

# CASSETTE ROMANCE



A PROCESS BOOK BY JUSTIN DONALDSON

*Part I:*  
**THE IDEA**



Sey Coffee | Brooklyn NY

# EMPATHY KEEPS US GROUNDED

Here's a scenario: you catch a movie trailer that really intrigues you, so you go to the theater to check it out. By the end of the film, you find yourself *so invested* into the characters that your eyes well up the moment one of them falls ill or experiences trauma. Now, you may not exactly relate to their situation, so why are you crying? *It's just a movie*, so obviously it isn't real—or is it?

These feelings that you share with those characters derive from a core value known as *empathy*. Empathy most literally means “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.” It allows us to be available, responsive, and open to the process, rather than obsessing over the product. It tells real

human stories and encourages critical thinking and positive shaping of one's view of the world. When you watch a film—whether it be a romantic drama or a knee-slapping comedy—there's a good chance that the creators have implemented empathic storytelling qualities to engage the audience and share an experience that is near and dear to them. Not every movie contains these qualities; in fact, true empathic storytelling is becoming more scarce as we continue through the mighty age of streaming. Companies like Hallmark and Netflix are producing dozens of films a year, which not only dilutes meaningful content, but overwhelms viewers into not watching films altogether (or watching too many).

# CASSETTE

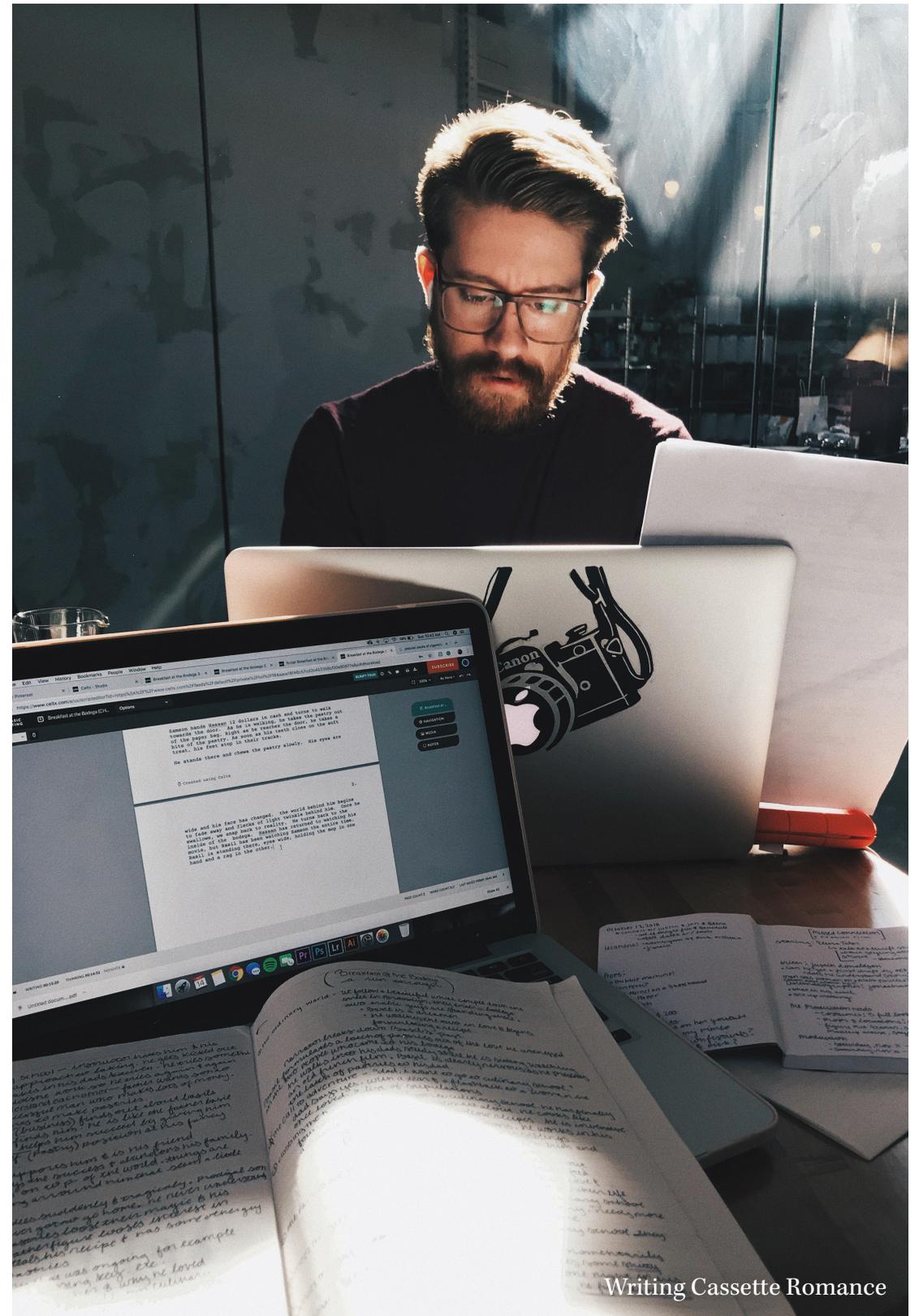
In August of 2018, I moved to New York City with a plan: to write, direct and craft a short film that exhibits empathy. The idea is that I would create my own film from scratch, and then use it as an educational tool for filmmakers and creatives who want to build empathy into *their* work.

The screenwriting process was excruciatingly slow—I spent days writing little to nothing on the page, and simply brainstorming scenarios I'd experienced. *Write, highlight, delete, write, highlight, delete.* It wasn't until I'd discovered what is now my favorite coffee shop of all time where I found my groove. Sey Coffee became a stronghold for creation; not only is their coffee

spectacular, but the breezeway of hanging foliage and sunroof converts the garage into a true haven. I wrote the script for *Cassette Romance* in three days, followed by tightly-knit critiques and draft revisions.

The first revision discussion took place in a bar called “Flowers For All Occasions” and it is where I truly learned about *subtext*. Subtext is what the characters are really saying between the lines. In certain scenarios—SNL skits, plays and soap operas—speaking literally is okay, however, in film you want to use subtext to convey messages. Naturally, humans don't normally say exactly what they mean, so to depict otherwise in film would be unrealistic.

# ROMANCE



Writing Cassette Romance

LOGAN

Who says I'm fucking settling?!

JAMES

Do you think Michael Bierut would've been partnered with the largest independent design consultancy in the world if he'd stayed in fucking Cincinnati, Ohio?

LOGAN

You don't know that he wouldn't!

JAMES

I'm pretty confident that he wouldn't.

LOGAN

Okay, so let's say I move--then what?

He's not listening to her.

JAMES

(beat)

I suppose you could link up with every potential artist and designer in SoHo and collab on some sort of 'super project.'

LOGAN

You really think I could do something like that?

JAMES

What? No, sorry, I was brainstorming again.

LOGAN

(pause)

I don't think we should do this...

James glances at his watch again.

JAMES

What--are you sure? I mean, I can give Evan a call and ask him to hold the table, or--

LOGAN

I don't think we should do this.

## breakdownexpress<sup>sm</sup>

Projects ▾ cMail ▾ Schedules ▾ Eco Casts ▾ Create Slides

### Project: CASSETTE ROMANCE

26 Actors selected for this project.

#### CASSETTE ROMANCE Published : 11/07/2018 10:50 AM

26 Actors selected for this breakdown.

Unviewed	Viewed	Selected	Not Scheduled	Scheduled	Callback	Role
280	14	12	9	3	3	JAMES DEGROFF Male Lead, between the ages of 21 and 28. Strong dialogue skills is highly recommended.
342	44	14	11	3	3	LOGAN SHEAR Female Lead, between the ages of 21 and 28. Strong dialogue skills is highly recommended.

My first draft of *Cassette Romance* was riddled with word-for-word subtext. It contained an *entire monologue* from the female character, which is not only unbelievable but just straight up rubbish—no one talks like that. Say things with actions, and subtext will show.

After completing the script, it was time to move onto the next step: cast and crew. Who would play these characters? Who would hold the camera? Operate the boom mic? Do makeup? Eyeball continuity? I had much to consider, and thankfully New York is abundant with resources. My mentor, Cameron Danger Strittmatter, runs a production company named *Failure Island*—this would become the production label the film would exist under.

Casting was probably the most enjoyable and intimidating process of the entire project. This was my first time directing a legitimate short film, so I had absolutely no idea where to even begin. Thankfully, Cameron was able to guide me through the process.

I started by creating a post on *Breakdown Express*, which is a talent sourcing website for casting directors. To my wildest surprise, I received over *six hundred* entries—it honestly didn't feel real to me, but it was true. I knew it was going to take a very long time to sort through all 600+ candidates, so a few trusted friends and I split a bottle of wine and we made an evening of it. From there, twenty-six people were selected to submit auditions.

From these selections, ten people sent in audition tapes: six for Logan Shear, and four for James Degroff. It was honestly difficult to choose because each actor and actress had their own strengths and interpretations of the part. Since empathy plays a large role in the project as a whole, it was important to consider this with each tape.

I managed to narrow down to four candidates, who I invited to participate in callback auditions. This is where face-to-face rehearsing would take place—the characters need to feed energy off of each other, or it would be impossible to share genuine empathy on screen. Between the four of them, Allie Shapiro, our lead actress, was *easily* the right

choice for the part of Logan. Not only was she able to tear up on command, but she could inherit both passive-aggressive and compassionate personalities when directed.

After much discussion and careful inspection of the callback audition recording, Jeff Ayars was selected to play James. His outstanding flexibility and natural engagement with Allie fit the bill like a puzzle piece, and we knew he would perform well. Casting was quickly followed by location scouting, budgeting, storyboarding, scheduling, prop hunting, equipment checking, many many coffee talks with crew members, and finally—the production phase of the film.

# CHEMISTRY IS KEY WHEN CASTING





*Part II:*  
THE PRODUCTION

## SCENE SIX, TAKE THREE

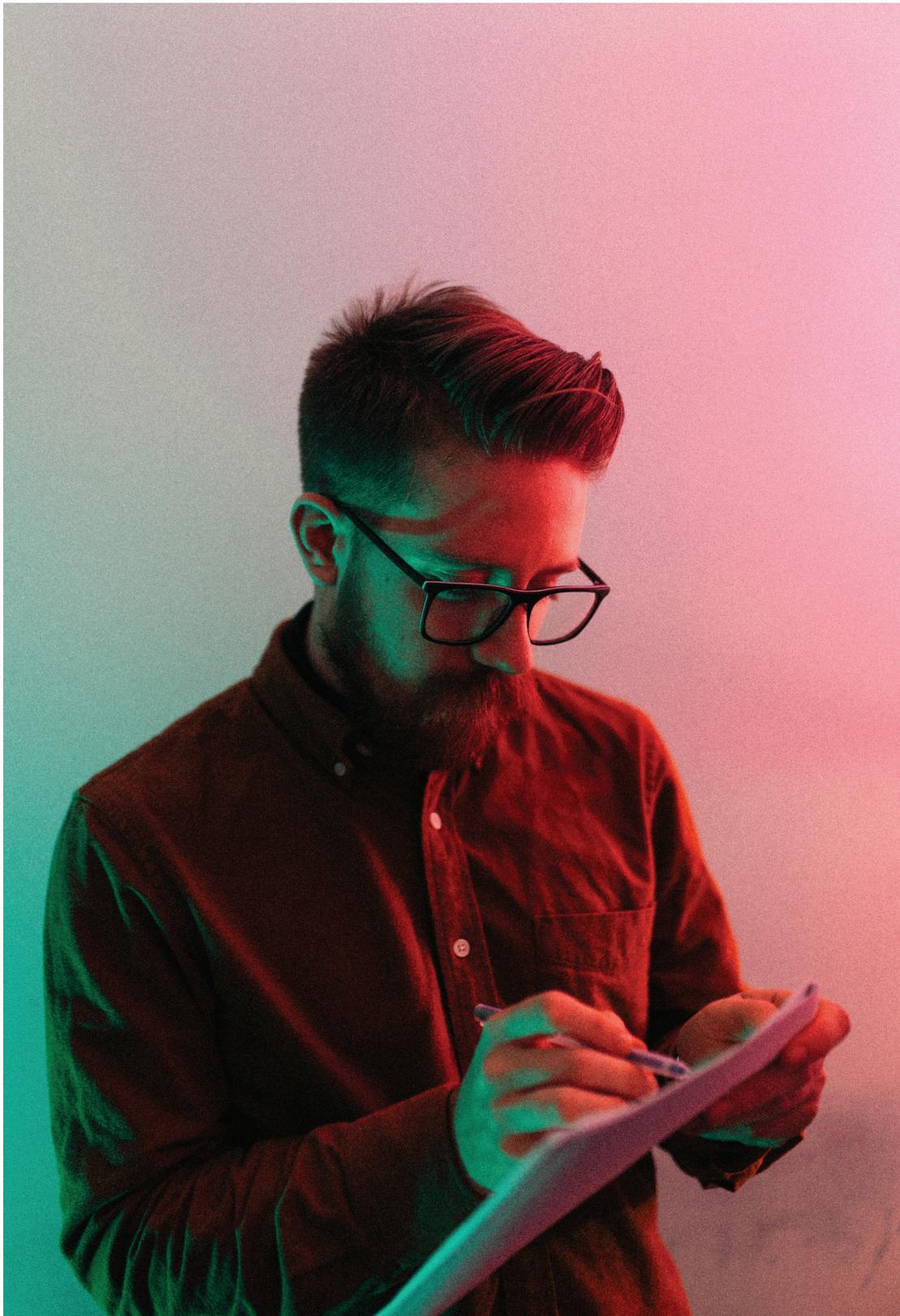
Originally, I had planned for two six-hour days to shoot *Cassette Romance* in its entirety. With that being said, we can all agree that not everything goes perfectly as planned—in fact, I can't remember a time that everything has. Due to scheduling issues, we were pushed to condense everything into one ten-hour shoot, which is *infinitely* more stressful.

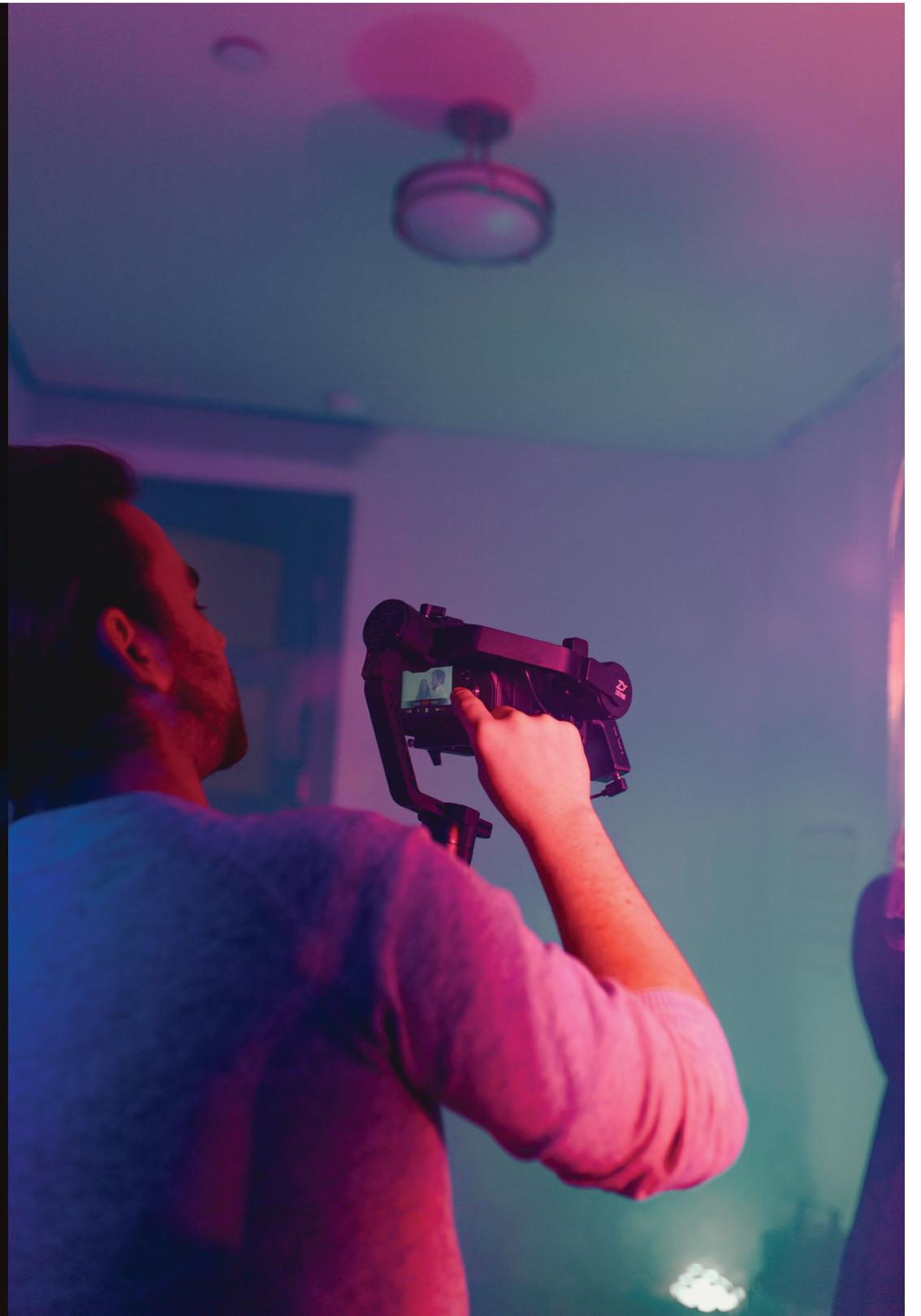
Thankfully, we had enough daylight to film the opening scene with the drone, which was the only time-specific shot. The rest of the film takes place in a bedroom the size of a Midwesterner's walk-in closet, with *only* enough room for the actors, director of photography, sound operator, and myself. The film was shot

linearly according to the story, with each scene shot a few different ways so that I could select the best takes and maximize the empathic experience.

Since dialogue is a primary element in the film, we spent at least half of the shoot capturing these scenes—which also means there were many re-takes. The most painstaking shot, for some reason, was a simple focus rack from a mirror to Allie's face as she turns around. At one point, a group of locals outside decided it was time to blast hip-hop music from a giant amplifier for two hours. To take advantage of this time, we filmed the beautiful dance scene, since it did not require the recording of sound.









# LIGHTS CAMERA ACTION!

Two fog machines, four fill lights, six gels, nine disco balls, and one mechanical gimbal brought this dream-like dance scene to life. Not much rehearsal went into it because it all came together almost magically. Allie and Jeff danced to the song “As the World Falls Down” by David Bowie on repeat while Jacob Wilson, our cinematographer, carried the gimbal around the two. Meanwhile, several crew members stood outside on the balcony shifting lights up and down.

The scene turned out beautifully, and I could not have been happier. It was a blessing that we ended up with a one-shot-wonder because the fog from the fog machine ticked off the smoke alarm

and alerted everyone in the apartment. Luckily, it wasn't late so no one outside of the place really noticed or complained. As we finished the final scene, it had finally hit me that we'd been on set from noon until ten o'clock. Not to mention, I'd blasted through several cups of coffee and consumed a curry dinner (yes, we fed our cast and crew Indian food and are aware of the potential spicy consequences that could have come about). At that point, I now had nearly 500Gb of footage and audio files to sort through. This would keep me busy over the next couple of months, so I was very thankful to be able to knock out the bulk of the film during my Co-Op semester. Moving into January, we reach the *video essay* phase.

*Part III:*

# **THE LESSON**

NerdWriter1 | David Fincher Films

# emotion

from latin "movere": to move

MasterClass | Aaron Sorkin

Script to Screen | La La Land

was -- this band -- you're going to be on the road for -- what, years now?

SEBASTIAN

Yeah, feasibly -- I could be on the road for years with just this record.

SCRIPT TO SCREEN

# EMPATHY IN FILMMAKING

Relationships are never what they're fantasized to be—they're messy, frustrating, and chaotically beautiful all simultaneously and in no particular order. The unpredictable nature of love is what makes it so fascinating to watch on the big screen, and why there is an over-saturation of sappy, unrealistic romance flicks in existence.

*Cassette Romance* is a project that is meant to point out some of the ugliness in relationships that you don't see in movies, and why empathy for these moments adds so much value to storytelling and filmmaking as a whole.

Films have the ability to share real, vulnerable experiences, which in return

connect people together and shape their perspectives on different cultural elements and behaviors. It's impossible to say a single person knows the exact right way to interact with someone in any given situation, but if we are able to spectate these moments created by screenwriters, directors, and actors, we build an emotional rapport that allows us to say "I've been in that person's shoes." This value, also known as empathy, is a core character trait that can be learned through film if done correctly.

Transitioning from the film to the video essay, I did some benchmarking, sourcing other video essays and classes as inspiration (left). These videos would influence the foundation of my essay.

# BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIER

Filmmaking is an exquisite art form and allows creatives to express themselves through intimate visual stories. These stories are portrayed by actors who believe in their vision and are brought to life by cinematographers, editors, and producers. If you've ever felt sorrowful or infuriated while watching a movie, there's a great chance you've empathized with the story in some way.

Creating this effect is far from easy, which is why I wanted to craft an educational video essay on empathic filmmaking, using *Cassette Romance* as an example in the curriculum. This would hopefully encourage young creatives to exercise their storytelling skills and

incorporate meaningful emotions into their work.

The goal of my video essay is to define empathy, explain why it's important, and identify techniques to exhibit it in film. Simply put, I've broken it down into SIX sections: Screenplay, Casting, Composition, Color, Sound (added in the second draft), and Conclusion.

The screenplay section breaks down topic selection, writing environments, dialogue, and subtext. Casting breaks down the talent selection process and emphasizes rehearsing. Composition details camera use and its impact on immersion. Color discusses the psychology behind certain hues and how

## PART I. THE INTRODUCTION

A montage of actor audition tapes plays, each continuing the lines from the last. Steady SCALE OUT.

JUSTIN (V.O.)

Countless elements go into creating a meaningful story--however, nearly all of them derive from one core value: *Empathy.*

The SCREEN goes blank.

The word 'Empathy' is typed out on screen, followed by the definition.

JUSTIN (V.O.)

Empathy most literally means 'the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.' It's what connects us to together and allows us to truly understand what another person is going through, whether it be through music, conversation, literature...

Show examples of these.

JUSTIN (V.O. CONT.)

...or in this case, film.  
(beat)  
Films will make you cry...

Share a clip from 'The Pursuit of Happiness'

JUSTIN (V.O.)

They'll make you laugh.

Queue 'Rushmore'

JUSTIN (V.O.)

And they'll piss you off...

Play a snippet from 'The Social Network'

JUSTIN (V.O.)

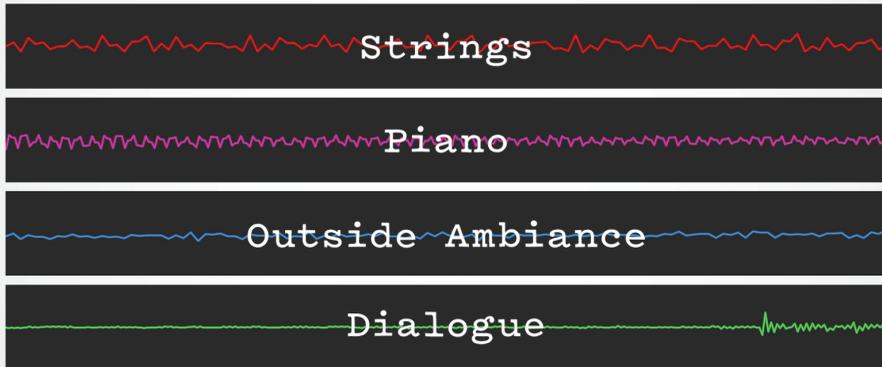
But, how? And why?

Reveal JUSTIN in front of the camera.



JAMES  
Don't think of it as *leaving* your family--think of it as... an extended dream vacation where you might not eat or be paid for weeks on end, but eventually you'll become so masochistic that it won't even matter.

LOGAN sighs.



Empathy

they will dictate the vibe of the story. Sound dissects the layers of audio built into a scene and explains the emotions derived from them. The Conclusion is mostly a synopsis of everything discussed while encouraging viewers to continue creating and implementing empathy into their work. It also showcases some lovely BTS footage from the filming of *Cassette Romance*.

Starting out, the animation process was incredibly smooth and straightforward: lay down a line of voice-over, source a clip from the film, add some text, repeat. I began by using the typeface Courier since it is the industry standard in screenplays. Later on, however, I decided that the typeface

was forgettable and predictable, so I decided on a beautiful typeface that resembled Courier but carried a unique feel: *Pitch*. This type would reveal itself typewriter style, which gives the viewer an idea of the pre-production process while building intimacy with the writer.

In scenes where dialogue is focused on, I would animate the script to scroll alongside the video, allowing the viewer to see how the actors interpret the words and bring them to life on the screen. In areas that involved a more detailed breakdown, I used graphic elements like wavelengths, circles, boxes, and lines to communicate the technique. The video grew over nine minutes, though it remains engaging.

## THE ELEMENTS OF FILM

# GRIDS

# GRIDS

# GRIDS

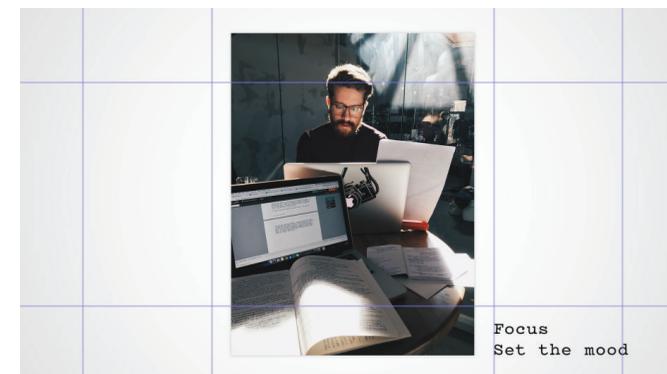
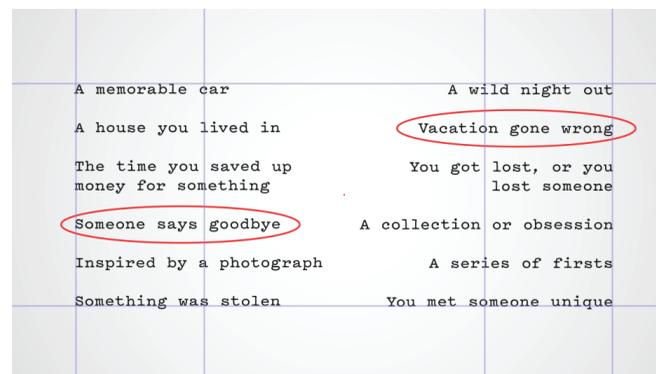
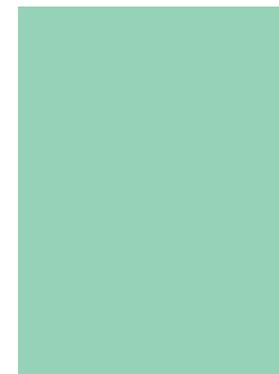
The biggest obstacle I came across was presenting all of the information and visuals in a relatively cohesive manner. Text appeared sporadically, and images occasionally went off the screen and revealed themselves randomly. To streamline this process and add a layer of sophistication, I added an element that every good designer is well acquainted with: *a grid*.

This is what differentiates my video essay from every other video essay on the internet. With video, it can be difficult to create and follow a grid, simply because 1) it typically isn't built into the program like it is in Adobe InDesign, and 2) people generally like to place all imagery and text in the center of the

screen—which, isn't a bad tactic, but it can be lackluster in its effect. Once I crafted this grid, not only was juxtaposing text to imagery easier, but connecting ideas across the video appeared much more fluently and interestingly.

In retrospect, *Cassette Romance* has been one of the most challenging and gratifying projects I've ever pursued. It was a series of firsts: directing, casting, working with dialogue, breaking down a film, and creating a visual essay that portrays a significant human characteristic. Empathy is within all of us, and through film, we can discover how to channel it into our work and our lives. Don't obsess over the final product—rather, indulge in the process.

It's *your* story, so tell it how *you* want. Write, review, re-write and don't quit until you've got something that makes you laugh, pisses you off, or melts your heart with emotion.



# THANKS



Justin Donaldson