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The Collapse: An Annotated Screenplay

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THE COLLAPSE: AN ANNOTATED SCREENPLAY

by

BRANDON COLVIN

Committee Chair: Dr. Ted Hovet

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Dr. David J. Bell
Dr. Clay Motley

Electronic Version Approved:

Honors College
Western Kentucky University
December 2009
ABSTRACT

The Collapse: An Annotated Screenplay consists of an in-depth theoretical essay and an original feature-length screenplay, with a series of annotations to the screenplay explicating how the principles established in the essay are implemented in a creative work. The essay, entitled “The Absurd Screen: Bresson, Tarkovsky, and ‘Waterless Deserts,’” investigates how Albert Camus’ philosophy of the absurd applies to the cinematic styles of two directors – Robert Bresson and Andrei Tarkovsky – using examples from the filmmakers’ own theoretical writings and specific scenes and sequences from their films. The Collapse provides a practical example of the essay’s conclusions and categorizations, weaving both the formal and narrative theoretical precepts into an observable aesthetic paragon. Elucidating the connections between the two, the annotations, in the form of endnotes, provide an unusual level of transparency and accountability, both uniting the primary elements of the project and revealing the creative process in practice.

INDEX WORDS: Screenplay, Film Theory, Albert Camus, Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, Cinema Studies
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DEDICATION

This Capstone Experience/Thesis project is dedicated to my mother, Bookie, and my father, Ray, whose support in all of my academic endeavors is nothing short of miraculous. I would also like to dedicate it to my friends, who have been there to read and revise and offer input throughout the process: Mary Sparr, Tony Oswald, Chad Ison, Landon Bevier, Rick Shrout, and Patrick Kack-Brice.
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In addition to those individuals mentioned in my dedication, I would like to show my appreciation for the assistance of the Honors College in providing Honors Development Grants in support of my project, allowing me to present an early essay on the films of Robert Bresson at the Midwest Undergraduate Film Conference in 2008 and enabling me to attend the 2009 Nashville Screenwriters Conference, both of which were significantly helpful in pursuing my CE/T. I would also like to acknowledge the valuable encouragement from the WKU English Department, particularly the devoted attention of Dr. Karen Schneider, in bolstering my ambition and facilitating my scholarly development.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my committee members – Dr. Ted Hovet, Dr. David J. Bell, and Dr. Clay Motley – all of whom have been incredibly cooperative and attentive throughout their involvement in my CE/T project. I would like to extend a special thank you to Dr. Ted Hovet, who, throughout my entire academic career at WKU, has been an irreplaceable mentor and a source of constant support. Without his efforts, I would truly not be who I am today, and my CE/T project would undoubtedly lack the critical integrity and intellectual rigor that he has instilled and fostered.
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INTRODUCTION

The intention of this project is to unite film theory and film practice, to investigate and exemplify the ways professed aesthetic principles are applied in a concrete creative context. Following the examples of Robert Bresson and Andrei Tarkovsky – the filmmakers upon which my theoretical essay, “The Absurd Screen: Bresson, Tarkovsky, and ‘Waterless Deserts,’” is focused and whose films are the primary influences on my screenplay, *The Collapse* – my project seeks to foster transparency within the creative process, fulfilling the responsibility to craft an aesthetic work with a high level of intellectual accountability. Like Bresson’s *Notes on the Cinematographer* (1975) and Tarkovsky’s *Sculpting in Time* (1986), my essay systematically analyzes and anatomizes an approach to cinematic communication in order to explicate the reasons for my creative choices, highlighting the formative influence of Albert Camus’ philosophy of the absurd upon my theoretical perspective and demonstrating the relationship between Camus, Bresson, and Tarkovsky. In addition to this, my essay is also a manifesto, a call for the further exploration of a distinct cinematic style, one which I call an “absurd style” because of its connection to Camus. My screenplay, therefore, is my response to my own theoretical challenge.

As a reader with screenwriting experience might notice, *The Collapse* is somewhat unconventional by screenplay standards. The script contains rather extensive and detailed descriptions of events and actions, exceeding those of typical screenplays, and is also paced (via spacing, etc.) with an attention to rhythm generally advised against in screenplays. However, these idiosyncratic stylistic choices are not without precedent. Considering that I plan to direct this screenplay, the regulations of scriptwriting cease to
be as rigorously important, as such conventions are often adopted in order to secure a screenplay’s marketability to others who will oversee its production, leaving subsequent producers and directors creatively free. Indeed, Bresson and Tarkovsky – as well as writer-directors such as Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni – have adopted more individualized screenwriting tactics in formulating projects for their own direction, ignoring conventions in favor of crafting a more appropriate written blueprint for their films. I dare not place myself in the same category as those filmmakers, but merely suggest that my screenplay should be read with the understanding that I will eventually direct the project and that any irregularities are, for the most part, intentional modulations to standard screenwriting practice in service of my aesthetic goals.

*The Collapse* is also unique in a more obvious way – it is annotated. The annotations that accompany the screenplay should, ideally, be read only after one has finished the screenplay. Additionally, they should be perceived as exemplary rather than exhaustive, concentrating upon a handful of instances of each technique in question rather than noting each and every occurrence; the reason for this is practical: the avoidance of redundancy. Many more scenes in the screenplay are informed by the concepts in “The Absurd Screen” than are featured in the notes, which is something that should be kept in mind when examining the annotations. While the notes do explain the relationship between my essay’s theory and my screenplay’s (and eventual film’s) creative choices, they are not intended to be explications or interpretations of the narrative. The reader might find allusions or brief aspects of the screenplay explicated in the notes; however, in keeping with the core elements of my film theory, most components of *The Collapse* are left for the reader to define and determine. As Camus
would have it, the reader remains in a “waterless desert,” a treacherous terrain of uncertain significance and ambiguous ontology, keeping with the absurd principle.
The Absurd Screen: Bresson, Tarkovksy, and “Waterless Deserts”

In his seminal philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus articulates his particular definition of the human experience of “the absurd”:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. . . . This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (497)

The absurd is not merely the ridiculous in this context. Rather, the absurd consists of a very specific occurrence, one that defines human experience, namely “the confrontation of this irrational [world] and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (Camus 509). Camus’ concept depends upon the inability to reconcile the human desire for unity, rationality, and explication with the unpredictable, irrational, inexplicable aspects of being-in-the-world, of existing in a universe with no clearly apparent meaning or reason. The familiar is revealed to be foreign and the human, faced with the inscrutability of the events and actions in her life, is alienated from them, forced by epistemological and ontological disconnection to redefine and reinterpret the world in the light of its elusive – and sometimes jarring – refusal to be logically comprehended. As a result of the disparity between the human ideal and the irrationally real, an existential pursuit follows, a possibly fruitless and potentially hopeless drive to understand that which escapes or confounds the realm of reason. Of course, this existential questioning is undertaken with varying levels of intensity depending on the individual. Everyone feels this absurdity, however, particularly when confronted with its distillation in the form of the absurd screen. What separates us is how we respond to it, if at all.
Faced with the cinema screen, the receptive viewer experiences the absurd in microcosm. As S. Brent Plate writes, “Films create worlds. They do not passively mimic or directly display what is ‘out there,’ but actively reshape elements of the lived world and twist them in new ways” (1) and when viewers watch a film, they “see the world, but see it in entirely new ways because everyday perceptions of space and time are altered” (11). In other words, films remake the lived-in world into an analagous world of cinematic experience, one with particular capabilities that enable it to utilize elements of captured reality to create a new reality. This new reality, contained in a series of frames and composed of recorded light and sound, is one in which the experience of absurdity is an implicit aspect of its basic form, inherent in the medium’s specific and unique qualities.

Critic and theoretician André Bazin identifies the specific qualities of cinematic reality that separate it from actuality, as well as the other arts, in his influential essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945). Bazin notes that cinema, in its combination of photographic objectivity and temporal reproduction, attains “a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making” (13), conferring upon it, by virtue of its essential properties, the distinction of being the most credibly realistic form of artistic representation. This claim is no doubt controversial, but from a practical standpoint, its accuracy is almost undeniable. Think of the scientist. Does she use a painting or a concerto to observe the behavior of underwater creatures interacting in their natural habitat? A poem? A dramatic interpretation? Perhaps she uses a photograph. But the photograph lacks the crucial elements of time and motion. It lacks a major facet of reality observable only through cinematography. Although not immaculate in its reproduction of
the world, cinema, as Bazin suggests, has the distinct ability to capture reality more effectively and convincingly than any other artistic tool. This is the first and most widely observed component of Bazin’s specificity thesis. The other component requires one to remember, as Plate says, that films do not merely copy reality, they rearrange its elements into something different. If perfectly reproducing reality can be considered an act of truth-telling, cinema is doomed to perpetually lie. In observing the dual nature of cinema as both the most potentially realistic medium of expression and as an artistic form whose nature is to derange reality into something decidedly unreal, Bazin paradoxically calls the cinematic image “an hallucination that is also a fact” (16). Because of cinema’s uniquely heightened ability to capture reality as “a fact,” Bazin observes that the unreal in cinema exceeds the limitations of mere fantasy, becoming instead “an hallucination,” a non-reality perceived to be a reality – a quality that was exploited by the Surrealists in their attempts to subvert the notion of reality; as credibility increases, so does the power of the lie (Bazin 16). Therefore, cinema’s superlative capacity for accurately capturing reality confers upon it an equally superlative capacity to derange it. Herein lies the absurd.

The conflict between the human desire for rational explanation and the irrational world in lived reality is mirrored in the conflict between the reality captured by the camera/microphone and the affectations imposed on these recordings by cinematic techniques. The absurd divergence between expected clarity and existential obscurity, which denies the world reasonable coherence, is matched by the absurd divergence between the illusory credibility of cinematic realism and the hallucinatory power of its myriad manipulations, which undermine the coherence of the cinematic image by altering
the Cartesian conception of space and time. In both scenarios, one is implored, upon experiencing the absurd disconnection, to undergo a process of redefinition in which the ontological contradiction is explored and the nature of each reality – actual and cinematic, respectively – is subject to renewed investigation. Likewise, both absurd experiences require two combative premises. According to Camus, the absurd “is essentially a divorce” and “lies in neither of the elements compared” but is “born of their confrontation” (517). Without both human rationality and the universe’s irrationality, the absurd would not exist. Without both its realistically representational capabilities and its techniques of dismantling the reality it represents, the cinematic absurd would not exist. These qualities are inextricably bound and endemic to cinematic form, as is the absurd. Cinema, however, consists of more than its basic form. It is, generally, a narrative medium. In fact, the combination of narration with the previously discussed cinematic form presents the optimal arena for encountering the absurd in microcosm, an experience that encompasses what I will argue is ultimately cinema’s most valuable and important role in human experience.

Admittedly, most films wholeheartedly oblige the viewer’s need for logical understanding, primarily through psychological causality, connective linear thrust, legible spatial and temporal continuity, and lucidly resolved thematic content. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson characterize the salient qualities of classical narrative cinema by describing the assumptions of the generalized viewer:

> We assume that there will be characters and some action that will involve them with one another. We expect a series of incidents that will be connected in some way. We also probably expect that the problems or
conflict arising in the course of the action will achieve some final state – either they will be resolved, or at least a new light will be cast on them. A spectator comes prepared to make sense of a narrative film. (59)

In the context of cinematic absurdity, the final sentence of Bordwell and Thompson’s pragmatic definition is crucial; their observation rhymes with Camus’ concept of absurd conflict: just as the philosophical absurd requires the human impulse to make sense of irrational existence, the cinematic absurd requires the spectator’s impulse to make sense of the world within the frame. Characters act, and the audience searches for a reason. One sequence follows another, and the audience expects a rational thru-line. Problems arise, and the audience anticipates meaningful resolution. All of this is dependent upon the drive to determine causality – what makes things happen? How can this or that be explained? Why does this follow that? What are the logical connections? Questions are formed extending beyond the basic problem of space/time disruption and manipulation invoked by the essential elements of cinematic art, entering a realm of inquisition beyond simple physical reality. In this way, narrative cinema can more closely approximate the absurd condition of the world (though it can also mask absurdity, depending on how an individual narrative film answers such queries) than the non-narrative film form, whose absurdity functions on a very empirical level of observation. When confronted with a cinematic narrative, viewers seek to understand the reasons for and meaning of events in order to fulfill the explanatory void left by irrational occurrences or unexplained behavior.

However, narrative cinema’s typical rationalism – as explained by Bordwell and Thompson – also imparts upon it an unparalleled capacity to frustrate the viewer’s logical
expectations, to refuse to explicate, fostering an absurd chasm that must be bridged by the logic-seeking viewer. It is the narrative films that reject clear causality, psychological reasoning, and definite meaning, therefore, that fully embrace cinema’s potential for encapsulating the absurd; and it is in these films that the full power of cinematic expression can be found, the power to replicate the defining human experience in miniature, providing a context in which the process of understanding the incongruities of the world may be repeated over and over, honing the viewer’s ability to analogously interpret reality beyond the frame and to define herself. Essentially, experiencing the absurd screen as cinematic life is the most effective method for preparing oneself to encounter the paradoxes, mysteries, and obscurities of actual life, as articulated by Camus.

What, then, are the epitomic techniques for crafting absurd cinema? Camus writes that the most noble and valuable pursuit of understanding absurdity amounts to willfully remaining in “waterless deserts” (500) – states of ontological confusion – explaining that “[t]he real effort is to stay there, rather, in so far as that is possible, and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions” (500). To fully explore the absurd – which amounts to exploring oneself in relation to the world and vice versa – one must actively remain in a state of incessant observance of the incomprehensible, attempting to maximize familiarity with and comprehension of that which appears to be a foreign environment: the inexplicable aspects of existence, those that defy humanity’s rational predilections. Remaining in these harsh environs is the most direct way of realizing the existential project of making and finding meaning, of redefining the world in face of absurdity. Naturally, the most effective absurd cinema mirrors Camus’ maxim of
remaining uncommitted, unsure, in a probing state between rationalism and irrationalism, between specifically cinematic realism and the derangement of the real. Examining how absurd films maintain this provocative uncertainty provides one with an understanding of the particular creative tools utilized in bringing existential ambivalence to the screen. But, where does one begin to look?

Bordwell’s discussion of “art cinema” as a cinematic style that extensively implements “the device of ambiguity” by filling narratives with “certain gaps and problems” (779) points to a generalized approach that may be construed as absurd cinema, particularly when considering his observation that the ambiguity of “art” films suggests that the filmmaker “knows that life is more complex than art can ever be, and the only way to respect this complexity is to leave causes dangling, questions unanswered” (780), a description that syncs up with Camus’ concept of remaining in a “waterless desert.” However, Bordwell’s categorization is problematically broad, encompassing a variety of styles from Antonioni to Zanussi and preventing his definition from articulating precisely what absurd cinema is – what stylistic and narratological choices comprise it in practice and preserve the absurd state of ontological confusion. To uncover the creative principles and prescriptions that best exude the cinematic absurd, it is necessary to look to more specific examples contained within the unwieldy – but usefully suggestive – category of “art cinema,” dissecting the work of filmmakers who consistently and demonstrably engage with the absurd in both cinematic form and narrative content. Here, one must turn to the theoretical and creative works of the two greatest absurd filmmakers: Robert Bresson and Andrei Tarkovsky.
In “Tarkovsky and Bresson: Music, Suicide, Apocalypse,” one of the few comparative studies on the pair of influential filmmakers, James Quandt observes, “The two friends shared cardinal themes – spiritual anguish, the search for grace and oblivion, the conflict between faith and the barbarity of the world – and both educed the mystical from the banal, made the ineffable inhere in the everyday” (259). From Quandt’s apt and concise articulation of the directors’ basic commonalities, one can tease out the shared roots of their mutual expression of the cinematic absurd; in fact, his description hinges upon dichotomies that underlie both the Camusian absurd and the narrative and formal approaches of Bresson and Tarkovsky’s films. Thematically, Quandt identifies “the conflict between faith and the barbarity of the world” as a unifying concept, a dialectic that restates the clash between the clinging to the rational human ideal – encompassing a faith in any sort of transcendent meaning or causality, whether earthly or divine – and the unflinching opacity of the irrational world, its resistance to reasoned comprehension, its brutal non-conformity to human expectation. This conflict extends beyond the complex narrative components of Bresson and Tarkovsky’s creative works, however, to include the essential properties of cinematic art, the film form (time, space, and sound), which Quandt touches upon in his second dialectic – “the ineffable” v. “the everyday” – a distinction that implores one to ask: how do Bresson and Tarkovsky “educede” the metaphysical from the physical, the inexplicable from the obvious? In other words, how do they manifest the absurd in their creative manipulation of recorded reality? The answer to this question is contained within the carefully constructed stylistic interplay between realism and the derangement of realism found in the work of both filmmakers –
an ontologically ambiguous combination of documentary elements and the mystifying abstraction of those very elements, which leads to the creation of cinematic analogues to the absurd, replicating Camus’ basic premises in every way, from their disorienting handling of time, space, and sound to their intentional narratological incertitude. Indeed, the films of Bresson and Tarkovsky present the viewer with the most consistently arid “deserts” she is likely to find, fulfilling Camus’ existential prescription.

More than just filmmakers, Bresson and Tarkovsky are established philosophers of the screen. As a duo, they are rare amongst directors, each having published detailed theoretical works explicating and exploring the aesthetic principles that provide the foundation for their creative efforts: Bresson’s *Notes on the Cinematographer* (1975) and Tarkovsky’s *Sculpting in Time* (1986). Both works frame their author’s films as visual and aural concurrences of the most demonstrably real and jarringly unreal extremities of cinema’s specific qualities. Written in contrasting styles that mirror each director’s cinematic technique – *Notes* is comprised of brief, fragmentary aphorisms, akin to Bresson’s elliptical films, while *Sculpting* features flowing verbiage in the vein of Tarkovsky’s languid, indulgent cinema – the books’ theoretical musings highlight cinema’s unique capacity for capturing the absurd by dually promoting the medium’s realistic capabilities and corresponding anti-realistic capabilities; in both cases, capturing the real is posited as a means to eventual ontological ambiguity as a result of the systematic dissolution and reconfiguration of the captured reality. The absurd in both Bresson’s and Tarkovsky’s cinema emerges from specific stylistic peculiarities that provide a precise category of formal and narrative techniques that maximize narrative
film’s unique ability to encapsulate the absurd, all of which are implemented based on the directors’ stated precepts.

Bresson’s influence was frequently admitted by Tarkovsky, who ranked *Diary of a Country Priest* (*Journal d’un curé de campagne*, 1951) as his favorite film (Tarkovsky, “Tarkovsky’s Choice”) and cited Bresson as his favorite director, writing of him, “Robert Bresson is for me an example of a real and genuine filmmaker . . . He obeys certain higher, objective laws of Art . . . Bresson is the only person who remained himself and survived all the pressures brought by fame” (Tarkovsky, “Tarkovsky’s Choice”). Much of Tarkovsky’s work, then, can be seen as a response to and extrapolation upon the principles underlying Bresson’s films – principles outlined in *Notes on the Cinematographer*. Begun during the production of the aforementioned *Diary of a Country Priest*, *Notes* expanded into a 25-year project, a collection of observations jotted down throughout the development of the nine films that comprise the bulk of Bresson’s filmmaking output: *Diary*, *A Man Escaped* (*Un condamné à mort s’est échappé*, 1956), *Pickpocket* (1959), *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (*Procès de Jeanne d’Arc*, 1962), *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966), *Mouchette* (1967), *A Gentle Woman* (*Une femme douce*, 1969) *Four Nights of a Dreamer* (*Quatre nuits d’un rêveur*, 1971), and *Lancelot du Lac* (1974). In *Notes*, Bresson articulates the important distinction between two types of films: “cinema” films, which “employ the resources of the theatre (actors, direction, etc.) and use the camera to reproduce” (15), and “cinematography” films, which “employ the resources of cinematography and use the camera to create” (15); this distinction provides the basis for Bresson’s further theorizing, which seeks to define the specificity of film as opposed to theater by downplaying the tendency toward mimesis found in the latter in favor of the
unique capability of filmmaking to capture reality and forge a new reality from the recorded material through editing, framing, movement, and sound design.

The key to Bresson’s creative ideals lies within the unmatched ability of the tools of filmmaking – the camera and the microphone – to convincingly fix reality, and, at this basic level, Bresson is a realist. Echoing the arguments of theoretical realists from Bazin to Kracauer, Bresson foregrounds the superlative observational quality of the camera, writing, “What no human eye is capable of catching, no pencil, brush, pen of pinning down, your camera catches without knowing what it is, and pins it down with a machine’s scrupulous indifference” (Notes 36). The camera is the pinnacle of realistic perception, the most accurate tool for apprehending reality, a fact that informs Bresson’s aphoristically-phrased statement, “Theatre and CINEMA: alternation of believing and not believing. Cinematography: continually believing” (Notes 66); the real exists in film more believably than in any other art form.

However, Bresson is not satisfied with merely presenting the recorded world. His true interests concern that which is beyond the observable confines of rational, Euclidean existence. Reality is used in Bresson’s films to point beyond itself. Discussing Bresson’s work, Raymond Durgnat describes his use of reality quite poetically, noting, “If photorealism can’t exactly see reality’s hidden, invisible aspects, its more abstract forces and relations, it can nonetheless trace them through patterns, illustrate them, as, for example, a pattern of iron filings makes visible electromagnetic forces that arrange it” (421). Bresson’s work is dedicated to highlighting and exploring these mysterious “forces,” the inexplicable components of the world that defy causal logic, and in the maximized realistic qualities of cinematography Bresson finds the most effective medium
for demonstrating the troubling limitations of rational reality, enabling him to craft analogues to Camus’ absurd conflict. Abstraction, of course, makes this possible. As James Quandt explains, Bresson’s manipulative use of realism “transforms objects and gestures into signifiers of the transcendent, and documentary realism becomes abstract formalism” (Intro. 7), an observation supported by Michael Bird’s point that the ontological confusion in Bresson’s films “is reached through his frequent intensification of the physical world, accompanied by a dissolution of that very world” (19). Following the dissolution discussed by Bird, the comprehension-desiring viewer must attempt to reconstruct and explain the world, now made foreign; this is a perfect microcosm of the confrontation with absurdity as discussed by Camus, a confrontation forced by the formal techniques present in Bresson’s films – namely his deliberate use of fragmentation, ellipsis, and incongruity.

The core principles of Bresson’s oblique, fractional style – and its resultant indeterminacy – are elucidated by a few selections from Notes, in which Bresson advocates the use of visual/aural incompleteness, writing, “Don’t show all side of things. A margin of indefiniteness” (Notes 104), a complimentary comment to his deconstructive aphorism:

ON FRAGMENTATION

This is indispensable if one does not want to fall into REPRESENTATION. See beings and things in their separate parts. Render them independent in order to give them new dependence. (Notes 93)
By splintering the image, the recorded reality of the camera, into less coherent fragments – usually through oddly-framed close-ups of hands, feet, torsos, and faces, disconnected from bodies, isolated as abstractions, or objects, doorways focused upon with bizarre intensity, all edited together in sequences that dismantle spatial and temporal continuity – Bresson eliminates the logical relationships between objects within the frame and the causal relationships between successive shots. Representation, a term Bresson uses to refer to theatrical mimesis, is avoided; instead, a new, uniquely cinematic system is created, one which fully utilizes film’s potential to replicate the absurd by refusing the norms of spatial and temporal understanding in favor of forging an unfamiliar, unreal, irrational mode of visual/aural experience. Wholes are reduced to parts. Expected moments are elided. Shots linger for protracted amounts of time. The typically unimportant is made conspicuous. All of the joints and tendons that frequently hold together our understanding of the world – and realistic narratives – are stripped away, leaving the viewer with pieces to fit together however she can; as Quandt describes this jarring approach to film language, “the viewer discerns only by decoding the conjunctions of images” and Bresson’s “elliptical style demands of an audience an act of divination” (Intro. 11), a perceptual grappling that mirrors the struggle to navigate Camus’ absurd “deserts,” to make sense of the incomprehensible.

Critic T. Jefferson Kline goes so far as to say that, “as an image maker, Bresson avowedly destroys the normal cues by which viewers orient themselves in a fiction film and find coherences in its images” (255), unmooring the viewer from the comfortable traditions of narrative logic and contradicting a causal scheme that favors over-clarification – like a cinematic saboteur; in fact, Bresson intends to invert
conventional causality outright, plainly stating in *Notes*, “Let the cause follow the effect, not accompany it or precede it” (102). Though it is present in every one of his films from *Diary* onward, Bresson’s fragmentary, elliptical style is epitomized by the memorable opening of *Pickpocket*, a film which Kline argues is particularly “dedicated to maximizing [the viewer’s] sense of discontinuity” (239). This discontinuity and its exact formulation is embodied in the lengthy initiating segment, which emphasizes Bresson’s and decodes the challenging cinematic grammar of his disorienting absurd style.

The sequence begins with an extreme close-up of hands scribbling onto grid paper. An unidentified male voice echoes the words scrawled in graphite, “I know those who’ve done these things usually keep quiet, and those who talk haven’t done them. But I’ve done them.” The shot dissolves to an equally tight close-up of white-gloved hands fondling a purse; in the background, another set of hands vigorously counts money. The gloved hands, belonging to woman, procure a few bills from the purse and deliver them to the counting hands, those of a man. An incredibly loud mechanized, metallic clacking suddenly overtakes the quietly ambient soundtrack. The camera follows the man as he walks right, toward the sound, allowing distance to be developed by lagging behind the unidentified person. The man reaches a ticket counter, the camera still following, but at a medium length. The clacking sound is identified as a mechanical ticket dispenser. The man pays for his tickets and turns to walk away. He stops to look at a nearby young man. The young man looks back, making eye contact in another medium shot; the voiceover returns: “I had made my decision some days before. But would I have the nerve?” A bell begins clanging. The young man walks away from the camera, disappearing out of frame. The shot lingers, still focused on the empty space created by his exit.
In a still, wide shot, a crowd hurries toward the camera and past it, through a gate; the distorted rumble of a speaker carries the voice of an event announcer. The young man appears in the group. He advances with them toward bleachers and a railing – some sort of track perhaps. As he approaches a smattering of people lined against the railing, a tighter shot follows behind, growing closer and closer as he nears the occupied onlookers, focused on something distant, beyond the limits of the lens. He stops behind a woman – the white-gloved woman from before. The shot is extremely tight. She turns to look at him. As she turns to face forward once again, the shot becomes a close-up from in front of her; the young man looms behind, stoic. He stares into the distance. The voiceover again: “I should have left.” The shot lingers as he looks out, then glances down, and back up. An extreme close-up reveals his hand gingerly unlatching the woman’s purse. The frontal shot of his nonplussed countenance returns; he gazes blankly as the camera lingers and lingers and lingers. The close-up of his hand and the purse fills the screen, then the camera goes back to him looking, glancing down. Now, the tightly-framed hand slips stealthily into the opened purse. Once again, he is looking out as the thundering sound of hooves zooms across the soundtrack; the eyes of the spectators and the young man follow the off-screen racers. The extreme close-up of his sneaking hand reveals a burgled wad of cash being abducted with absolute calm. Suddenly, a figure crosses in front of the camera, briefly disorienting the frame and shielding the thieving hand from view. The crowd rushes by the young man as he stands still in medium shot. Moments later, he turns and blends in to the mass, disappearing.

The crowd exits the track, dispersing toward the still, wide camera. The young man reappears and then breaks from the throng, wandering away and out of frame into
the background. A wide shot reveals his exit through a gate; he walks toward the camera and then parallel to it, down a sidewalk, as the camera pans left to follow him. The voiceover, undoubtedly his, remarks, “I was walking on air, with the world at my feet.” He glances over his shoulder. Two male figures walk into frame behind him. The camera pushes in, following. His voiceover continues, “But a minute later I was caught.” The shot dissolves to a frontal close-up of the young man in the back of the car, flanked on each side by one of the two men. He rides in silence. Subsequently, he is viewed from behind in close-up while sitting in front of a desk, once again flanked by the men, who stand. He says to an unseen interlocutor, in the first line of dialogue, “You can’t prove anything. You’re not certain.” One of the standing men crosses the frame and the other moves aside, revealing a man behind the desk, who rises as the camera zooms in. He replies, “We won’t keep you any longer, sir. You may go.” Michel is seen in frontal close-up as he rises as well, glancing down. A close-up reveals the object of his gaze—the folded bills pilfered at the track, lying on the desk before him. The presumed police officer’s hands pick up the cash and place it in those of the young man, who crosses the frame and approaches the door, walking away from the camera. He exits quietly; the camera lingers on the closed door.

The young man walks into frame of a wide shot of an alley, moving toward the camera and turning as the camera pans to follow him briefly. He exits the frame to the right, leaving the camera on a parked car in the foreground. The shot holds and holds, depicting the vacated space. A close-up of an ajar door from inside a building continues the relative visual emptiness. After a few heavy moments, the young man walks through the entryway and then immediately out of frame, leaving the shot bare. A medium shot of
a blank wall at the top of a flight of stairs waits for the young man to enter its frame, slowly coming up the steps and walking out of frame soon after; the camera dawdles interminably. Another open door shot follows from within a room, empty and then filled by the young man, who enters and shuts the door. He plops onto a bed and the camera pushes in. He turns to lie back and the voiceover picks up, “I wanted to put my thoughts in order. I was exhausted. I slept until morning.” At the conclusion of the last line, the unnamed pickpocket instantly nods off, and the scene fades to black.

Understandably, the viewer is taken aback by the unusual rhythms and obscurity of information presented in Pickpocket’s expository sequence. Consistently, Bresson presents the viewer with partialities, fragments of image and sound that lack clear referents. Shots are frequently limited to hands disconnected from bodies, or decapitated torsos, or enlarged objects in close-up, all seeming to float as abstracted forms, to occupy spaces that are compartmentalized, hermetically separated; the whole is withheld. Sounds are heard with unknown or unseen sources, their origin only concretely revealed after prolonged ambiguity, if at all. Visual and aural information is implied rather than made explicit, links merely suggested rather than elucidated. The cause follows the effect, as Bresson desired. Relationships between bodies, objects, movements, and sounds are established only after their appearances, creating a series of minute mysteries that translate into a sensation of dislocation; in the sequence’s editing, this is the operative principle. Gazes and glances (effects) are depicted before the objects of such optical observations (causes), establishing a shot/reverse shot system that forces the viewer to ponder what a character may be looking at long before the object is shown; sometimes, of
course, they are not shown at all, rather implied sonically, as with the galloping horses at
the track.

Indeed, what Bresson shows and does not show in his bizarrely edited sequence is
somewhat shocking, and, at the very least, counterintuitive. As Kline observes, “Repeated
viewings of this sequence lead to the impression that what Bresson has included in his
film are those images that are normally consigned to the cutting-room floor” (238); one
might add, “and vice-versa.” In a typical arrest scene, the viewer might anticipate the
physical act of cuffing and overtaking to be highlighted. In *Pickpocket*, it is completely
omitted. The approach of the policemen is depicted, as well as the ride to the station, but
not the actual arrest. Bresson unexpectedly elides what would be the centerpiece of a
traditionally edited scene. What he *does* concentrate upon throughout the opening is
equally irregular – the seemingly extraneous vacant shots and lingering images to which
Kline alludes. By tacking moments of dormant screen space onto the beginnings and
endings of many of *Pickpocket*’s shots (particularly those detailing the pickpocket’s walk
home), Bresson confounds the viewer’s expectation of cinematic time. Shots do not cut
on action; instead, spaces are revealed to exist before and after actions or a character’s
presence, providing a reconfigured temporality that jars the viewer out of the
complacency of continuity. The altered spatial/temporal aesthetic of *Pickpocket*,
therefore, dually elides the expected and foregrounds the superfluous. As Keith Reader
writes, the film’s opening “gives [the viewer] no sense of neighborhood . . . nor of
chronological time” (54), instead it compresses and protracts space and time to the point
of abstraction, a tactic that “shift[s] [the] center of gravity away from the explicable and
totalizable” (Reader 53), plunging the viewer into the realm of the unfamiliar and illogical, confronting him with the absurd experience of collapsed reality.

Perhaps even more than his oblique visual composition and editing, Bresson’s use of sound in *Pickpocket’s* first seven minutes contributes to the abstracted ambiguity pervading the sequence. As with the spatial/temporal elements of Bresson’s style, his aural approach is rooted in obfuscation, omission, and unusual amplification. In the film’s introductory segment, typically requisite orienting information is de-emphasized (the viewer doesn’t hear that the thief is named Michel until well after the opening sequence), while certain atmospherics and ambiences are treated with almost metaphysical intensity (footsteps, horse hooves, the distorted announcer’s voice). Reader addresses this strange sonic strategy, writing, “There is an *unheimlich* quality to this sequence that derives in large part from the use of sound, for while we hear the ticket-machines clattering away like mechanisms of destiny we do not hear the voices of the punters as they place their bets” (55). The use of the term “*unheimlich*,” or “uncanny,” in Reader’s description is particularly apt. Denoting an experience or object that is familiar yet strange, real yet unreal, “uncanny” encapsulates the absurd paradox that emanates from every facet of Bresson’s style, including his exceedingly incongruous appropriation of actual, concrete sounds.

In *Notes*, Bresson privileges the suggestive vagueness of sound over image, writing, “The eye (in general) superficial, the ear profound and inventive. A locomotive’s whistle imprints in us a whole railroad station” (81) and “When a sound can replace an image, cut the image or neutralize it. The ear goes more towards the within, the eye towards the outer” (61). Sound, for Bresson, allows for more potent interiorization,
demanding more of the viewer in terms of creative participation, imagination, divination. Instead of revealing objects, scenery, or people visually, within the frame, Bresson frequently uses aural metonyms – semi-real sonic fragments indicating the presence of a visual/physical whole – to imply elements of his cinematic reality, a signifying technique that enables specific sounds (such as the galloping hooves) to connote entire unseen, off-screen spaces (such as the race track). These implied off-screen spaces expand the reality of Bresson’s cinema to include unknown, undefined, essentially mysterious gaps – links between scraps of image and sound that must be ascertained by the viewer according to her own ontological predilections. The viewer is burdened with the task of fleshing out Bresson’s skeletal cinematic world by making meaning out of his often-cryptic sonic framework; a position that parallels that of Camus’ existential explorer encountering uncharted absurd terrain.

The fractured spatial/temporal/aural reality of Bresson’s post-Diary of a Country Priest filmography – as exemplified by Pickpocket’s startling opening – provides the viewer with an environment that foregrounds obscurity, omission, and implication as methods for engaging her in the recreation of the world in filmic terms, in addressing the enigmatic alienation of absurd experience through cinematic proxy. In comparison, the cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky is undoubtedly as formally challenging as that of Bresson, though it recreates the absurd using decidedly different – yet theoretically likeminded – methods of ontological disorientation and existential engagement.

Lying at the heart of the directors’ similarities is their shared confidence in the inherently realistic capabilities of cinema, and, in this capacity, Tarkovksy certainly matches Bresson, pronouncing, “I consider cinema to be the most realistic art in so far as
its principles are based on its identification with reality, on the fixing of reality in every separately filmed shot . . .” (“The Artist” 19). In Tarkovsky’s films, as in Bresson’s, recorded “reality” is the most basically essential creative implement. Even more closely than Bresson, however, Tarkovsky toes the classically realist line established by Bazin, accentuating the role temporality plays in legitimizing cinema’s apparent verisimilitude, remarking, “The specific character of cinema consists in pinning down time. Cinema operates with time that has been seized, like a unit of aesthetic measure which can be repeated indefinitely. No other art possesses this capacity” (“The Artist” 19) and noting that cinema’s method of capturing time is immanently “factual” (Sculpting 63). In Tarkovsky’s aesthetic system, the most “factual” image is one recorded in unbroken time, based upon the principle that as more consecutive time is ensnared, more reality is accumulated – a theoretical precept that informs Tarkovsky’s signature use of long takes, languid shots frequently ranging from three to nine minutes in length. Particularly in his later films – Stalker (1979), Nostalghia (1983), and The Sacrifice (Offret, 1986) – Tarkovsky maximizes his long-take aesthetic, attempting to impart a greater sense of representational accuracy to his manipulation of the camera and microphone.

Like his French counterpart, however, the Russian director is unsatisfied with merely crafting a convincing approximation of actuality. Discussing cinema’s capacity to express everyday mundanity, Tarkovsky explains, “. . . it is the especial virtue of cinema, as the most realistic of the arts, to be the means of such communication” while crucially qualifying that “such reproduction of real-life sensations is not an end in itself; but it can be given meaning aesthetically, and so become a medium for deep and serious thought” (Sculpting 23). As with Bresson, Tarkovsky’s cinematic ideal hinges upon the
aestheticization and reconfiguration of recorded raw “reality” (in this case, underscored by continuous chronology) into a formal system fostering an existentially challenging experience for the viewer, keeping with Camus’ notion of absurdity. In fact, Tarkovsky astutely and directly addresses the unique capability of cinema to recreate the incomprehensibility of absurd existence in *Sculpting in Time*, writing:

> The image is indivisible and elusive, dependent upon our consciousness and on the real world which it seeks to embody. If the world is inscrutable, then the image will be so too. It is a kind of equation, signifying the correlation between truth and the human consciousness, bound as the latter is by Euclidean space. We cannot comprehend the totality of the universe, but the poetic image is able to express that totality. (106)

According to Tarkovsky, the ideal filmic image, though perhaps necessarily mysterious, has the ability to encapsulate the absurd universe in microcosm, expressing the “totality” of an “inscrutable” world in what Tarkovsky perceives to be “a second reality” (*Sculpting* 176), one that enables the viewer to encounter an analogous image of the first reality in which “those details which seem to [Tarkovsky] most fully and exactly to express the elusive meaning of our existence” are emphasized (Tarkovsky, *Sculpting* 213).

In crafting his absurd cinema, Tarkovsky is forced by his staunch preference for long, continuous shots to depict the derangement of recorded reality into a dissolute, ambiguous abstraction without utilizing the fragmentary techniques that characterize Bresson’s films. As Quandt writes of the two filmmakers:

> Interior movement depends on a sense of duration, and each director in his way reinvented cinematic time, Tarkovsky dilating it with his long takes,
temps mort and immersive aesthetic – his films baptize one in time as much as in the elements of water and fire – Bresson confounding it with his increasingly fleet, elliptic editing and his unsettling temporal compressions. (“Tarkovsky and Bresson” 260)

Tarkovsky’s editing is without the oblique spatial compartmentalization and jarring, discontinuous cuts that highlight the opening of Pickpocket. Instead, Tarkovsky’s particular style emphasizes the elongation of time – which Quandt addresses – as well as another method of distortion left generally unexplored in Bresson’s films: the manipulation of mise en scène – the transformation of the content within the frame, specifically locations and objects into what David Gillespie calls “arrestingly vivid, but semi-real images” (56) through temporally continuous compositional juxtaposition. This technique forges images that fulfill Tarkovsky’s desire of “going beyond the limitations of coherent logic, and conveying the deep complexity and truth of the impalpable connections and hidden phenomena of life” (Tarkovsky, Sculpting 21), giving rise to the absurd confrontation between the rational and irrational.

Without Bresson’s temporal chopping and visual ellipses, Tarkovsky must make his mise en scène ontologically disruptive while maintaining the seemingly realistic flow of time. In Sculpting, Tarkovsky reinforces the importance of “[t]he incongruity of ‘composition’ in relation to what is happening” (21), explaining, “It is in fact the absurdity of the mise en scène that catches our imagination” (24-25). It is fitting that Tarkovsky uses the term “absurdity” when describing the effect of his irrational visuals, which typically feature metaphysically-accentuated elemental occurrences, eerily phantasmagoric locations and sets, and unusually placed bits of bizarre detritus – all
locked within the streaming time of Tarkovsky’s sustained shots. Gillespie addresses Tarkovsky’s techniques – particularly in regard to the elements and natural imagery – writing, “It is not unusual to see a Tarkovsky film, beginning with his first feature Ivanovo detstvo (Ivan’s Childhood, 1962) where fire and water are in the mise en scène, to incongruously unreal effect; indeed, such shots easily carry his signature” (56) and observing that in Tarkovsky’s The Mirror (Zerkalo, 1975), “fire and air, and even living animals, possess qualities that should be beyond them, and incongruities litter the narrative” (57), summarizing the deranging effects of Tarkovsky’s compositional principles.

The interjection of elemental abstractions into specific locations lends a certain unreality to nearly all of the sets in Tarkovsky’s films, combating the intentionally realistic use of long takes with equally intentionally distorted visions of the world. The absurd collision is powerful. Two memorable scenes from Stalker and The Sacrifice exemplify the disorienting impact of Tarkovsky’s mise en scène when combined with his protracted shots, demonstrating, respectively, his use of water and fire (among other tactics) to problematize the reality of his cinematic worlds.

Adapted from the Arkady and Boris Strugatsky 1972 sci-fi novel The Roadside Picnic, Stalker unfolds in an unspecified future in which a unique area known as “The Zone” is the object of much controversy. Restricted from the public by the government, The Zone is a stretch of decrepit rural land that, for an unexplained reason, is unfettered from the laws of physics, shifting its spatial make-up according to unpredictable patterns – the perfect absurd environment. Most intriguing about The Zone, however, is that it is rumored to contain a room with unimaginable capabilities: anyone who enters it will have
his deepest wish granted. As a result of its fickle terrain, The Zone is nearly impossible to navigate, with only a few spectacularly intuitive individuals – known as “Stalkers” – able to lead curious customers through the unstable, dangerous area to the mystical room. For the right price, the film’s unnamed Stalker agrees to guide a pair of unnamed travelers – commonly referred to according to their respective occupations, Writer and Professor – to the room (which the Stalker claims to have never entered). Making the lengthy trek to the room, the trio adheres to the Stalker’s careful method of travel without ever encountering the danger said to face occupants of The Zone, in which spatial shifts can result in death – a fact that causes the Writer and Scientist to doubt the validity of the room’s mysterious mythology.

The group reaches the building containing the room near the end of the film, having experienced their fair share of oddly omnipresent puddles, ominous animals, and puzzling sounds, only to find the most stunningly disorienting scenery within the walls of the dilapidated edifice. Following the discovery of an illogically-placed phone ringing outside the room and the Professor’s revelation that he had originally intended to put a bomb in the room in order to save humanity from its potential terrors, the three pilgrims waver on their decision to step into the room (even the Stalker desires to enter on this trip, wishing to cure an affliction plaguing his young daughter). Frustrated, standing in a building full of peeling walls, enormous pond-like pools of standing water, and various obliterated remnants of common objects, the men grow anxious.

At this point, Tarkovsky begins a single four-and-a-half-minute shot that demonstrates the ontologically challenging conflict between his unreal mise en scène and reality-replicating long takes. The shot begins wide, with the Professor to the left of the
frame, chucking a piece of his abandoned bomb into a nearby puddle, muttering, “Then it makes no sense to come at all. What the use coming here?”; the phone rings off-screen as the Professor walks toward the Stalker and the Writer, seated on the floor near another puddle – the camera slowly tracks right to follow him; as the Professor sits down beside the other two, the camera begins gradually pulling away until a large puddle is framed in the foreground, separating the characters from the lens; the light in the room suddenly begins shifting from a pale blue hue to a shadowy orange tone, darker and warmer, as the Stalker remarks, “It’s so quiet. Can you feel it?”; the camera stills and the light gradually reverts back to its cool coloring; a thunderous, presumably mechanical sound roars off-screen – a plane? a bomb? a gun?; a slight drizzle begins to fall within the building, apparently showering through unseen holes in the damaged roof; the rain picks up, pouring hard into the large puddle for one minute and forty seconds as the three travelers watch; the flash-precipitation gently fades; the Professor hurls the last piece of his dismantled bomb into the large puddle; the shot ends.

The startling appearance of prolonged indoor rain and the mercurial phasing of light undoubtedly strike the viewer as absurd, in the Camusian sense; both stand in irrational contrast to the rational, Euclidean conception of space and time – one might even deem them mystical in nature. The solid matter of the building is made porous, allowing for the blending of the inside and outside represented by the rain and the derangement of the distinction between the two spatial categories, making the observable physicality of Stalker’s environment mutable, almost inherently metaphysical in its superceding of Newtonian laws. Additionally, the brevity of the altered light and momentary rain signifies a warping of traditional time, inexplicably undermining the
steady flow upheld by Tarkovsky’s camera. The inscrutability of the shot’s otherworldly spatial/temporal distortions prompts the viewer to investigate the fluid composition’s jarring incongruities, which function as paragons of Tarkovsky’s theoretical position:

Through poetic connections feeling is heightened and the spectator is made more active. He becomes a participant in the process of discovering life, unsupported by ready-made deductions from the plot or ineluctable pointers by the author. He has at his disposal only what helps to penetrate to the deeper meaning of the complex phenomena represented in front of him. Complexities of thought and poetic visions of the world do not have to be thrust into the framework of the patently obvious. (Tarkovsky, Sculpting 20)

Not surprisingly, Tarkovsky’s championing of ambiguity harmonizes with Camus’ celebration of “waterless deserts” – an ironic connection considering the aqueous unreality of Stalker’s rain shot, perhaps the most memorable instance of Tarkovsky’s tendency to employ water en route to achieving an absurd mise en scène.

In The Sacrifice, Tarkovsky’s final film, fire is the means to an abstracted end. The film revolves around a heartfelt promise made by its protagonist, Alexander, in the throes of anxiety as the world rests on the cusp of nuclear annihilation. Faced with the possibility that everything he knows and loves – his young son, Little Man, in particular – will be destroyed, Alexander turns to God in desperation, uttering a prayer in which he promises to sacrifice all that he loves in exchange for the avoidance of an impending apocalypse, even going so far as to have sex with Maria, a rumored witch, in order to secure the safety of the planet. After falling asleep and awakening the following day to an
intact earth, Alexander becomes convinced that his prayers have been answered, and, in accordance with what he promised, goes about ridding himself of that which he loves – even though the ontological status of the threatening nuclear holocaust is left ambiguous, potentially being real, a dream, a delusion, or a faith test (and perhaps all four).

A dazzling, six-minute wide shot reveals Alexander’s chosen method of sacrifice: the incineration of his home and his willing acceptance of exile from the world. The long take begins after Alexander initiates the inferno by lighting a stack of wicker chairs and depicts him outside, lying in the waterlogged field adjacent to the house, watching the blaze engulf the building in the background. As Alexander looks on, flames and smoke billow up into the gray sky; he stands up and begins ambling across the puddle-laden lawn, and the camera pans right to follow him; his family, having seen the fire from far-off, runs toward the camera from the background, going toward Alexander; they call out to him, and he runs in the opposite direction as the camera continues to follow him; crackling and crashing noises from the out-of-frame conflagration dominate the soundtrack, punctuated by the eerily intense ringing of a telephone; Alexander runs toward Maria, who stands at the far left of the field, clutching at her; a car, parked in front of the house, catches fires and explodes; his family pulls Alexander away from Maria, dragging him back to the right; the camera follows them as they approach an arriving ambulance, simultaneously accompanied by the appearance of a neighbor on a bicycle; the family and medics attempt to force Alexander into the ambulance; he resists and darts away, first right, then left, then away from the camera, then toward the camera; exhausted, he acquiesces and climbs into the ambulance, delivering frantic farewells to his loved ones; the fire rages as the ambulance drives left, turns around, and exits the
frame right; Maria takes off running across the field, the camera following her, and hops on the neighbor’s bicycle before also riding off to the right of the frame; the camera pans back left as Alexander’s family stands in the soggy grass, watching their home disintegrate; the camera stops moving; Alexander’s wife, Adelaide, sprints toward the house before collapsing in a puddle with a splash; the rest of the family rushes after her, gathering around as the wooden frame of the house finally topples over in a flaming collapse.

Throughout the climactic shot, the fire functions as an ethereal glaze, shrouding the scenery in an astonishing layer of smoke and flame. The combination of Alexander’s hysteria and the fire’s unconquerable destruction bends the scene towards surrealism, though it is paradoxically rooted in the unbroken time of Tarkovsky’s flowing frames. Although the viewer witnesses the house burning down in real-time, the shot is certainly more absurdly striking and unreal as a result, attaining a sublime sense of uncanny indefiniteness – an ontological question mark that points to an answer beyond rational explanation, if any answer at all. The flames acquire semi-symbolic weight without necessary signifying anything other than themselves, leaving behind a strong aesthetic impression that begs the inquisitive viewer to undertake an existential examination of its rationale – what does it mean? The meaning, however, is elusive beyond its superficial significance, suggesting that searching for a rationale may be insufficient for attaining understanding, thus undermining any systematized logic. As with Camus’ absurd experience, the fire prompts a confrontation between the obscure and the familiar, leaving the viewer to fend for herself in a deftly muddled, meaning-resistant environment.
Adding to the ontological unease, Tarkovsky’s sound selections during the fire shot – particularly the inexplicably ringing phone and the blaring crackle of the blaze – exhibit his approach to aural aesthetics, which echoes that of Bresson. Quandt observes that, like Bresson:

Tarkovsky pared away his sound world, emphasizing silence and isolated or artificially acute sounds (creaking doors, dripping water, crackling fire, birdsong, wind, tolling bells, distant foghorns), aiming for both immediacy and mystery, to establish what he called ‘an emotional aura around the objects shown.’ Tarkovsky, again akin to Bresson, would use off-screen sound to suggest contiguous space or unseen events, and to mystify the audience. (“Tarkovsky and Bresson” 262)

Tarkovsky’s use of “artificially acute sounds” and off-screen noises – present in the form of the phone and the cacophonous commotion preceding the precipitation during the rain shot from Stalker – are also effective in an earlier scene from The Sacrifice. As Alexander and his family helplessly loiter about the house, awaiting the oncoming devastation, a deafening roar approaches. In one shot, a cacophonous tinkling of rattling glass crescendos with incongruously amplified volume before the camera pans down to reveal a stack of quaking crystal stemware on a table. Everyone panics. Soon after, a rumbling boom begins shaking the house – it’s source unseen, only heard. A pitcher of milk crashes to the floor amidst the tremors, but the thundering remains ambiguous; as Durgnat wrote of Bresson, the epistemologically evanescent forces are only made apparent in their effects, like the iron filings arranged by electromagnetism. The mystery of the strident sound is underlined by its lack of visual correspondence and its
exaggeratedly enhanced sonority, achieving an absurd aural design that Tarkovsky theorizes in *Sculpting*, writing, “As soon as the sounds of the visible world, reflected by the screen, are removed from it, or that world is filled, for the sake of the image, with extraneous sounds that don’t exist literally, or if the real sounds are distorted so that they no longer correspond with the image – then the film acquires a resonance” (162).

Tarkovsky prizes the abstraction of the soundtrack as a technique for imbuing his cinematic worlds with the Camusian clash between the concrete and the inexplicable – in this aesthetic goal, and in nearly all others, he and Bresson are in accordance, resulting in two distinct formal variations of a single pursuit: to dismantle and interrogate reality by deranging the realistic capabilities of cinema into ontologically ambiguous microcosms of the absurd experience, encouraging the viewer to continually reevaluate the analogous macrocosmic reality surrounding him.

Bresson and Tarkovsky’s cinematic kinship does not end with their formal approach to representing space, time, and sound; it also encompasses their principles regarding acting/characterization and narrative design. As in their constructions of an absurd cinematic form, both filmmakers craft their characters and stories with one foot planted in realism and the other paradoxically plunged into an opaque abyss. In doing so, Bresson and Tarkovsky build upon the basic ambiguity of the physics and metaphysics in their films by introducing narratives that resist the cause-and-effect progressions generally assumed to be endemic to generating a psychological/motivational understanding of traditional storytelling. What this achieves is the actualization of an absurd aesthetic by transforming a narrative film into what Bresson calls “One single
mystery of persons and objects” (Notes 26), a fact corroborated by filmmaker Michael Haneke’s assessment that in Bresson’s work, specifically, “Left out is the (all too) condensed meaning of the connections of sociological and psychological explanations – as in our daily experience, chance and the contradiction of fragmentary splinters of action demand their rights and our attention” (558). Characters remain inscrutable. Causal links are undermined. Conclusions lack finality and closure.

All of the systems of narrative incertitude in Bresson’s and Tarkovsky’s films are, of course, implemented with the viewer in mind. The specific methods employed by the two directors pose challenges to the viewer, pressing the issue of interpretive responsibility and inducing her to become an active participant in deriving meaning from absurd cinematic worlds. Favoring a narrative mode that encourages existential exploration, Bresson writes, “Accustom the public to divining the whole of which they are given only part. Make people diviners. Make them desire it’’ (Notes 107), adding, “Hide the idea, but so that people find them. The most important will be the most hidden” (Notes 44); he demands curiosity, which he seeks to accelerate by obscuring meaning, by asking the viewer to become responsible for making sense of her own microcosmic absurd experience. Likewise, Tarkovsky asserts, “A dialogue in which audience and creator are equal partners has to be developed” (“Encounter” 10), foregrounding the importance of audience engagement; he also notes the negative impact of didactic filmmaking and rigid narration on the unique potential for analogous existential understanding in the viewer, writing in Sculpting that obvious explanation “deprives the person watching of that prerogative of film . . . namely the opportunity to live through what is happening on the screen as if it were his own life, to take over, as deeply personal
and his own, the experience imprinted in time upon the screen” (183). Rather than swallowing solutions, the viewer is required to grapple with diminished causality in the narratives of Bresson and Tarkovsky, creating a conflict between viewer and film that arises from the irrational foiling of rational expectations.

Connecting their formal principles to their narrative theories, Bresson and Tarkovsky’s views on acting/characterization unite their combination of photographic/aural realism and abstracted incongruities with an equally tenuous policy of psychological opacity and resultant causal indistinctness. In this facet of filmmaking, Bresson is certainly the originator, with his philosophies directly influencing Tarkovsky’s own position on the stylistics of onscreen performance. Bresson’s guiding assumption is that the fullest realization of cinema’s uniquely heightened capacity for convincing representation necessitates the use of untrained amateurs instead of conventional actors, allowing individuals to merely react as themselves in front of the camera and microphone, which have the unparalleled ability to document their presumably uninflected inner lives. In *Notes*, Bresson proclaims, “What our eyes and ears require is not the realistic persona but the real person” (108), a clarification of one of his signature aphorisms:

No actors.

(No directing of actors.) No parts.

(No learning of parts.) No staging.

But the use of working models, taken from life.

BEING (models) instead of SEEMING (actors). (*Notes* 14)
By stripping away the conventions of psychologically-based acting and replacing them with a minimalist method that purports to record the actuality of the “real” performers (Bresson refers to them as “models”), Bresson’s approach consists of a systematic paring away of performance, reducing acting to a series of understated, relatively monotonous mannerisms, expressions, and utterances – abstracting the “real” into stylized unreality. What results is a bare, vacant onscreen appearance that has inspired some critics to describe Bresson’s models as “zombies” and which renders the performers as psychological blank slates, screens for the viewer to project herself upon, to make meaning for.

Bresson’s dictum that “‘Gesture comes before meaning’” (Kaul 561) is suggestive of the existentialist motto “Existence precedes essence,” which holds that things exist before their relevance can be derived, that significance is constructed a posteriori, just as with Bresson’s blank performers. Commanding, “Radically suppress intentions in your models” (Notes 25) and wishing for “No psychology (of the kind which discovers only what it can explain)” (Notes 82), Bresson explicitly excludes any a priori “essence” from his characters, inducing a motivational and emotional obscurity that perpetuates a disconcerting sense of vagueness about his characters – a constant submersion of the viewer into a “waterless desert” of uncertain interiority. As Amédée Ayfre puts it, Bresson’s characters occupy “a certain area of meaning beyond psychology yet this side of symbolism. They open up literally endless perspectives on themselves, on the universe, even on the whole of existence. In fact there is always something fundamental and mysterious in them which escapes us” (46). Ayfre’s observation is true of nearly every character in Bresson’s oeuvre, including Pickpocket’s Michel, played by
amateur Martin LaSalle, whose unchanging visage resists any expressive contortion even in the face of his mother’s death and whose uninflected line deliveries call into question the sincerity underlying nearly all of his thoughts and feelings, particularly those involving his eventual rehabilitation (which will later be analyzed in depth). Michel functions as a wallet-snatching, glazed-over automaton throughout *Pickpocket* – a man without essence, or at least without one that is easily apprehensible. Even more than Michel, however, the eponymous protagonist of *Au hasard Balthazar* is extremely inscrutable – namely because he is a donkey. The apotheosis of psychological impenetrability and inexpressive behavior, Bresson’s Balthazar is perhaps the most ambiguous character in any Bresson film (his fate will also be subsequently discussed), enduring repeated abuse and tribulations with no teleological end in plain sight and with no discernable emotional response. It should also be mentioned that, in keeping with Bresson’s principles, the filmed donkey was not a previously trained animal.

In *Sculpting*, Tarkovsky lauds Bresson’s performance theories and their practice, writing, “Bresson’s actors . . . will never seem dated, any more than his films will. There is nothing calculated or special in their performances, only the profound truth of human awareness within the situation defined by the director. They do not play personae but live their own inner lives in front of our eyes” (151). Tarkovsky further expounds on his preference for non-theatrical acting and his disdain for explicit psychology in *Sculpting*, writing, “Cinema doesn’t need actors who ‘play’. They are unbearable to watch, because we realized long ago what they were aiming at, and yet they go doggedly on, spelling out the meaning of the text on every possible level” (152) and declaring that “In cinema such introspective building-up of character can never be admissible; it is not for the actor to
make decisions about the stress, pitch and tone of his interpretation, for he cannot know all the components which will go to make up the film. His task is to live!” (140).

Tarkovsky’s opinions, like Bresson’s, hinge upon a trust in the realistic capabilities of cinema, and, though they might smack of naiveté, are more complex than they initially appear, particularly when considering the blatant and intentional unreality of his signature images and absurd techniques; as with his *mise en scène*, reality is not an end in itself regarding Tarkovsky’s performers, but rather a tool for crafting an ontologically and existentially challenging film practice.

The best example of Tarkovsky’s utilization of Bresson’s stylized performance theories can be found in his epic *Andrei Rublev* (*Andrey Rublyov*, 1966), a three-hour film that tracks the spiritual and artistic development of the titular 15th Century Russian icon painter. Regarding the film’s casting, Tarkovsky remarks, “The lead had to be someone nobody had ever seen in a film” and explains, “We selected the actors based upon our aversion to theatricality” (“The Artist” 28). Non-professional actor Anatoli Solonitsyn’s performance as the monastic artist fulfills both of Tarkovsky’s guiding ideals, providing an amateur interpretation bereft of theatrical artifice – allowing the performer to *be* the character rather than *seem* the character, as Bresson might say.

Though Rublev is the film’s central character, Solonitsyn’s blank, relatively unemotional performance imbues the monk with pervasive ambiguity, his reactions being those of an uninvolved observer throughout much of the picaresque film – during the scandalous witches’ gathering, during the Bruegelian crucifixion on a snowy hill, during the dramatic bell-casting sequence, and particularly during the period of the film that encompasses his vow of silence, taken following his defensive murder of a Tartar raider. In all of the
aforementioned scenes, Rublev’s responses are almost indecipherable, suggesting an unnatural stoicism that places his character beyond the realm of rational psychology and into the position of being an abstract canvas for vicarious viewing experience. Just as with Bresson’s Michel and Balthazar, Rublev’s jarring impenetrability places existential responsibility upon the film’s viewer to examine and construct meaning amongst myriad possibilities in order to comprehend Rublev’s motivations and reactions, in order to cope with the absurd situation brought about by the disorienting collision of the real and unreal and the conflict between expected rationale and confounding ambiguity.

Character psychology and motivational clarity, with all of the obstacles Bresson and Tarkovsky place around them, fold into the larger and even more interpretively demanding framework of the narrative arcs found in the directors’ Camusian films. The multivalent tales of Bresson and Tarkovsky’s works provide the viewer with ever-enigmatic environments held together by many tangled threads of unspecified meaning, a quality made particularly apparent in the often mystifying and indeterminate conclusions that bear their respective storytelling signatures. These conclusions grant insight into the effects of their narrative difficulty, effects that force the viewer to deal with the inscrutability of characters and plot, and, therefore, the macrocosmic absurd predicament reflected in them.

Bresson’s narratives – and the endings that cap them – are ceaselessly divisive, inspiring antithetical and contradictory interpretive responses ranging from René Prédal’s assertion that “The bleakness of Bresson’s films is total” (92) to Michael Dempsey’s opposing opinion that “Bresson has been the most optimistic of filmmakers; every facet of his fastidiously cultivated technique has striven to show the way to Paradise” (374).
Raymond Durgnat astutely suggests that the significance of Bresson’s films can be found in their very resistance to clear comprehension, writing, “Bresson’s films are about the near-impossibility of distinguishing soul from psychology, and happenstance from Providence. . . . they’re about finding freedom within contingency, and meaning despite the Absurdity of everything, even moral feeling” (442). Certainly, the ambiguity that fosters such disparate reactions renders Bresson’s narratives difficult to read, even for practiced critics and scholars, whose reactions to films such as *Pickpocket* and *Au hasard Balthazar* reveal the uncertainty underlying Bresson’s conclusions.

Michel’s seemingly miraculous repentance at the end of *Pickpocket* is one of the most baffling narrative turns in any of Bresson’s films. Following his arrest by an undercover cop whom he attempts to pickpocket at the racetrack, the film’s Nietzsche-paraphrasing protagonist is hauled off to the slammer, ending his petty thrills and criminal indulgences. Behind bars, Michel receives a visit from Jeanne, his latent lover and mother of another man’s baby. Separated from her by iron caging, Michel remarks that his major regret is not that he was wrong, but that he was weak enough to let his guard down and be caught, mischievously explaining, “I’ve confessed everything . . . but I’ll deny it later. I’ll make it hard for them.” Jeanne attempts to console him and offer her support, but he curtly rebuffs her kindness, claiming, “I want no one, nothing.” Having rejected everyone and denied his obvious guilt, Michel’s position seems hopeless. He contemplates suicide in his cell, his voiceover asking, “Why go on living?”

A sudden change occurs, however, once Michel receives a letter from Jeanne, announcing an upcoming visit. Ambiguously, his voiceover proclaims, “My heart pounded as I read that letter,” while his unchanging expression belies his excitement and
makes it difficult to determine if it is for Jeanne, for love, for contact of any kind, or for the way out that Jeanne represents – or, if his excitement is merely a manipulative ruse. Once Jeanne does arrive, Michel’s reaction is essentially the inverse of his response to her first visit. Michel presses himself against the bars of the visiting room, gripping them desperately with his hands and looking at Jeanne’s hopeful eyes, his voiceover commenting, “Something lit up her face.” Affected by his apparent longing, Jeanne approaches the bars. Michel bestows a kiss upon her forehead; an unusual swell of strings begins. Jeanne presses her lips to his hands. They touch their faces together through the caging. Michel’s voiceover (it is alarming that he does not speak this directly to Jeanne) observes, “Oh Jeanne, to reach you at last, what a strange path I had to take,” as a close-up pushes in before fading to black.

Michel’s transformation and its ambiguous driving motivations, as well as his abrupt emotional about-face, makes *Pickpocket’s* conclusion incredibly indefinite and somewhat suspect, to say the least. Critic Amédée Ayfre essentially accepts the ending at face value, writing of Michel:

Finally he discovers that someone else besides himself exists, and, through the bars which still cut him off from her, he hugs this unique person whose kiss reconciles him with the universe. . . . This is a happy ending which in another context could have been melodramatic, but here, although surrounded by apparent coherence, everything is so strange, so obviously predetermined by external forces, that one is obliged to accept it like the rest. (52)
T. Jefferson Kline, however, finds reason to question the believability and sincerity of Bresson’s potentially specious narrative wrap up, citing Michel’s previously uninvolved demeanor and suggesting that “His beating heart may be a sign of love, but it recalls as much his first essay at pickpocketing, when he notes the beating of his heart, as it implies an emotion that has never seemed more unlikely in a fictional character than in this automat. The ending is remarkably ambiguous . . .” (252). For Kline, the incongruity of characterization creates a possibly intentional barrier against accepting Michel’s shift, implying instead that his change of heart may merely be another form of desperate exhilaration, like his various anonymous thefts. Michel’s unspecified motives – necessary to Bresson’s absurd narrative technique – problematize any reading of his character’s inexplicable behavior. Keith Reader takes this ambiguity to be tantamount to subversion, writing that “the director here is clearly and deliberately playing with the conventional cinematic idea of the happy ending” (60), indicating that the inconsistency of Pickpocket’s narrative might be an attempt on Bresson’s part to ironically mock the platitudinous denouements that typically tie together the tidy finales of traditional cinematic stories.

Ultimately, the viewer of Pickpocket is left with an open-ended discontinuity that must be dealt with, interpreted, just as with the various critical analyses above, whether as a miraculously happy ending, a subtle sign of Michel’s lack of maturation, a deliberate reaction against expected closure, or something else entirely. The absurd dissonance between an anticipated logical conclusion and the bizarre, ambiguously abrupt ending of Pickpocket suggests that any solution to the problem of making meaning in the movie will be found somewhere in a Camusian “desert” of unfamiliarity, in other words, “the
undecidable turns out to provide the only answer” (Reader 60), challenging the viewer to confront the opacity and irrationality of life when deciphering the course of the film’s causally-murky narrative and befuddling culmination. In Au hasard Balthazar, Bresson maintains the same narrative ambiguity that “has engendered a fierce debate” about Pickpocket (Kline 252), relating the tale of the eponymous doomed donkey and his equally maltreated owner, Marie, with unrelenting uncertainty. At the end of their parallel persecutions – Marie’s at the hand of manipulative men and Balthazar’s by the lash of a series of interim owners – both characters endure brutal and mysterious fates, leaving their paths unusually unclear in terms of causal relevance and achieving a density that James Quandt compares to that of “an imploded nova” (“Au hasard”).

Marie, a young woman whose father initially possessed Balthazar, suffers sexual molestation from both a troublemaker named Gérard and a nameless merchant in film – a trend of abuse that reaches its degrading climax near the end of Balthazar when Marie is beaten and gang raped by Gérard and his destructive friends. Found weeping and naked in an abandoned building, Marie is assisted by a handful of her father’s friends and loaded into a carriage, visibly shaken. And then, surprisingly, she disappears. Following the wide shot of Marie in the carriage, she is nowhere to be found. Her friend Jacques queries after her, only to have Marie’s mother remark, “She’s gone. . . . She’ll never be back.” Outside, Marie’s father grieves. The viewer never learns where she has gone, why she has gone, if she is dead or alive, if she left of her own accord – nothing. As Keith Reader notes, “The major narrative ambiguity [of Balthazar] concerns what happens to Marie at the end; we are told along with Jacques that she has gone away and will not be back, but more than that we never know” (80). Marie’s motivations and emotions are
only very vaguely implied; her whereabouts and existence are left completely mysterious. Bresson instead encourages the viewer to fill the gaps, to actively participate in defining the undefined elements of the narrative, to search for meaning amidst the irrational shift in story that comes with her disappearance.

After Marie’s vanishing, Balthazar’s experience continues the film’s narrative obfuscation. Marie’s forlorn mother rejects Gérard’s devious request of Balthazar’s services, explaining, “He’s worked enough. He’s old. He’s all I have. . . . Besides, he’s a saint,” only to have the rapist and his clan steal Balthazar in the night, attempting to use him to smuggle stolen goods. Gérard and his comrades lead Balthazar through the woods, whipping and kicking him intermittently, before an unseen gunman begins firing shots at them, causing the smuggling thieves to scatter and leave Balthazar wandering within the bulleted forest. Intercut with close-ups of his expressionless visage, a tight shot of Balthazar’s side reveals he has been shot, blood oozing from his wound. Abandoned and dying, the decrepit donkey ventures down into a valley, kneeling down in the middle of a flock of sheep. Shepherd dogs rile the sheep into motion, however, and the bleating flock scoots away from Balthazar, leaving him isolated and lying on the grass. As the twinkling tune of Schubert’s “Piano Sonata No. 20” is heard, Balthazar’s head wearily sinks. Sprawled on the knoll, he dies; the clanging bells of the sheep ring loudly just beyond the donkey’s expired form. The film fades to black and ends.

Not surprisingly, this mystifying conclusion has prompted a variety of interpretations, approaches as divergent as those to Pickpocket. As Quandt observes, Balthazar’s ending “suggests to several critics a glorious return to the eternal, a revelation of the divine” (“Au hasard”), with Balthazar’s death becoming an allegory for
the crucifixion of Christ, fulfilling the sainthood bestowed upon him by Marie’s mother. Contrarily, Keith Reader points out that many other commentaries present the death “as the tragic culmination of a film from which God is absent and whose pessimism is more marked than in any of Bresson’s previous works” (86). Once again, antithetical perspectives demonstrate the immense ambiguity of a Bressonian finale. Reader acknowledges the centrality of such openness to Bresson’s intentional undermining of traditional narration, writing:

Uncertainty . . . arises in Balthazar much more at the level of motivation, and then only if we feel called upon to make a choice between different ‘explanations.’ . . . Most spectators will probably find themselves oscillating between these two modes of viewing, between filling in the film’s gaps and leaving its sense(s) to speak through them, so that Balthazar’s challenge – the donkey’s and the film’s – to our ways of viewing becomes an integral part of its meaning. (80)

This is, of course, the result of Bresson’s distortion of causal narration into indefinite pockets of motivational opacity, his absurd rendering of cinematic storytelling that juxtaposes the totalizing expectations of the viewer with the slippery significance of a polysemous plot. Any reading of the film is dependent upon a viewer’s particular predilections or assumptions and can even shift from viewing to viewing, alternating between any of the proposed interpretations and certainly allowing for the formation others as well, shaking any sense of secure explanation. The “point,” then, becomes the formation of a filmic reality that fosters the dismantling of rational meaning en route to
grasping an essence in the wake of absurd experience – the recreation of the conditions Camus finds endemic to being-in-the-world.

Tarkovsky’s narrative conclusions are equally as mystifying as those found in *Pickpocket, Balthazar*, and other Bresson films, tending to revolve around the Russian director’s use of absurd *mise en scène* and within-frame incongruity, in addition to provocative elision, to suggest the inexplicable. *Stalker*, with its potentially ineffectual wish-granting room, presents one of the most interpretively challenging finales in Tarkovsky’s œuvre, namely because the crucial fact of whether or not Stalker and his troupe enter the room is left unconfirmed. Following the rain sequence outside the room, the film leaves The Zone, cutting to the three pilgrims convening at the local bar in their hometown. Stalker’s wife and daughter, Monkey, are there to meet him, as well as the black dog he has recently adopted from The Zone. At this point, Stalker departs from the Professor and the Writer and returns home with his family, walking through a snowy industrial landscape. The viewer never witnesses any of the three men entering the room, as the film leaps (not sculpts) in time, leaving the validity of the room’s magical capabilities – and the reliability of the Stalker – unproven; Tarkovsky himself observed of the room, “In a way, it’s a product of the Stalker’s imagination. We thought about it this way: he was the one who created that place, to bring people and show them around, to convince them of the reality of his creation. . . . I entirely accept the idea that this world was created by the Stalker in order to instill faith – faith in his reality” (“Interview” 61). Tarkovsky’s comments, though they should be considered with some skepticism, suggest that the room might be entirely bogus, and that, even if the men had entered it, nothing would have changed.
Of course, Tarkovsky does not allow the narrative’s problematic elements to be so easily and definitely attributable to Stalker’s imagination; what follows his return home strongly indicates that the room might actually possess miraculous powers. After complaining to his wife about the faithlessness of his traveling companions (“They don’t believe in anything”) and lamenting his perceived obsolescence (“No one needs that room. And all my efforts are just in vain”), Stalker hints that he did enter the room on his trip with the Professor and the Writer. When his wife offers to venture into The Zone with him on his next journey, hoping to visit the room, Stalker mumbles, “Maybe it won’t work with you either . . .,” before trailing off and slipping into sleep. Stalker’s statement implies that, though it is not depicted on screen, he may have entered the room, presumably to wish for Monkey’s debilitation to be cured, and that, finding her not recognizably changed upon his return, believes his deepest wish to be unfulfilled. Stalker’s excursions might simply have been unrequited acts of faith.

The film’s final shot, however, complicates and muddles the matter even further. Immediately after Stalker’s conversation with his wife and her subsequent fourth-wall-breaking confession of her doubts about her husband’s profession, young Monkey sits at the kitchen table, upon which a trio of glasses is gathered (perhaps an analogue for the three pilgrims), glancing intermittently out a nearby window at the feathery flakes of snow. As the camera pulls away from her face, revealing the tabletop in its entirety, Monkey directs her gaze at the closest glass. Shockingly, the glass begins to creep across the table, unaided. She peers at another, seemingly scooting it to the table’s edge telekinetically. With two glasses mentally moved, she eyes the third one, directing it intently to the edge of the table before causing it to dive off, landing with a clink on the
floor. The camera pushes in on her focused countenance as Beethoven’s “An Die Freude”
warbles beneath the din of a thunderous train; the film ends.

Upon first viewing, it seems that Monkey is in command of miraculous powers,
insinuating a variety of possibilities. Considering that Stalker might have entered the
room, Monkey’s telekinetic abilities could indicate that his wish has come true, perhaps
exceeding his expectations by imbuing her with superhuman skills. Assuming the room
lacks any magic, however, Monkey’s abilities might merely be aberrant side effects of
the disease inflicted upon her as a result of her father’s exposure to The Zone before her
conception. Yet another interpretation is suggested by the fact that Stalker goes to sleep
preceding Monkey’s telekinesis, allowing the viewer to surmise that her behavior is
Stalker’s dream, or an imagined reality. This last option is acknowledged by Tarkovsky,
who explains, “… in the Strugatsky story, the desires were truly fulfilled, whereas in the
script this remains a mystery. You don’t know whether this is true or whether it’s the
Stalker’s fantasy. For me as the author of the film, either choice is OK” (“Interview” 55).
The viewer is left with an overwhelming, contradictory slew of potential meanings, all of
which are rooted in disparate approaches to nearly indecipherable occurrences. Did they
enter the room? Did Stalker’s wish come true? Are the events of the final shot real?
Tarkovsky strands the viewer through omission and seemingly impossible in-frame
activity, distorting Stalker’s narrative by conflating a series of interdependent unknowns.

Though the film ends, it is anything but over; narrative possibilities are thrust
provocatively into the viewer’s mind to be dealt with and mulled over, to be explored in a
vein of investigation that echoes Camus’ insistence upon restlessly interrogating the
inexplicable, the absurd. Stalker provides a narrative experience that, like Bresson’s
films, holds the viewer accountable for making meaning out of indeterminacy, inducing existential responsibility within a cinematic framework.

Similarly, the finale of Tarkovsky’s *Nostalghia* eschews any preconceived notions of narrative tidiness with a concluding shot that epitomizes his signature use of abstracted *mise en scène*, imploring the viewer to attempt to unravel the sheathed significance of an indelible closing image, one that plunges the film’s story into a hazy, possibly metaphysical, realm. Tarkovsky’s penultimate film, *Nostalghia* traces the migratory journey of Russian poet Andrei Gorchakov to Italy, where he plans to compile material for a biographical project about Maxim Berezovsky, an 18th century expatriate Russian composer. Joined by Eugenia, his guide, translator, and thwarted romantic interest, Gorchakov wanders through semi-rural Italian landscapes, all the while feeling a piercing homesickness for his native dacha and his family, both of which are repeatedly depicted in melancholy black-and-white flashbacks. While staying near an antique Italian spa, primarily populated by the elderly, Gorchakov encounters Domenico, a local lunatic previously institutionalized for locking up his family for seven years in order to supposedly protect them from the corruption of the world. A mystical zealot, Domenico claims that he must now save humankind by carrying a lit candle across the spa’s holy pool without allowing it to be extinguished. Unable to do so, Domenico breaks down, fleeing to Rome where he climbs the famous statue of Marcus Aurelius, delivers a prophetic warning of impending Armageddon to frightened onlookers, and then publicly burns himself alive. Back at the spa, Gorchakov, inspired by Domenico’s faith and despairing for his homeland after rebuffing Eugenia’s sexual advances, takes up the self-
immolator’s mission, proceeding to light a candle and traverse the spa’s now-drained pool.

Gorchakov’s climactic candle-carrying march is filmed in a single nine-minute tracking shot that follows his shambling movements back-and-forth across the pool as he twice fails to make it to the other side – the whirling wind whips the flickering flame into mere smoke – before finally completing his task and collapsing afterward. After his expiration, which could result from exhaustion or could indicate his death as a result of his ailing heart condition, the film cuts to a shot of people rushing toward the fallen Gorchakov and then to a black-and-white shot of the poet’s wife and son before presenting Nostalghia’s fascinating final frames. In the final shot, the camera begins with a wide framing of Gorchakov, in black-and-white, sitting in the yard of his Russian homestead and staring directly at the camera. Beside him, his dog lies obediently. Before him, a large puddle reflects what appear to be unseen columns. Behind him, his simple cabin is perched on the rolling Russian landscape, surrounded by trees. Glacially, the camera cranes back, revealing that Gorchakov’s dacha, trees and all, is nestled within a massive open-air Italian cathedral featured earlier in the film. As the camera’s two-minute pull out gives way to a static crane shot, snow begins falling through the roofless cathedral down to the grassy Russian earth and continues descending for a solid minute. Unseen yelping dogs and a Russian folk song punctuate the quiet soundtrack and the shot fades to black, slowly dimming the seemingly impossible image.

The final shot of Nostalghia seems to suggest a reconciliation between Gorchakov’s transformative Italian experience and the longing for his Russian homeland, a merging of memories into what could be an afterlife, a dying metaphysical fantasy, or a
life-affirming inspiration to cling to the world. Other possibilities deny the shot’s positive connotations, including David Gillepsie’s contrary opinion that, in the film, “the relationship of reality and dream/fantasy becomes so contradictory as the writer Gorchakov tries to embrace the very different cultures of Italy and Russia that the final frame literalises his dilemma” (57), suggesting that the shot might be a depiction of frustrating disunion rather than any sort of fused transcendence and adding another interpretive facet – tragic rather than ameliorative – to the film’s final moments. Tarkovsky claims that the shot’s absurd mise en scène, complete with the director’s trademark ethereal use of precipitation and collected water, presents a “new world” separate from “our strange and relative earthly existence” (Sculpting 216); however, the ontological context of this alternate reality remains unspecified.

As in Stalker, any reading of the concluding shot and its alternate world is contingent upon a viewer’s basic assumptions regarding a previous off-screen, unconfirmed occurrence: Gorchakov’s collapse/death. Though the viewer witnesses the poet falling down out-of-frame, Tarkovsky never clarifies whether or not Gorchakov dies. If one believes Gorchakov dies, the final shot is either his experience of the afterlife, or, is potentially unrelated to his consciousness altogether, being an authorial statement outside of Gochakov’s experience. If one believes he is still in the process of dying, the image might be his ideal of what comes after death, or an imagined manifestation of his homesickness before expiring. If one believes Gorchakov is alive, and that he will remain living, the final shot could represent his new, peaceful mindset, having completely absorbed his expatriate experience in Tuscany into his Russian identity (or, considering that the dacha is within the cathedral, the subsuming of his Russian heritage into the
powerful Italian reality he has encountered); as Gillespie notes, however, it could simply signify the unavoidable permanence of his internal incongruity. Ultimately, the viewer is once again left amidst the unknown as a result of Tarkovsky’s crucial ellipsis and subsequent ambiguous narration. Navigating a narrative “waterless desert,” the viewer is challenged to piece together the significance of Nostalghia’s absurd cinematic world, one in which cause-and-effect are intentionally problematized and in which understanding is elusive, requiring the Camusian commitment to remain existentially inquisitive – an ontologically outlook that translates to the world beyond the frame, enhancing the viewer’s ability to analogously engage actuality with honed philosophical rigor and curiosity.

Bresson and Tarkovsky’s combined and frequently overlapping absurd techniques – both formal and narratological – establish an overarching set of stylistic choices that resonate with and interrogate Camusian views of the absurd. By utilizing both directors’ distinct formal signatures – Bresson’s fragmentary, elliptical, compressed style and Tarkovsky’s unbroken temporality merged with incongruous mise en scène – as well as their shared use of abstracted sound design and non-professional, non-expressive actors, filmmakers may practice an encompassing absurd style, which, when used in causally-ambiguous, psychologically obscure, generally inconclusive narrative films, maximizes a film’s status as an aesthetic “waterless desert,” an ideal arena for existential examination and an invaluable training ground for exploring the ontological mysteries of life itself, fulfilling Camus’ recommendation for encountering the absurd.
Some might find the combination of Bresson and Tarkovsky’s polarized formal approaches to be untenable; however, as James Quandt has pointed out, a recent wave of filmmakers has successfully integrated both directors’ absurd styles into new, rather disparate cinematic dialects. Quandt cites a handful of contemporary filmmakers who merge both Bresson and Tarkovsky, writing, “The few directors who claim both directors as influences, such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Atom Egoyan, Olivier Assayas, and Michael Haneke, seem to sail between the two like Scylla and Charybdis . . .” (“Tarkovsky and Bresson” 264), while noting that another, specifically Asian, group of directors also conflates the two filmmakers as influences, observing:

Ironically, Bresson has been cited as a formative influence by numerous luminaries of the so-called ‘new Asian Minimalism’, including Jia Zhangke, Tran Anh Hung, Wang Chao, Tsai Ming-liang, and Hong Sang-soo, though a stylistic hallmark of that ‘movement’ is not Bressonian at all, but one of Tarkovsky’s trademarks: the long take. (“Tarkovsky and Bresson” 264)

One might add other contemporary directors to Quandt’s list, especially Carlos Reygadas, Lucrecia Martel, Lance Hammer, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, all of whom fit snugly within the aforementioned troupe of international filmmakers bearing the torch of absurd style with their synthesis of Bresson and Tarkovsky’s formal systems of disorientation and ambiguity. This surge in appreciation and exploration of the two directors’ works suggests that their Camusian techniques might be reaching a golden age of mutual implementation and experimentation, a promising prospect in terms of
fostering a philosophically provocative vein of cinema, one inherently interested in the confluence of the rational and irrational, the real and unreal. Even though the commingled application of Bresson and Tarkovsky’s absurd precedents is well underway in international cinema, there is still much left unmined. As with most forms of cinematic communication, considering the relative youth of the medium, any notion of an absurd style is still in its aesthetic infancy. The rise of directors such as Haneke, Zhang-ke, and Reygadas should be taken as an encouragement toward the further development of the absurd screen rather than an indication of potential redundancy. As Camus observed in The Myth of Sisyphus, the task of tackling absurdity is never-ending, a constant forge; doors open to rooms full of more doors, frames within frames within frames – an endless series of potential rabbit holes, existentially investigative paths that infinitely wind and warp amidst the inexplicable, methods of understanding. Now, perhaps more than ever, Bresson and Tarkovsky’s absurd styles seem incredibly relevant and crucial to expanding cinematic expression, particularly within narrative filmmaking. With the two directors’ films as aesthetic touchstones, here’s hoping that filmmakers will continue to sail into the unknown, crafting cinema in the absurd likeness of the world, attempting to visually and aurally map the “waterless deserts” within a series of ontologically interrogative frames.
Works Cited


THE COLLAPSE

An Annotated Original Screenplay

By

Brandon Colvin
A young man, around 17-years-old, walks out of a forest, carrying a bundle of wood.\textsuperscript{1}

His feet move intently from the edge of the forest to a dilapidated building nearby, as he walks across a field of dry grass.

He repositions his arms to accommodate the cumbersome lumber and coughs slightly, his cheeks red from the chill.\textsuperscript{2}

The young man arrives at the abandoned dwelling, breathing heavily.

The building is littered with debris of all sorts: rotted wood, broken furniture, ripped wallpaper, old cinders, stones, trashed appliances, newspapers, weeds. Scattered knickknacks still hang on the walls. Water drips from the tops of doorways and filthy, empty windows.\textsuperscript{3}

The young man stumbles on a broken, upturned chair as he walks down a hallway.

\textbf{YOUNG MAN}

Fuck!

He kicks the chair, flipping it on its side and rustling adjacent piles of wreckage.
The young man enters a large room of the building and walks to its center.

The floor at the center of the room is blackened with ash and burn marks from past fires. Scrunched up wads of newspaper and piles of kindling twigs skirt the outside of the fire-stained floor.

The young man drops his bundle of wood onto the floor. It scatters. He nudges the sticks into a pile with his foot.

He scratches his head and rubs the back of his neck. He coughs.

The cell phone in his pants pocket rings, playing “Love Will Tear Us Apart” by Joy Division. The young man takes the phone out of his pocket, looks at it, and turns off the ringer before slipping the phone back into his pocket.

He pauses for a moment, turns, and walks back out of the room.

EXT. OUTSIDE OF DESERTED HOME - CONTINUOUS

He exits the house and begins walking back to the woods.

EXT. GRASSY FIELD - CONTINUOUS

His arms sway, grazing his thighs.

He begins singing/humming “Love Will Tear Us Apart” by Joy Division.

EXT. WOODS - CONTINUOUS

Still singing/humming, the young man enters the woods, searching the ground for good lumber as he walks.

He lets his fingertips touch the trunks of trees within his reach, breaking off small pieces of bark as he walks and crumbling them in his hands.

He bends down to pick up a few sticks, interrupting his hummed melody.
He continues walking and resumes his tune.

The young man squats to grab another stick.

The sound of a bird chirping loudly.

He stops singing. The chirping is close-by, and steady, near the ground.

After rising to his feet, the young man begins quietly and carefully approaching the source of the constant chirping.

Leaves crinkle beneath his shoes, disrupting his stealth.

A large bird flutters through the trees, disrupting the light and catching the young man’s attention as he creeps onward.

He looks down at the massive protruding root system of the tree in front of him. An injured baby bird hobbles on the roots, terrified. It’s chirping grows more desperate.

The young man kneels down by the bird, placing the wood at his side.

He reaches cautiously toward the bird, studying it, growing closer, taking his time.

The bird screeches and seizes, attempting to run away on its small, inadequate legs.

The young man retracts his hand, startled by the bird’s jolting hysteria.

He notices that one of the bird’s wings is bloody and deformed.

The young man watches the bird struggle amongst the roots and dead leaves.

He looks up in the tree, searching. He spies an empty nest resting on at the base of a large branch.

He looks hard at the bird, then back to the nest.

The young man lowers his head.
He begins to glean his surroundings with his eyes and hands, picking up and examining the larger rocks within his reach.

Unsatisfied, the young man stands.

He wanders around the vicinity of the tree, kicking and scuffing the ground, upending rocks.

The baby bird continues to squall.

After scanning the forest floor, the young man finally finds a large enough rock and picks it up.

He lugs the rock over to the roots, cradling it in his arms.

He once again kneels in front of the bird, wiping his brow.

Frightened, the bird begins flapping its good wing frantically, moving itself unevenly across the ground; it’s chirping grows sharper.

The young man raises the rock, and, turning his head to the side, swiftly brings it down onto the bird, crushing the animal.

It is quiet.

He leaves his hand on the rock, staring at it.

A trickle of red gathers and creeps out from under the stone.

Continuing to gaze at the rock, the young man draws his hand back.

He picks up the wood at his side, and rises, somewhat weak.

His face is pale. His eyes are wide.

He coughs and turns away, shuffling back to the old house.

EXT. OUTSIDE WINDOW OF DESERTED HOME – NIGHT
Drops drip into a rusted pan on the windowsill. The young man is inside, looking down at the fire spot and his collection of tinder.

INT. FIRE ROOM IN DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS

Crouching, the young man arranges his wood for a fire.

He stacks the excess sticks in the corner of the room, covering them in a filthy rag.

He packs the middle of the conical stick pattern with newspaper and twigs.

He ignites the kindling with a cheap lighter, which he pulls from his front pocket.

He nurses the fire to life, puffing on it and shielding it with his hands.

With the fire thriving, the young man scoots an old wooden chair along the warped floor, bringing it to a scraping halt near the flames.

The young man sits down in the chair. He steadies himself with his hands, grasping the rickety seat. The chair creaks weakly under his moderate weight.

He watches the flames. The light flickers, reflecting warmly on his face.

Ragged curtains flutter in the evening breeze.

A screen door yawns open and then rejoins the doorframe.

The wind challenges the fire.

In the corner of the room, a rusty crib sits, filled with pieces of ceiling.

The young man’s phone rings again. He answers it this time.

    YOUNG MAN

    Hey.

    FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Where are you, Greg?

GREG
(observing the room)
Nowhere. Just wandering around.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
You need to be home soon. There’s no reason to waste gas out running the roads.
(beat)
It’s getting dark anyway.

GREG
I know. I’ll be home in a few minutes.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Okay, sweetie. Drive safe. I love you.

GREG
Love you, too, Mom.

Returning the phone to his pocket, Greg sighs, then coughs.

He begins humming “Love Will Tear Us Apart” once more, lightly drumming on his thighs.

The fire dies down. Greg kicks it a bit, throwing embers into the air.\(^5\)

INT. GREG’S CAR – NIGHT

Greg’s right hand grips the wheel. Changing lights race by.

“To Here Knows When” by My Bloody Valentine fills the car with quiet reverberating fuzz.

Greg drives through his small Kentucky town, cruising under green lights that flash onto his face and splash on the windshield.

He comes to a red light and halts.

He closes his eyes.
EXT. THE STREET BY GREG’S CAR – CONTINUOUS

The light turns green
Greg drives out of frame. The street is empty.
A streetlamp stands bright across the road.

EXT. GREG’S HOME – NIGHT

Greg’s car pulls into his driveway.

INT. GREG’S CAR – CONTINUOUS

He pops the CD out of the player and turns off the car.

EXT. GREG’S CAR/HOME – CONTINUOUS

Greg exits his car and walks toward his front door.
He fumbles with his keys at the door and mumbles to himself.
He enters his home and closes the door.
His car’s inside light turns off.
Immediately, the light in the home turns on, illuminating a window from within.

INT. KITCHEN – NIGHT

Greg stands at the open refrigerator, illuminated by its light in the dim kitchen.
He grabs a package of deli turkey, a bag of sliced cheese, a jar of mustard.
His hands full, he shuts the refrigerator door with his foot.
He makes his way to the counter.
Two slices of bread, a spreading knife, and a bright red cup filled with water await him.

Setting down his ingredients, Greg pushes his mother’s Medical Center nametag out of the way. She is smiling in the photo, under which her name appears: Nancy Sampson, Registered Nurse.

Greg’s hands open the turkey package and separate the thin slices, placing them carefully on a piece of bread.

He takes out a slice of cheese and lays it on the turkey.

Holding the knife is his hand, Greg attempts to open the jar of mustard.

Greg inadvertently drops the knife. It clangs against the counter and then the kitchen floor.

GREG
Shit . . .

Greg bends down. His fingers grasp awkwardly at the knife, eventually getting a grip on the handle.

He rises, places the knife on the counter and opens the mustard jar.

Once he opens the jar, he holds it and looks down into it.

The sound of the kitchen floor creaking under Nancy Sampson’s approaching feet.

Greg turns around, still holding the jar of mustard.

His mother, a woman in her late 30s, comes near him and stands sleepily, still partially in shadows.

Nancy rubs her eyes.

NANCY
(drowsily)
I’m going to bed, sweetie. Try not to throw any more silverware if you don’t have to. It’s very late.

GREG
Sorry.

NANCY
It’s okay. Just try and get some sleep.

GREG
(smirking)
Okay.

Greg turns back toward the counter.

NANCY (O.S.)
You know, you’re father was a night owl, like you. I never understood it.

GREG
I just like the nighttime.
(beat)
It’s quiet.

NANCY
You’ll like it less when you get older.
(beat)
Sleep well, honey.

GREG
(turning to look at her)
Night, Mom.

Nancy returns to the shadows and walks back to her room.

Greg slathers mustard on a piece of bread.

He licks the excess mustard off the knife.

He stacks his sandwich, picks it up and wipes the crumbs off the counter.

INT. GREG’S ROOM - NIGHT

Greg lies in bed, flipping through Nietzsche’s The Gay Science.

The remnants of his turkey sandwich lie on a paper plate beside him.
A desk lamp pools light on the blankets.

A small television sits on the desk with the lamp.

A shelf full of books rests against a wall.

Greg’s television is on, but muted, creating visual noise that flickers throughout the room.

Greg looks up from his book, at the silent television. A scene from Hal Ashby’s Harold and Maude is on the screen.

His phone rings. It’s in his pants pocket on the floor. He reaches down, straining, and extricates the phone from the pants.

He looks to see who’s calling.

Greg answers.

GREG
Hey, Emily.

EMILY (O.S.)
Hey, what were you doing earlier? I tried to call.

GREG
(watching the television)
I was just busy. Doing some stuff.

EMILY (O.S.)
Where were you?

GREG
Out at that old house.

EMILY (O.S.)
I’ve never even seen that place. I Swear I’ve driven by there a hundred times and I’ve never seen it.

(beat)
I can’t wait ‘til you mess around and start a forest fire out there, like an idiot.
GREG (smirking)
Yeah . . .

EMILY (O.S.)
How come you never take me out there?

GREG
I don’t know. Why would you wanna go?

EMILY (O.S.)
Just to see it, I guess.

He doesn’t respond.

EMILY (O.S.)
Was the guy there this time?

GREG
(readjusting himself)
No. I think he’s migrating with the birds.

EMILY (O.S.)
Smart dude.

GREG
Yeah.

Greg begins contorting his face, stretching it out, as if exercising.

EMILY (O.S.)
You doing anything tomorrow?

GREG
I’ve got some raking to do. Not much happening, really.

EMILY (O.S.)
We should do something . . . to celebrate the first day of Fall Break.

GREG
Like what?

EMILY (O.S.)
I don’t know.
(beat)
You feel like bowling?

GREG
I feel like sleeping.

EMILY (O.S.)
Right now?

GREG
And tomorrow.

EMILY (O.S.)
Oh. So you don’t want to do anything?

GREG
No, bowling sounds cool.

EMILY (O.S.)
You’re being weird.

GREG
Sorry. I feel a little sick.

EMILY (O.S.)
What kind of sick?

GREG
The kind that needs sleeping off.

EMILY (O.S.)
Are you mad at me?

GREG
No. I’m just tired.

EMILY (O.S.)
You promise?

GREG
(aggravated)
Yes.

EMILY (O.S.)
You would tell me if you were mad, wouldn’t you?
GREG
Probably.

EMILY (O.S.)
What does that mean?

GREG
Don’t worry about it. We can talk tomorrow.

EMILY (O.S.)
Well, just get some rest.

GREG
You too.

EMILY (O.S.)
Okay. Goodnight.

Greg closes his phone and tosses it to the floor.

He returns to his book. The television continues flickering.

The bedroom door creaks open.

The cat slinks into the room and leaps onto Greg’s bed.

GREG
Hey, kitty.

Greg closes his book and drops it to the floor.

He pets and nuzzles the cat.

The cat flops near Greg’s plate.

Greg’s picks up the plate, slides out of bed, and turns off the television and desk lamp, placing the plate on the desk.

Greg carefully crawls into bed so as to not disturb the cat.

GREG
(whispering)
Let’s go to bed.
INT. GARAGE - MORNING

The garage is dark and car-less. An oil spot has formed beneath where Nancy’s car is usually parked. The walls and nooks are filled with junk: old toys, tools, boxes.

The door leading into the garage from the house opens. Greg steps through.

Greg turns on the light in the garage. He scans the space.

GREG
(under his breath)
Now where the fuck are you . . .

Spying what he came for, Greg walks over to a corner of the garage and grabs a rake, jarring it loose from the surrounding clutter.

Rake in hand, Greg saunters back to the light switch and presses the button to open the garage door.

As the garage door rises with the sound of groaning metal, sunlight gradually seeps into the garage, warming the concrete and reflecting off the oil spot.

Greg begins lethargically ambling out of the garage, dragging the rake behind him, letting it scrape the garage’s cold floor.

He inadvertently pulls the rake through the oil puddle, streaking the sludge in spaced lines across the concrete behind him.

EXT. LAWN - CONTINUOUS

The leaves pile up, covered with stubborn dew, guided by Greg’s rake.

The morning is bright and brisk.

Greg beatboxes badly while he rakes, interrupting his rhythms to cough and snuffle.
An airplane flies audibly overhead. Greg looks up to catch a glimpse.

The airplane trails a stream through the sky, roaring.

Turning his eyes toward the ground, Greg goes back to raking.

The sound of leaves being rustled.

INT. HALLWAY – JUST BEFORE NOON

Greg walks down the hallway to his little brother’s room.

INT. LITTLE BROTHER’S ROOM – CONTINUOUS

The door to the room is slightly open. Greg carefully eases it open the rest of the way with his hand.

An athletic male, 14, lies in bed, cocooned in his blankets and snoring.

Dirty clothes cover his floor.

Light comes through his window, diffused by thin white curtains, making shapes on a computer desk.

Sports posters adorn his walls.

Greg stares at him, smirking.

    GREG
    Michael, wake up. It’s almost noon.

Michael’s snoring is interrupted. He rolls over, grumbling.

Greg begins flicking the lightswitch in Michael’s room on and off very rapidly, achieving a stroboscopic effect.

    GREG
    (in a high-pitched voice)
    Wake up . . .

Annoyed, Michael hurls a pillow at Greg and concurrently rises up in bed.
MICHAEL
(grumpily)
I’m getting up, goddamnit.

Greg kicks the pillow away from himself.

GREG
If you don’t, I’m just going to give you a seizure.

Michael
(sarcastically)
Greg, you’re so hilarious.

GREG
(walking away)
I know.

INT. LIVING ROOM – AFTERNOON

Greg and Michael sit on the couch, watching *Judge Judy* on television. Their respective breakfasts rest on the coffee table in front of them.

Greg’s spoon clinks against the rim of his cereal bowl as he scoops up a mouthful and slurps it down.

Michael, shirtless, fondles a Pop-Tart wrapper, crinkling the foil endlessly as he breaks off bite-sized portions of his pastry.

Only sunlight illuminates the room, which is decorated without flourish. Bland paintings of flowers and landscapes occupy the walls. Photographs line the room’s shelves.

MICHAEL
I had a pretty weird dream last night. Wanna hear it?

GREG
(disinterested)
Everyone has weird dreams.

MICHAEL
Don’t be such an asshole, dude. I
just want to tell you about my dream.

Greg leans back against the couch, leaving his cereal on the table.

GREG
Tell me about it, then.

He watches Michael with amusement, sneaking glances at the television. Michael scratches his mostly hairless chest before leaning forward and beginning.

MICHAEL
(heavily gesticulating)
Well, I was in this place that was like all dark. I couldn’t even see the ground. And there were no walls, it was just, like, um . . . dark. And there was this big fucking chain right in front of me and it was the only thing I could see and it, like, it was like glowing. And it stretched out forever. It was just like hanging in the air and I couldn’t see the ends of it. Now, this is the crazy part: I don’t know how I knew this, but I just knew that I had to count all of the links on the chain, every single one, and if I fucked up, I would die.

GREG
Was someone going to kill you?

MICHAEL
(still gesticulating)
I don’t know. I just, I just knew I was going to die. It was like intuition or something. But anyway, I started counting, and I got pretty far, when this voice from behind me yelled, “Hey, you!” I turned around really fast, but nobody was there. It was just the darkness and I was like “What the fuck? Who’s there?” Nobody said anything back, so I just turned back to the chain. I couldn’t count, though, because I had lost my place. So I was fucked . . .
and I just waited to die because I messed up, but I didn’t die. I just started counting again. I counted and counted, waiting for somebody to come and kill me, but they never came. . . . I just woke up.

(beat)
What do you think it means?

GREG
(with a mock-serious tone)
That you’re going to work in a chain factory when you grow up.

MICHAEL
Seriously, though.

GREG
Don’t know. Probably doesn’t mean anything.

MICHAEL
That’s it?

GREG
That’s it. Don’t quote me on it though, I’m not Freud.

MICHAEL
Who’s Freud?

GREG
A bigger asshole than I am.®

Michael fixes his eyes on a shelf of photographs in the room.

MICHAEL
Did you see that Mom put out a bunch of pictures of Dad?

The photos are of the boys’ father. His smile. With his family. On vacation. In his business suit. In college. In high school. With his parents. At his wedding.

GREG
Yeah.
The conversation hesitates.

    MICHAEL
    Does it still bother you?

    GREG
    (annoyed)
    What do you think?

    MICHAEL
    I don’t know. Just asking.\textsuperscript{9}

The two of them stare at the photos.

Greg gets up to take his empty cereal bowl to the kitchen.

INT. BATHROOM – AFTERNOON

The faucet drips.

Greg sits on the toilet, pants around his ankles, reading *The Gay Science*.

He whistles “Good Morning” from *Singin’ in the Rain* quietly and with inconsistent volume.

INT. GREG’S CAR – LATE EVENING

Greg sits in his car, parked outside of Emily’s house.

“A New Career In A New Town” by David Bowie provides a loud pulsing in the car.

Greg sees Emily’s front door open. Light from inside the house pushes out into the night.

Emily stands in the doorframe with her mother, who waves at Greg. Greg half-heartedly waves back, holding up his hand and smiling.

Emily walks down to Greg’s car, her mother still at the door.
Greg turns down the music as Emily approaches, her hand on the door handle.

The front door of Emily’s house closes.

Greg’s car door opens, illuminating the interior.

Emily climbs in.

Greg puts the car in drive.

    EMILY
    You ready to bowl?

    GREG
    Yeah . . .

    EMILY
    (smiling)
    It’ll be fun. I promise. I’ll buy you nachos if you win. Deal?

A beat.

    GREG
    You know I suck at this.

They start to drive off.

    EMILY
    Well, everyone sucks at something.

EXT. OUTSIDE OF EMILY’S HOUSE – CONTINUOUS

The car coasts away, taking a right turn and then disappearing from sight.

A man jogs by on the sidewalk, wearing extremely reflective clothing. His feet pitter-patter on the pavement.

INT. BOWLING ALLEY – NIGHT

The bowling alley glows in various neon hues.

1950s rock ‘n’ roll plays from an old fashioned jukebox by vintage arcade machines.
Children scamper about. Middle-aged men wear cut-off t-shirts and serious faces. Teenagers act stoned, even if they aren’t.

A bowling ball glides down a lane.

Greg and Emily watch as the pins burst apart.

    EMILY
    (non-chalantly)
    Put that in your pipe and smoke it.

    GREG
    (bluntly)
    I don’t smoke, Emily. Shit’s bad for you.

    EMILY
    (annoyed)
    Har-dee-har-har.

    GREG
    Don’t get pissy because you’re not funny.

    EMILY
    (trailing off)
    Don’t be a sore loser.

Emily turns to the computer screen and logs the two of them in for another game.

The epilepsy-inducing lights move across her stern face.

Emily turns and stares at Greg, who sits down to re-tie his shoelaces, keeping his eyes at his feet.

The sound of crashing pins fills the gap in conversation.

    EMILY
    (standing up)
    Do you want some nachos or something?

    GREG
    (dismissively)
    I didn’t win.
EMILY
I’m offering free food. Take it or leave it.

GREG
Okay. No jalapenos though.

Emily walks away.

Greg watches her, breaking his gaze once she merges with the crowd at the concession stand.

He coughs and rubs his eyes.

“I’ve Told Every Little Star” by Linda Scott starts to pour out from the jukebox.

Greg spies a small child attempting to wrest a bowling ball from the rack.

The ball is obviously too heavy, but the little blonde boy continues trying to pick it up or roll it out, to no avail.

The kid looks around, helpless. He scratches his cheek.

The boy’s father walks over and takes the bowling ball off the rack for his son. He crouches down and carefully puts the ball in his son’s arms.

Greg looks on.

Emily arrives with an assortment of snacks. She hands a tray of nachos to Greg after plopping down beside him. He takes them without acknowledging her.

Emily eyes Greg.

EMILY
What are you doing?

GREG
(lazily pointing)
Watching that little boy.

EMILY
(turning to look)
Oh.

The little boy bends down and rolls his ball down the lane, granny-style, almost falling over because of his efforts. The ball quickly rolls into the gutter.

He turns to his father and smiles.

Greg dunks a chip in his cup of cheese and devours it.

Emily looks at him, smiling.

Emily

You ready to play another game?

Greg
(to her, this time)
Yeah . . .

EXT. BOWLING ALLEY – NIGHT

Emily and Greg walk out of the bowling alley, talking.

The lights outside have a green cast.

A burly man in flannel smokes on the corner.

Greg
I can’t believe you rolled a 150.

Emily
It’s all in the wrist.

Greg smiles as Emily hold up her wrist.

Greg
What do you wanna do now?

Emily
(sighing)
I don’t know.

Greg
You have to get home, I guess.

Emily
You know how my mom is.

She grabs his hand.

GREG
Well, I wish you could stay.

EMILY
Me too.
(beat)
I’m glad you didn’t decide to sleep.

They reach Greg’s car.

Greg stumbles into Emily, placing his hands on her arms to guide him around her, making his way to the driver’s side.

He unlocks the car.

They duck in.

INT. GREG’S CAR – NIGHT

Greg starts the car.

“Schizophrenia” by Sonic Youth buzzes quietly in the speakers.

EMILY
What was wrong with you last night?

Greg sits in thought for a moment.

GREG
I know it sounds weird, but, I had to kill a bird, in the woods.

EMILY
Why? That’s awful.

GREG
It was a little baby one and it had a broken wing. It was gonna die anyway, so I smashed it with a rock.
Emily is quiet, looking at Greg.

    EMILY
    Well, I think you probably did the right thing. It was suffering.
    (beat)
    You shouldn’t feel bad, Greg.

She puts her hand to his face.

    EMILY
    You didn’t do anything wrong.

He nods.

    EMILY (CONT’D)
    Don’t worry about it.

The exterior lights of the bowling alley pulse in the background.

INT. GREG’S ROOM - MORNING

Greg lies sprawled out amidst his sheets, wearing only pajama bottoms.

The cat is curled up next to him.

Sunlight penetrates through his window.

The sound of the television humming to life in the living room – the murmur of a news program trickles into Greg’s room.

Greg begins to stir.

Startled, the cat awakens and leaps off the bed.

Yawning, Greg sits upright.

He stares blankly.

He listens to the hushed commotion of his mother moving about the house, tilting his head to the side.

He picks his nose.
The television audibly clicks off, leaving quietude.

Greg rises, scooting off of his bed and lumbering out his door.

INT. LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Greg stands in the middle of the room, befuddled.

    GREG

    Mom?

Calmly at first, but with increasing impatience, Greg moves from room to room in the house, searching for his mother.

Eventually, he makes his way to the front door, exiting hurriedly.

EXT. GREG’S FRONT PORCH – CONTINUOUS

Greg halts just outside the front door, shading his eyes with his hand.

He sees his mother’s vehicle driving away in the near distance.

Dejected, he returns to the house, closing the door softly behind him.

INT. LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Greg’s hand fumbles for the television remote, lifting it from the coffee table.

He lets out a deep sigh as he slumps onto the couch.

He flips on the television and then leisurely rests his feet on the coffee table, stretching his legs.

He changes the channel several times, stopping on a nature program about lemmings.
A narrator provides voice over for the program, which features footage of masses of lemmings leaping from cliffs.

NARRATOR
Norwegian lemmings, in particular, are infamous for their bizarre habit of gathering in large groups and leaping from cliffs into the ocean, committing what, to some, might appear to be a form of mass suicide. In actuality, the lemmings aggregate in migratory groups as a result of overpopulation, following acute biological impulses to break apart from the primary population in search of new habitats. During their search, the masses of lemmings often reach the shore, which, in the craggy Scandinavian landscape, is frequently a cliff. Once at the edge of the land, the lemmings’ instinct to press on causes them to jump into the ocean and attempt to swim to new environs, a quixotic endeavor that results in death from exhaustion. Nevertheless, the images of the rodents plummeting to their deaths, one after the other, presents us with an unsettling natural reality — that of creatures driven to the point of unflinching self-destruction.

Greg watches, his mouth drooping.

The cat meows and then springs up into Greg’s lap.

Greg strokes the cat, which purrs in delight and nuzzles his hand.

His phone rings. He answers.

GREG
Hey.

EMILY (O.S.)
Hey. Are we still eating later?

GREG
(mumbling)
Sure.

EMILY (O.S.)
What?

GREG
Yes, we are. Let me call you back, okay?

EMILY (O.S.)
Okay. Are you busy or something?

GREG
I’m learning about lemmings. Just let me call you back.

The program continues for a moment, then cuts to commercial.

EXT. DOWNTOWN SIDEWALK - AFTERNOON

Greg and Emily walk together on a sidewalk, surrounded by old architecture that is speckled with fast food restaurants and other unsightly 21st Century occurrences.

Green patches of grass line fence bottoms and sprout out of cracked concrete.

The sky is gray and overburdened.

They walk for a while without talking.

They pass a condemned building.

Emily walks with her head down, watching her feet and stepping over cracks.

They continue walking. Emily moves her hand close to Greg’s as they both sway back and forth.

They touch hands tentatively, then clasp them together.

Greg coughs. Emily smiles. They walk.
INT. Diner – Evening

Rain drizzles outside the window of a traditional American diner.

The diner is decorated with kitschy Americana and local memorabilia, including photographs of sports teams and autographed items belonging to hometown heroes.

Roy Orbison’s “In Dreams” bops along throughout the restaurant.

Beautiful neon accentuates the diner’s plain appearance, reflecting in windows and shiny metal surfaces.

Greg and Emily sit silently in a booth, eating their food politely.

After a while, Greg breaks the silence.

GREG
When are you leaving for the beach?

EMILY
Early tomorrow.

A waitress nearing her 50s stops by the booth. After initially glancing up at the waitress, Greg keeps his attention on Emily.

WAITRESS
(chipper)
Everything okay for you guys? You need anything?

EMILY
Everything’s great, thanks.
    (beat)
Oh, actually, could I have a refill please? It’s diet.

WAITRESS
No problem, sweetie.

The waitress scoops up Emily’s glass and pivots away from the booth.
GREG
Beaches suck.

EMILY
(smiling curiously)
What’s wrong with beaches?

GREG
Too many people.

EMILY
The worst part is the drive.

Greg takes a long slurp from his soda.

GREG
When you’re on long drives, do you ever think about what would happen if you crashed the car?

EMILY
(puzzled)
Well, yeah . . .

GREG
No, I mean, like if you crashed the car. On purpose. Just drove it off the side of the road.

EMILY
Like in Annie Hall?

GREG
Yeah, sort of like a curiosity.

EMILY
Pretty morbid curiosity.
(beat)
I don’t know. I’ve probably thought about it at least once. I think most people probably do.

GREG
So you don’t think it’s weird?

EMILY
Not really, no. Do you think about it
a lot?

GREG
Sometimes, I almost do it.

There is a silence.

EMILY
I’m glad you don’t.

The waitress arrives with Emily’s diet soda.

WAITRESS
Here you go, hon. You need anything else, you just tell me.

EMILY
Thank you.

The waitress waddles away.

Greg and Emily pick at their food.

The rain keeps falling and falling.

EXT. DESERTED HOME – LATE EVENING

The old building sits on wet grass and mud, leaking in the downpour.

Greg walks around the outside of the building, holding a bright red umbrella.

His shoes sink into muck.

GREG
Gross . . .

He tries to step around puddles, nearly slipping.

His umbrella bobs and sways in his unsteady hand.

He ducks into a doorway, accidentally banging the umbrella against the top of it.

GREG
Fucking shit . . .

He collapses the red umbrella and maneuvers it indoors.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{INT. FIRE ROOM IN DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS}

Greg drops his umbrella to the warped floor.

He saunters to the corner to gather wood from his rag-covered pile.

A small crash and scraping sounds from an adjacent room.

Greg turns to the room, confused.

He listens for further clamor. Nothing.

Bundling the sticks, Greg steps to the black stained burn spot in the center of the room.

Squatting, he begins arranging the twigs on the flaky embers.

He coughs.

Like an echo, a second cough, this one more throaty and wheezy, projects from the adjacent room.

Greg looks up, startled.

The hacking continues, rumbling out of murky lungs.

Greg rises slowly.

He begins inching toward the doorway of the adjacent room.

The coughing degenerates into groaning, accompanied by the sounds of a body scuffling on the floor.

Greg closes in on the doorway, placing his hand on the chipped molding.

He brings his head around slowly, peering into the room.

\textbf{INT. ADJACENT ROOM IN DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS}
Bum trash and decomposing organic waste clutter the room.

Rusted metal protrudes into the cool air from different piles of litter.

The walls look yellow-brown and tobacco-stained and mold swallows the edges of the bulging, bowed ceiling.

Against a far wall, a homeless man squirms restlessly beneath a mound of soiled clothes and dingy blankets.

Greg gazes at the homeless man as he tosses and turns in his damp makeshift bedding.

GREG
(speaking over the commotion)
You can come sit by the fire, if you want. I’m going to build one.

The homeless man stops writhing, but doesn’t respond or acknowledge Greg’s presence. He lies with his back turned to Greg, facing the wall.

Greg lingers in the doorway.

The homeless man’s heavy breathing undercuts the quiet.

After a few moments, Greg retreats solemnly to the fire room.

INT. FIRE ROOM IN DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS

Greg stands across the room from the burn stain. He sighs.

He yanks up his chair and hauls it to the fire space.

Lowering himself to the seat, Greg begins arranging his sticks.

EXT. DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS

A shaggy, benevolent-looking mutt prowls around the perimeter of the decrepit building.
He sniffs the mushy soil and prods debris with his cold nose.

The rain leaves him sopping.

INT. FIRE ROOM IN DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS

The fire is lit.

Greg twirls a twig in the flames, lifting it above the warm waves to watch it turn into cinder.

He hears the homeless man stirring in the other room.

Greg cranes his neck for a look, turning to find the mutt standing by the doorway of the adjacent room.

The dog vigorously shakes, flinging water outwards in a burst.

He pants and looks at Greg with sad eyes.

The rickety sound of the homeless man rising and limping grows louder.

The homeless man shambles into the fire room, bent and weak and wheezing.

The rain continues, now accentuated by the erratic cavernous boom of low thunder.

GREG

You can sit in my chair if you want.

The homeless man shifts his puffy red eyes to meet Greg’s, but says nothing, hobbling closer to the heat.

About a foot from the fire, the homeless man rigidly descends to the floor, contracting his joints with much effort.

Greg sits, observing him.

The homeless man closes his eyes softly as he lies next to flames.
The two of them rest in the warmth.

EXT. DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS

The mutt calmly rests on his haunches, looking inside the building, enduring the storm.

INT. KITCHEN – NIGHT

Greg and Michael do the dishes after dinner, working in assembly line fashion.

The steady patter of rain drip-drops on and around the house.

The sloshing and clinking sounds of dishes being washed add cacophony to the bored calm.

Greg scrubs and scrapes the plates, glasses, and silverware in the sink, elbow-deep in suds.

He hands the soapy dishes to Michael, who dries them with a dishtowel and stores them neatly in the various drawers and cabinets.

INT. LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Nancy lounges on the sofa in the living room, leisurely flipping through the pages of a magazine marketed specifically toward her demographic.

INT. KITCHEN – CONTINUOUS

A plate slips out of Michael’s hand and clanks on the countertop.

He winces and looks at Greg apologetically. Greg looks back, smirking.

The plate is fine – only a small chip on its edge.
INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Nancy tilts her head to the kitchen, grimacing.

Lacking further provocation, she turns back to her magazine.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Michael stacks the chipped plate with the others in the cabinet.

   NANCY (O.S.)
   Heard you had another date with Emily, Greg.

   GREG
   (amused)
   Who told you that?

   NANCY (O.S.)
   Look beside you.

Greg glares wryly at Michael, who smiles back mischievously.

   GREG
   (with monotone exasperation)
   It wasn’t a date. She’s not really my girlfriend. Michael exaggerates.

   NANCY (O.S.)
   Don’t get defensive, honey. She’s a cute girl. (A beat) Lord knows she’s about the only person you ever talk to.

   GREG
   That’s not true.

INT. FRONT DOOR - CONTINUOUS

A mop bucket catches a ceiling leak by the front door.
INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Nancy closes her magazine, laying it beside her
She turns her entire body toward the boys in the kitchen.
She watches them.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Greg and Michael continue lathering, rinsing, and drying the dishes.
The cat creeps into the kitchen and weaves around Greg’s legs.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

NANCY
Do you guys want to hear what the preacher talked about in church today?

She waits for a response.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Greg and Michael stand quietly at the sink.
They keep their backs turned to their mother.

GREG
(coldly)
Not really.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Nancy’s mouth tightens.
She averts her eyes from her sons, casting them down and puffing a sigh.
She lifts herself from the couch and sulks to her room.
She shuts the door.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Michael turns to Greg.

    MICHAEL
    What’d you do that for?

    GREG
    Because that shit is stupid, Michael.

    MICHAEL
    You shouldn’t be mean to her.

Greg shuts off the faucet.

He dries his hands on a paper towel and heads to the living room.

Michael dries the last glass and puts it away.

Something scratches at the front door.

Michael listens, confused.

    MICHAEL
    (to Greg)
    What the hell is that?

INT. FRONT DOOR - CONTINUOUS

The scratching raps at the door in syncopated, crescendo intervals.14

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Greg stands in the living room, staring at the front door, listening.

He advances slowly toward the door.

    GREG
Don’t know . . .

INT. FRONT DOOR – CONTINUOUS
Greg reaches the front door.

INT. LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS
Michael moves closer, anticipating the door’s opening.

INT. FRONT DOOR – CONTINUOUS
Greg cradles the doorknob in his hand, gingerly turning the knob and cracking open the door.

The scratching halts.
Looking down through the sliver of visibility, Greg sees a dog – the same mutt from the deserted home.

The animal whines.
Greg shuts the door carefully.

He turns to walk away.

MICHAEL
What is it?

GREG
It’s just a stray dog. I think it followed me home.

MICHAEL
From where?

GREG
Nowhere.

Greg continues moving, making his way to his room.
The scratching begins again.
Michael stands transfixed on the door.
After a moment, he pans his head and directs his eyes to Greg, whose footsteps fade down the hall.

INT. GREG’S ROOM – LATE NIGHT
Greg sits reclined on his bed, wearing his pajamas.
His eyes are closed. His hands are folded on his stomach.
The desk lamp is the room’s sole light source.

INT. OUTSIDE OF GREG’S ROOM – CONTINUOUS
Nancy sits outside Greg’s room, her legs extended, her back against the wall.
Nancy’s face is stone, catatonic and spaced.  

INT. GREG’S ROOM – MORNING
Greg’s window overflows with light. His room is cast in strange shadows.
Greg moves in front of the window, scratching his body and yawning in silhouette.
He turns to face the window and looks outside.

INT. SHOWER – MORNING
Greg’s hand rolls the knob of the shower.
Hot water spurts onto his chest as he stands in the warmth, eyes closed.
Droplets form on the shower curtain, drizzling downward as Greg’s body grazes and smears them.

INT. BATHROOM – MORNING
Shakily standing on one leg, Greg jerks his boxers up his thighs.

In the midst of his fidgeting, he falls into the wall.

GREG
Whoa.

He recovers and gets his underwear completely on.

He reaches for his towel and begins vigorously drying his hair, standing hunched over in the middle of the small bathroom.

Greg stands in front of the bathroom mirror and runs his fingers through his hair, attempting to style it. Frustrated, he tussles it into disorder.

Toothpaste plops out unevenly from a tube, piling onto Greg’s toothbrush.

Greg brushes his teeth.

He starts to gag on the suds and is forced to spit his minty saliva into the sink, coughing afterward.

Calming down, Greg rinses his toothbrush.

INT. GREG’S ROOM – MORNING

His pants already on, Greg pulls a shirt over his head.

He grabs his wallet, cell phone, and keys from his desk and shoves them into their respective pockets.

As he walks out of his room, he stops to scan everything around him.

Spying the cat dozed on his bed, Greg scratches and pets him lightly, so as not to rile him up.

INT. LOCAL USED BOOKSTORE – AFTERNOON

Greg stands in an aisle of a worn, atmospheric used bookstore, perusing a shelf of tightly crammed paperbacks.
The store is browned, looking tea-stained and sepia toned and faux ancient.

Old floorboards groan under the slightest pressure, creating a tension between leafed-through silence and wretched wood arthritis.

Greg grabs a weathered copy of Kafka’s The Trial off the shelf in front of him. He studies the book’s cover.

A large professorial man squeezes by him in the aisle, decked out in a tweed jacket and thick-rimmed glasses. Greg presses himself up against the bookshelf to make way.

Moments later, Michael approaches Greg from the opposite end of the aisle as the professorial man.

Greg flips the book over to read the blurb on the back, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

Michael moves close to Greg, reading over his shoulder.

MICHAEL
“‘Somebody must have laid false information against Josef K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong.’ From this sentence onwards, Josef K. is on trial for his right to exist. Maintaining an atmosphere of unease throughout, this chilling, thought-provoking novel, more than any other, is infinitely perceptive about the nature of terror and the futility of human life.”

Sounds like a winner, what’s it called?

GREG
The Trial.

MICHAEL
Isn’t that a John Grisham novel?

GREG
I don’t know.

MICHAEL
I think it is.

GREG
This one is by Franz Kafka, not John Grisham.

MICHAEL
Cool. You gonna get it?

GREG
Yeah.

MICHAEL
Mom gave you money for me, right?

GREG
Yeah. Are you actually going to get a book?

MICHAEL
(moving back up the aisle)
I’m gonna look for something. I don’t know. I might get one.

GREG
Okay, well, just come and get me when you find something.

MICHAEL
(walking away)
I will.

Alone again in the aisle, Greg tucks The Trial under his arm and returns to browsing.

After lethargically removing a few books and replacing them on their shelves, Greg begins moving toward the direction in which Michael left.

As Greg semi-tip-toes his way through the bookstore, the sound of the professorial man speaking in gruff, hushed tones grows audible.

Greg comes upon the professorial man, who is seated on a step ladder, chatting on a cell phone in the midst of the aisle.
Sneaking around to the other side of the shelf, Greg eavesdrops, and peripherally glances at the volumes around him.

PROFESSORIAL MAN
Honey, I’ve looked everywhere and I can’t find it. (pause) That’s where I’m at now. (pause) Are you sure this is the last place you had it? (pause) Fuck . . . (pause) Do you think the cashier would remember? Do they have a “lost and found” here? Do they even do that? (pause) God, I bet somebody just grabbed it, like an asshole. (pause) No, no, no. It’ll be fine. Listen, don’t panic. (pause) Yeah, I’m going to ask the lady at the register right now. (pause) I’ll call you if I figure something out. Okay? (pause) I love you, too. (pause) Okay. Bye.

The professorial man sighs as he closes his phone and rises.

PROFESSORIAL MAN
Goddamnit. Godfuckingdamnit.

Greg continues listening as the professorial man shuffles to the front of the store.

Hearing the man’s footsteps wrench skronks from the floor, Greg turns his full attention to the collection of literature in front of him, squatting to check spines, running his fingers along bindings.

The professorial man’s mumbled conversation with the cashier reaches Greg’s ears, obscured beyond intelligibility.16

INT. GREG’S CAR – AFTERNOON

Greg and Michael ride through town on their way back home.

Michael holds his purchase in his hand: J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye.
GREG
Do you have to read that for school?

MICHAEL
Nope.

GREG
So, you’re just reading it for fun?

MICHAEL
I heard it’s good.

GREG
I don’t think you’ll like it.

MICHAEL
Why not?

GREG
It’s just not something you would get into.

MICHAEL
Because I’m not as smart as you?

GREG
No. Because it’s not like you.

MICHAEL
You think you know what I’m like?

GREG
I’m just saying, Mike. Don’t take it so personally.

They drive for a while in silence.

MICHAEL
Do you ever think that you just hate people?

GREG
All of them? Like, every person?

MICHAEL
Yeah.
GREG
I don’t know. Maybe.

MICHAEL
You really fucking piss me off sometimes.

GREG
(sardonically)
Why, because I’m a “phony?”

MICHAEL
What?

GREG
Nothing. Read the book and you’ll get it.

The car pushes through sparse traffic, creeping up on the suburbs.

EXT. BACKYARD – EARLY EVENING

Greg grabs two trashcans in his backyard, firmly gripping their handles and pulling them roughly out of their resting places, where garbage bags are loosely piled around them.

One of the heavy garbage-packed containers tips over as Greg jostles it, thudding on the ground, losing its lid, and expulsing bits of trash.

Greg grumbles and sets the fallen can upright before picking up the scattered trash and tossing it into the container.

After closing the lid, Greg regains his grip on the cans and begins dragging them behind him.

As he walks toward the front yard, the cans bang against the backs of his legs.

EXT. FRONTYARD – CONTINUOUS

Greg pulls the leg-bashing cans all the way across the front yard, bouncing them along the grass, until he comes to the street.
At the street, Greg lines the cans up beside one another.

His work unfinished, he retraces his path, leaving the cans.

EXT. BACKYARD – CONTINUOUS

Greg enters the backyard.

He bends down to snatch up the lingering garbage bags, glancing at the unfinished back deck and the rotting boards piled beside it.

A loud bark startles him.

He crouches slightly, brings his arms close to his body, and backs away from the directional source of the sound.

He sees that the barking animal is the dog from the deserted home.

He drops his guard a bit and stares at the dog.

    GREG
    What do you want?

The dog stares back at Greg, tilting its head like dogs do.

    GREG
    Are you hungry? Do you want food?

Greg waits for a bit, seeking some sort of confirmation.

The dog communicates nothing.  

Exasperated, Greg drops the garbage bags to the ground and enters his house through the back door.

The dog remains in the backyard, waiting.

INT. KITCHEN – CONTINUOUS

Greg stands in front of an open cabinet and peers into it.
The contents of the cabinet include various food items and a few cans of Vienna sausage.

Decisively, Greg reaches for a can of the sausage.

Holding the can, he reads the label for a moment as he walks over to the sink.

Greg pops off the lid and strains the juice out of the can and into the sink.

He grabs a small plate nearby on the counter and dumps the meat onto it, grimacing at the “splat” sound.

He leaves the kitchen with the plate, headed for the backyard.

The emptied can sits on the kitchen counter.

EXT. BACKYARD – CONTINUOUS

Greg exits the backdoor, and makes his way over to the mutt.

He places the plate of sausage on the ground in front of the dog and steps back.

The dog doesn’t move.

Greg stands looking at the animal for a long time.

GREG
Aren’t you gonna eat it?

The dog trots away.

Greg watches the mutt, which disappears into a neighboring yard.

He picks up the plate and dumps the sausage onto the ground.

Slowly, Greg walks over to the garbage bags and hauls them up.

INT. LAUNDRY ROOM – EVENING
Nancy stands at the washer and dryer.

She opens the dryer and the door drops open with a clang.

She bends down and reaches in, transferring armfuls of fresh clothes to the top of the dryer.

Greg enters, carrying a small plastic bag, and moves immediately to grab the sifter for the litter box, which sits in a corner of the laundry room.

Wordlessly, Greg begins cleaning the litter box as Nancy begins folding the clothes she just removed from the dryer.

They continue on like that, working together without speaking, until Greg finishes scooping out the litter box, at which point he taps the sifter to rid it of litter residue, returns it to its place, ties off the now-full plastic bag, and exits.

EXT. FRONT PORCH – NIGHT

Greg sits on the front porch, with the light on, reading his newly acquired copy of The Trial, dangling his legs over the front edge of the concrete.

Crickets chirp.

Cars coast by.

Finishing up a chapter, Greg slowly lowers his back to the porch and lies there.

His mother opens the front door. Television sounds ooze out of the house.

NANCY
You’ve got a call.

She holds out Greg’s cell phone.

NANCY
It’s Emily. The thing’s been ringing like crazy. I’m surprised you didn’t hear it from out here.
Greg reaches up for the phone, straining. Nancy leans down and places the phone in Greg’s outstretched hand.

Returning to his horizontal position, Greg puts the phone to his ear.

    NANCY
    You okay?

Greg nods, raising a questioning eyebrow.

Nancy returns to the house.

    EMILY (O.S.)
    Hey there.

    GREG
    Hey.

    EMILY (O.S.)
    What are you doing?

    GREG
    Reading The Trial.

    EMILY (O.S.)
    How is it?

    GREG
    I just started it, but I don’t think I’m going to like it as much as The Metamorphosis.

    EMILY (O.S.)
    I never finished that.

    GREG
    It’s only like forty pages . . .

    EMILY (O.S.)
    I didn’t really like it that much.
    (beat)
    The drive down here sucked.

    GREG
    I can imagine.
EMILY (O.S.)
I got carsick. I do every time. Mom
told me to take Dramamine, but I don’t
like that stuff. It kind of makes me
sick to my stomach.

Rain begins falling just beyond Greg’s porch.

GREG
It just started raining here.

EMILY (O.S.)
I wish it would rain here. It’s so hot.

GREG
It reminds me of when I was a little
kid, when I would wander around outside
after it rained and everything was wet.

Greg watches the rain drip off the porch roof.

EMILY (O.S.)
Aww, I can imagine you being little,
jumping in puddles and stuff.

There is a pause as Greg continues watching the rain.

GREG
I’m sorry, what did you say?

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

Greg, Michael, and Nancy sit in the living room, watching
John Carpenter’s Halloween on television.

Each of them is on a different piece of furniture, with
Nancy positioned between the two boys.

The film’s theme twinkles along at a low volume.

Michael turns to Nancy, speaking over his shoulder.

MICHAEL
Did you tell Greg about the car?
GREG
No. What happened to the car?

NANCY
Somebody stole a hubcap off of it.

GREG
How do you know they stole it?

NANCY
I guess I don’t. I just don’t remember it falling off or anything.

GREG
That doesn’t mean it didn’t. I don’t think someone would steal just one hubcap. That would be strange.

MICHAEL
People do strange things all the time.

NANCY
It may have fallen off. I don’t know. It just seems like something that would happen to me, that they would take only one and make everything look terrible, like we’re poor or something.

GREG
You can just get another one, at the junkyard or something. It’s not a big deal, Mom. It’s just a hubcap. It doesn’t look that bad.

NANCY
Well, will you go to the junkyard for me and look around?

GREG
Yeah, I guess.

NANCY
Okay. Um, will you do that tomorrow?

GREG
Aren’t you going to go with me?
NANCY
I have to work, honey. But you can take your brother with you.

MICHAEL
I don’t wanna go.

NANCY
You need to go with your brother.

GREG
Don’t worry about it, Mike. I’ll do it by myself.

NANCY
Are you sure?

GREG
Yeah. I don’t care. Doesn’t matter.

On the television, Michael Myers plunges a knife into another victim.

Nancy changes the channel.

NANCY
I can’t watch that stuff.

INT. GREG’S ROOM – MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT
Greg lies in bed, his room dark and quiet.

He sneezes.

He rustles out of bed and moves across his room.

Greg reaches his desk and switches on his lamp before pulling out his chair and groggily sitting down.

Corralling a pen and a sheet of paper, Greg begins writing. The pen glides along the page as Greg writes, marking out words and replacing them, editing as he goes. As Greg scribbles the words onto the paper, his eyes grow a bit red.

Once he finishes, his eyes are swollen.
Greg looks at the paper and calmly turns it over, folding it up a few times and leaving it on his desk.

He flips off the lamp.

Sniffling sounds in the dark as Greg crawls back to bed.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Wearing only his pajama bottoms, Greg walks into the kitchen, squeaking his feet on the linoleum.

Television voices bleed in from the living room.

He opens the fridge and takes out the orange juice. With the refrigerator door propped open by his body, Greg opens the carton of juice, turns it up and begins chugging.

Once finished, Greg wipes his upper lip with his forearm and re-situates the juice on its shelf.

After shutting the fridge, Greg sees a note, affixed to the door by a magnet. He slides the note out from under its magnet and reads it.

Greg folds the note and puts it on the counter after perusing it, and turns to Michael, who sits in the living room watching television:

GREG
You sure you don’t want to go with me?

MICHAEL (O.S.)
Yeah, man. I’m cool.

Greg walks out of the kitchen.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Greg walks past Michael as he sits sprawled out on the couch, glued to Sportscenter.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - LATE MORNING
Nancy’s car waits in the sun-soaked driveway.

Greg exits the house through the front door and clops over to the vehicle, his arms and legs moving as dead weight.

Beginning at the front of the driver side, he slowly walks around the car, peering down at the wheels to find the unsightly outcast, eventually coming to the back passenger side tire where he stops and squats down to get a better look.

Greg traces the circular outline of the hubcap’s former place with his finger.

He leans over to gaze at the front passenger wheel, comparing it to its defaced partner.

Greg rises and stares at the car.

He turns his head, looking to his house, then lowers his eyes slightly.

Circling around the front of the car to the driver’s seat door, Greg scuffs his feet against the hard concrete.

INT. NANCY’S CAR IN DRIVEWAY – CONTINUOUS

Greg’s opens the driver’s side door and settles into the seat.

After shutting the door, Greg adjusts the seat, moving back, away from the steering wheel.

His legs comfortably extended, he leans forward, puts the key in the ignition, and starts the car.

As the car sputters to life, the radio comes on. Accompanied by the whirl of the air conditioning, a country song plays: “Time Marches On” by Tracy Lawrence.

Greg quickly rolls the volume knob down, simultaneously noticing the red light on the fuel gauge: empty.

GREG
Goddamnit, Mom . . .
He throws the car into reverse and backs out of the driveway, being sure to look over his right shoulder.

EXT. GAS STATION – AFTERNOON

Greg stands beside Nancy’s car at a small, un-crowded gas station, fuel nozzle in hand, pumping gas.

He looks out over the hood of the car, watching the road, shielding his eyes from the afternoon sun by lowering his brow.

EXT. NANCY’S CAR – AFTERNOON

Greg drives slowly down a rough gravel road into a hollow.

The windshield of his mother’s car is grimy and streaked with dirt in two semi-circular patterns from the wipers.

The sky is slightly overcast above the surrounding trees.

INT. NANCY’S CAR – CONTINUOUS

Squinting, Greg spots the sign for the junkyard up ahead.

The gate is hardly visible.

He drives on, slowing to a crawl and eventually pulling up at the entrance and parking.

Greg sits in his car, searching with eyes for someone to help him, looking curiously through the filthy windshield at the stacks of metal, glass, and plastic lying ahead.

Having turned the car off, Greg checks his phone, then puts it back in his pocket.

He exits the car and shuts the door.

EXT. JUNKYARD ENTRANCE – CONTINUOUS
Greg moves cautiously toward the junkyard gate, peering around as he steps.

Once he reaches the gate, Greg stops, places his hand on the metal barrier, and gazes through the bars at the dust and the weeds and the rusted heaps.

HUSKY VOICE (O.S.)
See something you like in there?

Greg turns hesitantly to his left, finding himself face-to-face with the junkyard’s oil-streaked attendant, a middle-aged man who stands just tall enough to meet Greg’s eyeline and whose own eyes are obscured behind thick bi-focals and shaded under a sweat-stained trucker hat resting high on his forehead.

Rather than answer, Greg studies the man, who wipes his brow with his farmer-tanned forearm.

ATTendant
Can I help you with something?

GREG
(gathering his thoughts)
Oh, um, yeah. I need a hubcap.

ATTendant
Just one?

GREG
Yeah.

The attendant turns toward Nancy’s car, pointing.

ATTendant
I guess you want one to fit that.

GREG
Yeah.

Making his way over to the vehicle, the attendant continues speaking to Greg, who trails behind him.

ATTendant
Which one is it?
GREG
Back one on the passenger side.

The attendant stands at the damaged wheel, hands on his hips, and talks to Greg without making eye contact.

ATTENDANT
Somebody steal it?

GREG
Maybe. I think it probably just fell off.

ATTENDANT (shaking his head)
Eh, you never know. Maybe.
(beat)
I think I’ve probably got something in there that might fit this. Might not be the exact same style though.

GREG
As long as it’s pretty close . . .

ATTENDANT
Yeap, I believe you can find something.

He turns to Greg.

ATTENDANT
You want me to walk through with you or you wanna look for yourself?

Greg looks toward the junkyard gate.

GREG
I think I can manage.

ATTENDANT (O.S.)
Well, lemme unlock the gate for you.

The attendant moves to the gate, his steps crunching on the dusty ground, leaving Greg staring at the gnarled metal lying within the junkyard.
Greg waits for the gate to be opened, gazing down at his hands as he fumbles with his cell phone, making repeated glances at the attendant’s progress.

The sound of clanking metal and rattling keys gives way to a creaking whine as the barrier yawns open and Greg begins walking in the direction of the noise.

Standing at the gate, gripping one of the bars, the attendant smiles at Greg as he approaches.

ATTENDANT
You find anything, you can just take it.

GREG
Thanks.

Greg inches through the entrance way and steps into the confines of the junkyard.

The attendant pulls the gate shut behind Greg, without locking it.

ATTENDANT
I’ll be in the office if you need help.

Greg nods at the attendant who slips around the corner and disappears quietly into his office.

EXT. JUNKYARD – LATE AFTERNOON

Wandering around the junkyard, Greg lethargically sifts through the grass-patched wreckage, analyzing the remaining hubcaps on the oxidized autos, prodding through piles of detached parts, and taking time to sit within the ripped interiors of a few junked vehicles.

After minutes of luckless prowling about, Greg comes upon a hubcap, still attached to a car, that roughly matches the three intact caps on Nancy’s wheels.

Greg squats and attempts to pry off the cap with his bare hands.

He grunts and strains, nearly tumbling backward, but the hubcap doesn’t budge.
Frustrated, Greg digs into his pocket and pulls out his key-chain, singling out the key to his own car.

Greg shoves the key into the crevice between the cap and the wheel and crowbars the cap loose with his makeshift tool.

Having thoroughly jarred the hubcap, Greg pops it off with his hands and, holding the cap at his side, rises to his feet.

He gives the deconstructed car in front of him a good stare.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Greg bends over and places the newly acquired hubcap on the kitchen floor, propping it at an angle against the wall.

While moseying about the kitchen, Greg rummages through the refrigerator.

His phone rings.

GREG (O.S.)
Hello?

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Hey, dude.

GREG (O.S.)
Hey.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
How you doin?

GREG (O.S.)
I’m alright. About to eat some lunch.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Cool. You gonna try and make it out tonight?

GREG (O.S.)
What for?
MALE VOICE (O.S.)
My party, man.

GREG (O.S.)
I didn’t know you were having one.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Yeah. My parents are gone.

GREG (O.S.)
Cool. Um, what time are people gonna start showing up?

Greg drops a can of soda in the fridge while speaking, causing a cacophonous tumble.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
What’d you say?

GREG (O.S.)
When should I come?

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Around nine.
(beat)
You gonna bring Emily?

GREG (O.S.)
She’s at the beach.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
That would be difficult, then.

GREG (O.S.)
Yeah.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Bummer.
(beat)
Is she like your girlfriend now?

GREG (O.S.)
Maybe. I don’t really know yet.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Hmm. Well, tell her I said “hey” when you talk to her.

GREG (O.S.)
Alright.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
I hope I’ll see you later, man.

GREG (O.S.)
Hey, I might be late.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
That’s cool. I wouldn’t want you to be unfashionable.

They chuckle.

GREG (O.S.)
Okay. See ya.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Bye.

Greg takes a soda from the fridge, shuts the door and pops the tab before taking a gulp.¹⁹

INT. LIVING ROOM – LATE EVENING

Greg’s cat prowls around the base of the couch, sniffing the floor and intermittently ogling upward.

After a few seconds, the cat leaps from the floor to the couch, crawling along and in-between Greg’s legs as he reads The Trial, sprawled out on his back and propped up on a pillow.

Greg holds the book open above his head and the cat slinks underneath the suspended novel, curling up on his chest.

Greg drops the book to his side, holding it in his right hand, and strokes the cat’s head with his left.

GREG
Hey kitty. What’ve you been doing today? You been eating? Look at your
big ol’ belly. You been being a fatass? You’re a cute little fatass. And you’ve got sleepy little eyes on you. I bet you’ve been napping. You’re always napping. You wanna nap some more? You wanna take a nap with me? Huh? Okay.

(beat)

Let’s take a nap.

The novel falls from Greg’s hand to the floor, freeing his right arm, which he uses to corral the cat closer against his chest.

Greg closes his eyes.

The cat purrs and purrs.

GREG
(sleepily)

You’re always sleepin’ on me.

A light visibly flickers in the kitchen before burning out.

EXT. PARTY HOUSE – NIGHT

A lamppost illuminates the outside of Greg’s friend’s home with pale light.

Greg walks in front of the house, stepping from the street to the curb before making his way across the sidewalk and onto the lawn.

Music rumbles from within the house, peaking in volume as a few partygoers march out the front door to join a group of friends aggregated in the yard for a smoke.

Swirling smoke emanates from the pack of hazy front lawn loiterers. Greg walks up to the crowd, hovering around meekly for a few moments before being addressed.

SMOKER #1

Whatsup, Greg?

GREG

Ah, ya know. Just hanging out.
SMOKER #1
Yeah.

SMOKER #2
(to Greg)
You wanna smoke?

GREG
Nah, I’m good.

SMOKER #3
(to Greg)
Kyle was looking for you earlier.

GREG
Yeah? What’d he want?

SMOKER #3
(to Greg)
I don’t know. He was just asking about you.

SMOKER #2
He was pretty drunk.

SMOKER #1
Yeah. He’s trashed.

GREG
Already?

SMOKER #3
He’s fucking ridiculous, man.

GREG
Shit. Well, I’ll see you guys later.

SMOKER #2
Later, man.

Greg ambles off toward the front porch stairs.

SMOKER #1
Hey, is Emily around?

GREG (turning to answer)
Vacation.
SMOKER #1  
(nodding)  
Alright. Tell her I said “hey.”

GREG  
(going up the stairs)  
I will.

Moving into the house, Greg shuffles and squeezes through the congested entryway, pressing against bodies and excusing himself under his breath.

INT. PARTY HOUSE KITCHEN - NIGHT

Greg leans against the kitchen counter, his arms crossed, a cup in his hand, tapping his free fingers against his skin to the rhythm of thumping rap music.

Chatting teenagers lurk around an opened keg on the counter, sipping from red plastic cups identical to the one Greg holds.

Greg stands off beside them, listening to their conversation while slurping his drink. He stares into space as he eavesdrops, momentarily glancing at other partygoers or gazing at the floor.

PARTY GUY #1 (O.S.)  
... and I was sitting in class when I heard this like thumping noise, like somebody was tapping on the back of my desk, so, you know, after about five minutes of this, I’m like, “What the fuck?” and I’m about to turn around and see what’s going on with fucking Matt Jenkins behind me . . .

PARTY GUY #2 (O.S.)  
Shit . . . fucking Matt Jenkins . . .

PARTY GUY #1 (O.S.)  
... But then Mr. Etherton asks me a question, something about Karl Marx, like, “What political philosophy did blah blah blah” and I was like,
“communism,” cause that was the answer, and the knocking stopped, so I was just like “fuck it,” you know, “he’s probably just whacking off or something.”

PARTY GUY #2 (O.S.)
No shit. That guy’s fucking nasty.

PARTY GIRL #1 (O.S.)
Oh my God. Do guys really do that in class?

PARTY GUY #2 (O.S.)
Guys like Matt Jenkins do. He, like, whipped out his dick in geometry one time and showed it to Erica.

PARTY GIRL #1 (O.S.)
That’s disgusting.

PARTY GUY #2 (O.S.)
She said he wasn’t circumcised.

PARTY GUY #1 (O.S.)
Anyway, so I’m thinking Jenkins is just being a dumbfuck, when the knocking starts again and I turn around to be like “fucking stop it” and then I see him and his eyes are closed and his hand is like under the desk . . .

PARTY GUY #2 (O.S.)
Oh my God! He was really doing it?

PARTY GUY #1 (O.S.)
Dude, I’m pretty sure.

PARTY GIRL #1 (O.S.)
That’s sick! That is like the grossest thing I’ve ever heard!

Greg spots the host of the party walking through the house.

PARTY GUY #2 (O.S.)
Isn’t he retarded or something? Like, he was in special classes in middle school, wasn’t he?
Greg leaves the kitchen, moving in the direction of the host.

PARTY GUY #1 (O.S.)
I don’t know. He might be retarded.
Wouldn’t surprise me.

INT. PARTY HOUSE LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Greg enters the room, trailing the host of the party, only to find him and a bevy of other teenagers watching excitedly as two males square off at Guitar Hero.

Greg moves up beside the host, standing slightly behind him, sipping from his red cup.

GREG
(softly)
Hey.

The host doesn’t respond, his attention on the video game competition.

GREG
(louder)
Kyle!

Startled, Kyle turns.

KYLE
Oh, fuck! Hey Greg! I didn’t know if you were gonna come or not. It’s good to see you, man.

GREG
You too. How’s your break going?

KYLE
Pretty badass, since my parents are out of town and shit.

GREG
No kidding. I wish my mom was out of the house.
KYLE
Yeah.

GREG
Been doin much?

KYLE
Eh, not really. Just been hanging out. Watching a lot of CNN. Keepin up with shit.

GREG
Really?

KYLE
Yeah. I was getting kind of bored with it. The news was depressing me, so, I thought I should have a party.

GREG
When are your parents getting back?

KYLE
Like, Friday, or something.

GREG
Cool.

KYLE
Yeah.

The two of them watch the others play Guitar Hero for a while.

KYLE
(nodding toward the TV)
Dude, you wanna play?

GREG
Nah, man. I’m awful at that shit.

KYLE
Come on, I’m not that good.

GREG
 Fucking better than me.
KYLE
You could hold your own.

GREG
Ehhh, I don’t think I’m up for it right now. I’m a little drunk anyway.

KYLE
Well, that’s the best way to play, man.

GREG
Maybe in a bit. I don’t know. I think I’ll just watch for now.

KYLE
You sure?

GREG
Yeah, dude. I just need to chill.

KYLE
Okay . . .

Kyle starts gravitating toward the television, turning to Greg as he walks away.

KYLE
Last chance . . .

GREG
I’m good.

Greg stands at the back of the room as the crowds tightens around the gamers.

INT. PARTY HOUSE LIVING ROOM - LATE NIGHT

On a large couch in front of a blank wall, Greg sits alone, slouched on the far right end.

Red cup still in one hand, he holds his cell phone in the other, typing and sending a text message.

A pretty girl sits down on the couch, a few feet to the left of Greg.
Greg watches her ease herself onto the seat.

He continues looking at her in silence as she drinks from her red cup.

Greg’s phone bleeps. He turns his eyes to his phone to check the text message.

Intrigued by the sound, the pretty girl turns and begins watching Greg as he types a response message.

After finishing the text, Greg looks up, then back to the pretty girl.

Momentary eye contact.

She turns away, staring off.

Greg’s head sinks.

He sits that way for a while, sullen, with the pretty girl beside him.

The phone bleeps again. Greg checks it, reading the message.

The pretty girl doesn’t look this time.

EXT. PARTY HOUSE - LATE NIGHT

Greg stands in the yard, by the streetlight near the house.

A couple makes out in the background, leaning against the front porch.

Gazing up at the light, Greg watches moths and insects swarm in the glow.

A car drives by.

Partygoers swing open the front door with a thwack, filing out and chattering.

Greg glances at them over his shoulder.
Whistling becomes faintly audible. The wavering tune is “In the Hall of the Mountain King” from Peer Gynt . . .

EXT. SIDEWALK – LATE NIGHT

. . . the whistling is louder, but still shaky, emanating from Greg’s lips as he walks home, alone.

Echoing in the dark, the tune reverberates along with Greg’s footsteps.

The streets are empty. The night is clear and quiet.20

INT. HALLWAY NEAR MICHAEL’S ROOM – LATE NIGHT

Greg stands outside Michael’s slightly ajar door, listening to the rapid clicking and clacking of a computer keyboard and mouse.

He pushes the door open wide enough to walk in.

INT. MICHAEL’S ROOM – CONTINUOUS

After entering the room, Greg plops down on Michael’s bed.

Michael sits at a computer desk, his back to Greg, focusing on a computer game.

Michael remains facing the screen. His fingers enthusiastically maneuver the machine.

MICHAEL
How was the party?

GREG
Shitty.

MICHAEL
Weren’t your friends there?

GREG
Pretty much just Kyle. But he was boring. It was just bleh.
MICHAEL
You drunk, dude?

GREG
Not really.
(beat)
Mom asleep?

MICHAEL
Yeah. She’s been in bed for a while.

GREG
She say anything about me being out late?

MICHAEL
No. She didn’t really talk much once she got home. She just went to her room. Didn’t seem mad though. Just . . . I don’t know.

Michael clicks the computer mouse vigorously.

Greg rubs and massages his eyes and temples.

GREG
Do you know what you’re going to be for Halloween yet?

MICHAEL
(delayed)
What?

GREG
What are you going to be for Halloween?

MICHAEL
(distracted)
Ummm, I actually have this pretty sweet idea that I’m gonna, like, tape condoms to my clothes and go as “safe sex.” Isn’t that awesome?

GREG
Mom will never let you out of the house like that.
MICHAEL
I mean, I’m not gonna show her my costume. I’m not going trick-or-treating or anything.

GREG
I was thinking maybe we could dress up as The Blues Brothers, or something like that, like do it as a team.

MICHAEL
Who are The Blues Brothers?

GREG
It’s from a movie.

MICHAEL
Oh. Who’s in it?

GREG
John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd.

MICHAEL
Never heard of them.

GREG
Don’t worry about it then.

Greg sits hunched on the mattress, staring at the back of Michael’s head

INT. KITCHEN – MORNING

Cereal rushes out of its titled box, filling a bowl with successive clinking sounds.

After shaking the box a bit, Greg turns the box right side up and places it on the counter before rolling up the bag and folding the box’s top flap.

He opens the fridge and reaches for the milk.

Pulling the jug out by its handle, Greg realizes that the container is essentially empty. He watches the slight amount of liquid slosh around in the plastic.
GREG

Fuck.

Greg sits the jug on the counter. He cups his hand under the cereal bowl, lifts it, and pours the cereal back into its box, clumsily allowing a few pieces to stray and rattle down onto the floor.

Nancy stumbles into the kitchen, yawning.

She sits down at the table, watching Greg.

NANCY
Outta milk?

GREG
(still pouring cereal)
Yep.

Greg finishes returning the cereal to its box then shuts the cardboard flap.

NANCY
That hubcap you found is almost a perfect match.

GREG
Yeah. Guy let me have it for free.

NANCY
That was nice of him.

Crouching, Greg picks up the ruined pieces of cereal on the floor.

NANCY
You know what Saturday is, don’t cha?

GREG
Mmhmm.

NANCY
Are you going to get flowers of your own, or do you want to just get some all together?

GREG
I’ll pick out my own, if that’s okay.

NANCY
That’s fine.

Greg rises and dumps the cereal into the trash.

NANCY
I saw what you wrote about him, that poem or whatever it is.

GREG
(turning to her)
What?

NANCY
It was on your desk, folded up, and I read it.

GREG
You read it?

NANCY
It was just lying there so I picked it up, last night, while you were out.

GREG
You shouldn’t look at my stuff like that, Mom.

NANCY
Do you want to talk about it?

GREG
Do you?

NANCY
What do you mean?

GREG
I don’t want to.

NANCY
Maybe you should talk to Pastor McNeil . . .

GREG
I don’t want to talk to him about it either.

NANCY
Don’t get like that, Greg. It’s good for us to talk about it.

GREG
You don’t.

NANCY
I don’t what?

GREG
You never talk about it.

NANCY
That’s not the point, Greg. I’m trying to help you.

GREG
I’m getting him my own flowers. That’s all.

NANCY
Don’t be angry with me.

GREG
I’m not.

NANCY
Don’t be angry with him either.

Greg is quiet. He begins grabbing filters and instant coffee to make a pot.

GREG
Do you want coffee?

NANCY
Okay.

GREG
You know we don’t have milk.

NANCY
That’s fine. I’ll take it black.
INT. FRONT DOOR - LATE MORNING

Bracing himself against the wall with his arm, Greg slips into his shoes.

He twists and turns his feet, gyrates his ankles, wiggles his toes, and reaches down to adjust the tops of the shoes.

Greg opens the door and walks outside, looking back into the house before closing it.

The closed door. Rapid footsteps thump through the house.

Moments later, Nancy hurries to the closed door and swings it open.

NANCY
(shouting)
Greg!

GREG (O.S.)
Yeah?

NANCY
(shouting)
Pick up some milk while you’re out.

GREG (O.S.)
Okay.

NANCY
(shouting)
You need money?

GREG (O.S.)
No.

NANCY
(shouting)
You sure?

GREG (O.S.)
Yes, Mom.

NANCY
(shouting)
Okay. Bye, sweetie.

GREG (O.S.)
Bye.

Walking away, Nancy closes the door daintily, leaving it slightly ajar.

The sound of Greg’s car rumbling to life in the driveway leaks into the house through the slight crack in the door, followed by the sound of the vehicle pulling away.

Eyeing the crack, the cat creeps up to the door.

The cat wedges open the door with his paw and snout and slinks out quietly through the crevice.

INT. FAZOLI’S COUNTER – AFTERNOON

Greg stands in front of the cashier’s counter, staring with slack-jawed inquisition at the overhead menu.

Customer chatter and the scuffling legs of chairs and people bustle.

Greg sighs.

GREG
I guess I’ll have the ravioli with meat sauce.

FEMALE CASHIER (O.S.)
Anything else for you, sir?

GREG
Ummm, a soft drink.

FEMALE CASHIER (O.S.)
Alright. That’ll be $6.39, please.

Greg takes his wallet from his back pocket. He looks down as he unfolds it and pulls out a few wrinkly bills.

INT. FAZOLI’S SEATING AREA – CONTINUOUS
Lethargically, Greg picks out a table, standing slouched and surveying the area.

Finding a suitable seat, Greg places his soda-filled cup on a table near the restaurant entrance.

His little black buzzer in hand, Greg shambles off to the restroom.

INT. FAZOLI’S BATHROOM – CONTINUOUS

Greg eyes himself in the bathroom mirror, peering closely at a pimple before lightly tapping it with his finger.

Securing the buzzer under his arm, Greg washes his hands.

The soap lathers and foams around Greg’s fingers under the hot clean water.

In the midst of washing, Greg’s buzzer lights up and vibrates unexpectedly. Stunned, Greg jumps and the buzzer falls from his arm, crashing on the tile floor.

   GREG
   (quietly, to himself)
   Goddamnit!

Frustrated, Greg holds up his soapy hands and glances down at the buzzer.

   GREG
   (under his breath)
   Fucking stupid . . .

He places his hands back under the still running water, rinsing them fully, and then wipes them off on pant legs.

Greg crouches down and picks up the vibrating buzzer, then stumbles out of the bathroom to fetch his food.

INT. FAZOLI’S SEATING AREA – CONTINUOUS
Cool light fills the restaurant as Greg digs into his meal. Alone, he alternates between hunkering over his food and scanning his surroundings.

Minutes after Greg begins his meal, the restaurant door slowly whooshes open.

The old homeless man from the deserted home limps through the doorway.

Clothed in a sweat-stained white t-shirt, an olive drab military jacket, electric blue running shorts, and distressed flip-flops, the man from the deserted home slithers across the floor, his muddy, grimy feet leaving a filthy trail.

Hearing his entry, Greg looks up and notices the homeless man, staring at him with troubled recognition.

Still advancing, the homeless man turns his head, like a dry gear, and gives Greg a distant, glazed look.

Greg can’t move. He just watches, locked in the returned gaze.

The homeless man drops his eyes from Greg’s.

He proceeds to the cashier counter, obscured from Greg’s view.

Shaken, Greg resumes eating – eavesdropping on the homeless man’s exchange with the cashier amidst the ambient buzz of the restaurant.

FEMALE CASHIER (O.S.)
Sir, can I help you?

HOMELESS MAN (O.S.)
(mumbling)
Spaghetti . . .

FEMALE CASHIER (O.S.)
Excuse me, what was that?

HOMELESS MAN (O.S.)
(mumbling)
Spaghetti . . .
FEMALE CASHIER (O.S.)
Sir, I can’t hear you. Could you please speak up?

No response.

The homeless man coughs loudly, the phlegm audibly rattling in his throat.

FEMALE CASHIER (O.S.)
What would like to eat, sir?

HOMELESS MAN (O.S.)
(hoarsely)
Spaghetti.

FEMALE CASHIER (O.S.)
Will that be all for you this evening?

No response.

FEMALE CASHIER (O.S.)
It’s $3.84. Do you have that much, sir?

Falling coins clink on the counter.

The homeless man again coughs harshly.

FEMALE CASHIER (O.S.)
Go and have a seat and we’ll bring it right out to you.

Greg looks on as the homeless man lurches back into his line of sight.

The homeless man plops down at a table near Greg, noisily scooting his chair out and back in as he sits.

He accidentally bumps the overhead table lamp, causing it to sway back and forth, casting its light in swooping pools.

Near catatonic, the homeless man rests at the table, waiting, hunched and sloppy, as the swinging light’s movement grows slower and calmer.
He doesn’t look at Greg.

Greg remains fixed on the weathered man, ignoring his plate of ravioli. Unnatural shadows rise and fall across his face from the tilting light fixture.

The light stabilizes.

A middle-aged woman approaches the homeless man’s table, wielding a steaming plate of pasta.

The man does not acknowledge her presence.

Confused by the homeless man’s unconcerned stoicism, the female server eyes him.

After a few seconds, the server carefully places the homeless man’s spaghetti on the table in front of him.

    SERVER
    Enjoy your . . .

Before the server can finish her sentence, the homeless man begins plunging his hands into the pasta, shoveling out mouthfuls and slurping them between his lips, marinara sauce smearing across his face and soiling his jacket sleeves.

Greg and the server watch in horror, their eyes bugged and their faces distraught.

    SERVER
    Sir, would you like a fork?

No response.

The homeless man continues cramming his jaws.

    SERVER
    We have utensils, sir.

No response.

Greg grows pale.
A cough erupts from the homeless man’s throat, causing food to dribble from his mouth onto the table. He wipes his discolored red face with his jacket sleeve.

The server scurries away, fetching a plastic fork, a plastic knife, and a stack of napkins.

Greg, eyes watering, watches the man intently as he continues raking the noodles off the plate with his sauce-covered fingers.

The homeless man shoots Greg a glance. His eyes are detached and wild. His jaw bobs up and down as his teeth mash the noodles and beef.

Greg swallows hard, feeling his face growing hot.

The man doesn’t break eye contact.

Briskly, the server returns, laying the plasticware beside the homeless man’s plate.

He pays no attention. His mouth gnaws the pasta. His eyes stare through Greg.

Greg’s lower lip trembles. His face becomes flushed.

The server gestures toward the homeless man.

SERVER
   Are you alright? Do you need help?

No response.

The homeless man remains firmly focused on Greg.

Quiet tears fade down Greg’s cheeks.

Greg leaps out of his seat, thrusting his chair out raucously.

The server turns to him, distracted by the commotion.

The homeless man continues fixing his eyes on the empty seat where Greg was, as if peering into an obscure dimension.
Crying silently, Greg walks out of the restaurant, pushing through the front door. His staccato gait reflects his nerves.

At the homeless man’s side, the server watches.

The front door glacially closes behind Greg, becoming quietly flush with the doorframe.21

EXT. FAZOLI’S PARKING LOT – CONTINUOUS

The sky is gray.

Greg strides away from the restaurant, across the bare parking lot.

He wipes his cheeks, soaking up the tears with his sleeve.

His feet scuff the pavement.

He breathes heavily, exhaling deeply, tempering his heart.

Reaching his car, Greg looks back at the building over his shoulder, his eyes reddened and moist.

Greg opens the door and gets in his car.

He coughs and sniffs, clearing the lumps in his throat.

INT. GREG’S CAR – CONTINUOUS

Greg shuts the door and starts the car.

“Frankie Teardrop” by Suicide drones thunderously, rattling the speakers.

He backs out of his parking spot, then drives out of the lot.

On the road, Greg continues at a steady speed.

His face regains composure. His eyes are now pinkish. His cheeks are less flushed.

All the way home, Greg drives.
He sniffs.
Traffic signals.
He sighs.
Stop signs.
He rubs his face.
Lane change.

“Frankie Teardrop” clangs hysterically. The synthesizers churn. Alan Vega interjects with squeals.

Houses rush by.
The sky has darkened.
Greg drives.

Coming up on his house, Greg begins to slow the car.

A moving blur of browns and blacks thrashes in the front yard.

Noticing the indiscernible movement, Greg leans toward his window, peering out at the leaf-littered lawn.

\[
\text{GREG}
\text{What the hell . . .}
\]

The car comes to a near stop.

“Frankie Teardrop” pulses.

Greg realizes what he is seeing.

\[
\text{GREG}
\text{(stammering)}
\text{Oh, fuck!}
\]

He throws the car into park on the street.

Without killing the engine, Greg flings open his door.
He stumbles out into the yard.

The music blares. A “ding” sound chimes, urging Greg to shut the car door. The engine hums.

A new sound – the snarling of a dog.

EXT. GREG’S FRONT YARD – CONTINUOUS

Greg sprints toward the violence, his breath short.

The moving figures become visible: the dog from the deserted home and Greg’s escaped cat, tumbling viciously – the dog at the cat’s throat.

The cat shrieks. The dog growls. The two creatures create a blurry miasma of blood and buzzsaw groans: slashing, biting, ripping.

Suicide’s jagged melody punctuates the racket, while the door “ding” adds a polyrhythmic beat over the rattling motor.

Screaming, Greg charges the dog in close proximity.

GREG
Get the fuck off of him! Get the fuck outta here!

Reaching the animals, Greg rears back and lands a swift kick to the face of the mutt.

Yelping and reeling, the dog drops the cat to the ground.

Greg lunges forward, fists clenched, his expression maniacal. His face is flushed. His eyes quiver.

The dog backs away, before turning and beginning to trot, its coat sticky with blood.

Greg stands firm.

He looks down at his feet, where the mangled body of his cat lies broken in the dead grass.

His eyes are large and frozen.
He drops to his knees, sinking down.

The cat is motionless – a corpse. The throat is shredded. The stomach is slit. Innards and entrails bulge out into the mess. The eyes are open, glassy, and still.

Tears trickling, Greg looks up at the dog as it disappears out of sight.

The commotion from the car continues sounding.

The front door of the house opens. Nancy steps through the doorway, concerned.

She sees Greg on his knees in the yard.

NANCY
Greg?

No response. No reaction.

NANCY
Honey? Is everything okay? What are you doing out there?

Still nothing.

Nancy moves out onto the porch.

NANCY
What happened? What’s wrong?

Greg turns and looks at his mother, his eyes swollen.

He does not speak. 22

INT. KITCHEN – EVENING

Greg sits leaning forward in a chair beside the kitchen table. His elbows rest on his knees.

Eyes downcast, he gently twists and wrings his hands, allowing his fingers and palms to slowly turn over one another and rearrange in unstable improvised configurations.
Nancy stands against the counter, fidgeting. Her slight movements cause creaks in the quiet.

    NANCY (O.S.)
    Greg, I don’t know what happened. I don’t know how he got outside.

Greg remains silent.

    NANCY (O.S.)
    I’m sorry.

Nancy sighs.

    NANCY
    Had you seen that dog before?

Greg looks up.

    GREG
    What?

    NANCY
    The dog. Do you know where it came from?

Greg swallows.

    GREG
    There’s a man. He was at Fazoli’s.

    NANCY
    What? What man?

    GREG
    His house is falling apart.

Nancy moves toward Greg, sitting down by him in a chair at the table.

    NANCY
    Honey, what are you talking about? Does the dog belong to this man?

    GREG
    I don’t know.
(beat)
I forgot the milk.

NANCY
It doesn’t matter. We can get milk anytime. Greg, where does this man live?

GREG
I don’t want to talk about this anymore.

NANCY
(consoling)
Okay. I’m sorry.
(beat)
I’m sorry he got out.

They sit without speaking for a while.

Greg stands up and walks determinedly across the kitchen toward the garage.

Concerned, Nancy turns.

NANCY
Where are you going?

GREG (O.S.)
To dig the grave.

The door to the garage slams shut.

Nancy listens to the scraping and clanking commotion as Greg searches amongst the tools for a shovel.

NANCY
(yelling)
Michael!

MICHAEL
(from the far end of the house)
Yeah?

NANCY
(yelling)
Go help your brother bury the cat.
EXT. BACKYARD – EVENING

The feline corpse, tied up in a white plastic bag, rests on the dull grass. A shovel audibly strikes the earth in steady successive thrusts, breaking up the soil.

Greg continues plunging the spade downward, scooping out hunks of dirt beside the bagged body.

Minutes later, Michael rounds the corner of the house and strolls hesitantly across the backyard. He halts at Greg’s back, watching.

Oblivious to Michael’s presence, Greg digs.

MICHAEL
You need any help?

Ceasing his work, Greg turns to Michael.

GREG
No, I can do it.

MICHAEL
Well, Mom told me to come help you.

Greg’s face droops a little.

GREG
Does she think I can’t do it?

MICHAEL
Man, I don’t know. She just wanted me to help you.

GREG
It’s just a goddamn hole. Jesus Christ.

The shovel slowly twirls in Greg’s hand, its tip faintly drilling into the softened ground.

MICHAEL
Just let me dig for a little bit, then.

GREG
Michael, I really can handle it.
MICHAEL
I know you can. Just take a break. And I can tell Mom that I helped you, and it will all be fine.

(beat)
Okay?

Greg tilts the shovel handle toward Michael; Michael takes hold and shuffles up to the gravesite.

As Michael begins shoveling, Greg plops down on the grass near the plastic bag, leaning back and extending his legs.

Greg stares at the bag as Michael works.

A gust flutters the plastic.

MICHAEL (O.S.)
We can get another cat, dude.

Greg watches the breeze move across the bag.

EXT. BACKYARD – LATE EVENING

Greg’s face is turned over his right shoulder, peering out at the dusk.

Standing alone in front of his completed excavation, Greg holds the thin plastic coffin, resting the body on his forearms.

He looks at the bag, looks away, looks down in the grave, then returns to the bag.

Greg bends over, cradling the corpse and lowering it into the hole, descending to his knees.

He chokes up, looking at the plastic down in the dirt.

GREG
Bye, kitty.

Greg grabs the shovel lying on the ground and begins raking the loose soil back into grave.
Eventually returning to his feet, he finishes filling the hole, repeatedly tossing splashes of earth onto the bagged corpse.

Sweat forms around his shirt collar and under his arms as he pants with progressive fatigue.

After packing down the last bits of dirt and grass with the underside of the shovel, Greg stamps thoroughly over the gravesite with his feet.

He gives the grave a long look as he inches away.

Moving with aching lethargy, Greg trudges back toward the house. The blade of the shovel drags behind him on the ground, scraping softly.

INT. GREG’S ROOM – NIGHT

Greg sleeps in the total dark. His breathing is heavy and deep.

His phone rings, muffled somewhere in the room.

Slowly, Greg awakens, sighing. Sitting up in bed, he looks around, scanning the room for the phone’s location.

He spies a faint glow in his pants pocket on the floor. Leaning over, he stretches out toward the glow and snatches the phone out of the pocket.

The phone reads, “Emily.”

Lying back in bed, he answers groggily. The phone glow lights his face.

GREG
Hey.

EMILY (O.S.)
Hey! Were you asleep?

GREG
Yeah, I’m pretty tired.

EMILY (O.S.)
It’s kinda early.

GREG
What time is it?

EMILY (O.S.)
Like 10, lazybones. I called you earlier. Did you not wanna talk?

GREG
I don’t know. Sorry.

EMILY (O.S.)
I’m beginning to think you’re a deadbeat.

GREG
No, my cat died.

EMILY (O.S.)
Holy shit. Are you serious?

GREG
I had to bury it.

EMILY (O.S.)
Oh my God. What happened?

GREG
A dog killed him, in the yard. I saw it.

EMILY (O.S.)
Are you alright?

GREG
I don’t know. I guess.
(beat)
It was that man from the old house, I think.

EMILY (O.S.)
What do you mean?

GREG
It was his dog. I think he made the dog do it.
EMILY (O.S.)
Jesus. Isn’t that illegal or something? What are you gonna do?

GREG
I don’t know yet.

EMILY (O.S.)
Greg, I’m so sorry.

GREG
Mom let him out. I know she did.

EMILY (O.S.)
I’m sorry.
(beat)
I’m gonna be home soon. Do you want to hang out or something? We can talk about it then if you want.
(beat)
I know you’re probably sleepy.

GREG
Yeah. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ignore you. I just . . .

EMILY (O.S.)
No, no. It’s okay. Oh, I got a copy of that book you were reading.

GREG
Which one?

EMILY (O.S.)
The Kafka one.

GREG
I don’t think I’m going to finish it.

EMILY (O.S.)
Really? Is it bad?

GREG
No, it’s just . . . I don’t know. It makes me feel crazy. I don’t want to feel like that. Not right now.
EMILY (O.S.)
I’m sorry, Greg. You know you can talk to me about anything, okay?

GREG
I know.

EMILY (O.S.)
Ready for bed again?

GREG
Mmmmm.

EMILY (O.S.)
Okay. Goodnight.

GREG
Night.

Greg rolls over and drops the phone to the floor.

INT. GREG’S ROOM - MORNING

A lint roller moves steadily over Greg’s blankets, removing traces of cat hair.

Greg stands hunched over near the foot of the bed, sweeping the roller repeatedly over the covers.

Nancy enters the room wearing her work scrubs. Greg pays her no mind. She lingers near the door before quietly taking a seat at Greg’s desk.

Greg glances slightly in her direction as he continues grooming his bed.

She watches him as he carries out his chore with care.

NANCY
You mind if we talk about something?

GREG
(facing away from her)
I don’t care.
She waits for him to face her.

NANCY
(leaning forward)
Will you stop doing that for a minute?

GREG
I’m almost done, Mom. Why, what’s up?

NANCY
I want to be able to look at you when I’m talking to you.

GREG
You can look at me now. I can hear you.

NANCY
Greg, put that thing down and turn around here.

GREG
Hold on a sec . . .

NANCY
I’m serious, Greg. You need to sit down.

GREG
(taken aback)
Okay, okay.

Greg lays the roller on the bed, turns, and plops on the edge of the mattress.

They sit, staring. Nancy drops her eyes, then raises them.

NANCY
Do you ever think about death?

He mulls the question over.

GREG
I think it’s impossible not to.

NANCY
Why do you say that?

GREG
It’s all over the place.

NANCY
You see death all over the place?

GREG
All over this house, at least.

NANCY
Is that how you really feel?

GREG
Well, yeah. I just had to bury the cat yesterday. Anniversary of Dad’s suicide is in two days. Am I, am I not supposed to be thinking about it?

NANCY
I didn’t say that.

GREG
But you’re suggesting it. I mean, isn’t it on your mind, too?

NANCY
Your father?

GREG
Yeah. Don’t you think about it all the time?

NANCY
I’m not talking about me, Greg. I want to know how you are.

GREG
What do you mean?

She pauses before responding.

NANCY
Do you ever just want to die?

GREG
(shocked)
What?
NANCY
I’m worried about you . . .

GREG
Uhh, okay.

NANCY
I think you’re depressed.

GREG
I feel totally normal. This is my normal state, Mom. There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m not depressed. I’m okay.

NANCY
How do you know?

GREG
Because I feel okay.

NANCY
You don’t act that way. You don’t act okay.

GREG
Neither do you. What do I act like?

NANCY
Like your dad.

GREG
What does that mean?

NANCY
Greg, I called your Aunt Sharon the other day. She gave me the number of someone who might help you . . .

GREG
I don’t need any help, Mom. What are you talking about?

NANCY
His name is Dr. Mime, and he’s a psychiatrist . . .
GREG
You want me to see a psychiatrist? Why?
I’m not crazy. What did I do?

NANCY
I know how you feel, Greg. I know how your father felt. I want to help you before you do anything. You might just need someone to talk to.

GREG
You think I’m gonna kill myself? Is that it?

NANCY
Greg . . .

GREG
I’m not going to a psychiatrist. I don’t believe in that crap. You know I don’t.

NANCY
You’re 17-years-old, Greg. You don’t know what you believe in yet.

GREG
So, this is what I get instead of church. If I don’t go to church and talk to Pastor McNeil, I go to the shrink?

NANCY
He’s a doctor, not a shrink. And this is not me punishing you. I’m not being the bad guy here.

GREG
(frustrated)
There’s nothing wrong with me!
Everything is clear. I’m okay.

NANCY
I don’t want to take the chance. I’m afraid, Greg. Just do it for me. Just go to the first appointment.

GREG
No!

NANCY
You don’t have a choice. You’re going, regardless.

GREG
Cancel it.

NANCY
I’ve already paid for three appointments. I can’t just cancel it.

GREG
You didn’t even ask me . . .

NANCY
I’m your mother. I don’t have to ask for your permission.

GREG
Why don’t you go?

NANCY
I don’t want to fight about this anymore.

They sit without speaking, without fighting.

NANCY (CONT’D)
You’re going. That’s final.

She gets up out of the desk chair slowly, standing in front of Greg.

NANCY
I love you.

Greg stares up at her with a tight expression.

NANCY (CONT’D)
I just want this all to be better. All of it.

She walks out of the room, her footsteps growing distant in the hall.
Greg remains on the bed. He picks up the lint/hair roller and angrily hurls it against the opposing wall of his room.

The roller smacks hard against the wall, chipping the paint and leaving a visible dent.

More thuds rhythmically sound with no visible cause, spaced unevenly . . .

INT. FIRE ROOM IN DESERTED HOME – AFTERNOON

. . . the cause of the thuds becomes apparent: rocks and chunks of destroyed material and bum trash being launched one-by-one against the crumbling walls of the deserted home, cracking and busting the wood and rot.

The popping sound of a fire and faint scuffling fills the lulls between throws.

Sitting in his chair, Greg continues chucking debris and detritus. A fire burns in the center of the room, between Greg and the wall.


INT. JUST OUTSIDE FIRE ROOM IN DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS

A soft rustling.

The cat-murdering dog sneaks up to the fire room’s entrance.

Resting on its haunches, the canine watches Greg quietly.

INT. FIRE ROOM IN DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS

Greg stares at the fire. The light shifts across his face.

He tosses a rock. It smacks the wall.

The creeping dog whimpers.

Startled, Greg snaps his head toward the dog. His expression sparks with recognition and blank rage.
The dog sits, mockingly.

Greg rises from his seat, his gaze locked on the dog’s black reflective eyes. He steps forward on the creaking floorboards.

Stepping back, the dog barks defensively.

A stalemate.

GREG
(yelling)
Hey!

Greg inches forward.

GREG
(yelling)
You fucker!
(beat)
Where’s the old man? Huh? Where is he?

Greg grabs a large hunk of debris and launches it at the animal, moving closer to the doorframe where it cowers.

The chunk strikes the dog, causing it to yelp and scamper off out of sight, tail between its legs.

GREG
Come back here!

Greg starts after the dog, leaving the fire flickering. He sprints outside.

EXT. DESERTED HOME - CONTINUOUS

Stepping out onto the grass, Greg breathes heavily and turns his head from side to side, searching for the dog in the surrounding field.

The sky has grayed.

A distant howl echoes from the nearby woods.

Greg turns his face to the trees, catching his breath.
Out of the corner of his eye, Greg notices a large shape quickly disappear around an edge of the building’s exterior.

Carefully, Greg sneaks up to and around the corner, peering stealthily in order to catch a glimpse of the mysterious figure.

Nothing - only the grass and the sky and the rotted exterior of the old home, undisturbed.

Greg halts and listens, his ear to the woods.

A racket thumps from inside the house. Hearing the noise, Greg turns and crouches, creeping up to a window. A rattling cough projects from within.

Through the filthy glass, Greg sees the fire room. Inside, the homeless man vigorously attempts to stamp out Greg’s fire, kicking at the blaze.

Greg bangs his fist against the window.

GREG
(yelling)
Hey! Hey!

Again, Greg slams his fist against the window. The glass splinters. A jagged shard slices a deep cut into Greg’s exposed forearm; he withdraws from the window in pain.

GREG
Fuck!

Alarmed by the breaking glass and Greg’s exclamation, the homeless man ceases his extinguishing, glaring through the busted window at Greg.

Blood oozes from Greg’s wound, he clutches at his forearm. He locks eyes with the homeless man.

The homeless man retreats into the adjacent room where Greg found him earlier.

Greg charges back around and into the house, blood dripping onto his clothes.
He stumbles as he rounds the corner, falls to one knee and pops back up, scrambling into the house.

INT. ADJACENT ROOM IN DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS

The room is shadowed and calm in the onset of twilight.

Greg’s scurrying steps approach, forecasting his subsequent breathless arrival at the room’s open doorway.

Leaning against the doorframe and gripping his ailing arm, Greg sighs heavily through his nose and blinks in long, exhausted intervals.

Strewn, ratty blankets and trash cover the floor. Greg spots a lumpy pile of covers in a far corner.

GREG
Are you in here?

Silence.

GREG (CONT’D)
Hello?

Silence. Greg directs his attention to the suspicious pile.

GREG
You coward. You fucking coward . . .

Stepping back, Greg extends his good arm and slams the door.

The room darkens. All remains still.

INT. FIRE ROOM IN DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS

In the burnt center of the floor, Greg’s blaze flutters weakly.

He approaches the embers, favoring his lacerated arm and wincing reservedly.
Greg hunkers over the fire. With his good arm, he removes a thick, burning stick from within. Careful to protect the flame, Greg shields it with his injured hand as he carries the torch to the crumbling cloth of the building’s curtains.

Greg lights the curtains on fire, the flames creeping upward slowly.

He proceeds to calmly burn the rest of the curtains.

Next, he begins igniting any flammable objects: wood, cloth, paper, sticks, etc. The room becomes engulfed with fire.

INT. OTHER ROOMS/CORRIDORS IN DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS

Greg methodically torches everything he can in the other rooms/areas of the old house, deliberately leaving the door to the homeless man’s adjacent room closed.

Every room ablaze, Greg drops the flaming stick.

INT. OUTSIDE OF ADJACENT ROOM – CONTINUOUS

The closed door.

The crackling, encroaching sound of fire.

Cutting through the fire’s sizzle is the scraping of dragged chair legs on wooden floor.

The chair comes to rest, propped by Greg at an angle against the doorknob of the adjacent room.

He exits.

EXT. DESERTED HOME – CONTINUOUS

Still bleeding, Greg walks away from the incinerated building, moving through the field, drained.

He looks back, continuing through the brittle grass. The fire is raging. The old rotted roof falls inward, crashing and partially bringing down the walls.
Turning away from the blaze, Greg trudges on.

The deserted home continues its collapse in the heat.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{INT. GREG’S CAR – DUSK}

The whirring hum of the car without music.

A ripped bit of cloth tourniquets Greg’s fresh wound.

He drives.

Greg’s ankles. His right one – sockless – flexes against the gas pedal. The left sits limply on the floorboard, still clothed in a sock identical in color to the makeshift bandage.

A red light.

Greg’s foot engages the brake pedal.

His face is distraught as the car comes to a stop.

The approaching shriek of a fire-truck, growing louder and louder.

Greg stares through the windshield at the source of the barreling noise. The stroboscopic red lights of the truck flash in his eyes.

His head turns as the fire-truck whooshes by traveling in the opposite direction. The vehicle out of sight, Greg looks forward.

The siren grows distant and then inaudible.

The traffic light turns green.

\textbf{INT. FRONT DOOR IN GREG’S HOME – CONTINUOUS}

Greg hurries through the door, opening it and slamming it behind him in haste.
The background becomes filled with the noise of the living room television as he enters.

Immediately, he heads down the hallway toward the bathroom, favoring his arm.

    NANCY (O.S.)
    (yelling)
    Greg? That you?

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Water rushes from the faucet.

Greg opens the mirror/medicine cabinet and grabs a tube of Neosporin and a handful of large bandages, placing them on the sink.

Breathing deeply, he unties his sock bandage and stuffs the soiled rag into his pocket. A ruddy crust of dried blood surrounds the slit in his arm.

He cautiously places his forearm under the water.

A knock at the door.

Startled, Greg turns and lunges toward the doorknob, twisting the lock shut.

The knob jiggles.

His wet arm drips on the bathroom floor. He moves back to the sink, scrubbing off the fresh scabbing.

    NANCY (O.S.)
    Honey, are you okay?

Greg winces as he scrubs. Blood trickles out of the reopened cut.

    GREG
    Yeah. Uh, I’m just gonna hop in the shower, I think.

    NANCY (O.S.)
    Um, okay. Are you, are you still mad
at me?

He continues washing, adding soap, which mixes with the pinkish water in the basin.

   NANCY (O.S.)
Greg?

   GREG
(snapping)
I don’t know, Mom. Can we just talk when I get out?

   NANCY (O.S.)
(softly)
Yeah. I just, I don’t want you to be mad. I want you to understand . . .

   GREG
What?

Greg turns off the faucet to listen.

A beat.

   NANCY (O.S.)
(softly)
Nothing. Dinner’s almost ready.

Greg begins gently removing his shirt.

   GREG
Okay. I’ll hurry.

Nancy’s footsteps move down the hallway beyond the bathroom door.

Gingerly pulling his shirt over his wounded arm, Greg continues undressing.

After taking it off, he smells his shirt, noticing the stench of smoke on his clothes.

He removes the rest of his clothing, piling it item-by-item on the floor.
The splatter of the showerhead beginning to drizzle water into the tub.

The whoosh of the shower curtain closing.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Greg, Nancy, and Michael sit at the kitchen table, eating.

Nancy is positioned in between the two boys. The chair across from her is unused and empty.

The three of them pick at their food. Silverware clinks against china as they sift through their portions.

Each of their plates is filled with an ample serving of taco salad. The various condiments for the meal rest in bowls and jars in the center of the table.

Greg is wearing a long-sleeved shirt, which covers his bandaged forearm. He scratches at it, over his shirt, between bites.

Nancy clears her throat in the relative quiet.

    NANCY
    (to Greg)
    One of the girls at the clinic was talking about some kittens she wants to get rid of today. I told her we might be interested in taking one off her hands.

Surprised, Greg glances at Michael.

Michael catches Greg’s eyes, looks down, then back up.

Greg turns to Nancy. She is confused.

Lowering his gaze, Greg returns to his plate, pushing his food around.

    GREG
    I don’t want another cat.

A silence.
NANCY
I just thought it might be nice.

Greg doesn’t respond.

He continues eating. Nancy and Michael uneasily follow suit.

Greg scratches at his arm.

Michael looks up from his food.

MICHAEL
Is Greg really going to a shrink?

NANCY
(chastising)
Michael!

MICHAEL
(taken aback)
Sorry, I was just asking. Geez.

Nancy glares at Michael, her mouth tight.

Greg ignores them, scooping up mouthfuls.

NANCY
We don’t need to discuss that at the dinner table.

They sit in the tension. Greg’s fork clinks on his plate.

The phone rings in the living room.

After the second ring, Nancy scoots back her chair, gets up and leaves the kitchen.

Greg looks at Michael. Michael averts his eyes.

The phone rings a third time.

Nancy’s chair sits empty.

NANCY (O.S.)
(on the phone)
Hello?
(beat)
Hello?

INT. KITCHEN – LATE NIGHT

Alone, in dim light, Greg soaks and scrubs dishes at the sink.

His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows. The lower portion of his bandages are damp.

The plates and glasses slish and slosh in the sink’s soapy water. Greg removes them, drying each dish with a rag before placing it in its proper cabinet.

As Greg washes, the living room television faintly projects storm sounds of rain and thunder beating down and whipcracking throughout the beginning of Dario Argento’s Suspiria.

The nearby oven clock reads 11:36.

Calmly, Greg puts away the last dish and drains the sink.

He dries his hands. The sink drain bubbles and gulps.

Greg flicks off the kitchen lights and enters the living room.

INT. LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Suspiria continues on the television, Goblin’s score eerily emanating amidst the thunder and rushing water.

Greg walks to the front door and turns off the porch light.

Moving back to the living room, he turns off the ceiling light, then a lamp in the corner.

All that remains is the television. He presses the “power” button as the film’s soundtrack intensifies. The television screen goes black. The sound blips off.

The house is quiet and dark.
Greg tiptoes down the hallway.

INT. HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

Passing Nancy’s room, Greg overhears muffled sobbing through her ajar door.

He stops.

Without a sound, Greg inches toward the door. Bracing himself with his hands, he presses his ear against it.

The crying becomes more audible. Slurred mutterings are interspersed in the sniffles.

Greg cradles the doorknob, silently widening the crack in the door. He looks down, shifting his eyes.

NANCY (O.S.)
(mumbling)
... stupid, stupid ... God ...

More sobs.

Gently, Greg twists the knob and shuts Nancy’s door flush with the doorframe, muting the crying.

He pulls away from the door, softly stepping down the hall.

He looks back at Nancy’s door for a moment.

Turning away, Greg continues down the hall and disappears into his room.25

INT. KITCHEN – MORNING

A large vase of fresh red roses rests on the kitchen table.

Greg and Michael sit at the opposite end of the table, eating. A hot breakfast of eggs, bacon, biscuits, and gravy steams on plates at the ends of their forks.

The television newscaster’s voice sing-songs softly from the living room:
NEWSCASTER #1 (O.S.)
Looks like it’s gonna be a lovely Friday, folks – highs in the 60s, lows getting down to the 40s, partly cloudy – but tomorrow is the real beauty. Expect temperatures in the mid 70s and lots of sunshine on what’s shaping up to be one of the most pleasant October days in recent memory; it should make for a warm weekend before the winter chill comes on next week . . .

Michael glances at the flowers on the table.

MICHAEL
I don’t think I’m going tomorrow.

GREG
Why not?

MICHAEL
Don’t want to.

GREG
You’re not gonna go at all?

Michael shakes his head.

GREG
Well, I’m going by myself. You can just go with me if you want. I told Mom I’m getting my own flowers and stuff.

MICHAEL
No, I just don’t want to go. I don’t think it would be good.

GREG
You’ve been there before, dude. This isn’t the first time we’ve been to the grave. It won’t be a big deal.

MICHAEL
Just not tomorrow. It’s different.

GREG
I guess . . .

MICHAEL
I’m just not going, so don’t let Mom give me shit about it.

GREG
You know she’s going to. She’s even pissed that I want to go by myself. You know how she is.

MICHAEL
I don’t know. She’s being weird. She never cooks like this. I don’t know what she’ll do.

GREG
I think she’s just freaking out a little.

MICHAEL (somberly)
Yeah . . .

They continue eating – clinking and creaking.

NEWSCASTER #2 (O.S.)
A local investigation into a potential arson claim surrounding the recent incineration of an abandoned building near Route 60 came to a close yesterday when police ruled the fire a “careless accident.”

Greg perks up, titling his head. He stops chewing as he listens.

NEWSCASTER #2 (O.S.)
(CONT’D)
Officials believe that the unidentified man, whose body was found amidst the rubble, was responsible for the blaze, which eventually engulfed the building and the man, who was presumably trapped. Some investigators suggest that the unidentified man may have intentionally burned himself alive, however, police remain hesitant about
ruling the death a suicide. Any viewers with information regarding the fire are encouraged to contact the state police.

NEWSCASTER #3 (O.S.)
A recent study on state agriculture claims that . . .

Greg resumes chewing and swallows.

GREG
Emily’s coming over later.

MICHAEL
You gonna fuck her?

GREG (shocked)
What?

MICHAEL (smirking)
You heard me.

GREG
You’re an idiot.

MICHAEL
I didn’t mean to make you mad. I was just kiddin’.

GREG
I’m not mad.

MICHAEL
Yes, you are.
(beat)
Are you still a virgin?

GREG
Why does it matter?

MICHAEL
I don’t know. Just asking.

GREG
I wouldn’t tell you. You’d tell Mom.

MICHAEL
Would not. That’s stupid.

GREG
Yes, you would!

MICHAEL
I don’t tell her anything. And if I do, I lie.

Michael returns to eating, dropping the conversation.

Greg gives him a look, then scoops up a final bite.

Rising from his chair, Greg turns to the sink. He drops his dish in the basin and turns on the faucet.

GREG
(turned away)
I’m still a virgin.

MICHAEL
(still eating)
So am I.

The water patters in the sink.

INT. GREG’S ROOM – AFTERNOON

Greg’s finger hesitantly slides beneath his worn bandages. Moving gently back-and-forth on his skin, the finger loosens the bandages, lifting them slightly.

Greg exhales deeply.

He sits on his bed. An opened tube of Neosporin rests on his leg.

Gingerly unsticking his bandages, Greg continues sliding his finger.

He peeks at his now-exposed wound.

With one hand, he mashes the Neosporin tube, squeezes out a dollop and uses his finger to spread it over the reddened, scabby flesh.
A faint knocking.

Furrowing his brow and leaning to peer out his window, Greg applies more ointment to his arm.

The knocking again.

    NANCY (O.S.)
    (yelling)
    I’ll get it!

Startled, Greg fumbles the Neosporin onto the floor before nudging it under the bed with his heel.

The distant squeak of the front door opening.

    NANCY (O.S.)
    Hi, Emily.

    EMILY (O.S.)
    Hey! Greg’s home, right?

He quickly presses his bandages back to his skin, rubbing them smooth

    NANCY (O.S.)
    I believe he’s in his room. You can come on in, sweetie.

The front door shuts firmly amidst the commotion of her entrance.

Greg rolls his shirtsleeve back down to his wrist.

    NANCY (O.S.)
    (softly)
    Did he tell you what happened to the cat?

    EMILY (O.S.)
    Yeah . . . he seemed a little upset about it.

Grabbing the television remote, Greg hastily reclines on his bed and flips on the tube. He mutes it to listen to the approaching conversation.
NANCY (O.S.)
You know, he was very attached. (pause)
It’s been hard for all of us this week.
It was this time last year that Greg’s father passed.

EMILY (O.S.)
(condolingly)
I know, I’m sorry. It must be tough.

NANCY (O.S.)
(entering the hall)
 Tomorrow makes it a year
to the day.\textsuperscript{26}

Greg un-mutes the television and feigns attention. A basketball game skronks and whistles on the screen.

Moments later, his bedroom door cracks open. Emily enters, smiling.

EMILY
Hey, handsome.

GREG
(smirking)
Hey.

Greg sits up Indian style on the bed. Emily moves to him with her arms outstretched.

As she sits down on the bed beside him, he leans into her hug. She is perpendicular to Greg, so that her legs hang over the bedside.

EMILY
(hugging)
I missed you.

GREG
(hugging back)
Missed you too.

She pulls back and looks him in the eyes.

EMILY
You okay?
Greg locks in on her concerned irises.

GREG
Yeah. Um, yeah, I think so.

EMILY
Your mom was talking . . .

GREG
I heard her. Did I tell you she’s sending me to therapy?

EMILY
No . . . Are you serious?

GREG
Yeah. I think it’s more for her than me.

A silence.

EMILY
Are you really okay, Greg?

He drops his head a bit.

GREG
I don’t know. It’s been weird.

EMILY
What’s been weird?

GREG
A lot of stuff. The cat thing. And the stuff about Dad. And, just I don’t know. I mean, I don’t know.

(beat)
I could be a lot worse than I am.

EMILY
I know it’s a lot at once.

Greg nods.

Emily puts her hand on his.

He glances down.
She squeezes.

He looks up.

She kisses him deeply.

Their lips disentangle slowly.

She caresses his face.

EMILY
I’m sorry I wasn’t here. I’m here now.
(beat)
Okay?

Greg’s watering eyes search her face, inching closer.

He holds her face in his hands and returns the kiss. Emily’s hand clasps gently onto his wrist.

Her legs kick out slightly and fall back against the bedside.

INT. VIDEO STORE – EVENING

Greg wanders through the rows of shelves at a local video store. Emily peruses a few rows away.

Well-lit and nearly empty, the store is tidy. Movie posters adorn the walls. Two clerks run the counter, mumbling fuzzy conversations, surrounded by candy racks and soda fridges.

In the “Horror” section, Greg stops his slow glide through the aisles.

He grabs a DVD case from the shelf before him – Pet Sematary. Holding the case, Greg turns to look for Emily. He spies her near the “Drama” shelves.

GREG
(whispering)
Emily!

She doesn’t hear him.
GREG (CONT’D)  
(whispering)  
Emily!

Confused, she spins toward his voice.

He holds up the DVD case and nods to her.

She strains to see, smirks, and meanders through the rows to him, a DVD in hand.

Once she gets close enough, he hands her the movie.

She scans the cover and gives him a skeptical look.

EMILY  
Very funny, Greg.

GREG  
You get it though, right?

EMILY  
Yes, I get it.  
(beat)  
Maybe you should go see a psychiatrist.

Greg chuckles nervously.

Emily looks at him fondly and tousles his hair before planting a kiss on his cheek.

She puts Pet Sematary back on the shelf and holds out her selection: Dances with Wolves.

Greg looks at her in momentary silence.

GREG  
Are you serious?

EMILY  
What?

GREG  
Emily, this movie sucks. Like, it’s awful.

She flips the case over to read the back.
EMILY
(looking at the DVD)
It says it won like a million Oscars.

GREG
It’s like Nyquil. It’s boring, like super boring. I’ve tried to watch it multiple times and I always fall asleep. I don’t even know what happens in the last two hours.

EMILY
Jesus, how long is it?

GREG
Three hours, at least.

EMILY
Well, a lot of people apparently like it.

GREG
I don’t.

EMILY
So?

GREG
Trust me. It’s agony. It’s Kevin Costner, man.

EMILY
(shrugging)
I like him.

GREG
(sarcastically)
Okay . . .

A beat.

EMILY
Well, then you pick something.

Greg stands slouched, his face tense in thought.
They make their way toward the “Drama” section. Greg takes the lead.

GREG
(turning to her)
Have you ever seen Taxi Driver?

EMILY
No. Is it depressing?

GREG
(amused)
I guess so. Why?

EMILY
You always like depressing movies.

GREG
Sounds like my mom.

EMILY
Sorry, I’m just saying.
(beat)
I mean, it’s true.

GREG
There is nothing inherently wrong with depressing movies.

EMILY
I would rather watch something that makes me feel good.

They arrive at the “T”s.

GREG
You’d be missing out on some pretty good stuff if you always adopted that policy.

EMILY
I’d probably be happier.

GREG
I doubt it.

EMILY
You should try it.

GREG
Happy movies won’t make me a happy person.

Greg snags the DVD and hands it to Emily

GREG
It’s by the same guy who directed Goodfellas and you liked that.

EMILY
Yeah, but it has a lot of voiceover.

GREG
(smiling)
So does Taxi Driver. I didn’t know you liked voiceover so much.

EMILY
It makes me feel like someone is reading a story to me.
(beat)
It’ll help put me to sleep if it gets too depressing.

GREG
Let’s get it, then.

Greg takes the movie out of her hand and out of frame.

The opening of Bernard Herrmann’s saxophone-laden Taxi Driver score begins . . .

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATE EVENING

. . . and continues as the film’s opening shots of the cab, the fog, the lights, and the streets fill the screen of Greg’s living room television.

In the dark, Greg and Emily occupy the couch. Her body leans against his. Her legs are tucked up on the cushions, his are on the carpet. Between them is a bowl of popcorn, which they pick at lackadaisically.
They watch as Travis Bickle first appears on-screen, looking for a job at the taxicab office.

Greg begins playfully tossing puffs of popcorn up and catching them on his tongue.

Emily notices.

He misses a couple, but makes enough.

Emily looks at him, smiling.

Emily looks at him, smiling.

EMILY
Toss me one.

She scoots away to create sufficient distance.

GREG
(falsely stern)
Watch the movie.

EMILY
Just one. I’ll catch it.

Amused, he plucks a piece and aims.

GREG
You ready?

EMILY
(mouth open)
Uh huh.

He flings the popcorn, which bounces off Emily’s forehead and drops. She bobbles the stray kernel in her hands before grabbing it and plopping it into her mouth with an exaggerated bite.

EMILY
(sarcastically)
Good shot.

GREG
(smirking)
That was just practice.

He primes another popcorn projectile.
GREG  
(continuing)  
This one’s for real.

Emily wets her lips with her tongue and parts them.

On the television, Travis Bickle’s voiceover broods.

Greg releases the popcorn, which lands squarely on Emily’s protruding tongue. Surprised, her eyes light up.

They give each other a high-five.

GREG  
Nice catch!

EMILY  
(in a regal accent)  
Ah, thank you.

After the high-five, their hands drop, still touching.

Their fingers interlock.

Emily lays her head back on Greg’s shoulder.

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT – MINUTES LATER

On the television, Travis Bickle takes Betsy out on a date to a porn film.

Greg and Emily watch as Travis and Betsy enter the theater. Emily’s eyes are droopy.

Travis and Betsy are seated as the porn film plays. Betsy is uneasy as they watch.

Greg and Emily watch Travis and Betsy watching the porn film.

Infuriated, Betsy storms out. Travis chases after her. They have a confrontation outside the theater.

Greg and Emily watch. Emily is nearly asleep.
EMILY  
(mumbling)  
Pervert . . .

Greg looks down at her.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - MINUTES LATER

Travis Bickle calls Betsy on the phone in the film.

Emily is sound asleep on Greg’s shoulder. Their sitting position has slightly shifted.

Travis speaks desperately into the phone.

Nancy walks through the living room into the kitchen.

Greg turns to look at her - gently, so as not to disturb Emily.

Nancy doesn’t acknowledge Greg and merely flips on the kitchen light before getting a glass of water. After gulping the water, she sets the glass on the counter and turns off the light before walking back through the living room.

Greg observes her in his periphery.

As Nancy disappears down the hall, the camera in Taxi Driver begins its slow pan right while Travis continues his unanswered call to Betsy.

Greg watches, concerned.

      GREG (V.O.)
      Wake up. Wake up, Emily.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - AN HOUR LATER

Greg soothingly shakes Emily.

The closing theme music for Taxi Driver plays over the end credits.

      GREG
The movie’s over, Emily.

EMILY
(groggy)
Hmmm?

GREG
(smiling)
Wake up!

She starts to squirm and stretch.

EMILY
It’s already over? How long was I asleep?

GREG
Almost the whole movie.

Emily’s shoulders relax.

EMILY
Really?

GREG
(laughing and nodding)
Yeah.

EMILY
I’m sorry.

GREG
It’s okay. You can always watch it again.

She rubs her eyes.

EMILY
What time is it?

GREG
About 10:30.

EMILY
(flustered)
Shit. I gotta get home.
She starts to get up. Greg puts his hand to hers.

GREG
You can stay as long as you want. My mom doesn’t really care.

EMILY
My mom does.

She squeezes his hand and rises completely.

Greg stands up to meet her.

She puts her arms around his neck. They stand close and quiet.

EMILY
(routinely)
Will you call me tomorrow?

GREG
Mhmmm.

EMILY
Okay.

Greg follows her to the door at a distance, standing anxiously as she slips into her shoes.

Shoes on, Emily opens the door and waves to Greg.

EMILY
I’ll talk to you tomorrow.

GREG
Alright. Drive safe.

EMILY
Bye.

GREG
Bye.

She steps out. The door closes behind her.
Greg moves to a nearby window, watching as she starts her car and drives off, her headlights streaming through the house.

He exhales and makes a puckering sound with his lips.

The saxophone slurs of the *Taxi Driver* theme rise and fall in the television speakers.²⁷

INT. GREG’S ROOM – MORNING

Recently showered, Greg stands in his underwear and wet hair at his closet.

His room is softly lit. The scraping and thudding of closet-scouring rumbles as Greg pulls out garments and neatly lays them on the bed.

Black slacks.

White button-down shirt.

Black tie.

Black suit jacket.

Shutting the closet, Greg steps to the bed, rubbing his wet hair to dry it.

Greg stands at the bedside. He gently removes his arm bandages, pulling them completely off. His partially-healed cut is exposed – a dark pink hue.

Without re-bandaging, Greg gets dressed calmly, as in a ritual: slacks, shirt, tie, jacket.

He gets up and reaches into a drawer, retrieving a pair of black socks. Sitting on the bed, Greg pulls the socks over his bare feet. Black dress shoes wait on the floor. He squeezes into them.

Standing up, Greg adjusts his tie and walks out the door; he shuts it as he exits.

INT. HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS
Greg walks down the hallway from his room.

The living room television is audible.

INT. LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Entering the living room, Greg sees Nancy on the couch in a blue nightgown, watching the morning news.

Spaced and oblivious, she says nothing.

Approaching the front door, Greg briefly turns.

GREG

Bye, Mom.

No response.

He walks out the door, quietly.

INT. GREG’S CAR – AFTERNOON

Greg sits in his parked car at the cemetery. He looks out the rain droplet-speckled windshield at the expanse of dying grass and marbly slabs. In the passenger seat, a bouquet of white, blue and purple flowers lays, freshly bought.

He rubs his fingers at his temple and then down his face. Misty drizzle continues to fleck the car’s windows.

After a moment, Greg snatches the flowers from the seat, opens his door, shuts it, and starts his walk.

EXT. CEMETARY – CONTINUOUS

Greg walks through dewy grass amidst the rows of headstones, running his free hand along the cool, hard surfaces of the stones as he passes.

He comes to a gap in the grid-like pattern – a freshly dug grave, still awaiting its casket. Slowing to a near stop,
he discreetly looks down into the chasm, its dirt dark and moist from the rain.

He walks on.

Navigating the graves, he comes to his father’s plot. The plain, charcoal gray stone reads:

Jonathan Gregory Sampson

1967-2008

A Beloved Husband and Father

Greg stands at the grave, staring. Brown, withered flowers lie at the foot of the headstone.

A faint melody approaches – an elderly woman warbling “Amazing Grace.” Her voice is coated in phlegm and her colloquial notes are interrupted by hacking coughs and deep swallows.

Greg squats down and places his bouquet on the grass at his side. He gathers the dead flowers from the grave, holding the brittle stems in one hand. With his other hand, he takes his bouquet and lays it up against the headstone.

The singing draws nearer.

He stands, wadding up the decayed plants and shoving them into his pocket.

The voice is upon him, wavering and wheezing. An elderly woman, walking arm-in-arm with a younger man – presumably her son – enters into Greg’s periphery. The two move together step-by-difficult step as she croaks the hymn.

Greg watches them as they pass. His eyes grow shaky.

The elderly woman releases a violent whoop from her lungs and her son hands her a tissue to cover her mouth. She stops her song. They move out Greg’s sight.

Greg stares at the headstone, near tears.

His cell phone rings. After taking the phone out of his pocket, he looks at the screen – “Mom.” He answers.
GREG
(quavering)
Hey.

No response.

GREG
Mom?

No response.

GREG
Can you hear me?
(beat)
Are you there?

No response.

He hangs up and looks at the phone, confused. He puts the phone in his pocket.

Standing at his father’s grave, he wipes his eyes and sniffs hard before exhaling.

INT. GREG’S CAR – LATE AFTERNOON

Greg drives through the rain-sprinkled streets.

He listens to “No More Runnin” by Animal Collective at a low volume as he coasts past homes and trees and green lights.

He pulls into his driveway, turns off the car. The song stops. It’s very quiet.

Greg climbs out of his car.

EXT. FRONT YARD – CONTINUOUS

Still dressed in his suit, Greg saunters through the yard and enters the house through the front door, humming the Animal Collective song.
INT. FRONT DOOR/LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS

The natural light from outside is squelched in the dim house.

Greg finds Michael lazily sprawled on the couch, watching Vh1 on television.

    GREG
    You seen Mom?

    MICHAEL
    (half-interested)
    Not in a while. Why?

    GREG
    She called me and I think lost service or something. Call fucked up.

Looking for Nancy, Greg wanders into the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN – CONTINUOUS

Poking his head around, Greg paces in the empty kitchen, all clean and ordered.

    GREG
    Is she even home?

    MICHAEL (O.S.)
    I don’t know.
    (beat)
    I think so.

Without results, Greg leaves the kitchen and heads for his room.

INT. LIVING ROOM/HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

He strides past Michael and into the hallway, glancing back at the door to Nancy’s room.

He stops and eases up to the door.

He knocks. No answer.
Greg continues down the hall to his room.

INT. GREG’S ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Standing at his bedside, Greg takes off his suit jacket and lays it on the mattress.

He loosens his tie and rolls up his sleeves before reaching into his pocket.

As Greg digs out his cell phone, brittle fragments of the old cemetery flowers spill out of his pocket, unnoticed.

He dials Nancy’s number, waiting for the ring.

When the ringing begins in Greg’s ear, the tweeting tune of Nancy’s cell phone blares up, audibly close-by. Greg turns his head suddenly in the direction of his mother’s cell phone ring tone: the hallway.

Phone at his ear, Greg moves into the hallway.

INT. HALLWAY/OUTSIDE NANCY’S DOOR – CONTINUOUS

Puzzled, Greg walks toward the sound, finding it loudest at Nancy’s door.

He eyes the door and stops.

He puts his ear to the wood. The ringing is coming from within her room.

Placing his hand on the doorknob, Greg turns it and slowly pushes open the door.

Nancy’s cell phone rings loudly.

Greg steps into the room with the door partially opened.

INT. NANCY’S ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Greg opens the door the rest of the way.
He sees Nancy, sitting hunched over in her blue gown at the foot of the bed. A soiled knife is on the floor. She holds her arms out on her knees; they are covered in blood. Her wrists are slashed deeply, vertically, along the veins. She is sobbing and rocking slightly back-and-forth.

Greg hangs up the phone and drops it to the floor, frozen.

Nancy turns to him slowly, her eyes ravaged from crying.

NANCY
(with solemn detachment)
He did it just like this. You see?

Speechless, Greg starts crying.

Nancy turns away from him, looking down at her gory wrists.

Greg blinks.

GREG
(yelling)
Michael! Call 911! Now!

MICHAEL (O.S.)
(yelling back)
What are you talking about?

GREG
(yelling)
Just fucking DO IT! Call now!

He rushes to Nancy, bends over and scoops up her limp body in his arms.

NANCY
(whispering)
I’m sorry . . .

Greg turns and carries her out of the room.

INT. HALLWAY/LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS

His feet thumping under Nancy’s added weight, Greg trudges down the hall.
As he enters the living room, Michael sees him.

Michael’s eyes widen and his brow furrows. He holds the phone at his ear.

Greg gives him a stern look, approaching the couch with Nancy in his arms.

    MICHAEL
    (into the phone)
    We need an ambulance. My mom tried to kill herself.
    (the operator speaks)

Carefully, Greg lowers Nancy to the couch. The television continues behind them.

    MICHAEL (CONT’D)
    (into the phone)
    With a knife, she cut herself.
    (the operator speaks)
    21 East 3rd Street.

He hangs up the phone and set it down. Tears start welling in his eyes.

Greg kneels by Nancy beside the couch. She grows paler by the moment. Her blood is smeared on Greg’s white shirt and her blue gown. She keeps crying. Greg tends to her, his hand on her forehead, his other holding hers.

    GREG
    (yelling)
    Get a towel! Get water! Go get something, Mike!
    (beat)
    What were you doing this whole time?

    MICHAEL
    (yelling back, crying)
    How was I supposed to know? What the fuck was I supposed to do?

    GREG
    (yelling)
    Just get a fucking towel, Michael! Goddamnit!
Michael trips his way into the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN – CONTINUOUS

Searching around, Michael hurriedly grabs the first reasonable item – a roll of paper towels.

He darts back into the living room.

INT. LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Michael holds out the roll of paper towels to Greg.

MICHAEL
Here!

Greg looks up from Nancy.

GREG
(frustrated)
I said a towel, you idiot!

Michael starts crying harder. He throws down the towels.

MICHAEL
(rubbing his face)
Fuck . . .

GREG
Go!

Michael exits the living room, headed for the laundry room.

Nancy starts moaning. She suddenly lifts up her arms, touching her face with her hands and smearing blood everywhere.

Greg gently reaches out and pulls her hands away from her cheeks and mouth. He holds her down.

GREG
(whispering)
Shhhhh. It’s okay. Shhhhhhh.
Towel in hand, Michael returns.

    MICHAEL
    (muttering under his breath)
    Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, . . .

Nancy sobs.

    GREG
    (reaching out)
    Gimme the towel.

Michael hands him the towel then backs away a few steps.

Greg spreads out the towel and places it under Nancy’s arms. He takes the sides of the towel and wraps them over her open wounds, protecting them.

Nancy calms slightly, her breathing longer and slower.

Greg caresses her forehead. He brushes her hair out of her eyes.

    GREG
    (whispering)
    It’s okay, Mom. It’s gonna be okay.
    We’ve got you.

She starts crying again.

An ambulance siren sounds outside, quickly growing closer.

    GREG
    (whispering)
    It’s okay . . . It’s okay . . .

The siren blasts and squeals as the ambulance arrives.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Michael and Greg sit in chairs against a beige wall near a hospital room.

In the chair nearest to the room’s door, Michael sits doubled-over, his forehead on his crossed arms. Beside him,
Greg sits straight with his head leaned back against the wall. His eyes are closed.

The sounds of shuffling papers, squeaky plastic wheels, opening and shutting doors, and intermittently ringing phones provide ambient noise in the otherwise quiet hall.

After a moment, a nurse appears from within the nearby room. As the door opens, the three sitting youths turn their attention to the sound.

The nurse steps toward the chairs. She gives the group a condoling look.

    NURSE
    (understated)
    She wants to see Greg.

Greg rises wearily. Michael stirs and looks up at Greg as he stands.

The nurse stands at the door, holding it open.

Greg walks up to her. He half-intentionally makes eye-contact.

She takes the bait.

    NURSE
    (soothingly)
    It’s okay, honey.

Lowering his eyes, he passes by her, into the darkened room.

She carefully shuts the door behind him and walks down the hall.

Michael waits.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Greg moves slowly through the hospital room.

The cardiac monitor bleeps at a regular interval.
A lamp beams diffused light from behind a thin partitioning curtain.

Greg passes the curtain and enters the nook containing Nancy’s bed.

He sees her, swathed in blankets and a hospital gown. Her arms lie crossed on her stomach, wrapped from palm to elbow in white bandages. Her face is pale and splotchy. Her eyes sockets seem to be stained a sickly pink color. Her hair is oily and disheveled.

She looks up at him, straining a slight smile.

He instantly drops his eyes and shuffles to the chair by the bed, sitting down without a sound.

They sit quietly for a long time – Nancy looking at Greg, Greg looking at his own hands.

NANCY
(smiling a bit)
Amy’s a nice girl, isn’t she?

GREG
Who?

NANCY
That nurse. Amy. I used to work with her over at the clinic. She’s been real nice to me. She’s a sweet girl.

GREG
She seemed okay.

He starts to look up a bit.

NANCY
How’s your brother?

GREG
He’s fine.

Nancy nods.

NANCY
Tell him this was not his fault, Greg.
Be sure he knows.
(beat)
You know how he can get.

GREG
I know.
(beat)
He knows.

NANCY
It’s just . . .

She trails off into a sigh. She reaches for Greg’s hand, laying hers on it.

NANCY
(looking directly at him)
I’m sorry, Greg.

Greg gives her a tense look but says nothing.

NANCY (CONT’D)
I didn’t mean to put you through this again.

Glancing at their hands, Greg pulls his out from under hers. Nancy lets her hand passively move to rest on his leg.

NANCY (CONT’D)
I mean it . . . I just want you to understand what happened . . .

GREG
(snapping)
I do understand.
(beat)
You don’t have to say anything.

They are silent for a while.

NANCY
But I want to say something.
(beat)
I want to say . . .
(choking up)
I want to say, “thank you.”
Greg doesn’t respond. He swallows hard.

Nancy’s lower lip trembles and her brow lowers.

    NANCY (CONT’D)
    (crying a little)
    And I want to tell you, “I’m sorry,”
    and that this should not be your
    burden. This should not be on your
    hands, or your brother’s.
    (beat)
    And you haven’t done anything wrong,
    honey.
    (crying harder)
    You haven’t done anything. And I’ve
    ruined it. All of it.

Greg takes her hand again.

    NANCY (CONT’D)
    (sobbing)
    I let it all go. I let it all go . . .

Her speech becomes absorbed in her weeping. Greg watches
her as he blinks spare, silent tears.

    NANCY (CONT’D)
    (still sobbing)
    . . . and I don’t know what to do.

Greg looks at her, stilling his thoughts.

    GREG
    (sincerely)
    It’s okay, Mom.
    (beat)
    I don’t know what to do either.

He rubs her hand in his. They are quiet.

    NANCY
    (calming her tears)
    I’m proud of you.

Greg rises from the chair, and, standing at the bedside,
lays his body against his mother’s, taking her in his arms.
Nancy kisses the top of his head.

GREG
(softly)
I love you, Mom.
(beat)
I’m here.

He holds her tired body in the low light of the hospital lamp.29

FADE TO BLACK

EXT. SIDE OF HOUSE/BACKYARD – EARLY AFTERNOON – WEEKS LATER

Greg walks to the backyard, carrying an armful of wooden boards.

The sun shines meekly and without brilliance.

Arriving at the unfinished back deck, Greg unloads the boards. They clap together as they hit the grass.

He wipes his hands on his pants and walks back to the front yard.

EXT. FRONT YARD/DRIVEWAY – CONTINUOUS

Greg rounds the house.

His car is in the driveway. The front passenger door is ajar. Nancy sits in the seat, gathering up her purse and a few bags. The trunk is popped up.

GREG
(loudly)
Mike, are you getting the nails?

After scuffling around for a bit, Michael slams the trunk down with one arm, holding boxes of nails with the other.

MICHAEL
Yeah, I got ’em.
Michael walks to the front of the vehicle.

NANCY
(too quietly)
Greg, do you need this?

He doesn’t hear her. She climbs all the way out of the car.

NANCY
(louder, holding out a hammer)
Do you need this hammer?

GREG
(nodding toward his arms)
Put it on top.

She places it on his stack of boards. He re-balances his load.

NANCY
You got it?

GREG
(straining)
Mmhmm.

Nancy shuts her door.

Michael approaches Greg and piles the boxes of nails onto his bundle of boards.

Greg gives him a look.

GREG
(turning away)
Help Mom.

Nancy shuffles along slowly.

NANCY
I’m alright.

Michael goes to her anyway, taking her bags and purse and walking beside her up to the front door.

Greg carries the supplies around the house to the backyard.
EXT. BACKYARD – CONTINUOUS

Perspiring, Greg smoothly unloads the tools and wood onto the most completed area of the back deck.

He climbs onto the deck, positioning himself on his knees as he lays out a board and opens a box of nails.

Steadying a nail in one corner, he begins hammering. The chiming thuds of the metal-on-metal and the echoed vibrations of the wood clash as he pounds.

Finishing that nail, he begins another.

Michael appears out of the back door, carrying his own hammer. He walks to the deck, hops on, and steps to the other end of Greg’s board.

Michael fishes a nail out of one of the boxes. As Greg continues driving his second nail, Michael begins tapping his first one.

Their hammers clang. They work for a long while, without speaking.

CUT TO BLACK

The sounds of the hammer swings continue, layered over one another in cacophonous syncopation.

Slowly, they fade into silence.30

THE END
Here, it is important to note that the performer in question, like all performers in the eventual film, will be an amateur actor. Keeping with Bresson and Tarkovsky’s mutual utilization of amateur performers in order to achieve a conflict between documentary “reality” and fictive representation in their films, *The Collapse* will be performed solely by amateurs. In doing this, the film will achieve cinematic absurdity in its inexpressive, unconventional performative approach, thwarting dramatic/narrative expectations by presenting characters that are depicted according to non-theatrical, inscrutable, seemingly abstracted aesthetics while also being resolutely rooted in the personae of actual people, their personalities bleeding into the characters and coloring them with “reality.”

Bresson’s fragmentary technique finds its first manifestation here. Though it will be consistently present in the framing patterns and editing rhythms of *The Collapse* (indeed, it would be impossible to cite all of the instances in which it occurs), the spatially disorienting style of Bresson’s films is epitomized in the way the above actions will be presented. The scene will begin with a close-up of the wood on the characters arms as he walks. A close-up of his feet stepping over ground will follow. Next, a close-up of his arms as he repositions the wood. An off-screen cough will be followed by a close-up of his cheeks and face. The character will be introduced in pieces, abstracting each part from any whole and fostering the understanding of the character as an accumulation of disparate elements without a totalizing image to unite them. As the viewer encounters the character in this sequence, she will have to make imaginative leaps in defining and connecting the sequestered spatialities, immediately urging her to practice making meaning from various fragments of experience, just as Camus suggests we all do in confronting the absurd.

The description of the deserted home might strike one as being similar to the contents of the building containing the room in Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*. This is intentional. As is demonstrated throughout the script, the room is an example of Tarkovsky’s absurd *mise en scène*, being only semi-real, riding the line between actually existing and existing in an ontologically unclear zone (just like The Zone in *Stalker*). Water and fire will be repeatedly associated with the deserted home, as in Tarkovsky, with the result being that the deserted home, and the characters and actions associated with it, will acquire an ambiguous status, becoming a meaning-resistant “waterless desert” for the viewer to explore and interpret.

This is the first instance in the script of an absurd technique involving aural design, one that is present in both Bresson and Tarkovsky’s work and which is discussed in my essay using the examples of *Pickpocket* and *The Sacrifice*, respectively. As the character approaches the bird, the sound of the bird’s chirping precedes its actual appearance, occurring with an abstractly amplified cacophony. As with Bresson and Tarkovsky’s usage, this technique is intended to offer a spatial/aural mystery to the viewer. Without a visual referent, the bird’s sound encourages the viewer to fill in the representational gaps, imploring her to actively assist in building the film’s world, defining it, interpreting it, attempting to solve its jarring incongruities. This aural approach is one of the defining elements of the film’s sound design and appears consistently throughout.
The preceding scene will be filmed in a single long take, as per Tarkovsky’s technique. By depicting the scene in one shot, “reality” will accumulate as time progresses, as Tarkovsky theorized, allowing the shot’s ethereal touches – the fluttering curtains, the opening screen door, the rusty crib, the fire – to be maximized in their absurd intensity. The unreality of the environment and the incongruous continuity of the uncanny elements will find their realistic counterbalance in the unbroken time of the shot, creating a paradoxical presentation of mystical mise en scène and the “reality” of recorded temporality that encompasses the absurd.

With the inclusion of Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* and Ashby’s *Harold and Maude*, I am attempting to implement an absurd technique that is essentially absent from all of Bresson and Tarkovsky’s films – the involvement of other media (i.e. books, films, music, etc.) in the mise en scène. Throughout *The Collapse*, this technique is utilized, problematizing the “reality” of the cinematic apparatus by making it deliberately and openly intertextual, deriving unspecified meaning from external aesthetic sources and integrating them into the narrative as semi-real elements that might be imperceptible to some viewers, but which might implore other viewers to question their ontological status as either diegetic occurrences, expressionistic manifestations of interiority, authorial commentaries, surreal meta-moments, simple aesthetic enhancers, all of the above, some of the above, or none of the above. These instances populate the screenplay (including the earlier example of “Love Will Tear Us Apart”) and will be left for the reader to uncover and explore from this point on, without any annotative explanation or citation.

The leaf-raking scene is both an example of and a reference to Bresson and Tarkovsky’s implementation of off-screen sound to expand the world of the screen beyond the frame, crafting the film so that it points outside its boundaries, to an unseen, unspecified reality which the viewer must assist in formulating and defining. The airplane, though it will be heard and its jet stream made visible, will remain off-screen, providing a spatial hiddenness and alluding to Tarkovsky’s use of similar overhead plane-like sounds in both *Stalker* and *The Sacrifice*. At the conclusion of the shot, the amplified sound of raked leaves will dominate the soundtrack while their actual raking will remain unseen, a reference to one of the most memorable examples of such a technique in Bresson’s œuvre: the leaf-raking scene in *Diary of a Country Priest*, in which the unseen (only heard) raking of leaves attains an ambiguously symbolic, somewhat unreal status while the eponymous priest absolves a confessing woman.

Michael’s dream story and Greg’s cold rejection of any totalizing meaning for it signifies the ambiguous status of absurd narratives and provides a commentary upon *The Collapse*. The scene is a microcosmic model of the difficulty of interpretation, which the film itself is a microcosm of, replicating life in miniature. Specifically, Greg denies and mocks a distinctly psychological approach in his jesting about Freud, indicating that motivations and meanings are ultimately impenetrable and that any attempt to absolutely apply psychological perspectives/frameworks to a situation will prove reductive and insufficient. Without such digestible structures for parsing out narratives, the viewer, like
Michael, will be left to interpret her own experiences, playing the Camusian role of the absurd interrogator/explorer.

9 Immediately following the film’s deprecation of easy explanation, the viewer is presented with a narrative mystery: what happened to their father? This is slowly revealed throughout the narrative, in bits and pieces, which the viewer must assemble into an interpretation (as the absurd requires). However, at this point, the viewer is stranded, looking for clues and indicators of meaning, unable to resolutely map a “waterless desert.”

10 Once again, Bresson’s editing rhythms will be prominently employed. Instead of the fragmentary approach annotated in the film’s opening, this brief scene will feature the director’s tendency to unexpectedly protract a shot by lingering after a primary action/character has exited the frame, leaving the shot vacant. Though it will also appear repeatedly throughout the film, this is a particularly exemplary instance, as the jogger presents a very obviously disconcerting incongruity once Greg’s car drives out of frame.

11 Tarkovsky’s introduction of elemental associations in order to transform a location in an absurd, ontologically opaque space will find full demonstration as Greg ventures to the deserted home, an already established locus of ambiguous reality. The pouring rain, pooling water, and omnipresent wetness evoke the landscapes and absurd interiors of Stalker and The Sacrifice, once again aligning the deserted home with slippery meaning and the fluid, malleable status of being only semi-real.

12 Juxtaposed with the surrounding aqueous environment, the repeated presence of fire will intensify the ethereal quality of the film’s various elemental flourishes. Additionally, the combination of fire and water more fully illustrates the absurd mise en scène of Tarkovsky’s films, particularly that of The Sacrifice; in doing so, it also provides a very subtle example of foreshadowing for the viewer aware of Tarkovsky’s film.

13 The unreal mise en scène of the deserted home begins to creep into Greg’s own home, initiating it as a potential location of ontological confusion and obscure meaning. As the home’s subtle dilapidation continues, the viewer might notice a parallel increase in absurd elements surrounding Greg’s own home. The indiscernible intermingling of the realms will create a disorienting example of grotesque Camusian absurdity.

14 This sequence will feature sustained crosscutting between the different rooms, applying Bresson’s disorienting technique of spatial fragmentation. Continuous occurrences in different spaces will be hermetically separated from one another, splitting the kitchen, living room, and front door into related but disconnected spaces, resisting any sort of spatial unification. As a result of this, the distinct areas will be abstracted from a whole, just as Bresson’s concentration upon hands, feet, and objects dislodges them from a totalized reality. The viewer will be forced to link them, to make a coalesced meaning from their visually independent spaces; until, of course, they are brought together in the sequence soon after. The prolonging of their separation, however, will also prolong the
spatial mystery, urging the viewer to become used to probing and asking, connecting fragments of meaning.

Nancy’s superficially impenetrable appearance is indicative of the amateur acting that will typify the film, as well as its narrative/psychological inscrutability. Her emotions are hidden. Her feelings are unreadable. Her presence in the hall is somewhat mystifying, encouraging the viewer to build her own explanation, to make sense of the absurdity.

The inclusion of the professorial man’s scene introduces an instance of ancillary mundanity that seems to suggest meaning beyond itself, but which may contain none. In this respect, it is a sort of narrative dead end, a potential red herring (a number of them intentionally litter the script). Confounding the typical cause-and-effect logic that is the hallmark of classical narrative filmmaking, the peripheral scene will challenge the viewer’s ability to interpret it as part of a coherent understanding of the film, stretching the bounds of narrative unity and explicability. An absurd conflict will therefore be created, arising from the viewer’s desire to make sense of the scene and its resistance to such categorization.

As in Bresson’s *Au hasard Balthazar*, animals have prominent performance roles in *The Collapse*; and, just as in that film, they present the viewer with characters that refuse psychological interpretation – motivational mysteries that inspire interpretive leaps. The fact that the dog “communicates nothing” is an extension of the performance aesthetic that will characterize much of *The Collapse*. Presenting a paragon of Bressonian inexpressiveness, the animals in *The Collapse* further hinder any definite derivation of meaning.

This brief scene will utilize the amplified sound techniques of Bresson and Tarkovsky to abstract an otherwise unremarkable moment, lending significance to it in the process. The sounds of the washer and dryer and the scraping of the litter will be elevated to an incongruous level, highlighting the fact that Greg and Nancy are not speaking to each other and that their relationship is growing more and more distant. Therefore, the scene will gain an absurd aura as it also gains narrative relevancy, all because of a jarringly incongruous bit of aural design.

The entirety of the phone conversation scene will take place off-screen. The camera will be locked in a fragmented close-up of the hubcap as the conversation audibly occurs. As previously discussed, the use of off-screen sound encourages the viewer to participate in crafting the cinematic world by implying an unseen and necessarily imagined reality beyond the frame.

Greg’s walk home will be framed and edited in a way that evokes Michel’s trip home from the police station in *Pickpocket*. The temporal and spatial compression which distorts the sense of time and space in Bresson’s film will lend an abstract, almost unreal quality to Greg’s walk, which will include the use of Bresson’s lingering shots and disorienting rhythms.
In the Fazoli’s scene, rational “reality” and the inexplicable are merged in what initiates *The Collapse*’s most crucial sequence. The homeless man from the deserted building crosses from Greg’s isolated, possibly unreal space, into the populated economically-based, measurable, rational world of the restaurant. Greg has an absurd experience. As he does, so does the viewer.

The previous sequence, from when Greg gets in his car until the end of the dog attack will be filmed in one shot, once again, *a la* Tarkovsky. In the sequence, the violent manifestation of the Fazoli’s scene is realized. The significance of the events in the shot is unclear beyond its superficial relevance, however. The dog’s association with the ontologically mysterious deserted home lends added ambiguity to the attack. Connections between the various events remain elusive, prompting Nancy’s questions, “What happened? What’s wrong?” and Greg’s subsequent inability to answer with any certainty. The viewer is in his position, attempting to make sense of the absurd juxtaposed occurrences and wrest meaning from them.

As in Michael’s dream explanation, this conversation between Greg and Nancy highlights the narrative’s refusal to acquiesce to standard cause-and-effect rationalizations of behavior. Bucking Nancy’s expectations (as well as those of the viewer), Greg (like the narrative) resists attempts to categorize his experience according to codified, pre-existing interpretations of reality. His response to Nancy’s religious and psychological panaceas is modeled closely after a scene in Bresson’s *The Devil, Probably* in which the protagonist, Charles, contradicts the efforts of a psychoanalyst, Dr. Mime, to pigeonhole and explicate his feelings according to popular theories of behavior. In both *The Collapse* and Bresson’s film, systematized meanings are judged as insufficient and facile, encouraging the viewer to adopt an interpretive strategy that circumvents traditional modes of understanding, those which are rendered inept by the absurd presence of irrationality.

The burning of the deserted home will be modeled after similar scenes in Tarkovsky’s *The Mirror* and *The Sacrifice*. As such, it will be done in a long take, highlighting the absurd conflict between the surrealism of the *mise en scène* and the accumulated “realism” of the unbroken shot. The shot will present the entire burning of and collapse of the house, lingering long after Greg walks out of frame. This scene, more than any other, cements the deserted home’s status as an ontologically ambiguous locale and presents the major turning point of *The Collapse*.

Nancy’s emotions and thoughts are obscured throughout the film; in this scene, they are literally behind closed doors. Greg, like the audience, is not privy to any clarification regarding her psychological state. He must guess, ponder. His lack of sureness prevents any action. Regarding his mother, he is stuck in a “waterless desert,” like the viewer.
As denoted by the script directions, the previous sequence will occur only audibly, with Nancy and Emily off-screen until Emily enters Greg’s room. Just as in the previous instances of extensive off-screen scenes, the viewer (like Greg, in this circumstance) is forced to imagine the spatial reality of the contextual cinematic world beyond the frame. It is a form of suggestion, of abstraction, demanding that the audience participate in filling in the visual gaps of the narrative. The film will stretch itself, and the viewer, to encompass an indefinite area of representation—a mystery.

Like Marie in *Au hasard Balthazar*, Emily disappears from the film at this point, with her character unresolved. Her trajectory and its mystifying conclusion leave the viewer in the dark as to her significance and the reason for her vanishing. This narrative lapse contradicts the neatness of plot that typifies classical narrative filmmaking and strands the viewer in a challenging interpretive circumstance, placing the responsibility upon her shoulders to explicate Emily’s disappearance.

Here, I employ Bresson and Tarkovsky’s technique of elision, omitting the central action that might otherwise be the privileged portion of the scene. Like Bresson’s elimination of the actual arrest in *Pickpocket*, this scene forgoes depicting Nancy’s suicidal action, only revealing the surrounding activity. In terms of visual clarity, the literal act of her wristcutting is left undefined, encouraging the viewer to compensate for the missing link in cinematic grammar, the ellipsis—a narrative device also present in Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* and *Nostalghia*.

The preceding scene is undoubtedly the most emotive in the screenplay. As a result, it will also be performed with the most acute attention to maintaining an inexpressive, unsentimental acting aesthetic. Bresson and Tarkovsky’s performance theories—particularly those of the former—will be maximized in this scene between Greg and Nancy, tingeing the epiphany-like resolution with an unreal, potentially insincere quality, much like that of Michel’s oft-disputed repentance in *Pickpocket*. Applying absurd performance techniques to this ostensibly straightforward scene will problematize the simplicity of interpretation suggested by Greg and Nancy’s exchange, causing the viewer to reconsider the potential narrative relevancy of the scene and leaving the significance of a crucial narrative moment ambiguous, absurd in its refusal to be categorized and rationalized.

The Collapse’s conclusion is, of course, inconclusive. In keeping with Camus’ belief in remaining in the “waterless deserts” of meaning and understanding, the narrative ends on an ambiguous and polysemous note. Building upon the unreliability implied in the hospital scene, this final scene at the deck is designed to foster a number of possible readings. As the script’s author, I have my own interpretation, but I have taken measures to ensure that it is not definitively suggested. An uncertain future is brought up in Greg and Michael’s constructive act, which might bring ennobling results or merely prove futile. They might be perpetually unaided; or, Nancy may join them in rebuilding. It also implores the viewer to ponder whether or not Greg has truly escaped his father’s footsteps (as well as his specter). There is a multitude of possibilities. Like the rest of the
narrative, this conclusion is intended to provoke the viewer to take initiative in creating the film’s world, in making meaning of its disparate elements. The film will become an aesthetic arena for absurd grappling, a “waterless desert,” as Camus would have it.