

If the apple tree did not die (working title)

Word count ~ 1500



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1. Overview

I am making a short documentary film (estimate duration: 15 minutes). It is about the exile from, making of, search for: home. It is the discovery of home in oneself. In a similar fashion to the recent short films I made, I identify stories within people (section 3.1). The current character list consists of: myself, Marieke (peer), Tom (friend) and, currently in development, Sören (tentmaker) and Youqing (peer).

I have themed the storylines as homemaking, homecoming and home-carrying and made them into a series of statements after two different shoots. The statements are:

1. Home is shelter.
2. Home is abundance.
3. Home is safety.
4. Home is free of judgement.
5. Home is quiet.
6. Home is routine: of small, yet necessary activities.
7. Home is a collection of objects.
8. Home is lost and found.

I hope to evoke the tenderness of grief, the resilience of hope and the very solidarity of being human in this film. The project reflects my continuing research on the creation of meaning and evocation of feelings through image-making.

I have been in search of form, just like I have been in search of home. The making of this film has enabled me to articulate loss, transcendence and new beginnings. Through reading, making and writing during my first year at PZI, I have started to clarify my practice — what was once topical and typological have given way to the existential and spiritual.

2. Characters and stories

At the moment I have completed the shoots with Marieke, Tom and am continuing to create footage for the character of myself.

2.1 Myself

all statements - 2, 5, 6, 7 in particular

After living in the US for nearly a decade, I lost my home in New York due to visa restrictions in 2016. (China — where I never chose to be, yet nonetheless, was born — does not bear the name of home.)

I create scenes to address my aspiration to return to home. Over trips to well-lived apartments that are not mine, I brought daily objects I have used for daily activities — including a coffee maker, a toothbrush holder and an aromatic stone. I film myself conducting these quotidian activities in the new spaces. Through showing rough cuts at a group critique, I learned that the images spoke comfort and ritual. I plan to travel more this year, test/refine new images and make the performative/poetic aspect of the setup more explicit. *These are, however real, only imaginary homes.*

2.2 Marieke

statement 3 and 4

As I offer Marieke a haircut in my living room, we share memories. Mine is of a book that has traveled with me and Marieke's, a recount of a childhood haircut.

I want to achieve with this story a sense of vulnerability. I scripted our acts, but left conversations to be improvised. As this was the first shoot for the project, I used the shots to concretize a style with which I feel confident in conveying my intentions. (I will include the process in my thesis.) I plan to

do a different edit and only use the dialogues to accentuate — as opposed to distract — the visual story.

2.3 Tom

statement 5 and 7 - changing to 8

Tom's bonsais, for which he had been caring for a few years, died because of the heat in his latest apartment. One of them was an apple tree that he grew from seed.

The original story I had in mind was one about Tom's dedication to his plants as a way of making home in an unfamiliar city. Through our chats, however, I sensed an aloof uncertainty he had about his home and himself, which lay beneath his obsession with productivity. (“You are defined by what you have done recently,” he said.)

Due to this realization and an untimely sickness of his, we did not follow our discussed plans (i.e. he would purchase new plants and pot them in his apartment). Instead, I interviewed him and recorded mostly still shots in his apartment. I will make a rough edit with the new materials and infer further.

2.4 Sören

statement 1, 3, 5, 7 - still researching

I met Sören and his wife during a hike in Iceland in the summer. He knows everything about tents and makes his own without help from any tutorial. He also makes other expedition gears such as backpacks and stuff sacks. He used to be a pastor and works at the equivalent of the Salvation Army in Sweden. After all, Saint Paul was a tentmaker.

2.5 Youqing

statement 8 - still researching

I met Youqing in September, who is starting his first year of in the same Master's program. We found out that: we both speak a version of Chinese, we are amazed by the migration of one's mother tongue, and we share a similar interest in the notion of home.

3. Methods

3.1 For making the film

Before each shoot, I devise situations with/for each character. I alternate my roles as a metaphorical host or guest as a conceptual aid. I try to cultivate trust and define boundaries with individuals through clear, open and ongoing conversations. In pre-production, I turn the situations into scripts, storyboards and shot lists. During the shoot, I leave space for improvisation and make adjustments based on circumstantial changes (similar to the method I use for *Seek*, a short film I created during the first year). In current editing, each rough cut becomes a self-contained story, which I use to evaluate the images.

3.2 For reflecting on each filming occasion

After each shoot, I re-evaluate the story, reassess its contribution to the bigger story and note down the challenges that occurred in communication/filming. Showing them in tutorials and group critiques, I ask whether they carry the meaning I intended. This feedback loop helps me phrase new questions for the next shooting. For example, after a tutorial in which David pointed out the ambiguity of my style (composed vs. as-are shots), I asked: *how can I imbue meaning in an object through close-up shots?* It resulted in a series of tests with varying shot durations, camera movements and blocking. Each reflection becomes a building block that informs the next round of production.

3.3 For more general research on image-making

I browse books in libraries. I search for articles with emphasis on: *film*, *image*, *cinematography*, *emotions*, *feelings*, *affect*. I pay close attention to the footnotes and bibliography of articles that I find resonating to grow my reading list. Some of the materials have helped me think through my shots, others increase and make more precise my understanding towards concepts such as time, duration and movement.

- *The Cinematic*, ed. David Company
- *On Directing Film*, David Mamet
- *Transcendental style in film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Paul Schrader
- *Understanding a Photograph*, John Berger
- *Image*, Voigt, Ellen Bryant. *New England Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3/4, 1991, pp. 254–268

I also read films. I joined cineville last year so that I can frequently access films in a proper cinema setting and have benefitted from long, condensed viewings during IFFR 2019. For films/plays that strike me as moving and/or thought-provoking, I write a brief analysis and note down my learning.

- *The Mirror* (1975), Andrej Tarkovski
- *Birds of Passage* (2018), Cristina Gallego & Ciro Guerra
- *Minding the Gap* (2018), Bing Liu
- *Gulyabani* (2018), Gürcan Keltek
- *Light of my Life* (2019), Casey Affleck
- *Vulnerable Histories (A Road Movie)* (2019), Koki Tanaka
- *Salt* (2018), play by Salina Thompson

4. Collaborations

From a few projects in the first year, I have recognized the importance of teamwork in filmmaking. I would like to keep building work relationships and become fluent at delegating with trust as a director and writer.

I have asked Cem, a peer at PZI, to be my director of photography and cinematographer based on our rapport. He has helped me put emphasis on pre-production. During meetings we discuss the shot list, sketch alternatives and figure out the equipment. (This applies to both shoots where he is present and those where he is not able to be.) I also ask him for feedback during assembly and editing.

I have talked to Yanik Soland, a musician who happens to be my flatmate, about potentially composing for the film.

5. Milestones and support

I plan to make a first rough cut of Tom's story and cuts that involve new activities I shot in SF in November.

In the meantime, I am drafting my first email to Soren, in which I will try to clarify the potential story as much as possible. (If the story is indeed there and grants logistical feasibility, I have an inkling about shooting in the dead of winter.)

For support, first, I would like to continue having frequent conversations with tutors. Simon and Barend have helped me with processing new learnings in filmmaking. David has offered critiques on the precision of my images. I would also like to participate in another group critique once I make more edits.

Second, for further editing next year, I would like to get feedback from a professional editor or extended tutorials with Simon and Barend to hone in on the arch of the overall story.

Last, I have been researching funding potentials, especially for traveling to Soren's residence in Sweden. I would like to know more resources from the department and/or relevant personnel.