Cheery Point: A Case Study for Independent Film and Existentialism

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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I. Abstract

Existentialism and postmodernism frameworks have pervaded much of recent cinema and television to the point at which viewers can experience a new level of escapism, one which not only allows audiences to leave their own lives behind, but to also take away an altered perspective from a theater to grapple with well after the screening. Examples as of late of this post-modernism “story within a story” framework are present in director Christopher Nolan’s *The Prestige* and *Inception*, as well as ABC’s *LOST* episodic television series. *LOST* had resonated deeply within me and brought me to a new level of familiarity with characters that I never wanted to stop watching. Protagonists and antagonists were never as clear-cut as they seemed to be at the onset, and one’s sense of right and wrong, no matter how Kantian in nature it may have started, would be ruffled in some way by the end of the season. Its last episode had aired on May 23rd, 2011, and seven months later I still found that nothing within me had been ruffled in the same manner again. So, I literally made my own happiness that would center, not around a need for a group of interesting individuals to survive a plane crash on a mysterious island, but instead the need for a small town’s citizens to regain sentimentality in a time at which expressing emotion was illegal. From November of 2011 to May 2012 all aspects of the pre-production and principal photography process would ensue on the feature-length film that would be known as *Cheery Point*. In this thesis I present a case study of what this endeavor took from a Executive Producer and Director of Photography’s standpoint, and analyze how this film was conceived philosophically.

II. Acknowledgments

As far as independent films are concerned, many Directors/Producers do not have the honor of formally thanking those who have helped them bring their visions to fruition on a dazzling red-carpeted stage. While my team and myself strive in every capacity to bring them the verbal recognition they deserve, I would like to bring attention to several individuals here
now in written form. *Cheery Point* quite simply could not have transpired without the constant help of the generous contributions of resources—time, talent, and treasure—that were offered for little, if any charge and without expectation of return. First and foremost, to Adam Bailey, for sacrificing as much time as he did and infusing his creative talent in the form of director into this story that I am so infatuated with; it takes a truly special individual to pick up a story in its infancy, with all of the ties that have not yet been made, and to align his or herself to that vision and stay on the same wavelength. Secondly, to Allison Flood, for supporting me and my rants of excitement when it was just a vision and subsequently joining me in the writing room from the beginning to work on developing many of the characters that stand in the script’s final form. To James Monroe Treakle for polishing and adding to the script alongside Adam for its submission to the Writers Guild of America. I would like to thank my friends and most importantly my family (Kim, Tim, Sophie, and Sam Stevenson, as well as David and Kendall Orwick) for instilling the confidence within me to take the risk and invest as much money and time as I did into the project; because of you, I will foster no regrets when looking back at my college years.

A heartfelt thanks to the advisory team that joined Adam and myself, specifically Andrew Bennett, Kelsey Williams, and Sam Courter. To Andrew, for temporarily forfeiting the creative side of directing in order to produce this film. It was more necessary than I will ever be able to stress, and I would trust very few others with managing my credit card and the burden of dealing with the innumerable calls that awaited on my cell phone. To Kelsey, for keeping everyone on track as the 1st Assistant Director both in pre-production and on set. The patience and foresight that went into planning the execution of day-to-day activities was something I knew had to be taken into account with someone that could handle any situation without further oversight. Last of my thanks to the advisory team goes to Samantha Courter; her observation and quick learning skills continue to baffle me as she worked as 2nd Assistant Director on and off set to ensure that forms and the digitizing of information to our server happened behind the scenes, as a freshman nonetheless.
I would like to quickly thank my key crew members who have been with me in the craziest of conditions during nearly every weekend for principal production throughout Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois: Ethan Gibbs as my gaffer, Shane Dresch as my camera assistant, Jayme Kroll as my makeup artist, Grant Steckeck as my stunt/fight choreographer, Jessica Pettengil as my wardrobe adviser, Jake Madson as my key-grip and production designer, Robert Dalley and Blake Mohler as my audio engineers, as well as publicist Dylan Pierre. Still more thanks are in order to the people who have embodied the characters I have come to love and have done so based off of little more than faith and provided food/lodging/travel: Tommy Martin, Amy Hunt, Richard Hackel, Louie Lawless, Heidi Yost, Kyle Dal Santo, Jennifer Wilkens, Jake Douglass Smith, Adam King, Tony Gray, Dale Fanella, and Mark Esch. We were so very blessed to have worked with people that were as flexible and trusting as these. Driving across the Midwest on little more than a promise to receive finished results for reels was a commonplace undertaking on these shoots that was incredibly appreciated.

From a believability standpoint, *Cheery Point* is able to offer its audience a great deal of production value based off of the locations and resources that were so graciously provided. Independent filmmaking lies at the mercy of those willing to best accommodate renegade cast and crew who sleep on basement floors and wreck houses, only to restore them just as they were found after everything is "a wrap". A special thanks goes to Chris Flook, Sonny Wingler, and Zack Parker with Along the Tracks Productions, who personally advised me on the journey. A heartfelt thanks goes out to the Bennett family for its support in Illinois, Kim and Tim Stevenson, Vicki Sampson, Perry Puckett, Father Dick Sullivan, Sheila Marstiller, Sherry Eibel, and Jimmy Weeks for their support in Louisville, the local businesses in Muncie and Jay County Indiana, as well as the Dalley family in Waldon Indiana. Last but certainly not least, to the Markwell family in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky for reasons that far outweigh what can be mentioned here as far as its generosity is concerned. And, of course, many thanks to the people
who have helped fund this project on Kickstarter.com and Indiegogo.com, as well as the many others who will inevitably join us on our journey.

I. Introduction

It is very interesting to step back midway into the process of creating such a mammoth project and try to explain how it was exactly that you began such a journey. The project that has come to be known as Cheery Point is a feature-length film that has evolved to be a feat on so many levels. I am quite excited to join viewers in seats in the near future to partake in the premiere experience. However, I make this assertion not out of vanity and pride in the work that I have put into the feature. True, pride is there, but this excitement is more of a genuine sort in seeing what thought-provoking conversation and insights are taken away from its plot. The film from its onset started as I feel so many others probably do, from the most far-flung of concepts that slowly just builds and builds until an avalanche with a message that has marketable promise is evident. What is so unique about it, and what is in my opinion the most risky attribute to its entirety, is that it tries to tackle two enormous contenders from an independent filmmaker’s perspective: marketability and intellectual stimulation. Not to mention this was to be done with a shoestring budget and resources that I had available as a filmmaker quickly entering “the real world” from college. It is no easy task to put these two facets of storytelling into balance, and anyone who has seen the trends in the business will tell you that aside from the horror genre, anything else created in the “ultra-low budget” sector is looking for very little opportunity in regards to distribution or a reasonable reaction. Today, people approach their content for instant gratification that is for the most part, streaming online.

Moreover, the target audience for Cheery Point, being a sci-fi drama, is primarily anticipated to be teenage to young-adult males based off of the trends that I see evident amongst my contemporaries. This only more solidifies the assertion that our demographic would not find it kosher to sit down for extended periods of time in front of their personal computers.
with a narrative made in a traditional straightforward manner. No teenager has the attention span to surf the Internet and stay attuned to media for the length of a feature film. And it is for this very reason that I believe *Cheery Point* stands as good a chance as any in its genre; the story is constructed out of a number of very different individuals that makes it more easily accessible for the seasoned streaming viewer. This film mimics my love for *LOST*, an episodic television series, and as such deals with a number of back stories at once that could easily be dissected into a short film web series. I set out irregardless to put together a film that could evoke emotions and a series of thought processes that I found present in J.J. Abrams' *LOST*.

**III. Film Synopsis**

Joshua Barrett is in his late 20s living in the small town of Cheery Point in the year 2017. In this world, citizens of the United States were convinced by their government in the late 1960s to conform to a new welfare program. It stipulated that the newly created drug Torpase was essential for everyday living. Torpase eliminates all psychological and physical pain by delivery of an insulin-like pump on the abdomen, and as a result people simply exist without the knowledge or need of art, religion, or emotional empathy towards each other in any regard. Joshua's life centers on a habitual workday as a photographer at Brotzky's Media, a company that mettles with very little due to the effects of Torpase and the lack of interest in stylistic/colorful graphics. Employees create little more than rudimentary art and are consistently fired and rehired by the company's CEO, Mr. Richards.

However, this is all shattered for Joshua when he is taken hostage by Albert Camus, the last priest of the Roman Catholic Church. Albert introduces him to a resistance whose members cry and show emotion openly, more commonly referred to as "Springers". This group of individuals is regarded as dangerous and its movements are extremely illegal and easy to identify by Cheery Point's mayor and his SWAT-like "Paser" forces at the Torpase Distribution
Division (T.D.D). Joshua's negative perception and criticism of this movement diminish as Albert enlightens him to the point of emotional awareness and a fuller understanding of the world around him. His path collides with Becca Reynolds, a young woman who is haunted with an overwhelming need to continue “pasing” to quell her issues with depression, despite her desperate desire to be without. In the mix also is Corey Sarte, a man with his own perception of what pain can mean in the grand scheme of things that is not always contingent with the well-being of others. It is up to the “Springers” to demobilize the T.D.D factory and restore sentimentality to Cheery Point.

IV. A Case Study for Producers in the Indie Scene

My principal roles in Cheery Point have been that of Executive Producer and Director of Photography (DP), the former being more so what I found myself involved in before the actual days of shooting, and the latter, of course, what I was completely absorbed in while on set. While the boundaries of what I actually did quickly became greyed and entailed a great deal more than what is apt for my job description, generally it is the responsibility of any producer to provide the resources, which in all likelihood boils down to money from a studio that I may or may not be affiliated with, to the director in order to get the vision he or she has to the screen. That role is one of literally ceaseless cell-phone conversations, continuous glances at budgets, and an obsession with worst-case scenarios for which to plan accordingly. I have found it to be a player in one of the most maddening strategic board games, with the pieces in the case of this feature ranging from over sixty cast and crew members, to thirty different contacts for resources involving locations, housing, and catering, to a myriad of other “in-between” individuals who serve as barriers to the people at the top that really need to be dealt with for the answers desired.
What I found interesting nearly halfway into principal photography was how much I was going about my position as Executive Producer in a non-cinematic manner. Adam Bailey and I formed a very unique bond from the standpoint of his leadership as director and my need to facilitate and move the process along as his producer. At least I should have been *his* producer in a cinema sense. In actuality, I was treating him as *my* director. Many people are mistakenly under the impression that all directors are at the forefront of commanding all people on set and that *they* operate cameras, this belief most likely present due to the inundating amount of stills portraying the likes of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas with their arms propped upon their Panavision mounts. There came a point at which Adam mentioned in passing that I ought to read an article he had recently stumbled upon describing how much more lucrative television was shaping up to becoming in contrast to the unpredictability of films. (5) He had also identified several aspects I exhibited while working with the advisory team that suggested I was running an episodic production. In such scenarios producers have much more of a pulling force for the decisions that need to be made while the show is in production, to the point of working with several different directors on different episodes, enforcing rewrites, and making hard-hitting decisions such as firing certain cast members because of liability concerns. I held Adam in high regard for pointing this out to me so tactfully and enabling me to see something within myself that I had never truly considered existed but that may have proven stressful when put in the context of *Cheery Point*’s production.

It proved difficult, as we knew it would most certainly be, to stay within my bounds as Director of Photography while on set and allow for another individual to go through all the processes of directing the film, especially when I was consistently working as the outspoken voice of *Cheery Point* from a public relations standpoint and had initially generated the film as the Executive Producer. In hindsight, the two of us learned that from a more practical and overall less stressful standpoint, the Executive Producer and Director role would be better consolidated as one and that the Director of Photography role should stand alone as another.
This was especially true in this case, seeing as in a business sense I was essentially contracting all my crew, including my director, as vendors; this can be very tricky when also needing to relinquish much of the creative power to the director simultaneously as a pseudo-partner. We had the utmost respect for one another, and in the end, I feel extremely blessed to have worked with an advisory team that was able to adapt and see these areas for improvement for what they were, and never take them too personally.

Generally, my role of Executive Producer was to ensure that everyone else was working well within the confines of "the system". My father had introduced me to a book in the summer of 2011 about starting one’s own business by Michael Gerber. It was called *Awakening the Entrepreneur Within*, and it centered around the idea of “The Dream Room”(6). The “Dream Room”, when stripped down to its core is a very organized and well-defined vision that one wants to bring about with his or her business/company/organization. "Dream Room" sessions involving the weaving of the initial vision were all for naught if the dreamer could not create a variety of systems for which everyone else on the team that shared the same dream could work within. I had already participated in one such “Dream Room” session with a group of 15-20 friends that past summer in creating the basis of a film company of independents called Versa Studios Media LLC (www.versastudios.net); its goal was to create professional content and network with other passionate content producers outside of a University setting.

Every weekend would spawn a new project, and I was to mediate the members by creating the best version of a well-cogged film crew that I could. By the time the Christmas Holidays of 2011 had come around, a militarized rendition of a film set was evident for my team and it would seem that every role, from Audio Engineer to Best-Boy Grip was accounted for with individuals who had truly honed their craft. The Cheery Point “Dream Room” session, however, would be carried out differently based on the mistakes and lessons I had learned prior. I first chose a director that was well respected amongst his peers and had already led a student organization on campus called Media Minds. Adam’s strengths lay in creating consistent tone,
having a strong sense of what to expect from actors based off of independent study, and above all else, writing. I created a system that would be called “the server”, that in actuality was just a shared Google Docs account that would enable anyone with shared access to easily and quickly obtain the information they needed for the sake of the project. The most frequently accessed of these would be the “Expenses” spreadsheet, the screenplay itself in the form of a .PDF, the “Master Contact” spreadsheet with all of the cast and crew’s email addresses and phone numbers, and a variety of documents that would be edited for the sake of aspects such as props, wardrobe, etc. Adam, James Treakle, my girlfriend Allison Flood, and myself collaborated consistently, although the majority was upfront, on a joint screenwriting service called Celtx Studios to manage, edit, and keep track of revisions to the screenplay itself. The Associate Producer would maintain what we would jokingly be referred to as “the magic box” for all receipts, and the wardrobe would likewise be maintained in “the magic (rolling suit)case”.

Next, I created a strip-board that would break down every scene according to location, the actors involved, the amount of screen-time involved, and the time of day each scene took place. From there I could easily cut each strip up and arrange them methodically into groups in which it would make most sense economically to shoot. Generally speaking, I knew that it would always make sense to shoot everything necessary in one location before breaking down company, and moving to another, and that one page of the screenplay would usually signify one minute of screen-time. This would also help me figure out how to delegate my shoe-string budget to each of the scenes, later give the composer the appropriate pages (screen time) to begin considering themes ahead of time, and decide what toys I could realistically buy or find DIY (do-it-yourself) guides to build for myself. Contracts were something that consistently created anxiety and perplexed me; while a great variety of release forms were found and maintained on “the server” by the assistant directors, I truly wish that I had the time to research and create my contracts for all my cast and crew before pre-production began. I had heard too many horror stories of uncompromising cast and crew members to have felt comfortable with
after production had started. While I consolidated and manipulated several contracts into one to simplify signing, the two that were of most importance were the "Copy and Credit" and "Toronto Low Budget Agreement". I definitely felt as if I had minored in law before the project was to come to a close. A number of other smaller systems were created for the project; just a few would include the purchasing and code etiquette to be maintained on walkie-talkies for crew, the maintaining of a roll call for our slate to later synchronize the audio and video that were captured separately, and a method of meticulously backing up and labeling said elements on several hardrives. When dealing with the influx of material we were capturing, it would be important to consider the enormous amount of storage we would need to digitally hold the data. This would result in several visits to the local Best Buy for additional terabytes.

The reality of the situation called for people who I knew would be willing to do this endeavor for free, and nearly all my friends with whom I networked were in college. This being said, I was positive that if I wanted to complete the film it would have to be while I was in close proximity to them during the school semester, and filming would only be able to take place on the thirteen weekends or so at our disposal, with the notable exception of the Spring Break vacation and possibly Easter weekend. The thought of a feature-length film brought great dissension and uncertainty within the company I had created, and about half of the individuals I had grown accustomed to working with deserted the idea immediately. As disheartening as this was, the other half would form the nucleus of the Cheery Point experience and would be joined by a few new faces that just beamed at the thought of working on such an experience.

Newcomers would include Shane Dresh, who had a knack at creating beautiful compositions with cameras as my Assistant Camera. Next would be Grant Steckbeck as a formidable Fight/Stunt Choreographer, who was key for maintaining my sanity during many scenes of which I would be held liable. Also in the mix was Jayme Kroll as our makeup artist, who was overly humble with her ability to make any knee, elbow, chest, or forehead walk away with a ridiculously realistic bullet hole, scratch, or bruise. Then of course, there was Jake Madson as
the Best Boy Grip in the lighting department and our Production Designer; when things broke, something needed to be soldered overnight, or someone just needed to simply hold a piece of equipment without asking too many questions, Jake was there.

I knew that a fair amount of the budget would have to be spent on the lighting department, and after my friend Ethan Gibbs had completed his internship with Derek Hammer Lighting and Grip it felt like the natural choice to ask him to be my gaffer. After speaking with him at length, we settled on purchasing three large 500 watt china balls to illuminate locations that were generally dark, a three-point soft-box lighting kit for highlighting faces, a 1k fresnel on eBay for all-purpose use, and a large reflective griffolyn backdrop to suspend from a greenscreen frame I already owned; this would bounce light back onto our subjects for our many outdoor lighting schemes when in direct sunlight. Even with this rudimentary lighting plan, however, Ethan knew that these lights would simply not cut it for the purpose of properly exposing the subjects on our camera’s sensor, so it was determined early on that we would need to set aside roughly $100 a shoot (for a grand total of eight weekend shoots) to rent bigger lights. In the end, I was able to barter with two friends who each owned 2k lights and heavy-duty stands to pay them $50.00 to $70.00 a weekend. To anchor this rag-tag fleet of lights we knew that we would need sandbags, and in the interest of saving the crew from having to visit any grip rental facility when we did not have to, I sewed our own sandbags using industrial strength fishing wire, vinyl, and some construction sandbags that my dad had on reserve. Generators, an array of extension cords, and the insurance to save ourselves in light of disaster were to come from my family’s Louisville-based entertainment business Funmasters (www.wedeliverfun.com).

I set up an advisory team that would meet every week to discuss and delegate what needed to be done for the upcoming weekend’s shoots. This would include the very talented Kelsey Williams as 1st Assistant Director, with her 2nd Assistant Samantha Courter, Andrew Bennett as my Associate Producer, and Adam, of course. These people were the key ingredients for the success of the film as the tasks they were responsible for throughout the
week were critical for events to transpire as needed. Kelsey had developed a reputation as an outspoken organized leader on set and a highly meticulous, quiet worker behind the scenes. Sam was a new recruit to Versa, and was a great asset to have around because of her connections to the theatre department. Both of these women gave the rest of the crew the “reality checks” we needed to see the small scenes we were working-on in the greater context of the whole. Their responsibilities would include the obtaining and oversight of the vast amount of release forms that would need to be signed and to maintain the slate/order on set. They also, would, unfortunately, have to take up the task of organizing the props and wardrobe for each shoot while on set, seeing as we were never quite able to pinpoint an individual who would take up this sole responsibility. It was a lesson that was hard to learn, as it was perhaps the most frequent harrying obstacle we would run into while in production.

I found that Kelsey and Sam, besides assisting me with scheduling the cast and crew with countless emails and creating agendas for time-delegation on set, would serve as an invaluable bridge to carry out what I needed to happen on set with Adam as the director. While on set, Adam and I agreed early in the production phase that my mind needed to be focused on my role of Director of Photography, and that meant that holding him accountable on set as the Executive Producer would simply create a conflict of interest and be an embarrassment in front of the rest of the crew. Each crew member needed to perform his or her job without ceasing while we were on schedule, and if I interjected in other matters beside the cinematography on set, the others would feel as if they could override the director and do the same. Kelsey and Sam were the balancing force that I needed; I could pass along general observations while on set during breaks that they could focus on imparting to Adam to make the filming process smoother.

It was imperative to have another producer on board that could literally steal my cell-phone and credit card during the weekends and ensure that continuous contact was being made with location owners, caterers, actors, and countless others. I knew from experience on
other productions, however, that many producers are too business-oriented and do not have an understanding of the film in greater context. They are looked at as nagging money-mongerers. I needed someone who had the experience of telling his or her own story; Andrew Bennett had served as a director on several Versa projects and was a blessing to have behind-the-scenes coordinating with the same mentality with which we were concentrating. He was constantly to check the budget, help our publicist Dylan Pieri get word out of the film in the forms of our online Kickstarter (8) and IndieGoGo (7) campaigns, and ensure that everyone felt comfortable on set. This was very important when it came to invading the homes and properties of people who had been generous enough to allow us entrance. Andrew had to pacify them, assure them that everything would be returned to its initial position, and feed the actors in the most economic way possible, as promptly as possible.

By the time each of these other systems were established, it had seemed that we had nearly run out of time to go through with the auditions themselves. This would prove to be one of the most interesting processes to go through alongside Adam. I found that by quickly gathering as many .PDF resumes and cover-shots of actors through websites such as IndianaActors.com, I could quickly form possibilities for Adam to choose from. I created a separate folder for Adam to browse through on “the server” and once given the “ok” from Adam, would email his selections with general information. This would prove to be a very drawn-out ordeal during two and a half weeks that involved several SKYPE conversations and some out-of-town visits with cast members from Adam’s end. In general, I knew that I wanted to stray away from using those who were affiliated with the SAG/AFTRA union considering that at the time the budget only looked to be $7,000.00, and even when it reached its final $16,000.00 it was still unrealistic to pay them their per-diem dues mandated by the Chicago office. I also could not expect my assistant directors to be able to keep up with filing the appropriate paperwork with the SAG offices when our crew was working fifteen-hour days on average to
accomplish everything on the shooting schedule. Thus, Adam and I did our best with the limited time we had to try and locate true budding talent that was on the brink of deciding to go union.

The Executive Producer role was not always the most popular when it came down to casting concerns, however. The most stressful point of the production proved to occur midway into principal photography in which it became evident that one of our actors, who was casted to play Corey Sarte, was not reading the script as promised and repeatedly made a mockery of the set. The crew had already spent three weekends of shooting with the individual in question alongside several of the other major cast members, and when it came down to the decision of re-casting, and by extension, re-shooting those scenes, most of the advisory team was adamant to keep steering ahead. It was ultimately the decision of myself and my assistant director that we had to re-cast before the next shoot, which was by far the most expensive in Illinois with the most production-value. While it was unpopular and extremely costly to re-cast, it proved to be the best decision and turning point for the film. Kyle Dal Santo joined the cast's ranks as a formidable pseudo-antagonist and fulfilled his role better than Adam and I could have dreamed. If there was one aspect I wish I could go back and remedy, it would have been to put my foot down sooner during the initial advisory meetings and stick to my gut, as well as hold more rigorous casting sessions.

As far as the promotional aspects of my Executive Producer role were concerned, I had already spent the previous summer working as an in-depth SEO (Search Engine Optimization) analyst for local businesses in Kentucky. I knew that the best way to ensure that companies could build a lasting presence on the web was to simply generate more content, and link that content to every other piece of content that existed regarding said company. With Cheery Point, the fruits of my labor are just now becoming more apparent. The first marketing move I made was to follow what I saw as a popular trend for successful motion pictures advertised online and on television: the found-footage phenomenon most often associated with Blair Witch Project, Cloverfield, and Paranormal Activity. I coupled this with what I thought was a pretty unique
approach J.J. Abrams had undergone with his summer blockbuster *Super 8*. In his initial teaser trailers, he focused on engaging audiences with material that had somewhat of a presence in the final product, but in actuality were very insignificant. In the instance of *Super 8*, it was the event of a train crashing and exploding (4). However, much later, his company Bad Robot would release other trailers that would focus much more heavily on the plot of the film surrounding the train incident. Abrams calls it his "Mystery Box" technique, that he dubbed from years of watching his grandfather perform allusions as a magician (9). It was a technique he used often in *LOST* and one I felt could be easily replicated for *Cheery Point*. Using people we had at our disposal and the general theme of "what one would do to take away his or her most painful experience", Adam and I filmed six teasers before Christmas break of 2011 that would introduce the complex deep feelings of our characters and warp them with a backdrop of conspiracy that would be accentuated with stock footage of the 1960s war era/presidencies. It was my thought to use lens flares as a bridge for curious viewers to make the necessary leap of faith for continued interest in our project from other similar sci-fi/thriller films from popular directors such as Abrams and Michael Bay. Having started as a visual effects artist, it was also my initial hint of homage to Abrams and my interest in pursuing the themes he tackled in *LOST* (10).

The teasers were shown in front of a few rooms of test audiences, and were received with many different interpretations as to what was occurring in them. I personally did not find this to necessarily be a negative, as these were of course teasers, and Adam and I were still creating the screenplay. With an independent sci-fi thriller such as *Cheery Point*, a call-to-action was felt to be necessary for further engagement between the user and the film. What was disconcerting was the amount of responses that attributed our film as a replica of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. This response was brushed off at first because I had no idea how the resemblance between the two plots was even close, but in later talks with Adam it was apparent to me that the teasers' continued used of the phrasing "I'd like to forget that" and "it's not something I ever like to talk about" do hint at a memory-altering experience. Still another
response was that the film would be a retelling of *Equilibrium* with Christian Bale. It is interesting to me to see the evolution of finger-pointing as more plot-driven trailers for *Cheery Point* are emerging. The latest called for a comparison to George Lucas’ *THX-1138* and the book *SOMA* (2).

Regardless of initial comparisons which have dwindled as time has passed, I chose to heavily promote *Cheery Point* using social media in the form of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. It has been the experience of myself and the publicist that the twitter feed does best with calling out direct links to images and videos for users to explore while the facebook page does best with retaining a consistent following for members we wish to steer in one direction or the other. The best example of this would be the creation of the *Cheery Point* Kickstarter (8) and IndieGoGo (7) campaigns and how we subsequently marketed them. The formula we found as independent filmmakers to best get the word out for our project, and by extension generate the most funds, was to first create a private Facebook group containing all of the individuals with which the film comes to encompass during its creation. In this group it was easiest to maintain constant communication with everyone: cast, crew, and resource/location managers. What was most helpful, however, was that it served as an enormous wave of initial publicity for our content as soon as we would post it to the group. The many people who had been involved in some fashion would feel excited about receiving it first and subsequently promote it on their individual feeds. In essence, we could generate a great deal more excitement with sixty publicists at once instead of one. Our publicist Dylan Piere chose to utilize the new HTML5 features present in the WIXX website editing template for the main website and I would later re-code the video galleries on the site and implement iframes to make it look nicer.

V. A Case Study for Cinematographers in the Indie Scene
As the Director of Photography, there was a very deliberate method to the madness of shooting *Cheery Point* that I tried to uphold during the entirety of principal photography, but it only came with great foresight. I had struggled to find another individual to act as sole Director of Photography so I could concentrate on producing for quite some time. There were quite a few talented individuals on campus, but I knew that if I wanted the film to retain a stylistic look and stay consistent to make sense, I needed one person to have hands on the camera during the entire span of production. All the individuals in question could only fill in as temporary DPs throughout various weekends, so I decided to heed the advice of a contemporary of mine named Joe Sailer and take on the endeavor of shooting the picture myself. Joe was an esteemed cinematographer on campus and was gracious enough to give me a few nights worth of pointers he had picked up along the way. That, combined with the insight I had received from a standard DSLR Camera class on campus, and Andrew Koo's renown DSLR Cinematography Guide (12) instilled the confidence I needed to begin thinking in terms of taking on the task of Director of Photography.

Originally, I had been adamantly about shooting the film on an emerging media camera, more specifically the Red Scarlet, but later settled on pursuing the SONY PMW-F3 considering I had a connection. I had interned for SONY during the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) convention in Las Vegas during the Spring of 2011 and spent some time learning the specifications of the camera to relay them to customers interested in purchasing. It promised a more film-like experience on media more reliable than flimsy SD cards, more flexibility with low lighting conditions without the expense of noise, and a full 35mm sensor. Shortly after Thanksgiving holiday of 2011 I headed up a pitch with my company Versa Studios Media to SONY's National Marketing Manager Shari Sentlowitz with the desire to demo the camera on *Cheery Point* (11). The pitch was met with some interest and emails upfront but did not result in any further conversation. With only a couple weeks left to go until principal photography began, I elected to use my Panasonic GH1 HDSLR camera.
The GH1 had been in the back of my mind but was obviously not my first choice considering it only shot at a resolution of 1920x1080 and was not as cutting-edge as one would find in emerging sensors offering 2k-5k resolutions. Out-of-the-box, the GH1 was no better than a consumer vacation video camera. But a couple years prior, a brilliant engineer named Vitaly Kiselev had found a way to manipulate the firmware of the camera to shoot at a ridiculous bit-rate of 50mb/s in a MJPEG codec while at a frame rate of 23.976fps (13). I had undergone the tinkering with my model and was pleasantly surprised with the results I had achieved. While this Lumix camera was using a micro 4/3 sensor that was in no way the 35mm full-frame sensor I had initially wanted, I found that by creating a small viewfinder adapter to ensure I was shooting in a cinematic 2.35 aspect ratio, buying a few extra batteries, along with a ProAim DSLR mount, I felt confident enough that I could still shoot a film that could later be color-corrected and enhanced for an audience to equally enjoy. I would err on the side of caution, however; when it comes to the filming of scenes in which the background mattes have a high density of different vibrant colors or subtle movement; there were a few such occasions during the day in which these circumstances would cause card writer-errors and hold-ups on set.

Cheery Point, as the audience is introduced to it, is a flat, sterile, uninteresting place in which to live. It is so stifling and uncomfortable that Adam and I felt that it would naturally create just enough apprehension in audiences so as to almost generate a natural sigh of relief when they are introduced to the possibilities of life as seen through the eyes of the “Springers”. To best exemplify this one-dimensional mentality of the “Pasers” (those who uphold the regulations of the government and are regularly administering Torpase), I stuck to static shots of all the action. There was very little panning, tilting, dollying, trucking, the use of jib arms, sliders, or any other array of movement that could signify a movement for these characters in the town. I wanted it to almost feel like a picture “flip-book” look at these characters that are so lethargic and slow to change. I felt that this mindset would help me sell the fact that I was just coming into my own with my knowledge of lenses and their different capabilities and uses as well. It felt
more excusable to stick to using my one very versatile Panasonic Lumix GH1 kit lens for the entirety of the shoots involving aspects of life that we dubbed “the Cheery Point Manner” while I learned more about different lenses with the hope of incorporating them into my cinematography work-flow for the future shoots that were more “Springer”-oriented.

When it came to the “Springers”, I really wanted to “punch them out” from the rest of the film’s sequences to depict them embracing life to the fullest. I dabbled with using a Nikon adapter with different prime lenses on the GH1 to make the most of the clarity I could achieve while the sun was out at the ranch in which we were shooting. Then too came considerations for the flashbacks and how we would film them. In a very last minute and bold move, Adam and I agreed that all of them would be set apart from the rest of the movie by purposefully shooting them in one continuous shot. While this was certainly a challenge in all aspects of production when it came to elaborate sets and movement, I feel as if it will be very rewarding. This was also to be exaggerated with the lighting that I sat down and discussed with my Gaffer and Grip team. We went through the entire script together and marked it up according to how the lighting could further sell this death-to-rebirth approach. Ethan determined that most of the lighting within the town would be flat as far as faces were concerned, and together we decided that a sickly green color temperature that was of a lesser degree than the Matrix could be used in areas within the town that was overridden with the use of the drug, including the workplace, the bar, and the T.D.D. Factory. Later, with the “Springers”, the lighting would be much more dynamic, bright, and color-correction would be used to “pop” the sequences.

Among the many aspects of cinematography I took away from Cheery Point were the art of pulling focus with my Assistant Cameraman Shane, the proper use of shutter speed, and the amazing results one can achieve with the use of an everyday fog machine. I must confess that it was not until I had spoken with a fellow DP on Ball State’s campus named Brian Hollars that I realized that one’s shutter speed should always be twice that of his or her frame rate if going for a cinematic experience. There were several tricks that I found most useful for my arsenal of
future DP work. The camera and lighting department, for example, frequently would pull out its large container of industrial trash bags to cover the largest of windows in an establishment to fake a night scene while filming during the day, and without the use of a professional flickerbox to simulate fire scenes, I found that an equally effective simulation could be achieved by having production assistants quickly jiggle their fingers in front of light sources gelled with CTO. It also became a running gag to frequently utilize the fog machine to break up the streams of light pouring in through locations' windows for a softer, more elegant composition or to fake a scene taking place at dawn.

IV. Existentialism: How the World of Cheery Point Goes Around

On its surface, Cheery Point is a narrative film that has come to be influenced by many actors' personal experiences, different writers' stances on subjects, and ultimately the execution of the director's own mentality, but it started with very real topics that were heavily concerning me in my own life. Of primary importance was a lack of true contentment with what I was doing in my field and hobby of emerging media/filmmaking. For so long, I had been concerned with the technical side of the industry that I had lost sight of creating the content that I enjoyed working with most. As a result, the quality of what I created lost-out to the mere fact that I could do something to remedy the situation in post-production. I became well-versed in fixing problematic situations in the editing room, and that was unfortunately what I became known for dealing with by many of my peers. This peculiar situation was coupled with the fact that for some reason I felt that life was passing before me too steadily; I had not experienced much in the area of loss or heartache in quite a long time, not even that of a pet. Everything seemed to be moving too smoothly, and out of that observation came the strange feeling that I wanted something to go wrongly just to have to slow down, adjust, and have an emotional reaction. I had lacked inspiration to do much for the better part of the year other than watching a couple of friends battle with depression. It was at that point that I pondered how terrible it would be if
everyone on Earth was faced with that same lack of motivation everyday of their lives. How horrible would that place be to live in and how would people interact with each other? That "what if" question came right around the time I had seen the film 2081 featuring Kurt Vonnegut's Harrison Burgeron and the Handicap General (14). It was a dystopian film that featured a society obsessed with leveling the playing field for all individuals by disabling the unique facets or talents each possessed. Everything seemed to be finally fair. This film had been adapted from Vonnegut's short story and took small liberties in its final form, but its well-crafted living room scenes centering around the main character's parents and how they deal with their handicaps would heavily influence how I chose to introduce the realities of Cheery Point when I sat down to write the first thirty pages of the film. Joshua Barrett's mother had to be introduced as being so dispassionate and removed upon her entrance to the family kitchen to demonstrate that even the powerful commonplace relationship between mother and son did not exist in this town. Furthermore, the inclusion of the injured limping Yorkshire Terrier was to further accentuate the absurdities of the times; the sight of the dog acting more human in the face of pain than humans themselves would best setup the household with which the movie is concerned. Another author of importance to the screenplay was the late Ray Bradbury and the development of his rather static main character in Fahrenheit 451.

LOST, as previously mentioned, had been off the air for nearly half a year at that time, but its fan-base had still not waned. The show, which was produced and maintained by Damon Lindelof after Abrams moved on to other projects, would engage its viewers in week-by-week discussions online via ABC's forums and the likes of others online; fans desperately wanted to be informed about what was truly happening on the island and why so many peculiarities existed. Lindelof and his writers would come to find that the common question from fans revolved around the notion of whether or not the characters were actually already dead and were walking around in a type of after-life experience. From the second season forward, the show took on on a reputation for dealing with judgment and spirituality, but cleverly enough,
never with judgment in an overarching Jude-Christian sense (3). It remained accessible enough so that its viewers, regardless of dogmatic affiliation, could connect with the show. It was the individual characters and what they perceived as being judgment passed upon them that made the show so interesting; it was the judgment passed from one to another and the past they were trying to escape from. The existentialism involved in the show was what most excited me. The constant use of close-up shots on eyes to signify perspective and the way in which "the truth" would constantly change from episode to episode to reflect the perspective of the character in question would have made Kierkegaard proud.

If one analyzes the character arcs in LOST it is very easy to find the similarities in the characters Adam and I molded. Sawyer, a man of constant stubbornness and self-loathing over his past stands out as a redneck in LOST and mirrors our Corey Sarte in all but appearance. In Cheery Point, our Corey is more sophisticated and haunted by his need to hunt and survive, making him seem to be a unique blend of Sawyer and the character Dale from the recent The Walking Dead. His question regarding "the truth" is namely: "Is all life worth living? And is one life worth more than another?"

Joshua Barrett, who many would argue is the main character of the film, carries what I think society considers to be the most commonplace questions in regards to "the truth". His questions regarding "the truth" are namely: "What does life mean at all? Is it safest to conform?" It was extremely difficult to develop Joshua as a central character and show progression at all due to the fact that we had so many characters to explore. That is perhaps the weakest aspect of the film, and is one that many criticize Lindelof of in his recent screenwriting endeavour in the form of Prometheus. In LOST, Jack Shepherd is unarguably at the show's head and struggles with letting go in general and the "super man" complex of always having to fix something. Benjamin Linus, who serves as LOST's key character in turning audience's perception of "the others" (the antagonists during the first couple seasons of the show) upside down, is best mirrored in Cheery Point's Mayor. Both have a complex side to them that is cloaked in the
desire to play games with their contemporaries; Benjamin does so in a more mental sense as he searches for a way off the island and to protect his people, and the Mayor does so in a more literal sense while trying to ensure that the rest of Cheery Point administers its medicine. His question regarding “the truth” is principally: “Is life worth living if it has no order?”

Another rather large personal influence that has reared its head in the film is my contention with the Roman Catholic Church. Having grown up in a conservative Catholic household for the majority of my life, I had felt rather put out and discouraged by the presence of some very evident signs that the church’s influence in my hometown of Louisville was waning for my generation. I returned home from Ball State on only a few weekends throughout my college career, and when I did I had wanted to reconnect with my roots on Sundays for mass. If for no other reason, this would be to simply visit with friends again in the congregation. It had a profound effect on me when, during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, I saw no one from my graduating class in attendance. My suspicion that the Church was losing significant numbers solidified when I would take notice of a great many of them speaking about attending services at the recent mega-Christian church called Southeast. Their choice was not in-and-of-itself what was upsetting, but it was the fact that as I would continue visiting home, I felt less and less familiar with it as members of my own immediate family members spoke of their disappointment they took away from services and their longing for more elsewhere. All of these feelings were the foundation of what would become Albert Camus, one of the main characters in the screenplay that is the leader of the “Springer” order. Albert is motivated purely out of loneliness and the desire to put the state of things back where they started before the introduction of Torpase to the town. His perspective of “the truth” is enlightened by a conservative Roman Catholic clergy mentality, as he is the last priest known to be in existence. To fully understand Albert’s dilemma would be to understand what I felt when I would come home, namely that millennial Catholics are seemingly on the sinking end of a ship and feel alone when trying to cling on to their religious heritage. The question posed: “Can life regain
meaning if one's social construction of reality is shattered?" His character must grapple with whether leading the resistance will truly bring him peace, or whether it will only pain him to take witness of the watered-down version of his Catholic dogma that may take root.

His name, of course, harkens back and alludes to the famous French existentialist Albert Camus, who was also in arms in regards to his contemporary society. Corey's last name is obviously an allusion to Kierkegaard's existential, more secular foil, and Kierkegaard himself along with several other existentialists are mentioned by name as street names and the like throughout the film. To create allusions to famous philosophers was also a practice found more often than not while watching LOST, although it generally was geared towards more prominent figures such as John Locke, Rousseau, and Faraday.

The last character with which I wanted to carefully craft my own experiences and mix them with a unique vantage point was Becca Reynolds. One of the most difficult experiences I went through while at Ball State was seeing two people I cared about go through chronic forms of depression. I struggled greatly with it and try as I might, found that I did nothing but frustrate their mental progress in my attempts of fixing them. Becca was my attempt of letting go of the disappointment and hurt I felt at losing these people's friendships and the time we could have spent together. She is a character that struggles to live with any sense of clarity, as Torpase does not completely take away her bouts with depression. She is forced by her father, who works for the T.D.D., to continue administering and struggles with the sad question regarding "the truth": "Is life worth living at all?"

I feel as if Adam and I correctly attained a formula for making this existential plot work by deciding to push so much of the film to a remote location in a wooded secluded cabin involving the "Springers". I have noticed that popular episodic plots such as those of LOST and The Walking Dead feature isolated locations in which they can weave the deeper issues of the characters. In the former, it is, of course, the jungles of the island, and the latter features the woods of the South in which the character camp and grapple with their anxieties away from the
Walkers. There is something special that just works by having characters silhouetted by locations that have an exotic quality to them. It is as if the location is a character itself. In *Cheery Point*, so much of the character development, and nearly all of the dialogue takes place while at the wooded ranch. It almost feels like a commune, and I am excited to see what audiences can take away from the characters in this setting.

In conclusion, *Cheery Point* is a case study that given the proper mix of determination, steadfast attention to details and systems, and the incorporation of people that are equally passionate, independent filmmaking can be done effectively and with great results. While it is my hope that it will turn several heads towards the possibilities that smaller Midwestern cities such as Louisville can provide for the indie market, it has been a privilege to have been part of such an experience, regardless of outcome.
VI. Supplementary Material

For Promotional Purposes:

1. Official Cheery Point Website
   www.cheerypoint.com

2. The Kickstarter Fundraising Page

3. The IndieGoGo Fundraising Page
   http://www.indiegogo.com/cheerypoint

4. YouTube Channel
   http://www.youtube.com/user/CheeryPoint

5. Facebook Page
   https://www.facebook.com/cheerypoint

6. Twitter Feed
   https://twitter.com/#!CheeryPoint

7. 1st Teaser Trailer
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQpH45YEq5k

8. 1st Theatrical Trailer
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIEGnFk7h7g

9. Our Pitch to SONY
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gApjlbo81kg

Internal Organization:

1. Production Expenses
   https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AgFPBGI444PudHpsaXJpT1hSV1NCN2dpNDZ6bTBxTWc

2. Master Strip Board (Must download to view)
   https://docs.google.com/open?id=0BwFPBGI444PuZGRiZjk5MzctYjQyNyo0NmM4LTkyMTYtYTA3N1VhM2I4YTdj

3. Screenplay (5/30/2012)
   https://docs.google.com/open?id=0ByxXsfoOmTGAczFPVmR5NExRT2M

4. Shooting Schedule
   https://docs.google.com/document/d/19_NdO278PCAyWGcLWVbjw8zq-B4vibSiPNkStGnbhsY/edit
VII. Works Cited


