 1978, p. 377). Though Fisher’s narrative paradigm is broadly defined to subsume all theories of communication, it seems best suited for analyzing discourse that tells a story.

Even so, the narrative paradigm is not free from criticism. Though the narrative paradigm does propose “a precise perspective for critically reading texts” (Fisher, 1985a, p. 357), it does not provide a specific method of analysis. While testing Fisher’s paradigm, Rowland (1987) admits, “Through stories humans come to grips with who they are and what their role should be in society, in other words with basic problems of human existence” (p. 267). However, he asserts that narrative standards cannot account for all

modes of discourse and argues that “narrative approaches are of little use when applied to discourse that does not tell a story” (Rowland, 1989, p. 39). In response to this latter critique, Fisher (1989) points out that Rowland, while trying to test the narrative paradigm, does not test it for real, but tests “his understanding of it, and it is his understanding that fails” (p. 55). Furthermore, Fisher (1984) argues, “The ground for determining meaning, validity, reason, rationality, and truth [in understanding ordinary experience] must be a narrative context” (p. 03). Another critic, Gring-Pemble (2001) challenges the liberatory and participatory functions of the narrative paradigm, implying that audiences do not have that much control in the creation of meaning of the messages they receive. She argues that fact alone “discounts the power of discourse to shape and position audiences’ understanding of their world in particular ways” (359). Though legitimate, many of the criticisms against Fisher’s narrative paradigm can be accounted for by combining it with Robert Entman’s conception of framing theory.

### **Framing Theory and the Narrative Paradigm**

If narratives are stories about X, Y or Z, then frames are the structures within stories that get us to think a certain way about X, Y or Z. For example, Author Joshua David Bellin (2005) rightly acknowledges how the Sixty-fifth Annual Academy Awards ceremony – ironically dubbed Year of the Woman – illustrated how Hollywood addressed the issue of gender equality in film. He writes,

The opening montage was telling: though it began with a send-up of Snow White warbling *Some Day My Prince Will Come*, and though it did excerpt films that buck the Snow White image, including *Norma Rae* (1979), *Private Benjamin*



(1980), and *Thelma and Louise* (1991), the bulk of the sequences were devoted to films, past and present, that portrayed women in their traditional roles: love objects, femmes fatales, and mothers. (p. 106)

He continues by demonstrating the prevalence of fantastical, monstrous women that dominated the movie screens throughout the '80s and '90s, which include the Tyrannosaurus Rex of *Jurassic Park* (1993), the salivating Queen baddie of *Aliens* (1986), the bloated, husky-voiced Ursula of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), the hyper-sexual (and unwed) Lucy of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), the equally hyper-sexual Sil of *Species* (1995) and the Satanic stripper of *From Dusk 'til Dawn* (1996) (p. 106). It could be argued that the purposive element of such films – aside from their presumed entertainment value – is not only that they disseminate a specific message, but how they disseminate said message. It's not what you say, after all, but how you say it, and our social reality is created through framing images of reality. The assumption inherent within the above examples is, of course, that Hollywood typically frames women using either a traditional stereotypical domestic sexual goddess mindset or a monstrous one, an idea which is supported by my shot breakdown for the first torture set-piece of *Hostel Part II* included in the previous chapter. You will recall how that scene effectively framed women in three ways – as helpless victims, as objectified pieces of meat and as monstrous, deviant sexual predators.

Framing theory essentially posits that people's perceptions of reality and values can be constructed or shaped through mediated discourse. Although the concept of framing existed prior to the '90s (for examples, see Goffman, 1974; Iyengar, 1987; Iyengar, 1989), it was Robert Entman (1993) who parsimoniously defined and structured

it. He said, “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality [or story] and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment and recommendation for the item described” (p. 52). Entman saw framing as a scattered conceptualization wherein previous studies lacked clear conceptual definitions and relied too heavily on context-specific operationalizations, so by defining “framing” in this manner, he sought to bring together insights and theories that would otherwise remain dispersed over various disciplines. He acknowledged, “Despite its omnipresence across the social sciences and humanities, nowhere is there a general statement of framing theory that shows exactly how frames become embedded within and make themselves manifest in a text, or how framing influences thinking” (p. 51).

You may find it helpful to think of a “frame” as a particular angle or a spin that shapes the way one thinks about specific elements within a story (Scheufele, 1999 p. 115). According to Balaban (2008), different presentations of similar situations can decisively influence how individuals assess particular situations, and that frames are essentially the framework for that interpretation. In other words, frames are selective views on specific issues, stories or events that guide individuals’ interpretation of said issues, stories or events (p. 11). Berger and Luckmann (1967) refer to these as typifications.<sup>19</sup> Chong and Druckman (2007) explain, “A frame in a communication organizes everyday reality by providing meaning to an unfolding strip of events and

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<sup>19</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1967) observe that most our day-to-day encounters with other people are typical and explain, “The typifications of social interaction become progressively anonymous the farther away they are from the face-to-face situation ... If I typify my friend Harry as a member of category X (say, as an Englishman), I *ipso facto* interpret at least certain aspects of his conduct as resulting from this typification—for instance, his tastes in food are typical of Englishman, as are his manners, certain of his emotional reactions, and so on” (p. 31).

promoting particular definitions and interpretations” (p. 110). Framing ostensibly changes attitudes by altering the underlying considerations used in one’s evaluation of events over time, and frames can – and oftentimes do – build upon themselves or change over time (re-frame) to reflect new or changed values. Frames, then, can be viewed as schemas for both presenting and comprehending information. The obvious reason framing theory stands hand-in-hand with narrative theory is because it revolves around how information is presented. Different frames are used in different circumstances and to illicit different reactions, just like different narrative techniques are used within different genres. Narratives bind facts and our experiences together in a coherent pattern (Goldberg, 1982, p. 242), and frames are those structures within narratives that shape how we think about those facts and experiences. As Lakoff (2008) explains, “Frames are among the cognitive structures we think with ... The neural circuitry needed to create frame structures is relatively simple, and so frames tend to structure a huge amount of our thought. Each frame has roles (like a cast of characters), relations between the roles, and scenarios carried out by those playing the roles” (p. 22).

Frames are both individuated and contextual, and framing theory utilizes both literary and rhetorical strategies to essentially tell stories. In this way, both framing theory and narrative theory are part of social constructivism. Remember, Fisher believes humans experience and comprehend life as a series of narratives which are constructed from personal experience, history, rhetorical fictions and the like. Similarly, the various modes of framing present logical puzzles for audiences to decipher. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Fisher’s paradigm is that it takes into account the whole of human experience through the act of, and within the framework of, storytelling. The integration

of framing theory within the narrative paradigm allows for a meta-theoretical understanding of how reality is both created and shaped through the act of storytelling. Adding framing theory to the narrative paradigm allows me to make the needed distinctions between the overall stories I tell within the movies I create and how they are framed.

For example, the storyline told within *High School Sweethearts*—a broken-hearted high school girl gets revenge on her cheating boyfriend by killing off his sexual conquests before torturing him alongside his supposed favorite—is separate from the frames I willingly employ and subvert to tell it. Suffice to say, the way I chose to tell this story is different from the way someone else would have. Throughout this thesis I refer to both framing theory and narrative theory to distinguish between my shifting roles as an individual, a screenwriter and as a filmmaker. Now that I have provided the theoretical groundwork for my thesis, I will move on to an explanation of autoethnography, and how it is a methodology well suited to my understanding of narrative and framing theories.

### **Defining Autoethnography**

The term *Autoethnography* refers to an autobiographical form of ethnographic writing that situates the researcher as the focus of attention and attempts to communicate personal truths and their relationship to culture through his/her lived emotional experience. Ellis (2004) cites David Hyano as the originator of the term, though he limited “the meaning to cultural-level studies by anthropologists of their ‘own people,’ in which the researcher is a full insider by virtue of being ‘native,’ acquiring an intimate familiarity with the group, or achieving full membership in the group being studied (p.

38).” Its scope has since expanded to cover multiple meanings, including but not limited to, personal narratives, self-stories, ethnographic memoirs, reflexive ethnographies and personal ethnographies.

Autoethnography is first and foremost an evocative style of ethnographic writing intended to evoke experiences in readers by taking them to the immediacy of a moment to stimulate discussion. In addition, Ellis and Bochner (2003) assert that the autoethnographer’s goal is “also to enter and document the moment-to-moment, concrete details of a life” (p. 737). As stated before, Fisher conceived the narrative paradigm largely because he was displeased with the prominence of experts within society. Like Fisher, autoethnographers recognize that every human being experiences and comprehends life as a series of ongoing narratives, each with its own conflicts, characters and plot twists. By privileging the unique nature of individual experience, autoethnography attracts voices that are either dampened by societal “experts” or marginalized within mainstream society. Saukko (2008) explains that while traditional scientific methods stress that the researcher maintains a detached perspective from the subjects under study, autoethnographic style posits the author as making both a personal confession and a critical reflection on it (p. 13). Autoethnography, then, is a postmodern form of ethnography that is decidedly emotionalist in nature and borrows from constructivism (aka constructionism). As Gubrium and Holstein (1997) assert, emotionalist sociologists have always included themselves as subjects, and, “the emotionalists’ tone of writing and its substantive concerns resonate with the sights and sounds of its subject matter ... the emotionalist directs us straightaway to the feelings surrounding the actions, characteristically in florid terms. (58-9)

In short, autoethnography is emotionalist, because it positions the reader to feel experiential truths and empathize with the researcher.

For autoethnographers, this ability to “feel” the lived experiences of others is directly related to constructivist thought. Hammersley (2002) contends that constructivists believe we gain access to the world only through performative accounts designed to have a particular effect on an audience and that these accounts reflect the social characteristics of their creators (pp. 12-3). In constructivism, according to Charmaz (2000), “Data do not provide a window on reality. Rather, the ‘discovered’ reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts. Researcher and subjects frame the interaction and confer meaning upon it” (p. 523). Autoethnography is constructionist, according to Foltz and Griffin (1996), in that social scientists adhering to its methodology “reject the concept of objective ‘truth’ and remind us that writing ethnography is cultural construction, not cultural reporting ... Since all knowledge is socially constructed, the researcher, as the instrument of data collection and interpretation, plays a central role in creating this knowledge” (p. 302). Yet, unlike constructionists, autoethnographers give primacy to emotions. Ellis (1991) states, “Although social constructionists now study emotions, they neglect what emotion feels like and how it is experienced” (p. 23). As stated before, autoethnographers attempt to communicate personal truths and their relationship to culture through their lived emotional experiences (for examples, see Saukko 2008; Tillman-Healy 1996; Ronai 1996; Crossley 2009; Ellis 1995; Waymer 2009). My autoethnography detailing the making of *High School Sweethearts* will take into account constructivist and emotionalist elements by addressing my personal relationship to the culture of violence in America as

a creator of violent entertainment by presenting a first-person account of my ever-changing emotional state of mind throughout the filmmaking process. By doing so, I hope to ascertain why it is I am so entranced by Horror, why I enjoy creating and consuming fictional violence as a form of entertainment and why I ultimately chose to make *High School Sweethearts*.

### **The Autoethnographic Approach**

Autoethnographers question what Jensen (2008) refers to as “the gold standard of objectivity in research – the idea that it is possible to produce knowledge that is timeless, reproducible and interchangeable (and that only knowledge that fulfills these criteria can be valued)” (p. 384). So it is not surprising that criticisms of autoethnography oftentimes come from empirical scientists. Waymer (2009) explains that these critics,

argue that research is problematic if it does not seek to uncover objective truths but rather sees research findings as representations of interpretations or cultural events ... Autoethnographers answer these critics with a concern for verisimilitude – or the quality or state that the findings that they articulate are appearing to be true. (p. 174)

For example, the narrative of Carolyn Ellis’s “The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography” intentionally combines fictional and ethnographic scenes.

Ellis (2004) states,

I never actually taught the class I describe [in the novel], two of the characters are made up, and many of the scenes did not take place. What has taken place is that I’ve watched (and felt) myself learn, write, and teach autoethnography for the past

eighteen years ... Combining literary and ethnographic techniques allows me to create a story to engage readers in methodological concerns in the same way a novel engages readers in plots. (pp. xix-xx)

Situated within narrative and framing theory, an autoethnographer's authority is a matter of rhetorical strategy, not scientific method (Conquergood, 1991, p. 191). Viewed in this light, autoethnographies are judged by their ability to convince people that what they are reading is an authentic account of a lived experience. Conquergood states, "In a rhetorical masterstroke, Turner (1986, p. 81) subversively redefined the fundamental terms of discussion in ethnography by defining humankind as *homo performans*, humanity as performer, a culture-inventing, social-performing, self-making and self-transforming creature" (p. 187). At first glance, this seems to contradict Fisher's notion that human beings are not actors. However, if we're to accept that human beings are indeed storytellers, then humanity itself becomes a cast of characters. Our parts may not be scripted, but each one of us is indeed a character in the lives of both our own life stories and those of the people we come into contact with directly and indirectly.

According to Crawford (1996), autoethnography represents a reflexive turn of fieldwork in human study

by (re)positioning the researcher as an object of inquiry who depicts a site of interest in terms of personal awareness and experience; it utilizes the self-consciousness ... to reveal subjectively and imaginatively a particular social setting in the expressions of local and grounded impressions. Autoethnography orchestrates fragments of awareness – apprehended/projected and recalled/reconstructed – into narratives and alternative text forms which



(re)present events and other social actors as they are evoked from a changeable and contestable self. (p. 167)

Autoethnographers achieve this in the following way. According to Ellis and Bochner (2003), the researcher starts with their personal life. They pay attention to their physical feelings, thoughts and emotions to try and understand the experience they've lived through. They then write those experiences as a story. By exploring a particular life, autoethnographers hope to understand a particular way of life (p. 206). Furthermore, autoethnographies themselves showcase concrete actions, dialogue and emotions experienced by the researcher who then introspectively examines his/her own actions, decisions and feelings within the events under study. This distinguishes autoethnographies from autobiographies, or memoirs, which merely expose the self without interpretation or cultural analysis. The autoethnographer must always step back from an experience and unflinchingly examine their participation in it, their interpretation of it and its cultural significance. As Crawford (1996) states, "If the ethnographer has any expertise, it is the expertise that comes from subjective experience and implicit knowledge" (p. 158). After all, according to Ellis (1991), "Who knows better the right question to ask than a social scientist [that] has lived through the experience? Who would make a better subject than a researcher consumed by wanting to figure it all out?" (pp. 29-30). Jackson (2000) elaborates on this, stating, "although others may be able to comment as external observers of these varied experiences, again, the ones who live these daily experiences are the most qualified and well suited to convey the intricacies of personally lived events" (p. 54).

Autoethnographers primarily use introspection and emotional recall to write their narratives, and I will now discuss each of these in turn. Elshof (2005) explains, “When human beings claim to be introspecting, they are (at least sometimes) engaging in some form of observation, reflection, or inner perception of their own occurrent mental states” (p. 23). Introspection is, quite simply, the self-reflexive act of thinking about an experience without distraction with the intent to communicate that experience to someone else. To aid in the process of introspection, autoethnographers use personal diaries and/or professional notebooks, which Goodall (2000) defines in the following way:

A personal diary is a record of what happens to you in everyday life. It tends toward the intimate, and it is generally not intended for public consumption. A common entry might include the date of an entry, details about your day, a conversation that was strangely meaningful, an episode that was ecstatic or troubling, and some random reflections on what it all means to you ... A professional notebook is a record of what you observe, hear, overhear, think about, and wonder about that connects your personal life to your professional one. (p. 88)

That’s not to say autoethnographers only take notes after the fact, or after an experience has occurred. Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (1995) explain that field researchers jot down notes during ongoing scenes or events to jog their memories about it later on. They state,

Jottings translate to-be-remembered observations into writing on paper as quickly rendered scribbles about actions and dialogue. A word or two written at the moment or soon afterwards will jog the memory later in the day and enable the

fieldworker to catch significant actions and to construct evocative descriptions of the scene. (pp. 19-20)

Whereas introspection focuses the researcher's attention on what happened, emotional recall focuses his/her attention on how it felt. Ellis (2004) describes emotional recall in this way: "I imagine being back in the scene emotionally and physically. Revisiting the scene emotionally leads to remembering other details" (p. 118). Here again, autoethnographers keep personal diaries and professional notebooks to organize their thoughts. Taken together, introspection and emotional recall allow the autoethnographer to communicate their lived, emotional experiences to an audience while rooting those experiences in culture.

However, can we consciously access the motivations behind our decisions? Researchers have been studying the workings of our conscious and unconscious minds for many years and contend that much of our everyday behavior is automatic. Lakoff (2008), for instance, points to cognitive science and neuroscience that shows how we "see ourselves as having only the choices defined by our brain's frames and cultural narratives. And we live out our narrative choices made for us by our brains without our conscious awareness" (p. 34). Furthermore, according to Bargh & Chartrand (1999),

To consciously and willfully regulate one's own behavior, evaluations, decisions, and emotional states requires considerable effort and is relatively slow.

Moreover, it appears to require a limited resource that is quickly used up, so conscious self-regulatory acts can only occur sparingly and for a short time. On the other hand, the nonconscious or automatic processes ... are unintended, effortless, very fast, and many of them can operate at any given time. (p. 476)

The primary implication of these findings is, of course, that introspection and emotional recall may not actually provide autoethnographers with an accurate account of their complete lived-experiences. After all, how can we consciously access our unconscious mind when it so effectively remains hidden from us in our everyday lives? The answer to that question, according to Lakoff, is quite simple: “What we can do is become as self-aware as possible” (p. 36). And the processes of introspection and emotional recall are, at the very least, a step in the right direction.

### **My Methodology**

Following the work of Ellis (1995), Saukko (2008) and others, my autoethnography about the scripting and shooting of a torture-porn film, *High School Sweethearts*, takes the form of a self-reflexive personal narrative I composed using introspection and emotional recall. What follows is a description of the methodology I used to compose the autoethnographic chapters that make up the rest of this thesis.

The script for *High School Sweethearts* was written over the course of three months – September, 2008 thru November, 2008 – while the movie itself was filmed over the course of thirteen days, twelve of which occurred between December, 2008 and March, 2009. The first official night of shooting occurred on August 22, 2008, even though the script was still in the early stages of development.<sup>20</sup> All of my volunteer cast/crew members for *High School Sweethearts* had previously worked on other locally produced films; likewise, most had personally worked with me on my previous two films.

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<sup>20</sup> This scene required that we shoot outdoors, and I opted to shoot it well before everything else, because I knew the bulk of filming would take place in the middle of winter

Following industry standards and requirements, every cast member was required to fill out a Talent Release Form. Furthermore, every cast and crew member was fully informed about my autoethnographic work and methodology, which was ongoing simultaneously with the film's production process.

To preserve the accuracy of my personal narrative, I kept a detailed journal of the filmmaking process beginning on January 09, 2009 and ending on March 01, 2009.<sup>21</sup> This journal, itself an amalgam of a personal diary and a professional journal, not only detailed my recollection of events, but also my recreations of conversations with my actors, crew members and friends, general observations about horror films and the filmmaking process, self-analyses and daily scribbling about anything and everything in particular that had to do with *High School Sweethearts*. In addition, I had routine debriefing sessions with my friend and cameraman Rob Matsushita, my friend and special effects collaborator, Shannon Daubner, and my Thesis Chairperson, Ana Garner, Ph.D., concerning the filmmaking process and my emotions surrounding it. My debriefing sessions with Rob and Shannon typically took the form of cell phone conversations that occurred in the days prior to or immediately following each day of shooting, whereas my meetings with Dr. Garner were always scheduled as in-person office visits. Finally, Emily Mills, Kelly K., Shannon Duabner, Dolores Daubner and Josh Klessig each provided me with a variety of onset photos they snapped throughout the production process for use in my thesis.

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<sup>21</sup> I submitted my thesis proposal to the Marquette University Institutional Review Board (IRB) in December, 2008 and received their letter of approval on January 09, 2009. On that day, I retroactively wrote journal entries about the script-writing process and the filming that occurred on August 22, December 26 and December 29, 2008.

The debriefing sessions allowed me to organize my thoughts concerning every level of the filmmaking process, while the production stills and my personal journal were invaluable aids for me to engage in introspection and emotional recall before writing my autoethnographic chapters. The photos and personal journal were particularly important, because they allowed me to re-experience flash points of emotion, excitement and worry that occurred throughout the creation and construction of *High School Sweethearts*. By referring to the photos, I was able to remember various aspects of the production process that would have otherwise slipped my mind. By referring to the journal while writing my autoethnographic chapters I was able to reflect on my lived emotions and experiences with added perspective. As Ellis (2004) states,

The advantage of writing close to the time of the event is that it doesn't take much effort to access lived emotions – they're often there whether you want them to be or not. The disadvantage is that being so involved in the scene emotionally means that it's difficult to get outside it to analyze from a distance, from a cultural perspective. Yet both of these processes, moving in and moving out, are necessary to produce an effective autoethnography. That's why it's good to write about an event while your feelings are still intense, and then go back to it when you're emotionally distant. (p. 118)

Without the production photos or my journal entries, my recollections about the scripting and shooting of *High School Sweethearts*, about tidbits of conversation, specific moments of frustration, etc., would no doubt have been dampened due to the passage of time.

The following chapter is my annotated version of the shooting script for *High School Sweethearts*. It provides you with a thorough understanding of my film's

narrative as originally written and the changes I made to it throughout the filmmaking process. From there, the next three autoethnographic chapters – Chapter 5: From Heartbreak to High School, Chapter 6: The Gore the Merrier and Chapter 7: This Job Can Be Murder – are written in a novella format that combines my own ruminations about the formative experiences that shaped my interest in (and love for) horror movies with making-of-the-film vignettes and self analysis to better understand why I willingly consume and create violent imagery. I conclude this thesis with a self-analytic eighth chapter that wrestles with the implications behind my willing consumption and creation of violent imagery as a form of entertainment, and how doing so (perhaps implicitly) endorses and contributes to the culture of violence within American society. I present the annotated script first, because I want you to see my fictional narrative in its entirety before reading about my real-life experiences that shaped its creation.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Script

As previously stated, this thesis is an autoethnographic exploration about my motivations for writing and filming *High School Sweethearts*, which belongs to the torture porn sub-genre of horror. In this chapter I present my annotated version of the shooting script for the movie, because I want you to read the fictional narrative of *High School Sweethearts* before reading about the real-life events that inspired it and transpired throughout its production. Also, I want you to read the events depicted within its pages without quite knowing what to expect. Quite simply, I want you to be surprised by it.



"HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEARTS"

Screenplay by

Will Gartside

Additional Dialogue by

Rob Matsushita

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FADE IN:

INT. DAWN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Teenagers - MIKE BRISINGAMEN and his girlfriend DAWN - are lying on their backs next to one another in bed, glowing, so to speak, with an after-sex aura a la *Run Lola Run*.<sup>22</sup> A mirror hangs on the wall across from the bed.<sup>23</sup>

DAWN

Look at our reflection in the mirror.

MIKE

Yeah?

DAWN

Do you like what you see?

MIKE

That's a silly question.

DAWN

Is it? What exactly do you like?

MIKE

Everything.

DAWN

Everything?

MIKE

Yep.

DAWN

(suspiciously)

There's not one thing you'd change about how I look.

MIKE

(kissing her shoulder)

Nope.

---

<sup>22</sup> Originally, I intended to shoot this with a red filter. However, I opted against this because I felt doing so would undermine the realism of the sequence and call attention to its artificiality.

<sup>23</sup> We didn't have a mirror, so we don't actually see the characters looking into it.



In this photo: Kelly Maxwell (as Dawn) and Ben Wilson (as Mike) share what appears to be an intimate moment on set. Photo courtesy of Josh Klessig.



The illusion is shattered. From left to right: Sam Lawson, yours truly, Rob Matsushita, Ben Wilson and Kelly Maxwell. Photo courtesy of Josh Klessig.

DAWN

Oh really? Know what I think?  
(raising an eyebrow)  
...That you still have your sex  
goggles on.

MIKE

I guess you could stand to lose a  
few pounds.

Dawn rolls on her back.

DAWN

Mmmm, I see. Where from, exactly?

Mike lovingly caresses her body with his eyes.

MIKE

Definitely not your ass. That's  
already pretty cute.

DAWN

What about my breasts? Do you like  
them too?

MIKE

Tremendously!

DAWN

Which do like more?

MIKE

Never gave it much thought...I  
like them the same.

DAWN

What about the rest of me? My  
mouth? My eyes? My nose? My ears?  
How about my belly? You like it  
all?

MIKE

Every last part...

DAWN

You're so full of shit.

MIKE

...Every wrinkle and beauty mark.  
Even those five pounds I said you  
could lose.

DAWN

Okay. Before, you said "a few,"  
And now it's *five*? That number  
better not keep going up!

MIKE

What can I say? You're perfect in  
your imperfection.

DAWN

Blah, blah, blah, sentimental gay.  
(seeing he's serious)  
Then you must love me. M'aimez-vous?  
Ou voulez-vous juste me baiser?<sup>24</sup>

MIKE

Uh, would it make sense to say,  
"Je ne sais pas?" How bout, "Je  
ne parle pas Français?"

DAWN

(amused)

Why did you even take French?

MIKE

To meet you. When I heard you were  
taking it, I transferred out of  
German.

Dawn raises an eyebrow.

DAWN

Just to meet me, huh?

---

<sup>24</sup> As you will see, Dawn's character speaks French quite often throughout the script. I purposely do not subtitle these lines in English, because the audience, like Mike, isn't supposed to really know what she is saying. French-speaking members of the audience will notice that Dawn's command of the language is actually quite poor, which was intentional, because her character is only supposed to think she is speaking it well. In this particular instance, Dawn is basically asking Mike, "Do you love me, or do you just want to fuck me?"

MIKE

And I was failing German. Besides, I had a feeling you would sound sexy when you spoke French. I was very, very, right. You're practically fluent in it.

DAWN

I've been taking French since I could talk.

MIKE

Then why bother with a low-level high school class?

DAWN

Because I don't like to play games I could lose.

(beat)

Do you love me, Mike?

MIKE

Sure I do. Yes. Totally.

DAWN

Me too. Totally, tenderly, tragically.<sup>25</sup>

Dawn rolls away from him.

MIKE

What's wrong?

DAWN

I know your reputation. I could be just another girl to you.

MIKE

That's bullshit! This is different. You're different.

DAWN

Am I, now?

---

<sup>25</sup> This line of dialogue comes straight out of Jean Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963) wherein Paul says this to his wife Camille.

MIKE

Listen to me. Everything feels  
good with you. I don't assume  
anything when I'm with you...

CUT TO:

Mike in bed with MAULLY.

MIKE (CONT'D)

...Maully...

CUT TO:

Mike in bed with SIMONE.

MIKE (CONT'D)

...Simone...

CUT TO:

Mike in bed with AUTUMN.

MIKE (CONT'D)

...Autumn...

CUT TO:

Mike in bed with MARIE.

MIKE (CONT'D)

...Marie...

BACK TO SCENE

MIKE (CONT'D)

...Dawn. You're fun! For  
Christ's sake, I'm happy just  
hanging out with you.

(tenderly kissing her  
shoulder)

All this is just a wonderful  
bonus.

Dawn turns to face Mike. They simply regard one another,  
nervously holding each other's gaze. Dawn bites her bottom  
lip.

DAWN

We play well together, I think,  
but break my heart and you'll  
regret it.

MIKE

I know...I'd lose the best thing  
that's ever happened to me.

DAWN

(softly, almost to  
herself)

*Si tu triche sur moi je tu tuerais.*<sup>26</sup>

MIKE

God, that sounds sexy.

FADE TO BLACK

INSERT - Months later...

We hear boisterous laughter.

FADE IN:

INT: FARMHOUSE: BEDROOM: NIGHT

We're right smack-dab in the middle of a shared punch-line  
between Dawn, Autumn, Simone, Mully and Marie.<sup>27</sup>

Simone's LAUGH is a little louder, a little bit more  
obnoxious than everyone else's.

SIMONE

Ooh, ooh, ooh, if you think  
that's funny, just wait 'til you  
hear this one.

MAULLY

Oh my God, I, like, can't wait...

---

<sup>26</sup> In English: "Break my heart, and you'll regret it."

<sup>27</sup> The movie version of this scene differs from the one you are reading here in that Dawn is not automatically in the room with the girls. Rather, she is downstairs setting up for Mike's eventual arrival. I didn't want the audience to know Dawn and the other girls were at the same location until she walked upstairs to the bedroom. She enters the room as Simone finishes reciting the poem "The Ivory Keys."





In this photo: Mike and Dawn share an intimate moment in *High School Sweethearts*.  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



In this photo: Dawn recites "The Snow Covered Plains."  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

AUTUMN

Quiet, I want to hear.

MARIE

(despondently)

He wrote you poetry too? Un-fucking-believable.

Simone has memorized the poem. As she recites it, Marie's expression turns from one of heartbreak to anger. The other girls don't notice and struggle to stifle their laughter.

SIMONE

(clearing her throat)

"The Ivory Keys," by Michael Brisingamen.

(snickers)

*I envy, the ivory keys, gracefully touched by your fingertips. Their pleasure from your play is obvious, for the music they sing is so beautiful.*

Everyone in the room erupts in laughter.

MAULLY

That's, like, soooo ricockulous. You don't even play the piano.

MARIE

No, *she* doesn't.

A silence hangs over the group like a funeral pall.

SIMONE

Mike is so busted! Hey, Dawn, did he write you anything?

Like Simone, Dawn has committed her poem to memory.

DAWN

(without hesitation)

*The snow-covered plains, tranquil, innocent, disturbed by footprints, disrupted by the knowledge of wrongdoing.*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DAWN (CONT'D)

*The scavengers wait in the branches, watching the innocence fade, watching the goodness diminish. There they wait with mocking chatter, until I fall under the weight of my own choices. It is then they swoop to pick away my humanness, and see me to oblivion.*

MAULLY

Oh-my-god, that was, like, soooooo Emo!

MARIE

Oh-my-god, that was like soooooo 2002! You are so dumb sometimes! Hey, Maully, what's the capital of Wisconsin?

(impersonating Maully)

Um, "W."

MAULLY

Whatever, bitch! I know it's...

(thinks)

Madison?

AUTUMN

Yeah.

MAULLY

See, I knew it.

MARIE

*Fail.*

AUTUMN

Christ, Marie! We all know your dick's bigger than Maully's. Can we please get back to the poem now? Which, by the way was the very idea of honesty.

MARIE

Okay. So Mike's...flawed. But-

SIMONE

He's still worth keeping around.

MARIE

Not how I would have put it, but yeah.

SIMONE

And not just for, y'know, the righteous screaming orgasms he gives me, either. When I was having my period last month...

MARIE

Hey! Party foul.

SIMONE

Oh I'm sorry. Let me rephrase that. Last month, when I was bleeding out of my V-hole in chunks so thick I thought I was Cherry Garcia, Mike was sweet enough to buy me tampons.

CUT TO:

INT: CONVENIENCE STORE

Mike places tampons, condoms, gum and wet wipes on a pharmacy counter, smiling.<sup>28</sup>

BACK TO SCENE

MAULLY

That is, like, so gross...

MARIE

Can we keep details about Mike generally above the waist?

AUTUMN

He gave my chinchilla a dust bath...

---


<sup>28</sup> Shooting this with brand-name products in an actual convenience store would have been impractical. So, I simply filmed actor Ben Wilson standing in front of a white background while holding invented brands of condoms and tampons designed by Greg Panovich.

Economy Pack

# ACHAEANS

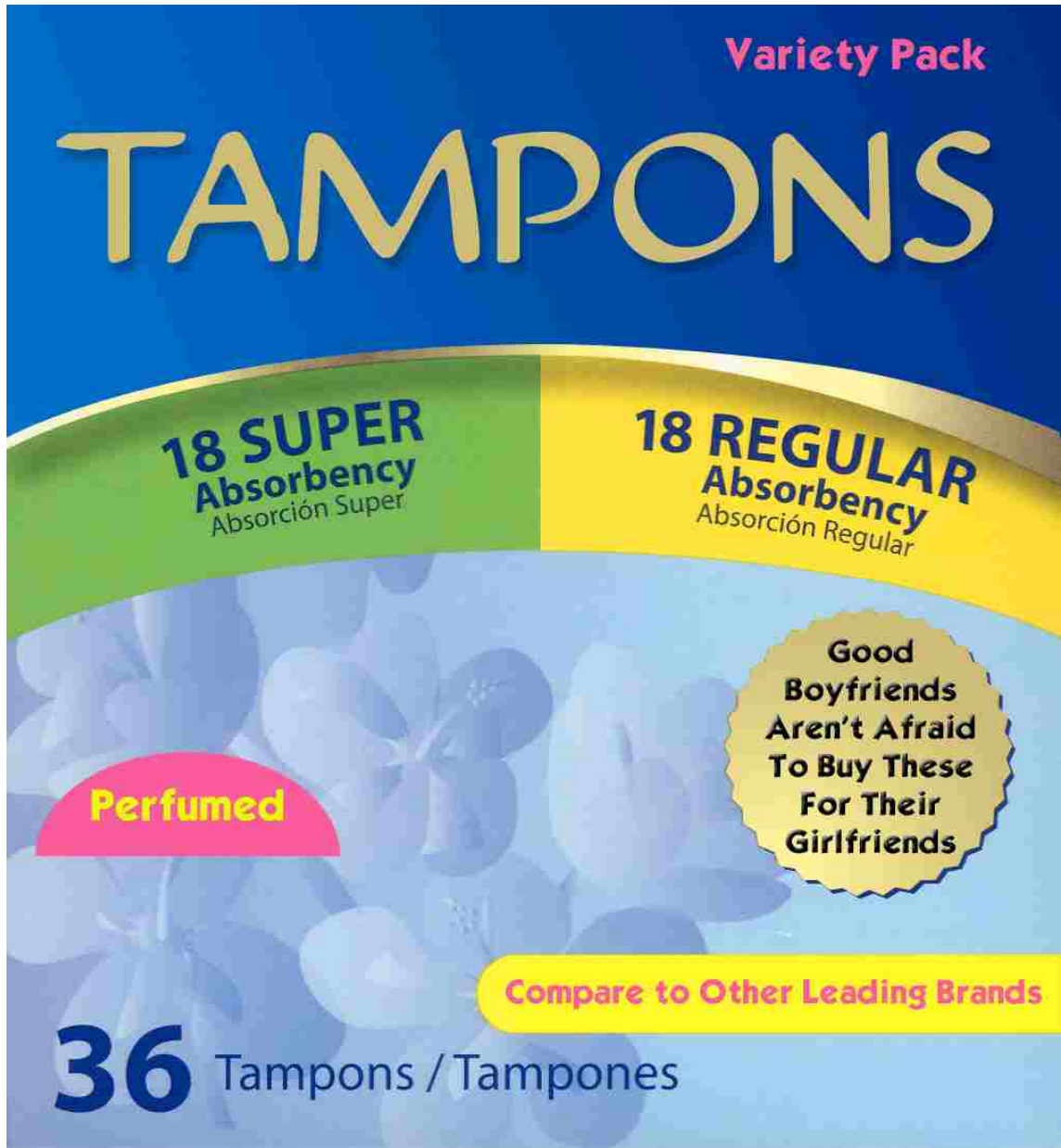
Brand Latex Condoms

**Ribbed and Lubricated**  
Because Her Pleasure is Important to You



36 Latex Condoms

In this photo: Achaean brand latex condoms. The outline of the couple was traced from the two-shot of Ben Wilson and Kelly Maxwell on page 69. Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



In this photo: Tampons brand tampons.  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

MARIE

What did I *just say*?

AUTUMN

No, no...he actually gave my chinchilla a dust bath.

MARIE

What does that even mean?

CUT TO:

Mike placing a DUST BATH on the ground for Autumn's waiting CHINCHILLA.

MIKE

There you go, little fella.

We watch the chinchilla take its dust bath in SLOW MOTION.

BACK TO SCENE

AUTUMN

Mike was so cute. He called her a little ball of furry ninja fury, a whirling dervish of cuteness.<sup>29</sup>

(beat)

It was special. To me.

SIMONE

You should have seen him with Rosy, who pretty much hates everybody.

CUT TO:

Mike and SIMONE sitting on a couch in her living room. Simone's dachshund, Rosy, is curled up next to Mike. The dog's eyes are heavy with sleep.

MIKE

(sweetly)

Close your eyes Rosy, you're safe.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

---

<sup>29</sup> Though I filmed actress Molly Greenwood saying these lines, I decided to cut them from the rough edit of the movie, because they simply didn't translate very well off the page.

CONTINUED:

MIKE (CONT'D)

Nothing to worry about. Not like I'm gonna cut your throat with a straight razor as soon as you're asleep. Not like I'm gonna just wrap my arms around your throat and start chokin' ya. Just start chokin' the life out of ya. Choke, choke, choke. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer! But don't sleep next to your enemy, dog, that's just plain foolish...it'll be your last fatal mistake!

SIMONE

You're terrible!

MIKE

She knows I'm kidding. She's fun to cuddle up against, just like you.

The two cuddle with Rosy.

SIMONE

Mmmmmm, such a smooth operator...<sup>30</sup>

BACK TO SCENE

MAULLY

I like when he licks my clit, because he writes my name with his tongue.

Everyone stares at her, flabbergasted.

MAULLY (CONT'D)

And he loves the snaky-lick trick I do when I suck his di--

---

<sup>30</sup> I decided fairly late into production to cut Simone's character from this fantasy scenario and simply filmed Ben Wilson saying his lines with three different dogs, two dachshunds and one Lhasa Apso. The dachshunds were very energetic and often jumped off the couch before Ben finished his lines, which is why I decided to shoot with a different breed of dog altogether. The Lhasa Apso (whose name was Piglet) enjoyed being the center of attention. Sadly, Piglet fell ill days after production, and his owners put him to sleep. The credits to *High School Sweethearts* include a special thanks to this wonderful, very sweet dog.



MARIE

HEY!

MAULLY

Well, I don't *have* any cute stories! And you all slept with him too!

DAWN

No, we didn't "all sleep with him." He fucked around on all of us! With each other. Let's just call it what it is. Cheating. We should do something about that, don't you think?

MARIE

Well, what are you suggesting? Sure, it's easy to be mad at the jerk-off when we're together, but that all kinda melts away when he talks.

DAWN

But he doesn't mean the things he says.

MARIE

(to Dawn)

Maybe not to you.

AUTUMN

Not to any of us!

DAWN

Thank you! That's exactly why we need to make him un-datable.

MAULLY

Oh, I get it. Like, we convince everyone he has genital herpes or something so no one else will want to have sex with him?<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> This is a direct reference to *John Tucker Must Die*.

SIMONE

That way we get him all to ourselves!

MARIE

I've heard worse ideas...

AUTUMN

That's a terrible idea.

MARIE

(staring right at Dawn)

Why? I still want to fuck him!  
Let's be honest here, we all do.  
To know Mike is to love him. And  
to love him, means having to share  
him. We've always known this. And  
I can live with that because it  
just isn't a big deal.

DAWN

You seem awfully cavalier about  
Mike.

MARIE

Because it's not a big deal.

Dawn narrows her eyes, like she's trying to see through a lie.

DAWN

What do you know that we don't?

MARIE

What is that supposed to mean?

DAWN

It means maybe you think you're the  
favorite.

MARIE

And maybe when he's fucking me, I  
know he's not fucking you...any of  
you.

DAWN

Oh, but it doesn't bother you that he has? Fucked me.

MARIE

That's not what I said.

AUTUMN

It bothers me. He's never even gone down on me.

DAWN

No? What about you, Marie? What does he do for you that he doesn't do for any of us? With me he does it all.

MARIE

This...is not...about...me. It's about Mike. You're the one with the fucking problem.

Dawn stares daggers into Marie.

DAWN

No. Mike is. I don't like being used.

MAULLY

As what? A cum-dumpster?

(beat)

Sorry. I thought we were -

(imitating Dawn)

"calling it what it is." Cum-dumpster.

(annoyed)

I mean, what are you suggesting, Dawn?

DAWN

(matter-of-factly)

We could kill him.

Nobody says a word.

DAWN (CONT'D)

(softer now)

Of course we'd torture the hell out  
of him first.

Dawn's poker face refuses to break, and no one can tell if she's serious or not.

AUTUMN

You're joking, right?

MAULLY

Duh, obviously!

DAWN

You've got to admit, that *would*  
make him pretty un-datable...

MARIE

Let me guess, we'd videotape it and  
put it on YouTube too.<sup>32</sup>

There's a Sesame-Street style hand-puppet on Dawn's bed dressed like a doctor. Its arm is controlled by a wooden stick jutting out from its wrist. Simone picks the puppet up and begins playing with it. As she says the next line, she manipulates its hand in an "I'm going to kill you" motion that slices across its throat.

SIMONE

(playfully)

How would we get away with it?

DAWN

Haven't you ever thought about how  
easy it would be to get away with  
murder?

MAULLY

No.

---

<sup>32</sup> This line is in reference to a 2008 incident in Florida involving eight teenagers (two boys and six girls) who were arrested after filming the beating of one of their classmates to put on YouTube.

SIMONE  
(still playing with  
the puppet)  
Not seriously.

MARIE  
Can't say that I have.

AUTUMN  
Uh-uh.

DAWN  
Really? Never ever? I'm the only  
one? Weird.

MARIE  
Yes, Dawn, we're the weird ones.  
Of course.

DAWN  
Well, are you at least thinking  
about it now?

There's a loooong pause. Dawn sighs, glances at the open doorway and checks her watch.

DAWN (CONT'D)  
How about now?

An awkward silence lingers.

Dawn checks her watch again and, looking right at Marie, raises an eyebrow.

DAWN (CONT'D)  
Now?  
(beat)  
Well, think fast girls, because  
he'll be here any minute.

MARIE  
WHAT?

DAWN  
Christ, I assumed you'd all be on  
board with this!

MARIE

With what, murder?

We hear a car pull up outside, followed by the sound of a car horn.

DAWN

(frustrated)

Time's up. "Yes" or "No."

MARIE

Holy shit, is that Mike?

DAWN

"YES" or "NO?"

SIMONE

"Yes" or "No" what?

MARIE

What exactly did you think we'd be on board with?

Dawn looks at all of them. They are...not ready.

DAWN

A prank. On Mike. A funny, embarrassing little prank that he'd never see coming.

Dawn smirks – well, it's sorta true.

AUTUMN

Won't a prank hurt his feelings?

DAWN

That's kinda the point. Look, when I invited all of you over here, when we put one and two and three and four together, didn't it hurt?

(to Autumn)

Didn't it?

(to Marie)

Didn't it?

MAULLY

It didn't feel awesome.

DAWN

Thank you. He made us all look like fools.

SIMONE

What, was it a secret? I basically always knew.

MAULLY

I actually kind of suspected at the pre-prom. He dedicated "The Hell of It" to me, which is from a musical I've never even fucking seen.

Behind her, Marie smiles. She's the one who showed him that movie.

DAWN

And it hurt, right?

MAULLY

It was fuckin' awkward, but I wouldn't say it hurt.

DAWN

How big a jump is it from fuckn' awkward to fuckin' hurt? Autumn, did you suspect?

AUTUMN

(holding her stomach,  
looking at her feet)

No.

MARIE

Up until now, she's been laughing along with all of us--don't bully her into feeling how *you* do.

Dawn thinks and switches tactics again.

DAWN

Listen. I am willing to acquiesce to the idea -

MAULLY

(to the tune of "La  
Cucaracha")

Vo-cab-u-LAR-ie!

DAWN

(snapping)

I can accept that maybe you're not  
as hurt as I am. But if you don't  
think you're hurt now, you WILL be  
hurting later. I promise.

(beat)

When I...when Mike makes me happy by  
just being around me, when he makes  
me smile, when I look in his eyes,  
and I see myself reflected back, I  
feel...special. I used to feel special.  
But knowing about the rest of you, I'm  
no longer special. I'm just a weak,  
foolish little girl, and that pisses me  
off! I had so much love for him. I  
would've loved him forever. And now, I  
only want to say one thing to him. Just  
one fucking thing:

(beat)

Final question, Mike.<sup>33</sup>

MARIE

(quizzically)

What the hell does that mean?

The doorbell rings. No one seems sure what to do.

DAWN

Last chance! Fine! This isn't going  
anywhere. Can't say I didn't try.  
Everybody out. Let's go!

MARIE

What? Where?

---

<sup>33</sup> Rob Matsushita suggested that this line be changed to "You're going down, clown." However, I wanted this line to directly foreshadow something we would hear again later in the movie and kept it as is.



DAWN

You can't be in this room when I answer the door. Mike and I usually come up here to...you know...and I don't want him to see you here.

Nobody moves.

DAWN (CONT'D)

(pleading)

Listen, my mind's a creaky wooden hamster wheel spinning around and around, and it's getting ready to splinter into a thousand fucking pieces! I got carried away before and just want you to move to a different room for a few minutes so I can make an excuse to get Mike to leave, okay. Please?

The doorbell rings again.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Please?

Marie capitulates and the other girls follow in step. Dawn escorts everyone to a room down the hall that looks like its ready to be repainted. Tarp, newspaper and sheets cover the floors, walls, and furniture.<sup>34</sup> A MEDIUM-SIZED AQUARIUM filled with PLANTS sits on the dresser. The PICTURE-WINDOW in the room is OPEN.

DAWN (CONT'D)

I'll be right back, try to keep quiet.

(to Marie)

We'll sort this out, okay? I'm sorry. I didn't know what I was saying before.

Dawn closes the door and we hear a faint CLICKING noise that may or may not be the door locking behind her.

---

<sup>34</sup> You'll notice the film's two most violent set pieces occur in rooms covered with tarp. This made clean-up a lot easier.

AUTUMN

So, are we doing the prank or what?

MAULLY

I dunno. I don't think so.

MARIE

No. She said she's sending him home.

SIMONE

She never really explained the fucking prank anyway.

CUT TO:

We follow Dawn as she walks downstairs. She stops at the front door and glances at her reflection in a nearby wall-mirror. She plays with her hair a little before opening the door and inviting Mike inside.

BACK TO SCENE

MAULLY

Why is she even inviting him inside if she's just gonna kick him out?

SIMONE

She probably wants to have sex with him in her room. That's why she moved us in here. That scheming, manipulative little bitch!

AUTUMN

With us here?

MARIE

Quiet! I want to hear.

SIMONE

Perv.

CUT TO:

## DOWNSTAIRS

One of Mike's legs is in a CAST. He is holding a DVD case and a bouquet of flowers.

Mike and Dawn two walk into the living room. There is a mini bar. Mike heads to the couch, but Dawn stops him, and redirects him to a dining room chair she's clearly pre-set for this purpose.

DAWN

No, no, the chair.

MIKE

But -

DAWN

It'll be fun. You'll see.

Mike sits in the chair, and Dawn stands in front of him. Mike seems to feel a little uncomfortable - like he expected nookie and is getting a performance review instead.

Dawn suddenly notices his cast.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Oh my God, what happened to your leg?

MIKE

Skateboarding accident...

CUT TO:

Mike busting his shit while trying to land a complicated skateboard maneuver.

DAWN

Poor baby...what movie did you bring?

She grabs the DVD from him, glances at it and frowns slightly.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Does John Tucker actually die at the end, or is it just a clever marketing ploy to sell tickets?

MIKE

I thought you girls were supposed to like this stuff.

DAWN

Booooooring!

MIKE

It's cute and harmless.

DAWN

You mean dopey and brainless.

MIKE

I brought you flowers.

DAWN

I see that. They're very pretty.

MIKE

Pretty flowers for a pretty girl.

DAWN

(taking the flowers)

You never stop, do you?

Dawn slinks towards Mike, gazing at him seductively and smiling that devilish smile.

MIKE

What's on your mind, dirty girl?

DAWN

Nothin' much. Just thinking about what I'm going to do to you.

MIKE

And what's that?

DAWN

Oh, you know...a little of this, a little of that...

Dawn straddles Mike, bringing her scarlet lips a mere Chapstick layer away from his own.

DAWN (CONT'D)

*Je ne suis pas sûr. Mais je ne pense pas que je te vais a tuer rapidement.*<sup>35</sup>

MIKE

Hmmm, that sounds sexy.

Dawn wraps her arms around Mike.

DAWN

Too bad you don't speak my language. It's your loss. Want me to tell you what I'd like? A drink. Want one?

Dawn races to the mini-bar before Mike even has time to respond.

Giddy, she mixes two drinks, a screwdriver (for herself) and a glass of scotch, neat (for Mike).<sup>36</sup>

She rushes back to the couch, careful not to spill anything. Mike smells his drink and cringes a bit.

MIKE

What is this, straight alcohol? I thought you'd just get me a beer or something.

DAWN

That's a big boy's drink. Would you prefer a kiddie cocktail?

Mike downs the scotch like a shot, trying really hard not to cough as it burns its way down his throat.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Dawn is essentially saying, "I don't know, but I don't think I'm going to kill you quickly."

<sup>36</sup> To save time, I decided to have pre-made drinks sitting on a tray next to the chair Mike is sitting in.

<sup>37</sup> Ben had recently turned 21 prior to shooting this scene. Because I wanted his character's reaction to the bitterness of the drink to be natural, I had him drink real scotch-whiskey for the first take (during subsequent takes, the glass was filled with apple juice). It is worth noting that, until this moment, Ben had never drunk straight alcohol before.

MIKE  
(a little hoarse)

Happy now?

Dawn giggles, lifts Mike's arm around her and snuggles up really, really close.

Dawn slides her right hand up her left sleeve, feeling for something. This is behind Mike's head, so he can't see it.<sup>38</sup>

DAWN  
(whispering in his ear.)  
You know I love you to death Mike,  
a slow, painful, torturous death.

With her teeth, Dawn pulls off the cap from the front of the pre-filled SYRINGE.

MIKE  
And what if I kill you first?

DAWN  
*Bon chance.*<sup>39</sup>

Dawn bites Mike's shoulder hard, while simultaneously jabbing him with the syringe.<sup>40</sup>

MIKE  
Ow...God! Wow...

Dawn unceremoniously stands up, still holding the syringe.

MIKE (CONT'D)  
Hey, where are you going?

Mike stands, his legs are a little wobbly. He tries to be playfully menacing, though his knees buckle and he plops back down in his chair. His eyes are glazed over like someone who's had a little too much to drink.

---

<sup>38</sup> Dawn does not reach up her sleeve in the filmed version. Instead, as she snuggles up to Mike, the camera pulls back to reveal she is reaching for a syringe taped to the back of the chair.

<sup>39</sup> In English: "Good luck."

<sup>40</sup> Ben requested that his co-star actually bite him in the neck, so his pained reaction is real. The needle piercing his neck, however, is a fake. It is simply a piece of a straightened paper clip rigged to move into the syringe when pressed against any surface.

DAWN

This is boring. Let's do something else.

MIKE

Something's not right...I don't feel good.

Mike attempts to stand again but simply falls to his knees in front of Dawn. It's here where he finally sees the syringe in her hand.

MIKE (CONT'D)

What the fuck--did you stick me with something? We're doing *that* now?

DAWN

(holding up the syringe)

Animal tranquilizer.

(shrug)

I temp at a vet clinic. Sometimes I steal. I hope I didn't use too much. I gave you enough to knock out something like five cats, twelve ferrets, or one big dog. And you, Mike, are one...big... dog.

Dawn drops the syringe, and it sticks into the floor like a lawn dart.<sup>41</sup>

MIKE

(falling over)

I thought we were gonna watch a movie...

DAWN

You never listen, Mike. I told you, romantic comedies are soooooo fucking boring. Let's kick it up a notch.

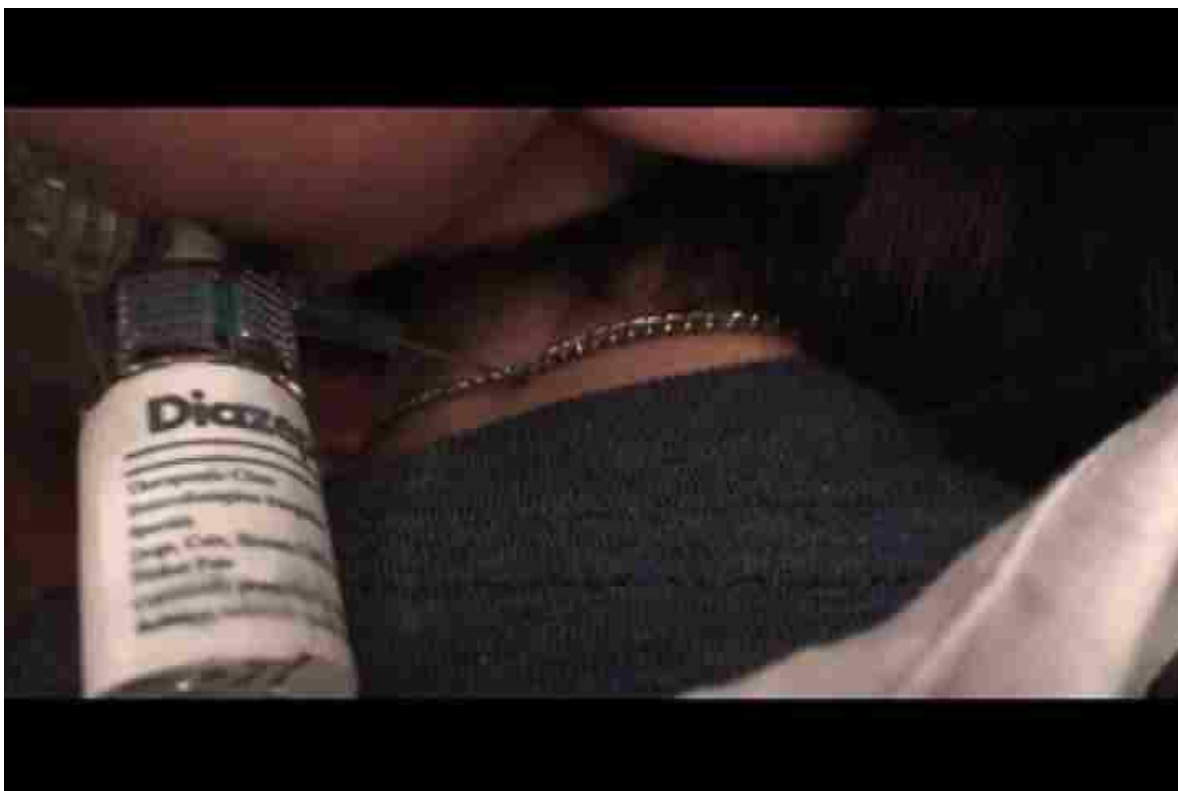
Dawn leaves our line of sight for a moment. We hear a metallic rustling. When she walks back into view, she is

---

<sup>41</sup> In the filmed version of *High School Sweethearts*, the syringe does not stick in the floor. I felt that would be too unrealistic.



In this photo: Dawn reaches for a syringe taped to the back of Mike's chair. The prop was constructed by Rob Matsushita. Photo courtesy of Rob Matsushita.



In this photo: Dawn bites down on Mike's neck while simultaneously jabbing him with a needle. Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



obviously holding something, though she is concealing it from view.

MIKE

(slurring his words a little)

What're you doin' Dawn...?

CUT TO:

UPSTAIRS BEDROOM

The girls are listening intently at the door, though all they really hear are muffled noises emanating from downstairs.

MARIE

Fuck this, I'm leaving.

Marie tries to open the door, but it's locked.

CUT TO:

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR

The room's doorknob is tied off with a rope attached another doorknob across the hall.

BACK TO SCENE

MARIE (CONT'D)

This is not good.

AUTUMN

Is it locked? Why is it locked?

SIMONE

Autumn, are you okay?

AUTUMN

I don't like it locked, I don't!

SIMONE

Christ, where are your anxiety meds?

AUTUMN

I left them in my purse in the other room. Oops.

MAULLY

You take meds?

AUTUMN

(barely controlling  
panic)

I don't like being locked in.

SIMONE

She has claustrophobia.

MAULLY

What's that a fear of?

SIMONE

(beat)

Elephants. WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK?!? She doesn't like being closed in!

MAULLY

(no longer interested)

Whatever.

AUTUMN

I need air...

Autumn runs to the window, with Simone close behind. Autumn sticks her head outside...it's a loooooong way down.

MAULLY

(to Marie)

What do you hear?

MARIE

Hard to tell--they might be just talking.

Simone pulls Autumn back in. Meanwhile, over at the door...

MAULLY

(walking to the door)

She didn't even bring him upstairs.  
Little whore's probably riding him  
on the couch like a dime store pony.

MARIE

Or engaging him in her retarded  
debate about getting away with mur...

Marie eyes the tarp covering everything in the room very intently. Where are the paint cans? More importantly, if the room is being repainted, why is there a working aquarium still on the dresser? Her eyes widen in an "Oh shit!" moment of clarity.

MARIE (CONT'D)

...der. We need to get out of here  
right fucking now.

Maully has no idea what Marie is going on about, and Simone and Autumn aren't paying any attention because they're still at the window as we...

CUT TO:

DOWNSTAIRS: MIKE AND DAWN

Dawn hears banging from upstairs and shrugs.

DAWN

I couldn't sleep the other night. I  
have this problem a lot.

She nudges Mike with her foot, so he's lying flat on the floor.

DAWN (CONT'D)

(stepping over him)

And the way I usually get myself  
to fall asleep, pretty much like  
everybody else, is by rubbing one  
out. And, as usual, my fantasy  
started with us in bed, in our  
underwear. I was straddling you.

Dawn straddles him.

DAWN (CONT'D)

As I shimmied up your torso you lifted your head to kiss me underneath my panties, and right as you were about to, I smacked you across the face with a claw hammer.

She does just that. CRACK! The item Dawn's been holding is said CLAW HAMMER.

DAWN (CONT'D)

See, there's absolutely nothing sexy about that, right? Then, I smothered you with a pillow.

Dawn drops the hammer, grabs a PILLOW off the couch and presses it firmly over Mike's face.<sup>42</sup>

Mike flops around like a fish out of water.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Then, I dragged your body into the bathtub, removed your fingerprints with a razor, cauterized the wounds with a butane lighter, chopped your hands off at the wrists with a cleaver, sliced your arms off at the shoulders, removed your feet, sawed your legs off right below the knees and right above the thighs with a hacksaw, smashed out your teeth with a brick to void your dental records, hacked off your head, let the shower run to wash away all the blood, sprayed everything down with bleach, threw you piece-by-piece into a burlap sack, hauled the sack to a freshly dug hole in the middle

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

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<sup>42</sup> Ben asked Kelly to press the pillow firmly against his face so he could convincingly play someone being asphyxiated. After establishing a hand signal that would alert us should Ben genuinely feel threatened or in danger of passing out, I consented to the stunt.



In this photo: Dawn smothers Mike with a pillow.  
Photo courtesy of Rob Matsushita.



In this photo: Dawn checking Mike's pulse after suffocating him with a pillow.  
Photo courtesy of Rob Matsushita.

CONTINUED:

DAWN (CONT'D)

of a forest, covered it with Lyme, planted some ferns over your grave, scattered the remaining loose soil over the area, removed the bumper stickers from your car with rubbing alcohol, drove your car to a run-down neighborhood, left it there with its doors unlocked and the keys still in the ignition, and calmly walked to a bus stop, where I got on the bus and rode away.

(beat)

And I slept like a baby.

Mike goes limp. Dawn removes the pillow and checks his pulse to make sure he is still alive.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Stay with me buddy boy. We're not through yet.

A kitten walks into the room. Dawn grabs a laser-pointer from one of the nearby end-tables and uses it to capture her pet's attention.

The cat darts around the room, regarding Mike's unconscious body as little more than an obstacle for it to overcome as it struggles to capture the elusive red dot.<sup>43</sup>

CUT TO:

UPSTAIRS BEDROOM

The other girls are frightened, but they aren't quite sure why.

---

<sup>43</sup> Instead of using a laser pointer, I had Dawn use her necklace. It seemed more personal. In real life, Ben is the kitten's owner. He found her outside, frozen in a snow bank and brought her home to nurse her back to health. He named her Misfit. The entire cast and crew fell in love with Misfit, and we decided to put her in this scene and an additional one for the beginning of the film. Before Dawn walks upstairs to meet the other girls in the bedroom, we see Dawn sitting on the stairs and using her necklace to play with the kitten.

Simone pats Autumn on the back.

SIMONE

You gonna be okay?

AUTUMN

I don't like heights either.

SIMONE

You want to come back in?

AUTUMN

My fear of heights sorta overrides  
my fear of closed in spaces, so  
yeah.

SIMONE

Every day is like an anxiety attack  
with you now. Is something going on?

Autumn stares at her feet.

SIMONE (CONT'D)

Autumn, what is it?

Autumn cries a little.

SIMONE (CONT'D)

Autumn?

AUTUMN

I'm pregnant--

SIMONE

What did you just say?

The room goes silent.

Over on the other side of the room...

We hear the creaking of the wooden floorboards from the  
other side of the door.

MAULLY

Like, what are you waiting for?  
Open the door.

MARIE  
 (whispering)  
 I think Dawn's in the hallway.

MAULLY  
 With Mike? What are they doing?  
 Let me listen.

Marie moves away from the door, off to the side.

Maully takes Marie's place in front of the door and puts her ear against it. We stay on her for a long time, starting on her from afar and slowly moving in on her as she listens.

CUT TO:

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR

Dawn stands in front of the door, holding a KNIFE in one hand and a MINI SLEDGE HAMMER in the other.

BACK TO SCENE

MAULLY  
 (facing Marie)  
 You're hearing things.  
 (louder)  
 Hey Mike, the jig is ...

Maully opens the door. On the other side, Dawn stands with the mini sledge hammer raised high above her head, ready to strike.

MAULLY (CONT'D)  
 ...up. Dawn, what are you doing?<sup>44</sup>

And...WHAM! The hammer comes down hard, smashing Maully across the face and snapping her neck as her head spins around. Maully's body flops to the floor and convulses violently as she spits up blood in fits and starts.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> The line, "Dawn, what are you doing?" was cut from the finished version of the film.

<sup>45</sup> Maully's demise is an homage to actor William Vail's death scene in the 1974 version of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.



Simone runs to Maully's aid. Dawn hurdles Maully's convulsing body, pushes Simone against the wall and stabs her through the mouth.

A waterfall of blood cascades down Simone's chin as she struggles to scream. Dawn removes the blade, drops the knife and proceeds to hammer Simone in the head until her lifeless body crumples to the ground.

Autumn bolts towards the door, but Dawn blocks her path and strong-arms her ass-first out the open window.

We see Autumn's body freefall down until she lands hard against the ground, face-first.

Marie makes for the door but gets tripped up by Maully's convulsing body. With her balance out of control, she barrels towards the stairs.

Marie catches herself right as she's about to fall.

Then...Dawn races into the hallway and pushes Marie down the stairs.

Marie's leg breaks as it gets caught up in the spokes of the hand-rail. This causes her body to jackknife, and her head crashes into the wall.

Dawn slowly walks down the stairs, regarding Marie to see if she is still alive.

We hear Autumn crying from outside.

CUT TO:

OUTSIDE

Autumn is miraculously still alive, though she is clearly in bad shape. One of her legs appears to be broken, and her face is covered with blood. She rolls onto her back and stares up at the open window.

BACK TO SCENE

Dawn walks into the bedroom, being careful not to trip over Maully's still convulsing body.



In this photo: Mully listens at the door.  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



In this photo: Dawn on the other side of the door, preparing to strike.  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



In this photo: After opening the door, Dawn prepares to bash Maully in the head with a hammer.  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



In this photo: We assume Maully's point of view. This shot was taken from the 1974 version of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



In this photo: Actress Danielle Atkins (who plays Mully) fills her mouth with fake blood.  
Photo courtesy of Rob Matsushita.



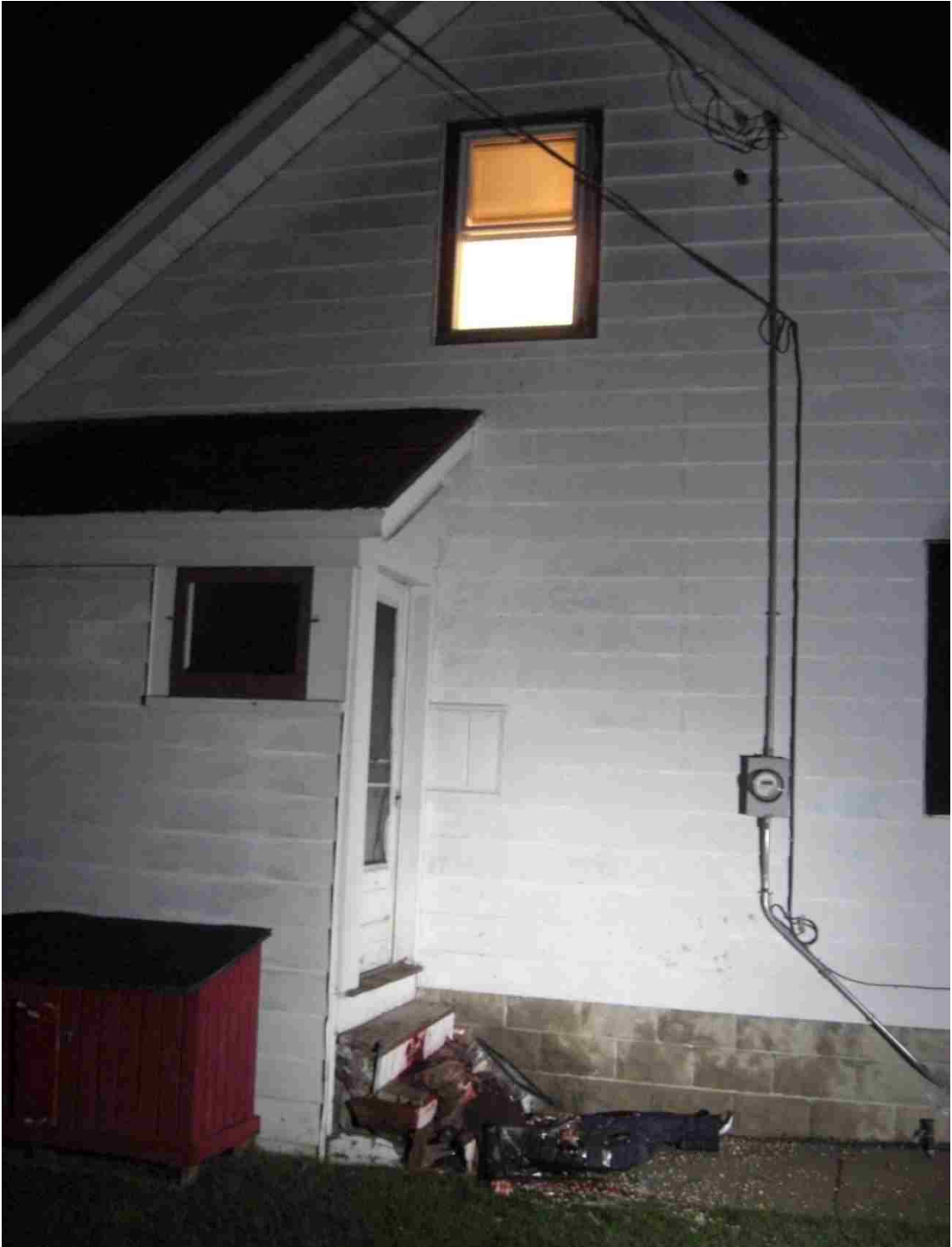
In this photo: Dawn pins Simone against a wall and stabs her through the mouth.  
Photo courtesy of Gravside Pictures, LLC.



In this photo: Simone's body, crumpled in the corner of the room.  
Photo courtesy of Rob Matsushita.



In this photo: The partial aftermath of the bedroom massacre.  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



In this photo: Autumn, after being crushed by the aquarium.  
Photo courtesy of Shannon Daubner.

Dawn looks out open the window to see Autumn's body wriggling in pain.

After a moment, Dawn walks over to the aquarium, picks it up and carries it to the window.

CUT TO:

OUTSIDE

Autumn is still staring up at the open window. She sees the aquarium being pushed out. She doesn't even have time to scream.

The aquarium falls and smashes against her head in a gore-filled catastrophic mess of blood, water and broken glass.

BACK TO SCENE

Dawn simply stares at Mully's convulsing body for a little while. It finally stops wriggling.<sup>46</sup>

FADE TO BLACK

FADE IN:

INT: BASEMENT: NIGHT

We're in a very open, spacious basement with cement floors. The center of the floor is covered with a clear painter's tarp. There are two wooden chairs on the tarp, a wooden table with various instruments and a vase filled with the flowers Mike brought earlier in the evening.

Mike sits in one of the chairs, his arms and legs bound such that he is propped up in an upright, stable position.

Dawn walks to the table, picks up a SANTOKU KNIFE and a SHARPENER and walks over to Mike. She holds the sharpener close to his face and begins to drag the blade across its surface slowly, making sure to emphasize the sound it makes as it drags across the CORRUGATED METAL.

---

<sup>46</sup> In the filmed version of this scene, Dawn crawls over to Mully's convulsing body and gently caresses her face before crushing it with the hammer. The scene abruptly cuts to black at the moment of impact. I wanted this act of violence to be both horrific and merciful. At this point, Dawn is simply putting Mully out of her misery.

Mike's eyes open and they immediately follow the blade back and forth, back and forth. His breathing under his gag grows heavier.

CUT TO:

MIKE'S POV

Our view throbs along with Mike's head.

BACK TO SCENE

DAWN

Good, you're awake. I was beginning to think I used too much!

Dawn places the knife and sharpener back on the table.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Ever heard of the French physiologist, Legallois?

Mike looks at her confoundedly.

Dawn fidgets with one of the carnations Mike brought her, eventually positioning it between her thumb and forefinger.

DAWN (CONT'D)

No? Well, Legallois believed you could revive *une tête séparée du tronc* by simply giving an injection of oxygenated blood through its severed cerebral arteries.

With that, she flicks her thumb and pops the bulb from its stem. As Dawn does this, she makes a POPPING sound with her mouth.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Momma had a baby, and its head popped off...Theoretically, as  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED:

DAWN (CONT'D)

long as the blood supply lasts,  
the head continues to live. If you  
can call it "living." It can see,  
hear, think, smell, grind its teeth,  
roll its eyes at your poetry, and  
so on and so fourth.<sup>47</sup>

MIKE

(muffled by the gag,  
groggy)  
Whaf are oo talphing avout?

DAWN

I'm sorry...I didn't catch that.

Dawn removes Mike's gag.

MIKE

What are you talking about?

DAWN

I want to see if Legallois was  
right.

Mike's face goes white.

MIKE

How?

DAWN

Wait right here.

Dawn rushes upstairs. After a moment, a large canvas bag  
holding something weighty slides down the stairs with a  
THUMP.

Dawn bolts down the stairs after it and proceeds to drag it  
near the empty wooden chair next to Mike.

MIKE

What's in the bag?

---

<sup>47</sup> I got this idea from Mary Roach's 2003 book "Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers."

DAWN  
(straining)  
You're using the wrong  
interrogative.

Mike doesn't get it.

DAWN (CONT'D)  
The wrong "wha" word. Besides, you  
can't do an experiment without a  
test subject, now can you?

MIKE  
I don't understand ...

DAWN  
Jesus, do I have to spell  
everything out for you?

Mike begins to sob. This is all getting to be too much.

MIKE  
Oh God, Jesus...*who's* in the bag?

At that, a muffled, high-pitched shriek emanates from the bag as it wriggles free from Dawn's grip and proceeds to catapult itself into the wall a la Takashi Miike's *Audition*. The person inside, obviously traumatized, stumbles around best they can before falling back down to the floor, unconscious again.

Dawn unsuccessfully tries to stifle a laugh and quickly cuts open the bag to reveal the now unconscious Marie.

Dawn lifts Marie into to the chair and binds her hands and feet so she and Mike are matching prisoners.

Dawn walks over to the table, picks up a vial of smelling salts and awakens Marie with them.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> This sequence of shots, as written, was potentially unsafe. In the filmed version of this scene, Marie flails her limbs while encased inside the body bag and Dawn kicks her in the head. As Dawn's foot connects with the body bag, we abruptly cut to a two shot of Marie and Ben both bound to the wooden chairs.

DAWN

Don't scare me like that. Without you, this can't work.

Marie is dazed and she begins to panic. Her chair rocks back and forth a little, though it does not topple over.

DAWN (CONT'D)

(clapping her hands together)

FOCUS!

Marie shuts up immediately.

DAWN (CONT'D)

As I was telling Mike, I'm interested in conducting a little experiment. But I only need one guinea pig. Any volunteers? Yes? No? Didn't think so.

Dawn removes a stack of game cards from her pocket.<sup>49</sup>

DAWN (CONT'D)

(to both)

Here's how this is going to work. I draw a card and read you a question. If you answer correctly, you get to tell me how I should punish your opponent. If you answer incorrectly, your opponent tells me how to punish you. If you cannot think of a penalty, then *I* have to. You don't want me to. Trust me on this. The object of this game is simple... The first person to score three points gets to be the control group.

MARIE

You're crazy.

DAWN

(imitating Marie)

This...is not...about...me.

---

<sup>49</sup> The prop cards were created with the assistance of Greg Panovich.

MIKE

You can't do this.

DAWN

And here I am, doin' it.

MIKE

You can't just kill us. I know you, Dawn. You could never kill anybody.

MARIE

Yes, she could.

MIKE

This is insane. You can't get away with it.

DAWN

I could have. But maybe I don't plan to anymore.

(leaning in)

Maybe we're all fucked. One body's probably pretty easy to hide, but five? C'mon!

MIKE

Five?

DAWN

Eventually.

MIKE

Who else is here?

DAWN

Who else have you been fucking?

MIKE

Answer my question!

DAWN

Your question answers mine.

MARIE

Oh, God, Mike...we're *all* here.

MIKE

Oh God, not Beth too?

MARIE

Just how many people have you  
been fucking, anyway?

DAWN

Looks like you're not the favorite  
after all. And the game is afoot.  
*Bonne partie!*<sup>50</sup>

(reading off a card)

Mike, which shoulder should you  
throw spilled salt over?

Mike just blankly stares at her.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Come on, Mike. Take a guess...  
you've got a fifty-fifty chance  
of getting this.

MIKE

The left?

DAWN

*Tres bien!* Nice job! You guessed  
didn't you?

MIKE

So?

DAWN

Just curious. Either way, you got  
it right.

(turning to Marie)

And you know what that means...

(turning back to Mike)

Well, that's up to you, isn't it big  
boy? So what'll it be?

MIKE

I don't know...flick her in the ear  
or something.

Dawn punches Marie hard across the face.

---

<sup>50</sup> In English: "Good game!"

MIKE (CONT'D)

I said flick her ear with your  
finger!

DAWN

...or SOMETHING.

MIKE

That's not what I meant!

DAWN

Then next time, either be more  
specific or less lame.

(to Marie)

Your turn.

Dawn flips over a new card.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Name the first 25 presidents of  
the United States.

MARIE

Are you fucking kidding me!?

DAWN

I'm just reading what's on the  
card.

MARIE

Let me see!

Dawn shows Marie the card. It reads, "Name the first 25  
Presidents of the United States."

DAWN

Aaaaaaaand go!

We see Marie fidgeting behind the chair with her hand-  
restraints. She is slowly making headway in freeing  
herself from them.

MARIE

When a just man meets a just boy  
he talks politely to Fillmore,

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MARIE (CONT'D)

Pierce, Buchanan, Lincoln, Johnson,  
Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur,  
Cleveland, Harrison, Cleveland and  
McKinley. How many was that?

DAWN

I don't accept mnemonics.

MARIE

Fuck! Fine, you petty bitch!  
Washington, John Adams, Jefferson,  
Madison, Monroe, John Quincy Adams,  
Jackson, Van Buren, William Henry  
Harrison, Tyler, Polk, Taylor.  
Happy?

DAWN

(to Mike)

Should I give it to her? I don't  
have to, you know. She didn't give  
me complete names.

MIKE

Give it to her.

DAWN

That's mighty brave.

MIKE

Give it to her.

DAWN

You heard him, Marie. What'll it  
be?

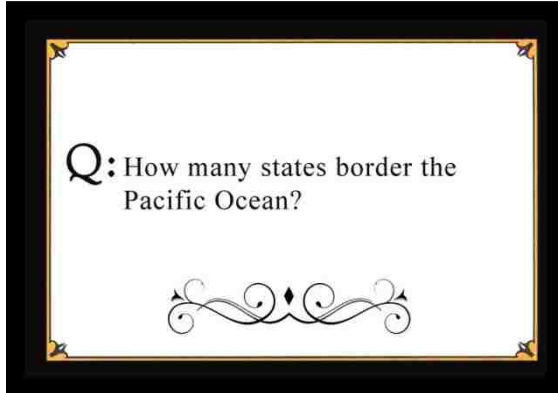
MARIE

Slap him in the face.

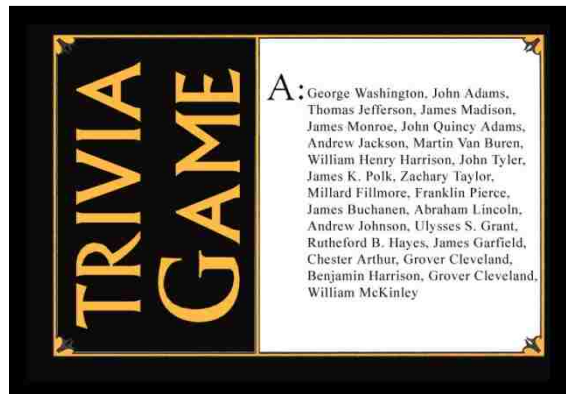
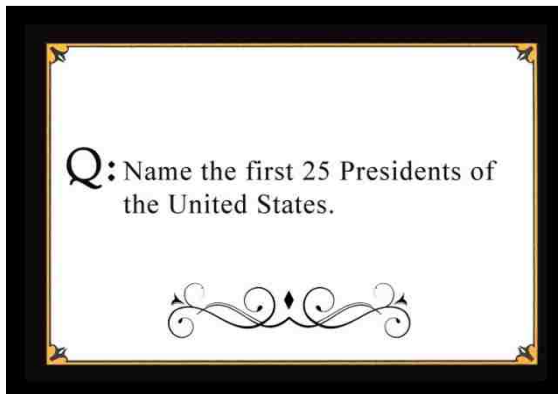
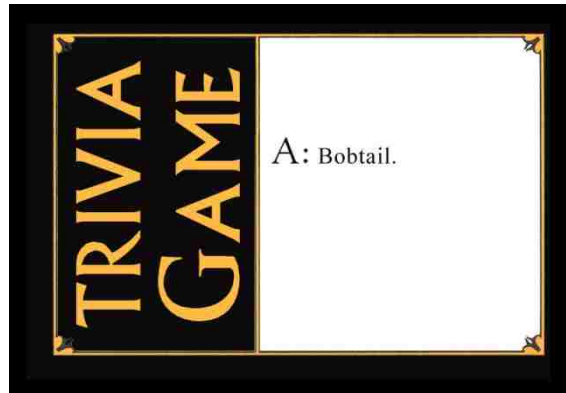
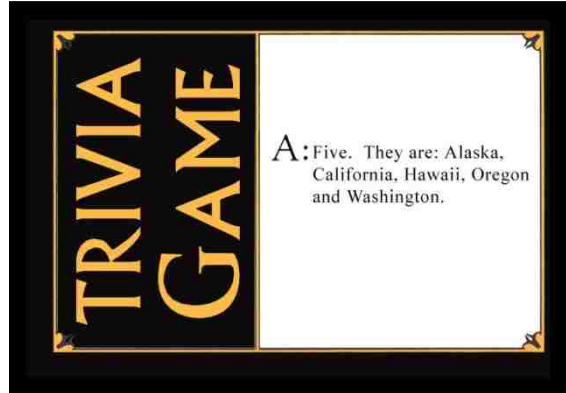
DAWN

Booooooooooring!

Front



Back



In these photos: Examples of the Trivia Game trivia cards (front and back) used in *High School Sweethearts*. Photos courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



Dawn walks over to Mike and slaps him hard across the face.<sup>51</sup>

DAWN (CONT'D)

I'm changing the rules a little. From now on, every penalty needs to be more entertaining than the last. And by more entertaining, I mean harsher.

MARIE

That isn't GODDAMN FAIR!

DAWN

It's not your GODDAMN GAME.

Dawn flips over another card.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Mike, how many states border the Pacific Ocean?

MARIE

Why does he get another easy one?

DAWN

Shhhhhh!

(beat)

Come on, Mike, everybody knows this.

MIKE

Three?

DAWN

Ooooooh, so close.

MARIE

How could you get THAT wrong?

Mike is wide-eyed. He's sure his answer is correct.

MIKE

It's not wrong! California, Oregon and Washington...

---

<sup>51</sup> Actor Ben Wilson asked Kelly Maxwell to actually slap him across the face for this scene. I shot the slap in slow motion, so the audience would see Ben's cheek ripple after the hit.

DAWN

...are the continental states  
that border the Pacific Ocean.  
You forgot Alaska and Hawaii.  
Tough break. Marie?

MARIE

Don't make me do this...please  
don't make me do this.

DAWN

If you don't, I will.

MARIE

But I can't think of anything!

DAWN

(gesturing to the  
tool table)  
You need help? Ta da!

Marie looks over the items, and for some reason, decides  
the least threatening item is the STRAIGHT RAZOR.

MARIE

Shave his face without shaving  
cream.

DAWN

Hmmm, creative.

Dawn grabs a straight-razor from the table and walks over  
to Mike. She draws the blade slowly and menacingly at  
first, and then hurriedly (in a series of jump cuts) rakes  
the blade over the stubble on his face.

SERIES OF SHOTS

Mike wincing in pain.

The straight razor raking across stubble.

Blood droplets forming along Mike's neck.

A hard slice across Mike's cheek.

BACK TO SCENE

Mike sits in the chair with blood droplets and razor burn all over his face and neck.

DAWN (CONT'D)

(laughing)

Goddamn, this was a good idea.  
Outstanding, Marie! If you could  
only see yourself, Mike.

Mike turns to Marie.

MIKE

Why did you do this?

MARIE

I'm doing the best I can!

DAWN

Your turn, Mike.

Dawn flips to another card and shakes her head "No."

DAWN (CONT'D)

Don't like that question. I've got a  
better one to ask you.

MARIE

This isn't fair!

DAWN

That question was too easy.

(looking at card)

"What country is known to export  
Swiss Chocolate?"

(imitating Mully)

"Mexico? See, I knew it."

(leaning in on Mike)

I have a better question. Do you  
remember the last time we made  
love?

MIKE

What?

DAWN

Do you remember the last time we  
fucked, Mike?

MIKE

Yes.

DAWN

Did I climax?

MIKE

(without hesitation)

Yes.

DAWN

Wow. No hesitation, just "You came. Ten-HUT!" You sure you don't want to take a little more time to think about this one?

MIKE

No.

DAWN

Really? You're so sure I came?  
Because I sounded like this...

Dawn proceeds to fake an orgasm very convincingly, coming closer and closer to Mike until her arm is around his neck. She grinds her forehead into his as her performance reaches its crescendo.

MIKE

That's not what you sound like when you cum.

DAWN

No?

MIKE

No. First of all, you don't start huffing and puffing right away. You try to play it cool, like you're the one in control. So, you just smile. But then the smile starts to twitch. And even though I can tell you want to keep your eyes open, you can't, you shut them, and your forehead

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MIKE (CONT'D)

crinkles up, like you're working on a hard math problem.

(beat)

Then I stop.

(beat)

Then I start again. And then you open your eyes, like they're going to fly out of your head. And then the purr comes.

(eyeing Dawn)

You know the purr, right? It comes right from your heart, and it catches on the back of your throat. And then you're mine. Your mouth locks open, and it's like you're screaming, but there isn't any noise, no sound at all, as your eyes roll back, and your hands grab out, and your fingers grab hold of whatever they can get hold of--, the wrinkled sheets of your bed, the skin on my back, the hair on my head.

(beat)

Then you sigh out.

(beat)

And then...

(whispering)

Twitch. Twitch. Twitch.

Dawn leans back. Her face lightens. She smiles and moves her fingers through Mike's hair, kissing his forehead.

DAWN

Why do you always have to feel so good?

MIKE

You felt good too, Dawn.

DAWN

Good enough?

Dawn's still smiling as her eyes drift over. Mike looks to see what she's looking at...

Marie. She's barely holding it together. Nice going, Mike.

Dawn snaps him out of it.

DAWN (CONT'D)

"Break my heart and you'll regret it...*Si vous trichez sur moi je vous tuerai.*" Remember when I said that?

MIKE

For fuck's sake, I don't speak French!

DAWN

*Quel dommage.*<sup>52</sup> This isn't about revenge. It's about accountability.

MARIE

What do you call what happened upstairs?

DAWN

Revenge...but you all had your chance.

(to Mike)

So, what'll it be? What's worse than dry-shaving?

MIKE

I don't know.

DAWN

For Marie's sake, I wouldn't say that again.

MIKE

Okay, okay...uh, put out a cigarette on her arm.

---

<sup>52</sup> In English: "Too bad."

DAWN

I don't smoke.

MIKE

I do.

DAWN

I know you do. You have any?

Marie notes this with no small concern.

MIKE

My pocket.

Dawn reaches into Mike's pant pocket, pulls out his pack, puts a cigarette in her mouth and lights it.

We watch the slow burning tip of the cigarette as Dawn takes a draw.

Dawn walks over to Marie, blows the smoke in her face and puts out the cigarette on her neck. Marie lets out a high-pitched squeal of pain as the ash sizzles.<sup>53</sup>

MARIE

(to Mike)

That really fucking hurt, you asshole!

MIKE

I'm sorry!

Dawn flips to a new card.

DAWN

Marie, "What's the name of the horse in the song *Jingle Bells*?"  
Feel free to sing it out if you need help.

Marie suddenly realizes she actually has to remember the fucking song.

---

<sup>53</sup> We used an herbal cigarette for this sequence. And, just in case you're wondering, I did not have actress Kelly Maxwell put it out on Emily Mills' neck. Rather, Kelly snuffed out the cigarette's burning ash on the neck of a female mannequin torso purchased from a clothing store.

MARIE

(tentatively)

Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle  
all the way, oh what fun it is to  
ride in a one horse open sleigh,  
hey, jingle bells, jingle bells  
jingle all the way, oh what fun it  
is to ride on a one-horse open  
sleigh.

(beat)

They never say.

DAWN

Apparently they do.

MARIE

No, I just did the whole fucking  
song, and *nowhere* did they say the  
name.

MIKE

That's not the whole song.

MARIE

Yes, it is!

MIKE

There's a whole other thing at the  
Beginning - "Dashing through the  
snow..."

DAWN

Stop. Don't give it to her.

MARIE

Shit, you're right, there is more to  
that song.

(thinking)

Dashing through the snow...On a one  
horse open sleigh...O'er the fields  
we go, laughing all the way."

MARIE AND DAWN

(unspirited)

Ha ha ha.



MARIE (CONT'D)

Bells on Bobtail's ring, making  
spirits bright, what fun it is to  
laugh and sing--BOBTAIL!

DAWN

Nicely done.

MIKE

No, wait, no.

DAWN

What?

MIKE

The horse's name isn't "Bobtail."  
Bobtail is just a type of tail that  
the horse happens to have.

MARIE

Shut up, Mike! It's not "Bells on  
the bobtail's ring."

DAWN

I'm giving it to her, since that's  
What's on the card. By the way,  
Mike - bad time to piss her off,  
because it's her turn to pick *your*  
penalty. So what'll it be?

MARIE

Punch him in the nuts!

MIKE

WHAT?

Dawn front kicks Mike hard in the junk. His chair falls  
over, and he coughs in fits and starts.

MIKE (CONT'D)

(to Marie)

What the fuck's wrong with you?

Dawn flips to another card.

DAWN

2-2. This one's for the win.  
Mike, what U.S. state doesn't  
border anything else?

MARIE

For fuck's sake!

MIKE

Alaska.

DAWN

Are you fucking with me? Hawaii.  
The answer is Hawaii. Did you forget  
about Canada?

MARIE

Not again! Don't make me do this!

DAWN

You don't want me to pick. YOU DON'T  
WANT TO SEE WHAT'S IN MY HEAD!

MARIE

But I can't think of anything worse  
than what you just did.

DAWN

I can.

Without hesitation, Dawn places Mike back in an upright position, walks over to the table, grabs a bottle of compressed air, tears open Mike's shirt and proceeds to freeze off one of his nipples by holding the canister upside down at close range.<sup>54</sup>

Mike's nipple cracks off. The remaining skin turns black and purple.<sup>55</sup>

MARIE

JESUS CHRIST! MIKE, I'M SORRY!

---

<sup>54</sup> Ben Wilson's chest is actually quite hairy. The male mannequin torso I wanted to use for the close-up of this had a shorn chest. Consequently, we needed to have Dawn somehow remove his chest hair. Taking a cue from *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (Apatow, 2005), I had Dawn wax the area around Ben's nipple and filmed his natural reactions to the procedure.

<sup>55</sup> In the filmed version, Dawn cuts off the nipple with scissors. I felt it was more shocking.

DAWN

That's how this works! Get it?

Dawn flips to another card and walks over to Marie.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Score's still 2-2. Ready?

Marie struggles not to cry. She is still trying to free her hands from behind the chair.

Marie locks eyes with Dawn as the next question is read.

DAWN (CONT'D)

How many minutes does it take for most people to fall asleep?

MARIE

I don't know, five?

DAWN

(giddy)

Good guess, but no! Card says "seven."

MARIE

Isn't that a little arbitrary?

DAWN

Don't be a sore loser. Mike... oh Mike...

MIKE

What the fuck's worse than burning off someone's fucking nipple?

MARIE

Mike, just say something. Whatever you say can't possibly be worse than what she wants to do. I know you don't mean it.

DAWN

Five seconds...four, three...two... one...



In this photo: A close-up of my nipple, made-up to look like Mike's burnt one, about to be chopped off with scissors. Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



In this photo: An extreme close-up of Mike's nipple being cut off with scissors. This is a special effect. Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

MIKE

Break one of her fingers!

DAWN

That's not really worse than what I did to you, now is it? I think I'll cut one off.

MIKE

NO! DO IT TO ME INSTEAD!

MARIE

(blurting it out)

Yeah!

Marie regrets that the moment she says it.

DAWN

Really, Marie? Very well, then.

MARIE

Wait, no, I didn't mean it.

DAWN

But you said it! And you, still trying to play the hero? So quick to offer up your finger? How about a whole hand instead?

Dawn rushes back to the table, grabs a cleaver and without hesitation chops off Mike's hand at the wrist in one smooth motion. WHACK!

Mike shrieks in not so much agony but surprise!

MIKE

Ohmygodohmygodohmygod!

DAWN

Back to you, Marie!

CUT TO:

Marie's hands are almost free.

BACK TO SCENE

MARIE

Fuck you!

DAWN

Am I understanding you correctly?  
Are you refusing to participate?  
I figured this would happen  
eventually. I need you to listen  
to me very carefully. I want you  
to repeat after me, okay? One blink  
for yes, two blinks for no. One  
blink for yes, two for no.

Marie, almost free.

MARIE

One blink for yes, two for no.

DAWN

One more time, please.

MARIE

(determinedly)

One blink for yes. Two for no.

DAWN

Very good.

(beat)

This is the part where you scream.

Dawn walks over to the table. Her back is towards us.

MARIE

Please, please, please, please.

Marie frees her hands. YES!

Before she can do anything useful with them, Dawn spins  
around with a silver axe held over her right shoulder and  
quickly swings it into Marie's neck. WHAM!

The axe imbeds itself in Marie's neck like a wedge but  
doesn't decapitate her.

Marie's newly freed hands limply grab hold of the axe  
momentarily before falling at her sides.

Dawn pries the axe free. Marie gurgles in pain.

Blood spurts out as the axe is removed.

Marie turns to face Mike.

MARIE (CONT'D)

I love you, Mike.

MIKE

(flabbergasted)

I love you too!

DAWN

OH MY GOD! You totally didn't earn  
that moment!

Dawn strikes again, almost chopping off Marie's head, but not quite.

Marie struggles to scream but her vocal chords have practically been sliced in twain.

A geyser of blood shoots diagonally against the tarp against the wall.<sup>56</sup>

More quick swings. WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

Marie's head flies off, and her trunk slumps to the ground. Her eyes furtively glance around for a few seconds before rolling up into her skull.

Mike blubbers and coughs, practically going into shock as he struggles in vain to free himself.

Blood pumps out of Marie's trunk in rhythm with what one imagines are her final heartbeats.

Dawn picks up Marie's severed head and poses with it in front of Mike.

DAWN

We have our guinea pig.

Dawn tosses Marie's head into Mike's lap, drops the axe and creeps behind him.

---

<sup>56</sup> I chose not to shoot this cutaway image, because I felt it was too clichéd.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Mike? Mike! Micheal? Up here, Michael. Focus on me. You're understandably upset. I, I get that. But Mike, as bad as this looks – and I know it looks bad – Marie can still survive this. Dying is not a fast process. Bodies aren't designed to die quickly. We still have time to save her. But it's going to take both of us, Mike. We're going to have to work together.

MIKE

How?

CUT TO:

Dawn drawing blood from Mike's arm with a needle. Once the vacuum is created and the blood moves through on its own accord, she attaches it to a tube in Marie's carotid artery. As the blood flows into and out of Marie, Mike's lap becomes a cascading waterfall of blood that pools on the plastic covering the floor. For a moment nothing happens.<sup>57</sup>

DAWN

(calling out and  
clapping her hands  
together loudly)

MARIE!

Marie's eyes shoot open for a second and glance around wildly. Eventually her eyes fix on Dawn's – a mean look to be sure. Marie's teeth chatter, and her muscles twitch. Her lips begin to bleed because her teeth are biting into them.

MIKE

No fucking way. This isn't real...  
this isn't real. This can't fucking  
be happening.

---

<sup>57</sup> Horror fans will recognize this as an homage to *Re-Animator* (Gordon, 1985).





In this photo: Dawn holds Marie's newly severed head in front of Mike.  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



In this photo: This is all getting to be too much. Mike, about to break down.  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

DAWN

Marie, can you hear me? One blink  
for yes, and two for no.

Marie's eyes blink once. Her teeth continue to chatter and  
grind.

Mike begins to slump in his chair. Dawn notices this.

DAWN (CONT'D)

You're losing a lot of blood there,  
slugger. Want me to pull the plug?

(to Marie)

What do you think, should he cut  
you off?

Marie's eyes blink twice.

MIKE

This isn't real.

DAWN

It's up to you, Mike. Kill Marie to  
save yourself or go to your grave  
knowing you kept her alive just a  
little bit longer? God, that's  
romantic.

MIKE

She's not alive! I saw you kill her.  
Stop fucking with my head!

DAWN

Let's ask her. Marie, are you  
alive?

Marie's eyes blink once.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Do you want Mike to kill you?

MIKE

I didn't kill her the first time!

Marie's eyes blink twice.

MIKE (CONT'D)

But I didn't kill you the first time! I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry I have to do this.

Marie's eyes blink twice.

MIKE (CONT'D)

Why am I fucking arguing with a head? Don't look at me like that!

Dawn pushes Mike back.

DAWN

Alright, alright, you're just confusing her.

Dawn leans real close to Marie's face.

DAWN (CONT'D)

I have a question for you, Marie.

Marie's eyes widen.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Which of the two of us do you think loves Mike more? Blink once for me. And twice for you.

Marie's eyes roll up, in an expression that can only say: "Oh, give me a fuckin' *break*."

Dawn's superior smile fades. She's cut Marie's head off, and somehow, it's a tie.

Dawn throws Marie's lifeless head against the wall.

DAWN (CONT'D)

Fuck you Marie! Final question, Mike.

MIKE

WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT FROM ME?

DAWN

We've been through this, already.

MIKE

I know, I know, I know...you told me this would happen, and I didn't pay close enough attention to you, and I didn't know that Hawaii and Alaska border the Pacific Ocean. But I don't deserve this. Yes, I cheated on you! I admit it! Are you happy? Does that make you happy? I'm seventeen. Just don't torture me anymore, okay? Please don't fucking torture me anymore. Just kill me! Kill me! Kill me! Why don't you kill me? Get it over with! What is this supposed to be teaching me? Please... just don't torture me anymore. I can't take it.

Dawn procures a crossbow from behind the tarp and proceeds to shoot Mike in the stomach. She reloads the weapon and walks over to Mike, placing the arrowhead firmly into his forehead such that a drop of blood forms underneath its point.<sup>58</sup>

DAWN

I'm going to ask you one more question, Michael. If you get it right, I'll let you go. I'll untie you and let you crawl out of here to go to the police, Beth's or God knows where. If you get it wrong, though, I'm going to shoot you in the face. But I promise you, no matter what, I will not torture you anymore. Okay?

MIKE

Okay. For what it's worth, I'm sorry I hurt you.

---

<sup>58</sup> Originally, I was going to have Dawn shoot Mike in the stomach with a Beretta and tie a burlap sack around his face prior to her recitation of the final question. I reconsidered, because the appearance of the crossbow is more surprising in my mind. And I wanted to show Ben's face here, because I didn't want to hide the vulnerability of his performance from the audience.

DAWN

We're waaaaaay past that now, and you're only saying that because you got caught.

MIKE

Go to hell thinking whatever you want. But if you think I didn't care about you, you weren't paying attention.

(beat)

Let's get this over with.

Dawn flips to a new card.

DAWN

If someone is algophobic, what are they afraid of?

Mike breaks down a little. He doesn't fucking know.

Dawn presses the arrowhead hard into his temple. A trickle of blood runs down his face.

MIKE

(chuckling a little)

Suffering pain?

Mike begins a steady laugh that starts softly and builds as the rest of the scene is played out.<sup>59</sup>

Dawn flips over the card to read the answer on the back. She glances back up at Mike.

We see the arrowhead against Mike's temple. It is shaking as we...

FADE TO BLACK.

---

<sup>59</sup> Mike's hysteria here references the ending of the 1974 version of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, wherein actress Marilyn Burns, having successfully escaped Leatherface, breaks down in a fit of laughter.

### About the Ending

So what exactly happens to Michael Brisingham, especially since he correctly answers Dawn's final trivia question? Does she actually let him go, and even so, does he survive? By this point in the film, Mike's character has been physically and emotionally abused, had one of his hands chopped off at the wrist, lost a considerable amount of blood and has been shot in the stomach with an arrow. It seems likely that, no matter what, Mike is going to die. But to be perfectly honest, I don't know what happens next. I'll leave that up to you. If you think Mike's character survives, then he does. If you think Dawn pulls the trigger, then so be it. There were days throughout this production where I wanted to see Mike's character die in that chair, laughing his fool head off as Dawn depressed the trigger. There were days I wanted to see Dawn, true to her word, free Mike from his confines and watch him crawl out of the basement to his uncertain future. I even entertained the notion of having Dawn let Mike go so I could cut to a shot of his character lying face down on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. I purposely left the ending open to interpretation, however, because I wanted Mike's survival to rest squarely on your shoulders. Remember, according to Walter Fisher, the whole of human experience can be accounted for through the act of storytelling, and as you will see in the following chapter, the fictional narrative of *High School Sweethearts* grew out of my own personal, real-life narratives of heartbreak.

## CHAPTER 5 From Heartbreak to High School

Today is Monday, October 13, 2008. It is my birthday. I am now 30 years old. I am not married, single and do not have any children. And I am now officially able to begin sentences with the phrase, “When I was in my twenties I ...”

I’m sitting on the edge of a rickety wooden desk-chair in the middle of my kitchen, staring at the tripod-mounted digital camera at eye level across from me. It is recording. Charlie, the grey and white domestic short-hair I willingly inherited from the wreckage of my failed relationship with Audrey over a year ago, brushes up against my leg. My hands are on my knees, and I am holding a dual-action Beretta in my right hand. It’s heavier than I expected.

I slump back on the chair and raise my left hand to let my fingertips drag across the two- days-worth of stubble on my face. I breathe in. I breathe out. I lift the gun and release its clip into my free hand before slapping it back into place hard enough so its sound echoes against the walls of my apartment. I move the slide back and release it to lodge the first round into the chamber. I double-check to make sure the safety is off. It is.

I close my eyes and think of Debbie, the girl who gave me my first broken heart. “This really is your fault, you know” I say aloud. In my imagination Debbie smiles that devilish smile and replies: “I know. Get on with it already.” And with that, I open my eyes, raise the gun to my head and ready my trigger finger. I’m scared, but it’s that good kind of scared. I stare directly into the camera and say, “No one ever lacks a good reason

to commit suicide,” a quote from Italian poet Cesare Pavese that I find oddly fitting and darkly comic for this moment.

Wait, something’s not right. I’ve read about people surviving self-inflicted gunshot wounds to the temple. I figure, if I’m going to do this, I might as well do this right. I move the barrel of the gun from the side of my head and into my mouth. It’s cold. It tastes burnt. I stare into the camera. I breathe in and hold it. That’s what you’re supposed to do right before you pull the trigger. Breathe in and hold it. That’s what they told me when I was in Army ROTC learning to fire an assault rifle. And in that moment when your body goes completely still, you gently compress the trigger. So that’s exactly what I do. I breathe in and hold it. My vision goes blurry, as tears well up in my eyes. And in that moment when my body is completely still, while I’m staring directly into the camera, and the heat of a tear burns its way down the right side of my face, I gently pull the trigger ...

---

I’m 18 years old. It’s Saturday morning, 9:47 a.m. to be precise. A sliver of sunlight protrudes through a crease in the curtains drawn across my bedroom window. I’m wide awake, lying in bed and staring at the digital clock on my dresser in a vain attempt to will it to become 10 a.m. I want to call Debbie. I want to tell her I love her. I want to hear her say she loves me. Most importantly, I want to see if she tells me the truth. But I have to wait until 10 a.m., because I know she doesn’t like waking up before then.

I didn’t sleep well. My overactive imagination was busy trying to convince me my year-and-a-half relationship with my high school sweetheart was about to end. She is



my first love. We shared our first kiss together. We lost our virginity to one another. Yet the dull ache in my stomach is telling me that all of that is about to end. It is 9:51 a.m., and in nine minutes I'm going to call her up and say what exactly? "Hey Debbie, I just wanted to say that I love you and am afraid you're sleeping with someone else?"

I've watched Debbie's interest in me dwindle these last few weeks as she's spent more and more time with her co-worker, Paul. She and I would talk, but she'd talk about him. She'd tell me how smart he is, or how funny he is, or how considerate he is to bring her milkshakes from Kopp's Frozen Custard during her breaks, even when I'd be standing right in front of her holding a milkshake I'd purchased for her from the same place as a surprise. And she'd get angry with me for insinuating their friendship was anything more. But I know better, because I see the look in her eyes when she talks about him. That's how she used to look at me. More importantly, I see how she averts her gaze from mine when she tells me they're just friends. And I hate it. I really hate it.

Two weeks ago, I called Debbie at work and asked if she could come over after her shift. She hemmed and hawed a bit before telling me she'd be happy to stop by. I greeted her at the door, and after she'd exchanged pleasantries with my parents, we moved to my room.

"How was work," I asked, sitting down at the edge of my bed. "Fine," she replied. "I can't stay too long." She explained that her parents have been keeping track of the mileage she's been putting on the car and that they'd know she came here from work.

"That doesn't sound like your folks," I said, not believing her story. "It's not like you live *that* far away. Besides, why would they care? They like me."

"I told them I'd come home right after work."

I gestured towards the cordless telephone on my nightstand. “Can’t you just call them and tell them you’re here?” She told me it was late, and she didn’t want to disturb them.

“But it’s barely 10:30,” I countered.

“I just don’t want them to get angry with me. I’ll see you at school tomorrow, okay?”

And with that, I walked her to the door and watched her drive away.

“She didn’t stay very long,” my mother said.

“Nah,” I replied. “She had to go meet one of her friends.”

It’s now 9:56 a.m. Four minutes ‘til the ticking-clock scenario in my brain results in the end of the world as I know it. The knots in my stomach continue to tighten, like a noose around my neck.

Fuck this, I can’t wait any longer. My clock’s probably a few minutes slow anyway. I grab my phone and dial her number. It rings once, twice, three times, four. Come on, pick up already. My palms are cold. My armpits are soaked with sweat.

Debbie’s mother picks up the line and says “Hello.”

I hesitate for a moment, not really knowing what to say. “Hey, this is Will,” I stutter. “Is Debbie there?”

“Oh sure, let me see if she’s awake.”

Debbie’s mom muffles the receiver with her hand and calls out her daughter’s name. I can hear the two of them talking but can’t make out any of what they’re saying. There’s an inordinately long pause before I hear Debbie pick up the phone in her room.

“I’ve got it” she yells moments before her mom hangs up the phone in the kitchen.

“Hello, Will?”

“Hey,” I say in a cheerful tone, overcompensating for the swarm of butterflies infesting my stomach. “Sorry if I woke you. I just wanted to call and say hello, and, uh, see how your evening with Paul was.” I cringe. Real smooth dipshit.

“It was fine,” she says matter-of-factly. “We just hung out in his room.”

My abdominals tighten as if someone suddenly jabbed me in the gut. Did she just say she hung out with him in his bedroom? “You sound tired,” I say, my voice a little shaky. “Were you up late?” Debbie yawns audibly.

“Kind of – he dropped me off about one or so.”

“What did you two do?”

“Paul introduced me to his mom and showed me pictures of himself as a baby. His mom’s really nice. You know she’s in a wheel chair?”

“So he’s using his mother to get your pity?” I say instantly regretting my none-too-subtle insult.

“It’s not like that. Paul’s really nice.”

“So you keep telling me.” I sigh, not really expecting a reply but surprised by the sudden lull in the conversation. “Is there’s something you’re not telling me?”

“You’re being paranoid,” Debbie says, clearly struggling to hold back tears.

“Did you kiss him?”

“Yeah,” she says before starting to cry.

“But I love you,” I blubber uncontrollably.

“I love you too,” she says, “I’ll always love you, but ...”

Looking back, I find the whole situation rather quaint. It was, after all, only a kiss. And as much as storybooks and romantic comedies say otherwise, a kiss is really such a little thing, such a tiny indiscretion. And yet there I was acting as if I'd just been told that the supposed love of my life had sex with someone else. If the 30-year-old me could travel back in time to counsel and console my 18-year-old self, I'd like to think I would throw an arm around me and say something like, "Buck up kid. This is only the first. It won't be the last."

---

Fast forward a bit. It's nearing the end of my senior year in high school, and everyone is exchanging yearbooks. People who have barely said a word to me the last four years all of a sudden want to scribble what turn out to be generic platitudes in mine and have me do the same to theirs. Honestly, I don't know what to say to some of these people.

*Dear so-and-so,*

*These last four years together have been disconnected. Have a good time doing whatever it is you're going to do with the rest of your life.*

*See you rarely, if ever,  
Will*

As Debbie and I share numerous classes together (a special torture if ever there was one), I assume it's only a matter of time before she asks to sign mine. Part of me wants her too, of course, especially since I'm still pining for her. I've deluded myself into thinking there's still a chance she'll realize she's made a terrible mistake and ask me

to take her back. One day, in AP Chemistry, she asks to sign my yearbook, and I hand it over. Twenty minutes later she returns it, and I hurriedly open it to her message, which reads:

*William,*

*I can't believe we graduate Sunday!! Out of all four years in high school, the last two (since I've known you) have been the happiest, most memorable years of my life! You truly are the perfect gentleman & I know I can talk to you about anything. You truly are the only person in my life that I can count on to listen to me and love me no matter what. I want you to know that the same goes for you. I will ALWAYS love you and will ALWAYS want to do things with you (no matter what you think). You've grown to become part of me. The deepest part, with the roots attached to my heart. When I'm with you I am happy inside & my heart smiles. Our life together at Marquette will only strengthen our relationship together. Having you so near me all the time will be like a dream come true! I will always need you in my life, especially when I need a good paper written (Just kidding, Love). I am so proud of you and all your accomplishments. I'm your #1 fan. Always remember that, because if you forget, I'll remind you every day! I love you!!*

*Love Always,  
Debbie*

I read the message at least three times before closing my book and concluding that Debbie's sentiments, while outwardly sweet, are utter rubbish. Her repeated use of the word "always" strikes me as insincere. "I love you!!" she writes, with two exclamation points no less. She must really mean it.

Debbie hands me her yearbook to sign. Initially, I write a short, “Boy, haven’t these last four years been great?” message in the corner of one of its empty pages. She frowns after reading it and asks me to write something else. I think about writing an angst-filled, “How could you do this to me?” style entry. Instead, I write a page-length message filled with clichés, trite declarations and half-truths. I tell her how wonderful she is and how I want nothing more than for her to be happy – blah, blah, blah. The strange thing is I really do want her to be happy. I just wish I could add the caveat “with me.”

---

Fast forward a little bit more. Debbie is still dating Paul. She and I have both graduated from high school and are now freshmen at Marquette University. We don’t share any classes together, thank Christ! Just knowing we’re on the same campus is tough enough most days.

Of course there are times we run into one another. We never wave. Most times we avoid eye contact entirely. We don’t ever hang out; so much for always wanting to do things together. And then there are those rare occasions when I notice her before she sees me, which gives me time to avoid the encounter altogether. God, I’m pathetic.

“Get over it,” my friends tell me. “You’ll meet someone else.”

“Wow, great advice!” I say. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

I write angry, stream-of-consciousness diary entries that I usually tear up the moment they’re finished. My handwriting here, scrawled at the speed of thought, is knotted, sharp and practically illegible. I write page after page of meandering invectives

and melodramatic, woe-is-me poems about abandonment and heartache like the one below.<sup>60</sup>

### *The Snow Covered Plains*

*The snow covered plains,  
Tranquil,  
Innocent,  
Disturbed by footprints,  
Disrupted by the knowledge of wrongdoing.  
The scavengers wait in the branches,  
Watching the innocence fade,  
Watching the goodness diminish.  
There they wait with mocking chatter,  
Until I fall under the weight of my own choices.  
It is then they swoop,  
To pick away my humanness,  
And see me to oblivion.*

I write just to expel the anger that never fully seems to go away. I wrestle with the conundrum that if I truly love Debbie as much as I claim to, then I should want for nothing more than her happiness, right? And if she's happy with someone else, then that should make me happy. But it doesn't. Why does her happiness come at the price of mine?

I think about how I was 11 years old when I saw my first slasher film. My friend Adam and I were having a sleepover, and my mom rented a copy of *Halloween 4: The*

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<sup>60</sup> You'll recall this is the poem Dawn recites to the girls in *High School Sweethearts*.

*Return of Michael Meyers* (Little, 1987) on VHS. She said we could watch it under two conditions: that she watches it with us and that we promised not to get too frightened.

“Is it scary?” I asked. She told me it was. “Is it bloody?” I pressed further. “Most likely,” she replied. “But remember, none of it is real. So, it’s okay. No one is actually being hurt. It’s the good kind of scary. It’s the good kind of violence.”

Eventually, while in a particularly self-hating mood, I indulge myself by writing a revenge fantasy of sorts – a short script below titled, *High School Sweethearts, or Life Sucks, and then it gets Worse*. I disgust myself as I write it, but I press on, leaving my anger unchecked. “Don’t worry,” I tell myself. “None of it is real. No one is actually being hurt. It’s the good kind of violence, so it’ll be therapeutic.” And you know what? It was.<sup>61</sup>

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FADE IN

INT: HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM: AFTERNOON

BILL paces in front of DEBBIE and PAUL, who are both bound and gagged and sitting on chairs in the center of the gymnasium. Paul’s hands are duct-taped together on his lap. Debbie’s are duct-taped together behind the chair. The entrances and exits to the room are blocked. BILL holds a REVOLVER. He spins its chamber menacingly as he paces back and forth in front of his hostages. He is singing “Lovey Dovey” by the band Local H.

BILL

Don’t you hate it, when people are  
in love, they’re so ... they’re so  
happy, so goddamn happy, happy.

Bill gets nose to nose with Debbie. Tears stream down her face.

---

<sup>61</sup> Looking back, I am struck by the idea that I even lose in my own revenge fantasy.



BILL (CONT'D)

(improvising)

Don't you hate it, that we were once  
in love. We used to be happy, so  
fucking happy, happy.

Bill gives this a moment to sink in before snapping the  
chamber of the revolver into place.

BILL (CONT'D)

(to Paul)

Do you like games?

(to Debbie)

I know you do. You play them all  
the time. What about you, Paul?  
I bet you think you're pretty  
lucky, huh?

With that, Bill holds the BARREL of the revolver up near  
Paul's head, cocks the HAMMER and pulls the TRIGGER. BANG!  
Paul flinches and his muscles tense, though he is somehow  
unharmed.

A thin stream of smoke wafts from the barrel of the gun.

BILL (CONT'D)

Wow, you are lucky. Five of the six  
rounds in this gun are blanks. Guess  
I should've told you that first. Want  
to play again? Of course you do.

Debbie struggles to free herself from her bounds, but  
cannot. She screams a muffled plea for Bill to stop.

BILL (CONT'D)

What's that? I can't hear you over  
the sound of my gun going off.

Bill pulls the trigger a second time, BANG! Paul  
reflexively winces again and screams under his gag. Once  
again, he is unharmed. Another blank.

Debbie's gag falls free.

DEBBIE

For God's sake, stop!

Bill kneels down next to Paul and slings his arm around his shoulder.

BILL

She must really love you. Think she'd care if I got shot? Want to find out?

Paul nods encouragingly. Bill stands up, places the gun in Paul's bound hands and moves in front of him.

BILL (CONT'D)

Go ahead, pull the tri-

Paul pulls the trigger. BANG!

Bill falls to his knees, moaning as if he's just been shot in the stomach, before laughing as he grabs the gun from Paul.

BILL (CONT'D)

You'd think I'd actually let you off the hook that easily?

Bill aims the gun at Paul and fires three times in quick succession. BANG! BANG! BANG! Paul is unharmed.

BILL (CONT'D)

Hmm, looks like they were all blanks.

Bill slides the chamber of the revolver open and dumps the spent bullet casings to the ground. He puts a QUICK-LOADER in, slaps the chamber shut, cocks the hammer and once again raises the gun at Paul.

BILL (CONT'D)

(looking at Debbie)

Funny thing about luck is, it always runs out sooner or later.

Bill shoots Paul in the head. BANG!

Debbie screams in anguish.

We hear the sound of POLICE SIRENS fast-approaching in the distance.

BILL (CONT'D)

It's a damn shame. He seemed like  
a nice guy.

Bill walks behind Debbie, unties her hands, walks in front  
of her and hands her the gun.

BILL (CONT'D)

Your turn.

DEBBIE

You're not getting off that easy...

DEBBIE shoots Bill in the RIGHT LEG, and he falls hard  
against the ground, annoyed.

BILL

Goddamn it! What the hell?

Bill forcibly takes the gun, shoots Debbie in the RIGHT LEG  
and tosses the gun back in her lap.

BILL (CONT'D)

Get it right this time. I don't  
want to kill you!

Debbie picks up the gun again and shoots Bill in the LEFT  
SHOULDER.

BILL (CONT'D)

You're not doing it right!

Bill grabs the gun with his right hand.

BILL (CONT'D)

You were so fucking quick to break  
my heart. What do I have to do to  
get you to kill me?

Bill shoots Debbie in the LEFT LEG. The bullet pierces her  
femoral artery.

DEBBIE

Why don't you just kill me  
already?

BILL

Because I don't want to! I want  
you to live with this. All of  
this!

Bill tosses the gun back in Debbie's lap.

DEBBIE

You fucking live with it!

Debbie shoots Bill in his other leg.

Bill falls to the floor, screaming in agony. He crawls  
over to Debbie and knocks her chair over, which breaks upon  
impact with the floor.

Bill grabs the revolver by its barrel and places it against  
his forehead.

BILL

Please, please, *please*. Just pull  
the fucking trigger!

Debbie is bleeding out fast. She realizes this and smiles  
wryly.

The distant police sirens are now very near. We hear  
commotion outside the doors.

DEBBIE

You're nothing but a coward.

Debbie jerks the gun away from Bill's head and points it in  
the air. She fires its sixth and final shot into the  
ceiling and dies.

BILL

No, no, no, no! Why do you get  
To win? Why do you get to be  
happy, while I'm stuck here being  
miserable?

Bill grabs the gun and holds it to his head. He pulls the  
trigger. CLICK. He pulls the trigger again. CLICK. He  
screams in frustration.

The gymnasium doors burst open and police flood the room.

FADE TO BLACK.

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A year passes, and though I try to date other people, I just can't seem to connect with anyone. Then, one day, I decide to write a screenplay for a horror story, just like that, about a villain who is just as consumed with anger and jealousy and resentment and self-loathing as I am. The script's title is *Jacob's Lament*, and its titular antagonist, a demon who hates God for favoring humans instead of the angels, takes great pride in proving humanity's frailty and imperfection by tempting people to sin. As I write, the demonic Jacob becomes a surrogate for my own frustrations and questions, not only about Catholicism and the concept of religion, but about human relationships in general.<sup>62</sup> And by the time all the blood has been spilt within its pages, I feel better—like I have found a creative outlet worth exploring.

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Fast forward to early May 2007. I've long since graduated from Marquette University with an undergraduate degree in journalism and am now living in Madison, WI with my girlfriend, Audrey. This is to be our last afternoon together. I return home from tending bar just in time to see her finish packing her belongings. Her half of our apartment sits piled in the center of our living room. It is pouring rain outside. Audrey's red pick-up truck is parked out front, and she begins loading it up with her things with hardly a word. I offer to help. "This is really happening," I think to myself. "Our eight

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<sup>62</sup> I was raised Roman Catholic, and though I identify as an agnostic nowadays, I still find Catholicism, and theology in general, fascinating.

year relationship is ending. She's moving to Tucson, and there's not a goddamn thing I can do to change that now."

Audrey secures her belongings underneath a painter's tarp before going back inside to get the animals. "Which ones do you want?" she asks plainly.

"Which ones do you want?" I reply.

"All of them."

"Well, you can't have all of them," I say.

"Why not?"

"Because you just can't do that!" I say, raising my voice a little. This has become a habit with me lately.

"They're more mine than yours," she counters. "If not for me we wouldn't have any of them to begin with. You would have never got them on your own."

"That doesn't matter," I say, calming down. "That doesn't mean I'm not happy we have them."

Audrey just graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's school of Veterinary Medicine. Like most vet students, she had a soft spot for any animal that needed help. It wasn't unusual for me to come home from work to find we had a new addition to the household. Though I groused about the ever-increasing number of animals we had in our home, I don't think I ever really put up that much of a fight. In addition to the horse and pony we stabled at a farm in Dane County, we had a chinchilla, an African leopard tortoise, an aquatic turtle, hermit crabs, guppies and three cats, including a tabby with petting and biting syndrome.

"You can keep the fish," she says matter-of-factly.

“That’s very generous of you.”

This must be what a divorce feels like in microcosm. Every one of these animals has affected my life in some way, and now I’m divvying them up with the rest of our belongings.

“What about Charlie?” she asks.

“You can’t have Charlie,” I reply assertively.

“We got Charlie from one of my friends, so she’s more mine than yours.”

“You can’t have Charlie,” I say again, “and if you fight me on this I will take you to small claims court.”

“Fine, but I’m taking the rest.”

I don’t argue with her about this. I’m trying to remain pragmatic about things. Audrey is a licensed veterinarian, after all. She is better qualified to take care of these animals than I am. This is what I tell myself as she takes them away from me. Once Audrey secures all the animals in carriers in the front seat of her truck, she and I stand in the empty living room across from one another.

“I’ve got to get going,” Audrey says, checking her watch. “I’ll call you when I get to Tucson.”

“Okay,” I reply. “You know, I can still come with you. I won’t be able to come today, but I can be there in a month or so.” My words are hollow, but I say them anyway, because I feel I’m expected to, and because I don’t know what else I can say. Our relationship is over, and no last-ditch effort from me is going to change that.

Audrey kisses me on the cheek; I’d rather she kissed me on the lips. I follow her into the pouring rain as she climbs in her truck, starts the engine and begins to pull away.

She waves goodbye at me for the last time. I stand there as she drives across the parking lot and onto Watts Road towards the expressway. I must look so foolish right now, like an amalgam of John Cusack characters brought to life sans the Boom-box and Peter Gabriel music. Part of me finds this moment amusing. Part of me finds it embarrassing.

I walk back into my rather empty apartment and calmly close the patio door. For a brief moment, I allow myself to break down and cry. When I'm finished, when the room stops spinning, and my muscles stop shaking, and I realize just how cold the stagnant rain water is on my skin, I strip down and change clothes. "Well, Charlie, it's just you, me and the fish. What the hell are we supposed to do now?"

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Fast forward yet again. It's September 2008. I'm on the Marquette University campus, sitting in Room 513 inside Johnston Hall. It is 3:30 p.m. or so, and I'm talking on my cell phone with Kelly. "I just don't understand why you won't give us a chance," she says through her tears.

I try to keep my voice steady and calm. "Kelly, we've only been going out for two months. And this is the third time we've broken up. You don't find that odd? You're just upset, because I'm the one who broke it off this time, and I'm sorry, I really, really am, but I just think we should stick to this decision."

"That is such bullshit. You're just scared."

"That may be, but I don't have the energy to go through all this with you again. How many different ways can I say the same thing? Breaking up three times, in less than three months, is not a good sign. You've even told me you're not over your ex-boyfriend."



She interjects that she doesn't think I am over Audrey either, to which I respond that she's probably right. There's a long pause.

"You weren't supposed to do this, Will. Not you. Why are *you* doing this?"

I simply didn't want to be involved in a relationship that was constantly in doubt. And having recently watched my eight year relationship crumble at its foundations, I felt I knew the warning signs of a doomed connection. So, rather than wait around for Kelly to inevitably break-up with me again, I decided that, for a change, I was going to be the one to pull the trigger and say I didn't think we should see each other any more.

"All I can say is I'm sorry, Kelly. I just think this is the right thing to do."

I listen to her cry at me for almost an hour. She tells me how horrible I am, how I'll regret this decision, how I'm throwing away the chance to be happy. Part of me thinks I deserve this tongue-lashing, though admittedly it is a small part. Mostly, I feel that giving her this chance to say whatever's on her mind will help her get over this faster and move on.

"Yes, I have issues," she says, "yes, I have mood swings, but I'm worth it. I'm worth it damn it. And you're making a mistake. You may not realize it today. But someday, you'll think back on what you're giving up and realize that this was a huge mistake. And it will be too late to fix it by then."

"Kelly, you may very well be right. But I don't think I'm making a mistake, and no matter how many times you tell me I am, no matter how sorry I am that I'm hurting you like this, I feel that this is the right decision for *me*, and I am sticking to it. All I can say is I'm sorry."

She oscillates between telling me how much she understands and how much she feels I am not being fair. “I’m in love with you, Will.”

“How was I supposed to know that? You waited to tell me that until after we broke up last week!”

“But you said it would be easy to fall in love with me. Was that all a lie?”

“You told me you didn’t know if you wanted to be in a committed relationship and that you just wanted to see what happened. Yes, it would have been very easy to fall in love with you, but you told me not too, so I didn’t”

“And it’s that easy for you to turn off your emotions, huh? You can just turn them off, just like that?”

“I never meant to hurt you, Kelly,” I say.

“Yeah, well, you did. You broke my heart, Will. Now you have to live with that.”

She was right. For the first time in my life, someone told me that I broke their heart, and it wasn’t an easy thing to hear. It was an accusation my body reacted to violently. The moment she and I hung up with one another I ran to the bathroom and threw up. I’m a nice guy, I thought. I don’t do things like this. But I did, and breaking up with Kelly ultimately made me a happier person, and that happiness was achieved at the expense of her own. Funny, after all these years I think I finally understand what Debbie went through when she broke up with me back in high school. I feel like an asshole.

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It's my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, October 13, 2008. I'm sitting in my kitchen with a Beretta in my mouth, staring at a tripod-mounted digital camera that's recording the whole thing. I've just pulled the trigger. *Click!* Technically speaking, I've just killed myself. At least I would have had the Beretta in my hand been anything other than a replica. I remove the gun barrel from my mouth with a mixture of laughter and tears. "Ta da!" I say into the camera, now an emotional wreck. This whole production has been—at least in part—a role-playing scenario designed for me to get myself in the proper mindset to finish writing the script for *High School Sweethearts*, which, though fictional, draws heavily from my real life recollections of heartbreak. It has also been a directorial exercise. Budgetary restrictions make it impossible to pay cast and crew members in anything other than free food,<sup>63</sup> which means everyone that graciously offers his/her time and talent to one of my productions is not under a contractual obligation. By never asking people to do things I am unwilling to do myself, I build and maintain trust with everyone on set. And because I'm going to ask my friend and actor Ben Wilson to drudge up painful memories to stimulate real tears during my film's climax, I needed to do the same to myself to approximate what that's ultimately going to feel like. But that's not the entire truth. I've had a fascination with death since 1986, wherein three people who were all very close to me died in quick succession during the summer. I was 8 years old then, and these deaths marked my first real experiences with loss. While the memories surrounding this summer are vague, I clearly remember sobbing in my mother's arms

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<sup>63</sup> This is a note to any would-be film director: Always feed your cast and crew, especially if you are asking them to work long-hour days. People are more willing to do what it is you ask them to do, if they know they are going to be fed.

before suggesting that I kill myself with scissors. “Shhh, hush now,” she replied gently, comfortingly. I don’t know why I said that to my mother, particularly because I didn’t want to die. In fact, I’m quite afraid of death, which is something I think I’m trying to come to terms with as an adult through staged representations of violence.

I stop recording, delete the footage and move to the bathroom to splash cold water on my face. I stare at my reflection in the mirror. The puffiness of my eyes accentuates the bags under them. I need to shave. I really need to finish this script. Looking back at my failed relationships is bittersweet, to be sure. Without them, I would never be writing this movie. My breakup with Debbie provided the impetus for it, when a simple kiss sent me into a crippling depression. My breakup with Audrey provided the little details that make my antagonist come to life – her love of animals, her position as a veterinary technician, her desire to go to veterinary school. Losing Audrey not only motivated me to finally start shooting movies<sup>64</sup> to begin with but ultimately prompted me to revisit emotions I buried with the original drafts of *High School Sweethearts* and *Jacob’s Lament*. Finally, my break-up with Kelly forced me to consider what it means to break someone’s heart.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, narratives bind facts and experiences together in meaningful ways, and frames are those structures within the narratives that shape how we think about them. My real-life narratives of heartbreak clearly influenced the fictional narrative of *High School Sweethearts*, which frames the experience of love as something that is both destructive and ephemeral. *High School Sweethearts* presents my personal heartache through graphic depictions of staged violence against the human form. And

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<sup>64</sup> My first movie was the 45-minute musical titled *Massacre (The Musical)*. It was adapted from the mini-musical “Discordia’s Sunshine Death” originally written by Rob Matsushita and Morey Burnard.

while none of my film's characters are emblematic of a single real-life counterpart, they are composites drawn from personal experiences. For instance, the script's antagonist Dawn is a synthesis of my 18 year-old, angst-ridden, heartbroken self, my ex-girlfriend Audrey, my ex-girlfriend Kelly and a hearty portion of fiction. Furthermore, the words that come from my characters' mouths, even those bits and pieces of dialogue that are my own recollections of actual conversations with or about my exes, do not have a direct correlation with the context in which they are spoken. The opening sequence, wherein Mike and Dawn share a post-sexual moment of intimacy, references both *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer, 1998) and *Contempt* (Godard, 1963) in its shot compositions and dialogue, but also includes conversational elements I shared with Kelly, as well as fictional elements drawn from my own imagination.



In these stills: Ben Wilson (as Mike) and Kelly Maxwell (as Dawn). Kelly's body position in the top left image references Brigitte Bardot's in a similar moment of intimacy during Jean Luc Godard's *Contempt*. The other pictures reference Moritz Bleibtreu and Franka Potente in *Run Lola Run*. Images courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

Each of the stories within this chapter is essentially a variation of a heartbreak narrative. In the most cliché version I framed myself as an emotionally distraught victim of circumstance—a sad-sack everyman whose crummy situation with members of the opposite sex isn't really his fault—because that's how I remember feeling when I was a teenager experiencing heartbreak for the first time. At that particular point in my life, and within that particular narrative, I framed myself as the heartbroken-hero, a frame that was reinforced with each succeeding break-up. Eventually, my role as heartbroken-hero shifted to one of heartbreaker-villain when I broke up with Kelly over the phone years later.

I hear my cell phone buzz on the kitchen counter to alert me that I have a message. I must not have heard it ringing while pretending to commit suicide. I access my voice mail. “You have one new message,” it tells me. “To listen to this message, press ...”

*Beep!* I press the number one on my keypad to speed things up. The message is from Rob, my friend and collaborator, who is helping me shoot my movie and create realistic-sounding dialogue for its characters.

“Hey dude, it's me. I just thought up a great torture for the ending of *High School Sweethearts* that I think you're going to love. Give me a call when you get the chance.”

I immediately call him back, and he picks up after a couple of rings.

“What's up?” I say. “Tell me about this torture.”

“You know those spray can keyboard dusters? According to Dan Savage<sup>65</sup>, you can use them to cause frostbite.”

“That’s awesome.”

“I can’t think of a single movie that’s done that yet. What do you think?”

“I think we need to have Dawn freeze off Mike’s nipple.”

After I hang up with Rob I try to think of a horror movie that shows someone having their nipple frozen off. I can’t think of one. That’s the thing about horror movies, audiences are always looking for that something special they’ve never seen before that is going to subvert their expectations — that “What The Fuck (WTF)?” moment of surprise that causes people to play peek-a-boo with the images on screen. If anything, *High School Sweethearts* is a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a bittersweet romantic drama about high school heartbreak that quickly turns into a series of WTF moments meant to confound audience expectations and demand attention.

As discussed in Chapter 1, fans of horror are accustomed to the oftentimes extreme depictions of violence that characterize today’s horror films. I feel it is important to both play to such expectations and give my audiences something extra they won’t necessarily see coming because, as a fan of the genre, that’s what I want when I watch a horror movie. Of course, *High School Sweethearts* includes what I hope is a strong narrative, well-written dialogue, fine performances and the like. But it also includes moments of realistic, stomach-churning violence which, while certainly disturbing to watch, were fun to make. And I’ll admit, making audiences shift in their seats because they believe—if only for a few seconds of screen time—that my created

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<sup>65</sup> Dan Savage is an author best known for writing the internationally syndicated relationship and sex advice column *Savage Love*.

violence looks real enough to be unsettling, gives me a rush. It's rewarding to see people squirm and avert their eyes when they see my violence, because, as you will see in the following chapter, making fictional violence appear realistic is easier said than done.



## CHAPTER 6

### The Gore the Merrier

It's a warm summer night in early August 2008, and I'm drinking Turkish coffee with my close friend, and frequent collaborator, Shannon Daubner in his kitchen. The two of us are discussing how we're going to pull off one of the most important special effect shots in *High School Sweethearts*—pushing a 10-gallon glass aquarium filled with rocks and water out his second-story backyard window and onto the head of a life-size stunt dummy we made weeks prior after watching Indy Mogul's do-it-yourself (DIY) tutorial on You Tube.<sup>66</sup>

Shannon's 5-year-old, soon-to-be stepson, Niki is playing a video game in the living room with Shannon's two boys, 8-year-old Jaxon and 10-year-old William. His 14-year-old daughter, Alexis, is out with her friends. Niki's mother – and Shannon's fiancé – Dolores Vinketa, alternates between hanging out with the kids and exchanging small talk with us in the kitchen. I glance up to see freckles of dried fake blood on the ceiling.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The video details how to craft a life-size stunt dummy using three rolls of duct tape, a pair of rubber gloves, a long-sleeved shirt, a thin pair of pants purchased from a thrift store, old clothes to be used as stuffing, an old pair of socks and a T-shirt to wrap around the model's head prior to taping it around his/her forehead and underneath his/her chin. The performer wears the thin pants, long-sleeved shirt, rubber gloves and old socks, which are then covered in layers of duct tape that create an exoskeleton which preserves the shape of his/her body. The duct-tape covered torso and pants are cut off, taped back together and stuffed with the old clothes to add girth and heft. I did not follow the video's directions completely and chose, instead, to improvise in two key areas, because I wanted my dummy to look as real as possible. 1) Rather than using rubber gloves, I simply purchased a pair of flesh-colored fake hands from Halloween Express. 2) I painted two female Styrofoam heads with flesh-tone liquid latex before applying fake eyelashes with spirit gum. Each head was hollowed-out with a soldering iron so they could later be filled with home-made ballistics gel (a home-made mixture of Karo-based fake blood and gelatin).

<sup>67</sup> Last February, Shannon co-starred with me in the short *Knife Fight*, a gratuitously violent splatter-comedy about two roommates engaged in a life or death struggle over the last bottle of soda in the refrigerator that I filmed as part of an independent study with adjunct professor Patrick McGilligan at Marquette University.



In these photos (from left to right): Dolores Daubner; yours truly adjusting the dummy's torso. Photos courtesy of Shannon Daubner.

“I’m surprised you don’t have ants,” I say, gesturing at the months-old blood-spatter pattern. “I made that out of Karo syrup.”

“Come on, that was a fun day of shooting,” Shannon replies. “I can’t clean that off. That’d be like erasing a piece of history.”

“Glad you think so. I’m still pissed I broke your ribs.”<sup>68</sup>

“Could’ve been worse,” he says with a shrug of his shoulders. “Besides, the footage looked great.”

Shannon’s comment refers to one of my favorite tenets of filmmaking – that all the hardship, stress and strain of making a movie with virtually no budget is worthwhile,

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<sup>68</sup> Calling *Knife Fight* low budget is an understatement. During the film, Shannon’s character throws knives at me and misses on two separate occasions. The knives were real, and they were quite sharp. In addition, Shannon and I performed our own stunts, one of which required that I leg-throw him from the dining room into his living room. During one of the throws, Shannon fractured two ribs. His hospital bill was \$350.00 out-of-pocket, and he missed three 8-hour days of work at \$23.48/hr.

provided it yields usable footage. “Well, yeah,” I say, hesitantly. “You look hurt because you were hurt, which you failed to tell me, or anyone else.”

“Come on, it makes for a good story,” Shannon says with a smirk. “If I’d have said anything, we never would have been able to finish shooting, and you would have had to take me to the hospital.”

“Yes, you’re a badass, Shannon, and everyone knows it. Too bad your kids didn’t take that into account before deciding to hold a grudge against me for breaking their dad. Remember what your sons said to me the first time I came over after you finally decided to see a doctor?”

Shannon’s face lights up as he chortles, “Yeah, they threatened to set you on fire!”

“William said, and I quote, ‘Thanks for breaking my dad’s ribs, jerk. Maybe we should break your ribs to make up for it.’ Then Jack suggested, ‘Maybe we should set you on fire.’ And William replied, ‘Yeah, then we can eat your ribs!’ I pause for added effect. “Can you explain how intentionally setting me on fire and eating my ribs is even in the same league as accidentally breaking one of yours? You can’t, because it ain’t the same league, ain’t the same ballpark, and – pardon the vulgarity – ain’t even the same fuckin’ sport!”

“Kids say the darndest things,” Shannon replies matter-of-factly. Besides, they were bluffing. And they did forgive you.”

“True, but part of me was genuinely afraid to have a 10-year-old tell me he wanted to eat my ribs. It was a little creepy. Still, you should’ve told me you were hurt. I would have stopped filming.”

“I’m sure. You, mister, ‘Let’s do it again.’ ”

“Dude, you could’ve made it worse.”

“How many times, Will? How many times did you say, ‘just one more take,’ before we did twenty-five?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. But you could’ve punctured something. People who watch our movie look at the pain on your face and think it looks real, because it was.”

“Then it was a happy accident.”

I’m reminded of stories about tyrannical, demanding directors who treat their performers like cattle and am glad I don’t have that reputation,<sup>69</sup> in part because I treat my cast members with respect and never, ever ask them to do anything that I would be unwilling to do myself. Nevertheless, I’m grateful Shannon doesn’t harbor a grudge against me for his injury, and it’s nice to know he’s willing to indulge my creative impulses. In fact, he seems just as giddy about the aquarium scene as I do.

There’s a lull in the conversation while Shannon and I sip our coffees. “We need to do some test drops,” I say.

“What with?” Shannon asks.

“An empty box? We could fill it with books, slide it out the window and see where and how it lands.”

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<sup>69</sup> According to Peary (1981), writer Michael Goodwin concluded that the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was filled with pain, because the people in it suffered during its production. Citing Goodwin, Peary explains the physical discomfort the performers experienced while shooting. He states, “Of the dinner table sequence, [actor, Edwin] Neal told Goodwin: ‘The animals on the table were filled with formaldehyde, and they were literally rotting under the lights ... As soon as they’d yell ‘Cut,’ we’d run to the windows and throw up. For thirty-six hours straight!’ Of the scene in which Sally runs into the gas station, [director, Tobe] Hooper said, ‘[Actress] Marilyn [Burns] had busted both knees up, she was bleeding badly, she was ... pretty badly injured. It was terrible, but it played very well.’ Of the graphic scene in which Pam is hung on a meat hook, [art director] Bob Burns commented, ‘When she was screaming in pain, she was screaming in pain. All they had to hold her up was a strip of nylon stocking, and it was cutting her in two’” (p. 350).

“I like it,” Shannon replies.

“What are we going to use as the dummy?”

“How about a pillow?”

“Nah, we need something that can act as a stand-in for a person, so we can properly block the shots and get a sense of where Molly’s body is going to be and how she’ll have to position herself when we film.”

“Then we only have one option,” Shannon says as he places his hand firmly on my shoulder while raising an eyebrow. “Get in the car.”

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Flash forward. Shannon and I are staring at a wall display containing various sizes, styles and genders of inflatable love dolls and male masturbatory aids inside an adult novelty and video store in West Allis. Female mannequins model lingerie. Heavy metal music plays through the speaker system. And the entire store smells like disinfectant. Opposite the love dolls and male masturbators is a wall featuring an assortment of pastel-colored sex toys for women. Though the business itself is fairly crowded, customers don’t make eye contact with one another. Young and middle-aged men, some of whom are wearing hospital scrubs, wander the rental aisles and occasionally pause to lift a DVD case from a shelf and flip it over to see if the sex it is none-too-subtly selling fits their preference. A young, presumably heterosexual couple walks hand-in-hand throughout the store; every so often, the young man whispers something into his companion’s ear, and she blushes. Three young women giggle as they maneuver beyond Shannon and me to inspect the sex toys behind us.

“So, which one do you want?” Shannon asks, gesturing towards the Area 51 Love Doll, a blue-colored, three-breasted female alien with suction-cup fingers. “Now that’s just ridiculous,” I say, grabbing the box from his hand before putting it back on its display hook. “And I don’t *want* any of these.”

“Whatever, man, I’m not the one who bought a 12-inch dildo!”<sup>70</sup>

I’m no prude, but I can’t help feeling embarrassed while standing here, staring at a wall housing products like the Slutty Sailor Love Doll, whose packaging unabashedly announces, “She’ll blow you away.”

We purchase a Briana Banks blow-up doll and inflate it with an electric air pump Shannon keeps in his garage. The doll, a grotesque distortion of sexuality whose anatomy is more or less assumed, is not unlike Lady Judy dolls typically associated with bachelor parties, save for its facial resemblance to a popular porn starlet and its inclusion of three vibrantly pink orifices. The packaging proclaims Banks’ actual visage is printed on the doll, and, sure enough, said photo is unnaturally stretched across its face with the features flattened by whatever process the manufacturers used to map it to the rubber in the first place.

“This would make a good ‘Where are they now?’ photo, huh?” I ask as I hold the doll next to me and pretend to pose for the camera.

Shannon and I clothe the doll in a pair of beat-up baggy jeans and a Mark Chmura #89 Green Bay Packers jersey,<sup>71</sup> hoping his boys aren’t so grown-up that they know what a blow-up doll even is. When we walk back in the kitchen through the utility room, with

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<sup>70</sup> My first movie, *Massacre (The Musical)* contained a series of sight gags involving a 12-inch translucent blue strap-on dildo called “The Blockbuster.”

<sup>71</sup> The irony, of course, is that Mark Chmura was accused of having inappropriate sexual contact with the 17-year-old babysitter of his children in 2000.

Briana in tow, Jack is standing at the sink getting a glass of water. “She looks funny,” he says. “Why is her mouth open like that?”

“I don’t know.” Shannon replies in deadpan.

Jack grabs the doll and runs into the family room to harass his older-brother.

“Gimme a kiss, gimme a kiss,” he repeats in a high-pitched voice whilst making kissy noises.

“Get away, Jack,” William says. “Gross! You’re messing up my game!”

“Okay guys, knock it off,” Shannon asserts as he walks into the family room to take the doll away. “Will and I have to get to work.”

Moments later, I’m outside in the backyard positioning the blow-up doll on the wooden stairs underneath the second-story window. Shannon is upstairs at the ready with a box of old phonebooks. Dolores is in the kitchen doing dishes. And as we’re about to get things underway, Niki walks outside and stands next to me.

“Can I watch?” he asks. “Sure,” I reply. “Just stay next to me. Shannon! On the count of three, slide the box off the windowsill, okay?”

“Roger!”

I glance over at Niki. “Don’t move, okay buddy? This is dangerous, and I don’t want you to get hurt. You’re going to stay next to me, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re not going to move?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Okay. Perfect. Are you ready, Shannon?”

“Ready.”

“One ...”

Niki eyes the box dangling from the windowsill with great interest.

“Two ...”

On the word “Three” Shannon relinquishes his grip on the box, and Niki makes a bee-line for the door. I instinctively raise my hand to stop him, but my reaction time is a split-second too slow. I cringe, bracing myself for the inevitable impact. Still, like a car crash alongside the highway, I can’t bring myself to look away. The tumbling cardboard aquarium crowns Niki’s head, and he crumples into the utility room, falling completely out of my sight. Talk about your bad omens. Time stops dead in its tracks. My bottom lip quivers. Shannon, upstairs, didn’t see what happened. Dolores, busy doing the dishes in the kitchen, didn’t either.

“Oh God, he’s dead” I say out loud. “I fucking killed him.”

A dog barks somewhere in the neighborhood. Crickets chirp. The warm breeze feels cold against the sweat beading up on the hairs of my neck, which are all standing at attention. My palms are cold. And then I see Niki calmly walk from the utility room back to my side. He glances up at me and says hi as if nothing’s happened.

“Niki,” I say, “why did you run for the door when I told you not to?”

He shrugs. “Don’t know.”

“Are you okay?”

“Ya.”

“Are you sure?”

“Ya.”



And with that, he runs back inside. Moments like these make me feel like I should never have children. I follow and tell Dolores her son got clocked in the head by a box of phonebooks. She looks him over, asks if he's okay and gives him a hug. Shannon walks downstairs, "How'd it look?"

"Listen, I told Niki to stay put. I told him to stay next to me. But he ran at the door and got hit by the books. I'm so, so sorry. I should've been holding his hand or something. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Well is he okay?"

"He says he is. So does Dolores."

"Was he crying?"

"No."

"Why'd he run under the books?"

"I haven't the foggiest."

Shannon turns to face Niki. "Hey buddy, you alright?"

"Uh-huh."

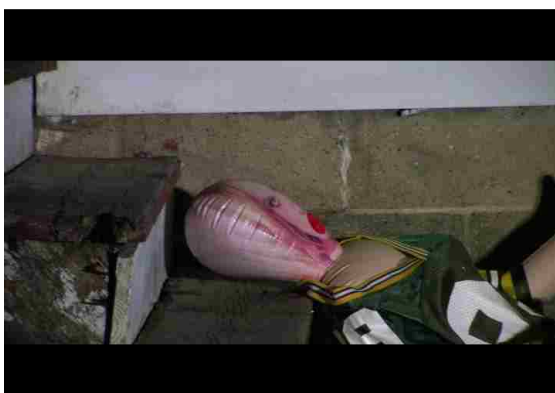
Shannon turns back in my direction, shaking his head from side to side. "Well, that was a dumb thing for him to do."

"We haven't even officially started shooting this damn movie, and I've already almost killed one of your kids."

"Not my kid yet," Shannon says with a smile. I appreciate the joke, because it means he's not angry. "Fair enough," I reply. "Shall we set up the cameras and block the shots, then?"

"Of course, my horse. But first I want to help Dola finish the dishes."

William walks into the kitchen and asks if we're going to drop the box out of the window some more. He wants to watch. So does Jack. This time, Dolores says she'll come outside to watch the children.



In these photos: Blocking/corresponding shots of the blow-up doll and actress Molly Greenwood. Photos courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

Shannon views horror films with his kids, like my mom used to do with me. I like that his children are interested in seeing the how-to of special effects work. It allows them to see firsthand how the medium of film creates an illusion of reality in highly contrived situations and how very realistic-looking violence can be artificially constructed. In other words, I like being able to show them how I create the good kind of violence. The good kind of violence is, quite simply, violence that isn't real. In Chapter 5 I described the first time my mother allowed me to watch an R-rated slasher movie. "No one is actually being hurt," she said. "It's the good kind of scary. It's the good kind

of violence.” Still, by allowing Shannon’s children to be present throughout the creative process, I run the risk of inadvertently de-sensitizing them to the sight of brutality, potentially encouraging the false idea that violence itself is either unreal or harmless, and perhaps even conditioning them to reproduce the aggressive actions they see us exhibit.<sup>72</sup> And this worries me. By watching Shannon and I enjoy ourselves while crafting realistic, oftentimes brutal, displays of fictional violence, are we encouraging his children to imitate our aggressive behavior in the real world?

Consider the following: Shannon recently asked me to watch a digital video on his laptop he recorded during his deer hunting excursion to Door County last winter. In the video the camera essentially acts as Shannon’s point-of-view (POV) as he follows a blood trail through the snow-blanketed forest. Moments before turning the camera on, Shannon fired his rifle at a buck and hit it somewhere in its hind quarters. We hear the crinkling of the leaves and grass as Shannon’s boots trek through the snow along with the rustling of barren tree branches in the wind. Eventually, we see the deer, which has collapsed in brush. As Shannon walks nearer, we see that it is still breathing. The camera remains trained on the fallen animal, and we simply watch with Shannon as the deer slowly bleeds out and dies.

“Shannon, this is a snuff video,” I say. “You’re showing me deer snuff. Why did you record this?”

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<sup>72</sup> Bandura, Ross & Ross (1961) found that preschool children were more likely to display aggressive behavior towards a 5-foot inflated Bobo doll after watching an adult treat it aggressively than preschool children who watched an adult model behave non-aggressively towards it.

“This is the ultimate trophy,” he says with a smile. “I got to witness this animal’s last moments. Do you have any idea how difficult a shot I had to make to hit it from where I was and how fast he was traveling?”

“I don’t want to watch this anymore,” I reply. “I know you’re proud of your shot, and you have the bust in your living room, and I can appreciate all of that, I really can, but I don’t hunt. And this is making me sick.”<sup>73</sup>

As I say this, Jack walks in between Shannon and I and giggles. When Jack sees the deer struggle to stand before its legs buckle, he giggles again.

“Jack, why are you laughing?” I ask.

“Because it’s funny,” he replies.

“Why is it funny?”

“Because he can’t get up.”

“Jack,” I say, “this isn’t funny. That’s a real animal. Your dad shot it, which is fine. But this animal is dying.”

Jack doesn’t say anything, probably because he doesn’t know how to respond. It’s possible he didn’t know that the video we were watching was real, because neither Shannon nor I told him. But he knows about hunting. He’s watched and helped his dad butcher a deer before in the garage. So the fact that Jack giggled at the animal’s demise raises an interesting and potentially vexing question: Am I contributing to his desensitization to real violence by allowing him to watch my creation of fictional violence? I certainly hope not. Nevertheless, Shannon and his children routinely watch horror films together as a family, and Shannon willingly allows his children to witness the filmmaking

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<sup>73</sup> In Chapter 1 I discussed a study by Haidt, McCauley & Rozin (1994), who found that documentary-style violence is unattractive to viewers because it lacks the framework of dramatic fiction.

process. Consequently, I reconcile my concerns by reflecting upon my own childhood experiences watching such movies with my mother, encouraging Shannon's children to actively think about and question the filmmaking process, and coming to terms with the idea that, as a filmmaker, I am ultimately not responsible for Shannon's children as they are not my intended audience, nor am I the one in charge of their parenting.

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Flash forward: It is the late evening of August 22, 2008. The sun is setting, and I am hurriedly positioning a light kit in Shannon's back yard in preparation for shooting the aquarium drop, which marks the first official shooting day of *High School Sweethearts*. The weather forecast for the evening calls for scattered thunderstorms, and though there remain patches of blue sky amidst the clouds, it definitely smells like rain. Shannon and his family are out at the moment but are set to arrive home any minute. The headless, hands-less test dummy rests on the floor of Shannon's kitchen, dressed in dark blue jeans, a maroon-colored, long-sleeved hoodie and brown tennis shoes—an exact duplicate of the costume worn by its living, breathing counterpart, Molly Greenwood. Kelly is with me,<sup>74</sup> assisting where she can to alleviate some of the stress I put on myself by being a hands-on director.<sup>75</sup> Molly waits in costume on the sidelines with her boyfriend Brett, who came to show his support and partake of the free food I provided for the cast and crew.

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<sup>74</sup> Kelly and I had not broken up at this point. She was kind enough to take the train to Milwaukee from Chicago to see me and help out with the shoot. Were it not for her, I don't think the night would have gone as smoothly.

<sup>75</sup> At this level and budget, there really is no alternative. It is commonplace for each person on the set to take on multiple positions. Tonight, among other things, I am the director, the lighting technician, the art director, the cinematographer, the costumer and the special effect and make-up coordinator.



In this photo: The headless, hands-less life-size test dummy.  
Photo courtesy of Shannon Daubner.

Shannon and his family arrive a little before 9 o'clock, and my friends and production assistants, Kent Schoenecker and Greg Panovich, show up shortly thereafter. Shannon, Kent and I finish constructing the stunt dummy by affixing one of two Styrofoam heads to its torso with flesh-colored medical tape, situating a blonde wig with loops of duct tape and attaching the fake hands.

With the dummy ready to go, the first item on tonight's agenda is to utilize hand-held camera techniques to film it falling from the second-story and slamming into the concrete below. I lug the dummy upstairs and situate it seat-first out the window.<sup>76</sup> The second story window overlooking the back yard is positioned high enough from the stairs

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<sup>76</sup> The scene leading into this one will be written and shot later. It is not unusual – at any level of filmmaking – to shoot scenes out of order. The bulk of filming will take place in winter, and nobody wants to shoot this scene outside, freezing in the snow.

to make the prospect of hoisting a hefty 10-gallon aquarium filled to the brim with water seem unlikely. Shannon secures two solid wooden planks perpendicular to the open window, so they rest on the trim of his walls. In theory, the planks are strong enough to support both his weight and the aquarium's.



In these photos (from left to right): Kent, Shannon and I attach a Styrofoam head to the test dummy; Yours-truly kissing the test dummy's head. Photos courtesy of Dolores Daubner and Kelly K.

Outside, Greg and I operate the digital camcorders. Kelly and Dolores corral the boys on a hammock, while Alexis hangs out on the sidelines with Molly and Brett. Kent assists Shannon upstairs.

I call up to Shannon, "Are we ready?"

"Ready!"

"Okay, here we go ... the first shot of *High School Sweethearts*! One, two, three! Action!"

The dummy slides through the window, and its wig falls off mid-flight. Everybody laughs. "Cut! Let's try it again."

We re-attach the wig, this time using obscene amounts of duct-tape.



In these photos (from left to right): Yours truly, carrying the dummy upstairs; the dummy, ready to fall through the window. Photos courtesy of Kelly K. and Shannon Daubner.

“Take two! One, two, three, action!” The wig falls off again. This happens six more times.

Eventually, Kelly suggests we attach the wig with the aid of a safety pin.

“Take nine, ready? One, two, three, action.”

The dummy falls. This time, though the wig stays on, its left hand pops off. Suffice to say, I’m getting frustrated. First shot of the night, and we’re already behind schedule. Thunder rumbles in the distance. We need to get this shot and move on. I personally secure the hands with nearly a quarter roll of duct tape, double-check the wig and carry the dummy back up to Shannon and Kent before running back downstairs.

“Ready, Shannon?”

“Ready,” he says, his voice slightly dejected, his excitement obviously waning.

“Okay, here we go again.” I can tell the kids are getting bored. Hell, I’m getting bored. “Jaxon, you want to yell action on this one?”

“Yeah!”



“Can I say it next time?” William asks

“Sure, why not? On three, Jack. One, two, three!”

Jaxon yells action, the dummy falls, its hands stay on, its wig stays on, and when it hits the stairs, the head flies off and bounces onto the lawn.

“For God’s sake,” I say, catching myself before I let loose a cavalcade of curse words that so desperately want to announce themselves to the world. “This is fu—rickin’ ridiculous!”

“You almost said a bad word,” William says.

We re-shoot the dummy drop until I have at least three good takes of it landing, face-first, on the stairs and I’m happy with the coverage. I like having multiple usable takes, so I don’t have to settle for a mediocre shot while editing. It’s going to be pain-in-the-ass enough to cycle through all these outtakes.

“Let me guess,” Shannon calls down, “One more time?”

“Not right now,” I say with an alligator grin across my face. “I was beginning to think I wouldn’t get to say this tonight: Next shot!” Everyone claps, and I can feel a collective sigh of relief pass through the group.

“It’s about goddamn time,” I think to myself, nervous that this is the easiest the night’s going to be. Another thunderclap rumbles in the distance.

Ideally, I will cut away from the dummy at the exact moment of impact. I wanted the dummy to land face-first, so I can eventually come back into the shot I am currently setting up. I pour a pool of fake blood precisely on the stair where I need Molly to lay her head. When she rolls over to reveal she is still alive, I want the audience to wince as they process the damage inflicted by her fall. The extreme, sudden burst of violence that

will ultimately lead to this moment is meant to let the audience realize what type of movie-going experience they're truly in for. This scene, the aquarium drop, is meant to raise the bar for those expectations. By this point in the film, viewers will have already seen – in a matter of minutes – the entire cast murdered and/or incapacitated by the villain. Autumn's short-lived survival provides a glimmer of hope, wherein viewers are meant to think that her character, the meek high school girl at the bottom of the pecking-order who reveals she is carrying Mike's child mere moments before being flung out a window, is somehow going to be the Final Girl that saves the day. After all, the film's not going to kill off a pregnant teenager, right?

In actuality, the character's body is broken, and her will is destroyed. The catastrophic mess of glass and gore that ends Autumn's life will shock some, offend others and set the tone for the rest of the movie. And I wouldn't have it any other way, because I am not trying to film happy violence. You will recall that happy violence results when violence occurs without serious consequences. Unlike the images of Road Runner cartoons and their ilk, which routinely depict characters like Wile E. Coyote being hit in the head with an anvil, crushed by a safe or squashed by any one of his myriad ACME products, the graphic, lingering shots of violent imagery throughout my entire picture revel in its physical and emotional effects. Like director Sam Peckinpah, who directed the ultra-violent western *The Wild Bunch* (1969), I want to rub the noses of the public in the violence of my film and believe people are obliged to accept their nature and be accountable for the savagery we as human beings commit out of avarice, domination, predilection and human desires (LoBrutto, 2005 p. 328). Plus, I have never seen anyone in a horror film killed in this fashion before, and there's definitely something

to be said about giving the audience something unexpected. The unpredictability of this kill, as well as its sheer brutality, makes this a stand-out WTF moment in my movie, which is a good thing. As Deneen (2007) rightly observes, “The right kill can separate your movie from whichever popcorn slasher flick will appear and disappear from the theater within a week of its release. That ‘good kill’ will be discussed on horror-oriented blogs for years and years ... A key to finding good kills is to know what kinds of deaths we’ve seen in previous horror movies” (p. 216).



In these photos (from left to right): Shannon demonstrating Molly’s body position; Molly contorting her body into said position on camera. Photos courtesy of Dolores Daubner and Graveside Pictures, LLC.

I dribble home-made, dark-red fake blood over Molly’s face and accent it with streaks of Ben Nye’s, mint-flavored stage blood before having her position her forehead on the appropriate stair. She cocks her right leg at an awkward angle to suggest a broken bone, and, on “Action,” I have her roll her body towards the house so she stares up at the open widow with a mixture confusion and relief that she is somehow still alive ... at least until she sees the aquarium appear on the ledge of the windowsill. Then that look turns to terror.

Just because Molly isn’t a professional actress, doesn’t mean her performance should be anything less than exactly what I want it to be. If her performance isn’t convincing, then the audience is libel to find the entire situation campy, which is not my

intent. But how can I expect Molly to realistically showcase her character's emotional and physical turmoil when our own ordinary experiences have little connection to the scene at hand? Moreover, how can I best help her deliver a solid performance without being too forcibly demanding? The answer really is quite simple: I will try to stimulate real fear, a decision I do not take or make lightly. I figure, if I can convince Molly she is in real danger, then her reactions can't help but be real as well. But is it ethical for me to do so? The short answer: In some cases yes, in others no. While my judgment here is at least partially clouded by my tenacious desire to "get the shot," I wholeheartedly realize that when a performer agrees to work with a director, there is an unspoken trust between the two parties. In this case, Molly trusts that I will be able to motivate her to give me the desired performance, and I trust that she will be willing to work with me to deliver said performance. But there is more to it than that. She also trusts that I will not ask her to do anything unreasonable. If I violate that trust, Molly could conceivably walk off the project altogether, or lose respect for me as a director, which would in turn damage my professional, working relationship with her. Prior to casting Molly in *High School Sweethearts*, however, she and I were already friends, so I knew, more or less, how far I could push her performance.

For example, one shot that is rather important to the scene is Molly's reaction to watching the aquarium as it plummets from the window and crashes into her body. I want to capture on film her character's moment of realization that she is about to be killed, and I achieve this by filming Molly's natural reaction to having a pillow dropped on her head from the second-story window, which is fairly innocuous. It stands to reason that Molly's natural inclination would be to flinch in preparation for impact.

Unfortunately, repeatedly dropping a pillow on Molly's face also stimulates laughter in at least half of the footage.

"Molly," I explain, "you're supposed to be scared. Someone is crushing you with an aquarium that is going to cave-in your head, shatter over your body and perforate your organs with shards of glass."

She responds, "But it's only a pillow."

In the glow of the light kit I see a smattering of raindrops. Every now and again, I hear the sizzle as one hits the bulb. I ask William and Kelly to hold umbrellas over the equipment and cameras and decide to press on, reluctant to cancel the shoot on account of a few drops of rain.

The last image I need to capture before we can drop the aquarium is Molly's reaction to seeing it appear in the window and linger along its edge. Again, it is imperative that Molly appears genuinely afraid, so I fill the base of one of my two 10-gallon aquariums with rocks and have Shannon dangle it out the window. In addition, I have Molly re-position herself on the ground to bring her body closer to the wall and directly underneath the aquarium. Intermittent strands of her dishwater blonde hair are stained with the reddish-hue from the food coloring in the pool of fake blood that surrounds her head like a demonic halo.

I kneel down next to Molly and apply a fresh coat of blood to her face and the stairs around her. The blood is sticky, very sticky. Every time Molly tries to blink, one of her eyes stays closed just a little bit longer than the other.

"Okay, what I am about to tell you may be scary, but in the interest of both full disclosure and safety, I have to say this."

“What’s up?”

“Shannon is going to dangle the aquarium out the window. It is not filled with water. It is filled with rocks. It is heavy. Though it will be balanced on the ledge, there is a chance, albeit a small one, that something could go wrong. If that something happens, and the aquarium falls, I need you to roll away from the house as fast as you can, okay?” Molly says okay, but I notice a slight change in her demeanor.

“Will that protect me?”

“Yes. Probably. Look, I’m just telling you as a precaution.”

“Well how dangerous is this?”

“Odds are nothing will go wrong. I’m only telling you this as a just in case.”

I walk away, relatively certain that everything will go off without a hitch. Still, her rolling away from the house wouldn’t do much to save her from being injured. Should Shannon accidentally relinquish his grip, the aquarium would fall so quickly that Molly wouldn’t really have enough time to vocalize a scream, let alone roll to safety. In fact, the aquarium would shatter with such ferocity that glass would no doubt pierce through her clothing and at the very least leave her with substantial injuries. And that would be my fault. And I would have to live with that. And yet I am going to go through with it. Because I don’t have the time to coax a believable, feigned expression of fear from Molly, I’m going to stimulate a real one.

I think back on filming *Knife Fight* with Shannon—how we used real knives, even during the knife throws, because we couldn’t find fake ones that looked real enough, how our bodies were both covered in bruises at the end of the shoot, how I accidentally broke Shannon’s rib and how willing I was to dangle a sharpened knife point so close to

my eyeball it brushed past my eyelashes. But *Knife Fight* was different, because Shannon and I both knew the risks associated with the project from the outset, and, if I'm being completely honest with myself, we were being stupid, trying to one-up one another through an escalating series of dangerous set-pieces. In addition, we relished the fact that what we captured on film was oftentimes real and something that other people would have faked. Here and now, Molly doesn't really understand the risks associated with the current situation, and if something unexpected happens and she actually gets crushed by a falling aquarium, it won't matter how good the footage looks.



In this still image: Yours truly performing an idiotic stunt in *Knife Fight*. Yes, that is a real knife. Image courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

I tell everyone to hold on a second, so I can go in and talk with Shannon. “How safe is this, really?” I ask.

“Pretty safe.”

“Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

Shannon and I trust each other implicitly. We always have. He’d tell me if he thought this was a bad idea. “Okay,” I say, let’s do this.” I tell myself this is all relatively safe, that Molly trusts me, and that my decision to tell her about the dangers of the scene was primarily a ruse to effectively prime her to be fearful.<sup>77</sup> As I walk back downstairs, through the kitchen and into the backyard, I wrestle with this decision and how my obligations as a filmmaker to capture the footage that best represents my vision for this movie stand at odds with my responsibility as Molly’s friend to inform her that what I am asking her to do is truly dangerous.<sup>78</sup> I go through with the stunt because there’s simply not enough time to go about this any other way, which is a decision that is, at best, ethically murky.

I call “Action,” and Molly’s reaction is perfect. She wriggles and squirms on the concrete, never taking her eyes off the aquarium.

To assuage her fears, and to show that I never ask my performers to do something I am unwilling to do myself, I switch places with her to shoot some point-of view shots of the aquarium dangling from the window. I tell Shannon to let the aquarium out a little bit more so that only a sliver of it remains inside. My view becomes that of the camera’s which has essentially become that of Molly’s character, Autumn. My neck aches as it

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<sup>77</sup> Shannon later told me that Molly’s boyfriend, Brett, walked upstairs and told him, “That’s my girlfriend down there. Don’t fuck around.”

<sup>78</sup> Months later, I showed this portion of the thesis to Molly. She chuckled and told me she knew how dangerous the stunt was from the outset. “Why’d you go along with it, then?” I asked. “I trusted you,” she replied. “And I figured you were just trying to make me feel better by telling me it wasn’t that dangerous. Of course it was dangerous. That aquarium was heavy!”



rests on the wooden steps. The cool puddle of fake blood feels oddly refreshing against the heat of the back of my neck. I feel my heart thumping through my chest and realize that if Shannon were to let go, I would in no way have time to roll out of its path. The last thing I'd ever see would be the aquarium descending towards me through the camera's viewfinder. Imagine the footage! I can only hope this very same, exhilarating feeling of fear I am currently experiencing, and that I imagine Molly herself experienced moments ago, translates in the captured footage.

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It is now well past 11 p.m., and we're finally set to film the aquarium drop. Shannon and Kent fill the dummy's hollowed-out Styrofoam head with ballistics gel (a combination of fake blood and gelatin), and secure a clear CD case to its underside to ensure none of it leaks out.

In theory, when the aquarium impacts with the dummy, its head will crack open in a torrential geyser of gore. After re-attaching the head to the dummy's torso, Kent and I set it up so it matches Molly's body position in the previous shots. Meanwhile, Shannon readies the aquarium by filling it to the brim with water and carrying it upstairs. Kelly, Dolores, Jaxon, Niki and William sit on the hammock outside, well out of range of whatever debris will no doubt hurl through the air during the explosion of glass. Molly, having changed from her costume into her street clothes, sits sipping a glass of wine alongside her boyfriend. I have a total of three digital camcorders set up on tripods to record the drop from different angles. One of them has the aquarium tightly framed in



In this photo: Yours truly recording a POV shot of the aquarium.  
Photo courtesy of Dolores Daubner.



In this photo: Shannon gluing a CD case to the bottom of a Styrofoam head filled with gore.  
Photo courtesy of Dolores Daubner.

the window. On “Action,” I will follow with the aquarium as it falls into the dummy. I toy with the idea of laying a tarp down to catch the glass but abandon the notion once I realize it would likely appear in at least one of the shots and throw off continuity.

I look over at Niki when I say this: “This is really, really dangerous everyone. So, I don’t want anybody to move. After the aquarium shatters, nobody move towards the house. There will be glass everywhere. Let the adults pick it up, okay?”

The kids all nod. Dolores holds Niki, presumably because she remembers the incident with the box of books a few weeks back. Everyone is going to say action together. “Here it is, the moment we’ve all been waiting for. One, two, three!” Everyone screams, “Action!”

The aquarium falls forward, but the inertia of the water causes it to fall well past its mark, missing the dummy completely, and shattering all over the lawn. Plus, I botch my shot completely by being over zealous and leading the aquarium too much with my tilt.

“You missed her” Jaxon says. “You missed her.” I don’t respond. My mind is a whirlwind of swear words, curses and exclamations begging to come out. Inwardly, I’m jumping up and down, throwing my hat to the floor, kicking over my equipment and screaming invectives into the night air. Outwardly, I’m speechless, listening to Jaxon repeat again and again, “You missed her. Hey Will, you missed her. Will, don’t you see you missed her?”

I spin around with the words, “No shit I missed her,” on the tip of my tongue. I take a couple of quick, deep breaths. “I know, Jack. It’s okay. We have one more try. That’s why I brought two aquariums.”

Kelly senses my anxiety and walks up behind me, placing her arm on my shoulder. “It looked cool,” she says reassuringly. “It’s fine,” I say. “We have another shot.” I really wanted the seamlessness of my shot to work, to follow the aquarium as it falls so the audience doesn’t have time to realize what they’re seeing is a trick. Now, all I want to do is have a usable take.

First thing’s first: We need to pick up the fragmented remains of the fractured aquarium. “Let’s see,” I say to myself as I pick up remnants of glass. “I already have the full shot, showing Molly’s actual body underneath the window.” My mind’s eye reframes that shot so you can see the dummy, but not the window. Obviously, I can’t chance sliding the second aquarium out of the window again. It’s just too risky.

Shannon suggests holding the aquarium directly over the dummy, thus ensuring a hit, and both Greg and Dolores offer to quite literally hold him by the seat of his pants as he does so. Once again, Shannon and I trust each other implicitly. If he says he can do this, I believe he can. While Greg, Dolores and Shannon run upstairs to get into their respective positions, Kent and I quickly reset the dummy, position the tripod-mounted cameras to record stationary shots and begin recording.

I call up to Shannon: “Go ahead whenever you’re ready.”

Shannon leans out the window holding the aquarium. Greg, in an attempt to weight Shannon down and prevent him from falling, tightly holds onto his belt, while Dolores interlocks her arms around Shannon’s waist. Shannon’s muscles quake; his face turns bright red as he strains.

“Are you recording?” he says, the weight of the aquarium clearly taking its toll.

“Yes!” I reply.

“Then call action! Say action!”

Everybody screams, “Action!” Shannon vocalizes loudly as he relinquishes his grip on the aquarium, which hits the dummy square in the face. The aquarium explodes into smithereens as everyone erupts with applause. A sliver of glass bounces off my cheek beneath my left eye. Molly giggles with glee on the sidelines. And I laugh like a crazy person, giddy with excitement that we got the shot from three angles “Yes!” I scream. “Yes! Thank you, Shannon! Thank you everyone!”

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Cut to: Shannon and I, standing over the dummy, whose head, for whatever reason, did not break open after being struck with the aquarium. “What do you think?” Shannon asks. “Well,” I reply, “We need to cut back to show the aftermath, and, quite honestly, after all the trouble we went through to get to this point, I want to make this as gory as possible. Go ahead and smack the hell out of it with a shovel.” Shannon does just that. He approaches the first strike pensively, approaching the dummy like a cat sneaking up on its prey. Whack! The head refuses to give. Shannon winds up again, this time striking with more force than before. Whack! We hear the snap of the Styrofoam as it splits underneath its thick, liquid latex skin. “Whatever you did to make this head,” Shannon says, “you certainly built it to last.” After having Shannon club the dummy one last time, I’m satisfied with the wreckage.

Eventually, Shannon and I spread the head’s gory insides on and around the stoop, strategically placing some of the more egregiously-sized shards of glass into and around the makeshift corpse. Every so often I step back and examine my handy-work at a distance, and each time I’m convinced the human wreckage doesn’t look real enough.



How many whacks does it take to get to the gore-filled, tootsie roll center of a fake head? Turns out the owl was right – three! In these photos: Shannon takes a shovel to the obstinately durable liquid-latex covered Styrofoam head. Photos courtesy of Kelly K.

I put a lot of love in my violence in that I take great care to make sure every effect I'm involved with looks as real as it possibly can under the given circumstances. But creating realism is not my only priority right now. This is my moment to release all of the pent-up aggression and tension this night has afforded me. This is my moment to revel and wallow in gore, because I enjoy creating it. And, once again, this is my chance to literally stare death in the face as I create it. And in this instance, there simply isn't enough blood. So I add more, a lot more. I add so much blood, in fact, that Shannon's backyard resembles a crime scene. "The gore the merrier," I think to myself, and I invite the adults on set to add their own personal death touches to what is quickly becoming a Rorschach of carnage. "This is fun," I say aloud, and everyone seems to agree.

Shannon's children stand on the sidelines, away from the glass, offering pointers about where to add more blood and brain matter. By the time we've finished decorating the body, we've effectively exhausted a little over three gallons of fake blood and a bucket of ballistics gel. You'd swear you were staring at a real corpse. Even under intense scrutiny and in extreme close-up my mind is convinced the effect looks like the real thing. I

breathe out a sigh of relief knowing that audience members aren't likely to find faults in the effect either. Of course, they'll know what they're seeing isn't real, but the realness of the effect will allow them to stay invested in the picture despite its artifice.

Shannon and I pose for pictures by our bloody little creation. What was once a serviceable life-size stunt dummy has been turned into a bloody mash-up of splayed glass and broken bones. Even Molly, her arms and her face temporarily stained pink from copious amounts of fake blood, agrees to a photo opportunity next to her stunt-double.

Kelly, Greg and I use the camcorders to capture various angles of the bloodshed splattered across Shannon's backyard, and after about fifteen minutes or so, we begin the lengthy clean-up process by folding the dummy—costume and all—head first into a garbage can, so that its arms and legs crumple and stick in the air.



In these photos (from left to right): Shannon and I happily pose over the wreckage of Autumn's corpse; Molly, her skin tinted pink by the food coloring in the fake blood, kneels next to her stunt dummy. Photos courtesy of Kelly K. and Shannon Daubner.



In these photos (clockwise from left): Shannon and I creating the aftermath of the aquarium drop; yours truly adding more brain matter and fake blood to the dummy; a full shot of the final effect; Kelly and I adding gore to the dummy; a close-up of the completed split head. Top-left photo courtesy of Kelly K.; remaining photos courtesy of Shannon Daubner.



Paraphrasing *Better off Dead* (Holland, 1985), I say, “That’s a real shame when folks throw away a perfectly good white girl.”<sup>79</sup> I imagine how funny it would be to see Shannon’s neighbors’ reaction on garbage day. “You know,” I say, “don’t be surprised if you get visited by the cops on trash day.”

Shannon shrugs “Eh, it’ll be funny.”

I look at my watch, and it’s after one in the morning. I’m exhausted, and my clothes are soaked through with sweat. Still, we did it. I bet against the weather and won. It never rained. Most importantly, I got all the shots I wanted to get. And that, in the end, is really the most important thing as far as the movie is concerned. As I pack everything up, and reflect upon the evening, I let out a sigh of relief, thinking that tonight will likely stand out as the most difficult nights of the entire production. And I couldn’t be more wrong.



In this photo: The crumpled remains of our stunt dummy.  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC

<sup>79</sup> In Savage Steve Holland’s 1985 dark comedy *Better off Dead*, John Cusack’s character falls from an overpass into the cargo hold of a garbage truck. As the truck drives by two African American tree trimmers, one says to the other, “Now that’s a real shame when folks be throwin’ away a perfectly good white boy like that.”

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In this chapter I presented my frustrations and ethical dilemmas surrounding the first day of shooting *High School Sweethearts* to illustrate, in part, why it is I create realistic displays of fictional ultra-violence as a form of entertainment. I do it, in part, because I have fun doing it. I do it because it gives me a thrill to create something I know will get a rise from an audience. I do it to confront death and my own mortality. And I do it to release aggression in a healthy, artistic fashion. Taken as a whole, the entire bedroom massacre asserts, in no uncertain terms, that none of my protagonists are free from danger, which is meant to keep viewers guessing as to which one, if any, will be the Final Girl. In terms of the film's narrative, Autumn's fall from the window and eventual demise primes viewers for the shocking level of violence they are about to endure for the remainder of the film's running-time.

Throughout this chapter—essentially a making-of narrative—I framed myself as a struggling, determined director to show the stress of trying to shoot a special effects sequence under time constraints and the threat of inclement weather and, at the same time, to depict the frustrations inherent in trying to create realistic-looking fictional violence. As I am interested in marketing *High School Sweethearts* to a broad horror-loving audience, I am also partially beholden to genre conventions. As a producer and consumer of violent media, I feel I have a responsibility to my target audience to make the violence I create as realistic as possible because I am not trying to film happy violence. Yes, I want my audience to be entertained, but I do not want them to feel that I am encouraging the violence I put up on screen. Consequently, the violence within *High School Sweethearts* focuses on its physical and emotional consequences.

In the next chapter I discuss my film's torturous finale, wherein I examine, more thoroughly, why it is I decided to make this movie so violent and wrestle with the ethical considerations behind my appropriation of real instances of violence within the framework of a fictional narrative.

## CHAPTER 7

### This Job Can Be Murder

I'm sitting in an examining room inside the Internal Medicine department at St. Luke's Hospital, chit-chatting with the middle-aged nurse who is preparing to draw a blood sample from my right arm as part of a routine physical. I'm nervous, but I'm always nervous whenever I'm about to have blood drawn. There's just something about needles and the invasiveness of the procedure that always makes me queasy. I watch the nurse sterilize the spot on my arm she is going to pierce with the syringe and feel a chill creep through my body. "Just to let you know," I say, shifting noticeably in my seat, "I sometimes get dizzy during these things."

"Oh, would you rather lie down?"

I know I should, but I'm too embarrassed to say yes. My irrational fear of needles makes me feel emasculated, and I feel the need to reassert my manliness and not look like a total coward. "No thanks, I should be fine as long as I don't watch."

My left leg starts to bounce up and down uncontrollably, a none-too-subtle sign that I'm full of shit. "Don't worry," the nurse says, "you don't have to look if you don't want to." I turn away before she finishes her sentence, trying to calm my nerves by staring at the oversized, laminated poster of the human body hanging on the wall.

With latex-gloved hands the nurse cinches a purple, rubber tourniquet around my bicep to puff up the vein she intends to draw from. My right hand immediately starts to tingle with pins-and-needles, and I rapidly clench and unclench my fist to alleviate the sensation and prevent my arm from completely falling asleep. I turn to see a large vein in

my arm engorge with blood. The nurse taps at it with her fingertip. My pulse quickens. I can feel myself starting to panic.

“Everything okay young man?”

“Just fine,” I say, not so sure.

“Didn’t I hear you tell the doctor you make horror movies? This should be a walk in the park for you.”

“I know, right? I can cover people in fake gore all night, but ask me to look at the real thing, and I get skittish.”

“Don’t worry. This will only take a few moments.”

I look away the moment the nurse raises the needle towards my vein. I feel its sharp sting, followed by the dull, throbbing pain as the attached vacutainer begins to pull the blood from my arm.

“This whole thing is silly,” I think to myself. “I’m going to get over this right now.” I turn my head to look directly at the needle sticking in my arm and watch the meniscus of blood rise in the tube. The nurse removes the first tube, attaches a second and removes the tourniquet from around my arm the moment it begins to fill with blood. The snap of the tourniquet lingers in my ears as I stare transfixed by the brightness of my own blood.

“That doesn’t look real,” I say to the nurse. “My own blood doesn’t look real to me. How weird is that? I’m so used to seeing movie-style blood, that if I saw this in a film, I’d complain about it.”

The nurse smiles as she smoothly removes the needle from my arm and covers the tiny puncture-wound with a bandage. “How do you feel?” she asks.

“Fine,” I say, kind of surprised. “I feel fine. That actually wasn’t so bad.”

“I’ve been doing this a lot of years, and I pride myself on making it as painless as possible.”

“This is great; I don’t feel dizzy at all. Thank you so much.”

I stand and my legs give out. Everything goes dark. The fleshy part of my buttocks hit the seat of the chair as I plop down like a sack of potatoes. I feel myself looking around, though all I see is a pulsating grid of lines, a checkerboard of blacks and grays. “Something’s wrong,” I try to say, though my actual words are slurred and indistinct. And then for a moment, there is nothing.

When I regain consciousness I have a throbbing headache behind my eyes and look up to see three nurses of various ages – each with a different hair style and in various states of panic – huddled around me. My hands feel clammy, and the chill of the central air only accentuates how cold the beads of sweat along my forehead truly are.

“Are you okay?” asks one of the nurses.

“What happened?” questions another.

“I guess I should’ve lay down,” I say aloud, cocking a smile. Whereas I was embarrassed before, now I’m mortified. Why did I pass out? It’s just blood, after all.

The nurses explain that my blood pressure plummeted, which is why I blacked out. They offer me juice to raise my blood sugar and the chance to lie down on an examining table in an adjoining room. I decline, saying that I simply want to sit with my head against the wall for a little while.

As everyone exits the room, I replay the preceding events in my head. I grew up on a steady diet of both cartoon and R-rated violence. Why does the sight of real blood

affect me so strongly, when the sight of the fictional violence I consume on a regular basis and produce as a creative outlet serve to quicken my pulse and invigorate me? As a kid, watching horror films with my mom, I learned about the artificiality of movie violence. The more fictional violence I consumed, the more desensitized to it I became. Now, as an adult, I look at the movies that once disturbed me with an air of nostalgia. Their level of bloodshed, which once seemed excessive, now appears considerably muted. My head throbs in pain, and as I lean forward, folding at the waist to position my head in-between my legs in a mock fetal position, I have an epiphany—*High School Sweethearts* is going to have real blood.

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Flash forward: I'm holding a digital camcorder while standing alongside my friend-turned-actor Ben Wilson in his claustrophobic bathroom as he prepares to dry-shave himself with a Fromm straight-blade razor for part of my movie's torturous finale. In the movie, Ben's character is dry-shaved by the villain as punishment for giving an incorrect answer to a trivia question.

A week prior to this moment, Kathy Lynn Sliter – production assistant extraordinaire – and actresses Kelly Maxwell and Emily Mills all expressed their discomfort at my idea to have Ben actually get dry-shaved on the set.

“It's called acting for a reason, Will-boy,” Kathy said to me, clearly displeased with my decision to have Ben dry-shave himself.

“But Ben's not an actor,” I replied. “He's a reactor. Don't worry, I won't ask Kelly to dry-shave him.” And I didn't. I simply asked Ben to do it to himself.

“Ben,” I said, “nobody feels comfortable actually shaving you on set, and to be honest, I don’t want to push the idea any further.”

“So you want me to do it myself,” Ben replied, preternaturally finishing my sentence.

“Would you be comfortable doing that?”

“Shit yeah, I’ll do it. I dry-shave all the time anyway, so it really isn’t a big deal.”

“The razor is pretty damn sharp, Ben.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, I’m asking you to do a rough shave on yourself. That means, in no uncertain terms, that I want you to cut yourself shaving. I want you to bleed on camera. The idea is to capture, in close-up, the blade scraping across the stubble on your face, focusing on any moment of actual blood flow.”

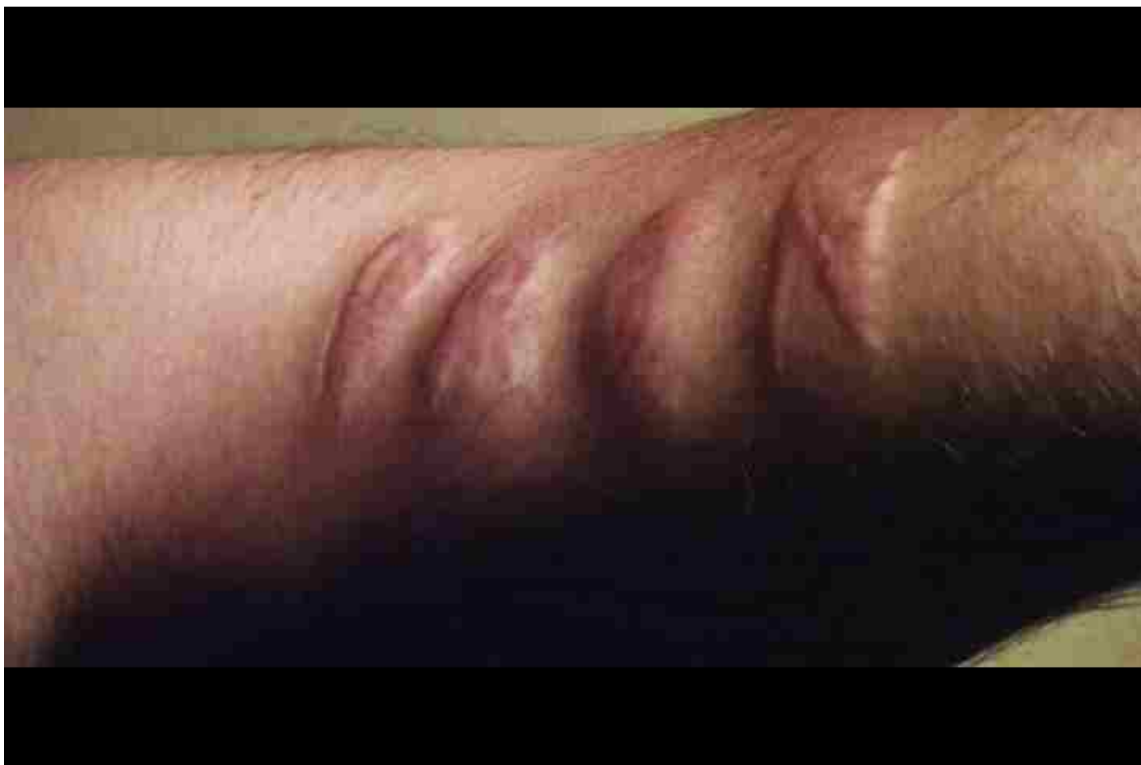
“I got it, I got it,” Ben replied. “You want me to cut the hell out of my face.”

“Kinda, sorta. I don’t want you to disfigure yourself or anything.”

“No, I get it. You’re basically asking me to do what I already do. You should see my face after I shave normally.”

*High School Sweethearts* marks Ben’s first time in front of the camera. In other words, he was not a battle-seasoned actor at the start of production. In the real world, Ben is the seemingly fearless Madison-based skateboarder with an uncanny ability to shake-off decidedly catastrophic falls and injuries and who carved the words “Pain” and “End” into his left arm, which is ultimately what piqued my interest to cast him as the male lead and why I do not feel uncomfortable asking him to inflict pain upon himself now.





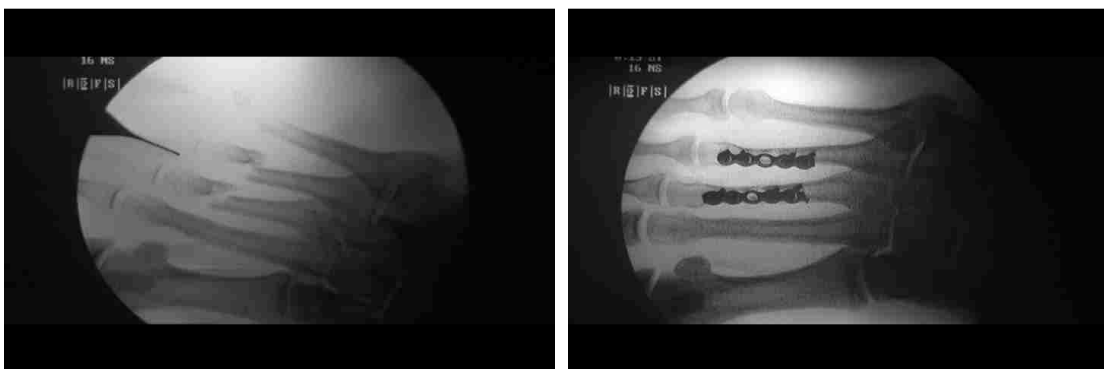
In this photo: A close-up of the word "Pain," which actor Ben Wilson carved into his arm. Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

“Skateboarding is mostly about falling,” Ben once told me. “I’ve had some pretty horrible injuries ... probably about half a dozen. In the most recent one I broke four of the metatarsals in my right foot simultaneously and had to be flown back to Wisconsin from Montana to have surgery.<sup>80</sup> Like I said, skateboarding is mostly about falling. And with falling comes pain. Pain is to be endured and embraced and not feared, because if you fear pain, then you can’t be a skateboarder.”

Back to present, back in Ben’s bathroom: Ben is standing in front of a mirror, while I am standing next to him, zooming in on his face from a low angle with my

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<sup>80</sup> Ben’s character was originally written to have a broken leg because of this skateboarding injury. Though Ben’s foot healed prior to the start of filming, his character retained the injury, because it made him physically vulnerable. Furthermore, when his character alludes to having suffered a skateboarding accident, the inserted footage seen by the audience is the actual recording of the fall that resulted in his real-life injury. This stands as another example of real violence being used in a fictional narrative.



In these photos (from left to right): X-Rays showcasing Ben's broken metatarsals and their eventual reconstruction. Photos courtesy of Ben Wilson.

camera so that his left ear and the line of his chin are both in frame. When I say “Action,” Ben is going to drag the straight-blade razor across the three days growth of brittle stubble he has on his face and neck. I like the idea that audiences aren’t likely to be in on the gag, so to speak. What they’ll be seeing here is a series of shots that they’ll no doubt assume we created with prosthetics or a fake head or a fake razor. In reality, they’ll be seeing digital footage of a real act of violence appropriated for use in a fictional representation of staged violence. My hope, of course, is that viewers who are like me – and get squeamish at the sight of real blood – will see this sequence, and the others like it, and be affected in ways they don’t consciously understand. I’ve always wondered how an audience would react to a recorded act of real violence (that is not news or archival footage) presented alongside fictional violence, especially if the violence is not shot in documentary style but done within the framework of a fictional narrative.<sup>81</sup> Remember, Haidt, McCauley & Rozin (1994) found that real violence, or films loaded with cues for reality, lack the framework of dramatic fiction and are therefore unattractive to viewers (p. 161). But this sequence, once cut together, will contain shots of actress Kelly

<sup>81</sup> There is precedent for this. According to reviewer John Fallon of The Joblo Movie Network, the opening surgery sequence in *The Stepfather III* (Magar, 1992) is effective because the director artistically filmed an actual surgery and cut it into the movie.

Maxwell bringing the razor blade to Ben's face intercut with the soon-to-be filmed close-ups of Ben actually dry-shaving himself, the natural sounds of the blade as it scrapes across bearded skin, reaction shots showcasing both Ben and Kelly to be shot at a later time and some lingering shots of the very real blood that is sure to form on Ben's face as he naturally cuts himself. In other words the scene's cues for reality will exist within a fictional framework.

I call "Action," and Ben unhesitatingly, unflinchingly rakes the razor deliberately down his left cheek, though its blade only partially cuts through the black hairs. "Let me guess," I say, "it's not sharp enough is it?"

"Let me try a couple more times."

I watch through my camera's viewfinder as Ben presses the blade firmly against his skin. Its impression creates ripples of flesh as he repeatedly drags it through his whiskers again and again and again. "No, the blade's too dull to cut anything this way," he says finally. "It hurts like hell though. So what do we do now?"

"Shave like you normally would with your Gillette," I say. "Cut the hell out of your face. Leave a few patches of hair. Then go over everything again with the straight razor."

It must be said that Ben does not shave with light, gentle strokes, nor does he go with or even against the grain. Rather, he shaves with a back and forth, see-saw motion that effectively razor burns his skin and leaves spots of blood over his entire face. "That is not how you are supposed to shave," I say while laughing.

When Ben finally takes the straight razor to his face once again, every new swipe generates more blood. "Can you go over that spot again," I say at one point, "unless it's

too painful?” “No worries,” he replies. I capture footage of my friend and colleague wincing as the blade nicks his skin. I continue recording as a bright red dollop of blood trickles down his cheek along his jaw line and down his neck.

I hold the camera in one hand and a squirt-bottle of fake blood in the other. As droplets of real blood ooze from Ben’s pores, I dribble streams of stage blood off camera so the two inter-mingle. The color of the fake blood perfectly matches that of his real blood such that it is impossible to distinguish between the two. “Okay, Ben, that’s enough. Thank you for doing this.”

“Are you kidding? This is awesome!”

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Stepping back: Though I’m loathe to admit it, I’m standing in a check-out line at Wal-Mart, waiting to unload my shopping cart filled with props needed to set up the torturous set piece that takes up much of my film’s running time. Inside my cart I have four rolls of thick, clear painter’s tarp, ten rolls of thin, clear painter’s tarp, black electrical tape, numerous rolls of duct tape, a meat tenderizer, a nutcracker, a black-rubber grip hacksaw and a Santoku knife. I inch forward in line, and as I unload

everything in front of the cashier – a portly middle-aged man with thick-rimmed glasses, a round, affable face and a receding hairline – I can’t help but wonder what this must look like to him.

“Got a big project?” asks the cashier.

“Yeah, you could say that,” I reply, realizing a second too late how cryptic that sounds, as if I’m taking my purchases home to murder a homeless person, hack up the



In these photos: Ben Wilson dry-shaves himself for *High School Sweethearts*. The blood in these photos is very real. Photos courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.



In this photo: Ben Wilson on the set, after dry-shaving himself and having fake blood to his face and costume. Photo courtesy of Emily Mills.



In this photo: Kelly Maxwell admires her bloody straight razor. Don't worry, the blood on the blade is fake. Photo courtesy of Emily Mills.



In this photo: Kelly Maxwell (as Dawn) finishes dry-shaving Ben Wilson (as Mike). The blood on his face is a mixture of real and fake. Photo courtesy of Rob Matsushita.

body and wrap it for disposal. But, then again, I tend to have an overactive imagination.

“Have fun,” he says. “Good luck.”

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Flash forward: I’m inside the makeshift murder room in Kathy Lynn Sliter’s basement. Surrounded on all sides by drapes of clear tarp, I feel kind of like a piece of meat underneath cling wrap. The plastic sucks the coldness from the concrete ground, creating an atmosphere that is both chilling and chilled, and the cloudy transparency of the tarp acts in strict contrast to the brightness of the solid colors that adorn almost everything within its walls.

It is the fourth and final day of shooting the torture scene in *High School Sweethearts*.<sup>82</sup> Filming began in the late afternoon and is set to go into the early hours of the morning if needs be. Unlike the sudden outburst of bloody slasher-style violence on display in the bedroom massacre, the prolonged suffering here stems from an escalation of physical and emotional abuse. This is the scene that situates *High School Sweethearts* within the torture porn sub-genre of horror because its grueling, protracted instances of violence are inflicted upon captive characters with little or no chance of escape over an extended period of time. A backhand to the face leads to a cigarette burn on the neck; a stomp to the groin turns into a nipple being frozen off with a can of compressed air; the threat of having a finger chopped off very quickly becomes the scene we are currently filming. Suffice to say today’s shoot is heavy on the gore. Once we finish chopping off

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<sup>82</sup> We shot the torture scene over the course of four days spread out over a period of four weeks during the cold months of Wisconsin winter. The set was constructed a total of four times, because we deconstructed it at the end of each day of shooting. Suffice to say, we used a lot of tarp.



the hand, we have to set up for Marie's decapitation. Because the violence here mirrors the corrosion of my emotional state of mind post high school, I feel it needs to look painfully realistic. After all, Mike's physical and emotional degradation is essentially a filmic representation of all the heartbreak I have ever felt or caused.



In this photo: Behold, the murder room sans blood and gore.  
Photo courtesy of Josh Klessig.

I'm kneeling alongside Ben Wilson, who is duct-taped to a rickety wooden captain's chair and is about to have his hand lopped off at the wrist with a meat cleaver. The fake appendage rests inside Ben's sleeve, while he uncomfortably holds his right arm behind his back underneath his white shirt. Nick Drake and I hold the large plastic syringes set to spurt copious amounts of fake blood the moment Kelly Maxwell saws through the arm and forcibly removes the prop hand<sup>83</sup> out of frame. Emily Mills takes

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<sup>83</sup> The fake hand was created in the following way: Inspired by the early make-up effects work of Tom Savini, I made an alginate mold of my right arm and then filled that mold with Plaster of Paris. I sawed

her position in the background as the helpless, and soon-to-be-headless, onlooker, while Rob operates the digital camera and Kathy acts as quality control, keeping a watchful eye on continuity, lighting placement and other elements of production that generally fall to the wayside the moment fake blood starts to coat everyone and everything on set.<sup>84</sup>

With her right hand, Kelly positions the cleaver's blade in-between the bloodied wrist and its severed appendage. With her left, she grips the fake hand and cocks it at an angle so it appears to be dangling from Ben's makeshift arm. On "Action," Nick and I depress the plungers on our sanguine syringes, and waves of gore break against the metallic surface of the cleaver. After a second, Kelly wrenches the hand out of frame while Nick and I continue to propel blood against the weapon's edge. "Cut," I say, turning to face Rob. "How'd that look?"

"HMMMMM," he hems. "We need to do it again. I mean, it looked okay, but we can do it better."

Nick and I refill the syringes with more blood, Kelly gets back on her mark, and we prepare to begin again. On "Action," we go through everything same as before.

"How'd that one look?" I ask.

"Not great."

"Fine," I say, "let's do it again." And we do.

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the plaster cast of my arm at the wrist and drilled three holes through its stump. I next ran rubber tubing through these three holes, whose ends would later be attached to large plastic syringes filled to the brim with fake blood (The fake blood inside each was diluted with water to increase its ease of flow through the tubes). I then painted both the stump and the hand using an airbrush and various flesh-tones to best match the coloration of my own hand. Finally, I applied a mixture of Cinema Secrets brand blood gel and Ben Nye brand thick blood to the stump and the base of the hand.

<sup>84</sup> There's a reason most of the gore occurs in places covered with, and surrounded by, tarp: fake blood manages to find its way into every nook and cranny of a set and on every piece of clothing and equipment. Worse still, when someone inadvertently gets even a drop or two on the bottom of his/her shoes, you can bet that it will be tracked off the set.

This time, I see Rob shaking his head even before Nick and I finish pumping the blood. “What was wrong this time?” I question bitingly.

“Well,” Rob says, “I don’t know how it looks from where you are, but from my angle it looks like exactly what it is?”

“Which is what?”

“A fake hand.”

“Okay, let’s do it one more time.”

Thus far, every single FX shot in this movie has been an arduous labor of love, but this shot is clearly starting to aggravate me. From my angle, scrunched next to Nick and wedged to Ben’s side, I have no idea how Rob’s shot looks and am forced to take his word for it that the effect isn’t playing well. Horror audiences will forgive a lot of things, especially at this level, but they won’t forgive an effect that looks terrible during a situation being played for its realism. And I can’t scrap this effect. I’ve put too much work into it to give up on it now. If I had a proper budget, this shot would be on a monitor so we could look at it from across the room as it plays out. As is stands, however, we’re stuck replaying it on the camera’s viewfinder, which isn’t very helpful right now. We run through the effect again with the same results. Rob still claims it looks off. “Damn it!” I yell, “What the hell was wrong with that one?”

“It just doesn’t look right,” Rob says.

“What doesn’t look right? We need to get this shot and move on! We have a lot to finish today and this ...”

“Look, if you’re happy, then that’s fine, let’s move on. But from where I’m standing, the effect looks like shit!”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? You’re seeing the same thing I am.”

“No, I’m not. I can’t see your shot! If it’s not working, tell me what’s not working about it so I can change it. If the shot’s a piece of shit, tell me what’s so shitty about it.”

“Please don’t fight, mommy and daddy,” Kelly interjects with her usual good-natured humor and lighthearted tone.

“Rob, honey,” Kathy says calmly, “articulate what it is that’s not working. If it’s the angle, change the angle.”

“No,” he begins, “the angle’s good. Something’s missing.”

Then Ben, who has remained quiet this whole time, asks if he should be screaming. That’s it! That’s got to be what’s wrong with the shot. This whole time, Rob’s been so set on capturing the shot, and I’ve been so intent on making sure the effect goes off without a hitch, that we had tunnel vision. I didn’t direct Ben or Emily to react to what was happening, which, in hindsight, is utterly ridiculous. Of course Ben’s character would be screaming; his hand is being chopped off. Of course Emily’s character would be reacting to the event; she’s partially responsible for this horrific act of violence. Rob frames the shot so Emily’s face can be seen in the background. This time, on “Action,” Ben howls in pain while Emily reacts accordingly.

“How was that one?” I ask nervously.

“Wow,” Rob says, “it’s amazing how much better that looked.”



In this photo: Kelly Maxwell palms the fake hand in between takes.  
Photo courtesy of Emily Mills.



In this screen capture from one of the many takes of this scene: Mike loses his hand while Marie screams in terror.  
Image courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

I am mentally exhausted by the time we shoot enough coverage of the effect. “Nice job everyone,” I say. “Take five while I set-up the next shot.” The preparation is really just an excuse to steal a moment. Really, I’m calling the break to compose myself, to take a breather, to remind myself there’s nothing to panic about and that all the people here who have devoted their time and talent to me and this project are not going to be let down by me losing my shit. But most importantly, I need the time to remind myself that this is supposed to be fun.

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Flash Forward: Emily Mills sits in the creaky wooden chair that has been her character’s prison for the entirety of the torture scene thus far, trying to get in the proper mindset to literally lose her head. Yes, Emily is about to have her head chopped off with an axe, and I imagine she is mentally preparing herself to trust that what I’m capturing on my camera’s viewfinder doesn’t look as silly as its staging. Before we film the actual decapitation, however, I want to grab shots of her reacting to the axe blade being imbedded in the point where her neck meets her shoulder. Weeks prior, I measured the diameter of Emily’s neck. Drawing my inspiration from special effects master Tom Savini,<sup>85</sup> I asked my friend Larry Rumsey – who specializes in metal work – to cut a semi-circle matching that measurement out of an axe bit with a carbon arc and then smooth its edges down with a grinder. Back on the set, I position the axe so it appears to

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<sup>85</sup> In his book “Grande Illusions: A Learn-by-example Guide to Special Make-up Effects” (1983), Tom Savini explains one of the many effects he crafted for George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). He says, “There’s a scene where I am riding by (as “Blades”) and a zombie pulls me off the motorcycle. My reaction to that is to leap into the air, kick him to the floor, pull out a machete, say, “Say goodbye, creep!” and plant the machete right into the zombie’s head. What I did here was use a piece of soldering wire and trace the shape of the actor’s head from the wire onto a machete. I then had the machete cut out in that exact shape so that it would fit onto his head and give the impression that it was imbedded deeply” (p. 44).

be deeply wedged inside Emily's neck. I run a plastic tube from a small aquarium pump submerged in a ceramic bowl of fake blood on the floor to the edge of the blade that rests out of shot. The open-end of the tube is angled so it will squirt along the arc of the blade, around the nape of Emily's neck and down her chest. "I'm not going to say 'Action' here," I tell Emily. "I'm simply going to turn on the pump. The moment you feel blood trickling against your skin is your cue to begin."



In these photos (from left to right): The axes used for the decapitation; Close-up shot of the axe that appears imbedded in Emily's neck. Photos courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

"And what do you want me to do?" she asks.

"Well, act like you've been hit with an axe. Remember, up to this point, your character's had a lot of fight in her. You've even managed to get your hands free. The audience is going to be on your side. They'll be rooting for you. But you lose, and this is the part where that becomes painfully obvious, not just to you, but to the people watching this movie. So, react to the hit, slump in your chair, slowly turn to face Ben and say, 'I love you Mike.' Sound good?"

By the time I'm satisfied with the footage, Emily's blue long-sleeved shirt is soaked with fake blood, so much so that it has been re-colored a dark purple. Her jeans, which have been marinating in the watery blood pooled in the seat of her chair, are likewise discolored. In retrospect, I should have warned her that the fake blood was

going to be exceptionally cold.<sup>86</sup> “Ugh, this feels awful,” Emily says with a smile. “It looks like I’m bleeding out of my ass. I can’t wait to see how much it stained my vagina!”



In this screen capture: Emily Mills reacts to getting whacked with an axe.  
Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

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Flash forward: Emily Mills, having changed out of her blood-soaked attire, shivers next to a tiny space heater in a corner of the murder room and is waiting to watch

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<sup>86</sup> On February 24, 2009, Emily Mills wrote about this experience on her blog, [thelostalbatross.blogspot.com](http://thelostalbatross.blogspot.com). She said, “I’ve now spent more time than I’d care to recall covered in cold, sticky, fake blood. I also spent 40 minutes in near total sensory deprivation, fighting off panic attacks, to get my head cast in alginate. And through the vast majority of this, I’ve been duct-taped to a rickety wooden chair in a tarp-lined basement during the middle of a Wisconsin winter. But what can I say? I love it. Working on such extremely low-budget films can be a pretty thankless task. None of us are being paid in anything more than free food (which is a lot, considering). I don’t think there’s one of us who thinks being involved in this project is going to break us big in the movie world, and we’re all giving up fairly copious amounts of our free time to allow our director free reign to torture us for hours on end. So why do we do it? Because we love to create, try new things, make art we think will entertain, and probably most of all, because we enjoy working with each other.”



a facsimile of her character get decapitated. Rob hurriedly vacuums up fake blood with a Shop-Vac, while Kelly Maxwell and I attach arms to a headless female mannequin torso, which has been fitted with Emily's necklace and her blood-soaked, long-sleeved shirt from the previous shot.

Originally, I envisioned the decapitation effect as an unbroken shot from the front showcasing the utter realism of my fake head, which I was going to craft from a mold of Emily's own. Unfortunately, the head casting was unsuccessful, partly because I had never done a complete head-casting before, but mostly because I forgot to leave a separation between the front and back halves of the plaster bandages I used to reinforce the alginate mold.<sup>87</sup> In other words, after covering Emily's head in alginate, I then completely encased it within a solid shell of plaster bandages that proved almost impenetrable. Did I mention Emily is claustrophobic?<sup>88</sup> So there I was, standing next to Emily inside Kathy's kitchen, trying not to panic when I realized I had no way of separating her head from its plaster frame.

Kathy's steady hand saved my skin – along with Emily's – because she was able to saw through the fortified plaster husk with a razor. Consequently, Emily was released from her confines unharmed. Unfortunately, the resulting head cast was unusable, despite my best efforts to save it. Yes, I could have asked Emily to undergo another head casting. Sure, I could have asked her to schedule another day with me so I could do it right. But I didn't want her to go through that again. It was obvious she didn't enjoy the

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<sup>87</sup> Alginate is a powder derived from seaweed which, when combined with water, creates a rubbery substance that is used to create impressions.

<sup>88</sup> This was not the only time during the shoot that I put Emily's claustrophobia to the test. As the torture sequence begins, her character's unconscious body is trapped inside a body bag. The scene required that Emily actually be inside the bag, because her character freaks out when she wakes up. I imagine that her panicked screams were a mixture of actual fear and innate acting ability.

process, and I told myself at the outset that I had one chance, and one chance only, to get this version of the effect right. Thankfully, there's more than one way to cut someone's head off, which brings us back to the present.

The mannequin torso has four holes drilled through it: two through the neck and two out the back. Plastic tubes run through these holes and are attached to large plastic syringes filled with – yep, you guessed it – fake blood. I have Rob situate the camera behind the mannequin, looking over the headless stump which has been covered in various colors and textures of blood gel. Off-screen, Nick holds a human hair Manikin (purchased at a Sally Beauty Supply Store), whose hair was cut to match Emily's earlier in the day. Kelly, holding the axe, takes her position in front of the torso. Nick places the head over the stump and angles it so it appears ready to tip off. On my signal, Kelly follows-through with the blade so it appears to chop through the neck and knock the head out of frame. While this happens, I pump the syringes to create rhythmic geysers of blood that erupt into the shot. For a change, the effect goes off without a hitch, though I can't help but wonder what's going through Emily's head during all this. Despite my elation that the effect here turned out so well, I worry that she is sore at me for using her as a guinea pig to teach myself the do's and don'ts of head casting.



In this photo: Emily's boyfriend, Nick, comforts and reassures her as she sits patiently and nervously underneath a thick layer of alginate and layers of solid plaster bandages. Photo courtesy of Josh Klessig.



In this photo (from left to right): Nick Drake, Kelly Maxwell and yours truly. I had no idea this picture was snapped. Photo courtesy of Emily Mills.



In this photo: Rob Matsuhita cleans up fake blood on the set with a Shop Vac.  
Photo courtesy of Emily Mills.



In this photo (from left to right): Rob Matsuhita, yours truly and Kelly Maxwell.  
Photo courtesy of Emily Mills.



In this photo: Kathy Lynn Sliter cuts the Manikin's hair to match Emily's. Rob holds the head up on a broom handle. Photo courtesy of Emily Mills.



In this screen capture: Kelly Maxwell (Dawn) watches as blood gushes from where Marie's head used to be. Photo courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

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Flash forward: We're about to film Marie's reanimation. Emily Mills kneels with her head in-between a pair of male mannequin legs (dressed to match Ben Wilson's character) in a position that does not betray the fact that her head is still very much attached to a live body. A plastic tube attached to an aquarium pump is positioned so it appears to have been driven into the stump of her neck. The aquarium pump rests at the bottom of a small plastic bowl that sits on a wooden end table. Another tube runs from inside the bowl to the insertion needle that looks as if it sticking out of a vein in Ben's left hand. In reality, this tube is attached to another aquarium pump off-screen. On "Action," both pumps get turned on, beginning the blood transfusion. As the bowl fills up with Mike's blood, the pump inside the bowl transports the blood to Marie's severed head. After a few seconds of allowing the blood to splash out over herself and everything around her, Emily opens her eyes and plays out the rest of the scene.

Aside from covering Emily with generous amounts of icy fake blood again, this scene is significant because it serves as another example of how I juxtaposed real violence with fictional violence in service of my fictional narrative. Though Kelly Maxwell's character is shown wrapping Ben's wrist in a blue rubber band before bringing the tip of a needle inexorably close to one of its bulging veins, she does not push it into his skin, and I hasten to mention that the close-up showcasing its penetration and its resultant blood flow is not a special effect. Rather, I filmed Shannon's fiancé performing an impromptu blood draw on her husband-to-be in their dining room one night when the kids were away. Both Shannon and Dolores are registered nurses and regularly perform blood draws on patients at the hospital they work at.





In this photo: Emily Mills positions herself in-between a pair of male mannequin legs dressed to look like Ben Wilson character. Photo courtesy of Emily Mills.

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Flashback to that evening: Shannon dresses in a pair of blue jeans that match the type worn by Ben’s character throughout the entirety of *High School Sweethearts*, and he asks Dolores to wrap his wrist in the same blue-colored rubber band we will eventually use on the set.

“Ready when you are,” Shannon says.

“I’ve been rolling this whole time,” I reply. “Go ahead Dolores. Whenever you’re ready.”

I follow the unfolding events through my camera’s viewfinder. I watch as Dolores grips Shannon’s limp hand, turns it towards the camera and drives the needle through his vein. I hear Shannon wince, but I don’t look up to see his facial expression. I merely see his hand twitch the moment the needle pierces his skin.

“That’s not good,” Dolores says suddenly, a little worried. “Sorry.”

She removes the back half of the syringe and lets the insertion needle sit in his vein for a moment, waiting for blood to drip out.

I glance up from the viewfinder to see Shannon clenching his jaw.

“You went right through it,” he says to Dolores with a painful chuckle. “It’s in the nerve. You missed!” He’s laughing. She’s embarrassed. And I’m trying not to pass out.

“By the way,” I interject, “this footage is amazing.”

“You went right through it,” Shannon continues. “I’m sitting here thinking, ‘What kind of angle is she doing?’ Look at this, I’m sweating!”

Dolores sheepishly removes the needle and tenderly places a piece of gauze over the wound. Shannon’s vein is puffy, and as I rewind and re-watch the footage, I feel myself getting a little queasy.

“Do you know how hard it was to not pull my hand out of the shot?” Shannon asks.

“Do you know how awesome this footage looks?” I reply.

Shannon holds up his hand to flex his fingers, balling them up and releasing them multiple times in an attempt to increase blood flow to his appendages and relieve the pain he is most assuredly feeling. “Holy shit!” he says. “You went right through!”

“Yeah, I hate to say this Dolores, but you basically stabbed through his hand.”

“Are you okay,” Dolores asks, clearly shaken by the accident.

“Well, Shannon,” I say, “do you want to say the phrase, or should I?” There’s a slight pause before Shannon beams and says, “Oh, let’s do another one!”



“One more time,” echoes Dolores.

Shannon continues to hold a wad of gauze against his hand. “Right,” he says, “let’s do this before the hematoma forms.”

“I can definitely use the previous take, but this time I need to see blood.”

“Yeah,” Shannon says to Dolores. “Let’s get gore blood all over.”

“Shannon,” I say, “I almost blacked out, that’s how good that looked.”

Dolores holds the second needle, waiting for my signal to begin. “I don’t care when I do this to old people,” she says, “but not to you. I’m sorry.”

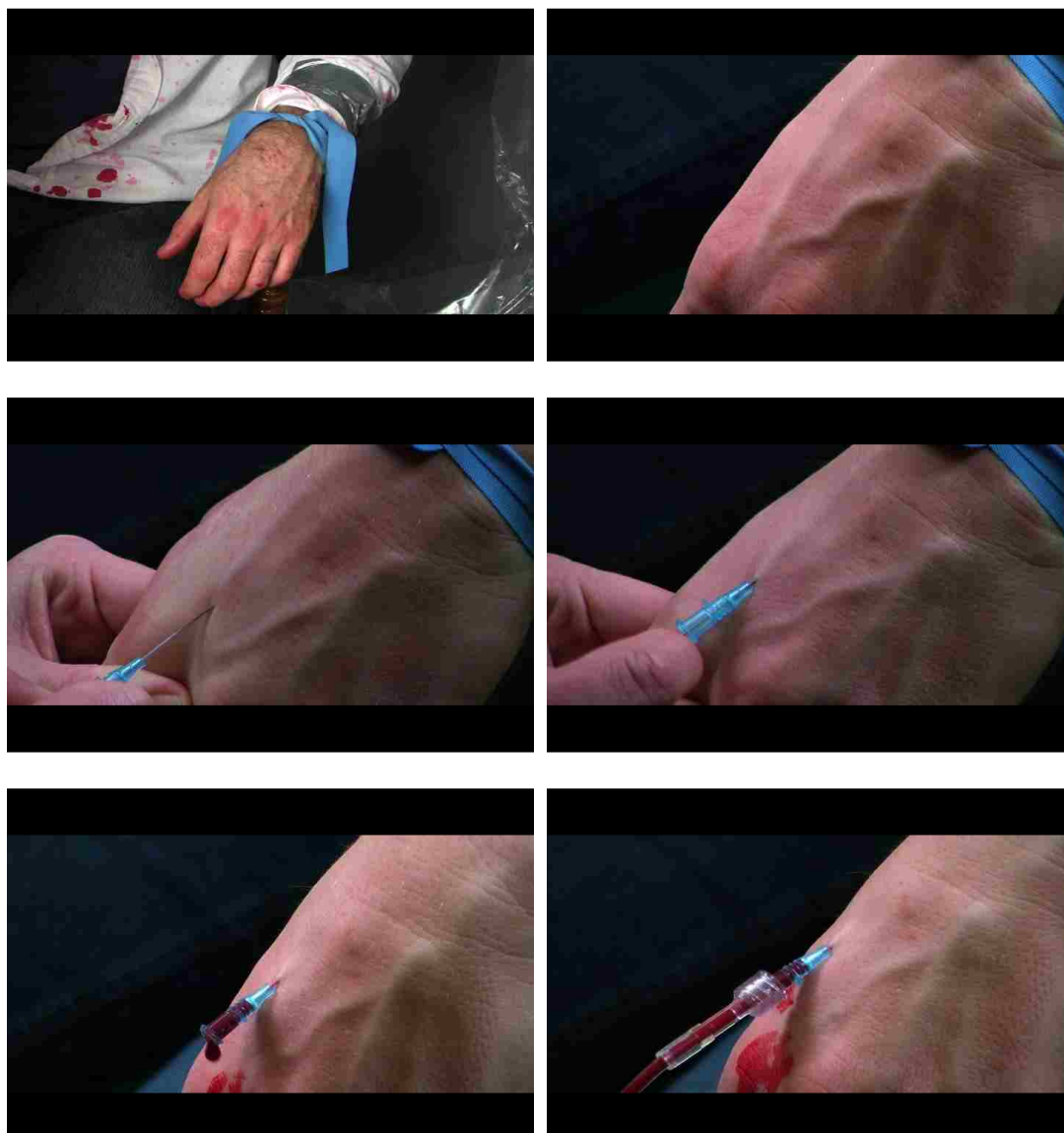
“Are you rolling?” Shannon asks.

“Indeed, I am.”

Shannon removes the gauze and allows his hand to dangle as before. I can see the red dot where the first needle punctured his skin. It’s clear that he’s going to have one hell of a bruise there in a matter of hours. I watch through the viewfinder as Dolores pushes another needle into his hand. This time, she successfully hits the vein. Thick drops of bright red blood fall from the insertion needle with the cadence of a dripping faucet.

“Just let it drip for a few seconds,” Shannon says. In the viewfinder, I watch the blood droplets hit Shannon’s hand and stain his skin.

“It’s amazing,” I say. “I have to keep telling myself this is a special effect to keep myself from passing out.”



In these screen captures (from top to bottom, left to right): The first capture shows Ben Wilson's hand; the other five captures showcase a real blood draw being performed on Shannon Duabner that will be intercut with the shot of Ben Wilson's hand. Screen captures courtesy of Graveside Pictures, LLC.

We specifically shot the blood draw on a night Shannon's children were at their mother's, because we didn't want to confuse their understanding that movie violence isn't real. So why do it then? Basically, filming a real instance of violence was simply easier than crafting a fake one. Shannon's willingness to have his blood drawn for my film, much like Ben's voluntary dry-shaving, saved me a great deal of time, effort and resources because I didn't have to worry about creating a realistic-looking special effect.

More importantly, though, just as my creation of the gory aftermath of the aquarium drop was my way of coming face to face with death and mortality, my decision to film Shannon's blood being drawn was my way of trying to conquer my hemophobia.<sup>89</sup>

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Flash forward, one last time: Back in Kathy's basement, the all-nighter is taking its toll. Emily and Nick have long since left for home. Rob desperately craves a cigarette. Kathy is asleep upstairs. And my hands are so stained with fake blood I look like I am wearing a pair of red gloves. It is nearly 3 a.m., and Kelly and Ben are preparing themselves for the final series of shots of the evening, the shots that will officially conclude my filming of the torture sequence, the shots that begin with Mike's monologue: "I know, I know, I know...you told me this would happen, and I didn't pay close enough attention to you, and I didn't know that Hawaii and Alaska border the Pacific Ocean. But I don't deserve this. Yes, I cheated on you! I admit it! Are you happy? Does that make you happy? I'm seventeen. Just don't torture me anymore, okay? Please don't fucking torture me anymore. Just kill me! Kill me! Kill me! Why don't you kill me? Get it over with! What is this supposed to be teaching me? Please...just don't torture me anymore. I can't take it." Once we capture these shots, Ben and Kelly get to go home, Rob gets to go have a cigarette and I get to begin cleaning up the bloody mess strewn across the floor. But that's easier said than done because, simply put, I need Ben to be an emotional train wreck. I need him to be broken. And, most importantly, I need his emotions to be real. As a filmmaker, I want his emotions to be real because that will lend the scene an air of credibility and encourage the audience to empathize with the direness

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<sup>89</sup> Fear of blood.

of his situation. I intentionally asked Ben and Kelly to shoot an all-nighter, because I wanted the natural wear-and-tear of the evening to show through in their performances. By this point in the film, Ben's character has been both physically and emotionally destroyed, so actual tiredness will play especially well.

During the early stages of production, while he was still memorizing the script, Ben asked me how he could get himself to the place I needed him to be for this scene. "I'm not an actor," he said. And I replied: "Then don't act. I'm not proud that I'm telling you this, Ben, but do whatever it is you have to do to get yourself there. I feel bad saying this to you – I really do – but if you have to, think about how angry you were when your mom died."

I walk over to Ben and kneel down beside him. He's hanging his head low such that his bangs obscure his face. "Are you ready?" I ask softly. "Ready," he replies in almost a whisper. I can see it in his eyes: he's allowed himself to go someplace dark, someplace he would never have gone had I not asked him to. And I feel a pang of giddiness in that I get to capture it on film. Ben's recital of his monologue doesn't seem scripted. His pain is real. His tears are real. And I keep the camera rolling in between takes, because I don't want him to fall out of character. At around 3:30 a.m., I ask Ben to break down and allow himself to cackle like a madman, to stare at Kelly Maxwell (who by this point is aiming a crossbow at his forehead) and laugh angrily, uncontrollably. Watching his performance is exhausting, and by the time it's over, all that's left for me to say is, "That's it. We're done."

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Days later, I call Ben and thank him for giving so much of himself to my movie. Though there are still some shooting days left on the schedule, his involvement with the project is essentially at its end.

“You told me you weren’t an actor, Ben,” I say. “You know you can’t say that anymore.”

“Don’t give me a compliment,” he replies. “You know I do better when you abuse me.”

“Fine. How about this? I just called to thank you for not fucking up my movie too much. Your performance, though trite and pathetic, wasn’t as awful as it could have been, especially given how terrible you are at having a normal conversation.”

“Perfect! That’s the Will I know and love!”

“In all seriousness, Ben, thank you. Thank you for going wherever it is you went the other night and for letting that through in your performance. The footage is phenomenal. Did you know that Kathy said she had to go to a different bedroom, because she could hear you upstairs and you were breaking her heart?”

“Really?”

“Yeah. So, again, thank you. Can I ask you something, real quick?”

“Sure.”

“Where did you go? How did you get to that place?”

“I thought back to when my mom died, how I was taking a shower and I told God that because He took her from me I was done with Him.”

“I’m sorry. But then again I’m not. Because no one else could have given the performance you did.”

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Looking back, I don’t regret my decision to have Ben dredge up the painful, long-buried trauma of his mother’s death to embody his character’s devastated emotional state, because doing so allowed him to play his part in a way no other person I know would have been able to match. More importantly, Ben’s performance here is itself based on one of his own very painful real-life experiences of heartbreak, which parallels the emotional core of my picture. In this way, the film’s metaphor is realized through Ben’s own emotional breakdown captured on camera and appropriated within the framework of a fictional narrative. In other words, the emotional thrust of *High School Sweethearts* is heightened because it is inspired from my own failed relationships and includes genuine moments of physical and emotional pain.

Throughout this chapter I presented my frustrations and ethical dilemmas surrounding the final day of shooting *High School Sweethearts*’ torturous finale and framed myself as a dedicated director, whose responsibility to the script at hand clashed with the ethical considerations my role as a human being required I consider. Interestingly enough, while I’ve argued that one of the reasons I’m attracted to violence as a form of entertainment is because the images presented onscreen are merely staged representations of it, this chapter provided evidence to the contrary. By appropriating real, though consensual and controlled, instances of violence and emotional trauma within the framework of my fictional narrative, I have perhaps damaged that claim.

In the previous chapter I mentioned that I am partially beholden to genre conventions. As a producer and consumer of violent media, I have a two-pronged responsibility to my target audience to make the violence I create as realistic as possible and to create something fans of the genre have perhaps never seen before. At the very least, I have the responsibility to take something they have seen before and present it in a new and interesting manner. One of the ways I accomplished this was by juxtaposing real blood with fake blood. You will recall that I decided to film moments of real violence after passing out during a blood draw because I am disturbed by the sight of actual blood, especially when it is my own. Consequently, the real instances of violence throughout *High School Sweethearts* exist because they are disturbing. I willingly admit I am desensitized to movie violence, but the fact that I am personally disturbed by real blood suggests that I am not desensitized to actual violence.

With that said, what are the implications behind my looking at real, though controlled and consensual, instances of violence through the viewfinder of a camera and appropriating them within the framework of a fictional narrative? In doing so, I have created something I find genuinely disturbing primarily because it is real. Because the violence within *High School Sweethearts* focuses on its physical and emotional consequences, shooting real instances of both only adds to my film's impact. While my audience may not detect that on a conscious level, I suspect they will detect it on an unconscious one. Paradoxically, I have also potentially begun to desensitize myself to real violence. Ascertaining whether these real instances of physical and emotional violence on film will translate to my being desensitized to such violence in the real world is beyond the scope of this present study, though it is something to consider.

As a dedicated director, all of my decisions are framed as being relevant to my desire to create the best version of the script I can under budgetary and time constraints, and this role as a director oftentimes conflicted with the ethical dimensions of what I was filming. As Ben has little to no fear of physical pain, I readily admit I exploited his willingness to inflict pain upon himself. In fact, I passive-aggressively encouraged it, especially when I told him that I wanted him to rake the straight razor over his skin again “unless it was too painful.” That said, my asking Ben to undergo dry-shaving, or asking him to conjure memories of his mother’s death prior to reciting his final monologue, is no different from what method actors undergo for their roles in many larger budgeted productions.<sup>90</sup>

In the next chapter I return to my original research questions and discuss the differences between my shifting roles as a filmmaker and as a person throughout the creation of *High School Sweethearts*.

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<sup>90</sup> For example, Christian Bale lost a staggering 63 pounds to play the role of Trevor Reznik in *The Machinist* (Anderson, 2004). According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com), “The producers of the film claim that Christian Bale dropped from about 173 pounds in weight down to about 110 pounds in weight to make this film. They also claim that Bale actually wanted to drop down to 100 pounds, but that they would not let him go below 120 out of fear that his health could be in too much danger if he did. His diet consisted of one can of tuna and an apple per day. His 63-pound weight loss is said to be a record for any actor for a movie role.



## CHAPTER 8

### Discussion and Conclusion

In light of my analysis offered in the present work, I conclude this thesis with a self-analytic eighth chapter that wrestles with the implications behind my willing consumption and creation of violent imagery as a form of entertainment.

#### Summary

Though previous research indicates that the consumption of violent media either increase aggressive constructs in viewers (Bushman, 1998), desensitize viewers to domestic and sexual violence (e. g., Donnerstein & Penrod, 1988; Mullin & Linz, 1995) or prime individuals to make hostile attributions about the behavior of others (e.g., Thomas & Drabman, 1978; Bargh and Pietromonaco, 1982; Wann and Branscombe, 1990; Zelli, Huesmann, & Cervone, 1995), my own experiences as a consumer and producer of graphically violent horror films suggest otherwise.

We experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, and these narratives are heavily reliant upon the frames we consciously and unconsciously use to define ourselves within them. Consequently, my thesis is as an autoethnography that details my own emotional, psychological and social factors as they relate to the scripting and shooting of my latest horror film *High School Sweethearts*.

This autoethnography presents a self-reflexive personal narrative about what it means to create violence as a form of entertainment, and it combines making-of-the-film vignettes with this self-analysis to better understand why I willingly consume and create violent imagery, which in turn contributes to the culture of violence. Furthermore, this

thesis implicitly challenges the orthodox transmission view of communication by arguing that certain forms of communication, such as horror films, are best understood through the ritual model of communication.

Throughout this thesis, I addressed the following interrelated questions as they related to my own personal decisions throughout the creation of my film: What motivated me to create *High School Sweethearts*? Of all the film genres, why am I so captivated by Horror? And finally, what motivates me, as an avid movie watcher and independent filmmaker, to willingly consume and create violent media? I will now answer each of these questions in turn before discussing their implications in greater detail.

### **Why did I Create *High School Sweethearts*?**

I created this film to come to terms with and release personal angst. Quite simply, *High School Sweethearts* represents my personal experiences of heartbreak in filmic terms through the graphic depictions of staged violence against the human form. The near-crippling depression I suffered after my girlfriend broke up with me during my senior year of high school left me an emotional wreck, and the horror genre afforded me a creative outlet for the contradictory emotions that threatened to consume me. This eventually resulted in my creation of a short script titled, *High School Sweethearts*, or *Life Sucks, and then it gets Worse*. The impetus to create the current incarnation of *High School Sweethearts* came years later and stemmed from my desire to reflect upon my additional failed relationships and make a serious-minded horror film that drew its inspiration from the teen-driven romantic comedy *John Tucker Must Die* and the torture porn sub-genre of horror.

### **Why am I so Captivated by Horror?**

Today is August 01, 2009, and I am at Shannon Daubner's wedding reception, sitting at a table with his eldest son, William, discussing this and that and things that are, for the most part, neither here nor there. Eventually, I steer our conversation in a more concrete direction.

"So, Will," I ask, "why do you like watching horror movies?"

"I like the sneaking around," he says, matter-of-factly.

"Okay, but is there any other reason? What kinds of horror movies do you like to watch?"

"I like Jason. I like the way he sneaks up and gets people." As William says this, he swipes an imaginary machete through the air into an invisible target. "Spppplt!"

"Do you like that these films are violent?"

William thinks about this for a moment. "I dunno. I like that my dad likes them. I watch them with him all the time."

I smile when he says this. William reminds me a lot of myself when I was a kid, and his response triggers my own memories of watching horror movies with my mother. In fact, as an adult, I realize my love for the horror genre directly stems from my childhood memories of watching horror movies with my mom, and she and I regularly attend theatrically-released horror films together to this day.

As William grows up, I imagine he too will continue to watch horror movies with his dad. No doubt he'll find directors, characters, sub-genres and villains he likes more than others, but his love of the genre will always be tied to his childhood memories of watching horror films with his father, just as my continued love for, and fascination with,

the horror genre is closely tied to those late-night slasher movie marathons my mom and I shared in our living room over heaping bowls of heavily salted, buttered popcorn.

### **Why do I Create Violent Media?**

Interestingly enough, my threshold for tolerating graphic displays of realistic-looking fictional violence is much greater than my mother's, which I readily accept as a sign of my desensitization to movie violence and a natural by-product of how I, as a heartbroken teenager, used screenwriting as an emotional outlet for the anger and frustration I felt throughout my depression. In other words, my routine consumption of fictional violence allowed me to filter my dark impulses that may have otherwise manifested themselves in anti-social and/or dangerous ways, which flies in the face of social science research that suggests the consumption of fictional violence is unhealthy. Fraser (1974) rightly explains how violence "demonstrates the 'real' nature of man, his fundamental disorderliness and will to destruction, his hatred of constraints, his resentment of ideas and all other artificial constructions. Hence the artist who deals honestly with violence becomes a kind of nose-rubber or mirror-holder, someone rubbing the spectator's nose in the disagreeable, and holding up a mirror in which he can contemplate the essential filthiness, nastiness, and beastliness of mankind" (109). I hasten to add that creating violence can also be fun. At least it is for me, and I produce realistic displays of fictional ultra-violence because it thrills me to design an effect I know will get a rise from an audience. I enjoy tapping into my creative impulses to take a gruesome scenario I've written on the page and make it a believable reality for someone else.

In addition, I create fictional violence as a way to quite literally stare death in the face. As stated earlier, real death scares the hell out of me because I am afraid of dying. More than that, I am afraid of the people closest to me dying. On the page and behind the camera I can set the terms. I am in complete control over the lives and deaths of my characters, and that feeling gives me a sense of control over my own life.

Understand, I am not suggesting the graphic violence within *High School Sweethearts* is not the product of desensitization to fictional representations of violence. I have clearly been desensitized to such representations. My Karo-based bloodlust was cultivated after years of watching violent films on television and in movie theatres, and it would be foolhardy for me to suggest otherwise.

### **Discussion and Implications**

So what do you think? Am I sick and disturbed? I certainly don't feel like it, but I'm willing to acquiesce that I could easily have become so had my mother not subjected me to horror films as a child and explained that the violence they contained, however realistic-looking, wasn't real. That may seem like a strange thing to say, especially in light of previous research that insists the consumption of fictional violence is harmful to our psyches, but my interest in violence as a form of entertainment grew from the notion that the images I was watching onscreen were merely skewed representations of a created reality. I'm not arguing that adolescents who consume violence as a form of entertainment without the guidance of a parent or guardian are not affected by it in potentially negative ways. Rather, I am simply arguing that the negative effects I suffered by my consumption of violent entertainment throughout childhood were

mitigated by my mother's active involvement in my movie-watching habits in such a way that, as both a teenager and an adult, I was able to use the genre as an outlet for anti-social and potentially dangerous emotions such as anger, frustration, alienation and the like.

For me, then, the current state of horror is illustrative of a collective culture based around anti-social emotions. According to Schlobin (1988), while "horror may, then, be of some social, redeeming value as an outlet for sociopathic and destructive character traits ... to justify it as a safety value or a purification is, sadly, to recognize symptoms and ignore causes. Its great and rising popularity in the modern era points to serious emotional problems, frustrations, and anger." In other words, the popularity of ultra-violent horror films like torture porn stems from our cultural predilection towards violence as a form of entertainment. Mass communication scholars who primarily focus their attention on studying the effects of watching violent media ignore its cultural roots and the role of the creators of violent media who, like me, have been culturally indoctrinated to appreciate violence as a form of entertainment. Society may discourage violence, but it thrives on the production and consumption of its fictional other. Horror films, then, reflect the cultural norms and fears of a society.

When we examine violent media as a form of entertainment enmeshed within culture, rather than as an agent that sets culture, we begin to see why certain frames within the genre remain so prevalent. To be sure, the repetition of frames within horror helps to maintain frameworks through which filmmakers and audiences view women, men, relationships, sexuality and violence without even consciously realizing it. For example, you will recall that I criticized *Hostel Part II* for framing women as helpless

victims, as objectified pieces of meat, as monstrous, deviant sexual predators and for supporting Clover's (2000) assessment that women in horror films suffer on-screen far longer than their male counter-parts. I have to admit that *High School Sweethearts* is not free from criticism here.

Because I possessed an overwhelming familiarity with the horror genre prior to my creation of *High School Sweethearts*, some may assert that I intended to frame women negatively. And as my entire cast of characters, save one, is made-up of young women, one could easily argue that my movie clearly frames women as either helpless victims and/or rash murderers. Borrowing a bit from Dyer (2002), as all of the female protagonists are killed during the movie, one could argue that I invite viewers into the fictional world of my story from scene to scene so as to see things only from my male point of view. Bear in mind—as of this writing—all torture porn films have been directed by men. The women as victims frame and women as murderous villain frame are indeed acceptable genre conventions, though I do not intend for them to be taken literally, as the violence within *High School Sweethearts* is essentially a manifestation of Dawn's own heartbreak, which was, in part, spawned from my own experiences with failed relationships. Furthermore, my film's male character suffers on screen far longer than any of his female co-stars, even though his ultimate fate is left to the viewers' discretion. Finally, one could suggest that the women being killed on screen are supposed to be emblematic of some real-life ex-girlfriend counterpart. However, that would be an erroneous judgment because, as mentioned in chapter 5, all of the film's characters are composites of a variety of sources. While my previous relationships

certainly inspired dialogue and specific character traits, the characters that appear onscreen are just as much my creation as that of the performers playing them.

Throughout this autoethnography, I maintained the idea that human beings experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, and part of my intent was to document the myriad ways my film's narrative drew its inspiration from the real life narratives of heartbreak that influenced it. Consequently, I utilized framing theory and narrative theory to structure these experiences. We occupy various roles throughout our lives, and the narrative structures that make them up change depending on the narratives we are trying to live out. Framing theory helped me identify the various roles I occupied throughout the filmmaking process, while narrative theory allowed me to structure these frames into coherent stories about it. The narratives that spawned *High School Sweethearts*, along with the narratives told within the two versions of *High School Sweethearts*, are quite different from the autoethnographic narrative I wrote about its various stages of production. Yet each one of these stories presents a necessary perspective in order to understand my total experience as the film's creator. By understanding my shifting roles throughout, one can see the difficulties inherent in trying to negotiate the act of filmmaking.

Both the short and feature-length versions of *High School Sweethearts* are interwoven within this overarching heartbreak narrative and essentially act to reframe its principle characters and motivations. In the short version of the script I turned the existing heartbreak narrative into a revenge fantasy narrative, wherein I framed myself as the victimized-villain. In essence, I reframed myself from the passive victim I was in reality to the active villain within my created fantasy. Though my alter-ego's motivation



here was one of heartbreak, the decision to write myself as a suicidal murderer was significant because it was a way for me to let loose bottled up aggression and angst towards Debbie and myself in a manner that was socially and culturally acceptable. When I finally sat down to write *High School Sweethearts* as it appears in this thesis, I was no longer the heartbroken-victim. Nor was I merely the heartbreaker-villain. I was the anti-hero within my own life story trying to understand how my previous relationships influenced the content of the script at hand. After all, we cannot understand people or ourselves without understanding and seeing how we fit into cultural narratives (Lakoff, 2008 p. 34).

## **Conclusion**

Drawing from my own personal experiences as a consumer and creator of graphic horror, my autoethnography has attempted to deepen understanding of why people create violence as a form of entertainment by focusing on my creation of a feature-length torture porn film, *High School Sweethearts*. On a personal level, I wrote the initial draft of *High School Sweethearts* thinking it would be a therapeutic cure-all for my burgeoning depression, but while it made me feel better in the short term, it also reflected my self-loathing. Years later, I wrote the feature-length version as a metaphor for heartbreak in general, and I found that I drew from my personal experiences to exorcise emotional demons in the hope that someone, somewhere would one day see my film and say, “My God, that’s me. That’s how I felt when so-and-so broke my heart.”

This explanation, however, does little to explain why *High School Sweethearts* contains such realistic displays of extreme violence. And while the lingering camera

shots of flayed flesh and arterial blood sprays are, on one level, the physical manifestation of the emotional pain associated with a broken heart, to say that's the end of the discussion would be a blatant lie. In truth, they exist primarily because I enjoyed making them. And I enjoyed making them because, as a child, I enjoyed watching them. So, after all this, my interest in creating and consuming violence as a form of entertainment ultimately points back to watching The Shape<sup>91</sup> stalk and slash his way through the streets of Haddonfield, IL.<sup>92</sup> Hey, mommy, look at what I did. I just made a horror movie.

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<sup>91</sup> The adult Michael Myers, the masked slasher of all the *Halloween* films within continuity, is referred to "The Shape" in the closing credits of John Carpenter's original.

<sup>92</sup> The setting for most of the *Halloween* films, with the exception of *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (Wallace, 1983).

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