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## You Were There : an Exploration and Analysis of the Filmmaking Process

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*You Were There:*

An Exploration and Analysis of the Filmmaking Process

by Regan Lanelle Emfinger

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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## Abstract

*You Were There:*

An Exploration and Analysis of the Filmmaking Process

This thesis explores the process of writing, shooting and editing my short film *You Were There*. My process involved scriptwriting with several revisions, shooting with a cast and crew, and editing the raw footage. This paper will not only serve as a timeline leading up to the final product of the film but also will explain the function of each artistic choice. This paper will also outline the biggest lessons I learned about fictional narratives, and discuss the successes and failures of the film as a whole. I also plan on discussing how those lessons will further my academic and artistic pursuits.

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## I. Initial Goals/First revisions

The original script of *You Were There* was inspired by Shakespeare's first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*. Particularly, the moment in the play where Tamora's sons rape and mutilate Lavinia in the woods. When her uncle, Marcus Andronicus, finds her after the incident, he delivers a monologue filled with imagery surrounding blood and nature. For example, lines such as "Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,/Like to a bubbling fountain stirr'd with wind,<sup>1</sup>" gave such a clear image of blood in the trees that I wanted to write a script that included such images. Nature also had a powerful influence over the initial script. *Titus Andronicus* utilized the duality of nature as both a place of beauty and chaos. I loved the concept that nature can be beautiful, but also unforgiving. This is why a majority of the scenes in the initial script took place in the woods.

The play's main theme of revenge and righteousness inspired the theme of my film *You Were There*. My original script contained a strong element of bystander guilt, with Mark feeling as if he should have done more for Lydia as an eye witness. Tara was not the lover and murderer of Lydia, but instead, a close friend of Lydia's who took more responsibility than Mark in her search for missing Lydia. Her initial character is best described in this final scene where Tara confronts Mark in the abandoned shack:

TARA

Well that doesn't matter now, does it? You had an opportunity to do something. You didn't even say anything to the police. And now she's gone, with no evidence to find her. All because of you.

Mark tilts his head upward to meet Tara's gaze. She now has a crowbar in her hand.

TARA

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* (Open source Shakespeare), Act II, Scene 4: lines 1086-87

In my eyes, you're just as guilty. She may be dead. I don't know. But what I do know is that you deserve to be punished.<sup>2</sup>

Tara's original motivation for her actions came from a more altruistic form of revenge. Although she had no involvement in Lydia's disappearance, she knew that Mark did not do enough to help find Lydia. Therefore, her violent actions in the original script came from misplaced anger towards Mark. However, as I reviewed this script, I found that these flimsy connections to Lydia and lofty ideals of revenge were not strong enough motivation for their actions. Why would Tara go out of her way to punish/ murder Mark if for such not doing enough? If Mark is only an acquaintance, why did he go searching in the woods to ease his guilt? Why would Tara, a person who had done nothing wrong, turn to such violent means to enact revenge? This is why in the final script, Tara is Lydia's girlfriend and Mark is her best friend. The connections between the characters needed to be stronger in order to have more convincing motivations. Tara needed a stronger reason to want to kill Mark and the revised abandoned shack scene in the revised version shows this transformation:

WOMAN'S VOICE

You just had to be the hero, didn't you?

Mark turns to see Tara in the doorway. Arms folded. She throws a red marker on the floor. He is so shocked he doesn't get off his knees.

TARA

What a mess, Lydia told me she was going for a walk in the woods, but she didn't tell me she was with someone. I guess she was worried I'd get jealous. How Sweet...

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<sup>2</sup> *You Were There* (Original) pg. 8

MARK

(Anger)

Who's blood is on that tree?

TARA

But unfortunately, she has now dragged you into this. She'd be so upset knowing you became a martyr for her. It's a good thing she's now in a state of... peace.

Tara quietly closes the door behind her and sprays something in Mark's face. He goes into a fit of coughing, all senses compromised.

MARK

The police will search this place again, they'll know it was you.

TARA

If that's the story you want to tell yourself, go ahead. I guess that's a better story than a girl dying because a chicken shit like you did nothing<sup>3</sup>.

Although the bystander guilt is still in this revision, the overall stakes are heightened to a point where it makes sense. Tara killed Lydia, Mark did nothing at first but tried to make up for it, and Tara kills Mark in the end for trying to find Lydia. The stakes are higher for both Tara and Mark, which makes their actions more convincing. I showed this version to my cinematographer and we began to test shoot scenes. I couldn't go forward with this revision for two main reasons. Number one, I could not find a proper venue for the abandoned shack scene. The abandoned shack scene served as a major pivotal moment of the film, revealing the truth of the film and the height of Mark's emotional state. Without that scene, the rest of the footage lacked momentum and purpose. None of the other scenes had direct action, a majority of the scenes either referred

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<sup>3</sup> *You Were There (Revision 1)*, pg 8

to actions that happened in the past or the action was off-screen. Although mentioning past events may give momentum in the written narrative, I learned it did not work within the visual medium. For example, I test shot this scene that shows Mark was there for Lydia's kidnapping:

Lydia gives a small head nod and starts walking to her car across the street. Mark lightly jogs, scanning the ground for his phone. He finds it near the beginning of the trail and picks it up.

LYDIA  
(Screaming)  
MARK!!!

Mark immediately turns and runs to the noise. Too late, all he sees is a black car driving off<sup>4</sup>

Within the written format, this plot moment pushed the narrative along in a way that made sense. However, when I actually filmed this, the actor was only listening and reacting to something that is never shown. Since this scene lacked a full visual, the footage felt disjointed from the goal of the film. Essentially, without seeing action, the film felt incomplete. Therefore, the script became a more present, linear plot. Instead of having all of the violence happen in the past, I figured it would be more compelling for the audience if they saw Tara murder both Lydia and Mark in real-time. My reasoning for this is that within the short film medium, the stakes for the characters needed to be heightened. The concepts of bystander's guilt and calculated revenge required a longer film in order for the concepts to build properly. Also, a more linear plot with both acts of violence happening within locations that were easily attainable made the filmmaking process more practical. My initial scenes that involved an abandoned shack

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<sup>4</sup> *You Were There* (Revision1) page 2.

and shooting at night were simply too impractical to create with my limited resources. Therefore, I moved forward with the filming process with the simpler script. While I was working with my actors and cinematographer, I saw no issue with the footage at the time. However, when I had the footage in post-production, I realized there were a few problems.

## II. Filming Complications/Shift in Goals.

There were two major issues with the footage from the linear version of *You Were There*. Firstly, a lot of dialogue scenes did not have enough coverage. Meaning, I had only gotten footage of a conversation from two or three camera angles which made editing very limiting. I did not have a variety of options to choose from if I wanted to cut away from a bad performance or highlight a good performance. The dialogue scenes ended up only cutting between two angles with long takes that seemed stagnant. Another major problem was the audio itself. The audio from each take was extremely inconsistent not only in dialogue content but also in tone quality. This made it difficult in editing because if I had one take with the best audio, the footage that looked the best did not match the audio. I either had to compromise on footage or audio, and to do so compromised *You Were There* as a whole. Through the editing process, I discovered that if the basic principles like sound, footage, and performance were sub-par, a linear narrative would highlight those mistakes rather than conceal them. This is the point when I knew I had to shift the plot narrative. Primarily, the plot narrative needed to be something non-linear. That's when I wrote the script for the interrogation scene.

### III. The Role of the Interrogation Scene

The concept of Tara being interrogated several months after the initial murders came into fruition for multiple reasons. Firstly, I needed a feasible way to make use of the previous footage I had while still continuing the storyline. With keeping the focus on Tara and having someone question her actions, footage involving Tara's POV or Tara herself could now be used as Tara's memory. For the detective's case, the footage could now be used to show what he knows whether through Mark or his own investigation. For instance, during the moment where the detective plays a recorded conversation between him and Mark, The audience sees footage of Lydia and Mark sitting in the woods. The footage is silent, but Mark is recalling the conversation based on his memory. At that moment, the footage from the woods not only represents Mark's memory, but also the Detective's knowledge. Because of the audio, the footage has a new role and a new context. The interrogation scene not only contextualizes the montage of footage but also adds a psychological layer to the plot that was missing in the initial shooting. The film now seemed a little less straightforward, and the audience would have moments where the non-linear footage would be ambiguous. For example, during this piece of dialog:

TARA

Mark is still bothering you guys, isn't he?

DETECTIVE (O.S.)

Actually, He's disappeared.

No one has seen him for 2 months now. We find this  
behavior.. odd.

Wouldn't you agree?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *You Were There* (Final) page 2

the viewers see footage of Mark leaving his car with a backpack. When that scene was shot initially, it was meant to be Mark searching for Lydia in real-time. However, now that the audience knows they are watching an interrogation, they are left to determine whether that is Mark in real-time of the interrogation, Mark in the past, or a figment of the Detective's mind.

However, it was important that I set up clear boundaries for the audience as to what was Tara's memory and what came from the Detective. Therefore, before and after each montage, the audience either sees Tara's face or the detective's hands. The detective was not there for the crime, footage that is seen while the Detective is speaking represents what the Detective understands based on the investigation. I chose to not show the detective's face until the end because it forces the audience to focus more on Tara and the Detective's words. The Detective serves as the provoker, or the person who offers Mark's truth in his place. Using his face throughout the film would detract from his main function, and it would detract from the focus on Tara. The Detective's face is revealed at the end, once he has come to a conclusion about Tara's actions. Footage that is seen while Tara is talking, is meant to represent her memories. Although there is some room for ambiguity at the beginning of the film, this structure gave the film a clear end goal. That end goal being, the audience discovers Tara is lying about being innocent.

While the interrogation scene served as a narrative choice that gave me more artistic freedom, it was also a pragmatic choice. I needed a setting where I could control both sound and lighting. When I was filming in the woods, it was difficult to maintain consistency as the sun movement continuously changed the composition of the shot. Shooting indoors proved to be a much easier process. The primary focus around the interrogation scene, as far as shooting goes, was audio. The interrogation shots were simple, but its simplicity contrasted with the vivid

footage in the woods and the intense nature of the script. Also, from a pragmatic standpoint, the simplicity of the interrogation footage allowed me to record quality audio that would connect these two spaces. A prime example of the pragmatic purposes of the interrogation audio is the recorded conversation between the Detective and Mark:

Tara says nothing to this and stares ahead with her mouth half-open. Her breaths are deep and controlled, but her brow furrows as the conversation plays.

DETECTIVE

(on the phone)

Do you remember what Lydia said to you that day in the woods?

MARK

(on the phone)

Yes, she said Tara's jealousy had gotten worse. That she became super possessive.

DETECTIVE

Did Lydia give you any reason to believe her life was in danger?

MARK

Yes. We wanted to file a restraining order. In fact, I told her sneak out of her house that night so I could take her to the police station. But I never saw her again.

Click. The recording stops and Tara raises her eyebrows in shock.

DETECTIVE

Care to explain that?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *You Were There* (Final), page 5.

This audio overlays the actual conversation between Lydia and Mark I had filmed for the previous script. The phone conversation was offered as a summary of the conversation between the two characters. It serves as a bridge between the linear and nonlinear, but also as a stand-in for the original conversation I could not use in full. This showed me that filmmaking choices not only come from artistic desires but also from pragmatism.

#### IV. Successes/ Takeaways

I believe the film was successful in using the previous footage to enhance the interrogation scene in terms of psychological depth. I also believe the interrogation scene was successful in bridging the past, and the present through dialogue and editing choices. Through showing the audience what Tara is saying versus what Tara remembers, I believe the film conveys Tara's testimony as a lie. I intend the audience to know that the Detective doesn't fully buy her story based on not only what he knows, but also what he sees in the interrogation room. I believe his final line and his face reveal successfully conveys his disbelief. As the interrogation progressed, I wanted Tara to seem like she was struggling to keep her violent memories at bay. I believe that moment was most successful in her final monologue. During her final speech, there are moments where she breaks eye contact and pauses as a flurry of bloody images go through her mind. It is my hope that by including Tara's pauses, it is clear to the audience that Tara clearly remembers her crimes and that it was difficult for her to ignore her memory. At the end of the film, I hope the audience leaves with no confusion as to the main conclusion of the plot. Of course, the audience never finds out if Tara actually gets caught, but I wanted *You Were There* to be a vignette of a psychological thriller. I think the story benefitted from being confined

to the interrogation scene rather than a larger narrative because it allowed me to focus on telling my story as concisely as possible while honing in on stylistic elements of editing.

Although I believe *You Were There* was successful in many respects, there are some elements that could be improved for an overall higher quality product. For example, the audio mixing could be more fine tuned so that both the Detective and Tara's audio would sound like they came from the same place. Due to logistic reasons, I was not able to record the main characters' audio in the same place. To combat this, I recorded both Tara and the Detective in several other places so the audio would sound like it came from the same room. Although I believe this padded most of the differences between the two recordings, some more sophisticated forms of audio mixing via editing would have greatly improved the sound. Moreover, the montages of memory could be faster in order to mimic flashbulb memories. From a psychological standpoint, our brains process and recall information quickly. If the memory is emotionally charged, like in Tara's case, the memory can be somewhat unclear. Therefore, I think making Tara's memories of the murder even more fast paced would have given a more realistic representation of how memory works. When it came to working with my actors, I could have been more clear about what I wanted performance wise. There were some moments in the filming process where I wanted the actor to deliver a line differently, or try another reading the dialog that portrayed a different emotion. Because I wasn't always assertive with what I wanted, I was not able to explore the capabilities of my actors.

Through this film, I was able to learn a lot about film as a visual narrative and what type of narratives translate well on screen. While studying under the English Department at the University of Mississippi, I learned not only the history of the written narrative, but also what

methods, themes, and tools work in a written narrative. I have also been able to analyze the film medium through the English Department and understand how a film narrative differs in form and function. While studying under the theatre and film program at the University of Mississippi, I learned the tools and techniques used to create a film narrative. *You Were There* is a project that shows not only the narrative storytelling skills I have learned to create *You Were There* but also the storytelling skills I have learned from creating *You Were There*. Since this thesis, I have gained hands-on experience on what it takes to write, execute, and fine tune a film narrative. This knowledge not only informs me about film narratives but narratives as a whole.

Moving forward I plan to take the lessons I have learned from this project and use them to not only analyze pieces of media accurately but also to create better narratives in the future. Regardless of whether or not I continue with film, I believe this experience has equipped me to better understand which narrative structures work for which medium. This knowledge will further my academic career in regards to teaching narrative storytelling at a higher level. This process has informed me of not only all the potential choices a filmmaker could pick, but also why those choices are made. From an analytical standpoint, I have gained essential skills when engaging with a piece of media. From editing structures, mise-en-scene, lighting, and acting choice, I have gained first-hand knowledge of using these tools to convey a narrative to an audience. Also, I have gained a critical eye for written narratives. Over my academic career, I have studied countless narratives in the written form. Because of my experience with writing and creating visual narratives, I now have a multidimensional approach when it comes to textual analysis.

## V. Conclusion

From beginning to end, *You Were There* was a process that not only pushed me to my limits but also changed my approach to the creative process. Although my vision was always the main focus of this project, this film taught me how much collaboration comes with film. Because I oversaw the whole project, it was difficult to overcome my mental blocks during the shooting process. The cinematographer always provided valuable input in regards to composition, and the actors were always vocal when it came to revising dialogue that they believed suited the character best. Without their help, my vision would not have been fully realized. Undergoing this project forced me to look beyond what I believed the filmmaking process to be, and expanded how I view the creative process in general. I am now more of a capable filmmaker and writer than I was before I started this project.

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